

# CELEBRATING IQBAL DAY

**Source:** *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 12/1/2001, Vol. 68 Issue 4, p109, 3p

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## **Subject(s):**

FORTE, David; IQBAL, Mohammed; TERRORISM; COMMUNISM, Discussion of significant events in the 20th century and the terrorist attacks in the 21st; Condemnation of communism and fascism; Comparison of Osama bin Laden's extremism to that of Nazis and Bolsheviks; Description of the life of Pakistani poet and reformer of Islam Muhammad Iqbal and the peaceful messages of his words; Need to defeat terrorism as other forms of extremism have been.

AN: 5624336 ISSN: 0042-742X

Paper: February 1998-February 2001 at Mount Vernon Film: 1934- at Mount Vernon PER 808.8 VITAL S Full Text Word Count: 2358

Database: Academic Search Elite

## **CELEBRATING IQBAL DAY—THOUGHTS ON ISLAM**

Delivered to The City Club of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio, November; 9,  
2001

We in the United States have not had much to celebrate since September 11. But today, November 9, is a day for celebration. Twelve years ago, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. An era of incalculable evil came to an end. That victory should put our contest against Osama bin Laden into perspective. Nearly 125 years ago, on November 9, 1877, Muhammad Iqbal was born. Muhammad Iqbal was one of the great poets of the 20th century, one of its brightest philosophers, one of the most sublime voices of Islam in all of its history. Muhammad Iqbal is the spiritual founder of Pakistan. His day, like Washington's birthday used to be here, is a holiday

for a founder that the whole nation celebrates. Almost certainly, there will be demonstrations today in Pakistan that will support bin Laden, and dishonor the message of Iqbal. But it is for the Iqbals of Islam, great and ordinary, that we contend. So let me speak of the battle that led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and let me speak of Iqbal in today's battle. As centuries go, the 20th will be one of the easiest to describe. It was the century of the West's great and bloody civil war. It began with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand. It ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was a century when the notion of individual rights spread around the world. It was a century when the rights of individuals was never more egregiously attacked. It was the century of a great war between those who worshipped the state and those who championed the individual in the face of state power. The United States was drawn into the first chapter of the great civil war in 1917. We were drawn into a second chapter in 1941. We led the final and decisive battle in the last half of the last century. The 21st century has begun with our being drawn into Islam's civil war. It is a war between those who idolize a political and totalitarian Islam, and those who champion a traditional Islam, an Islam of many varied and even conflicting voices. Like the West's civil war, Islam's civil war is being waged ideologically and diplomatically as much as it is militarily. Hitler's greatest triumphs were diplomatic, when he convinced the leaders of the democracies that if they would only satisfy some deep-seated territorial needs of Germany, all would be well. He gained sympathy because democratic leaders felt some guilt in having imposed the onerous Versailles treaty on Germany. He gained power and sympathy in Germany on the basis of the same harms. Most of all, he convinced many in Germany that they were victims of a great grasping conspiracy of international Jewry. He attacked religion and freedom. And he destroyed millions of lives. The Soviet Union had much more ideological success when it took on the mantle of the expansionist totalitarian state. It too set up a great devil: international capitalism. It gained many sympathizers among the free world's intelligentsia. It played upon the poverty of the third world. It set up fifth columns around the world. It developed a network of client states and sympathetic political parties. It attacked religion and freedom. And it destroyed millions of lives. Hitler and Stalin had sympathizers and even allies. They were the anti-Semites, or the fellow travelers, intellectuals who championed eugenics, or intellectuals who championed Marx. Bin Laden has sympathizers and allies within the Muslim world. Some are rigid fundamentalists. Some are

intellectuals. Some are merely anti-American. Some are repelled by secularism. The free world won the civil war in the West when it realized that it was engaged in a battle against evil, against the lust for power, against the false god of politics. It took a while. The West had to struggle against the moral relativism that obscured the real aims of Communism. Only when the free world's leaders unabashedly saw that it was a moral cause that they defended, only when they called upon the religious traditions of the West that championed the inherent dignity and respect of each individual, only when we affirmed the inestimable good of freedom, did we have the will to stay the course and overcome the threat. It was Truman, Reagan, Thatcher, and it was Pope John Paul II who called the evil for what it was and shook down its rotten edifice. Bin Laden's extremism has not yet consolidated its power, the way Nazism did in Germany and Bolshevism in Russia, unless of course, you call Afghanistan a consolidation. But it has the same objectives, and uses the same methods. It seeks to dominate Islam with a political ideology free of even the constraints of the classical law of Islam. It uses methods of organized terror parallel to Nazism and Bolshevism. It sets up cells as the Communists did. It makes effective use of propaganda. It justifies itself by calling upon political symbols, not the Rhineland or the Sudetenland, but Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Andalusia. It lists political wrongs: the crusades and the post World War I settlement, just as Hitler did. And it creates the great Satan: America and International Jewry. If it succeeds, it will do to Islam what Hitler did to Germany and nations it overran, and what Stalin did to Russia and the nations it overran. In the West, the free world that won the civil war against terror and tyranny now examines what it is it fought for, what it is to become. The free world set its face against evil, but that does; not insulate us against institutional imperfections, against the sins of flawed human nature. Are we to be secular, or religiously inspired? Are we to be a community, or riven by divisions? Are we to be acquisitive and materialistic, or, as shown by this country after the world trade center attacks, generous, faith filled, and self-sacrificing? The same kind of self-examination in Islam now comes in the train of its own civil war against evil. And the primary question will be, as it always has been for Islamic civilization, what will be the place of law in the religion? Will it be an adjunct to spirituality and righteousness, or will it be a set of rules that constrain, that are valued for its own sake, not for what it permits the expansive spiritual soul? In other words, will it be the voices of an intolerant form of Islam, or even an

