

**AN ORATION BY PRIME MINISTER : A FEAST OF
CIVILISATIONS: THE LIFE AND MIND OF TOSHIHIKO IZUTSU**

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AN ORATION BY

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PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA

**A FEAST OF CIVILISATIONS: THE LIFE AND MIND OF
TOSHIHIKO IZUTSU**

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AT KEIO UNIVERSITY, JAPAN

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

1. It is with profound gratitude and a deep sense of honour that I am here today at Keio University, a beacon of knowledge and innovation in Japan.

2. Today, we celebrate the life and contributions of an extraordinary scholar whose work has transcended the boundaries of culture and intellect and left an indelible mark on the global academic, intellectual and philosophical landscape.

3. In fact, Toshihiko Izutsu's contributions to the world of the intellect, theology and philosophy have been so immense, expansive and multifarious that it is a travesty to attempt to single out his most significant contributions. That's because his works are so seamlessly interconnected that it's almost impossible to segregate or compartmentalise them without appearing to have taken an arbitrary position.

4. Nevertheless, with that caveat lodged, there has to be a point of Allow me to begin with Izutsu's remarkable achievement of translating the Qur'an into Japanese. This is a feat of unparalleled distinction and a testament to his profound linguistic skills, the depth of his erudition and intellect, and without a doubt, the tenacity of his commitment.

5. This task would have proved incredibly daunting due to the Qur'an's complex linguistic, theological, philosophical, spiritual, and mystical For Muslims, the Qur'an is not merely a text but a divine revelation, and the highest form of revelation at that. It contains layers of meaning that are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural milieu of 7th century Arabia, and yet not constrained by limitations of time or place.

6. In light of this, Izutsu's approach to translation involved more than converting Arabic words into Japanese. Here, it would be useful to recall

the late German philosopher and culture critic, Walter Benjamin, and his legendary observation on translation:

“True translation is transparent, it does not obscure the original, does not stand in its light, but rather allows pure language, as if strengthened by its own medium, to shine even more fully on the original.”

7. I believe that it is in this vein that Izutsu was able to capture the essence and semantic nuances of the original text, leaning on an intimate understanding of both the Arabic language, the Islamic tradition as well as other Semitic and cognate linguistic cousins. The task enjoined nothing less than profound empathy and adulation for the original, so as to ensure fidelity not only to the letter but also the spirit of the Qur’an.

8. By translating the Qur’an into Japanese, Izutsu made the sacred text accessible to Japanese-speaking readers, and in the process, foster greater cross-cultural This work exemplifies his commitment to bridging cultural and linguistic divides, enabling a deeper appreciation of Islamic thought within the Japanese context. His efforts have significantly contributed to the field of Islamic studies, showcasing the universal relevance and unfathomable depth of the Qur’an.

9. In *God and Man in the Qur’an*, Izutsu attempts an eclectic exploration of the semantic structure of the Qur’anic *weltanschauung*. Izutsu’s main argument centres on the premise that the Qur’an creates a *weltanschauung* that is *sui generis* through the medium of language, yielding an intrinsic fabric of meaning with semantic structures that could

be used to explicate man's relationship with God. For Izutsu, failure to perceive and comprehend the semantic structures would render it impossible to grasp the Islamic weltanschauung.

10. Forging this Islamic world view, this weltanschauung, is an undertaking that ought to be seen also in the light of his other Qur'anic study, namely, *The Ethical Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. Izutsu maintains that through the Qur'an, God enjoins man to act in an ethical way infused within the Islamic moral code, articulated coterminously with explicit devotion to his religious duties. In other words, ethics, morality, and religion are inseparable.

11. Set against the tribal norms, law, and culture of 7th century Arabia, Islam therefore came as a religion of revolutionary magnitude, introducing the most acute, dire and sweeping religious reforms. For example, in the area of social security, Islam introduced the zakat policy which constitutes a system of codified almsgiving, seen as the precursor to universal government welfare. Likewise, changes were made to the family structure, including on women's rights, to a society that was largely male dominated and the women treated as chattels. Even more drastic would be the denunciation of aristocratic privileges in favour of a formula that leans towards the creation of a more egalitarian society.

12. Emblematic of Izutsu's monumental and significant Qur'anic studies is his mastery of semantic analysis, with an exposition of the structure and usage of words, through an approach that is both deep and Being a polyglot par excellence fortified him with the wherewithal to study various religious texts in their original forms, simultaneously.

