

TRADITIONAL, MODERN AND POST-MODERN CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS ON REALITY: UNDERPINNINGS OF IQBAL'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The task of describing the nature of the philosophy developed in the Indian subcontinent and defining its worldview comes close to being the object of an entire book. I will not try to compress here it into the limits of a brief talk but rather try to focus on some of its aspects with reference to Iqbal. Moreover I would like to take an approach slightly different from the one of comparative study of civilizations and would try to address the issue from a conceptual point of view, by referring to the overarching perspective or the paradigm that governs each conceptual shift. The present audience, I presume, agrees that with regard to the view of Reality we can speak of the entire Premodern world in the singular and simply assume that a common metaphysical “spine” underlies the differences in the worldviews, the theologies of the classical languages of the human soul, the world’s great religions or wisdom traditions. This is coupled with the claims of all the Premodern civilizations, including the pre-renaissance Western civilization, that people need worldviews, that reliable ones are possible, and that they already exist. It is only Modernity that made the totalizing claim for the truth of a single worldview and Postmodernism which categorically denies the existence or the possibility of reliable worldviews. I will come back shortly to the question of these conceptual shifts between traditional, modern and postmodern but let me first situate Iqbal in the context of our present discussion.

Iqbal is the best articulated Muslim response to Modernity that the Islamic world has produced in the twentieth century. His response has three dimensions:

- A creative engagement with the conceptual paradigm of modernism at a sophisticated philosophical level through his prose writings, mainly his *The Reconstruction....*, which present his basic philosophic insights
- His Urdu and Persian poetry which is the best embodiment of poetically mediated thought, squarely in the traditional continuity of Islamic literature and perhaps the finest flowering of wisdom poetry,¹⁶ or contemplative poetry¹⁷ or inspired poetry¹⁸ in the modern times.
- As a political activist/ social reformer – rising up to his social responsibility, his calling at a critical phase of history.

I have referred to the three periods of traditional, modern and Postmodern with regard to their respective conceptual shifts and also the word Modernity. For the rest of my presentation I would use Modernism in place of Modernity. In the wake of its Traditional and Modern periods, the Western world is now generally regarded as having become Postmodern. Both *Modernity* and *Postmodernity* refer to a life-style. *Modernism* and *Postmodernism*, by contrast, suggest an outlook: the basic sense of things that gave rise to *Modernity* and *Postmodernity* in the first place and now reflects its way of life.

Contrasts tend to throw things into relief, so I shall define these terms by contrasting these outlooks with one another; the traditional, the modern and the Postmodern, using epistemology as my point of entry.

Even today, when traditional peoples want to know where they are – when they wonder about the ultimate context in which their lives are set and which has the final say over them – they turn to their sacred texts; or in the case of oral, tribal peoples (what comes to the same thing), to the sacred myths that have been handed down to them by their ancestors. *Modernity* was born when a new source of knowledge was discovered, the scientific method. Because its controlled experiment enabled scientists to prove their hypotheses, and because those proven hypotheses demonstrated that they

¹⁶ The title given to this genre by Haywood, see note 80.

¹⁷ This is my preferred expression for it.

¹⁸ The epithet used by S. H. Nasr, *op.cit.*, p. 90.

had the power to change the material world dramatically, Westerners turned from revelation to science for the Big Picture. Intellectual historians tell us that by the nineteenth century Westerners were already more certain that atoms exist than they were confident of any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of.

This much is straightforward, but it doesn't explain why Westerners aren't still modern rather than Postmodern, for science continues to be the main support of the Western mind. By headcount, most Westerners probably still *are* modern, but I am thinking of frontier thinkers who chart the course that others follow. These thinkers have ceased to be modern because they have seen through the so-called scientific worldview, recognizing it to be not *scientific* but *scientistic*. They continue to honour science for what it tells us about nature or the natural order/natural world, but as that is not all that exists, science cannot provide us with a worldview – not a valid one. The most it can show us is half of the world, the half where normative and intrinsic values, existential and ultimate meanings, teleologies, qualities, immaterial realities, and beings that are superior to us do not appear.¹⁹

¹⁹ This important point is not generally recognized, so I shall spell it out. The death-knell to modernity, which had science as its source and hope, was sounded with the realization that despite its power in limited regions, six things slip through its controlled experiments in the way sea slips through the nets of fishermen:

