Iqbal and the Babi-Baha'i Faith

â”€

Iqbal* and the Babi-Baha'i Faith
Annemarie Schimmel

E very reader of Iqbal's magnum opus, the Javfdnama (published in Lahore

epic, Tahirih's song: J/J,1 ~/,
' . ., ,:
I.
1932), has been delighted to read in one of the most prominent places this
1/; (~ ;

r_ ~ ~ J ~•iI) rJ,
But one also wonders why the poet introducJd ~~hirih among the three immortal spirits whom he meets in the Sphere of Jupiter, that is J:Iallaj, Ghalib, and Tahirih Qurratu'l-'Ayn. During his flight through the heavens, which is administered by Maulana Rumf, the poet reaches the various spheres in which heavenly beings abide and discusses with them problems of life and death, of religion and politics. It is in the Falak-i mushtari that the poet sees three spirits, called by him pakbaz, "those who have given away everything" for their ideals, three people in whose breasts a fire is raging that can bum the whole world.

~1)?~~~;:j~
J /.. /

,,, .
This description certainly applies to J:Iallaj, the martyr-mystic of Baghdad, and to Tahirih, but it is difficult to find the reason for also introducing Ghalib, the poet of Delhi whose Urdu Divan had become such a treasure for every lover of the Urdu language. However, Ghalib appears in this context in connection not with his superb poetry but rather with another important theological problem, a problem concerning the possible continuation of prophetship after

* Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) was one of the more influential Muslim thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century. He was a scholar taking a degree at Cambridge in 1923, a poet, and a

philosopher. He wrote in English, Persian, and Urdu.

Mul]ammad. Mul]ammad had been called, in the Qur'an, the "Seal of the Prophets" (khritam al-nahiyin). About the year 1829, Indian Muslim theologians discussed the question of whether or not God can create another Mul]ammad if God should create another world. Ghalib's verse written at that occasion states that wherever a new world arises, there would be also ral;matan Ii' 1- '6Iamin, a prophet sent as "mercy for the Universe" (Qur'an 21:107). This verse constitutes the focal point of Ghalib's appearance in Iqbal's description of the Sphere of Jupiter-that is, he is called as a timid witness of the possibility of a continuation of revelation; as someone who knows that behind the surface of a poetic statement of this kind there may be hidden the borderline of "infidelity," and this can be interpreted as pertaining to the appearance of a religious movement that is based on the concept of such a "continuation of revelation."

Iqbal describes the three spirits as wearing tulip-colored garments-for in Persian and Turkish poetic imagery the tulip has been regarded as the flower of suffering and martyrdom. Thus, both I:Iallaj and Tahirih show the secret of their martyrdom in their red garments, which remind the poet of the blood they shed as witnesses to the truth or to their unshakable faith; therefore, he sees their faces likewise radiating an inner fire, the fire of fearless love. The three noble spirits, as he describes them, are in a state of glow and fever from the day of the primordial covenant where they imbibed the wine of divine love, and they appear to him still intoxicated by their own songs of passion.

In such words, Iqbal expresses his amazement at their sight. But his mystical guide, Maulana Rumi, consoles him and at the same time admonishes him not to lose himself completely by gazing at them but rather to be quickened by the fiery melodies of their song. And he tells his disciple:

Have you never seen fearless longing? Then look!
Have you never seen the power of this wine? Then look!
Ghalib and I:Iall<ij and the Persian lady
Have cast excitement into the sanctuary's soul!
These songs grant firmness to the spirit,
For their fire comes from the innermost heart of creation.

That is how Iqbal introduces the three martyrs (or rather two, for Ghalib lived happily until he died in Delhi in 1869). Upon this, each of the three sings a ghazal that in the case of I:Iallaj is invented by Iqbal, while both Ghalib and Tahirih are

quoted with original poems-and there is no doubt that Tahirih's famous lines:
.' . I'
J~JI4/{-; 4/{ Y(V1~)

~r~J~(('rJ
are among the high points of the i6vfdnama.

