

# RECONSTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT FROM SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN TO IQBAL

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It is implied in the institution of the finality of prophethood that the Qur'an has an unflinching validity and a relevance for all spatiotemporal situations that we may ever encounter. Every such situation with its own climate of opinion and cultural outlook as well as its own thought-fashions poses a challenge to the primordial teachings of Islam. Muslim Scholars have to meet this challenge every time by freshly interpreting these teachings and discovering a new layer of meaning in them which, they think, is always available. This reconstruction of Islamic thought- has been a continuing process. Mu'tazilites were the first regular school of thought who did this. Recognizing, in their own opinion, that the literalist understanding of the Qur'anic text led to antinomies, contradictions and confusions, they resorted to a demythologization of all the so-called supernatural concepts and the rationalization of emotive phrases. The Ash'arites strongly reacted to the excessive rationalism of the Mu'tazilites and tried to tone it down by tincturing logic with quite an amount of faithful, orthodox religiosity. Muslim philosophy, properly speaking, had its inception in the atmosphere which was saturated with the metaphysical teachings of Greek thinkers, specially Plato and Aristotle, their logic of fixed categories and their concept of a block universe. Muslim philosophers, among them Farabi and Ibn Sina, were so overawed by the forceful invasion of Greek ideas transmitted to them through a very vast and rapid activity of Arabic translations that they became oblivious of the characteristic weltanschauung of the Qur'an. They carried out an interpretation of the Qur'anic teachings in the light of Greek concepts and thus sought to reconstruct Islamic thought in a big way. The fallacies of this frame of reference were later on pointed out by Ibn Taimiya and others. Imam Ghazali undertook the revivification of religious sciences on the basis of a method that he devised, the method of doubt. This method which ensures the founding of a system of thought on indubitable grounds was later on used by Descartes also who happens to be the founder of modern European Thought. Coming closer to recent times, Shah Waliullah can be

easily recognized as the pioneer and the chief source of inspiration for all the later attempts at the reconstruction of Islamic Thought. He was the first Muslim, says Iqbal, 'who felt the urge of a new spirit in him'. He had a realization of those practices and beliefs that had entered into the religious life of the Indian Muslims due to Hindu and other local influences and made a passionate appeal to return to the original truth of Islam and to a rational understanding of this truth.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was primarily a social reformer and an educationist. He had before him the decadent Muslim society of the later 19th century Indo-Pakistan sub-continent who had lost faith and confidence in themselves and were thoroughly demoralized due to the loss of political power which they had wielded for centuries together. Deliberately oblivious of the new realities they had fallen back into the circuit of a narrow religiosity bordering on superstitious mystification and myopic dogmatism. Their hatred of the English rulers found its way into invoking religious authority in favour of their refusal to co-operate with the English, to study in their schools and colleges of higher education and, above all, to acquire modern science and technology which was imparted in these institutions. It is this religious context of his compatriots that Sir Sayyid Ahmad tried to set in order so that their social perspectives could be modified. By virtue of the reconstruction of Islamic thought which he accomplished he wanted to show that not only Islam would, but in fact positively enjoined upon its believers to recognize and accept the changing realities of life and to study nature and exploit its possibilities as the contemporary science was doing. Islamic teachings could be shown to be reconcilable to the modernist thought-fashions and proved to be progressive. He observed that just as the learned people of the earliest times of Islamic history had tried to reconcile orthodoxy with Greek philosophy, "in the present we are in need of a modern ilm al-Kalam by which we may either refute the doctrines of modern sciences or declare them to be doubtful or show that the articles of Islamic faith are in conformity with them. Those who are capable of the job but do not actually try their utmost to do it... are sinners all of them, surely and definitely... There is none at present," he goes on to observe, "who is aware of modern science and philosophy and (in spite of this awareness) does not entertain in his heart of hearts doubts about the doctrines of Islam which are to-day accepted as such... though I am equally sure that it will not, in the

least, affect the original glory of Islam”. Thus, according to Sir sayyid Ahmad Khan, essential principles of Islam contained in the Qur’an are in conformity with the conclusions as reached by his contemporary natural sciences. Physical universe is the work of God, according to him, whereas the Qur’an is the word of God. So how can there be a contradiction between the two. “Islam is nature and nature is Islam” is the title of one of his essays and in fact the burden of his entire philosophy. On one occasion he remarked that God Himself holds on to naturalism: He can initially enact any laws of nature He likes but once they are so enacted absolutely nothing can happen against them. Under the aegis of these and similar observations, he built up a comprehensive point of view, explaining away the so-called supernatural component in phenomena like miracles, prayers and their acceptance by God, sufistic illuminations, prophetic visions, angels, heaven and hell, and so on.

In furnishing the details of this learning, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan gave extensive quotations specially from the views of the Mu’tazilites, Imam Ghazali and Shah Waliullah. His views on the conformity of the Qur’an with the results of natural sciences—and, in general, his naturalistic rationalism.—have been accepted in one way or the other by a number of later thinkers like Ghulam Jilani Barq, Allama Inayatullah Mashriqi, Ghulam Ahmad Pervez and others. Strangely enough, even the orthodox Muslim religionists of today seek to profess the eternal truth of Islam by pointing out that what the scientists have discovered as late as the 20th century the Qur’an already contains them. Among his contemporaries, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan met a lot of opposition. It was, however, not his programme of educational uplift and social reforms of the Muslims that was opposed but rather his religious views which were, in fact, instrumental to his primary objectives.

