

## *Obituary*

### **Mumtaz Ahmad: Model Scholar, Educator, and Public Intellectual**

Wise, kind, humorous, humble, profoundly honorable and dignified – these are just some of the words that describe our beloved Mumtaz Ahmad, whose passing we mourn. A great scholar, mentor, friend, and family man, he will be missed by the countless people whose lives he influenced. I feel honored to count myself among them.

With degrees in economics, Islamic studies, and development administration, and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago, Ahmad published eight books. His most recent is *Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012). Bringing together a stellar array of scholars, this book is particularly prescient in stressing the importance of the responsible study of Islam in a country whose policies so deeply impact Muslims. He also published dozens of articles and chapters, and delivered hundreds of lectures throughout his native Pakistan and North America, as well as Europe, the Middle East, Africa, South and Southeast Asia.

He served as president of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists as well as the South Asian Muslims Studies Association. In addition, he served on numerous editorial boards, was editor of *Studies in Contemporary Islam*, and associate editor of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* and the *East-West Review*. His work was supported by grants from the Fulbright Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States Institute of Peace, the National Bureau of Asian Research, and the Brookings Institution, among others.

Ahmad taught political science at Hampton University in Virginia for twenty years, where he mentored countless students. He also served as vice president and then president of the International Islamic University in Islamabad (IIUI). At the time of his death on March 30, 2016, he was executive director of the Iqbal International Institute for Research and Dialogue at IIUI, a position he had also held prior to his presidency of the university. Even as he served in these august positions, Ahmad continued his mentoring. He was always available to the many students who flocked to his office for formal and informal discussions. Those who knew him will not be surprised to learn that, despite a critical illness, he worked until the day he died, making sure that his students were well situated to carry on his legacy.

Ahmad was not only a committed educator, but also a model scholar and public intellectual of the highest integrity. One of our earliest interactions was at a conference on pluralism in the 1990s. The Muslim community in South Africa was presented as a source of inspiration for Muslim-majority countries struggling to develop positive relationships with the religious Other.

Ahmad openly challenged the idea, asking what such a tiny minority could possibly teach the massive Muslim majorities in South Asia, for example. Years later, in an equally public venue, he recalled the incident and said that he had looked into the matter and had, in fact, found the South African Muslim community deeply inspiring. Finding the roots of interfaith solidarity in the Qur'an and Sunnah, they had amplified their strength, working closely with diverse communities to defeat the vile Apartheid system.

Of equal significance was Ahmad's highly principled stand on academic freedom. As president of IIUI, his decisions on issues such as women's scholarly activities and the choice of visitors to the university were challenged by the board of directors. Rather than compromise, Ahmed stepped down from the presidency and resumed his post as executive director of the Iqbal International Institute for Research and Dialogue (IRD). Indeed, the Iqbal Institute reflects his core commitments. With keen insight into the challenges facing Muslims in the twenty-first century, Ahmad brought scholars and students from Pakistan and around the world to the institute and en-

couraged lively and productive interdisciplinary discussions ranging from critical thought, human rights, and the rule of law, to pluralism, diversity, and democracy.

Ultimately, Ahmad was committed to Islam's central value of human dignity as it informs both private and public life. That value informed his views on critical issues such as Pakistan's blasphemy laws and their misuse to justify attacks against non-Muslims alleged to have insulted Islam. With typical clarity, he distinguished between blasphemy – attacking a tradition from within – and bigotry – attacking a tradition from the outside. Insulting other people's religions cannot be considered blasphemy; in fact, it can even be considered a simple matter of free speech. On the other hand, the lessons of history teach us the reciprocity of freedom and responsibility. The Holocaust and Rwandan genocide, for example, demonstrate that freedom of speech must be balanced by people's right to be protected from incitement to violence.

History also teaches us that the line between mere bigotry and violence-inducing hate speech is not always clear. In the context of systematic oppression, an apparently simple act of bigotry can trigger a massive explosion of violence – as has been seen in race riots in the United States and the violence resulting from the 2005-06 Danish cartoon crisis. Reflecting his moral commitment and intellectual vision, Ahmad universalized the value of human dignity and concluded that the global community must work together to oppose all forms of bigotry, whether against Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, or anyone else.

These are just a few examples of the kind of ethical and intellectual integrity for which Mumtaz Ahmad was known. His colleagues offer others. John L. Esposito, founding director of the Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, says, "Mumtaz Ahmad was a trailblazer in Islamic studies, particularly on the role of religion in politics and society. An expert on the Middle East and South Asia, he will be remembered for his major contributions in America and Pakistan as an academic, research fellow at major think tanks and university administrator, but most of all for his gentle but firm willingness to speak truth to power and his supportive friendship to so many of us." John O. Voll,

professor emeritus of Islamic history at the Center, says, “Mumtaz Ahmad helped us all to understand the nature of the relationships between religion and politics in Islam, showing how important it is not to leave such discussions to the ideologues and militants. He was also a wonderful friend.” Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun professor of Islamic studies at American University, says, “I loved Mumtaz Ahmad’s great spirit and unfailing optimism throughout Pakistan’s ups and downs.” He concludes simply, “We will miss him.” Indeed, we will. The greatest tribute we can pay him is to carry on his work.

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