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Iqbalian Narrative of Reconstruction as Perceived by Massignon

Abstract

The present article will focus at the reception and presentation of Allama Muhammad Iqbal's Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam by the French Orientalist Louis Massignon. For this purpose, the article will analyze the "Preface" written by Massignon for the French translation of Iqbal's Reconstruction. By looking at the "Preface" we will see how Massignon presented the Iqbalian reconstruction of religious thought to the French reader. More specifically, the article will look into the three fundamental aspects on which Massignon develops his introduction of Iqbal's thought to the reader. The first of these aspects is Massignon's claim that Iqbal's religious empiricism is influenced and inspired by Mu'tazilah and derived from the 'Asian Greek, Stoic, Anti Peripatetic models'. Second, is Massignon's reading of Iqbal's theory of 'Self.' Third, his depiction of the Iqbal belonging to the Shuhudiya school of thought. The article will also reflect on the personal exchange between Iqbal and Massignon on the topic of Iqbal's notion of the "Perfect Man." This exchange clearly shows that Iqbal is far more influenced by Hallaj's thought in this regard and completely uninfluenced by Nietzsche or any other European thinker.

Introduction

The reception of Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*¹ in the francophone world was duly advocated by Louis Massignon (1883-1962), the 20th century Catholic French Orientalist and Specialist in Islamic Studies. This is made clear in the Preface that he wrote for Eva Meyerovitch's French translation of Iqbal's *Reconstruction*. According to the critic Georges Vajda², the Preface by Massignon is highly significant as it introduces the moment of revival of Muslim thought that was initiated formerly by Jamal ud-Din Afghani. Vajda agrees that Iqbal's *Reconstruction* is an outstanding example of Iqbal's efforts to harmonize his Quranic mystic beliefs with the contemporary philosophical research in Europe and America. Furthermore, this is not merely a personal undertaking for Iqbal but also marks a watershed event in the history of the revival of Islamic thought in modern times. For Iqbal, the task of the revival of Muslim thought in Islam was indeed a great one and the biggest challenge that it faced was how to keep it connected with its past while meeting the demands of modern times. The question naturally arises: What resources did Iqbal use in his efforts to harmonize religious belief with contemporary thought.

It would be interesting to note that one of these harmonizing paths in Iqbal's work is the mystical teaching of ibn Masour al Hallaj. This is a point that Massignon

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emphasizes and details in the French translation of the *Reconstruction*. It is difficult to find someone more qualified to comment on this aspect of Iqbal's thought than Massignon given his monumental two volume work titled "*La passion d'Al Hosayn-ibn-Mansour al-Hallaj*" (*The Passion of Al Hosayn-ibn-Mansour al-Hallaj*). This work details the life and teachings of the tenth century Persian mystic/martyr, and whose dictum of '*Anal-Haq*' became central in the theological, philosophical, and mystical debates of the era. Published in 1922 this colossal work by Massignon details not only the milieu of early Islamic civilization but also elaborates the mystic theology in general (focusing on *tasawwuf*) and the dogmatic theology of al-Hallaj (discussing *kalam*, *usul al-fiqh*) in particular. He further discusses the juristic consequences of Hallajian doctrine (debating in particular the *furu*)³. Going through various texts of Massignon, it becomes evident that the writer is highly inspired by al-Hallaj and strongly professes the Hallajian doctrine in his texts.

The same tendency is noted in the introductory lines of Massignon in his Preface⁴ to the *Reconstruction*, where he vividly depicts the confluence of Islamic Renaissance, enacted and witnessed through the Hallajian doctrine in the tenth century and later through the Iqbalian narrative in the twentieth century.

Massignon, in his preface, focuses upon three fundamental points of Iqbalian narrative:

1. Iqbal's religious empiricism – derived from the "old Islamic tradition of mu'tazila, that was rooted in the Asian Greek, Stoic, Anti Peripatetic models".⁵
2. Iqbal's theory of 'monads', the Iqbalian 'self' – correlating with the "faith in one Unique God that unifies our personal soul and makes it immortal".⁶
3. Iqbal's discipline in *Shuhudiya* school of thought.

