

NEW DISCOVERIES ABOUT THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam is seen as a problematic writing of Iqbal. The reason may be that although much has been written about the book, it has never been subjected to a linguistic analysis. That is what I intend to do in this paper along with a comparative study of this book with two others writings of Iqbal written around the same time. The “new discoveries” in the title of this paper refers to some astonishing features of *The Reconstruction* that come to light when such a study is carried out. These features have not been brought to light before.

In December 1924, Iqbal delivered a lecture on *ijtihad* in Lahore. Its text is now considered to be lost. It raised some criticism locally but was much appreciated in South India where the Madras Muslim Association invited Iqbal to deliver a series of lectures. He started preparation in the summer of 1928 and delivered the first three lectures in Madras and Hyderabad Deccan in early 1929. Three more were prepared later that year, the last of which was again on *ijtihad*, and is supposed to be a revised version of the controversial one of 1924. All six lectures were delivered at Aligarh University in late 1929 and published as *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* from Lahore in 1930. Another lecture was later delivered at Aristotelian Society London in 1932 and added to the second edition, which is our definitive version of the book and was published by Oxford University Press, UK, in 1934 as *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Comparative

study of the two editions has shown that there were no fundamental changes apart from minor rephrasing of certain sentences.⁹

Almost a year before starting his preparation for the first three lectures, Iqbal had started his fifth book of poetry, *Javidnama*. It was going to be his greatest work, took several years in the making and was finally published in 1932. Hence it can be safely assumed that throughout the preparation of his *Reconstruction* lectures, Iqbal was simultaneously working on *Javidnama*. Yet he was also an elected member of the Punjab provincial legislature from 1926 to 1930 and the cumulative result of his evolution as a practicing politician was his presidential address at the annual session of the All-India Muslim League in Allahabad on December 30, 1930. In the present paper it will be called *The Allahabad Address*.

It is surprising that a comparative study of these texts has never been carried out. Such a study would have revealed a systematic coherence that exists between these three texts but which has gone unnoticed for more than seventy years. Strange it may seem but there is enough linguistic evidence there to suspect that Iqbal deliberately concealed some of these connections in a kind of “secret code.”

Discovering Linguistic Coherence

In my book *The Republic of Rumi: A Novel of Reality* (2007)¹⁰ I have tried to show the internal coherence in the canon of Iqbal’s writings in some detail. Here I shall briefly point out three aspects of linguistic coherence between *The Reconstruction* and *Javidnama* with some references to *The Allahabad Address*. These three aspects are:

1. Similarities in structure
2. Embedded allusions
3. Jigsaw reading

⁹ This has been shown by Dr. Rafiuddin Hashmi in his pioneering study of Iqbal’s texts, *Tasaniif-i-Iqbal ka Tabqiqi-wa-Tawzihi Mutalia* published by Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore.

¹⁰ *The Republic of Rumi: A Novel of Reality* by Khurram Ali Shafique (2007), published by Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore.

To begin with, *The Reconstruction* consists of seven lectures and *Javidnama* seven chapters. How ironic, that it was never noticed that each lecture covers the same topic which is the focus of the corresponding chapter of *Javidnama!*

	<i>The Reconstruction</i>	<i>Javidnama</i>
1	Knowledge and Religious Experience	The Sphere of Moon
2	The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience	The Sphere of Mercury
3	The Conception of God and the Meaning of Prayer	The Sphere of Venus
4	The Human Ego - His Freedom and Immortality	The Sphere of Mars
5	The Spirit of Muslim Culture	The Sphere of Jupiter
6	The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam	The Sphere of Saturn
7	Is Religion Possible?	Beyond the Spheres

Readers already familiar with both books can see the correspondence between structures from this table. For others this correspondence will become evident from related discussions offered in the rest of this paper.

From this similarity in the structure of both books we may now move on to an investigation of embedded allusions. The most obvious allusion occurs at the very end of each book. The last lecture of *The Reconstruction* ends on a passage from the prologue of *Javidnama*, where Rumi is inviting Iqbal to the spiritual odyssey. Below this passage occurs the reference, i.e. "*Javidnama*," and hence the title of that book becomes the very last word on which *The Reconstruction* culminates. On the other hand, in the epilogue of *Javidnama*, 'An Address to Javid: A Few Words With the Posterity' the author mentions that he has "condensed two oceans in two cups" and expressed his ideas in two manners:

That one is in the difficult language, using the terminology of the West,

This one is an ecstatic song from the strings of a harp.