13. In Izutsu's reckoning, the Qur'an speaks to us in linguistic binaries which are diagonally opposed and underscore the relationship between God and man, such as, for example, the binary nexus between "to guide" (hadaya) and "to lead astray" (dalala). Under the divine imperative, these words, and many other binary opposites, define the existential conditions under which God's creations subsist or exist. And if I might humbly add to Izutsu's exposition, it bears pointing out that language or lisan – literally the tongue – in the Qur'anic semantic paradigm is key to the institution of prophecy, as made clear in Verse 4 of Surah Ibrahim:

"We have not sent a messenger except in the language of his people to clarify the message for them. Then Allah leaves whoever He wills to stray and guides whoever He wills. And He is the Almighty, All- Wise."

14. "...to stray and guides whoever" that is the classic binary of opposites as mentioned earlier, manifesting a semantic schematic so brilliantly expounded by Izutsu.

15. This leads to the question of free will and choice in the ethical and moral dimensions of man's actions for the aforementioned passage makes it clear that to be guided or to be astray is entirely up to God's will.

16. Izutsu delves into this conundrum by setting it against the backdrop of the balance and tension between belief (iman) and unbelief (kufur). Going beyond the confines of legality and ethics, Izutsu posits a broader cosmic balance that postulates that free will remains subservient to the

Divine will and that this subservience is a manifestation of man's alignment with his Creator.

17. Izutsu's contributions extend far beyond Islamic studies. His work in comparative philosophy, drawing connections between Islamic thought and other global traditions, has highlighted the universal human quest for meaning and By engaging with diverse philosophical and religious perspectives, Izutsu has shown us that the study of one culture or tradition can illuminate the broader human experience, revealing the common threads that bind us all.

18. Central to Izutsu's approach is his doctrine of empathy in the study of By advocating for an empathetic perspective and urging scholars to understand religious texts from within their own conceptual frameworks, Izutsu paved the way for a more nuanced and respectful approach to cross-cultural dialogue.

19. Relating this in practical terms to the world today, without empathy, prejudice and distrust among follows of different faiths fester and, if unchecked, leads on to hostility and phobias. Coupled with other factors such as politics and ethnocentrism, this lack of empathy gives rise, for example, to Islamophobia.

20. This empathetic lens is particularly relevant in multicultural societies like Malaysia, where diverse religious and cultural communities The empathetic approach calls not just for tolerance but understanding and compassion, so crucial for the fostering of a harmonious and peaceful

society. Empathy demands that we listen, learn and understand another religion from the standpoint of those who profess that faith.

21. Unfortunately, we are confronted with insidious challenges such as religious scholars and opportunistic politicians who sow the seeds of suspicion and The ramifications can be seen in the emergence of elitist groups that reject religion all together, waving the banner of secularism instead.

22. In the United States and Europe, this is manifested in the morbid and insidious actions against people who overtly practice their religion, particularly Muslims, denying them their right to observe the strictures as enjoined by their religion. Politicians seize on these opportunities by condoning the discrimination and atrocities committed against minorities in their countries.

23. I believe in Japan while there is greater empathy in the approach towards the study of Buddhism and Christianity, as demonstrated by the level and frequency of dialogues, it would appear that it is somewhat lacking in the case of the approach towards Islam.

24. Which is why I commend this university and express my profound appreciation for inviting me to give this oration. In my humble view, if we are to stay true to the precepts and noble examples of Izutsu, there should be greater dialogue as well between Muslims on the one hand and Buddhists and Christians on the other.

25. Malaysia just hosted the inaugural international conference of religious leaders early this month where religious and intellectual figures from around the world participated, to forge greater religious understanding and cross-cultural dialogues.

26. True to the pursuit as advocated by Izutsu, empathy is self-evident in Islam as enjoined in the concept of rahmatan lil alamin (mercy to all creations) and the message of peace. As ordained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, it is incumbent on Muslims to be empathetic towards other religions so as to promote and preserve societal harmony. But empathy has to be reciprocal.

27. Just as it is so crucial for Muslims to understand and have compassion for other religions, likewise it is imperative that Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others have that same empathy for Izutsu.

28. Hence, it is incumbent on religious leaders across the broad spectrum of faiths to preach the message of empathy if the fruits of such an approach are to be reaped in practical terms. Translating ideas into realities in a world fraught with challenges will be a real testament to the teachings of Izutsu.

