

short speech which this writer delivered, describing with some detail our beginning, research agenda, activities and publications. We later discussed the possibility of collaborating with GIRU in the area of research and publication.

*Visit to National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (NCEIS),*

*University of Western Sydney and University of Melbourne*

Upon the invitation of Dr Abdullah Saeed, the director of NCEIS, we visited the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (NCEIS). The centre, though based in the University of Melbourne, provides academic access to the Griffith University and the University of Western Sydney. The centre established in 2007 with government funding, aims to advance the knowledge and understanding of the rich traditions and modern complexities of Islam and to profile Australia's strengths in the field of Islamic studies. Professor Kamali was requested to speak on "Reforming Islamic Law" to a sizeable group of scholars and students. The presentation went well and generated a lot of interest from the floor. Audiences were also keen to learn more of IAIS Malaysia's willingness to collaborate with international parties. The event, chaired by Dr Abdullah Saeed, ended with the discussion on several proposals which were raised by his deputy, Associate Professor Dr Shahram Akbarzadeh. We also met three Malaysians who were visiting fellows, currently doing their PhDs.

*Visit to University of Western Sydney (UWS)*

Professor Kamali and this writer met with four scholars for a two-hour meeting and in-depth discussion. There was no formal presentation. Instead our hosts were essentially interested to know more about how and why IAIS Malaysia came about. I spoke mainly on our plans, exchanging our ideas for the future. The meeting also featured a video presentation about IAIS Malaysia, and we discussed possible avenues of collaboration. Moreover, we met with Dr Nancy Wright, Dr Bryan Turner, Dr Steven Drakeley, Dr Jan Ali, and Dr Nigel Bond. Later, we discovered that USW has launched a new research centre, the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies, which aims at exploring the place of Muslim communities in contemporary multicultural societies. The Centre, an independent research group, is a component of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (NCEIS).

### **Three Conferences on Intercivilisational Dialogue (Shanghai, China, 28 June–3 July 2009)**

*Karim D. Crow, IAIS Malaysia*

I was fortunate to attend three meetings in the Peoples' Republic of China involving a team of international Christian and Muslim scholars working on cross-cultural and civilisational issues, interfacing with Chinese scholars at leading academic and policy institutes in Shanghai.

This international team, organised by the Washington-based Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (RVP) in collaboration with the host Chinese institutions, consisted of twelve scholars plus one organiser:

Prof. George McLean (RVP, Catholic University of America, Washington DC); Prof. Gholamreza Aavani (director, Iranian Institute of Philosophy, Tehran, and president of the International Society for Islamic Philosophy, ISIP); Prof. Vincent Shen (Lee chair in Chinese Thought and Culture, University of Toronto, Canada); Prof. William Sweet (Dept. of Philosophy and Religious Studies, St Thomas University, New Brunswick, Canada); Prof. Tran Van Doan (Dept. of Philosophy, National Taiwan University); Prof. João J. Vila-Chã, Dept. of Philosophy, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome); Prof. Edward Wamala, Dept. of Philosophy, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda); Prof. Wilhelm Danca (Roman Catholic Theological Institute, Iași, Romania); Prof. Anatolij Karas (chair, Dept. of Philosophy, Lviv Franko National University, Ukraine); Assoc. Prof. Edward ‘Alam (Faculty of Humanities, Notre Dame University, Louaize, Lebanon); Prof. Janis Ozolins (chair, Human Research Ethics Committee, Australian Catholic University, Victoria, Australia); Dr Karim D. Crow (principal research fellow, IAIS Malaysia); Dr Hu Yeping (RVP, Washington DC).

### **“The Enlightenment and Its Contemporary Re-Evaluation” (28–29 June 2009)**

This colloquium was convened at the National Research Base for World Marxism and Thought Trends, in the School of Philosophy at Fudan University (FU), with 13 scholars from FU’s School of Philosophy presenting papers. Founded in 1905 as a college, Fudan University is perhaps the most prestigious university in mainland China; the philosophy school has 50 teachers and about 500 students up to the doctorate level. The final afternoon was devoted to a roundtable discussion on the future cooperation among philosophers from social, cultural and civilisational aspects.

As China’s modernisation gathers speed, they are re-thinking the legacy of the Enlightenment Project for their continuing development. Issues of the environment, market societisation, the negative role of instrumental reason, the need to better exploit cultural resources, and the goal of harmonious international relations consistent with Eastern traditions, were all discussed. All papers were presented in English, with Chinese summaries provided orally. Exchanges were energetic, fruitful, sometimes controversial yet collegial.