The origin of one is contemplation, the origin of the other is thought,

May you be the inheritor of them both!

A footnote by Iqbal himself on the first line says: “Allusion to the book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.” This “cross-referencing” between the two books is the clearest example of embedded allusions through which Iqbal expected his readers to undertake a comparative study of both books and not to read them in isolation.

Another cross-reference, less visible than this one, occurs at the very beginning of the first lecture of *The Reconstruction*, where Iqbal mentions that certain questions are common to religion, philosophy, and higher poetry. These three domains are represented in the first chapter of *Javidnama* by three stations on the Sphere of Moon, i.e., the cave of the metaphysician Vishvamitra, the valley of the perennial muse Sarosh, and Yarghamid or the Valley of Tawas in, which contains the cryptic tablets of four prophets.

Next we may consider what is described in language teaching as “jigsaw reading.” It is an exercise where a text is broken down into pieces and each piece is put up on the wall in a separate corner of the room. Students or readers are asked to reassemble the text by reading the pieces distributed over different places and rearranging the whole text in the correct order. Language teachers use this activity in order to nurture the powers of making correct inferences. Iqbal seems to have used something similar to this technique, and the most interesting example is a chunk in *The Allahabad Address* which can be inserted into the preface of *The Reconstruction* with full justification and for significant results. In *The Allahabad Address*, Iqbal says, “One of the profoundest verses in the Holy Qur’an teaches us that the birth and rebirth of the whole of humanity is like the birth and rebirth of a single individual.” He doesn’t quote the verse nor gives reference but goes on to say:

Why cannot you who, as a people, can well claim to be the first practical exponent of this superb conception of humanity, live and move and have your being as a single individual?

The verse to which Iqbal is referring in *The Allahabad Address* is actually quoted in the 'Preface' of *The Reconstruction*:

'Your creation and resurrection,' says the Qur'an, 'are like the creation and resurrection of a single soul.' A living experience of the kind of biological unity, embodied in this verse, requires today a method physiologically less violent and psychological.

We can see that here Iqbal has abstained from commenting on the verse, due to which we cannot be sure what kind of biological unity, according to him, is embodied in it. This problem is solved if the passage is read together with Iqbal's commentary in *The Allahabad Address*. The result, in the minds of the readers, will be the following inference (in which the sentence from *The Allahabad Address* is italicized):

'Your creation and resurrection,' says the Qur'an, 'are like the creation and resurrection of a single soul.' A living experience of the kind of biological unity, embodied in this verse, requires today a method physiologically less violent and psychological. *Why cannot you who, as a people, can well claim to be the first practical exponent of this superb conception of humanity, live and move and have your being as a single individual?*

It appears from this inference that the method suggested here is in fact the realization of national unity – in other words the formation of a Muslim state based on this unity. It also explains the next lines of the 'Preface': "In the absence of such a method the demand for a scientific form of religious knowledge is only natural." Since true unity of a nation is a creative act, each individual in a society based on such unity would be empowered to have a living experience of the amazing "biological unity" embodied in the verse of the Qur'an. The demand for a scientific form of religious knowledge would be unnatural in such a society because evidence for religious truths will be abundant in the world within and without. However, *in the absence of such a method the demand for a scientific form of religious knowledge is only natural.*

This overview of linguistic coherence between the three texts of Iqbal makes it obvious that the author intended us to study these texts coherently. Now we should consider the question: *Why did he do so?*

Implications of Linguistic Coherence

Modern mind likes to make inferences. What we call “jigsaw reading” was being offered in one form or another by such masters as Joyce, Yeats and Eliot even in the days of Iqbal. However, what those European masters failed to do was to harness the powers of inference in the service of universal truth. Engagement with their literature becomes relative, subjective and essentially dependent on individual interpretation. Iqbal engaged the same techniques – and a detailed analysis of his verbal art will show that he excelled his contemporaries in doing so – but truth never becomes relative in his art. This is his achievement as a linguistic genius and in this he stands unparalleled in modern literature. However, we must delve deep enough into the canon of his writings in order to see this miracle of verbal art.