How did Iqbal become acquainted with Tahirih Qurratu'I-'Ayn, and what is the reason for his admiration for the Babi martyr? We have to go back twenty-five years to 1907 in Munich when he wrote his dissertation, The Development of Metaphysics in Persia. This study was the first of its kind in that it attempted to trace the development of Persian thought from the days of Zoroaster through Mani and Mazdak into Islamic times and to set forth a picture of the Greek influences on Islamic philosophy and the reaction of Persian thinkers to these influences, as well as discussing the typically Persian solutions of the problem of the relation between God and the world. His material was primarily gathered from manuscripts in Great Britain and Berlin, and his then prevailing tendency to a more pantheistic worldview can be understood from various formulations, including his praise of Ibn' Arabi. Still deeply under the influence of his British teacher, the neo-Hegelian McTaggart, Iqbal explained many phenomena of Islamic thought in Hegelian categories. For this reason, he refuted some of the ideas expressed in this dissertation in later years when he had turned away from Hegel and had become infatuated with the vitalists and when Ibn 'Arabi was no longer one of his Oriental guides but rather Rumi, whose original dynamism Iqbal had discovered after counting him among the pantheists in his thesis. I:Iallaj, then, in 1932 the true hero of the Sphere of Jupiter, appears in the dissertation as representative of a "widely pantheistic" Sufism, and his ana' l-~aqq "I am the Creative Truth" is seen, in consonance with the judgment of several European scholars, as an Islamic counterpart of Vedanta speculation (new edition, p. 89).

But there are also germs of ideas in the dissertation, which were later to grow into new, typically Iqbalian thought structures. The emphasis Iqbal laid on JfIi's description of the insan-i kami/ (perfect human), was to mature into his later ideal of the mard-i mo 'min, the true believer whose Self, khudf, has been developed so highly that the believer can speak to God without inhibition, similar to the Prophet. The dissertation also contains a very interesting, largely

positive
statement about the Isma'f1is, and Iqbal emphasizes that with them, Ahriman is "not a malignant creator but breaks up Unity into diversity,"-an idea he was to develop in later years into his very idiosyncratic satanology. It is astonishing,
however, that Suhrawardi Maqtul, the martyr of Aleppo, who was introduced by Iqbal for the first time to Western readers, does not appear in his later work, not
even among the martyrs in the Sphere of Jupiter, as much as some of his ideas are dimly reflected in some of Iqbal's concepts (God as light, et alia).
After the general survey from Zoroaster to Mulla ~adra comes the surprising last paragraphs of the dissertation, which shall be examined here. Iqbal says:

All the various lines of Persian thought once more find a synthesis in that great religious movement of modern Persia-Babism Baha'ism, which began as a Shf' ah sect, with Mirza' Ali MuJ:iammad Bab of Shiraz and became less and less Islamic in character with the progress of orthodox

persecutions, The origin of the philosophy of this wonderful sect must be sought in the Shf' ah sect of the Shaykhfs, the founder of which, Shaykh A~mad, was an enthusiastic student of Mulla ~dra's philosophy on which he had written several commentaries, (187)

After a short historical survey of the beginnings of the Babf movement, Iqbal tries to interpret the philosophy underlying this, in his words, "wonderful" sect.
He writes:

The young Persian seer (that is, the Bab), looks upon reality as an essence which brooks no distinction of substance and attribute, The first bounty or self-expansion of the Ultimate Essence, he says, is Existence, Existence is "the known"; "the known" is the essence of "knowledge," "knowledge" is "will," and "will" is "love," Thus from Mulla $adra's identity of the Known and the Knower, he passes to his conception of the Real as Will and Love, This Primal Love, which he regards as the essence of the Real , is the cause of the manifestation of the Universe which is nothing more than the self-expansion of Love,

