

# **About Iqbal's Doctoral Thesis – *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia***

**Riffat Hassan**

*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, is Iqbal's doctoral thesis submitted to Professor F. Hommel of Munich University, Germany, on November 4, 1907. The material for this dissertation had to be collected from numerous manuscripts preserved in the great libraries of Europe particularly Berlin Staatsbibliothek.

In his Introduction to the thesis Iqbal says, "Original thought cannot be expected in a review, the object of which is purely historical; yet I venture to claim some consideration for the following two points: (a) I have endeavoured to trace the logical continuity of Persian thought, which I have tried to interpret in the language of modern philosophy. This, as far as I know has not yet been done; (b) I have discussed the subject of Sufism in a more scientific manner, and have attempted to bring out the intellectual conditions which necessitated such a phenomenon." (*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, Lahore, 1964, p. XI)

While speaking of the previous investigators of the origin of Sufism, Iqbal states: "Much has been written about the origin of Persian Sufism; and, in almost all cases, explorers of this most interesting field of research have exercised their ingenuity in discovering the various channels through which the basic ideas of Sufism might have travelled from one place to another. They seem completely to have ignored the principle, that the full significance of a phenomenon in the intellectual evolution of a people, can only be comprehended in the light of those pre-existing intellectual, political and social conditions which make its existence inevitable. Von Kremer and Dozy derive Persian Sufism from the Indian Vedanta; Marx and Mr. Nicholson derive it from Neo-Platonism; while Professor Brown once regarded it as Aryan reaction against an unemotional Semitic religion. It appears to me, however, that such theories have been worked out under the influence of a notion of causation which is essentially false. That a fixed quantity A is the cause of, or produces, another fixed quantity B, is a proposition which though convenient for scientific purposes is apt to damage all inquiry in so far as it leads us completely to ignore the innumerable conditions lying at the back of a phenomenon." (*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, pp. 76-77)

While granting that Sufism like all great and intellectual movements was ultimately

the result of a certain environment, an early reviewer of Iqbal's thesis points out, "We cannot hope, by examining these general conditions, to learn how it came to pass that the mystical tendency assumed a particular form or how the special doctrines which we find in early Sufism arose. No wonder, then, that European Orientalists should have preferred a more fruitful line of inquiry, which has demonstrated the influence of other religions in moulding the *development* of Sufism. Those who derive it from Neo-Platonism do no more than assert that the early Sufis actually drew their ideas from that source; but had these Sufis been ignorant of Greek philosophy, they might still have produced a mysticism of the same type. To suppose that Sufism was *created* by foreign influence is an absurdity so palpable that its refutation, even in the most scientific manner, hardly constitutes a claim to originality." ("The Development of Metaphysics in Persia," (Book Review), in *The Athenaeum*, London, 14 November, 1908, p. 602). The reviewer tells us that he has dwelt upon the author's treatment of the question because it illustrates "the one weak spot in his admirable survey. He is rather deficient on the historical side and is apt to forget that a theory will carry greater conviction if it comes to close quarters with all the relevant facts." (*Ibid.*)

Iqbal Singh, author of Iqbal's biography *The Ardent Pilgrim*, while admitting that Iqbal's research work is "conscientious" asserts that it is "somewhat unsatisfactory. It leaves the reader with the impression of something that he can neither accept as serious work nor reject as something unworthy of attention and trivial. For a research thesis its scope is too wide, and for an original and interpretative study of the subject it seems too sketchy, too descriptive." (London, 1951, p. 47) To this the reviewer in *The Athenaeum* could no doubt answer: "Any one at all versed in the subject will perceive the appalling difficulty of the author's task when he undertook to give a coherent account in less than two hundred pages of the subtle and complex problems which have formed during thousands of years, the favourite pabulum of a race that has always been distinguished by its passion for metaphysical speculation. Moreover for a great part in his journey the traveler finds himself on virgin soil, which he must explore and delineate as well as he can without the help of guides. Shaikh Iqbal deserves high praise for that he has accomplished. The immediate result of his labour is considerable and he has laid a solid foundation for further research." ("*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*," p. 602)

Iqbal's thesis is his first philosophical attempt and was written at a time when he was greatly attracted by the pantheistic trend in Persian and Urdu poetry. This led him to speak in terms of glowing enthusiasm of Ibn 'Arabi, "the leader of the pantheistic-monistic current in Islamic mysticism," (S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge, 1964, p. 154) to quote Hegel's appraisal of the pantheism of Maulana Rumi, and to pay more attention to pantheistic Sufism than to any other philosophical school. Besides his

repudiation of pantheism, many of Iqbal's mature ideas were quite different from the ideas expressed in the thesis. Once his pantheistic phase was over, Iqbal was to choose Rumi as his spiritual guide in his *Asrar-e-Khudi* and subsequent writings even though he allowed him practically no place in his thesis, seeing him as "a full-fledged pantheist" until he went "to a deeper understanding of a personalistic trend in the Maulana's mysticism." (A. M. Schimmel, "The Ascension of the Poet," in *Muhammad Iqbal*, Karachi, 1961, p. 39)