On the basis of what has been stated here, we can formulate the following parameters for a linguistic study of *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*:

- a) Its structure is organic, where one part explains the other parts and some parts may reflect the whole.
- b) It is linguistically coherent with other writings of Iqbal, at least with *Javidnama* and *The Allahabad Address*, and a proper study of this book should not ignore those other texts.
- c) A study of this book cannot be based on preconceived notions about the issues tackled in it because previous knowledge from external sources may hinder the discovery of coherence in the text itself (this is the common shortcoming of most previous studies of this book).

On these conditions, let’s now study some basic aspects of this book:

1. What questions does it try to answer?
2. What perspectives does it adopt while answering them?
3. How does it propose to reformulate our knowledge of the world?

4. In what manner does the author hope his work to be relevant beyond his own lifetime?

The fourth question may not be asked of an ordinary book of philosophy but we are justified in asking it of a work of literature and verbal art. That is what *The Reconstruction* is in addition to being a great work of modern philosophy.

Seven Questions

The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam opens with some questions which, according to Iqbal, are common to religion, philosophy and higher poetry:

What is the character and general structure of the universe in which we live? Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe? How are we related to it? What place do we occupy in it, and what is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy? These questions are common to religion, philosophy, and higher poetry.

M. Suheyl Umar has very aptly pointed out that in fact these four question marks embody six questions.¹¹ I would suggest that we can add one more question: "Is religion possible?" That is the title of the seventh lecture and may even be reformulated according to the definition of religion offered in it, i.e. religion in its higher form is a direct vision of the Ultimate Reality. This gives us a total of seven questions, which are as follows:

1. What is the character of the universe in which we live?
2. What is its general structure?
3. Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe?
4. How are we related to it?
5. What place do we occupy in it?
6. What is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy?
7. Is it possible to have a direct vision of the Ultimate Reality?

¹¹ In a group discussion conducted at Iqbal Academy Pakistan in July 2007. Available on tape but not yet printed.

We find that one of these questions is answered in each lecture of *The Reconstruction* in the same order. The same questions are tackled in the seven chapters of *Javidnama*, again in the same order.

Philosophy, Higher Poetry and Religion

With the exception of the last one, these questions are common to philosophy, higher poetry and religion. Since *The Reconstruction* is a book of philosophy it obviously answers these questions in a manner of “free inquiry” (which, according to Iqbal, is the spirit of philosophy), yet it treats religion “on its own terms” and keeps it as “something focal in the process of reflective synthesis” (which, due to the very nature of religion, are pre-requisites for philosophical analysis of religion according to Iqbal).

While the answers offered in *The Reconstruction* have been discussed at great length in the literature of Iqbal Studies, the questions themselves have seldom been kept as the focal points for each lecture because the text of *The Reconstruction* is not usually seen as an organic unity. Consequently, scholars have complained that it becomes very difficult to follow the bent of the author’s mind at certain points. At such points it may be helpful to refer back to the basic question that underlies all the arguments in a particular chapter. For instance, the first chapter is ‘Knowledge and Religious Experience’ but the underlying question which determines the position of this lecture with regard to the general body of world philosophy is: “What is the character of the universe in which we live?” Hence Iqbal’s answer to this question (in the passage that begins, “What, then, according to the Qur’an, is the character of the universe which we inhabit?”) becomes central to the whole lecture and it should be kept in mind even for understanding the declared subject of the lecture, i.e. ‘Knowledge and Religious Experience’.

It is further important to remember that Iqbal equates the universe with the Qur’an, and most of what is true about the universe is to be used as a key for understanding the Qur’an. In the light of this proposition, the question about the character of the universe is also a question about the general character of the Qur’an with due regard to the essential difference between the word of God and “a fleeting moment in the life of God” (which is how Iqbal sees the world of Nature). According to Iqbal, the universe is:

- a) not the result of a mere creative sport;
- b) a reality to be reckoned with;
- c) so constituted that it is capable of extension;
- d) something whose mysterious swing and impulse is even reflected in the passing of day and night, and which is one of the greatest signs of God;
- e) carries in it the promise of a complete subjugation by the human being “whose duty is to reflect on the signs of God, and thus discover the means of realizing his conquest of Nature as an actual fact.”

