

OPENING ADDRESS (IQBAL AND MYSTICISM)

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Your Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentle-men!

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here today on behalf of the Iqbal Academy (UK) to take part in the Seminar on “Iqbal and Mysticism” – which is being held to commemorate the 110th birth anniversary of the Poet-Philosopher of the East – who died on the 21st April .1938 at Lahore,

Iqbal Academy (UK) was founded in 1972 by the late Mr. Saeed Hasan Butt to disseminate the message of Iqbal – which is the message of universal brotherhood, the spiritual re-awakening of humanity, and rebirth of self-confidence and self-respect amongst the subject nations of the world.

For today’s Seminar, we have chosen the theme of “Iqbal and Mysticism” – about which I shall say a few words in a couple of minutes’ time. But let me first of all begin by explaining the total canvas of today’s proceedings.

Let me, at the outset, welcome H.E. the Ambassador of Pakistan, Mr. Shaharyar Muhammad Khan – whom I have had the pleasure and honour of knowing for over thirty years – ever since we were both students at Cambridge – Iqbal’s old University. He comes from one of the most distinguished noble families of the sub-continent – his grandfather being the Nawab of Bhopal, Nawab Hameed Ullah Khan, a great leader of the Muslims of India, a great devotee of Iqbal who helped Iqbal through the crucial years of his last illness – and indeed to whom a number of Iqbal’s poems are dedicated. Mr. Shaharyar Muhammad Khan, thus, has a personal family connection with Iqbal; and I am very pleased that you, Sir, have accepted our invitation to be with us today.

Our chief speaker today is Dr. Muhammad Ajmal – a distinguished philosopher and psychologist of Pakistan. During the course of a most lustrous career; he has been the Principal of Government College Lahore Iqbal’s old college – Vice Chancellor of the University of the Punjab at Lahore, the Federal Secretary for Education to the Government of Pakistan, a Member of the Public Service Commission, and, most recently, the Founder-Director of the National Institute of Psychology at Islamabad. He was also the first Iqbal Professor at the University of Heidelberg in 1979-80, where I had the pleasure of meeting him the day after he arrived there. We are most grateful to you, Sir, for having come all the way from Lahore to be with us today.

I shall introduce the other speakers as they come to speak. Let me now just say a few words, if I may, about the sequence of speakers and their topics, which should demonstrate the richness and the variety of the fare to be placed before you today. We have not confined the topics strictly to Iqbal and his philosophy; but have tried to place his distinctive standpoint in the larger perspective of mystical thought – both Christian and Muslim – which forms a background to it.

1. The first speaker will be Dr. Ziauddin Shakeb from London, and his topic – “Sources of Iqbal’s Mystical Thought.”
2. Second, Dr. Erica Hunter from Cambridge – on “Early Christian Mysticism”

(in the Eastern Church).

3. Provost Peter Berry of Birmingham Cathedral – on “Christian Mystical Tradition”.
4. Bishop Michael Nazir Ali of Oxford and Lambeth Palace – on “Iqbal and Rumi.”
5. Dr. M. Ajmal – on “Iqbal and Mysticism.”

.....THEN BREAK FOR LUNCH 1.00 – 2.00 p.m.....

After lunch:

6. Dr. David Kerr, Director of ‘the Centre for the Study of Islam, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham – on “Iqbal’s Concept of Religion.”
7. Mr. Abdullah Bawahab – on “Iqbal and Bergson.”
8. Dr. Khalid Alavi, Director of the Central Mosque, Birmingham – on “Iqbal and Sufism.”

And last but by no means least –

9. Dr. Christopher Lamb, Community Relations Adviser to the Bishop of Coventry – on “Relevance of Iqbal for Inter-Faith Dialogue.”

It is with regret that I announce that two other distinguished speakers who were to address us today have had to withdraw at the eleventh hour. These are: Mr. Peter Avery, Reader in Persian, University of Cambridge, who was to speak on “Humanism and Sufism,” and Professor Hasan Askari, Director, Inter-Religious Foundation, London, whose theme was Iqbal’s Concept of Time. I am sorry we shall miss them; and I take this opportunity to send to Mr. Avery-the very best wishes from all of us here for the complete restoration of his health,

Now this, despite the absence of the last two speakers, is, from any point of view, a very full and fairly heavy programme – especially considering that not all those who are present here are specialists in metaphysics or mysticism.

To relieve the heavy and rather esoteric nature of the programme, we have arranged for Iqbal’s poetry – in both Urdu and Persian – to be recited at intervals. This will not only entertain and provide light relief to the listeners – but will also underscore the point that Iqbal was not merely a philosopher, but also a poet – and an incomparable one. To convey some faint sense of that poetry, I have requested Dr. Lawrence Barfield (the grandson of Iqbal’s illustrious mentor, Sir Thomas Arnold) and Dr. -Christopher Lamb to read out English translations of some of the poems being recited (– some of these translations being by your humble servant; the present speaker, and made in great haste, which cannot possibly do justice to Iqbal’s enchanting and majestic poetry). Some other translations are by Professor Victor Kiernan, and are being incidentally, has also sent his best wishes for the success of today’s seminar – as indeed have several other distinguished persons, including the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, Professor M. Thompson; the Bishop of Coventry, Rt. Revd. Dr. Simon Bevington-Ward; the new Bishop of Birmingham, Rt. Revd. Dr. Mark Santer (who hopes to attend a part of today’s proceedings); several Members of Parliament; and last, but not least, Dr. Ashiq Hussain Batalvi, now living in London.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I ask the speakers to present their contributions, I hope you will permit me to say a few words about the general theme of the Seminar. Why have we chosen the topic of the Seminar: “Iqbal and Mysticism?”

