

The Flame of Sinai: Hope and Vision in Iqbal

Sheila McDonough

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The current surge of attention and sensitivity to Islam in western academia and popular culture often boils down to the question of Islam's compatibility – or lack thereof – with modernity. The issue is by no means a simple one, and is further complicated by the fact that both "Islam" and "modernity" are made to carry a heavy load of multiple definitions that are also susceptible to ideological uses and abuses. Such influential American commentators as Francis Fukuyama, Daniel Pipes, and Bernard Lewis have been unanimous in their diagnosis that while Judaism and Christianity have come to terms with modernity, Islam has so far failed to take that necessary and crucial step. In the larger context of modern Muslim history, however, the question is almost two centuries old; it was repeatedly grappled with in the past and continues to occupy a prominent place in the Muslim consciousness. Sheila McDonough's new book on Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) can be approached with reference to this particular discourse, for the question of Islam and modernity was perhaps the most important factor that motivated and shaped Iqbal's creative output – a body of ideas whose relevance has tremendously increased in the six decades since his death.

While Iqbal's poetic and intellectual genius has been greatly celebrated and widely acclaimed, both within the Indian subcontinent and abroad, it can be safely contended that his true potential as the twentieth century's most important post-critical Muslim philosopher is yet to be discovered. In view of his work's creativity, depth, and visionary reach, the number and quality of English-language studies on Iqbal's thought leave much to be desired. In this context, McDonough has done a remarkable service by making the intellectual and imaginal contours of Iqbal's consciousness accessible to a new generation of Muslim and non-Muslims readers, many of whom have been recently sensitized to the question of Islam's relationship with modernity. Mixing her serious erudition with a loving sensitivity and an almost artistic gift for discerning interconnections, McDonough skillfully blends together the accounts of the vicissitudes of Iqbal's personal life, his turbulent socio-historical context, and his sometimes shocking ideas to paint a colorful picture of his life, times, vision, and struggle. *The Flame of Sinai* is sure to become a classic, alongside a similar work by another Western admirer of Iqbal, namely, the late Annemarie Schimmel's book *Gabriel's Wing*. Incidentally, both of these charming titles come from Iqbal's own symbolic imagination.

The book consists of 10 neatly organized chapters and an introduction. It discusses the Islamic world's intellectual and historical contexts at the turn of the twentieth century and the gradual evolution of Iqbal's ideas as he struggled to come to terms with his own religious and cultural traditions, as well as with aspects of western modernity. The author presents a comprehensive account of the fruits of Iqbal's intellectual and spiritual labor through copious excerpts from his prose and poetry.

Using the image of Moses' blazing vision on the Sinai as her weaving thread, McDonough follows Iqbal's life and activities with scholarly care and critical reverence. She traces his origins in the Punjab in a traditional, but decaying, Islamic milieu, his transforming encounter with European thought and society, his struggle to find creative ways to bring about a true revival among his people at the most basic level of the self, and his discovery of fresh ways of thinking that seek to blend the best and the most authentic elements of tradition and modernity. She emphasizes Iqbal's openness to new ideas, his rejection of dogmatism and blind imitation of authority, and his readiness for undergoing a never-ending process of self-criticism and growth. This brings out the irony in the fact that his legacy has often been superficially treated as a set of final and immutable truths – as if it were an idol in itself.

McDonough expresses a respectful gratitude for her mentor, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who himself was greatly influenced by Iqbal during his stay in Lahore and who established McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies with a view to actualize a major element of Iqbal's vision. McDonough's own training in the comparative history of religions at McGill allows her to see Iqbal's contributions to that discipline. She takes him seriously as a major twentieth-century religious thinker in the tradition of Max Müller, William Robertson Smith, and Thomas Arnold; from another perspective, of course, Iqbal also belonged to the tradition of Shah Wali Allah, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Shibli Nu'mani on the one hand, and of Hallaj, Emerson, and Nietzsche on the other. These later connections have also been duly emphasized by McDonough.

The author notes that Iqbal's perspectives on the comparative history of religions as an academic discipline have now entered western academia through his influence on Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Fazlur Rahman. She traces Iqbal's influence on several contemporary Muslim thinkers, including Abdolkarim Soroush and Asghar Ali Engineer, and also notes similar currents of thought in Farid Esack. In a well-written section on gender, she attempts to correct the impression that Iqbal's ideas are misogynist or otherwise inim-

ical to women's liberation. One of the most interesting sections of the book consists of her sensitive and creative comparison of Iqbal and Gandhi.

This timely book is not just another addition to the heaps of laudatory but superficial books and pamphlets on Iqbal; rather, it actually makes worthwhile and exciting contributions to the understanding of the relationship between Iqbal's context and his ideas, particularly in relation to Islam's encounter with modernity. Furthermore, it points out the continuing relevance of Iqbal's numerous concerns, many of which have been virtually ignored by his so-called followers.

Despite McDonough's self-conscious attempt to avoid putting words in Iqbal's mouth, to a large extent *The Flame of Sinai* represents *her* understanding of what Iqbal meant to convey through his prose and poetry. Even though the question of his "real intention" can never be completely settled, to this reviewer it seems that McDonough's interpretation comes rather close to what Iqbal would have wanted us to learn from his legacy. To the extent that this judgment is true, it is likely to be the result of the author's approach to her subject matter, an approach that consistently seeks to locate Iqbal's writings in his socio-historical and cultural contexts. Unfortunately, this edition's careless editing and proofreading failed to do justice to either the subject or the author; these mechanical deficiencies are annoying enough to require a revised edition.

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