

IN MEMORIAM

PROFILE OF A CHAMPION OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: PROFESSOR DAVID KERR (1945-2008)

Professor David Kerr will be remembered by posterity for his contribution to the academic dialogue between Muslims and Christians. He was instrumental in founding the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham.

In September 1975, Kerr, then a young lecturer at Selly Oak Colleges, in his capacity as Secretary of a Steering Committee, published a report in the pan-Islamic fortnightly journal *Impact International* published from London. Part of his report is reproduced below to explain the objective of the proposed dialogue centre at Selly Oak.

The urgent need for a place where Muslims and Christians can meet together in the interests of understanding one another better need hardly be emphasized in the columns of this journal. For nigh on fourteen hundred years, Christianity and Islam have been engaged in an immensely complex relationship which has embraced the full spectrum of human passions and which continues to defy simple definition. Majoritively [sic.], however, we have looked at each other through our respective blinkers—doctrinal, political, social, cultural—and relatively rarely only have individual Muslims and individual Christians tried to understand one another as they really are, and to communicate with one another sympathetically. Today, whether we like it or not, political, economic and social forces are driving us into ever closer contact the world over, and the demand for deeper mutual comprehension and cooperation—in our individual interests, in our mutual interests and, not least, in the interests of others with whom we share this world—has never been more insistent. The challenge is international, but not for that ‘remote’; the international is made up of many ‘nations’, and here in Britain as elsewhere in the Europe to which we belong the relationship between our Christian and Muslim communities is vital to the well-being of Europe’s pluralist societies. We live alike in a prophetic tradition; alike we have prophetic responsibility. (22 Aug – 11 Sept, 1975, p. 9).

After this wake-up call, the proposal for a Christian-Muslim Study Centre was launched in draft form in October 1974 and was approved by the Central Council of the Selly Oak Colleges. Subsequently, a steering Committee was set up to help further

planning, with an equal membership of Muslims and Christians (including Professor Walid Arafat, Professor Khurshid Ahmad, Riadh al-Droubie, Ashur Shamis, John Taylor, Dirk Bakker, Albert Hourani and Sigvard von Sicard). As a result of these efforts the CSIC (Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations) was formally established in 1976 with Kerr as director. Kerr subsequently earned a reputation as a scholar in the field of inter-religious dialogue. According to Chris Lamb, Kerr was one of the most significant figures in the contemporary encounter between Christianity and the Muslim world.

David Kerr was born on 16 May 1945 in London. His father, Wilfred Kerr, was a United Reform Church minister and his mother, Jean (née Maclachlan), was born to Scottish missionary parents in China. At Mill Hill School in north London a teacher urged him to study Arabic at degree level. Hence David graduated in Arabic from SOAS, University of London (1963-66). He went on to study theology at Mansfield College, Oxford (1966-68), and under the supervision of Professor Albert Hourani completed a D.Phil. thesis at St. Antony's College Oxford (1969-73) entitled, "The Temporal Authority of the Maronite Patriarchate, 1920-1958", which explored the relationship between church and state in Lebanon. Thus he studied a particular brand (Maronite) of Middle Eastern Christianity and the role of the Maronite Church in the 1958 civil war in Lebanon and the delicate relationship between the Maronite Christians and the Muslims in Lebanon.

It was no wonder therefore that Kerr devoted his career to promoting a dialogue between Muslims and Christians during his working life at Selly Oak Colleges (1973-88), Hartford Seminary's Duncan Black Macdonald Centre, Connecticut USA (1988-1995). He edited *The Muslim World* (quarterly) at the Hartford Seminary. Finally, he was a Professor at Edinburgh University, Scotland (1995-2005) and at the University of Lund in Sweden (2005-2008). In these last two institutions he supervised a number of doctoral dissertations on Christian-Muslim relations.

Albert Hourani not only supervised his D.Phil. thesis, but suggested how he might seek answers on how the conflict in a Middle Eastern society like Lebanon could be resolved. According to some of his friends, Kerr analyzed the global and contextual dimensions of the Christian-Muslim encounter and shed light on "the present conflictual understanding of the relationship between the two religions and the civilizations they have spawned ... (Despite the severely strained relations between the Muslims and Christians after 9/11) David Kerr remained an advocate for peaceful convivencia instead of construing the Christian-Muslim encounter as a clash of civilizations". It has been aptly said that he tried to root out what he saw as an "anti-Muslim polemic" in the "soul of Western Christianity". It was in Sweden that he was afflicted with terminal motor neuron disease. Professor Kerr died on 14 April 2008 about one month before his 63rd birthday. He will be missed by the academic community which seeks understanding among Abrahamic faiths. He is survived by his wife, Gun-Marianne Holmstrom, his son Simeon, daughter Anna and three grandchildren.

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