The first two of these characteristics can be directly applied to the Qur’an but the rest need explanation. The universe can show its capability of extension materially but the Qur’an as a complete and unchangeable text will show this capability only in terms of its meaning. However, since its text is an organic unity, even the extension of meaning occurs organically and is therefore more real than, and different from, a mere accumulation of commentaries. Likewise, while the universe carries in it the promise of “a complete subjugation by the human being,” the Qur’an empowers the humanity to this end by helping it to “reflect on the signs of God, and thus discover the means of realizing [their] conquest of Nature as an actual fact.”

The fact that Iqbal held the Qur’an as a role model even for the linguistic structure of his verbal art gives us some important clues for understanding his poetry. In *Javidnama*, the same seven questions are handled in corresponding chapters but while the aim of philosophy is to tell, the aim of poetry is to show. In *The Reconstruction*, Iqbal was trying to tell us about a world that was not yet born (“the day is not far off when Religion and Science may discover hitherto unsuspected mutual harmonies,” he said since the day had not arrived by then). In his poetry he showed us the world about which he was telling in his prose (“May you be the inheritor of them both!”). The intricacies of the linguistic structure of *Javidnama* reflect the five characteristics of the universe, especially using the Qur’an as a role model for achieving this end through language.

I will give only one example here from the first chapter. This chapter ought to correspond to the first of the seven questions: “What is the

character of the universe in which we live?” The five characteristics of the universe described by Iqbal in *The Reconstruction* find a practical demonstration here. For instance, the first characteristic, that the universe is not the result of a mere creative sport, is reflected in the fact that even the ghazal of Sarosh has seven couplets, each touching upon one of the seven basic questions. The first couplet that should reflect on the question of the character of the universe in which we live, is:

I fear that you are rowing your ship in a mirage;

Born within a veil, you die within a veil.

In this manner, each couplet also provides the preview of a subsequent chapter of *Javidnama* where the same question will be taken up more exclusively. The implications of this device are enormous. For instance, suppose we wish to study the character of Sarosh. How should we go about it? The poet could have told us about it but he didn't. Instead, he gave us her monologue on the seven questions which we are answering for ourselves. We judge the character of Sarosh by comparing her reflections with our own, and by comparing them with the other realities of her world as they unfold in *Javidnama*. Thus, by chiseling down the ghazal of Sarosh to seven couplets around the basic questions, the poet provides us an opportunity for seeing the characteristics of Sarosh in an endlessly greater detail than would have been possible by any number of vivid descriptions. On one hand, the poet has virtually created the possibility for each reader to form a different opinion about Sarosh, while on the other he has provided a tangible criterion against which the various interpretations by various readers can be judged. That criterion is the world of *Javidnama*, into which the poet keeps pulling us deeper until we become the true protagonist of the story itself. Thus the world presented in *Javidnama* carries in it the promise of “a complete subjugation” by the reader while the text of *Javidnama* itself empowers us for this end by helping us to “reflect on the signs of God, and thus discover the means of realizing [our] conquest of Nature as an actual fact.” Indeed, the linguistic structure of *Javidnama* is “not the result of a mere creative sport.”

It is interesting to note that in the opening paragraph of the first lecture where Iqbal differentiates between the functions of religion, philosophy and

higher poetry, he says, “But the kind of knowledge that poetic inspiration brings is essentially individual in its character; it is figurative, vague, and indefinite.” Now it should become obvious that he didn’t use these adjectives in pejorative sense.