Contemporaneous to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and following him, we find a number of religious thinkers who kept up the spirit of, and were inspired by, his characteristic teachings with some modifications and adjustments here and there. Among his younger contemporaries, Syed Ameer ‘Ali was clearly so inspired. Regarding the truth of Islam Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s attitude was on the whole defensive. In his various writings, specially the Spirit of Islam, Syed Ameer ‘Ali took the argument on to the positive plane. Instead of arguing that Islam is not inferior to Western culture or that

it does not resist the assimilation of this culture, he sought to establish that, being a system of values closer to the realities of life, it is in fact superior. He did not simply defend and justify Islamic principles and injunctions as rational but rather confidently declared them to be so. However, unlike Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan who had laid great emphasis on the word of God which he considered to be in harmony with the work of God, Syed Ameer 'Ali concentrated on Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the central theme of his writings. Anyway, like his elder contemporary, he refused to recognize him in terms of the supernatural and the miraculous as the orthodox would do but rather as a perfect man with an excellent moral character, an embodiment of all human attainments and virtues. Like him, too, he regarded Islam as a dynamic religion inherently capable of progress and development as the cultural environments grow and evolve.

Iqbal, one of the greatest thinkers of modern times was also a progressionist. In his attitude to Western culture, he combined the apologetics of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan with the positive approach of Syed Amerr 'Ali. "The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history," he observed, "is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement for European culture on its intellectual side" he believed, "is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam". However, "the dazzling exterior of European culture" should not be allowed to "arrest our movement" so that we "fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture". Consequently, "it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and, if necessary, reconstruction of theological thought in Islam". Iqbal made an attempt at such a reconstruction against the perspective of contemporary intellectual moods and scientific discoveries and brought out the liberalism inherent in the doctrines of Islam. Despite its eternality, "the ultimate spiritual basis of all life", he says, "Reveals itself in variety and change.... Eternal principles, when they are understood to exclude all possibilities of change which, according to the Qur'an, is one of the greatest signs of God, tend to immobilize what is essentially mobile in its nature".

Further, in agreement with Sayyid Ahmad, Iqbal was firmly of the opinion that Islam, essentially, need not be apprehensive of any danger to its integrity from scientific advancements and discoveries: it rather encourages such investigations. The spirit of Islam is experiential and inductive. The Qur'an lays paramount emphasis on the 'observation of nature and regards the various facts of experience no less than the signs of God himself. In one of his 'Lectures' Iqbal actually demonstrated how the discoveries of scientists of his times in the realms of physics, biology and psychology were, in general, pointing towards the same Ultimate Reality as in conceived by the Qur'an. This was the so-called intellectual test suggested by Iqbal which the religious experience in Islam qualified. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan had shown religion to be reconcilable to the scientific discoveries of the 19th century. Iqbal did it to those of the 20th century. As, in general, to the desupernaturalization of various Qur'anic concepts, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Iqbal have remarkable mutual affinities. They have similar views on the creation of Adam, nature of the Divine Trust, mode of prophetic revelations, freedom and responsibility of human beings, character of eschatological concepts and so on.

It was observed in the beginning that Islamic thought has a 'climate of opinion' with reference to which it has to be reconstructed and this is what, in general, has actually been done by various thinkers right from the Mu'tazilites to the present times. However, granting some honorable exceptions, what these reconstructionists failed to adequately recognize is that for which the cognate phrase 'local weather' has been used. 'Local weather' here comprises the indigenous nature of Islamic thought itself which, of course, is delineated in the Qur'an, the Divine revelation. The Qur'an is not an ordinary book giving revelation. The Qur'an is not an ordinary book giving some descriptive statements only. Its primary function is guidance. It seeks the inculcation of moral and spiritual values and the sublimation of man to more and more superior levels of existence. This function is not exterior to, but is rather synthetically woven into, the revealed descriptions themselves. This unique synthesis characterizing the Qur'anic language is to be understood, recognized and appreciated if one is to proceed to a reconstruction of Islamic thought against any particular spatio-temporal context: however long be the distance that we have to go, we must start from where we are, For instance, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's formula that the word

of God and the work of God should be in harmony, though an innocent principle to all appearance, would be thoroughly inadequate if the phrase 'word of God' is understood in its plain, ordinary, descriptive meaning because in that case it, being a revealed and so an eternal truth, would be incomparable with the contingent, temporal truths discovered by human beings. Similarly, when Qur'anic descriptions are compared with the statements formulated by Greek philosophy or with the 19th or 20th century scientific descriptions this would be nothing other than what is known in philosophy a 'category mistake'. When Iqbal said that religion will not submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy but on its own terms, he had an inkling of the 'local weather' of Islamic thought but he did not spell it out. Anyway, this is an independent subject by itself and cannot be given even a brief treatment here. It may simply be pointed out by way of a concluding statement that a perception of this 'local weather' must necessarily be presided over by a supernatural metaphysical attitude and a faithful commitment to the Supreme Author of revelation.