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# The World Congress of Philosophy and Islamic Thought

IBRAHIM KALIN

The 21<sup>st</sup> World Congress of Philosophy was held in Istanbul, Turkey, from 10-17 August 2003 and inaugurated by Turkish President Ahmed Necdet Sezer. An impressive number of philosophers, social scientists and scholars came together from about eighty different countries. The main theme of this year's congress was 'Philosophy Facing World Problems'. Officially founded in 1948, The World Congress of Philosophy which organizes a general meeting every five years, is the largest association of philosophy in the world and has an honored history of over a century.

At face value the fact that the Congress's first meeting of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was held in the Islamic world is more than symbolic. On one hand, it confirms philosophy's appeal as a potential universal discourse. On the other hand, the choice of world problems as this year's theme points to its desire to represent a discourse that has something to say about urgent problems of the world. When analysed carefully, however, neither of these claims can be said to have been realized at the Congress. The world problems highlighted at the Congress included poverty, immigration, civil war, terrorism, exploitation of labor, environment, human rights, democratization, civil liberties, multiculturalism and the consequences of globalization. Various analyses were offered from different points of view. Participants called for a collective and global effort to confront world problems and condemned the rise of American unilateralism and hegemonic power relations. There was a palpable sense of anti-American (or rather anti-Bush) sentiment at the Congress. Although at times this sentiment verged on simplistic reductionism whereby most of the present evils of the world were attributed to American power, the speakers were also critical of the deeper causes of world problems faced by both Western and non-Western societies.

## Philosophy facing its own legitimacy crisis

Contemporary philosophy's attempt to address world problems can be seen as a response to the legitimacy crisis of modern thought. The vacuum created by the devastating attack of postmodernism, now waning as a philosophical vogue, forced practitioners of all schools of thought to question their own legitimacy. Modern thought has been further rendered dysfunctional and practically meaningless by the uncontrollable power of capitalism, transnational corporations, globalization, hegemonic power politics, genetic engineering, consumerism, the *de facto* culture of nihilism, and the trivialization of all thinking and

**For the first time in its history the World Congress of Philosophy met in a Muslim majority country. The meeting venue was more than symbolic for it confirmed philosophy's potential to be a universal discourse. Similarly, the choice of this year's theme, 'Philosophy Facing World Problems', points to the desire and potential of philosophy to engage in urgent problems of the world. When analysed carefully, however, neither of these claims can be said to have been realized.**

This sincere and earnest desire to address world problems in a global context, however, was marred by the lack of analyses and perspectives that could lead to a global ethics in confronting today's problems. Putting aside sessions on specific topics in philosophy and critical theory, the overwhelming majority of discussions on political issues did

not go beyond the East-West and South-North dichotomies. Nor were there any perspectives that interpreted the world from a non-European or non-American point of view. Blaming the West for the misdeeds of the modern world and then taking a condescending approach towards non-Western societies, though well intended, simply reinforces the conception of the world as revolving around a center, i.e. Europe and the United States.

Constructing the world from a non-Western perspective that will allow multiple actors to play a central role in the current system of relations is a real challenge for the oft-repeated multiculturalism of our day. Frankly, one would have hoped that someone would have at least raised this issue at the Congress, but no one did. Perhaps one major reason for this absence is that despite some earnest efforts, the

concept of multiculturalism is still used in a primarily Western context. In Europe 'multiculturalism' refers primarily to a mode of religious and cultural coexistence confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the case of the US, it is a matter of internal politics with no real and concrete applications outside *Pax Americana*. In the final analysis, the central actors of world affairs in both the political and intellectual senses of the term are relegated to Europe and the US. Inevitably, this leads to the widespread suspicion that multiculturalism, when it is invoked at all, is an intra-Western rather than inter-cultural concept.

## The meaning of multiculturalism

Last May Habermas and Derrida, the two most prominent and celebrated contemporary European philosophers, published a letter condemning American unilateralism and the invasion of Iraq. The letter authored by Habermas and signed by Derrida takes the Iraq issue as

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the surfacing of a deeper problem in world affairs. At face value the problem is the limitless ambition of American neo-conservatism and its relentless efforts to subdue any alternative power, be it political, economic, or cultural. But the deeper problem, Habermas and Derrida tell us, is the waning of European civilization as we know it. To counter irresponsible American pragmatism, the philosophers urge Europeans to go back to the ideals of the Enlightenment that gave Europe its present identity and self-consciousness and made it a 'universal system of culture'. What is remarkable about this proposal is that it is not only based on a concept of Europe that is fixed in space and time, but also ignores the present realities of multiculturalism in Europe. In drawing out a roadmap for the future of Europe the two philosophers say nothing about the presence of non-European and primarily Muslim minorities in Europe's midst. There is no indication that Habermas and Derrida want to see Europe as a truly multicultural entity beyond the limits of Judeo-Christian tradition on the one hand, and secular European culture, on the other.

