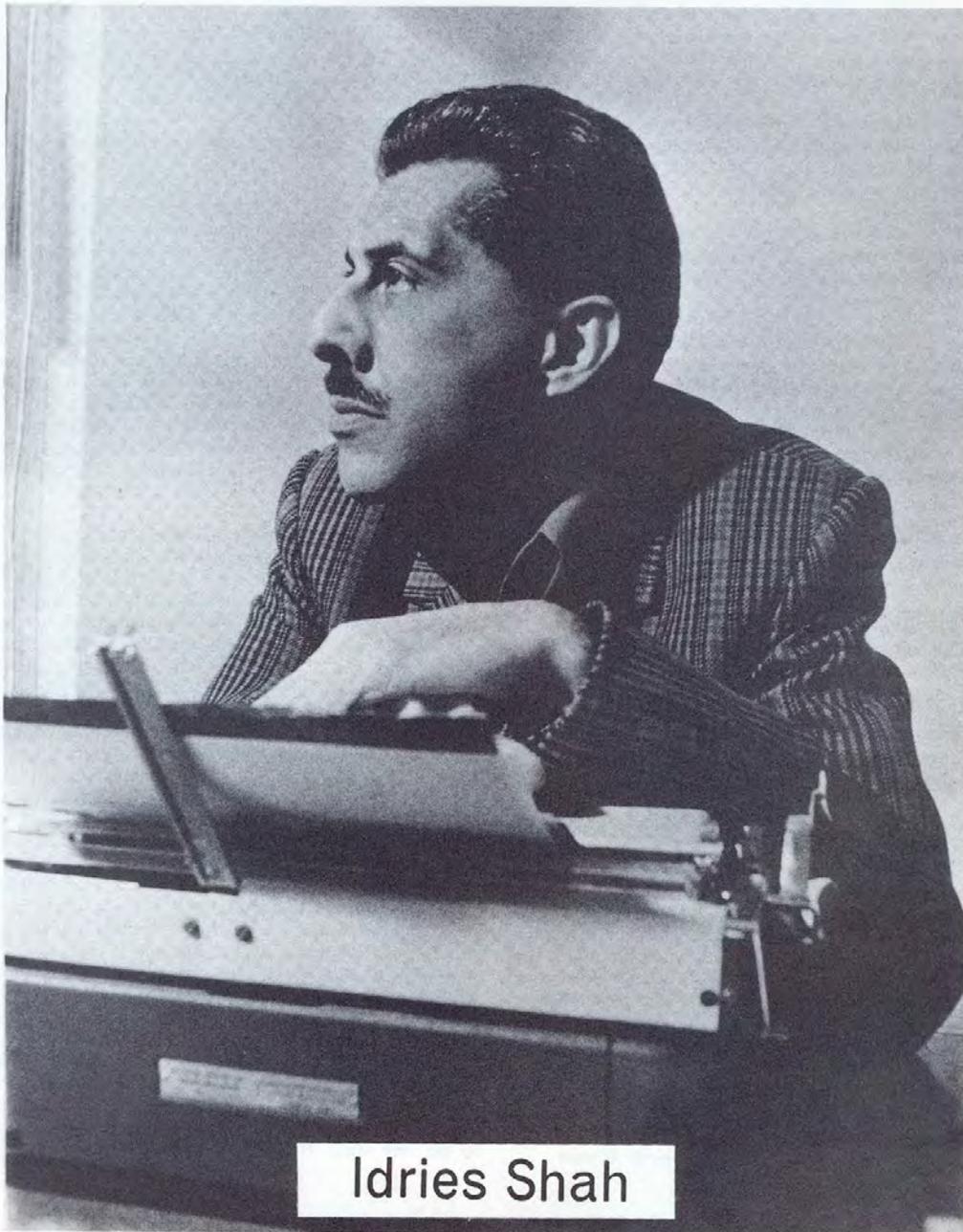


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books and bookmen



Idries Shah

The East's new dawn

BOOKS & BOOKMEN

IT HAS BECOME a truism among orientalists, since the Victorian and later rediscovery of the contribution of the Saracens to civilisation, that during the late Middle Ages the West was far behind the achievements of the new culture of the Middle East. We hear of the public libraries and street-lighting of Moorish Cordova, the academies of Fez, the science of Baghdad and Samarkand, and how the scholars of the West flocked to these and many other centres to possess themselves of the knowledge which the Caliphs concentrated and developed from the rubble of the previous centres of learning in these areas. And then, so the story goes, the tide turned. The East fell into lethargy, and the West snatched up the banner of progress. One could fill a book with the generous plaudits for the role played by Islam in the cause of learning, culled from our own scholars. But Islam remains a mystery, and the (often rhetorical) question is still being asked, by the academics of the East and West alike: how and why did the East lose its power to transmit its ideas to us? Was there anything left to pass on?

This book*, a collection of scholarly papers by literary men and scientists, by experts on religion and orientalism, by people from the top echelons of learning in both worlds, answers both of these questions in a way which has probably not been done before. The book, published in celebration of the 700th anniversary of the death of Jalaluddin Rumi, one of the Eastern poet-philosophers best known in our culture, takes as its theme the vast amount of work done in less than twenty years in bringing Eastern thought in a usable form to the West, by Sayed Idries Shah.

The East 'lost its power' to communicate partly because its thinkers did not study us and the priorities which motivate us. They failed to put their thought in a form which paralleled our concerns. At the same time the long period of Western self-satisfaction—only now coming to an end—meant that people on this side were not motivated to seek for valuable insights among a collection of peoples in the Middle East who seemed unable to defend themselves against our growing economic and military might.

