

IQBAL AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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I want to speak this afternoon about what we might call the Sunna of Iqbal, for I believe we need at this stage of our consideration of Iqbal to return from mysticism to a prophetic faith which can guide us in our daily problems and situations. My own work faces me continually with the practical issues of community relations, and I need to be fed by a vision of society. Can the Sunna of Iqbal provide us with just such a vision? There is much that might be said about the relevance of Iqbal to contemporary interfaith relations, almost fifty years after his death. We cannot pretend that he foresaw the present pluralist societies of Western Europe, or would even necessarily have approved of them. But we can draw from his own vision of the nature of Islam to help us construct a vision of a society which enables people to put God first, and for that to be recognised as the proper aim of human living.

There is a passage in Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, which although it speaks to the situation of his own Islamic times, carries a message for all of us, not only Muslims, today.

“For the present every Muslim nation must sink into her own deeper self, temporarily focus her vision on herself, until all are strong and powerful to form a living family of republics. A true and living unity ... is truly manifested in a multiplicity of free independent units whose racial rivalries are adjusted and harmonised by the unifying bond of a common spiritual aspiration. It seems to me that God is slowly bringing home to us that the truth is neither Nationalism nor Imperialism but a League of Nations which recognises artificial boundaries and racial distinctions for facility of reference only, and not for restricting the social horizon of its members.”¹

Iqbal saw Islam as a faith which did not recognise national and racial distinctions except as convenient markers to refer to people and for them to identify themselves by; but for him the real distinctions were quite other. He made the same point more poetically in verse:

“Our Essence is not bound to any Place;
The vigour of our wine is not contained
In any bowl; Chinese and Indian
Alike the sherd that constitutes our jar, Turkish and Syrian alike the clay
Forming our body; neither is our heart Of India, or Syria, or Rum,
Nor any fatherland do we profess.
Except Islam.”²

I find in this thought of Iqbal a vital release from the restrictions of majority and minority consciousness. Iqbal is not concerned with majorities and minorities, and I believe he would not have approved of the term that we so often use, ‘ethnic minorities’. We are in fact all minorities of one sort and another, and the point is rather ‘to leap from shallowness’, and the kind of thinking which finds all-important distinctions in culture and race. Things which really matter are rather faith and a vision for society. As Christians and as Muslims we will differ as to how we envisage that society, but for both of us there is a ‘leap from shallowness’ to be made, which Iqbal identifies with the Hijra, or Prophetic migration from Mecca to Medina. We cannot remain content with the situation which we inherit or the customs which we found our forefathers observing, as the Qur’an again and again insists.

In constructing a society in which different communities live harmoniously and creatively with one another, we have enormous problems, unique perhaps to our times. We can only solve them by seeking refuge in God and by looking for what Iqbal called 'the kingdom of the poor'. The poor in his eyes were not those, necessarily, who were literally impecunious, but rather those who knew their only help to be in God, and we in the same way look for a society which can put God first. As Iqbal said 'the whole world is a mosque, a place of prostration and submission to the Lord'. That is the profoundest sense in which we are 'world citizens'.

¹ Iqbal, Sir Mohammad, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 159.

² Iqbal, Sir Mohammad, *Rumuz-i-Bekhudī*, Trans. Arberry, p. 29