extremist Islam that will come to dominate that great civilization? Or will it be the voice of men like Muhammad Iqbal? Muhammad Iqbal was a master of Western philosophy, a barrister, a poet of greatness, a man who revered all religions and a reformer of Islam. Above all, Iqbal was interested in the self, the expansive creative personhood of every individual; Iqbal thought life was movement, an unfolding of the supernatural and natural elements in each human person. In his poem, *The Tulip of Sinai*, for example, Iqbal likens the self to a rosebud, and God to the sun. Learn from the rosebud how to live, O heart. It is a symbol of life's search for light. It springs out of the darkness of the earth, But has its eye on the sun's rays from birth. His radiance is in hill and dale, and flowers All have their cups full of his lustrous wine. He has left unilluminated no one's night: In each heart does the light of His love shine. A bud sprang up in the narcissus bed, And dew wash sleep out of its eyes, Thus out of Selflessness did Self arise: The world at last found what it had long sought. Think on that line: Thus out of Selflessness did Self arise. Is that not what every great religion teaches about the love of God and the uniqueness of each individual? And this was his image of Islam. Thus in his inmost being man, as conceived by the Quran, is a creative activity, an ascending spirit who, in his onward march, rises from one state of being to another. If he does not take the initiative, if he does not evolve the inner richness of his being, if he ceases to feel the inward push of advancing life, then the spirit within him hardens into stone and he is reduced to the level of dead matter. (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*) Conversant with all the-traditions of Islam, Iqbal believed all contributed to an understanding of the relation between God and Man, but none did so exclusively. These early traditions included the Murji'tes, who were the advocates of toleration and equality within Islam. They counseled peace among Muslims, recognized non-Arab Muslims as equal to Arabs, accepted a sinning Muslim as still a member of the faith, and emphasized faith over works as the means to salvation. They were opposed to the Legalists who sought to define righteousness by the law. A second party, the Mu'tazilites, championed the role of reason within Islam. They made use of works of pagan philosophers that had come into the expanded Islamic empire. Reason, the Mu'tazilites taught, could ascertain the truth even without the aid of revelation. Good and evil could be known by all men. But because of the weakness of the human will, revelation was necessary to confirm to man what was truly good and to provide men with rules of behavior that unaided reason could not

apprehend. Many of the great Islamic philosophers, though not of the Mu'tazilite party, championed reason. Many modern-day Islamic reformers and thinkers are also, in their own way, heirs to the Mu'tazilite tradition. A third group, the Kharijites, was the enemy of all. The Kharijites held that any person who strayed from the perfect practice of Islam was ipso facto an apostate subject to being killed with impunity. Any leader who did not hold true to the principles of Islam was likewise illegitimate and should be overthrown and killed. True to their beliefs, they committed frightful massacres on Muslims whom they believed no longer practiced the faith. They made war on those who later become the Sunnis and those who were to be the Shi'ites. Generally regarded as heretics to the Islamic tradition, they were eventually put down, but are precursors to the politicized Muslim extremists of today. The Legalists, of course, bested their rivals to become the dominant voice in Islam. Over the centuries, they developed the system of law, the Shari'a, that was in many ways more than 500 years ahead of the English common law but in other ways remained primitive. Sufism, the mystical voice of Islam, developed in reaction to the dry spirituality of the Legalists. The Sufis' spirituality, their unrivaled poetry, evinced an element of Islam that continues to awe the world. Iqbal studied and praised all the traditions of Islam, except, of course, Kharajism. Thus he extols Sufism, the mystical voice of Islam, for demonstrating to the self the inner experience of God. But he faults Sufism for not understanding the concreteness of nature. At the same time, Iqbal praises the philosophical school of Islam, the Mu'tazilites, for demonstrating to the self the rational structure of the universe, but faults it for neglecting the inner experience of the divine. He believes that law will be a means for the self to find its fulfillment, but faults it for hardening into unyielding rigidity. In fact, he opposed the literalistic fundamentalism and called the Shari'a in the hands of the ulema a form of Arabian imperialism. Instead he called for a new jurisprudence, a new ijtihad, which he defined as movement. He believed democratically elected legislatures had the divinely sanctioned right to create new laws based on the Quran and the authentic traditions of the Prophet. He wanted movement and dynamism to return to Islam. The long centuries of imperial rule within Islam had deadened it with an immobile weight. The only alternative open to us, then, is to tear off from Islam the hard crust which has immobilized an essentially dynamic outlook on life, and to rediscover the original verities of freedom, equality, and political ideals with a view to rebuilding our moral, social,

and political ideals out of their original simplicity and universality. The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam Iqbal called upon Islam to transcend its history. He believed democracy is the natural form of government for Islam and that Islam's message has been corrupted by centuries of autocratic empires. His notion of the inner dynamism of religion can be seen in his poetic dialogue between God and man, a dialogue that has echoes in the Jewish tradition as well. GOD I made the whole world with the same water and clay, But you created Iran, Tartary, and Ethiopia. From the earth I brought forth pure iron, But you made from that iron sword, arrow, and gun. You made an axe for the tree in the garden, And a cage for the songbird. MAN You made the night, I made the lamp; You made the earthen bowl, I made the goblet. You made deserts, mountains and valleys; I made gardens, meadows, and parks. I am one who makes a mirror out of stone, And turns poison into sweet, delicious drink. We are, as President Bush said last night, in a war to save civilization itself. We are fighting in this new civil war against hate and for voices like Iqbal's. I notice that there are high school students here today. This is a generational war. This will be your war. As my father and his generation defeated Nazism for me; as my generation stared down Communism for you; so you must win this war for your children. There is no end to history. This is no end to the drama of salvation. There is no end to hope. Happy Iqbal day.