

BOOK REVIEW

QUEST FOR THE ETERNAL

Shahzad Qaiser

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Few books nowadays justify the claims printed boldly — and sometimes badly -- on their titles, but Shahzad Qaiser's book is certainly up to the mark. It is the battle field of a thinking mind trying to come to grips with a perspective and a wisdom towards which he is strongly attracted but a clear and proper understanding of which calls for a destruction of mental idols and preconceived notions. Throughout his educational career he has been a serious student of philosophy and knows well where this wasteland ends. His attempt to reach out for the traditional wisdom from the confines of profanes of profane philosophy to timeless, perennial wisdom, pointing out various shortcomings of the former in its course. The essays collected in this volume were written over the last decade and these he has gathered without pruning and editing according to his later thought. The book, thus, should be regarded as a crucible of ideas where Shahzad Qaiser fumes and frets to get a glimpse of Reality.

The better half of the book is the second half which mainly concentrates on a critique of Western civilization. The first half concerns itself with the ideas of prophecy in Islam, existential 'understanding of God, stages of religious experience, Iqbal, Imam Hussain's existential choice and Imamate and Caliphate.

Not only in his first article 'Prophecy in Islam', but in many subsequent chapters of the book Shahzad's discussion and critique of the Muslim philosophers is limited only to the names that appear in the popular books on the history of Muslim philosophy, mainly written by the Orientalists and uncritically accepted by the modernists. The Mutakallimum, the traditionalists, Theosophers, mystics and even the distinguished figures among the later Muslim philosophers who, unfortunately, did not find their

place in the works in Western languages, 'since they happened to be born after Ghazzali, are kept out of the pale of his discussion. The only thinker of the later period that he mentions is Iqbal. As a poet, philosopher and political theorist, Iqbal is head and shoulders above his contemporaries, but Shahzad has mainly dwelt on his ideas about the phenomenon of Prophecy as they are voiced in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. After recapitulating the views of the Muslim philosophers on the question of prophecy and revelation in a few sentences he goes directly to Iqbal, but he cannot bring himself to agree with Iqbal's description of prophecy as "a type of my sticconsciousness" since that can lead us to believe that Iqbal made no distinction between the nature of mysticism and prophecy and that for Iqbal, in fact, the difference is only one of degree and not of kind. Shahzad is justified because this as well as the next assertion he cites from Iqbal about the destruction of the old and disclosure of the new directions of life, finds no support either from Iqbal's poetry or from the traditional literature. Scores of Israelite prophets who served to perpetuate the prophetic function of some law-giving prophet who preceded them bear witness that prophets confirmed and continued existing traditions contrary to what Iqbal proposes. Iqbal, in fact, contradicts the classical notion of prophecy by insisting that prophecy is the outcome of an evolutionary development of psychic energy. Full rightly, Shahzad has again differed with Iqbal on this point though his own comments are not sufficient to give us a clear idea of how he himself envisions revelation. An elucidation of the classical concept was due from Shahzad is such wise as is done by a contemporary authority on traditional metaphysics and religion: "Inspiration, like revelation is a divine dicatae, with the difference that in the second case the spirit dictates a law-giving and obligatory Message of over-riding force, where as in the first case the Message, whatever be its value, has no dogmatic significance, and has an illustrative role within the frame work of the fundamental Message."²⁵⁴

Iqbal's assertion that the return of the mystic "does not mean much for mankind at large", does not gain Shahzad's approval either and we can readily add that, till the modern times, even on the practical level, all the freedom-movements and movements of political, social and religious reform had, invariably, an eminent mystic at the helm of their affairs. If the return does

²⁵⁴ F. Schuon, 'Paradoxical Aspects of Sufism', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Sum Mer-Autum, London, 1978, pp 131.

not mean much to mankind then how can one account for the spread of Islam outside Arabia in which the mystics were historically crucial?