Having considered philosophy and poetry, we may now move on to religion. If the answers to these questions are found in religion then they must be there in the Qur’an, and if they are to be found in the Qur’an then they must also be contained in its first chapter, ‘The Opening,’ which is regarded as a summary of the whole Book. Incidentally, the chapter consists of seven verses (which makes us wonder whether Iqbal had it in mind when he formulated seven questions that could cover the general history of human thought). The seven verses of ‘The Opening’ are:

1. In the name of Allah, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful
2. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Universe,
3. The Mercy-giving, the Merciful,
4. Ruler of the Day of Repayment.
5. You do we worship and You do we call on for help.
6. Guide us along the Straight Road,
7. The road of those whom You have favored, with whom You are not angry, nor who are lost.

The connection between the seven questions and the seven verses of the Qur’an is obvious from the third verse onwards: *Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe?* “The Mercy-giving, the Merciful.” *How are we related to it?* “Ruler of the Day of Repayment.” And so on.

In those instances where this connection is not so obvious, for instance, in the case of the first two questions, some observations on *The Reconstruction* help us discover the connection. For instance, the first verse is, “In the name of Allah, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful.” The first question is, *What is the character of the universe in which we live?* In the first lecture, Iqbal specifically answers this question by pointing out five characteristics of the universe. If we keep them in mind, we not only find the connection between this question and the first verse of the Qur’an but we also find a very interesting perspective on that most-of-often repeated verse of the Qur’an.

Five Perspectives

Each of the seven questions may be undertaken at five levels, as is evident from Iqbal's conception of God. In the third lecture of *The Reconstruction*, he points out that according to the Islamic conception, God is:

- a) intensively infinite,
- b) creative,
- c) knowing,
- d) powerful, and
- e) eternal.

It is quite clear that Iqbal's conception of the character of the universe as discussed above is also derived from his conception of God. The five elements listed here correspond to the five characteristics of the universe described earlier, but the correspondence occurs in the inverse order:

- a) not the result of a mere creative sport; (*God is eternal*)
- b) a reality to be reckoned with; (*God is powerful*)
- c) so constituted that it is capable of extension; (*God is knowing*)
- d) something whose mysterious swing and impulse is even reflected in the passing of day and night, and which is one of the greatest signs of God; (*God is creative*)
- e) carries in it the promise of a complete subjugation by the human being "whose duty is to reflect on the signs of God, and thus discover the means of realizing his conquest of Nature as an actual fact." (*God is intensively infinite*)

Even the seven questions, and hence the seven lectures, are derived from these five elements by extending the first element (God is eternal – the universe is not the result of a mere creative sport) into three stages: character of the universe, its general structure, and the permanent element in it. Yet another linguistic feature of *The Reconstruction* that has gone unnoticed is that each of the first two lectures ends with an announcement of the next, while each of the second and the third opens with a recap of the previous one. This device turns the first three lectures into a mini-series (the other four lectures do not start or end with such cross-references), and the mini-series

together explains one element in the conception of God, i.e., He is eternal – and the corresponding characteristic of the universe, i.e., not the result of a mere creative sport.

If we take these five elements as five perspectives, then each question can be answered in five different ways depending on which perspective is taken while answering. The five perspectives correspond to five layers of reality, which are:¹²

1. Things as they are, or the Wisdom of Adam – based on our understanding that God is eternal
2. Principles, or the Wisdom of Angels – based on our understanding that God is powerful
3. Potentials, or the Wisdom of Soul – based on our understanding that God is knowing
4. Contrasts, or the Wisdom of Love – based on our understanding that God is creative
5. Resurrection, or the Wisdom of Civilization – based on our understanding that God is intensively Infinite

It is possible to have functional models of knowledge without relating them to an Ultimate Reality but in that case the functionality of each branch of knowledge becomes restricted to its domain and any correspondence with other branches of knowledge is mechanical and arbitrary. Indeed that has been the case so far. However, recent trends in human thought, especially the American thought, have displayed an increasing desire for holistic worldviews. Iqbal's conception of God deserves our special attention in this context. On one hand it is consistent with the deepest truths of metaphysics while on the other hand it is remarkably free of dogmatic underpinnings. Hence it facilitates a holistic approach that connects the functions of various disciplines in a manner that the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts.

¹² Adam, Angels, Soul, Love and Civilization are the labels I have discovered from *Persian Psalms* through a system of interpretation which I have described in my book *The Republic of Rumi: A Novel of Reality*. Their attributes, i.e., things as they are, principles, etc., are of my own coinage according to my understanding of Iqbal.

