

IQBALIAN IDEALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MUSLIM WORLD TODAY

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Before assessing the influence of Muhammad Iqbal's thought within the Muslim world today, it is necessary to provide an outline of his perception of Islam, Muslim nationhood, new Muslim society, Islamic state and the unity of the world of Islam.

Iqbal regards himself as "The Poet of Islam's Tomorrow." He advanced this claim when the Islamic world had been militarily overpowered and its political and economic destiny was in the control of the European Colonial Powers.

With the political expansion and economic penetration of the West in the world of Islam came new ideas like nationalism, patriotism, secularism, constitutionalism, etc. The impact resulted in the eighteenth century Muslim revival which, owing to its conservative nature, unsuccessfully resisted' the new ideas. But within a generation or so, out of this conservative background, emerged a group of reformers scattered over the Muslim world who took up the task of Islamizing these new ideas. Eventually this resurgence led to the development of two mutually conflicting interpretational attitudes conventional and reformist among the Muslim intelligensia each with its own notions as how to deal with the prevalent conditions.

Iqbal was acutely conscious of the reality of change. According to this philosophy "change" is the only "constant" or "permanent" feature in the whole of the created universe. Therefore he could not subscribe to the conventional viewpoint, which had made the old Muslim society static and immobile. But through reforming or reconstructing religious thought in Islam, he contemplated the creation of a dynamic and progressive new Muslim society.

In Iqbal's perception, Islam is not a religion in the ancient sense of the word. It is an attitude of freedom from narrow-mindedness and even of

defiance to the universe. It is a protest against all kinds of spiritual slavery of the ancient world.¹ Therefore according to him Islam is neither national, nor racial, nor personal but purely human. As a culture, it has neither any language nor any script nor any specific mode of dress.

According to the Western interpretation of “nationalism”, a group of people having the same language, race and territory constitute a nation. But Iqbal is of the view that this definition of “nationalism” is narrow and anti-human. In his perception, any factor which develops among the people a sense of belonging to one another could constitute a nation. Advancing this argument further he held that Muslims constitute a nation on the basis of having a common spiritual aspiration, even though their languages or races are different and the territories they occupy are geographically non-contiguous. Therefore Islam endeavors to transform and unify different peoples with various racial and linguistic backgrounds into a single human community (Ummah). Iqbal considers Islam as a nation-building force when he maintains that for the Muslims, Islam is their “nationalism” as well as “patriotism”. His contemplated new Muslim society of the - future is to be founded on the political, cultural and economic unity of the Islamic world. On the basis of this reasoning, and following Syed Ahmad Khan, Iqbal was convinced that there were two nations in the Indian subcontinent Muslim and Hindus— and therefore territorial specification of Islam was necessary by carving out a separate consolidated Muslim majority state.

Iqbal evolved his philosophy of individual and collective ego in the background of his perceptions of Islam and Muslim nationhood. He was not a philosopher in the formal sense of the term. Nevertheless, he believed that each and every individual has numerous potentialities. If he is to become aware of even a single such potentiality within himself and endeavors to realize it, he could become a centre of latent power and attain uniqueness. According to him, a society consisting of such unique individuals is bound to be collectively unique. This is his vision of the future Muslim society.

What was to be accomplished by the new Muslim society? First: Iqbal laid emphasis on the need for the evolution of a new *Ilm al-Kalam* (Science

¹ Stray Reflections (A Note-Book of Allama Iqbal) ed. by Javid Iqbal, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1992, p. 134.

based on rational interpretation of revelation) in the light of the discoveries of modern empirical sciences as well as the advancement of human knowledge. This was necessary for strengthening the faith of the younger generation of Muslims in the Qur'anic precepts. Second, he insisted on the abolition of the distinction between institutions of religious instruction and universities for teaching philosophy, literature, arts and other sciences. Third, he demonstrated through his analysis of history that Muslims were the founders of the experimental method or empirical sciences and contributed to the making of humanity. Therefore, he held that in the amalgamated centres of learning, the study of Islamic -sciences should be revived and their broken link be re-established with modern sciences and technologies.