Referring to Iqbal in this preface, Massignon asserts that Iqbal "wanted to legitimize philosophically the presence of Islam in India through a Universal Muslim thought", while one witnesses the following lines in Iqbal's own writing in one of his letters to Dr. Nicholson in which he presents his detailed arguments about his philosophy of Self :

The object of my Persian poems is not to make a case for Islam; my aim is simply to discover a universal social reconstruction; and in this endeavor I find it philosophically impossible to ignore a social system which exists with the express object of doing away with all distinctions of caste, rank and race; and which, while keeping a watchful eye on the affairs of this world, fosters a spirit of unworldliness so absolutely essential to man in his relations with his neighbours. This is what Europe lacks and this is what she can still learn from us.⁷

Thus it is obvious that for Iqbal his efforts to detail a "falsafa-e-khudi" or "philosophy of self" was not utliamtely aimed at the "philosophical legitimization of Islam in India." Even though this could be one of the outcomes but the goal was a "universal social reconstruction" that would serve the critical needs of modern Europe--needs that few Western thinkers were attentive to.

The main point of convergence of Massignon's thought with that of Iqbal can be seen when he continues his Preface by developing the *Shuhudiya* perspective of Iqbal. In this context he focuses upon the 'culminating experience' of Hallaj that Iqbal philosophically replicates and elaborates in his *Reconstruction*. In this context, one witnesses Iqbal's statement in his *Reconstruction* :

The development of this experience in the religious life of Islam reached its culmination in the well-known words of Hallāj- "I am the creative truth." The contemporaries of Hallāj, as well as his successors, interpreted these words pantheistically; but the fragments of Hallāj, collected and published by the French Orientalist, L. Massignon, leave no doubt that the martyr-saint could not have meant to deny the transcendence of God.⁸ The true interpretation of his experience, therefore, is not the drop slipping into the sea, but the realization and bold affirmation in an undying phrase of the reality and permanence of the human ego in a profounder personality.⁹

Now, the above mentioned affirmation by Iqbal clearly indicates that it is this very ego to which he refers while professing his idea of Perfect Man. Hence, it would be more justified to say that Iqbal's idea of perfect man was not derived from Nietzsche's superman, contrary to the general impression that had started emerging since that time. Rather, it can be ascertained that, Iqbal's idea of the Perfect Man was embedded in the Hallajian doctrine of "reality and permanence of human ego in a profounder personality". The same assertion by Iqbal stands in sharp contrast to Massignon's interpretation when the latter says in the Preface that it was the Western philosophical thought that strengthened in Iqbal the religious empiricism.

Massignon also confesses in these lines that Iqbal himself invited him to read the part relating to Hallaj and Nietzsche in Iqbal's *Jawid Nama*. Here Iqbal clearly and explicitly draws a contrast between the ideas of Hallaj and Nietzsche. He upholds the Hallajian doctrine while elaborating upon the fact that how a mystic perceives the Nietzschean model of superman with a fictional self, who could not go beyond the limits of "no deity" to the reality of "but one God":

زندگی شرح اشارات خودی است
لا و الا از مقامات خودی است
او به لا در ماند و تا الا نرفت
از مقام عبده بیگانه رفت¹⁰

Life is a commentary of the secrets of the self,

'No god' and 'but one God' are the echelons of the self;

He remained at the stage of 'No god' and could not reach (the station of) 'but one God'¹¹

And therefore remained ignorant of the station of "His slave".¹²

The above mentioned verses from Iqbal highlight the place of Nietzsche in Iqbal's eyes: for him, Nietzsche was lost half way through in his quest for affirming the reality of the human being or of the human ego. His notion of the Superman is able

to reach the reality of ‘no god’ that constitutes the first half of Tawhid (the most essential and basic concept of the monotheistic belief of Islam), but he could not go beyond this first stage. Consequently, Nietzsche remained ignorant of the reality of “but one God”, which is the essence of Tawhid. As a result, he could not understand the station of the Perfect Man who achieves his “supremacy” by virtue of becoming “His slave” (i.e. the slave of God). For Iqbal, at no point during the many, many evolutionary stages of the “khudi” (or “self”) of the Perfect Man, can he free himself of his servitude to God. This is where one can make a distinction between the philosophical concept of Iqbalian self versus that of Nietzschean super ego, the latter being, according to Iqbal “is purely materialistic” and probably “borrowed from the literature of Islam or of the East” and “degraded by his materialism”.¹³

In the same context, in January 1921, Iqbal replied thus to Prof. Nicholson while clarifying the conception of his idea of Perfect Man : “Some of the English reviewers have been misled by the superficial resemblance of some of my ideas to those of Nietzsche [...] I wrote on the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man more than 20 years ago – long before I had read or heard anything of Nietzsche [...]”.¹⁴

It is apparent from the afore mentioned arguments that while drafting his lines of the Preface to the Reconstruction’s French translation, Massignon was himself not clear about the philosophical depths of Iqbalian narrative. On Massignon’s part we also find that he confesses that Iqbal asked him to read his *Jawid Nama* and to reflect upon the fact that Iqbal was rather more inspired from Hallajian doctrine than from anyone else. Iqbal’s Perfect Man is more a reflection of al-Hallaj’s ‘*Ana-al-Haq*’ than of any materialistic fictional self, or of any Mu’tazilite or other Asian Greek abstract philosophical concept.