Functions of Knowledge

In the Wisdom of Adam, where we interact with things as they are, we merely formulate questions (such as the seven basic questions listed above). Answers at this level can be provided through speculation (philosophy), inspiration (higher poetry) or revelation (religion) but empirical evidence for sophisticated answers is not available.

Science and ethics (and hence philosophy in general) is concerned with principles. They are the second layer of reality and correspond with the fact that God is powerful. Hence science and ethics aim at empowering us most directly – science by giving us command over the physical world and ethics by giving us command over the human world. In either case, this command comes through a balance between submission and assertion: we can assert our will over the forces of nature only by submitting to them and over the human society only by submitting to the values of goodness. Iqbal identifies this wisdom with angels, who are powerful and who manipulate the hidden forces of the universe on God's command.

Psychology deals with potentials, which is the third level of reality and corresponds with the fact that God is knowing. Hence psychology aims at giving us knowledge of ourselves, and in his seventh lecture, Iqbal envisions a futuristic psychology that should extend our knowledge of ourselves to an awareness of the inherent unity between us and the rest of the universe. He identifies this wisdom with the soul.

Art and language deal with application of principles and hence they operate among contrasts and polarities of all sort– beginning with the fundamental contrast between the vast potentials of the soul and the fewer applications possible in the world at any given time. This is the fourth layer of reality and corresponds with the fact that God is creative. Iqbal identifies it with love.

Religion is the only institution that is concerned with life after death and aims at empowering the human being to be resurrected beyond this world. It corresponds most directly to the fact that God is intensively Infinite. Iqbal identifies religion with civilization. The life of each civilization is determined

by the formation of fresh ideals and creation of new values, and the birth of a civilization is like resurrection of humanity— “Your creation and resurrection are like the creation and resurrection of a single soul,” the Qur’an says in a verse that is quoted by Iqbal at significant points. Historically, too, religion has been the originator of nations and hence the guiding force in the evolution of human civilization.

Redefining the Historical Context of *The Reconstruction*

“The day is not far off when Religion and Science may discover hitherto unsuspected mutual harmonies,” Iqbal wrote in his ‘Preface’ to *The Reconstruction*. The day has arrived now but it is going unnoticed by the intelligentsia of Pakistan mainly due to one crucial mistake made by some of our best minds soon after independence. We misunderstood the decline of the West as the decline of humanity. This mistake deserves some elaboration due to its crucial importance for our future existence.

The birth of modern times is symbolically attributed to the year 1776. Regardless of the accuracy of this placement, at least by the end of that century it had become visible to the aware minds in the West as well as the East that times have changed. The question was whether the change should be accepted or rejected. Of course, it depended on whether the change was temporary or permanent, and whether the spirit of modern times was good or bad. Hence it posed three basic questions to the thinkers of the age:

- a) Are modern times passing or permanent?
- b) Are they good or bad?
- c) Should they be accepted or rejected?

While unprecedented changes were taking place every day it was impossible to assume that any change could be permanent. From this premise, there were eight possible answers to the remaining two questions, out of which only two were logically acceptable:

1. Modern times are passing but good and should be accepted.
2. Modern times are passing and bad, and should be rejected.
3. Modern times are passing but good and should be rejected.

4. Modern times are passing and bad, but should be accepted.

Obviously, the last two propositions are only theoretically possible but they are logically absurd and need not concern us here. Out of the first two, the proposition that modern times are passing but good and should be accepted was adopted by the Romantics. The second proposition, viz. the modern times are passing and bad, and should be rejected, was adopted by the conservatives (and would also become the position of the Marxists still later in the century). This was the situation in 1800.

Over the next hundred years two basic changes took place. The first was that it was by then possible to assume that the modern times were permanent. This assumption would have been incomprehensible to Wordsworth, Coleridge and Goethe but it seemed natural to Conrad, Kipling and Eliot.