Shahzad's next consideration is the question of finality of prophethood for it forms an integral part of the question of prophecy. Here he has agreed with Iqbal that God has sealed prophecy because mankind had undergone intellectual development in an expressedly evolutionary sense as to be possessed finally of inductive perfection which made prophecy henceforth unnecessary. This proposal raises some disturbing questions. If it is the gift of the inductive intellect that now distinguishes man, then how are we to look at the pre-Islamic man, including the prophets of the old? No one in his right mind would claim that they belonged to an inferior kind since they did not, supposedly, possess the so-called inductive intellect.

The second chapter, "Existential Understanding of God", as well as the fifth chapter "Existential Significance of Hussain's Choice" betray that Shahzad would still like to retain elements of the existential perspective which he struggles to reconcile with the traditional perspective. However, traditional metaphysics and existentialism are irreconcilably opposed. The two perspectives have no common ground because their very points of departure are contradictory. Existentialism has been described by a contemporary author as "the esoterism of stupidity". Metaphysical knowledge is sacred and it is the prerogative of the sacred to require of man all that he is; intellect, will and sentiments. That is to say that real knowledge is existential, but this type of knowledge pertains to the supra-individual truth. This truth is precisely what the existentialists refuse to admit, therefore it were better to speak of presential knowledge rather than existential knowledge when speaking of the metaphysical perspective, lest it be thought that there was any-thing in common between the two usages of the word. "The thing that is absolutely lacking with the existentialists, and which reduces to nothing their theories as well as their moral attitudes, is an objective truth which is metaphysically integral, whether it be an orthodox theology or an authentic metaphysics."²⁵⁵

Apart from the question of existentialism, Shahzad's treatment of Hussain's choice calls for an historical overview. Time and again in his book

²⁵⁵ F. Schuon, 'Letter on Existentialism', Studies in Comparative Religion, spring 1975, London, p. 68.

Shahzad has stressed the need for a critical examination of history but the facts on which he has based his observations are open to objections on the plane of historical records even. For example, he writes, "Hussain's stage was primarily ethical. He was grounded in a Tradition which left no room for romantic hedonism."²⁵⁶ But this is true for Yazid even if to a lesser degree. According to Shahzad's interpretation Hussain "Never experienced for a single moment that his existential freedom has been subjugated or captivated. He always felt himself a free man. Free to commit to God or to betray him." So was Yazid, though according to some, he chose to betray God.

Shahzad is all praise for Keirkegaard's "Fear and Trembling" and the parallels that Kierkegaard draws from the story of Abraham Kierkegaard, even at the heights of his thinking, fails to transcend the individual realm of subjectivity ('alam all Nafs) and his understanding of the trial of Abraham is only confined to the sentimental and, at the best, rational level.²⁵⁷

Both the chapters "Religious Symbolism and the Stages of Religious Life" and "Iqbal on the Possibility of Religion"; take their cue from Iqbal and revolve around the concept of three stages of religious life as expounded by Iqbal. Shahzad has posited a fourth stage which he places between 'reason' and 'discovery' and names "intellect". He agrees with the traditional writers like Guenon and Schuon in making a distinction between reason and intellect, the latter being supra-individual and capable of direct access to the realities beyond the confines of discursive thought.

These concepts of the stages of the religious life are, to say the least, problematic, for these would entail such judgments about the companions of the prophets that can never be entertained by the believers. Shahzad has very wisely pointed out that these should be construed in a non historical context and in a personal sense only. Moreover, the stages, contrary to the common interpretations, reveal a process of decadence rather than evolution. The earlier generations of any religion possess the degree of intelligence that, (thanks to a transparency of phenomenon, made possible by the presence of a prophet amidst these generations) is never attained in the later ages. The psychic element that makes its appearance only in the later ages is, thus, an

²⁵⁶ Shahzad Qaiser, *Quest for the Eternal*, p.25.

