

IQBAL ON NEW ULEMA FOR A NEW MUSLIM SOCIETY

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When the European Colonial Powers penetrated the Muslim world, the Ulema in different Muslim countries resisted them. But their resistance could not stop the advance as the Ulema were totally unaware of the advancement made by human knowledge as well as science and technology in Europe. They fought against the long-range of the imperialists with timeworn rifles and swords. Subsequently when the reformers like Syed Jamal-uddin Afghani, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan etc. preached that in order to know the secret of Western power one had to acquire the new knowledge, they opposed them as Westernized Muslims. It was in this background that in the conflict between the “conservatives” and the “liberals”, the liberal Muslim reformers regarded the conservative Ulema as a hinderance in the material progress of the Muslim nations.

The problem of “conservatism” was handled in two ways in Turkey and Muslim India. In Turkey Kemal Ataturk eliminated the Ulema completely from the religious life of the Turks. But in Muslim India, Iqbal tried his best during his life time to educate and train the Ulema so as to create among them a group of new Ulema to provide a new motivation for Islam to the new Muslim society which he thought of bringing into being.

Iqbal found the Muslim society suffering from numerous ailments. He has drawn a portrait of it in one of his Urdu articles titled “Qaumi Zindagi” (National Life) which appeared in the journal *Makhsan* in 1904. He observes:

“This unfortunate community has been deprived of political, industrial as well as commercial power. Now unconcerned with the demands of times and smitten by stark poverty, it is trying to survive with the help of the useless staff of contentment. Leaving aside other matters, it has so far not been able to settle its religious disputes. Every other day a new sect is brought into being which considering itself exclusively as the heirs of paradise declares the rest of mankind as fuel for hell. This form of sectarianism has scattered the Muslims in such a manner that there is no hope for unifying them as a single community. The condition of our Maulvis is such that if two of them happen to be present in one city, they send

messages to each other for holding a discussion on some controversial religious issues, and in case the discussion starts, which usually does, then it ends up in a deplorable brawl. The width of knowledge and comprehension which was a characteristic of the early Ulema of Islam does not exist any more. But there exists a list of “Muslim infidels” in which additions are being made daily by their own hand. The social scene of the Muslims is equally distressing. Their girls are illiterate, their boys are ignorant and jobless. They are scared to try their luck by working as industrial labourers, they consider taking up vocational jobs as below their dignity. The number of dissolution of marriage cases in their families is rising. Similarly the crime among them is on the increase. The situation is quite serious, and there is no solution of the problem except that the entire community should direct its mind and soul completely towards reforming itself. God does not change the condition of a community unless it changes itself.”

According to Iqbal one of the most important factors for the establishment of a new Muslim society was the reform of Islamic culture, and it was in this connection that he felt the need for educating and training the Ulema. He argues:

“The question of cultural reform among the Muslims is in fact a religious question, because there is no aspect of our cultural life which can be separated from religion. However, because of the occurrence of a magnificent revolution in the conditions of modern living, certain new cultural needs have emerged. It has therefore become necessary that the decisions made by the old jurists, the collection of which is generally known as the Islamic *Sharā‘ah*, require a review. The decisions delivered by the former jurists from time to time on the basis of the broad principle of the Quran and the Tradition, were indeed appropriate and practical for those specific times, but these are not completely applicable to the needs and requirements of the present times. If one reflects deeply on the conditions of modern life, one is forced to arrive at the conclusion that just as we need the elaboration of a new *Ilm-i-Kalām* for providing a fresh religious motivation, we likewise need the services of a jurist who could by the width of his vision stretch the principle so widely as to cover all the possible situations of the present cultural needs. As far as I am aware, the Muslim world has not yet produced any such great Jurist, and if one were to consider the magnitude of this

enterprise, it would appear that perhaps it is a job for more than one mind to accomplish, and it may require at least a century to complete the work.”