The second change was that the Western colonialism had planted the seeds of its own demise in the East and the mind of Europe had become aware of it. Yet it could do nothing about it because such was the spirit of modern times that empires could not be built on brute force alone. They required mandates, treaties and at least pretence of disseminating modern knowledge. Even these pretenses were enough to empower the oppressed. The actual collapse of the Western empire happened in the middle of the twentieth century but the principles that led to it became evident to the East as well as the West by the 1890's. Obviously, the results were different – in fact opposite – in each case. The East adopted the position of the Romantics: the modern times were passing but good and should be accepted (of course, in the East they were to be accepted on Eastern terms). The finest representation of this Eastern Romanticism were Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Iqbal.

In the West, on the other hand, new propositions stemmed out of the fatalistic assumption that the modern times were permanent. Out of the four propositions theoretically possible from this assumption, only one is logically impossible:

1. Modern times are permanent but good, and must be accepted.

2. Modern times are permanent and bad, but must be accepted.
3. Modern times are permanent and bad, and must be rejected.
4. Modern times are permanent and good, but must be rejected.

The fourth proposition is logically impossible. Of the rest, the first was the position of early modernists of the 1890's. That the modern times were good and permanent and must be accepted was the premise hidden beneath all the ambivalence of Nietzsche towards good and evil.¹³ This premise found a more direct expression through the bards of Western colonialism in the later nineteenth century but the fatalism implied in accepting any set of circumstances as permanent is only one step away from accepting those times as bad: good times would appear bad after a while if you cannot alter them by choice. Hence the early modernism developed into its later schools of deep pessimism, most characteristically represented by T. S. Eliot. The proposition underlying the works of these later modernists as well as the post-modernists is that the modern times are permanent and bad but must be accepted.

This position is suicidal in a dignified manner. A dignified suicide was indeed how Europe looked upon its obligation to wrap up its empire in the East. Unfortunately certain minds in the East also borrowed this new premise from Europe. Of course, given the fact that the East at that time had not started receiving any dividends on the modern times, the premise had to be modified so that it became the third proposition listed above: modern times are permanent and bad, but must be rejected. When you stand up to reject something bad which cannot be changed because it is permanent, what do you do? Archival footage of Gandhi's followers turning up for a voluntary beating by the police should serve as a graphic illustration of the implications of this proposition. It also explains Tagore's alliance with the modernist poets of the West, the overwhelming appreciation of his poetry by them and

¹³ It is true that he talks about the advent of yet another change in the coming of Superman, yet the doctrine of eternal recurrence gives a very weird kind of permanence to the modern times: they will pass but will come again, just as they have before. Hence the modern times are passing phenomena only superficially but in their essence they are a permanent element of the universe which returns in never-ending cycles.

the unrelenting efforts in the West to turn Gandhi into a media celebrity, a living cult and a role model for the Third World countries. "I do not mystify anybody when I say that things in India are not what they appear to be," Iqbal stated at the end of *The Allahabad Address*. "The meaning of this, however, will dawn upon you only when you have achieved a real collective ego to look at them."

The outlook we adopted five years after the birth of Pakistan was not consistent with the collective ego achieved by our ancestors who had created this great country. Some of us misunderstood that the proposition of the Western modernists that "the modern times are permanent but bad but must be rejected" was a confession that the West was evil. As a free nation of the East it should concern us less whether the West is evil or not. What should concern us more is what role can we play in the future of humanity? This is where Iqbal comes in with the fundamental premise of a Romantic: "the modern times are passing but good and must be accepted."

What does it mean to accept the modern times when the West no longer has jurisdiction over us except what privileges we may grant it out of our folly? This is the question which is answered in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, but the question is of such overwhelming significance that the search for answer must entail a creative engagement with the book rather than a mere understanding of it. That is the task that lies ahead of us since it has never been undertaken before.

A New Basis for Comparison

The proper comparison of Iqbal is not with the decadent stream of golden words emerging out of Europe, especially France, in the twentieth century, which was like the suicide attack of European imperialism against the intellectual frontiers of the Third World. The proper comparison of Iqbal is with that life-giving current of thought which is practically shaping the destiny of our world and also framing the New World Order.