Iqbal’s first research publication was Development of Meta-physics in Persia, which he wrote as his dissertation for the degree of B.A. from the University of Cambridge in

June 1907, and then presented at the University of Munich for his degree of Ph.D. in November 1907 (about both of which theses I have myself done some detective work!). I believe that his interest in mysticism (and metaphysics in general) was greatly heightened and intensified at that time. Then, when he wrote his first seminal poetic work *Asrar-i-Khudi* (Secrets of the Self) in 1915 (in Persian) he really delved deep into the mystical tradition in Islam. It was about that time that he took Rumi, the great 13th century mystical poet – and a genius of all time – as his spiritual guide. (Later, when Iqbal wrote his great work *Javed Nama* “The Journey through Eternity”, which has been likened to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, he took Rumi as his guide through the seven heavens, as Dante took Virgil as his guide.) But I leave the relationship between Iqbal and Rumi to be fully developed by Bishop Nazir-Ali.

All in all, however, Iqbal’s attitude towards Sufism and Mysticism was rather ambivalent. To put it broadly – and rather crudely or superficially – he seemed to be for the Sufis, but against Sufism itself: or at least against some beliefs attributed to Sufism, and against some of the practices associated with its devotees. But I shall let greater students of Mysticism and Metaphysics than myself (for I am a mere physicist – not a metaphysicist!) amplify this theme – I leave it, namely, to the speakers in today’s Seminar.

Let me end by reading out some excerpts from Aldous Huxley, taken from Chapter 1 of his book *The Perennial Philosophy*.¹ This chapter entitled ‘**THAT ART THOU**’, opens as follows:

“**IN STUDYING *The Perennial Philosophy*** we can begin either at the bottom, with practice and morality; or at the top, with a consideration of metaphysical truths; or, finally, in the middle, at the focal point where mind and matter, action and thought have their meeting place in human psychology.

The lower gate is that preferred by strictly practical teachers – men who, like Gautama Buddha, have no use for speculation and whose primary concern is to put out, in men’s hearts, the hideous fires of greed, resentment and infatuation. Through the upper gate go those whose vocation it is to think and speculate the born philosophers and theologians. The middle gate gives entrance to the exponents of what has been called ‘spiritual religion’ – the devout contemplatives of India, the Sufis of Islam, the Catholic mystics of the later Middle Ages, and in the Protestant tradition, such men as Denk and Franck and Castelliio, as Everard and John Smith and the first Quakers and William Law.

It is through this central door, and just because it is central, that we shall make our entry into the subject matter of this book. The psychology of *The Perennial Philosophy* has its source in metaphysics and issues logically in a characteristic way of life and system of ethics. Starting from this mid-point of doctrine, it is easy for the mind to move in either direction...

Perennial Philosophy (relates) to the science, not of the personal ego, but of that Eternal Self in the depth of particular, individualised selves, and identical with, or at least akin to, the divine Ground. Based upon the direct experience of those who have fulfilled the necessary conditions of such knowledge, this teaching is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvam asi* (“That art thou”); the Atman, or immanent Eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being is to discover the fact for himself, to find out Who he really is.

‘The more God is in all things, the more He is outside them.

The more He is within, the more without.”

Eckhart

This statement of Meister Eckhart, the 13th-14th century German mystic, is very close to that of the Muslim Sufi, Bayazid of Bistun, who said:

“I went from God to God, until they cried from me in me, ‘O thou I!’ “

Bayazid of Bistun

Two of the recorded anecdotes about this Sufi saint deserve to be quoted here. 'When Bayazid was asked how old he was, he replied, "Four years". They said, "How can that be?" He answered, "I have been veiled from God by the world for seventy years, but I have seen Him during the last four years. The period during which one is veiled does not belong to one's life." ' . On another occasion someone knocked at the saint's door and cried, 'Is Bayazid here?' Bayazid answered, 'Is anybody here except God?'

To gauge the soul we must gauge it with God, for the Ground of God and the Ground of the Soul are one and the same."

Eckhart

Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel I have taken enough of your time – and the few opening words that I have said should suffice to demonstrate that the tradition of mysticism is quite closely analogous – and indeed stems from the same roots – in all the various religions and philosophies of men. They are all aimed at answering the central questions: the nature of God, and of Man, and of relationships between God and Man and the universe and fellow creatures – the purpose and goals of Man and of all creation. These are fundamental and profound and difficult questions. Today we have gathered together to examine these questions with special reference to Iqbal and Mysticism in general. With these words I close my introduction and call upon the various speakers to enlighten us on at least some aspects of these great questions – as well as some of the answers – as they see them, and as Iqbal, and various other great thinkers and mystics of the past, have seen them.

Notes and References

¹ Huxley, A.: The Perennial Philosophy, Chatto and Windus, London (1946).