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Centre of Islamic learning

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AFTER passing the Prime Minister's residence in Jalan Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, the traveller will reach a compound within which the buildings are carefully protected from curious stares by a high wall. Only a glimpse of the buildings may be caught through a gate constructed in a breach of this wall.

When he ponders this sight, the traveller might ask whether he has arrived at the residence of a late descendant of King Boabdil, one of the last Muslim kings of Granada. The building's architecture does indeed remind the visitor of the kind of palaces that were built in Spain at the time Muslim kings ruled the land.

If our traveller is of the intrepid kind, he will approach the gate, which then will be readily opened by its ever-smiling guard. When the traveller subsequently climbs some stairs and enters the building, he will find a corridor in which 16 doors protect the entrance to as many rooms, amply provided with cool air.

In each room he will find a man (sometimes a woman) in casual dress, sitting behind a desk, either reading one of the books from a collection displayed on various shelves, or diligently typing behind a computer, or in conversation with a usually somewhat younger person, a young man, or a scarved woman.

Then the traveller will have understood what the building is that he has boldly entered: this must be ISTAC, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, about which he has vaguely heard but does not know much about. Those men in the rooms are professors and their counterparts in conversation are students.

When the visitor walks about and one of the professors approaches him and asks him if he can help with anything and if perhaps he would like to know more about the place, he gladly accepts the invitation to hear the story of ISTAC. He discovers that the institute was founded in 1987 by Professor Dr Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who is also its director, and its designer-architect - all its interior and exterior were conceptualised and designed by Naquib.

The visitor will also learn that it was opened officially in October 1991 by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and that it is an authority of the International Islamic University, but independent from it, autonomous in its administration and academic affairs, deciding its own syllabus and courses of study for its graduate students, who hail from various parts of the globe.

They come to ISTAC to specialise in any kind of knowledge that is connected with Islamic civilisation in the past as well as in present times. Their course of study is, more specifically, streamed loosely into any one of three areas of inquiry, namely, Islamic Thought, Islamic Science, and Islamic Civilisation.

Then he asks whether this institute is a kind of university. As often occurs, the answer is both "yes" and "no". "Yes", because there are professors and students, there are lectures and exams, there are papers to be written, homework to be done - such things that make up the usual daily life at a university.

And the level of teaching is truly on the level of graduate studies of a European or American university, where, incidentally, most of the lecturers were educated. Also, research is maintained at a similarly high

level, and in the short time of its existence, 19 students have obtained their master's degrees and seven their doctorates.

But the answer is also "no". It is so unlike a university where one lecturer talks to 100 students or more in a large classroom, so that those in the back can hardly concentrate and then start their own conversation, so that those in front of them in turn cannot concentrate, starting to chat among themselves too - you know what happens in such cases.

It is not like a university where a lecturer, if someone addresses him, wonders whether it is one of his students or not. At ISTAC, there are 17 professors and senior researchers and about 100 students, although this number is more if one takes into account the many professionals and working people who audit courses at ISTAC without following a degree programme. Thus, the ambience at ISTAC is more intimate, the atmosphere more relaxed, the relation between students and professors more informal, and all this stimulates the students' interest in studying well and achieving the best results.

But what are the subjects that a student may study here and in which he may conduct research? Well, this may be any subject that also took the interest of the thinkers and scholars who were formed and produced by the Islamic civilisation during the last 14 centuries, those religious thinkers, theologians, philosophers, scientists, jurists and historians.

In fact, on the one hand, the study and research done at this institute aims to continue this tradition of Islamic intellectual life, and on the other hand, it will give the students an outlook on the ways of thinking in the modern world, the "global civilisation", so that they will be able to take their position and function well in this present time.

So a student will learn about traditional Islamic subjects like the Quran, hadith and fiqh, about theology, philosophy and Sufism, about science and medicine as they were practised by Muslim scholars, about Muslim thought in economics, psychology and politics.

But he or she will also learn about the history of Western philosophy and science, and also the religions and civilisations of the major Eastern and non-Muslim religious traditions.

Of course, the student must study many books, modern ones and ancient ones, and these books are written in various languages, like Arabic, Persian and Turkish. So he will have to learn these languages. And if he wants to follow the history of science and philosophy from its sources in ancient Greece to its further development during the flourishing of Islamic civilisation, and then to its transmission to the West in the Middle Ages when the current language among scholars was Latin, he has to learn the ancient Greek and Latin languages as well.

But he need look no further than ISTAC to study these languages, for here Persian, Greek and Latin are taught, apart from Arabic, which is of course compulsory for all students.

And where to find all those source materials? Why, in the library, of course, and indeed, the library of the institute is outstanding and unique in Southeast Asia. It now contains more than 130,000 volumes on all those fields of knowledge which might be of interest to a student or lecturer at this institute or to any scholar from elsewhere. It also contains over 10,000 manuscripts in microform, which are in several languages on subjects connected with Islamic civilisation, plus 2,543 manuscripts in book form. Many are rare works, and form a treasury of material, some of whose contents are still largely unknown and yet to be discovered. So it is not surprising that the library is a specialist library, meant specifically for scholars.

What about the result of all this study and research? Will it remain within the mind of the students, becoming knowledge shared only with some

colleagues, or will the rest of the world profit from it?

Surely only the last possibility can agree with the spirit the visitor has found pervading every pore of the institute he has newly befriended. Therefore the fruit of all the work done is published regularly in a journal that appears twice yearly, and in a number of books and monographs on works of original research done by the professors; even students contribute to the journal, so that the whole world may get acquainted with the research done and the ideas developed here and take part in the discussion on them. ISTAC publications now number almost 50.

When the traveller continues his journey, he would have left his heart behind at ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur's very own piece of Moorish Spain, with some of its splendour, but all of its thirst for knowledge from all civilisations.

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