1. *Values*. Science can deal with descriptive and instrumental values, but not with intrinsic and normative ones.
2. *Meanings*. Science can work with cognitive meanings, but not with existential meanings (Is X meaningful?), or ultimate ones (What is the meaning of life?).
3. *Purposes*. Science can handle teleonomy – purposiveness in organisms– but not teleology, final causes.
4. *Qualities*. Quantities science is good at, but not qualities.
5. *The invisible and the immaterial*. It can work with invisibles that are rigorously entailed by matter's behaviour (the movements of iron filings that require magnetic fields to account for them, e.g.) but not with others.
6. *Our superiors, if such exist*. This limitation does not prove that beings greater than ourselves exist, but it does leave the question open, for “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”.

In his second lecture, “The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience” in “*The Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam*”, Iqbal has made a very perceptive remark:²⁰

There is no doubt that the theories of science constitute trustworthy knowledge, because they are verifiable and enable us to predict and control the events of Nature. But we must not forget that what is called science is not a single systematic view of Reality. It is a mass of sectional views of Reality— fragments of a total experience which do not seem to fit together. Natural Science deals with matter, with life, and with mind; but the moment you ask the question how matter, life, and mind are mutually related, you begin to see the sectional character of the various sciences that deal with them and the inability of these sciences, taken singly, to furnish a complete answer to your question. In fact, the various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature, and each running away with a piece of its flesh. Nature as the subject of science is a highly artificial affair, and this artificiality is the result of that selective process to which science must subject her in the interests of precision. The moment you put the subject of science in the total of human experience it begins to disclose a different character. Thus religion, which demands the whole of Reality and for this reason must occupy a central place in any synthesis of all the data of human experience, has no reason to be afraid of any sectional views of Reality. Natural Science is by nature sectional; it cannot, if it is true to its own nature and function, set up its theory as a complete view of Reality.

Where, then, do we now turn for an inclusive worldview? Postmodernism hasn't a clue. And this is its deepest definition.²¹ The generally accepted

²⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, IAP, Lahore, 1987, pp. 26.

²¹ Ernest Gellner defines Postmodernism as relativism – “*relativismus über Alles*” (*Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*) – but relativism is not an easy position to defend, so postmoderns do everything they can to avoid that label; Clifford Geertz’s “anti-antirelativism” is a case in point. The T-shirts that blossomed on the final day of a six-week, 1987 NEH Institute probably tell the story. Superimposed on a slashed circle, their logo read, “No cheap relativism”. By squirming, postmoderns can parry crude relativisms, but sophisticated relativism is still relativism. Postmoderns resist that conclusion, however, so I shall stay with their own self-characterization.

definition of Postmodernism now that Jean-Francois Lyotard fixed in place decades ago in *The Postmodern Condition* is, “incredulity toward metanarratives”.²² Having deserted revelation for science, the West has now abandoned the scientific worldview as well, leaving it without replacement. In this it mirrors the current stage of Western science which leaves *nature* unimagined. Before modern science, Westerners accepted Aristotle’s model of the earth as surrounded by concentric, crystalline spheres. Newton replaced that model with his image of a clockwork universe, but Postmodern, quantum-and-relativity science gives us not a third model of nature but no model at all. Alan Wallace’s *Choosing Reality* delineates eight different interpretations of quantum physics, all of which can claim the support of physics’ proven facts.²³ A contemporary philosopher described the situation as “*the Reality Market Place*”—you can have as many versions of reality as you like.

Another analogy can pull together all that we have just said and summarize the difference alluded to in these remarks. If we think of traditional peoples as looking out upon the world through the window of revelation (their received myths and sacred texts), the window that they turned to look through in the modern period (science) proved to be stunted. It cuts off at the level of the human nose, which (metaphysically speaking) means that when we look through it our gaze slants downward and we see only things that are inferior to us.²⁴ As for the Postmodern window, it is boarded over and allows no inclusive view whatsoever. In the words of Richard Rorty, “There is no Big Picture.”

