

PROFESSOR SYED ALI ASHRAF OBITUARY

SHAIKH ABDUL MABUD*

It is indeed with great sorrow that we announce the sudden death of Professor Syed Ali Ashraf, who passed away at his home in Cambridge on the morning of Friday, 7th August 1998.

He was Director-General of the Islamic Academy, Cambridge and the Founder and Vice-Chancellor of Darul Ihsan University, Bangladesh. He was also a member of the Faculty of Education and a Fellow of Clare Hall, Fitzwilliam College and Wolfson College, the University of Cambridge.

He was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1925, where he received his primary and secondary education. After obtaining his Master's degree in English from the University of Dhaka, he came to the University of Cambridge where he completed his Honours and PhD, at Fitzwilliam College.

He went on to become a lecturer and then Reader in English at Dhaka University (1949), Head of the Department of English at Rajshahi University (1954-56), Professor and Head of the Department of English at Karachi University, Pakistan (1956-73) and at King Abdul Aziz University, Makkah (1974-77), and Professor at King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah (1977-84). He was visiting Professor at Harvard University (1971)

and New Brunswick University (1974). He was the organizing secretary of the First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Makkah (1977) and helped to organize all five other World Conferences: the Second in Islamabad (1980), the Third in Dhaka (1981), the Fourth in Jakarta (1982), the Fifth in Cairo (1987) and the Sixth in South Africa (1997). He was also the first Director-General of the World Centre for Islamic Education, set up by the Organization of Islamic Conferences in Makkah (1980-2).

Professor Ashraf was a man who symbolized Islam, both in his person and in the cause he stood for. He made an original and considerable contribution to the regeneration of Islamic education drawn from the Islamic worldview, laid the foundations of the movement of the Islamization of education throughout the world, and left a global impact on various aspects of the Islamic philosophy of education.

A great Islamic thinker and educationalist, he never supported the kind of education which promotes an unduly anti-faith approach to life, which too easily breeds scepticism and relativism and leads to the loss of the sacredness of life, with all the impoverishment of the human spirit, which this can entail. He fought for the establishment of that kind of education that helps to integrate one's faith in God with day to day actions and belief in eternal values with social situations.

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He also believed that in spite of differences of religious beliefs and practices, there is a whole range of values which are held in common and which have important implications for educational enterprises world-wide. He sought to find the common grounds among different faiths and thus his educational contributions have a lot of significance for people of all faiths alike: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism and others. As a pioneer of faith-based education he tried to achieve spiritual and moral development through value-based education, the core values of which should be based on and derived from religion. His contributions in this field will have a lasting influence on curriculum designing and the teaching methodology for Muslim communities all over the world as well for non-Muslim scholars who hold similar views.

He was an author both in English and Bengali, and inspired many people through his thoughts and writings. Besides his work on creative and critical literature, his major works on education include the following: general editor of six books in an Islamic education series (Hodder and Stoughton), of which he co-authored *Crisis in Muslim Education* (1978). Among his books are *The Concept of an Islamic University* (1984) and *New Horizons in Muslim Education* (1984). He was the founder editor of the Cambridge based educational journal *Muslim Education Quarterly* (1983-). He was also co-editor with Professor Paul Hirst of *Religion and Education: Islamic and Christian Approaches*, and the author of Islam, part of Stanley Thornes' series for GCSE on World Religions.

In addition to this, Professor Syed Ali Ashraf was a poet, a literary critic and a writer-both in English and in Bengali. The fields of his specialization were: Islamization of education (especially of the Islamic concept of education, curriculum designing and teaching method-

ology); English language and literature (especially literary criticism and the teaching of the English language) and Islamic culture and the relationship between Islam and the West.

Professor Ashraf was a man of great spiritual vision and intellectual thinking, with indefatigable energy, though he lived a simple life. He was an embodiment of true faith, a faith which nurtured by knowledge and love. He was loving and affectionate, and inexhaustibly so. Full of kindness and compassion, he would always help others wherever and whenever possible. He loved and was loved by people who happened to come in contact with him from all parts of the world.

He was a treasury of knowledge and wisdom from which we all benefited greatly. He was a great teacher, a gentle friend and a wise guide and we will remember him as these as well as eminent scholar who devoted all his life to spreading the message of Islam all over the world. His death is certainly a global loss: the world has lost a great Islamic thinker, educationalist and spiritual master. But even more so, his death is a great personal loss to his friends and colleagues all over the world.

His body was taken to Dhaka where he was buried at the Darul Ihsan University campus on 10th August 1998. May Allah bless him.

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