

THE ARDENT PILGRIM

Reviewed by: Sheila McDonough

***The Ardent Pilgrim*, Iqbal Sing**, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, Pp. 182, pb. C.

This revised version of the study of Iqbal, which was first published in 1951, contains much of the new biographical information that has been published since that time, but the basic approach has not changed much at all. The original approach was very similar to that of Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his seminal analysis in *Modern Islam in India*. The latter, first published in Lahore in 1943, was the first attempt to put forward a class analysis of the ideas of the Indian Muslim modernist thinkers. Two German thinkers towards the end of the nineteenth century, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, had begun the method of studying the history of the religious ideas of Christian thinkers in their historical contexts. Close study of the ideas in their contexts makes clear that ideas develop and change over time as the social and economic conditions of life change. For example, when the historical situation is such that no change in the actual conditions of life seem feasible, thought tends to be more other-worldly, whereas when change seems more possible, thought tends to focus on a this-worldly understanding of the religious symbols, namely that the religion teaches that the world can and should be made better. Smith came out of the milieu of Christian thought at Cambridge where the study of Christian history was making it clear that Christian religious thought had always been linked to the social contexts of the period.

When Smith got to Lahore in the late 1930s, where he was teaching at Forman Christian College, he applied the same approach to the social situation of the Indian Muslim. Smith was the first scholar to apply a sociological analysis to the last two hundred years of Indian Muslim thought. He was actively involved in conversations with Muslim and other intellectuals in Lahore in the late 1930s and early 40s. The mood in his book reflects the mood of himself and his friends in that place at that time. The book *Islam in Modern India* indicated that the author had a cheerful and optimistic confidence that science, notably sociology of religion, was going to remove confusion from people's minds about religion, and that it would quickly be possible to make the world a rational and well-ordered place in

which social justice would be implemented. Iqbal Singh's original version of *The Ardent Pilgrim* reflected very similar attitudes. His recent revised edition of the book continues to acknowledge the brilliance of Smith's analysis, and he quotes Smith's conclusions about Iqbal as representative of his own opinion. In brief, Iqbal Singh, half a century later, still thinks that Smith was right to characterize Iqbal the poet as confused between progressive and reactionary ideas.

Smith himself, however, did not retain his original perspective. He was shaken up by the experiences of partition violence, and by the discovery of the Gulag and other atrocities of Stalin's regime in Russia. He was forced by experience to rethink his simple-minded socialist confidence that forces immanent in history were going to make the world better. Smith abandoned his simplistic socialist analysis of history, and his early critical interpretation of the alleged confusion of the Muslim poet-philosopher. Iqbal Singh, however, has apparently learned nothing from historical experience, and continues to insist, almost a lifetime later, that his original ideas when he first wrote the *Ardent Pilgrim*, are still correct. Singh does have considerable feeling for the beauty of the Muslim author's poetry, but he disparages Muhammad Iqbal as significant religious and political thinker. He continues to portray the Muslim poet as essentially confused, and a more or less witless tool of reactionary bourgeois interests.

In his later book, *Islam in Modern History*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith explained his change of his mind, and his subsequent conviction that the Marxist analysis was wrong because its metaphysics was wrong. The wrongness came, in his opinion, with a refusal to take the human person seriously as unique. Those who thought they understood 'objective' reality has in practice turned out to be ready to use the state to annihilate opposition. The state had been made superior to the individual person. The repentant Smith came much closer eventually to the poet Iqbal's conviction that the fundamental reality is the person, who is always much more than the product of his class. Smith came close in this later analysis to what Iqbal himself had said about Marxists, namely that their adherence to a closed system of ideas forced them

to distort their understanding of the complexity of existence –“twisted minds”.¹²⁹

Since the poet Iqbal’s dynamism did not lead him to embrace the cause of revolution, the socialists of Lahore in the 1940s labeled him as essentially bourgeois. Much of Iqbal’s Singh’s analysis is taken up with attempting to prove the bourgeois nature of Iqbal’s life and thought. The fact that Iqbal the poet did not bother much about trying to make a lot of money is not considered significant. Iqbal Singh continually labels as confused and unsystematic Iqbal the poet’s awareness that social change is a complex unruly process, and that societies cannot be transformed overnight. This class analysis of Iqbal’s thought is simplistic and out-dated. In Smith and Iqbal Singh’s early volumes, the assertion was made, doubtless characteristic of the intellectual milieu of young socialists in Lahore in the late 30s and early 40s, that Iqbal the poet did not understand socialism. From the perspective of more than fifty years later, this sounds like arrogant young men thumbing their noses at the elderly philosopher of their town. The truth is rather that the elderly poet understood, but did not agree.

