An *Ummah*, a Man of Wisdom and a Priest

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It is not just that we lost a distinguished colleague, a mentor, and a friend; it is not just that the philosophical community lost a great philosophical bridge-builder and dedicated scholar, but all of humanity lost a great treasure when Professor George F. McLean passed away on September 6, 2016. Father McLean was an *ummah*. While the word *ummah* is normally used in the Islamic context to refer to the faithful community and nation, the Quran once mentions Abraham as an *Ummah* (the Quran, 16:120), to highlight his unique status. To be sure, the loss of Father McLean was more than the loss of an individual. It was the loss of a community, a nation. As a Farsi poem says, “The eye missed one individual, but the intellect missed more than one thousand ones.” This statement is not an exaggeration, for two reasons.

We have two terms, in Islam, to refer to one who is engaged in philosophical activity: philosopher (Filsuf) and wise man (Hakim). While they are distinct, they overlap often: for example, you may hear of Peripatetic philosophy (Falsafih) and Peripatetic wisdom (Hikmat), or the Illuminative philosophy and the Illuminative wisdom. There is an association between wisdom and divinity, but not between philosophy and divinity. Wisdom sees the nature (Mahiyyat) of things, but philosophy examines the qualities of things.\(^1\) According to the Quran, God is Hakim (the owner of Hikmat) (i.e., 2:129; 3:6 & 18 & 62 & 126; 6:18 & 73; 29:26), the Quran itself is described as the book of Hikmat (3:58; 10:1; 36:2), and the prophetic mission is to deliver wisdom to people (i.e., 2:129; 3:48; 4:113). Thus, wisdom is more relevant to the meaning of life and the true and total connection of the person to the world. It goes beyond the senses and sees the unity behind the diversity. Philosophy can separate the subject and object, but wisdom cannot isolate the human from the world. Moreover, wisdom is spread among all nations and in various ways of life. People may ignore philosophy, at least to some extent, but they cannot ignore wisdom. Some nations might consider their philosophy their own property, but wisdom belongs to all humanity. Philosophy, more or less, is accompanied by reason, but wisdom has greater resources, including reason, intuition, and self-awareness. Of course, everybody is encouraged to seek wisdom, but this is not necessarily the case with

philosophy. Professor McLean reflected all the wonderful features of wisdom as far as was humanly possible.

The Quran reminds us that good is given to those who listen to all things, and then follow the best of them. They receive guidance from God and will possess understanding (39:18-19). Professor McLean was one of these wise men. He was a philosopher, but he was much more than a philosopher. He was curious to learn about and from other civilizations, and he followed the truth wherever it led. He saw the world as a place full of great meaning, but which needs to be explored. Professor McLean saw clearly the unitary meaning behind the various historical and cultural phenomena. He had the exceptional talent to both understand and to explain that the journey of human beings from the beginning to the present time, from totemism to civil society, and from India to Africa, is a Way to God. McLean deserves the good tidings of the Quran, because he was really listening to the divine word. He was open and embraced other cultures. He build a Center to deconstruct the heavy Western tradition of knowing “others” only through Western eyes. Professor McLean lay the foundation for others to speak for themselves. And I have to testify that he had an extraordinary gift of understanding the other, as he already lived with them. He was an upright and wise man who could see how far human beings can seek God in a world filled with technology, science, media, and politics.

Father McLean’s wisdom allowed him to go beyond the formal limitations of philosophy as well as narrow religiosity and dogmatism. There is a text of the Quran that says to Muslims why and how far Christians are close to them, it is because they have priests and monks who are not proud of themselves, but rather who are inspired by the truth, and witness to it (5:82-83). The last verse clearly calls such people “faithful” (Mu’min), and rejects the popular misconception that “the people of the book” are unfaithful or infidels. McLean was a true and humble priest who was faithful to the Quranic revelation and witnessed it by his life. He was not merely a theoretician of religious pluralism, who talked of the Multiple Paths to God, but had himself experienced the elements of truth in other faiths and cultures. This experience could be seen through his knowledge, respect, and insight. Father McLean was an inspiring example of faith – of a faith that is associated with the openness, welcoming, forgiveness, kindness, humility, and everlasting search for the truth. He was, indeed, an enlightened person of deep faith, who saw himself as one who is seeking and approaching the truth, rather than possessing it.

To conclude, McLean was a clear example of a combination of philosophy and religion, of reason and revelation – and a response to those who believe that these two are irreconcilable. He was not only a man of knowledge and faith, he was a man of ethics. In spite of his high position
in philosophy, he was approachable and reachable. When I used to talk to him in my poor English, he was patient and not judgmental. When there was a need, Father McLean was ready to lend a hand. He was brave enough not just to confront new ideas, but even to challenge his own views. He was an extraordinary example of how beauty, kindness, and knowledge can come together. The first time I saw McLean was in Qum, Iran in 2003; the last time in Washington, DC, a few months before his death. Every day in between, I came to learn more both about and from him, and I marveled at his unique way of bringing the West and the East closer together. For McLean, the dialogue among civilizations was, in a way, a movement towards a “fusion of horizons,” where humanity would come to acknowledge more fully and to be grateful for the beauty of life, the effect of benevolence, and the spirit of knowledge. And McLean himself was very grateful to be part of this, as his last words were “Thank you, Thank you, and Thank you.”