Iqbal wanted to establish an Islamic university for the education of the new Ulema. This was necessary for the realization of many objectives, and one of them, as explained by Iqbal was:

Who does not know that the moral training of the Muslim masses is in the hands of such Ulema and preachers who are not really competent to perform this duty. Their knowledge of Islamic history and Islamic sciences is extremely limited. In order to persuade the people to adopt in their lives the moral and religious values of Islam, it is necessary for a preacher of today to be not only familiar with subjects like history, economics and sociology, but must also have complete knowledge of the literature and modes of thinking of the community.”

The Islamic University was not created. However, in the thirties the Aligarh Muslim University thought of introducing a new faculty of Islamic studies, and accordingly Aftab Ahmed Khan, Chancellor of the university wrote to Iqbal seeking his advice. Iqbal wrote a long letter to him which is a very important document. Some of the extracts of the same are given below:

“Our first and foremost object should be to create Ulema of proper qualities who could fulfil the spiritual needs of the community. Please note that alongwith the change in the outlook of the people their spiritual requirements also undergo a change. The change in the status of the individual, his freedom of thought and expression, and the unimaginable advancement made by the physical sciences, have completely revolutionized modern life. As a result, the kind of *Ilm-i-Kakam* and the theological understanding which was considered sufficient to satisfy the heart of a Muslim of the Middle Ages, does not satisfy him any more. This is not being stated with the intention to injure the spirit of religion. But in order to re-discover the depths of creative and original thinking (Ijtihad), and to emphasize that it is essential to reconstruct our religious thought. Like many other matter, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan’s far sightedness made him also look into this problem. As you may know he laid the foundations of his rationalism on the philosophical doctrines of an ancient and bygone age for the resolution of this problem. I am afraid, I do not agree with your proposed curriculum of Islamic studies. In my view the revival of the faculty

of Islamic studies on the old lines is totally useless. As far its spiritual significance one can say that it is based on stereotype ideas, and as far its educational significance it is irrelevant in the face of the emerging new problems or the new presentation of the old problems. What is needed today is to apply ones mind in a new direction and to exert for the construction of a new theology and a new *‘Ilm-i-Kalām*. It is evident that this job can be accomplished by those who are competent to do it. But how to create such Ulema? My suggestion so that if you desire to keep the conservative element of our society satisfied, then you may start with the school of Islamic studies on the old lines. But your ultimate objective should be to gradually bring forward a group of such Ulema who are themselves capable of independent and creative thinking (Ijtihād-i-Fikr) in accordance with my proposed scheme In my view the dissemination of modern religious ideas is necessary for the modern Muslim nations. A struggle has already commenced in the Islamic world between the old and new methods of education as well as between the upholders of spiritual freedom and those monopolizing religious power. This movement of independence of human thought is even influencing a conservative country like Afghanistan. You may have read the speech of the Amir of Afghanistan in which he has attempted to control the powers of the Ulema. The emergence of numerous such movements in the other parts of the Muslim world makes one arrive at the same conclusion. Therefore in your capacity as the Head of a Muslim university, it is your duty to step forward in this new field with courage.”

These educational reforms proposed by Iqbal were never implemented. Even a couple of months before his death on 21 April, 1938, an attempt was made by one of his devotees to establish a Dār-ul-‘Ulēm according to the specifications of Iqbal, and for this purpose a correspondence started between Iqbal and Al-Mar‘āghā, the Rector of Al-Azhar University of Egypt through Maulana Maudoodi, but the Egyptians could not produce an Arabic instructor satisfying Iqbal’s requirements.

There are many old and new Islamic educational institutions operating in Pakistan today. But it is difficult to say what kind of impact the duly qualified Ulema of these institutions have on spiritual life of the Muslims of Pakistan. The fact remains that neither Iqbal’s new Muslim society could be brought into being in this country nor new Ulema could be trained on the lines

suggested by him for disseminating among the Muslim faith, unity and discipline so that they could collectively face the challenges of the new world.