Iqbal Singh, unlike his original mentor Smith, has apparently neither grown in his own understanding, nor increased his appreciation of the poet Iqbal. What is much worse is that he uses character assassination techniques to undermine the respect which readers might have for the poet. This kind of attack was present in a minimal way in the two early books, that of Smith and that of Iqbal Singh, which were charactering the poet as bourgeois and unimportant for the young radicals of their generation. The original critique was that Iqbal was reactionary about women. Iqbal Singh repeats this, and even suggests that nothing is known about the fate of Iqbal’s daughter, with the implication that something bad must have happened.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ See “Iblās kā majlis I Shērā”, *Kulliyāt i Iqbal*, Urdu, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1989, p. 709. (Editor)

¹³⁰ Though it seems like a platitude for the Pakistani readers we would like to mention, for the information of the uninitiated readers, that Iqbal’s daughter, Munira Bano received good education. She was married to a gentleman from one of the prominent families of Lahore and after leading an active life of social responsibilities and community work, now lives peacefully amidst her children and grandchildren. (Editor)

What is particularly unpleasant about the revised edition of *The Ardent Pilgrim* is in that the gratuitous character assassination is nastier than it was in the original version. Iqbal Singh just tosses off the thought that Iqbal would have become a fanatic Muslim if he had lived to see Pakistan come into existence. The Indian writer emphasizes that he sees Iqbal as a failure for several reasons. 1. The poet's ideas were used by a particular class to justify their seizure of power. 2. The poet sinned against his elder son by refusing to have anything to do with him.¹³¹ This is presented as a serious character flaw. 3. The poet was intellectually confused because he did not have an integrated set of ideas about the objective reality of his situation.

On the intellectual level, the problem with this perspective is well stated in Cantwell's Smith second book, *Islam in Modern History* in which he says what was wrong with his youthful socialist arrogance. What was wrong was the idea that persons are nothing more than representatives of class values. Smith later affirms, as Iqbal did, that the individual is more than his context, and that it is always necessary for the individual to keep revising his purposes and adapting to new situations. The flaw of Iqbal Singh is that he does not understand this aspect of Iqbal's thought, and that he retains the simplistic Marxist notion that a person's thought is no more than the product of his context. Iqbal Singh's naïve trust that 'objective reality' can be clearly grasped by a right-thinking person shows how little he has learned since the days of his enthusiastic socialist youth. This kind of Marxist analysis inevitably concludes that dissenters are confused and bad persons.

Iqbal Singh keeps insisting that Iqbal the poet would have been more intelligent if his thought had been integrated and systematic, and if he would not have irritated his readers by seeing so many complex and apparently contradictory aspects of reality. The answer to this from Iqbal the poet's perspective, and from that of the later Cantwell Smith, is that reality itself, if we are open to it, does not permit us to have totally integrated and systematic thought. A person with a closed intellectual system is, by definition, closed to the impinging of the complexities of existence. It is Iqbal Singh who is simple-minded, and not Iqbal the poet.

¹³¹ Here, as at other places in his book, Iqbal Singh betrays that he, perhaps, came across authentic sources of Iqbal's biography (like *Zinda Rud*) but, nevertheless, relied on the fictional accounts gleaned from secondary sources. (Editor)

All this is not to deny that social justice is an important goal. One of the best Muslim philosophers of the 1990s, Farid Esack of South Africa, fought hard with his Muslim group, the Call of Islam, for the cause of Nelson Mandela, and for social, racial and gender justice in this country. His sophisticated contemporary philosophical position, expressed in his book *Quran, Liberation and Pluralism*¹³² is a very articulate expression of a position similar to that of Muhammad Iqbal, namely that the struggle to articulate how to implement ideals in concrete social forms remains always urgent. One does not need a closed intellectual system to see the need for justice in a particular context.

¹³² Farid Esack, *Quran, Liberation and Pluralism*, Oneworld, Oxford, 1997. (Editor)