²⁵⁷ For a comparative study of Keirkegaard and Ibn 'Arabi see "Ibn Arabi and Keirkegaard", *Waqt Ki Ragni* (Urdu) Lahore 1979, p. 58.

indication of the fact that with the march of times hearts harden and the transparency of phenomenon and direct vision of reality becomes more and more inaccessible so that the travelers on the spiritual path have a certain need for psychic experience. Similarly the loss of the aforementioned vision creates a legitimate demand for rational or mystical theology. In this regard the objective pole of the "unquestioned acceptance", that is, the presence of the Prophet among the companions should never be lost sight of. These men were testifying to a presence that itself claimed "He who has seen me has seen the Truth". (Man ra'ani faqad ra'a al Haq) To the later generations it was available only indirectly and the inevitable process of degeneration justified the appearance of various disciplines that operated at different levels. This is the saga of "devolution" and not an evolution.

Shahzad's chapter, "Symbolic Understanding of Imamate and Caliphate" seeks to achieve a balance between the Sunni and Shi'ite theories of spiritual authority and temporal power. He suggests that there could be an elected assembly with an upper chamber, consisting of the *fugaha*, that would act as a guiding force. His approach is sympathetic towards both the perspectives and he tries to bring about a synthesis with a view to uniting the Ummah.

The better half of the book, as said earlier, starts from the chapter, 'Psychotherapy and Western Tradition'. In this article Shahzad gives a brief but informative account of the origins and development of psychotherapy in the West. He points out the shortcomings of psychotherapy and suggests the possibility of an other perspective that has always been the basis of this science in the East and, generally speaking, in all the traditional societies. Traditional science of the soul had two dimensions one "static" and non-personal, that is, cosmology and the other "operative" or personal, that is, ethics. The former determines the place of the soul and its modalities in the hierarchy of existence and is in turn based on metaphysics. Shahzad clearly perceives that this dimension is absent from modern psychotherapy and psychology and its absence leads to the dilemma which Jung described in his famous statement, "The object of psychology is the psychic, unfortunately, it's also its object". The soul cannot be properly and successfully studied except from a view point higher to it. This is why in all the traditions the sage and the metaphysician is the psychologist par excellence.

The next chapter discuss, again in the context of the Western civilization, tradition and the idea of progress. According to Shahzad the idea of progress

has formed the essence of Western civilization. Starting with an etymological inquiry into the meaning of tradition, he proceeds to give an overview of the idea of progress as it influenced different spheres of philosophy, religion and science. This analysis is interesting since he agrees with the traditional perspective in seeing in this idea of progress the very cause that undermined the Western civilization.²⁵⁸

"An Introduction to Critique of Western Metaphysics" is a review of almost all the important "system builders" of metaphysics in the West including brief remarks about their short-comings from the point of view of traditional metaphysics. His probing into the origins of philosophy start with Thales and this again echoes the histories of philosophy written by Western scholars, not only in the sense that it does not recognize the period before Tales as philosophy, but also in that it completely turns a blind eye to the symbolist element in the thought of these Greek thinkers. Had this symbolist element been properly appreciated the ancient doctrines might have been recognized as the lofty expression of the profound and supra-rational truth that it is. For example, a literalist intepretation of Thales doctrine that water was the basic stuff out of which the universe was formed²⁵⁹ makes him look quite naive in these times so dominated by the dogmas of scientism. Yet however "advanced" we may consider ourselves for having discovered the periodic table and for having split the atom, there are very few persons today who can understand the smallest part of these integral sciences of antiquity of which metaphysics is the source and which concerned themselves pre-eminently with the supra-formal levels of the Real, that is, the ontological dimensions.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ No other topic, perhaps, so readily gives rise to misunderstanding and sentimental reaction as that of progress. Since it is beyond the scope of this review to enter into a discussion or critique of progress and the concomitant idea of evolution, we would refer the reader to the masterly expositions of Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon and Lord North bourne specially relevant are the chapters, "Pictures of the Universe", and, "Planning for Progress" in North bournes. Looking Back on Progress, Lahore 1983, and "Civilization and Progress" by Rene Guenon in Iqbal Review Vol. XXVI, No. 1, 1985, p.1.

²⁵⁹ Shahzad Qaiser, Quest for the Eternal, p. 60.

