

Some Thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival-London 1976

by

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The World of Islam Festival officially ended on the last day of June, but like many multifaceted events it still presents new aspects and activities which will continue well into 1977.

It is too early to evaluate or judge the full effect or usefulness which has been achieved. I would therefore confine myself to some personal observations about the Festival, its impact upon the public and upon those whose work enabled it to take place.

We live in a political world, and one of our necessary objectives was to keep politics out of the Festival, but at the same time to enlist the support and aid of governments in order to finance and present national treasures and the work of national institutions and scholars. This meant that our appeal was pan-Islamic—covering the whole extent of the Moslem world—and not a geographical area divided by political frontiers. How, indeed, could we possibly relate “*dar al-Islam*” with political boundaries? It is a contradiction in terms, and in no way could we arbitrarily set a date by which to determine those boundaries, since many were drawn by European and other powers without regard for natural or ethnic frontiers or demarcation lines.

By concentrating on the mainstream of the religious inspiration and evolution of Islamic culture, we were able to avoid regional and schismatic controversies, which would have made the presentation of Islamic civilization too complicated for the majority of non-Moslem recipients. Even so, there were many who felt that we were trying to present a Festival of Islam, which we were neither qualified nor intending to do. But from the start we made it as clear as we could that we were trying to provide a “platform” upon which Moslems would portray the inspiration, synthesis and achievement of Islamic culture through the variety of media available to modern communications ; exhibitions, films, books, television, lectures and discussion, by enlisting the support and cooperation of British academic and cultural institutions. Unlike an ordinary exhibition, the Festival brought together scholars from all over the world, who worked side by side, literally and metaphorically, for two years in order to produce the final presentation to the public. Contacts so made do not disappear with the end of the Festival, and we look forward to the development of these newly founded associations.

In a world where blind economic growth and the avid pursuit of materialistic gains have become the “*desiderata*” for many of its inhabitants, it was timely that attention should be drawn

to other values and methods by which societies had once—and still do to a certain extent—order their being. The “western” linear or separate evolution of scholarship and disciplines—leading to the narrowing of expertise and the study of the sciences in isolation from each other—is already being questioned and faulted. Modern housing, medicine, and all that is embraced by the ecology and husbandry of our natural resources, and the accompanying threat of profligate consumption, be it of newsprint, foodstuffs, or energy, demand that we rethink the problem of our survival and welfare on a global scale. Although the Festival did not touch directly upon the modern aspects of these problems, guidelines from the past are clearly there for us to use.

So, by asking modern scholars and academic institutions to describe and display their views and to demonstrate the fundamental themes and manifestations of the World of Islam from within to the (largely) non-Moslem West, not only are we helped to take a new and different perspective of our own society, but the Moslem world, from which they come, can also reassess and revalue the ordering of its own societies, which have become jeopardized by Western technology and all that is accompanied by it, and which has appeared so fascinating to it.

A Festival like this (—but I know of none like it!) has an enduring effect, and at best, a growing influence upon those by whom it has been attended. To say that over half a million people were expected to have visited the exhibitions by the time the last one closes is a statistic indicative of public interest. It is estimated that over a million viewers watched each of the six-part film on the World of Islam on BBC television. The books, of which there were a great many, including our own beautiful fully illustrated series by most distinguished Moslem authors, will be read and valued for years to come. Exhibition catalogues will provide scholastic references for schools, universities and general libraries.

The Educational Programme which launched over one hundred and fifty public lectures on a wide variety of themes throughout the UK—all upon complementary subjects—embraced over eight hundred schools and universities. The culmination and highlight of this was the Colloquium at Cambridge University in July where scholars from all over the world met and discussed “The Islamic City”. The Festival in its widest sense, incorporated related activities by museums and universities as far west as Exeter and north to Edinburgh in Scotland.

We have welcomed many visitors from abroad. Distinguished and important people attended the inauguration of the Festival by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, whose official titles include that of “Defender of the Faith”. With nearly a million Moslem subjects in Britain today and many millions of British Moslems within the framework of the Commonwealth, I venture to suggest that this once exclusively Christian title now embraces a wider responsibility.

The opening of the exhibition of “Science and Technology in Islam” at the Science Museum by Her Imperial Majesty, The Empress of Iran added to the regal elegance of the opening ceremonies and represented the role played in the Festival by those countries outside the Arab

world, whose influence and culture have contributed to and enhanced the synthesis and development of world-wide Islamic civilization.

Perhaps above all else, and attended by little publicity, the visit by His Eminence the Shaikh al-Azhar, Dr. Abdel Halim Mahmoud, symbolized the new approach and attitude towards Islamic-Christian relations, which has been cautiously developing in the last few years. Invited to a fraternal meeting by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to open the truly magnificent exhibition of Qu'ran manuscripts in the British Library, the Shaikh was seated with the Queen at the inauguration of the Festival. He was able to visit and receive representatives of the Moslem community in Britain, and was himself welcomed and entertained by dignitaries of the Church of England.

There is much yet to be written about the Festival, both in general and upon particular aspects. The main events have drawn to a close, and the influences and effects begin to sink into our society, like rain into the earth. I think that we can claim that many people all over the world worked hard and contributed, each in his own way, each according to the demands put upon him, and each country according to its resources and the requirements sought from it, in order to achieve great international success.

For the recipients and viewers and listeners—the “witnesses” of the Festival—as many questions have been posed as have been answered. That is as it should be, for the search for Knowledge and Truth never ends.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians, xv. 26.