

AVICENNA

His Life and Works

SOHEIL M. AFNAN

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Preface

This is an attempt to present to the general reader the life and works of Avicenna, who is beyond doubt the most provocative figure in the history of thought in the East. It is not a defence of him and his system, nor a critique of his philosophy. During his lifetime he was deliberately scornful of defenders and critics alike; he could not think better of them now that a thousand years have gone by. With his position amply justified, and after that extended period when his name hung on the lips of physicians and philosophers from the borders of China to the cloisters of mediaeval Paris and Oxford, it seems best to let him speak for himself. The painted frieze only lately discovered behind a coating of plaster at the Bodleian, is sufficient evidence that he is no newcomer to the Western world.

We have felt no temptation to adapt him to modern thought; or to graft his conceptions on to those that belong distinctively to an experimental age. We have wished to give the right historical perspective, and to show him as the product of the impact of Greek thought on Islamic teachings against the background of the Persian Renaissance in the tenth century.

The legitimate question whether there is anything of permanent value in his thought has been left for the reader to decide. Yet it has been emphasized that the problems he was confronted with

resulted from the conflicting disciplines of two separate cultures brought face to face. He is therefore of more than historical interest. His attitude can be of guidance to those in the East who are meeting the challenge of Western civilization; and to those in the West who have yet to find a basis on which to harmonize scientific with spiritual values.

There remains the pleasant task of expressing our thanks to Dr S. Pines with whom we have discussed Avicenna frequently, and who has read some of the chapters of this book, and made valuable suggestions. ❁

S. M. AFNAN

Pembroke College, Cambridge, July 1956

Avicenna, or Ibn Sīnā, the tenth-century Persian scientist-philosopher, is beyond doubt the most provocative figure in the history of thought. With a wideness of range, a vigour of thought, and a unity of conception unequalled among the philosophers, his thoughts extended far beyond the Eastern lands, giving rise to the most complete philosophical system that the Islamic world was to have. Though the system owed much to his predecessors whether Greek, Hellenistic or Muslim, he gave to his successors in the East as well as in the West far more than he had ever received. Avicenna combined philosophy and medicine with such marked distinction, building an intellectual edifice that could not be surpassed for centuries after him.

Avicenna's works can be of guidance to those in the East who are meeting the challenge of Western civilization; and to those in the West who have yet to find a basis on which to harmonize scientific with spiritual values. This book attempts to present them to the general reader.

Soheil Muhsin Afnan (b. 1904) graduated from the American University in Beirut in 1923. He obtained his PhD from Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1956, and was a lecturer in Persian at the University of Cambridge from 1958-1961. His other works in English include *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian* (1964) and *A Philosophical Lexicon in Persian and Arabic* (1969).



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