²⁶⁰ Water is a symbol of the passive pole of manifestation, the universal substance. For a detailed exposition of its symbolism see Martin Lings, 'The Ritual Purification', in A Sufi Saint of the 20th Century, p. 178 ff; "Quranic Symbolism of Water "In Studies in Comparative Religion; Book of Certainty, N.Y. 1974, pp 55-58; also see Rene Guenon, Reign of Quantity, Lahore 1983. For a reference to the Christian and Hindu traditions see,

Shahzad's critique of Heidegger is quite arresting and he is successful in showing the basic limitations not only of Heidegger, but of all the major figures of Western thought that fall within the ambit of his discussion. "The history of Western metaphysics is the history of the oblivion of the universal".²⁶¹ Such is the verdict he gives after his analysis.

In his criticism of the West he has relied on Guenon's works. But some of his statements about Guenon call for some explanation. Shahzad says that while differentiating between the universal and the individual orders, Guenon maintains that there is no common measure, co-ordination, symmetry, opposition or possible relationship between them. According to Shahzad Guenon maintains, they belong to distinct realms without any point of contact".²⁶² This is misrepresentation of Guenon for in fact he held no such view. Indeed, Guenon does differentiate between the two realms, but far from proposing mutual exclusiveness, he regards the individual order as dependent on and contingent to the universal in every respect. The dovetailing of the universal with the individual is the fundamental mystery whose apprehension is sought in all esoteric and initiatic teachings and Guenon had too keen an eye for the subtlety of metaphysics to endorse the erroneous view which Shahzad has attributed to him.

Shahzad thinks that Guenon "erred in stating that the sciences cannot be based directly upon metaphysics"²⁶³ Shahzad has missed the point completely. He should have given a bit more attention to the word "directly". What Guenon points out here is the intermediary science of cosmology is an application of metaphysical principles to the cosmic domain.²⁶⁴

"The phenomenon of Anti-Metaphysics in Western World" is complementary to the preceding chapter. It marshalls the facts about the

Genesis 1: 1-2 and Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad 1-2.

²⁶¹ Ibid. p.67.

²⁶² Ibid.p.69.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ For a discussion of cosmology and its relationship to metaphysics see Nasr. S.H., "The Role of Traditional Sciences in the Encounter of Religion and Science: An Oriental Perspective", in MAAS Journal of Islamic Science Vol. No. 1 Aligarh, India, Jan 1985, p. 9; T. Burckhardt, "Nature de la perspective Cosmologique", in Etudes Traditionnelles, 49, 1 216-219 (1984); also see his *Cosmology and Modern Science* in J. Needleman (ed.) *Sword of Gnosis*, Penguin Books Inc. 1974.

process of revolt against metaphysics in the West and not only contrasts the situations of East and West in this regard but also outlines the dialectics of the Western philosopher amongst themselves. Shahzad's chapter "Parameters of Humanism", is a vehement refutation of the prevalent notions of humanism as these exist in the modern West he traces humanism to its roots in the post-Renaissance period at which, time a Promethean attitude gained currency in which man saw fit to turn his back on heaven to conquer the earth. Shahzad has analyzed humanism in its religious, social, scientific, philosophic, pragmatic and existential forms and concluded that, "All forms of humanism cut man from the roots of his being."²⁶⁵ It is really reassuring that he escapes the trap of drawing false parallels between the "love for one's neighbour" of the religions and humanism of the Western brand.

The last chapter included in this book, "The Failure of Muslim Philosophers in the Realm of Islamic Metaphysics", comes as an anti-climax. It would have been better if the book ended with the preceding chapter. This chapter not only weak in its "home-work", but betrays a complete reliance on the secondary sources, primarily Western, for its material. This is nowhere more evident than where Shahzad enumerates the Muslim philosophers. His survey shows a somewhat puzzling period of some seven hundred years during which Muslims produced neither metaphysician nor philosopher worthy of the mention. Then after a lapse of centuries Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Iqbal appear on the scene. To cite Sayyid Ahmed Khan as a metaphysician is, for us, outrageous. He had not the least aptitude for metaphysics; all his philosophizing amounts to no more than servile apologetics. Although Sayyid Ahmad Khan prided himself as a rationalist, he was hardly that, for in his zeal to imitate the British, he was led into the worst kind of sentimentality. His contribution in the realm of social reform could be acknowledged, but with some reservations. However, in no way or manner can he be regarded as an exponent of the intellectual tradition which the Orientalists and their students amongst the modernist Muslims would have us believe ended in the twelfth century A.D.