According to Iqbal, modern Western civilization, particularly in the sphere of knowledge, was a prolongation of Islamic civilization. During the dark ages of Europe, Muslims were the torch-bearers of knowledge, but when Muslim culture sank back into darkness, Europeans took over these sciences and made further advancements on them. This ushered the era of enlightenment in Europe. Therefore, the acquisition of science and technology from the West does no amount to borrowing something from an alien culture, but taking back what was originally handed over by the Muslims to the Westerners.

Iqbal desired the awakening of the spirit of curiosity and inquisitiveness in the new Muslim society through the reacquisition of science and technology so that the process of research, innovation, discovery, invention and creativity could be recommenced in the Muslim countries.

In the Iqbalian view, a modern Islamic state is to be based on the principles underlying the pivotal article of Islamic Faith i.e. Tawhid (Unity of God) which, in practical terms, stands for human solidarity, human equality and human freedom. It is an effort to transform these universal ideals into space-time forces and an endeavor to realize them in a specific human organization. Iqbal regards the reformation of elected legislative assemblies in Muslim countries as a return to the original purity of Islam.² The Democracy

² The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, 1982 Ed. pp. 154, 157.

of Islam, according to him, did not grow out of the extension of economic opportunity, but it is a spiritual principle based on the assumption that every human being is a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character.³

As for the responsibility of Muslims for protecting the rights of non-Muslim minorities in a modern Islamic state, Iqbal proclaims:

A community which is inspired by feelings of ill-will towards other communities is low and ignoble. I entertain the highest respect for the customs, laws, religious and social institution of other communities. Nay, it is my duty, according to the teachings of the Qur'an, even to defend their place of worship if need be⁴

The last sentence in the dated passage is based on Surah 22 verse 40 of the Qur'an in which it is laid down:

If Allah had not created the group (of Muslim) to ward off the others from aggression, then churches, synagogues, oratories and mosques where Allah is worshiped most, would have been destroyed.

In the early stages the jurists interpreted this verse as a command to the Muslim to protect the places of worship of the Jewish and Christian communities in the Muslim state being the "People of the Book" (Ahl-i-Kitab).

However, after the conquest of Iran, the places of worship of the Zoroastrians were also included under this protective clause on the ground that the jurists had declared them as "Like the people of the Book" (Ka-mithli-i-Ahl-i-Kitab). On the same principle the temples of the Hindus were granted protection during the Mughal rule in the India.

The modern Western civilization has dealt with the problem of religion through "secularism". There are two varieties of "secularism" developed in

³ 3. Stray Reflections, p. 139.

⁴ Discourses of Iqbal, Ed. by Shahid Hussain Razzaki p. 62.

Europe after the Reformation and incorporated in the political orders of the Western countries. One type of secularism is based on the principle of “indifference to religion” and this is, the accepted norm in the capitalist democracies, Western Europe, Britain, U.S.A, India etc. The other type is founded on the principle of “suppression of religion” and for a number of years this policy had been followed by the so-called socialist countries including the former U.S.S.R. But from the persecution of minorities, particularly the Muslim in Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine, Kashmir etc., it is evident that either of the forms of secularism is based purely on hypocrisy and double standards. Even otherwise, generally speaking, the attitude of “indifference to religion” has resulted in the dissemination of a kind of freedom which leads to “ethical waywardness” and treading on the rights of others. Furthermore, the recent developments in the former U.S.S.R. and other East European countries indicate that atheism cannot be imposed on a people from outside through state terror, and whenever such an attempt is made, it is bound to fail. Thus, it is clear that the existing types of secularism evolved by the modern Western civilization have not been able to solve the problem.