29. In a world where populism and right wing ethnic or religious extremism prevail, the calls for empathy may not be the easiest and most convenient approach particularly for politicians who want to get re- We are seeing this across the world particularly in Europe and the United States,

which is why the imperative for cross-cultural dialogue is more pressing than ever.

30. In this regard, Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, exemplifies such a pursuit and By examining the metaphysical and mystical thought systems of Sufism and Taoism, Izutsu discovered shared features and patterns despite their lack of historical connection. This work underscores the potential for trans-historical dialogue, opening new doors in the study of comparative philosophy and mysticism.

31. In the study of comparative religion, detractors would tend to look for points of divergence while advocates would seek points of The latter approach can only be done with empathy. In his *Sufism and Taoism*, Izutsu calls it "sympathetic intention."

32. Izutsu's exploration of the epistemological paradigm and ontological structures in the works of Ibn 'Arabi and the Taoist thinkers Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu revealed profound Both Sufism and Taoism are based on concepts such as the Absolute Man and the Perfect Man, showing that different cultures can arrive at profound truths at the metaphysical levels through their unique journeys. This comparative analysis highlights the universal aspects of human spirituality and the shared quest for understanding the ultimate reality. Now, what really is 'reality'?

33. At this juncture, it would be instructive to quote from the great book itself:

“According to Ibn ‘Arabi, however, that kind of ‘reality’ is not reality in the true sense of the word. In other terms, such a thing is not Being (wujud) as it really is. Living as we do in this phenomenal world, **Being in its metaphysical reality is no less imperceptible to us than phenomenal things are in their phenomenal reality to a man who is asleep and dreaming of them.**”

34. As for concept of the Perfect Man, Izutsu says:

“All men are naturally endowed with the same ontological ‘comprehensiveness’ but not all men are equally conscious of the ‘comprehensiveness’ in themselves. They are variously conscious of it, ranging from the highest degree of lucidity which comes very close to that of the Divine Consciousness of the Names and Attributes, down to the lowest which is practically the same as complete opaqueness. **And only at the highest degree of lucidity can the human mind play the role of a ‘polished mirror’. Only at the highest degree of lucidity can Man be the Perfect Man.** This is the gist of the whole problem.”

35. As we pay tribute to Toshihiko Izutsu, let us also reflect on the urgent need for civilisational dialogue in our increasingly fragmented world. The rise of obscurantism, bigotry, and intolerance threatens to divide societies and undermine global By promoting empathy, understanding, and respect, we can counter the forces of division and build bridges across cultures, religions, and nations.

36. By fostering a more informed and compassionate global community that looks beyond immediate differences to recognise our shared humanity, we can create a world where cooperation and mutual respect This dialogue is not about erasing our unique identities but about celebrating them as part of a rich, diverse, and interconnected human experience.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

37. Keio University's rich history of promoting innovative and impactful scholarship provides the perfect backdrop for celebrating and carrying forward Izutsu's By nurturing scholars who push the boundaries of knowledge and contribute to the betterment of society, Keio University continues to honour the vision of its founder and the ideals that inspired Izutsu's ground-breaking work.

38. As we consider the current global landscape, Izutsu's emphasis on empathy and dialogue becomes even more In a world fraught with division and misunderstanding, Izutsu's approach offers not only a way to bridge cultural gaps but also provides the antidote for society to ameliorate the unbridled pursuit of material gain and wealth.

39. In a world lacking in compassion and humanity, bereft of focus on values, and where intellectual pursuit is the exception rather than the rule, society becomes deprived of a moral compass and the upshot is disillusionment, cynicism, scepticism, and angst.

40. As we honour Toshihiko Izutsu's life and contributions, let us be inspired by his unwavering commitment to intellectual rigour, cross-cultural understanding, the power of language and empathy and most significantly perhaps the primacy of ethics and morality. Let us carry forward his legacy by seeking knowledge that unites us, engaging in meaningful dialogue across boundaries, and working tirelessly to build a world where understanding and empathy triumph over division and intolerance.

41. Izutsu's life and mind were indeed a feast of civilisations, an example of how the harmonious blending of diverse intellectual traditions can enrich our understanding of ourselves and each other.

42. As we celebrate his legacy and continue to explore the contributions of scholars like him, let us remember that pursuing knowledge is not an end but a means to build a more just, compassionate, and united Let us honour Izutsu's memory by embracing his spirit of empathy, by seeking to understand before seeking to be understood, and by striving to create a future where the light of wisdom and compassion dispels the darkness of ignorance and hatred.

Thank you.

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