When an occasional Oriental did in fact bestir himself to analyse the successes of the West and applied the resulting lessons to a teaching aimed at awakening the East, the results were more than dramatic. One such was Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani (1838-39/1897) who is the founder of the struggle of Islam for freedom from colonial hegemony, regarded as one of the greatest figures produced by the East. It is noteworthy that his kinsman, Sayed Idries Shah is often likened to him by several of the contributors of this *festschrift*.

Today, in the United States alone, there are over three hundred University and college courses in psychology and sociology and other branches of the humanities, which use materials based on the work extracted by Idries Shah from Islamic tradition. This is not because people today turn more readily to the East to solve their problems: that is a pre-occupation of those who follow gurus. It is because Shah has asked and answered the fundamental question: 'How is the thought of the East to be projected to the West so as to answer some of their own questions, and not to try to impose

upon its people only what we might want to tell them?' It is the difference between proselytism and education. This robust and informative symposium, astonishingly readable, is the evidence of his success in this ingenious and skilful undertaking.

Arabs and Jews, Hindus, Christians and Moslems, a Chinese an African, a Turk and an Hungarian: as befits an international assemblage of scholars, we find them all writing their accounts of some part of Shah's work. The section of twenty-four potted biographies of the authors is a useful introduction to the kind of people concerned in this newly-mined treasure and the skills which they bring to their task. It is almost a briefing on the inter-disciplinary capacities of contemporary scholars. Their approaches are almost all distinctive: ranging from the expected to the entirely new. Professor Chen concentrates on Shah's teaching-stories and sees them from the literary, Chinese and Christian viewpoints. Professor Hamarneh, based in Poland, analyses Shah's impact in historic-social terms. What is particularly striking here is how Shah's twenty books are seen as vital and essential by eminent people who are themselves rooted in what have been seen as entirely different, sometimes even mutually hostile, ideologies.

Judge Makram Ebeid, the influential Coptic-Christian layman of Egypt, and Dr Bankey Behari, a notable Hindu monk, examine his work and concur in finding in it dimensions which humanity sorely needs for the improvement of the human lot. The same sort of reaction has been seen for some years in the West. Shah may not be dearly loved by irascible scholars whom he has outpaced, or by cultists who run after stage Orientals. But he is authoritatively held to be the first Islamic worker since Al-Ghazzali (died 1111 AD), to hold his own with Western thinkers, both in the literary and scientific fields.

The score of workers whose efforts are collected here have undoubtedly done their homework. This must have involved them in reading something like a million words of Shah's books, and familiarising themselves with papers and articles which in the past decade have accumulated in reprint form from Arabic, Persian, Urdu, English, Spanish, Turkish and French. There has been very little overlapping in the text, in spite of the wide dispersal of the contributors: consummately well orchestrated, the papers are edited by one of the greatest living authorities on the East, and this quality shines through, as with all Professor Williams's work.

Each writer has selected some specific and important highlight in Shah's books, which he has sought to present to be intelligible to specialists and also to the general reader. Professor M Y Haschmi, the philosopher and scientist, of Aleppo, notes how Shah has demonstrated the internal coherence of the ideas with which he has worked, in a manner which has not been done before. This has had the effect of removing the Western objection that there are so many forms of Islamic experiential philosophy that they must be mutually contradictory and hence only of local value. The redoubtable Iranians, Professor Arasteh and Aga Ahmad Saidi point out the uncanny ability to transpose Eastern ideas into English, and how, in a lucid and apposite form, Shah's 'ancient Oriental' concepts are on a par with the most advanced ones of the West. The Indian thinker, Dr Hidayatullah, emphasises how this can be done only when the very essence of the Eastern approach has been assessed and applied to the new area: 'He did this by disclosing the perennial and

RUSHBROOK WILLIAMS (ed)

**Sufi Studies: East and West*

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pre-existing truths that are timeless in their reach and universal in their appeal'.

Another clue to the question about why more cultural interchange does not take place is to be deduced from Professor I H Qureshi's chapter. You may have the materials, and you may have the desire, but have you got the ability to do the job? The sources and literature of Islamic and Sufic thought cannot, he avers, be plumbed even by deep scholars until a key is provided. And by this he does not only mean Western scholars. Qureshi is one of the world's specialists in this field, and he ought to know.

Mir Basri's paper introduces quite one of the most important elements in the study. He emphasises the instrumental nature of so much of the new ways of thinking introduced and illustrated by Idries Shah to the West. It is worth noting that the effect, both in form and content, of the materials has been so powerful that it has received very comprehensive recognition. Basri is echoed by Professor R Ornstein (*The Psychology of Consciousness*, London 1972, 224-5):

A new synthesis is in progress in modern psychology ... such a new formulation is currently being presented by Idries Shah ... modern technological work is coupled to the special form of literature which he has recently reintroduced to this culture.

This extract clearly shows how a distinguished contemporary psychologist can easily apprehend that the value of the books is not in any system which they might purport to provide or explain; nor, indeed, to any ideology or automatic activity. The application, as well as the content, exists in reading and understanding the books themselves. This concept is obviously not so unfamiliar to a scientist as it will generally be to someone in the arts, despite many protestations to the contrary.

The literary editor of one mass-circulation daily has already assured his readers that Shah's books work away at the mind whether one wants them to do so or not; and his opposite number in a religious journal begs his readers to beg, borrow or steal the Shah books and to read them. The interest of this book, together with the fifty-nine redoubtable wellwishers in the scholarly field named in it, makes it an unusually valuable one.