It is perhaps in this background that Iqbal rejects the contemporary methodologies of secularism, territorial nationalism, capitalism, atheistic socialism, sectarianism or religious conservatism as drawing upon the psychological forces of hate, suspicion and resentment which tend to impoverish the soul of man. A deeper analysis of his writings on this subject indicates that he recommends the adoption of the policy not of “indifference” or “suppression” but of “respecting and liberating all religions, faiths and creeds”. He argues that the political philosophers of today must reconsider their approach to secularism and materialism in the light of the discoveries of modern physics. He states:

The ultimate reality according to the Qur’an is spiritual and its life consists in its temporal activity. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is therefore sacred in the roots of its being. The greatest service that modern thought has rendered to Islam and as a matter of fact to all religions, consists in its criticism of what we call material or natural — a criticism which discloses that the merely material has no substance until we discover it rooted in spirit. There is no

such thing as profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self-realization of spirit. All is holy ground.⁵

Iqbal further argues that since the Muslims believe that there can be no further revelation binding on man, they ought to be spiritually the most emancipated peoples on earth. He thinks that those who came within the fold of Islamic early stages could not comprehend the true significance of this basic ideas because they had just emerged from the spiritual slavery of pre-Islamic times and had no conception of spiritual freedom. However, he concludes, the modern Muslims are perfectly competent of appreciating this idea. Therefore, he wants them to reconstruct their social life in the light of ultimate principles and “evolve, out of the hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, that spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam”⁶

It is interesting to note that in the modern Muslim political literature of South Asia, Iqbal is probably the only thinker who has used the expression “spiritual democracy” in order to define a modern Islamic state. He also employs the expressions “spiritual slavery” and “spiritual emancipation” for describing the collective states of minds of fanatical ignorant religious folks as opposed to the tolerant enlightened religious people. “Spiritual democracy” of Iqbal obviously means “a democratic state which is based on the principles of respect and freedom of all religions”. This concept of Iqbal is founded on Surah 5 verse 48 of the Qur’an in which God addressing man commands:

For each of you we have appointed a law and a way. And if Allah had willed he would have made you one (religious) community. But (He hath willed it otherwise) that He may put you to the test in what He has given you. Therefore, compete with one another in good works.

Unto Allah will ye be brought back and He will inform you about that wherein ye differed.

⁵ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam p. 155.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 178-180.

If, according to Iqbal, the political message of Islam is to establish a “spiritual democracy” in any multi-cultural society where Muslims dominate numerically, then Iqbal’s perception is a departure from the traditional notion, of Islamic state. But Iqbal points out the conventional literature on Islamic political order was compiled during the times when the Muslim world had been afflicted with perverse kind of monarchy and when the political ideals of Islam had been “repaganized”. He proclaims.

I consider it a great loss that the progress of Islam as a conquering faith stultified the growth of those germs of an economic and democratic organization of society which I find scattered up and down the pages of the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet. No doubt the Muslim succeeded in building a great empire, but thereby they largely repaganized their political ideals and lost sight of some of the most important potentialities of their faith.⁷

In regard to the legislative activity of the modern Islamic state, Iqbal’s was of the view that the Pariah principles pertaining to worldly matters (Mu’amalāt) were subject to the law of change. They have to be reinterpreted through a continuous process of Ijtihad and made to conform with the modern needs and requirements of the Muslim community. He declares:

The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles in the light of their own experience and the altered conditions of modern life is, in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Qur’an that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.⁸

According to Iqbal the power of Ijtihad should be exercised by elected Muslim assemblies in the form of Ijma’ (Consensus of the community on the majority basis). In order to exclude or reduce the possibilities of erroneous interpretation, Iqbal suggests that the Ulema be nominated to constitute a

⁷ Thoughts and Rejections of Iqbal, Ed. by S.A. Wahid, p. 168.

⁸ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 168.

vital part of the legislative assembly helping and guiding free discussion on questions relating to law along with the contribution from laymen who happen to possess a keen insight into affairs. But Iqbal does not give the power of veto to the Ulema. He thinks that the only effective remedy for eliminating the possibility of erroneous interpretation is to reform the present system of legal instruction in the universities of Muslim countries, to extend its sphere and to combine it with an intelligent study of modern jurisprudence.⁹ He is convinced like Pibli that if the reinterpreted socialistic or welfare- laws of Islam are implemented in the Muslim countries, their economic problems could be resolved.