One will easily find here the connection between Babf thought and the traditional $Uff idea that is expressed in a famous ~adfth qudsf in which God says, "kuntu kanzan malsJJJiyyan" (I was a hidden treasure [and wanted to be known, therefore I created the world,]) The use of the word love Cishq) for the innermost
essence of the divine, the first Cause of creation, can be traced back to I:lallaj, for
whom this dynamic principle of Love was indeed the very essence of Divine Life, as Louis Massignon has shown convincingly, However, Iqbal 's statement about Love in Babf philosophy leads to his own position in later years: in the

introduction to his first Persian mathnawf, the Asrar-i khudf, published in 1915,
he explains his frequent use of the word 'ishq-"the word is used in a very wide sense and means the desire to asssimilate, to absorb, Its highest form is the creation of values and ideals and the endeavour to realize them ," Love becomes for
Iqbal the true essence of life: it is both "the breath of Gabriel and the heart of
Mu~ammad Mu~tafa," as he sings in his great Urdu ode on the Mosque of Cordova, written in 1933, Love in this sense is that power which with its whole existence "destroys what is against love," and must be united with power, a formulation by Paul Tillich to which Iqbal would certainly subscribe,
Iqbal then continues his survey of Babf philosophy:

The word "creation," with him (i,e" the Bab) does not mean creation out of nothing; since, as the Shaykhfs maintain, the word "creator" is not peculiarly applicable to God alone, The Quranic verse, that "God is the best of creators" (Qur 'an 23: 14) implies that there are other self-manifesting beings like God,

This last sentence looks quite shocking at first sight, but its use is not confined to Iqbal's introduction to the Babf doctrine. Rather, a few years after completing his dissertation and having radically changed his philosophical stance, the poet-philosopher writes in the introduction of the Asrdr-i khudf (xviii) that
the quranic phrase, Alldhu ahsanu ' l-khGliqfn (God is the best of creators) "indicates the possibility of other creators than God." That means, he uses here the position of the Shaykhf-Babf thinkers to point to his favorite idea in those years,
that is, that humans too can be creators in their own right-an idea most clearly
defined in the famous poem in the Paydm-i mashriq (1923) when humanity angrily calls to God, claiming that God had created the clay, the desert, and the
dark of night, while human beings created from God's raw material the goblet, the gardens, and, to overcome the darkness, the lamp.
In his historical appreciation of Babf philosophy, Iqbal then continues:

After the execution of 'Alf Mu~ammad Bab, Baha'u'lIah, one of his principal disciples who were collectively called "the First Unity" took up the mission, and proclaimed himself the originator of the new dispensation, the absent Imam whose manifestation the Bab had foretold. He freed the doctrine of his master from its literalistic mysticism, and presented it in a more perfected and systematized form. The Absolute Reality, according to him, is

not a person; it is an eternal living Essence, to which we apply the epithets Truth and Love only because they are the highest conceptions known to us. The Living Essence manifests itself through the Universe with the object of creating in itself atoms or centres of consciousness which, as Dr. McTaggart would say, constitute a further determination of the Hegelian Absolute.

Iqbal's allusion to his teacher McTaggart is meaningful in our context, for in one of his articles, Iqbal was later to compare McTaggart to I:Iallaj, the brave
defender of the Truth who experienced an extension of normal human consciousness. One may also think of Iqbal's idea concerning the relation between God and the creatures, which, though worded differently, seems to contain a similar image: the world is conceived as an Ego, and everything created is noth-
ing but an Ego, all comprised in the comprehensive Divine Ego (Enver, "Metaphysics of Iqbal" 72). The similarity perhaps becomes clearer when we continue reading Iqbal 's account of Babf thought:

In each of these undifferentiated, simple centres of consciousness, there is hidden a ray of the Absolute Light itself, and the perfection of the spirit con-
sists in gradually actualizing by contact with the individualizing principle-matter, its emotional and intellectual possibilities and thus discovering its own deep being-the ray of eternal Love which is concealed by its union with consciousness. The essence of man, therefore, is not reason or

consciousness; it is this ray of Love-the source of all impulse to noble and unselfish action, which constitutes the real man,

In this paragraph, we read almost a description of Iqbal's own later position, namely the very great emphasis on Love as the moving principle of life, It reminds us of his idea that khudf, the true Self, can develop only thanks to the
power of Love-that Love which teaches the Self to grow until it reaches its final goal of proximity to the Greatest Self To wit, he sang in his second Persian Divan, the Zahur-i 'ajam (1927):

Only Love can be called a "real Muslim," because
it sees the One and advances toward the One,
while reason has still bound the "infidels'" girdle? (Part 2, no, 13)

Iqbal sees, in some allusion to Mulla Sadra, which is not very clear to me, an "influence of the corporeality of Imagination":

Reason ... according to Mulla Sadra, is not a necessary condition of immortality... .