### **“Consultation on Religions and Cultures” (30 June 2009)**

This event took place at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), Center for Ethnic, Religion and Culture Studies (CERCS). Three directors of

separate institutes were present, including the influential Madame Professor Yu Xintian (director of CERCS), the Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies, and Professor Ye Jiang, director of the Institute for Global Governance Studies. SIIS was established in 1960 by Chou En-Lai (1898–1976), the first premier of the Peoples' Republic of China, and today represents one of the three most important think tanks for China's foreign policy, with over 100 researchers and staff.

Madame Yu gave an overview of the foreign policy objectives of China: in her view, peaceful international relations, sustainable development, openness and reform, and cultural authenticity are paramount for national policy. Ye Jiang suggested the need to go beyond the nation-state identity and to learn and integrate from other cultures. He addressed the topic of tradition and modernity, stressing his view that today's China encourages the fostering of cultural traditions (which in the past had been neglected).

The role of religions and renewed religious identity, too, was discussed, and one director forcibly raised the issue of the Dalai Lama – *is he a political or a religious leader?* The new confident even strident sense of self-assurance exhibited by the political leadership class was clearly evidenced. All the Chinese thinkers agreed that Islam (like Christianity) was a 'foreign religion', while Buddhism could be viewed as 'Chinese' or as exhibiting 'Chinese characteristics'. The increasing spread of Protestant Christianity (unofficial 'house' churches) among Chinese elites was raised, and it was suggested that its attraction was partly due to identification with being Western and modern. Madame Yu argued that essentially Chinese are not truly religious and only adopted religions for social or material needs.

The visiting scholars sought to convey that religions must be studied and understood not merely for strategic or security reasons, but for assisting the cultural transformations underway in arriving at authentic forms of modernity, and for national advancement and international cooperation. Economic and political ties need to be reinforced and deepened with cultural understanding and appreciation of traditions.

### **“Diversity in Unity: Harmony in a Global Age” (2–3 July 2009)**

This conference was convened at the Institute of Philosophy of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS), with eight scholars from SASS's Institute of Philosophy participating by presenting papers. SASS includes several high-quality post-graduate institutes.

These papers with ensuing wide-ranging discussions dealt with broad issues of civil society, underlying values, pluralism, particularist trends in societies or regions, and critical themes of epistemic importance at the heart of Eastern and Western traditions. The connecting concern was how to support international harmony in the face of the cultural diversification spread by globalising forces, and the conflicting

visions of self-interest and identity exhibited by nations and peoples. The tone of discourse was uniformly high and very well-informed, Chinese scholars being well acquainted with European thought and contemporary intellectual fashions.

### Assessment

In the course of both the Fudan University and SASS's discussions, several basic realities became apparent to the foreign visiting scholars: Contemporary Chinese thinkers – being very well trained in historical materialism and still wedded to a formal ideology of Marxist social theory with its reductionist view of the human – do not accept the reality of universals for knowledge theory. Even more remarkable is their explicit *rejection* that ancient Chinese philosophic worldview (Daoism; less so Confucianism and Buddhism) embraces any sort of transcendent basis for human awareness and achievement. In a very real sense, mainland Chinese thinkers remain good children of the Enlightenment (Kant, Hegel, Marx...), and uphold a materialist anthropology and epistemology. This feature of contemporary thinking in China was painfully demonstrated when the Iranian professor Aavani presented a profound summary of the metaphysical basis of Daoism, comparing it to the Pre-Socratic thinkers Heraclitus and Parmenides, supported by references to Ibn al-‘Arabī, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā, and offered this metaphysical harmony as a realistic grounding for global unity. Several highly respected Chinese professors attacked him for *mis*-understanding the essence of Chinese thought, heatedly insisting that ‘transcendence’ has always been foreign to Chinese thinking and experience. This led them to an amused dismissal of Professor Aavani.

### **Fifth International Conference on Children and Youth in MENA Cities: "Education, Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Youth for the Labour Market" (Aleppo, Syria, 6–8 July 2009)**

*Azizah Anuar, LAIS Malaysia*

The Fifth International Conference on Children and Youth in MENA Cities, organised by the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) and MENA Child Protection Initiative (MENA CPI), with the collaboration of Aleppo Municipality, Syria Trust for Development–SHABAB Project, UNICEF, and the World Bank, inaugurated by the Governor of Aleppo, Eng. Ali Ahmad Mansourah, gathered 26 speakers and 300 participants to share lessons learned and best practices related to vulnerable and marginalised children and youth in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. The conference aimed to share experiences from other countries regarding policies and programmes for children and youths and seek solutions and offer recommendations to curb socio-economic illnesses