The Islamic intellectual tradition, for a variety of reasons, is so poorly appreciated in the Muslim world in our era that it is hardly possible to mention it without briefly mentioning what it is. Pre-eminently it is the

²⁶⁵ Shahzad Qaiser, *Quest for the Eternal*, p. 85.

metaphysical (Ma'rifah, 'irfan) tradition but also a legitimate and traditional philosophy. Apart from the profane and rationalist philosophy which was largely suppressed by the Providential dialectics of men like Al-Ghazzali and Fakhruddin Al-Razi there emerged a tradition of legitimate philosophy based on the supra-rational certainties which were provided by revelation (Wahy) and inspiration (ilham). Properly speaking this should not be called philosophy but theosophy to distinguish it from the profane philosophy of the modern West and any philosophy which trespasses basic articles of faith and would be censurable, for example, under the twenty objections Al-Ghazzali raises against profane philosophy in Tahafut AI-Falaslfaq. The traditional theosophy, in Arabic sometimes referred to as hikmah dhawgiyyah. or kalam 7rfani, has ever been a living force in the Islamic World. It is quite in order to list briefly some of the more outstanding exponents of this tradition who appeared in the Muslim world after the period of the Western Renaissance, such as: Sadruddin Shirazi, Mulla Mahmud Jonpuri, Mulla Muhibullah Bihari, Shah Waliullah, Saed Nursi Badiuzzaman of Turkey, Maulana Ayyub Dehlevi, Ibn Rondi, Maulana Fazli I-Haqq Khayrabadi, Bahuddin Amuli, Mulla Hadi Sabzawari, Jalaludin Kashani, and Mulla Nuruddin Herati. Dr. S.H. Nasr has done much in recent decades to present the living intellectual tradition of Islam in Western languages and it is high time the Muslims recognized their own qualified spokesmen instead of swallowing the Orientalist version of their own intellectual heritage.²⁶⁶

The other aspect of the intellectual tradition, which, as mentioned above, is the metaphysical tradition (ma'rifah), is perhaps more widely appreciated and so there is less need to list its major exponents like Ahmed Sarhindi and quite recently Mir Ali Shah. Having mentioned so much we can return to Shahzad Qaisar's exposition and consider his remark that "both the medieval and the modern Muslim philosophers have failed in the realm of Islamic metaphysics."²⁶⁷ The brief survey we have just given above suffices to amply

²⁶⁶ See 'Living Sufism, London, 1980; "What Does Islam Have to offer the Modern World", pp. 147-153; idem. Islamic Life and Thought, Lahore 1985; "The Pertinence of Studying Islamic Philosophy Today" pp. 145-152, "Islamic Philosophy — Reorientation or Re-understanding" pp. 158-168 and Chapters 15, 16 and 17 in the same book. See also Nasr, Islam and the plight of Modern Man.

²⁶⁷ Shahzad Qaiser, Quest for the Eternal, p. 95.

refute this assertion. What is to be noted is that it is perhaps Shahzad's dependency or Orientalist literature that accounts for this breath taking disregard and denial of a living tradition. If he were only to have a look at what he ignores we could expect him to adopt a radical change of attitude.

We feel that it would not come amiss if we point out a few expressions that do not mesh in with his otherwise carefully worded exposition. In his first article he writes, "in the entire arena of human experience the era of Divine authority has passed away". What he, perhaps, wants to convey is that after the Prophet, direct revelation (Wahy) discontinued. An other sentence runs as follows, "God has been reduced to a mere concept or a symbol without any roots in human existence". (p.8) God can never be rooted in human existence. It's the existence that has its roots in God and not otherwise.

Throughout the book one feels the commitment that Shahzad has for his subject as well as a certain development of thought. We hope that he would continue to develop his ideas in the same direction and his quest for the Eternal would bear fruit in future in the form of some other treatise, more promising and written in the same vein.

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