

ISLAM AND THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL SYMBIOSIS

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Symbiosis: the Japanese Connection

The idea of symbiosis has its first philosophical and scientific conceptualizations and articulation in modern Japanese thought. It is also in the "land of the rising sun" that this idea still has its widest reception and practical applications. This is perhaps not surprising since, as the Japanese proponents of this idea themselves have claimed, "the roots of the concept of symbiosis are to be found in Buddhist philosophy and traditional Japanese culture."¹ The Japanese exponents of this idea went on to claim that "symbiosis is a key concept in understanding Japanese culture."² One of the most famous of them is the architect, Kisho Kurokawa, whose book "The Philosophy of Symbiosis" we have just cited. Kurokawa is known to many Malaysians as the architect of the impressive Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Kurokawa's "The Philosophy of Symbiosis" was first published in Japanese. It was the publication in England of the English rendering of this book which helped to introduce and popularize the concept of symbiosis in the English-speaking world. My intention in this paper is to show that the roots of the concept of symbiosis are not exclusive to Buddhist philosophy or traditional Japanese culture. The roots of the concept of symbiosis are also to be found in traditional Islamic thought, particularly in the tawhidic worldview of Islam as it has been traditionally understood. I am inclined to believe that elements of the philosophy may be found in various forms in many other traditional cultures and civilizations, a fact I pointed out to Kurokawa himself many years back during a lecture on philosophy of symbiosis he gave in Kuala Lumpur which I happened

¹ See Kurokawa, Kisho, *The Philosophy of Symbiosis* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), p. 7.

² Kurokawa, *The Philosophy of Symbiosis*, p. 7.

to attend. I told him then that I could see many similarities between his philosophy of symbiosis and the traditional Islamic philosophy of nature and Islam's tawhidic vision of the cosmos and of human culture and civilization.

If Kurokawa is inclined to dismiss any idea of co-existence and harmony in the human world that would exclude elements of "opposition and competition" contrary to the biological symbiosis observable in the world of living things,³ then we would respond to him by saying that the Islamic idea of co-existence and harmony certainly does not preclude those elements in question. In several pages that follow, we will show on the authority of the Qur'an that Islam envisages the formation of a human society in which there is cooperation (*ta'awun*), competition (*tasabug*), and even opposition and yet always pursued within the framework of human fidelity and servitude to God. Differences, of course, exist between Kurokawa's philosophy of symbiosis and the Islamic model of living together in a culturally and religiously plural world. However, this essay is not the place to go into a discussion of their similarities and differences. My purpose of pointing out that the two 'philosophies' have similarities and differences is to suggest that we may in fact speak of a distinctively Islamic concept of symbiosis, particularly of the cultural type.

My personal encounter with Kurokawa's philosophy of symbiosis in the 1990s did not influence me into producing even a single writing explicitly concerned with the concept of symbiosis. I continued to work on the theme of *tawhid* and its various manifestations in Islamic life and thought, especially in the field of knowledge and the sciences. However, my visiting professorship at Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan in May 2006 brought me back to the issue of the intellectual encounter between Islam and the philosophy of symbiosis. Realizing that my lectures delivered at the University both in Kyoto and Tokyo have harped on the theme of *al-tawhid* as the source of balance, harmony and peaceful co-existence both in nature and in human society,⁴ which perhaps reminded him of the Japanese

³ Kurokawa, *The Philosophy of Symbiosis*, p. 10.

⁴ My several lectures include a presentation on the role of monotheism (*al-tawhid*) in