But, according to the Baha'I teachings as Iqbal interprets them:

... in all forms of life there is an immortal spiritual part, the ray of

Eternal
Love, which has no necessary connection with self-consiousness or reason, and survives after the death of the body.

Here again, we can see some parallels to Iqbal's teaching as he had expounded it, especially in his "Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in
Islam" (1930), namely: the Self that is powerful enough to survive the shock of corporeal death (and that happens, as we can easily gather from his poetic utter-
ances about the same topic, when the Self has been strengthened by Love) will continue to live and to develop into higher and higher forms of consciousness. Iqbal, in this respect, seems to agree fully with Baha'u'llah whose way of salva-
tion, as contrasted to that taught by Buddha, is described by Iqbal as follows:

Salvation ... to Baha'u'llah lies in the discovery of the essence of love which is hidden in the atoms of consciousness themselves.

And as much as the Buddha and Baha'u'llah differ in their attitude toward sal-
vation, yet, as Iqbal continues:

... both ... agree that after death thoughts and characters of man remain, subject to other forces of a similar character, in the spiritual worlds waiting

for another opportunity to find a suitable physical accompaniment in order to continue the process of discovery (Baha'u'llah) or destruction (Buddha). To Baha'u'llah, the conception of Love is higher than the conception of Will. ...

However, after some digre ss ion into Schopenhauer 's thought, Iqbal states-perhaps with some regret-that Baha' u' llah, contrary to Schopenhauer who conceives Reality as Will,

does not explain the principle according to which the self-manifestation of the eternal Love is realized in the Universe.

That is how Iqbal's analysis in the last chapter of his dissertation ends-an analysis which is based, as he mentions in a footnote, on Myron Phelps's book on 'Abbas Effendi, particularly the chapter "Philosophy and Psychology." But whatever his sources may have been, it is impossible not to be struck by some basic similarities between his later philosophy and the central ideas which he postulates as the essence of Baha'ism, especially the concept of Love as the central motif of life.
But the thesis shows no awareness of the role of Tahirih Qurratu'l- 'Ayn's mar-
tyrdom. How did he become interested in her fate? And where did he find her poem, which he included in his iav£dnama? There were, of course, a number of books dealing with Babism and with martyrs of the faith, and Iqbal was probably acquainted with E.G. Browne's studies of this topic. But the poetry of Qurratu'l-
'Ayn was difficult to find. However, there is a clue. Martha Root, in her book

Tahirih the Pure, Iran's Greatest Woman , tells that in 1930 an ardent Baha'f in Karachi, Mr. Isfandiar Bakhtiari, copied the most famous poems of Tahirih and had them printed in an edition of one thousand copies, which were distributed to distinguished people in India. This was soon followed by a second edition. There is no doubt that Iqbal received one of these copies (although I have not checked in his library), and touched by the mellifluous poetry, he introduced Tahirih's most beautiful song through his own work to a wider readership. Interestingly, according to Martha Root, one year after the publication of the iav£dnama, that is in 1933, Hidayat Hosain published an article "A Female Martyr of the Babf Faith" in the proceedings of the Da'ira-yi ma'ari/i Istamiyya, Lahore, a publication dedicated to the Ni~am of Hyderabad. We can, therefore, conclude that the public interested in Persian poetry in Lahore and other cultural centers of India was probably well enough acquainted with the work of Tahirih to recognize her poem in Iqbal's epic, and not to mistake it as Iqbal's own verse.

But Tahirih's beautiful ghazaf is not the only occasion when she is heard speaking in the Jav£dnama. The three noble spirits discuss important theological problems. J:lallaj tells Iqbal (who has assumed during his heavenly journey the name of Zindarud) that his sin was that he witnessed, and gave witness, not only

of God's love but also of his power; and even more, that he had tried to bring "resurrection to spiritually dead" people, At the end of his monologue, he warns Iqbal-whom he sees almost as his spiritual disciple-to be aware that one has to pay for such daring undertaking with one's life. l:Iallaj's so-called sin was the attempt to lead people to a spiritual resurrection. In the verse immediately following l:Iallaj's last word, Tahirih takes up the thread and continues his thought:

Out of the sin of the obsessed servant
A new universe emerges,
Unlimited longing tears the veils,
and takes away old age from the vision.

