

CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL TRADITION

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Dear Mr. President and Your Excellency!

With all the cognoscenti present here, I am very conscious today of being surrounded by great learned people. And after the magisterial address by Dr. Mohammed Ajmal – really, in one sense, silence is in order and not a lot of talk. And I think it would be a great Sufi insight to say now that we should have silence for an hour or two – or three - or four (laughter).

I wish, if I may, as Provost of the Cathedral, and now that I work in Birmingham, to pay tribute to Iqbal Academy and to wish it well and all its tremendously important work in Birmingham. I have been associated with it in Coventry for some years, and have been delighted always that the Cathedral at Coventry should be the centre and office and library of the Iqbal Academy. And I am delighted to see it on the notepaper which you have all received.

I wish to add just one or two points, if I may. I am pleased that the choice of the subject is about mysticism, but I wonder if you do share this – we have not had speakers yet who would say that both in orthodox Islam and within the Christian tradition, mysticism has always been unorthodox and difficult, and unacceptable to many people, because it has been misunderstood. And I think that it is very important that we understand it, particularly in our Islamic traditions and in our Christian, Western Christian, traditions.

I would want to move into a situation where we regard all theology as mystical theology and all life as mystical; and that we ought not to allow the words mystical and mysticism to be separated and put to one side as though it was something different and special in every human person's experience. We are all on that *via mystica*, if you like; we are all caught up in whatever mysticism is – it is, if you like, a pilgrimage to God.

Last year I spent a month in Abu-Dhabi, and Dubai and Sharja, and at the oasis, the Burami oasis, in the Sultanate of Oman. And for the first time in my life I experienced something of the desert, something of the mystical life that I read about and share with Muslim friends. It does seem to me, as an earlier speaker from Cambridge has indicated, that there is a very close interlocking of the Christian and Muslim experience. And it does seem to me also that it is centered in the desert as a very special way in which the 7th and 8th centuries AD, or 1st and 2nd centuries of the Hegira, are closely intertwined. And therefore we must look for the mystery, the experience of mysticism, which, I think, Iqbal of Lahore was experimenting within his own enormously pantechnicon mind.

He was looking also for the sutures that bind the experiences of different religions and communities together. The suture – I just thought of that word – comes from the medical world. The sutures are those special things that bind us together. It seems to me that the work of Iqbal Academy, and all that we are doing today, is to bind us together and not to separate us. It is the work of the devil, the diabolos, to divide. Satan divides the world; it is God who unites it. And it seems to me that one of the marks of our work in the Iqbal Academy is to look for sutures and things that hold us together.

I would like to suggest that through our work today, it has already come through the experiences of the sermons and addresses given to us, that we explore more deeply the spiritual, the life of the spirit: the life that, in Islamic theology, is رُوح and Nafs two levels of

the spirit in Islamic theology; the life of the spirit in the great tradition of Ruach of the Hebrew tradition; the life of the Sanctus Spiritus in the Christian theology. It seems to be a very important part of exploration, and we should share it.

But if I may just say one last word, about the abiding influence of the Islamic mystical tradition on the Christian tradition,

I think I would use perhaps that marvellous word – Tauhid (توحيد i.e. Unity) – and say that one of the extraordinary developments within Islamic mysticism is the wrestling with the question of God, Allah, who is truly within himself and yet Creator, and yet relating to His world; and the constant awareness of the difficulty of talking about a relationship – what is the relationship between Allah and us? – And search that relation-ship. It seems to be a pilgrimage, or Hajj, or an exploration of all relationships. It is at the heart of all mysticism. And there are two words which mean a great deal to me in my own search, in my own Hajj for truth. And those two words are kabd قبض and bast بسط. It seems to me they are the essence of spirituality, because they are related to universals. Kabd means contracting of our life and soul and spirit; and bast, an expansion. And because they are related to deep human experiences of fear, kabd; and love, bast.

And it does seem to me that if we are to explore together, as Christians and as Muslims, together as creatures of Allah or God, then we have to explore how to move from the kabd, fear, of each other or a hostile world, towards that wide expansion of life that is, I think, the theme of our conference and of the other papers that we shall have this afternoon. But I wish to thank you for asking me to just say a word. And also to say how deeply important it is that the Iqbal Academy, perhaps more than any other institution, enables, in this special way, this creation of a garden out of the desert of our relationships: to create a garden of relationship and love and fellowship and friendship between the Muslims and Christians – as a special flower for today (applause).