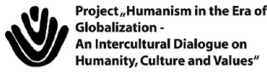




International Symposium
“Humanism in Islam – An Intercultural Discourse”
in cooperation with

6-8 April 2009, Alexandria, Egypt
Bibliotheca Alexandrina Conference Center



Stiftung
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GOETHE-INSTITUT
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This Symposium is organized in cooperation with the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the Goethe-Institute in Egypt, and the project on "Humanism in the Era of Globalization – an intercultural dialogue on humanity, culture and values" of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, KWI, Essen. All three institutes agree upon the necessity of an interculturally valid humanism as an essential element of cultural orientation in the process of globalization.

The aim is to create an understanding of mankind in the era of globalization that encompasses all civilizations, and at the same time emphasizes their particularity and diversity. Traditional European humanism bore ethnocentric features and after the traumatic experiences of the 20th century it had to undergo fundamental criticism in light of post-modernism and post-colonialism. In the West, it has mostly been replaced by a form of cultural relativism that fails to solve urgent problems of intercultural communication (cf. September 11). In the face of the challenge that is globalization, the cultural orientation of the present is facing two distinctive options: one would be a clash of civilizations, the other the development of a new culture of mutual recognition of cultural differences based on shared norms of a dialogue aimed at understanding. It is therefore high time to establish a dialogue between Western and non-Western civilizations on their interrelationship as well as their understanding of fundamental values and cultural identity and diversity so that cultural confrontations can be reduced, and new shared insights and ways of recognition of the interrelation of civilizations may be developed, strengthened and demonstrated.

This Symposium contributes to this dialogue by “thematizing” the traditions of countries deeply influenced by Islam. It discusses the peculiarity of humanism in the context of these conditions and their topical importance for the lives of the people. It brings humanism in Islam into a discursive relationship to other humanistic traditions, mainly those of the West. By doing so, it tackles the highly debated issue of the

interrelationship of religion and secularism in respect to modern humanism. Middle Eastern and Western perspectives are brought together in a comparative perspective as well as in a perspective of mutual critique and recognition.

The Conference aims to renew the different traditional humanisms and perpetuate them into the future of world society. Two tasks are important here: the scope of the concept of humanism has to be widened. The concept of humanity that is limited to the paradigm of Europe and the West and has left only little space for non-Western civilizations to explore their intellectual potential and cultural differences cannot serve our present purpose. Moreover, the traumatic experiences of Western imperialism and the 20th century and the present have to be underlined systematically. A humanism that fails to cope with the crimes against humanity so characteristic of late modernity all over the world cannot be made plausible but remains weak and ineffective from the very beginning. It is therefore important to use the historical experiences of inhumanity as a new opportunity for understanding man. The high commitment to values ascribed to man in nearly all civilizations needs to be exerted convincingly. The Symposium will enlighten the role Arab and Islamic traditions can play in this new intercultural approach to a future directed humanism.

Can differences of interrelationship be recognized on the basis of a new concept of humanity? The global situation of the intercultural discourse calls for a culture that recognizes cultural differences. The tendency towards fundamentalism in world religions more than sufficiently proves this need. In their basically oppositional development, forms of cultural identity have developed concepts of humanity that go beyond ethnic, national, or even cultural limits. Instead of using this universalism against each other, it would be more sensible to change its logic from an exclusive into an inclusive one and to integrate it into a general concept of humanity where cultural differences are modified to become internal differentiations. In theory, the clash of civilizations in the sense of a clash of different cultural identities would thus be overcome, and new forms of discursive understanding would be made possible.