One immediately understands here the allusion to Maulana Rumf's "Song of the Reed," in which the flute's tunes "tear our veils," which separate humankind from God and which bar humanity's understanding of the divine source of life.

).,1)'
~
/ 0
(,ft 4)~~ t ~J/1
I

Tahirih continues in Iqbal's rendering:

Finally he takes his lot from gallows and rope
and does not return alive from the street of the Friend.

This clearly points to the l:Iallaj-motif, for "gallows and rope" is the standard formula when Persianate poets allude to the secret of l:Iallaj's death at the gallows suffered at the hands of the unfeeling mull as because he dared to divulge the secret of loving union. Likewise, the formula that the true lover does not return alive from the street of his beloved is commonplace in the mystical tradition of Iran and the Subcontinent, and occurs also in Ghalib, who made clever use of the inherited images. In the case of Tahirih, the two lines perfectly express the secret of her suffering and death for the sake of Truth. Tahirih then continues, as Iqbal has it:

See his manifestation in city and desert
Lest you think that he has passed away from the world.
He is hidden in the innermost core of his age-
How could he find room in this seclusion?

The true lover, who, through his death, gives witness not only of his divinely inspired passion but also of the power of longing love itself, is found everywhere: in the city, the dwelling place of sober intellectuals; and in the desert, where demented lovers like Majnun have their home. Such longing, and the

people who embody it, can never disappear from this world; in fact, they are there, in the midst of the present age.

Iqbal has proved with these lines, which express Tahirih's ideals very well, that he still cherished the memory of the martyr-poet of Iran and understood her brave attitude. The whole symbolism of the passage put into her mouth expresses her ardent desire to die for the glory of eternal love.

It should be kept in mind that Iqbal, often accused of not alloting women any room in his ideology of the mard-i ma'min and of restricting a woman's role

exclusively to that of an obedient wife and mother, has shown here, that he was not that narrow-minded. The fact that he introduces Tahirih into the Jupiter Sphere (as he introduces Princess Sharafu'n-Nisa in Paradise) shows that for him
everyone was admirable in whom he witnessed the glow of true love; that he, following the traditional Sufi outlook, admired the woman who was so filled with divine love that she ventured to go out on the difficult path toward her Beloved, that path, which leads inevitably to martyrdom: Tahirih is here, like the
heroines of the Sindhf-Panjabf folktales, a true mard, a true (a lib al-maula, willing to leave everything in this world behind and sacrifice herself for the sake of
union and love, of witnessing what she had experienced as being the truth.
The scene in the Javfdnama seems to prove that Iqbal, as much as he changed his philosophical outlook during the years that followed his stay in Europe (after
the completion of his dissertation), had maintained his admiration for at least one
aspect of Babism-Baha'ism, this "wonderful"-as he calls it-religious development, which may have even influenced some of his central ideas, particularly the
idea of the absolute predominance of divine Love in human development. And we know the problem of whether there can be any revelation after Mu~ammad, the Seal of the Prophets, had occupied his mind for quite a while. That is proved
by the way he introduces Ghalib's relevant verse in the context of the Sphere of
Jupiter, but it is also known from some pieces of his correspondence, and it is here, in connection with the belief in a continuing revelation, that Tahirih had to
sacrifice herself, following, as it were, the example of l:Iallaj.
It seems appropriate to close this paper with the very end of Iqbal's dissertation, which-written in 1907-gains a strange relevance in the light of the present situation in Iran:

> Pure speculation and dreamy mysticism undergo a powerful check in Babism which, unmindful of persecution, synthesizes all the inherited philosophical and religious tendencies, and rouses the spirit to a consciousness of the stern reality of things. Though extremely cosmopolitan and hence quite unpatriotic in character, it has yet a great influence over the Persian mind. The unmystic character and the practical tone of Babism may have been a remote cause of the progress of recent political reform in Persia.

— Iqbal and the Babi-Baha'i Faith (Used by permission of the curator)