Pointing out the shortcomings of Iqbal's work, in his Foreword to *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, an eminent historian of Muslim Philosophy, M. M. Sharif observes, "In his observations regarding Al-Farabi, Ibn Miskawaih and Ibn Sina he has more or less echoed the views of early Western Orientalists and has denied these great thinkers the credit for originality and deviation from Neo-Platonism." The historical accuracy of Iqbal's statement attributing the rise of Babism to the School of Mulla Sadra, has been questioned by S. H. Nasr who points out that the Bab, in fact, had been a student of the School of Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i who wrote a commentary against one of Mulla Sadra's works (*Three Muslim Sages*, p. 154 n. 47)

In 1927, Iqbal wrote about his thesis: "This book was written eighteen years ago. Since that time new discoveries have been made and also my ideas suffered a great revolution. Many books that have since been written in German on Ghazzali, Tusi, etc., that were not in existence at the time when I wrote. In my opinion only a little portion of this book remains now that can escape criticism." (Iqbal's letter quoted by A. Bausani in "Classical Muslim Philosophy in the Work of a Muslim Modernist: Muhammad Iqbal," in *Archiv Fur Geschichte Der Philosophie*, Berlin, 1960, Band 42/3, p. 284). Nevertheless Iqbal's work until it is superseded by a more comprehensive work will retain its importance in Oriental Studies. It presents "the first and only historical account of Persia's philosophical thought and credit of its conception goes to Iqbal." A. Bausani comparing Iqbal's dissertation with his more mature lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, gives high praise to the earlier work although it "abounds in hasty comparisons between philosophers historically unconnected" since these comparisons are sometimes "highly interesting and illuminating." He goes on to say "In a sense it cannot be denied that, from a purely objective and scientific point of view *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* partly rejected by author - seems superior to *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. In it Iqbal drew his materials from original and in many instances manuscript sources and gave important notices of philosophers almost unknown in European circles of that time or put some into a new light through his somewhat bold, but always fascinating reinterpretations." (*Ibid.*)

Iqbal's thesis which covers the enormous range of speculation from Zoroaster and Mani to modern Babism contains a successful examination of both Persian Idealism and Realism, and is important for the history of religious thought. As pointed out by the reviewer in *The Athenaeum*, "The immediate result of his (Iqbal's) labour is considerable, and he has laid a solid foundation for further research. The most notable sections of the volume are perhaps those which describe the '*Hikmat al-Ishraq*' or 'Philosophy of Illumination' expounded by Shihab-al-Din al-Suhrawardi, the famous Sufi thinker who was put to death as a heretic by order of Malik al-Zahir, a son of Saladin; and the '*Insan al-Kamil*' or 'Perfect Man,' of al-Jili, whose system in some points curiously anticipates the views of Hegel and Schleiermacher." (p. 602). Al-Jili's views also seem to have influenced Iqbal's own concept of an individual's spiritual development. (A. M. Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing*, Leiden, 1963, p. 38). Iqbal also drew attention to Persian theologians like Mulla Sadra and Hadi Sabzawari who were nearly unknown in Europe.

About Iqbal's thesis which was described by Mulk Raj Anand as "an illuminating little treatise soundly written," Professor Nicholson wrote, "although it is only a sketch, some parts of it are as illuminating and suggestive as anything that has been written on the subject." (*The Secrets of the Self: A Moslem Poet's Interpretation of Vitalism*, in *The Athenaeum*, December 10, 1920, p. 803). Though inevitably sketchy and incomplete, Iqbal's work has been described as "a really valuable resume of the history of Persian metaphysics, sound in principle, and trustworthy as far as it goes." (*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, p. 601). The work which is mainly concerned with elucidating the various systems of Persian thought and their relation to each other, leaves "no doubt as to the competence of the author's scholarship and the importance of his work." (*Ibid.* p. 602) Not only does it point to the fact of Iqbal's wide reading and his grasp of the subject, but also demonstrates that he is "familiar with, and has learnt to employ, European methods of criticism which generally leave no profound impression, even on the most gifted Oriental minds." (*Ibid.* p. 601)

Iqbal's study "shows a remarkable knowledge of European theology from Thomas Aquinas to Adolf Von Harnack of German philosophical thought." (*Gabriel's Wing*, p. 38). It is valuable not only as a research work for the student of Persian metaphysics or Islamic thought but also as a starting point of his own philosophy for "there can be no doubt that the mystics who are discussed in the metaphysics, and their religious and philosophical conditions have helped him to form his philosophy either in congruence with them, or out of a complete antithesis." (*Ibid.*, p. 39)

The thesis was first published in the form of a book by Luzac and Co. London, in 1908; it was reprinted by Bazm-e-Iqbal, Lahore, in 1954, and has now seen a third print

(in 1964) which carries a foreword by M. M. Sharif. The book is dedicated to Professor T. W. Arnold with these words, "This little book is the first fruit of that literary and philosophical training which I have been receiving from you for the last ten years, and as an expression of gratitude, I beg to dedicate it to your name."

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