Iqbal was greatly influenced by Syed Jamal-al-Din Afghani and his vision of the unification of the Muslim nationhood is to aspire for the realization of a unified Islamic world. He advanced his concept of Muslim nationhood at the time when the independent Muslim state were under the spell of territorial nationalism. Therefore, taking notice of this trend in modern Islam, Iqbal was of the view that for the present, every Muslim nation must sink into her own deeper self and focus her vision on herself alone, until all are strong and powerful to form a living family of republics. He points out:

A true and living unity... is manifested in multiplicity of free independent units whose racial rivalries are adjusted and harmonized by the unifying bond of a common spiritual aspiration. It seems to me that God is slowly bringing home to us the truth that Islam is neither nationalism nor imperialism but a League of Nations which recognizes artificial boundaries and racial distinctions for facility of reference only, and not to restrict the social horizon of its members.¹⁰

The Western powers had brought into being the League of Nations at Geneva during Iqbal life time. But Iqbal was not satisfied with its deliberations so far as the Muslim World was concerned. Therefore, he felt

⁹ Ibid., pp. 173-176.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 159.

that sometime in the future, the Muslim states may have create their own League of Nations and he even suggested Tehran as its seat.¹¹

As far the influence of Iqbal on the Muslim world of today, it may be noted that the bulk of his poetic works is in Persian and the rest of them in Urdu. Some of his poetic works have been rendered into Arabic and Turkish. But in Turkey and the Arab World, particularly Egypt and Syria, his impact is confined to a limited circle of Muslim academicians or intellectuals who consider him as a poet of Islamic renaissance. Similar is his position in the Persian speaking people of the new Central Asian Republics.

His famous English prose work titled *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* has been translated into Muslim languages like Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Turkish and Indonesian. But it is only in Iran that his poetic as well as prose works have been studied with greater depth. The Iranians claim that his thought was partly responsible for the recent Islamic revolution in Iran. The outstanding Iranian thinker Ali Pariati has been greatly influenced by Iqbal's ideas, and Imam Khaminaei, the present successor of Imam

Khomeini is a renowned scholar of Iqbal's poetry.

Among the Muslim of India he has been accepted as a great Urdu poet-philosopher, whereas in Pakistan he is revered and respected as the spiritual father of the country.

Some of the political leaders of the contemporary Islamic world are familiar with his name, including President Rafsanjani of Iran, who paid rich tributes to his memory at the OIC Summit held at Islamabad on 23 March, 1997.

However, it is not important to measure the extent of Iqbal's influence within the contemporary Muslim world on the criterion of a conscious in-depth study of his ideas. On the contrary, what is required to be assessed in the rapid spread of Iqbalian idealism all over the modern Islamic countries although some of them may have not even heard his name.

¹¹ Zarb-i-Kalim p. 147 in *Kulliyat-i-Iqbal* (Urdu) 1977 Ed.

The emergence of numerous free and independent Muslim nation-states, their endeavors to stand on their own feet educationally, economically and technologically, their bilateral or multi-lateral cultural, economic or military pacts with one another for mutual benefit and security, their aspirations to work out some kind of forum like OIC for unification, in order to strengthen Islamic solidarity and promote cooperation among Muslim states for the collective well-being of all of them, are all different dimensions of Iqbal's magnificent dream. Furthermore, wherever Muslims are still struggling for the realization of their right of self determination as a distinct national unit founded on a common spiritual aspiration, be it Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Cyprus, the Philippines or Palestine, and also wherever movements exist for reform on the basis of constitutionalism, democracy, social justice and for reinterpretation of Islamic law to suit the the modern needs and requirements of the Muslim community, one is again reminded of Iqbal's voice as spokesman of dynamic, progressive and modern Islam. Some of his dreams may have been realized, but in many respects he still remains the Poet of Islam's tomorrow.

The paper is based on the prose writings of Muhammad Iqbal. But some major poetic works like *Asrar-i-Khudi*, *Ramuz-i-Bakbusi* (Persian), *Bal-i fibril*, *Zarb-i-Kalim* (Urdu) have also been consulted. “ /he Glorious Qur'an” English translation by M. Pickthall has relied upon.

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