Iqbal mediates between these conflicting views by pointing out to the shortcomings and achievements of all the three paradigms objectively. He agrees that there is a Big Picture and his writings give us to understand that the Postmodern view of the self and its world is in no way nobler than the ones that the world’s religions proclaim. Postmoderns yield to their

²² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), pp. xxiv, 3ff.

²³ Alan Wallace, *Choosing Reality* (Boston and Shaftsbury: Shambala, 1989).

²⁴ No textbook in science has ever included things that are intrinsically greater than human beings. Bigger, of course, and wielding more physical power, but not superior in the full sense of that term which includes virtues, such as intelligence, compassion, and bliss.

dilapidated views, not because they like them, but because they think that reason and human historicity now force them upon us. Iqbal would argue that it is not necessarily the case and the present predicament is the result of a tunnel vision that we have adopted but which really is not the only option for us. At the same time he is keenly aware of the fact that ideals of irreducible dignity of the individual human being, the equality of all human beings before the law and the value/worth of the material and profane worlds have been successfully embodied in the Modern and Postmodern paradigms. In conjunction with other ideas and in tension with still some others, these three ideals have shaped the social, political and educational institutions of the modern West. Speaking in the most general terms, it can be said that modern civil law, the modern political state and the modern secular academy/university represent the institutionalization of these ideals. While the depth and breath of institutionalization of these ideals has varied greatly in different Western societies, the past 3-4 centuries of Western history show an inexorable movement in this direction. But at the same time he raises a very troubling question about the past. If it is indeed the case that Islam affirms the irreducible dignity of the individual, equality of all before the law and the inherent goodness of the material/profane worlds then the question emerges: why is it that the modern, secular West has succeeded in institutionalizing these ideals with a greater degree of consistency than the traditional Muslim society? The posing of this question and an honest facing up to it opens up the possibility of contemporary Islam gaining a better understanding of the historical development of which it is a product. To gain an insight into that question we shall refer to our earlier remarks again and take a look at those three major stages of our intellectual history from a different angle.

In Iqbal's view a worldview is an inclusive outlook, and it is useful to distinguish its social, cosmological, and metaphysical components. The social component of past worldviews included, at times, justifications for slavery and the divine right of kings, while its cosmological components described the physical universe as understood by the science of the day – Ptolemaic astronomy or whatever. The contents of those two components obviously change, so are not perennial. The perennial, unchanging philosophy is metaphysical, or more precisely, ontological. It concerns such matters as the

distinction between the Absolute and the relative, and the doctrine of the degrees of reality that is consequent thereon.

Following this threefold criteria I would like to say a few words about the Metaphysical, Cosmological and Sociological achievements/ shortcomings of Tradition, Modernity and Postmodernism, respectively. When we align these problems with the three²⁵ major periods in human history: the traditional period,²⁶ the Modern period,²⁷ and Postmodernism,²⁸ it is obvious that each of these periods poured more of its energies into, and did better by, one of life's inescapable problems than did the other two. Specifically, Modernity gave us our view of *nature*,²⁹ Postmodernism is tackling *social injustices* more resolutely than people previously did. This leaves *worldviews* – metaphysics as distinct from cosmology, which restricts itself to the empirical universe. In Iqbal's view it is our ancestors, whose accomplishments on that front have not been improved upon.³⁰ Let us shuffle the historical sequence of the periods and proceed topically – from nature, through society, to the Big Picture, tying each topic to the period that did best by it. Modern first, then Postmodernism, leaving the traditional period for last.

Cosmological Achievements of Modernity

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europe stumbled on a new way of knowing that we refer to as the *scientific method*. It centres in the

²⁵ For the present discussion I have left out the beyond-Postmodern paradigm and its conceptual shift.

²⁶ Which extended from human beginnings up to the rise of modern science.

²⁷ Which took over from there and continued through the first half of the twentieth century

²⁸ Which Nietzsche anticipated, but which waited for the second half of the twentieth century to take hold.

²⁹ It continues to be refined, but because modernity laid the foundations for the scientific understanding of it, it deserves credit for the discovery.