In spite of Massignon’s gross misreading of Iqbal’s conception of the Perfect Man, his Preface to the French translation is an important chapter in the history of ideas. It marks the deep and open exchange of ideas between two thinkers in two different traditions who are passionately committed to learning from each other. This reason by itself makes the Preface worth reading. The English translation of the Preface is produced below :

Preface¹⁵

by Louis Massignon, Professor at the *College of France*,

in the French translation of Iqbal’s *Reconstruction* by Eva Meyerovitch – 1955

It is rather through this philosophical work that Eva Meyerovitch chose, among other works of Iqbal, to create awareness among the French reader about the growing possibilities in the contemporary Islam that offer to a European reader: to see in it the birth of original thinkers worth to be compared at the same level with that of our (*European*) thinkers.

One cannot reproach Iqbal, a Muslim and a genuine believer, whose last work was directed towards Makkah, to be a fanatic rejecting every philosophical research or to look at it rather tactfully; and the way Iqbal uses the terminologies of Arabic origin common to all Muslim thinkers, proves that the Arabic language, very often neglected by the Europeans in Maghrib as a detrimental instrument of an outdated

obscurantism, is susceptible, thanks to the great writers like Iqbal, to become once again, what it was during the Dark Ages, a true instrument of exchange and intellectual, philosophical and scientific research; precisely on this international Muslim plan, where the newly born independent Muslim nations, after going through a crisis of nationalism, it represents the philosophy and religious experience by means of traditional Arabic terminologies of Islam. Same as in Karachi as in Cairo.¹⁶

As we tried to mention in the Arabic course at Cairo University, and, since 1946 at the Paris School of Oriental Languages, at the time of the commemoration of Iqbal by Prof. Saiyidain, the rich originality of Iqbal portrays that he was not restricted to uphold certain claims of Islamic ideal vis-à-vis the technical ideal of the Atlantics, metaphysically so weak; son of India, the Mother India, one and indivisible, he wanted to legitimize philosophically the presence of Islam in India through a Universal Muslim thought, therefore, at least partially mystic, rather than social (that is why he was accused of aristocratism). But his mysticism was not at all quietist, and his mystic philosophy did not isolate him from the rhythm of life and the miseries of people. Because Iqbal, such as we will see him shortly, artist as well as poet, feels, according to a profound word of a Turk philosopher, N. Topcu, “the rebelliousness of God, within us, against ourselves”, this “holy battle in the heart of man” that is the origin of the belief in Muslims: “rebellion”, porter of dynamic mysticism.

Various initiations that Iqbal searched for, in the Universities of Europe, about the Western philosophical thought, struck him as far as they strengthened in him this religious empiricism about which it was said that he took from Schleiermacher; while Iqbal had taken it from the old Islamic tradition of mu'tazila, that was rooted in the Asian Greek, Stoic, Anti Peripatetic models. Like Stoics, Iqbal argues as an empirical doctor (school of Pergamon). Like Stoics, he is atomist, not only in physics but also in metaphysics and in psychology: where, contrary to Plato and Aristotle, he designs his theory of human “monads”, of the “egos” (according to the ancient Islamic trends confirming that it is the profession of faith in one Unique God that unifies our personal soul and makes it immortal). On the Day of Judgment, no one can substitute for the deeds of others (substitution is only possible for the pilgrimage to Makkah). In this regard, many centuries before Iqbal, the Muslim thinkers of India had reacted sharply against the mystics Wujudiya (Ibn ‘Arabi) school of thought. The adherents of this school were supporters of existentialist monism which constitutes the common ground for Hindu speculations on the eventual annihilation of the mystics. The reaction came in the form of the the Shuhudiya school of thought. The adherents of this school were supporters of testimonial monism. This school traces its origins to Ali Hamadhani (disciple of Semnani) in Sarhindi, and Shah Waliullah Dihlawi: Iqbal is shuhudi, he shared it with us when he visited Paris.

