Obituary: Ataullah Siddiqui (1954-2020)

YUSRI MOHAMAD RAMLI

Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him do we return. It is with the profoundest sadness to hear the passing away of Professor Dr. Ataullah Siddiqui on 8th November 2020. Dr. Ataullah was widely known as well as praised by many for his dedication and contribution in interfaith engagement in Britain as well as education and training of British Muslims. He was born in India in 1954 and moved to Britain in 1982 and worked as an academia. His last position was Professor of Christian-Muslim Relations and Inter-faith Understanding at the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicester. It was in this institution together with its parent institution Islamic Foundation where he worked since his early years in Britain.

I could remember meeting Dr. Ataullah 10 years ago when I was chairing his talk on Islamophobia during his visit to my home university. I had already read some of his books before, but this was my first time to meet him in person. From my first impression, I sense right away of his humbleness and we then get acquainted easily. What is more astonishing that caught my attention was on how good he being assimilating himself in British way of gentleness far peculiarly beyond any typical British citizen of south Asian ancestry I met during my living in Britain from 2007 until 2008. It was not a coincidence that his distinctive character well represents his thought and journey which I will describe shortly in a glimpse based on his writings. Four years later, he paid another visit and we were again together on several meetings. It was during this time we managed to get a slot from his packed schedule to discuss about our journal. Between the visits, we had already corresponded each other through email regarding several matters including appointing him as one of our advisor.

Back to what I promised to explain, Dr. Ataullah early works in 80’s portray a bit skeptical view on Christianity and its missions, probably as a result of cultural shock after moving to a new country and perhaps some influences of his background of his home country. Off course, it is quite common for Muslim families in any part of the world to educate its members to keep holding on to the faith of Islam and to be well aware of other religions. Surely the awareness rises in the situation of moving to a foreign country. During the days, the idea of dialogue and engagement yet to cross Dr. Ataullah’s mind.

But some years later particularly in the mid 90’s, he began to move forward to a more engaging attitude towards Christian by offering readiness for dialogue with Christians which gave a starting point in moving to a step forward in interfaith relations in Britain and to some extents the world. It was his book, Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century, published in 1997, that made breakthrough to this impetus. The book explains about the reality of religious pluralism in modern time and the relations between Muslims and Christians, which in a way explains the challenges faced by Muslims including himself and Christians in encountering each other. Dr. Ataullah in this book advised Muslims to develop their actions based on the teachings of Islam on encountering the others by integrating theirselves into British community and culture and be part of it without leaving Islam as well as its principles and values. What came next was a number of works and efforts to bridge the gap between growing Muslim populations or other minorities and local Christians in order to make everybody to feel Britain like home.

Dr. Ataullah is indeed an outstanding inter-faith leader and an advocate for Islam in Britain. My sincere condolences to his family, colleagues, and friends. May Allah have mercy upon him and grant him a high place.

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