³⁰ The just entered distinction between cosmology and metaphysics is important here, so I shall expand it slightly. *Cosmology* is the study of the physical universe – or the world of nature as science conceives of it – and is the domain of science. *Metaphysics*, on the other hand, deals with all there is. (The terms *worldview* and *Big Picture* are used interchangeably with *metaphysics* in this presentation.) In the worldview that holds that nature is all there is, metaphysics coincides with cosmology. That metaphysics is named *naturalism*.

controlled experiment and has given us modern science³¹ which adds proof to generic science by its controlled experiment. True hypotheses can be separated from false ones, and brick by brick an edifice has been erected from those proven truths. We commonly call that edifice the *scientific worldview*, but *scientific cosmology* is more precise because of the ambiguity of the word *world*. Iqbal would argue that the scientific edifice is a *worldview* only for those who assume that science can in principle take in all that exists. The scientific cosmology is so much a part of the air we breathe that it is hardly necessary to describe it.³² Taught from primary schools onward, this story is so familiar that further details would only clutter things.

Tradition's Cosmological Shortcomings

That this scientific cosmology retires traditional ones with their six days of creation and the like goes without saying. Who can possibly question that when the scientific cosmology has landed people on the moon?³³ And there is another point. There is a naturalism in Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Islamic Cosmological doctrines and tribal outlooks that in its own way rivals science's calculative cosmology, but Iqbal would argue that it is the naturalism of the artist, the poet, and the nature lover³⁴ not that of Galileo and Bacon. For present purposes, aesthetics is irrelevant. Modern cosmology derives from laboratory experiments, not landscape paintings.

³¹ Generic science (which consists of careful attention to nature and its regularities) is as old as the hills – at least as old as art and religion.

³² Some fifteen billion years ago an incredibly compact pellet of matter exploded to launch its components on a voyage that still continues. Differentiation set in as hydrogen proliferated into the periodic table. Atoms gathered into gaseous clouds. Stars condensed from whirling filaments of flame, and planets spun off from those to become molten drops that pulsated and grew rock-encrusted. Narrowing our gaze to the planet that was to become our home, we watch it grow, ocean-filmed and swathed in atmosphere. Some three and a half billion years ago shallow waters began to ferment with life, which could maintain its inner milieu through homeostasis and could reproduce itself. Life spread from oceans across continents, and intelligence appeared. Several million years ago our ancestors arrived. It is difficult to say exactly when, for every few years palaeontologists announce discoveries that “set the human race back another million years or so”, as press reports like to break the news.

³³ Our ancestors were impressive astronomers, and we can honour them unreservedly for how much they learned about nature with only their unaided senses to work with.

³⁴ Of Li Po, Wordsworth, and Thoreau.

Postmodernism's Cosmological Shortcomings

With traditional cosmology out of the running, the question turns to Postmodernism. Because science is cumulative, it follows as a matter of course that the cosmology we have in the twenty-first century is an improvement over what we had in the middle of the twentieth, which on my timeline is when modernity phased into Postmodernity. But Iqbal would argue that the refinements that postmodern scientists (it is well to say postmodern *physics* here) have achieved have not affected life to anything like the degree that postmodern social thrusts have, so the social Oscar is the one Postmodernists are most entitled to.³⁵ Be that as it may, in Iqbal's view Postmodernism's discoveries (unlike modern discoveries in physics – the laws of gravity, thermodynamics, electromagnetism, relativity theory, and quantum mechanics, which continue to be used to make space shuttles fly and to help us understand how hot electrons behave in semiconductors) have concerned details and exotica.³⁶

³⁵ I need to support my contention that postmodern science does not measure up to modern physics in the scope of its discoveries. It says nothing against the brilliance of Stephen Hawking, Fred Hoyle, John Wheeler, Freeman Dyson, Steven Weinberg, and their likes to add that they have discovered nothing about nature that compares with the discoveries of Copernicus, Newton, Maxwell, Planck, Einstein, Heisenberg, Bohr, Schrödinger, and Born. In molecular chemistry things are different. DNA is a staggering discovery, but – extending back only several billion years compared with the astrophysicists billions of *light* years – it does not pertain to nature's foundations. The fact that no new abstract idea in physics has emerged for seventy years may suggest that nothing more remains to be discovered about nature's foundations.