By now Iqbal has been accepted as one of the greatest poets this world has ever produced. It means that we must be careful in picking up

comparisons for him, for he can only be compared with the best. However, as Yeats pointed out in 1920:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹⁴

It would be futile to compare Iqbal with those who lack conviction. It is true that the highest names in thought and literature of the twentieth century fall under this category but Yeats was wrong in calling them the best. Nor were those who were full of passionate intensity worst except from the peculiarly biased outlook of Yeats. They were the bestsellers and blockbusters influencing modern consciousness and thus shaping a new world. It is a good world, but its goodness escaped the notice of Yeats because the darkness dropped again too soon while he was reading from *Spiritus Mundi*. Ironically, the beast described by him in ‘The Second Coming’ had already been envisioned by Iqbal long before him and had been described rather differently than Yeats. The description given by Yeats in his 1920 poem was:

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

¹⁴ All quotations from Yeats in this paper are from his poem ‘The Second Coming’, first printed in 1919 and anthologized in *Michael Roberts and the Dancers* in 1920.

In a ghazal titled 'March 1907' (and written in that month), Iqbal had said:

The lion that leapt out of the desert and overthrew the Great Roman
Empire

Will be reawakened, so have I heard from the angels.¹⁵

Yeats saw the image of *Spiritus Mundi* while Iqbal heard about it from the angels. Yeats interpreted it as rebirth of bloodthirsty Hellenism whereas Iqbal saw it as the rebirth of freedom, equality and universal brotherhood as enunciated by Islam. In either case it was linked with the death of Western imperialism – a cause for disillusionment to Yeats (despite his links with the Irish freedom movement) but quite understandably a cause for jubilation to Iqbal.

“In view of the basic idea of Islam that there can be no further revelation binding on man, we ought to be spiritually one of the most emancipated peoples on earth,” he says at the end of the sixth lecture in *The Reconstruction*. “Early Muslims emerging out of the spiritual slavery of pre-Islamic Asia were not in a position to realize the true significance of this basic idea. Let the Muslim of today appreciate his position, reconstruct his 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.” This premonition about the future is apparently based on the same vision of “a shape with lion body and the head of a man” which was also seen by Yeats but interpreted in the opposite manner:

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

¹⁵ 'March 1907' was first printed in the Urdu literary magazine *Makhzan* in 1907 and later included in *The Call of the Marching Bell Bang-i-Dara* in 1924. Translation from Urdu is my own.

And what rough beast, its hour comes round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The age of European imperialism came to an end with the Second World War. A new world has come into being but we are living in its early phase. Since it is a new world, it is yet to find its classics. It is not surprising that the Nobel prizes for literature have been going mostly to authors from countries which are not leading the world. It is easy for these authors to adhere to the value system of a dead world that passed away with the Second World War. An illusion that the colonial world is still alive is given to us through the efforts of such authors from the Third World who follows the pessimist stance of the European masters of the twentieth century: “the modern times are bad but permanent” (whether the modern times should be rejected or accepted makes little difference once you accept this premise). Of course, these intellectuals, whether from the East or the West, not only feed the nostalgia of Europe but also give it a much-needed self-esteem by letting it imagine that the world didn't become any better after obtaining freedom from its clutches. Self-deprecating writers from East as well as West are duly rewarded by European gods of art and letter for singing this swan song on a broken harp. Hence we find that the most well-reputed names in art and letter continue lacking in conviction.

As long as we keep looking up to this pedestal of intellectual greatness, which is in fact a funeral-pyre, we cannot realize that a new world has no classics of its own and therefore its ideals are represented by bestsellers and blockbusters that will become classics when this world grows up. Nietzsche, Conrad, Kafka, Yeats and Eliot may be worshipped in the lecture halls of the Western *madrasabs* but they are not shaping our world (and shouldn't we be thankful for that!).

Among these bestsellers, Iqbal is a godsend. He is the only established authority from higher literature who celebrated the conception of this new world before it was born. As a thinker he is already accepted by five nations as their ideological role model. Among the giants of such stature he is the only one whose language belongs not only to the Olympian heights of the best poetry and philosophy but also to the classrooms, parliaments and

cinema halls at the same time – places where minds are being shaped and life being directed. The significance of *The Reconstruction* becomes fully evident only when it is taken out of the intellectual's closet and placed before the practical realities of a new world.