Here are the conditions (under which Iqbal is shuhudi) : Iqbal had known Bergson and despite a highly deficient English translation (that was rejected by Bergson), he felt a certain “semitic” spiritual affinity for Bergson; he ended up by coming to Paris in order to have a conversation with Bergson. But he also wanted to talk to me about Hallaj. He had written to me from Lahore on 18-2-1932 :

“I am sending you a copy of (my) latest work ‘Jawid Nama’ which I hope will interest you, especially the part relating Hallaj and Niet(z)sche (p.50). I have allowed the former to explain himself, and as to the latter I have tried to show how a Muslim Mystic would look at him. The book is a kind of Divine Comedy of Islam.

It is a pity I was not able to meet you in London. I am now thinking of making a tour to Spanish Morocco and if possible to French Morocco. This will give me an opportunity to meet you in Paris.”

Indeed I saw him at my home on the 1st November 1932. As he wrote about it in a letter addressed to Suleiman Nadwi that was published in Lahore in his “Correspondence”, Iqbal explained to me that, for him, the superman of Nietzsche is a Western replica of Hallajian saying “I am the Truth” (Ana’ l-Haqq). Guided by Rumi (whom he calls Zinderud) (1) in his ‘Jawid Nama’, just like Dante is guided by Virgil, Iqbal says about this ‘German sage’, and about ‘the old song of his flute’:

“Once again this Hallaj, without gallows and without rope, has come to say yet in another way this ancient saying (= I am the Truth)/ The saying audacious, (*but*) the idea was great; / the (two edged) sword has split the West in two.”

In his ‘Reconstruction’, Iqbal had already celebrated the ‘culminating experience’ of Hallaj. Iqbal could see in Hallaj someone who, bypassing the state of ecstasy, manifested and expressed the elevated veneration of the individual person; and through the very same he has shown to the Indians how one might carry out the union of two oceans (“Muslim faith”, and “Hindu unfaithfulness [infidelity]”): not through any conversion but by catalyzing “our inner rebelliousness against God” with the personal “suttee” of saints, their ascetic self-destruction, in the fire of sacrificial offering, and the clash of the two antithetical members practicing Muslim faith: “No god except God”. Following the example of Iblis, Hallaj, approved by Ghalib and Tahira (Qurrat al-Ayn, the executed Saint of Babis), chose the “cup of blood”, deprived himself of his Beloved by burning in the fire of his damnation; and recounts it to “Zinderud”.

Such is, we believe, the personalistic evidence of the divine rebellion in which Iqbal saw the supreme personality of the mystic. This takes us closer towards certain Hindu ascetics, and leads rather far from the bourgeois and provincial Islam to which we tried to limit this master after his death; when he was buried in his red marbled tomb, on the left side of the vast courtyard of the Grand Mosque of Lahore; there, where I inclined myself on the 15th of June 1945, the day of Urs of Ganj Bakhsh (Hujwiri, the mystic leader of Lahore); guided by his friend Khan Bahadur, before going to offer mourning to his second son, in the room where he died, in Jawid Manzil.

Louis Massignon

Notes & References

¹ Iqbal, Muhammad. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. (London: 1934). Rep. by Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2011.

² Book Review (in French) by Georges Vajda on the French translation of Muhammad Iqbal's 'Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam', published by the University Press of France, in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, volume 150, numéro 1, 1956, p. 123.

³ Massignon, Louis. Foreword in *La passion de Hallaj*. Editions Gallimard, 1975.

⁴ Iqbal, Muhammad. *Reconstruire la pensée religieuse de l'Islam*. [Allama Iqbal's *Reconstruction's* French Translation by Eva Meyerovitch ; Preface by Louis Massignon] ; Adrien-Maisonneuve, Paris, 1955.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Razzaqi, Shahid Hussain. *Discourses of Iqbal*. Ch. In Defence of the Self – Iqbal's letter addressed to Prof. Nicholson. Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2003.

⁸ Allama Iqbal refers to Al-Hallaj's *Kitāb al-Tawāwūsin*, English translation by 'Aisha 'Abd Ar-Rahman, Diwan Press.

⁹ Iqbal, Muhammad. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Chapter : The Human Ego – His Freedom and Immortality; (London: 1934). Rep. by Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2011.

¹⁰ Iqbal, Muhammad. *Jawid Nama*. (The Book of Eternity). 1932 ; in *Kulliyāt-e-Iqbal* (Fārsi) - II. Sheikh Ghulam Ali & Sons, 1992.

¹¹ Iqbal refers to the basic Islamic Shahada : *La ilaha illa-Allah*, there is no god but one God.

¹² English translation by the author.

¹³ Iqbal, Muhammad. *Discourses of Iqbal*. Ch. In Defence of the Self – Letter addressed to Prof. Nicholson. Ed. Shahid Hussain Razzaqi, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2003.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Translated from French to English by the Author

¹⁶ Same from Karachi to Cairo.