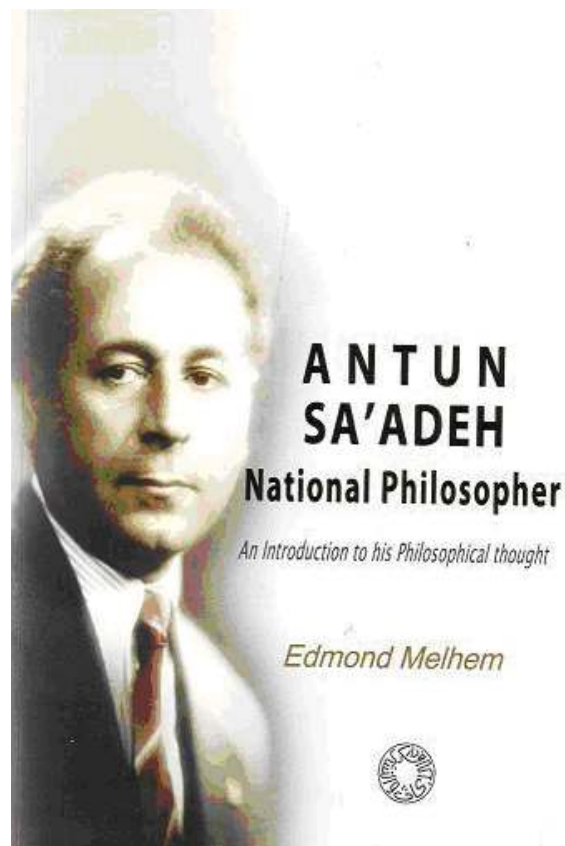


ANTUN SA'ADEH NATIONAL PHILOSOPHER

By *Edmond Melhem*



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Reviewed by

Adel Beshara

A thorough study of Antun Sa'adeh's philosophy has long been desired by those who have approached his works with interests primarily literary, and have been led

further and further into philosophy in attempting to grasp the ideas that permeate most of his works and many of his ideas.

Edmond Melhem's latest contribution, *Antun Sa'adeh: National Philosopher*, provides an almost systematic expose of Sa'adeh's philosophy from an analytic perspective. It is an honest and conscientious attempt to bridge the gap between what we know about Sa'adeh and what we should know about him and between the contours of his philosophy its core substance. With a sound and searching scholarship, Melhem dispels some of the romantic clouds gathered around Sa'adeh. His lucid elucidation should serve as a basis against the irrationalist misinterpretation of Sa'adeh's doctrines in the current literature.

The main theme the book is this: was Antun Sa'adeh a philosopher in his own right or was he a political ideologue and a conventional nationalist thinker? The author posits the issues as follows: "Those who refer to Sa'adeh as a founder of a national movement see him as an ideologist rather than as a philosopher; others believe that he dipped his hand in philosophy but did not produce a complete philosophy; and those who see him as philosopher do not appear to be clear about the nature of his philosophy." Melhem leaves us in no doubt about the answer: "Sa'adeh was a social philosopher" whose ideas deserve study and are very much more interesting than they have been made out to be. The new Sa'adeh who emerges from the book is one whose leitmotif is to furnish the world, especially the Syrians, with a new philosophical outlook far beyond the petty issue of our daily politics and routine squabbles.

Despite a proliferating literature on philosophy, there is still much disagreement on what a philosopher's role is: "For some the philosopher is an elite priest representing humanity before the depths of being that philosophy alone gives access to. Others regard him (or her) as a builder or shorer up of foundations - of our knowledge, our morality, our religion. Still others think the philosopher a sort of vehicle in which the evolution of the collective mind of man and God unfolds. Or the philosopher saves us by destroying our idols, liberating us to be ourselves in all our naked unsupported humanity. Or philosophers just spin theories to

satisfy - or at least to titillate - the curiosities of people with an intellectual bent.” The question here is: where does Sa’adeh fits in all this and what exactly is his role and *raison d'etre* as a philosopher? That is one of the fundamental questions that Melhem could have attempted to address in his book.

Indeed, one can say, and safely so, that Melhem’s book raises more questions than it attempts to answer. While this may seem a weakness, it is in fact one of the strengths of the book. The author may not know it, but the book’s real value is that prompts us to ask more questions about Sa’adeh and to seek to delve deeper into his philosophical concepts.

The book is not a final statement on Sa’adeh’s philosophy by any stretch of the imagination. On this point Melhem willingly concedes: “This book is an introduction to Sa'adeh's literary and philosophical thought. It does not cover everything and is not a complete interpretation of all his ideas. Rather, its aim is to introduce readers to the range of topics he discussed. Through a review of his views and impact on people and society, we can learn to appreciate his true scholarship, brilliance and achievements.” The book may be said to have succeeded in the somewhat diffuse project of presenting a rounded picture of Sa’adeh’s philosophical thought.

There is ample room for controversy about many points of detail in text, translation, and commentary, but the errors and ambiguities that I noticed are not serious enough to impair the book's overall usefulness. The study illustrates Melhem’s talent for combining textual and contextual criticism. He tackles many topics in an innovative way and provides a host of astute new insights. Individual topics are discussed in a careful and scholarly way, and the book is completed with an excellent bibliography and indexes. Both the edited text and translation of relevant passages continue the splendidly high standards exhibited by the author.

Those who do not know or care about Sa’adeh’s real philosophy cannot afford to ignore this book.