At the Congress, many pointed to the fact that multiple actors are shaping world culture and politics, but we are yet to see a full-fledged analysis that is both cogent and compelling. The Congress represented a unique opportunity for philosophers to develop a discourse that goes beyond pro or anti-Americanism to a context of genuine multiculturalism. The fact that the Congress convened in a Muslim city that boasts of being a meeting place of East and West, tradition and modernity, old and new, did not help the cause because neither European nor American philosophers demonstrated substantial knowledge about the Islamic world. Those participants from the Islamic world had an annoyingly insignificant presence and didn't make their voices heard on a larger scale.

### So, where is Islamic philosophy?

The virtual absence of Islamic thought at the Congress, made all the more ironic since it was being held for the first time in a Muslim country, was a missed opportunity. There are many reasons why this turned out to be the case, the most notable pertaining to the present state of Islamic philosophy and its study in modern academia. The first problem is related to the question of multiculturalism I referred to above. In spite of many sincere attempts on the part of both Western and non-Western philosophers, the word 'philosophy' by itself still refers to Western philosophy. When we use the term in the context of other traditions, we have to say 'Islamic', 'African', or 'Chinese' philosophy. From a pedagogical point of view, there is nothing wrong with this. But the deeper problem is the hegemony of Western philosophical thought whereby all other philosophical traditions are assessed in relation to, or separation from it. In spite of calls for multiculturalism right and left, the question remains: Is Western philosophy ready to open itself up to a dialogue with non-Western ways of thinking?

The second problem, and I believe this is even more important than the first, has to do with the way Islamic philosophy is studied today. From its inception in Western academia, Islamic philosophy was always studied by historians and philologists as part of Islamic-Near Eastern studies. Classical Orientalism never produced a work on Islamic philosophy or *kalam* for that matter that can claim to be a philosophical work on its own. The issues were always of a historical nature such as the extent to which Islamic philosophy was indebted to Greek philosophy or how Islamic thought came about as a result of translations from Greek. The situation has not changed since then. Islamic philosophy is still studied by scholars who come primarily from history or Middle Eastern studies background rather than philosophy. Courses on Islamic philosophy are offered not in mainstream philosophy departments but in either religious studies or Near Eastern and/or Middle East studies departments. One rarely sees scholars of Islamic philosophy at any of the major philosophical conventions in the US and other places. These obvious facts make the study of Islamic philosophy a parochial enterprise

insofar as philosophical thought is concerned. Putting aside the few exceptions to the rule, those who study Western philosophy have no interest in Islamic philosophy because it is mere intellectual history, and those who study Islamic philosophy study it as part of Islamic cultural history because they have no training in philosophy.

From a comparative standpoint we have to ask ourselves if Islamic philosophy has any place in the global philosophical scene today. Furthermore, we have to ask if Islamic philosophers, both intellectuals and professional scholars, are prepared to take Islamic philosophy beyond classrooms and academic meetings. It will be too simplistic to claim that since Islamic philosophy is no longer a living tradition it has to be studied as history, and its relevance, or lack thereof for modern thought, has no bearings on its academic study. There is nothing wrong with studying an intellectual tradition from a historical and cultural point of view. The problem arises when that tradition is construed as only history. This is especially the case in philosophy where pure historical analysis, no matter how successful it is, is not always the best aid to understand a particular philosophical problem. Compared with Hindu or Buddhist philosophy, there is less and less interaction between Islamic and Western philosophy and I believe the current study of Islamic philosophy as a historico-philological field contributes to this problem.

On the other hand, the perception of Western and Islamic philosophy in

Muslim countries is saddled with even more acute problems. In Turkey, for instance, Islamic philosophy is studied only at divinity schools, the reasons given for this are clearly more ideological than pedagogical. Those who study Western philosophy in Turkey and other Muslim countries believe that they study philosophy per se, and that all other philosophical traditions are either divergences from, or steps towards, modern European philosophy. Turkish President Sezer expressed this deep-rooted Euro-centrism present even in Muslim majority countries in his opening speech when he proclaimed, to the astonishment of hundreds of philosophers from different corners of the world, that 'philosophy must be modern and secular' as if one can give such a law-like definition of philosophy. Turkey's official state ideology still underlies much of how one studies both Western and Islamic philosophy in Turkey today. Paradoxically, this narrow definition of philosophy as an ideology of secularism excludes not only non-Western ways of thinking but also a good part of Western philosophical tradition. Needless to say, this was very much reflected at the various sessions of the Congress.

It will be a historic moment when Western philosophers open themselves up to other modes of thinking and especially to Islamic philosophy that shares a long history with Western philosophy. The absence of such a possibility at the present time makes the concept of 'world philosophy' a euphemism for 'European' philosophy. In a similar way, the scholars of Islamic philosophy are responsible for taking Islamic philosophy beyond a mere study of intellectual history. This will require training a new generation of philosopher-scholars in both Western academia and the Muslim world. Let us hope that the future conventions of the World Congress of Philosophy will create more impetus for expanding the meaning and relevance of philosophy in the world today.

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### Notes

1. The Congress program can be obtained from the Congress website at <http://www.wcp2003.org>
2. For the letter in German, see *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, May 31, 2003.

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