

IQBAL DAY IN LONDON

IQBAL AND THE MESSAGE OF PERSIAN METAPHYSICS

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I feel greatly honoured today at being invited to speak to you about one of the finest Muslim thinkers and writers of modern times — Iqbal. I hasten to add that I feel quite inadequate to the task of speaking of him as he should be spoken of: his range of understanding, of the workings of the human reason and emotions, was so wide that even beginning to become acquainted with the comprehensiveness of this man's thoughts and ideas is a daunting, though also an exciting, experience. More than this width of comprehension, which embraced all the states of man, Iqbal possessed the power to communicate: he was supremely articulate in three great languages, Urdu, Persian and English. Besides being a remarkable thinker, he was also a great poet and prose-writer. He was that rare combination, a philosopher and a poet, combining the poet genius with a powerful intellect, as our Milton did. He was not only an ocean of understanding, but he could speak to us of what he understood, and he saw mankind with the tenderness of a brother and the insight of a prophet.

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What is so remarkable about Iqbal is the dynamism of his Philosophy. Essentially it was a Philosophy of Love. It was the same as the philosophy of al-Ghazali and Maulana Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, the one a great Iranian thinker, who lived between 1058 and 1111 A. D., and the other the great mystic poet, who died in Qonya in 1273. They had preached the philosophy of dynamic love: the action of love in this world to lead to human fulfilment in an as near as possible complete working out of God's purpose in creation. Strangely enough this teaching has often been misunderstood and confused with forms of quietism which properly belong to the further east and incidentally to more lush lands than the arid, hard deserts in which Muslim civilisation has flourished and where the acceptance of passive doctrines would, when you come to think of it, present an incongruous phenomenon. Thus Sufism has been mistaken for a nihilistic way of life, in which the seeker desires absorption into the Sought. The emphasis placed in Sufi teaching on the necessity for the conquest of the base self, called in Sufi jargon, *oafs*, has somehow resulted in my supposing that Sufism's aim is the total destruction of the whole self, regardless of the fact that Sufism was evolved by Sunni thinkers and poets who were doctrinally convinced of the significance of the human self as God's supremest creation and God's greatest joy.

The assumption that Sufism meant the destruction of the Self, and some kind of bliss of identification in a return into an all-embracing deity, has led to the practical aspect of Sufism and its true nature being forgotten.

Real Sufism, as expounded by Farid-ud-Din 'Attar and Maulana Jalal ud-Din Rumi, was intended to fortify the Persian people at a time in their history when the depredations of the Mongols were implanting in the national consciousness of Iran a fearful pessimism, and driving the Iranian people into their own personalities, engendering a state of despair, the antithesis of action and vitality.

Sufism, as well as being an important spiritual and cultural phenomenon, was, and this is a fact too many are apt to forget, also a political and social phenomenon, part of the explanation of which must be found in the political and social conditions obtaining in eastern Islam, in Iran and Mesopotamia, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and here I need only drop the hint that the first raids of Chinghiz Khan began in Transoxania in 1219-20.

The great Iranian Sufi teachers were concerned to combat in their people the pessimism and despair which had taken hold of the Iranian mentality after the fall of the poetry-loving Samanid Princes of Bukhara and Samarqand in the tenth century. Firdawsī's great epic is in a sense a lament for the glory of Iran and a reminder that it is in need of saving and repair; this nationally conscious role, manifest in one great.

Persian poet, though expressed otherwise, is not absent in the great mystic poets either. I do not refer to ecstasies, of whom 'Iraqi may be taken as an example but to the great, constructive singers of the message of Love, such as 'Attar and Jalal-ud-Din

Rumi. They taught that we must be hard, hard with ourselves in order to temper the Self that it may adequately fulfil its covenant with God, and tender, in love and an understanding which shall have as its model the supreme understanding of God Himself, with our fellow men; that we should exercise solicitude and forbearance towards our nation, healing and helping the injured, frightened and leaderless people.

Now this is the very reverse of the passive asceticism, the complete withdrawal and the wild-eyed quest for some sort of ecstasy, which are the features often wrongly associated with that spiritual teaching which had its origin in Iran, and which to this day, perhaps particularly in this day, forms so important a part of the message to mankind of Persian poetry.

What is of particular interest in linking Iqbal with the Persian metaphysic — an association he himself would certainly not have denied — is that by his interpretation of the Persian philosophy of Love he shows that he understood as very few have done what Jalal-ud-Din Rumi and al-Ghazali really meant, for after all, he was a thinker of their level and power. Moreover, like them, he was concerned, prophet-like, father-like, with the fate of the people. These he found distracted and haunted by action-addling despair: in need of uplifting, their faith revived — and so, taking the Quran as the wonderfully sustaining basis of his teaching, he reiterated and explained its doctrine that Faith begins in the Self, and only from the Self can Faith be restored, nourished, strengthened. Again, in his reliance on the Holy Qur'an. Iqbal was

at one with the great Iranian teachers of eight hundred years ago; in fact it is perhaps in this, that the ground of their teaching was one; that is to say a dynamic conception of the Message of Islam, that Iqbal and Rumi were of one voice.

I have already remarked that the great Persian mystics have a message which is of very real importance to our world today; I hope now to have said enough to show this message will be more fully understood when it is studied in conjunction with the teaching of Iqbal. He supplements and explains the older teachers of Islam and he corrects those false ideas of the teaching of Muslim metaphysicians, for in him the dynamic quality of their teaching is realized and also the quality of their teaching has additional to the quality of many other world philosophies; I refer to the interesting fact that these Islamic thinkers have worked out a philosophy of life rooted in religion — their first premise is the Revelation of the Prophet Muhammad, and they are free of dichotomy which normally makes philosophy and faith separate.

Earlier we saw that Iqbal was that unusual combination, poet and philosopher. Here we find that he was, with a handful of great Muslim thinkers of centuries before him, something even more unusual, a man of profound religious conviction who was also a philosopher.

Iqbal was not only what I should like to describe as the great vindicator of the preaching of the Iranian mystics who taught the powers of dynamic love; he was also one of the modern world's most important vindicators of the powers of religion. He proved

that the scientific modern man can also be the man of faith and that out of the most rigorous questioning to which a powerful intellect can subject it, Faith can emerge not only unimpaired, but strengthened, a stalwart adjunct to the building up of the self into that mirror of the love of God it was created to be (Javid Nama, 241-2):

حرف بد را بر لب آوردن خطاست

کافر و مومن همه خلق خداست

آدمیت احترام آدمی

با خبر شو از مقام آدمی

بنده عشق از خدا گیرد طریق

می شود بر کافر و مومن شفیق

To speak evil is a sin,

Infidel and believer, both are God's creature.

Humanity is respect for human kind:

Become aware of the dignity of man.

The waiter on Love takes direction from God;

He is solicitous for believer and unbeliever.