

## Toshihiko Izutsu's contribution to Islamic Studies

TAKESHITA Masataka

This year 2014 marks the centenary of Toshihiko Izutsu's birth and many books and articles are being published about him, and his complete works published in Japanese are in the process of coming out as *omnia opera* consisting of 13 volumes. (As far as I know 8 volumes out of the 13 volumes were published so far.) Recent studies in Japan on Izutsu mainly focus upon Izutsu as an original philosopher, especially a philosopher of language and mysticism. However, here in my comment, I reevaluate Izutsu's accomplishments as a specialist in Islamic studies, that is, the first Japanese scholar on Islam who used original Arabic sources and earned international fame. I have to emphasize 'international', because when I was a university student, that is in the late 60's and the early 70's, he was not very well-known in Japan. His major works, that is, the semantic studies of the Qur'an, had been published only in English, and his Japanese works which he wrote in his twenties, that is, *A History of Arab Philosophy* (1941) and *the Life of Mahomet* (1952), had been long out of print. He left Japan in 1961, and he had no strong ties with Japanese academic circles. His background is also very different from other Japanese scholars in the field of Middle Eastern studies. Most Japanese scholars received their academic training abroad, either in the Middle East or in the West, and when they return to Japan, they publish their works mainly in Japanese. However, Izutsu received his academic training in Japan, and while in Japan, he published his works mainly in English, which was really amazing in those days. Even when I was a student, there were very few libraries in Japan, which had Arabic and Persian books. Even the secondary sources in

Western languages were not easily available.

His two books, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran; A Study in Semantics*, published in 1959 and *God and Man in the Koran, Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, published in 1964 are ground-breaking works in Qur'anic studies, and were translated into many languages, such as Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Qur'anic studies occupy a central place in the field of Islamic studies, both in the West and Muslim countries. How in this well-studied field can a Japanese scholar living in Japan where there are no library resources, make a substantial contribution? The main stream of Qur'anic studies in the West is historical, such as Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans*, which uses many native commentaries and chronicles, or source studies like Heinrich Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, which uses many pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian sources. On the other hand, Muslim Qur'anic studies are mainly exegetical, and heavily relying on traditional commentaries and biographical literature. Also Muslim commentaries are traditionally atomistic, that is, they comment verse by verse, and word by word, and usually ignore the whole structure. Izutsu's studies opened up an entirely new dimension in Qur'anic studies. First, his studies are based on clearly-stated methodology. It is Weisgerber's semantic *Weltanschauung* which Izutsu adapted for his semantic analysis of the Qur'an. He took the Qur'an as a closed text, and through the analysis of the interconnection of the key-terms he tried to show the *Weltanschauung* of the Qur'an. This kind of approach does not need a big library of Qur'anic commentaries and pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian sources. Also his awareness of the rigorous methodology is something new in the field of Islamic studies. His approach to the Qur'an had a strong influence, both on Muslim scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Abu Zayd, and on non-Muslim scholars.

When he moved to McGill University, he changed the subject of his study from the Qur'an to Ibn Arabi. The major work in this field is *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism*, published in 1966-1967. In the preface of the 1983 edition, he writes as follows.

“At that time I was becoming conscious of myself gradually getting into

a new phase of my intellectual life, based on a series of rigorously philological, comparative studies of the key terms of various philosophical traditions in the Near, Middle, and Far East.”

It is possible that Izutsu’s choice of Ibn Arabi was inspired by Corbin’s famous work, *L’imagination creatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn Arabi* (1958), although he did not mention Corbin’s work in his book. Indeed, the approaches of the two scholars are very different. Corbin did not intend to present a whole philosophical system of Ibn Arabi; rather he picked out certain themes which drew his interest, such as the world of archetypes (*alam al-mithal*), and love for a beautiful woman who is a manifestation of divine beauty. As a whole Corbin was not so much interested in the philosophical structure of the Unity of Existence, which is central to Ibn Arabi’s thought. On the other hand, Izutsu’s approach to Ibn Arabi’s text is very similar to his approach to the Qur’an. He chooses Ibn Arabi’s *Fusus al-Hikam* out of hundreds of Ibn Arabi’s writings, and analyses the key terms in the text rigorously and elucidates Ibn Arabi’s philosophical Weltanschauung. It is an *explication de texte*. He is not interested in the historical background nor later commentaries (except for the occasional uses of Kashani’s commentary.) It must be remarked that a comparative part (Part 3) is relatively short, and as in his two works on the Qur’an, methodological preliminaries are put in the beginning of the comparative part, which shows his strong awareness of methodology.

His next major study in the field of Islamic studies is *The Fundamental Structure of Sabzawari’s Metaphysics*, which Dr Pourjavadi already mentioned.

It is interesting to imagine what would have happened if he had continued to stay in Iran. Considering a kind of the renaissance of Islamic Iranian philosophy at that time in Iran, he would have continued his pursuit of Persian wisdom, and would have elucidated many difficult texts such as Suhrawardi, Mir Damad, and other philosophers, which had been rediscovered by Corbin in collaboration with Ashtiyani, and he would not have returned to his original project of reconstructing “Oriental philosophy,” or “synchronic construction of a metaphilosophy of Oriental philosophies”, because the attraction of Persian wisdom is so strong.

After his return to Japan, he seems to have been interested more in speculative Buddhist philosophy than in Islam. His father was a devout Zen Buddhist, and it is because of his resistance to Zen Buddhism that he was attracted to the rationalism of Greek philosophy. By returning to Japan from his long journey in Canada and Iran, he seems to have returned to his spritual home, Buddhism, but it is not Zen Buddhism, but a highly speculative, philosophical Buddhism. And it is his long-term research in speculative, philosophical Sufism which enabled him to rediscover similar tradition in Buddhism.