³⁶ The billions of dollars that have been spent since the middle of the twentieth century (and the millions of papers that have been written on theories that change back and forth) have produced no discoveries that impact human beings in important ways. All are in the domain of the meta-sciences of high-energy particle physics and astronomy, whose findings– what is supposed to have happened in the first 10-42 seconds of the universe's life, and the like – while headlined by the media have no conceivable connection to human life and can be neither falsified nor checked in normal ways. This allows the building blocks of nature – particles, strings, or whatever – to keep changing, and the age of the universe to be halved or doubled every now and then. Roughly 99.999 percent of science (scientist Rustum Roy's estimate) is unaffected by these flickering hypotheses, and the public does not much care about their fate.

Outranking the foregoing reason for not giving the cosmological Oscar to Postmodernism is the fact that the noisiest postmodernists have called into question the very notion of truth by turning claims to truth into little more than power plays.³⁷ This relativizes science's assertions radically and rules out even the possibility of its closing in on the nature of nature.³⁸ As there are no neutral standards by which to judge these paradigms, Kuhn's thesis (if unnuanced) leads to relativism among paradigms that places Hottentot science on a par with Newton's. Kuhn himself phrased his thesis carefully enough to parry such relativism, but even taken at its best, it provides no way that science could get to the bottom of things. This demotes the whole enterprise of science as understood by Modernity, and in doing so provides a strong supporting reason for not giving Postmodernism the cosmological prize. It does better with social issues so now we discuss Postmodernism's achievements on the social front.

Postmodernism's Fairness Revolution

The magic word of Postmodernism is society. This is not surprising. With the belief that there is nothing beyond our present world, nature and society are all that remain, and of the two, nature has become the province of specialists.³⁹ This leaves society as the domain that presses on us directly and the one in which there is some prospect of our making a difference. Iqbal forcefully advocated the changes and changes are occurring.⁴⁰ A quick rehearsal of some changes that have occurred in a single lifetime makes it clear that social injustices are being recognized and addressed more earnestly today than they were by our ancestors.⁴¹

³⁷ According to this reading of the matter, when people claim that what they say is true, all they are really doing is claiming status for beliefs that advance their own social standing.

³⁸ The most widely used textbook on college campuses for the past thirty years has been Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and its thesis – that facts derive their meaning from the paradigms that set them in place – has shifted attention from scientific facts to scientific paradigms.

³⁹ We seldom confront it directly anymore; mostly it comes to us via supermarkets and cushioned by air-conditioning and central heating.

⁴⁰ Post colonial guilt may play a part here, and so much remains to be done that self-congratulation is premature.

Tradition's Social Shortcomings

These signs of progress acquire additional life when they are set against the unconcern of earlier times regarding such matters. There is no reason to think that traditional peoples were more callous than we are. Iqbal would argue that on the whole they saw their obligations as extending no further than to members of their primary communities: Buddhism's *dana* (gifts), Jesus' "cup of water given in my name," Islam's "pure due" and their likes.

- In 1919 the Brooklyn Zoo exhibited an African American caged alongside chimpanzees and gorillas. Today such an act would be met with outrage anywhere in the world.
- The civil rights movement of the 1960s accomplished its major objectives. In the United States and even in South Africa today, people of different races mix where they never could before – on beaches, in airline cabin crews, everywhere.
- In the 1930s, if a streetcar in San Francisco approached a stop where only Chinese Americans were waiting to board, it would routinely pass them by. By contrast, fifty years later, the highly respected chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, was a Chinese American who spoke English with a Chinese accent.
- No war has ever been as vigorously protested as was the war in Vietnam by United States citizens. When things were going so badly that military leaders advised President Nixon to use nuclear weapons, he declined because (as he said) if he did that, he would face a nation that had taken to the streets.
- The women's movement is only a blink in the eyes of history, but it has already scored impressive victories. Until long after the Civil War, American women really had no civil rights, no legal rights, and no property rights. Not until 1918 did Texas alter its law that everyone had the right to vote except "idiots, imbeciles, aliens, the insane, and women."
- Arguably, the most important theological development of the latter twentieth century was the emergence of the theology of liberation, with its Latin American and feminist versions in the vanguard.
- In an unprecedented move, in March 2000 the Pope prayed to God to forgive the sins his church had committed against the people of Israel, against love, peace, and respect for cultures and religions, against the dignity of women and the unity of the human race, and against the fundamental rights of persons. Two months later, two hundred thousand Australians marched across Sydney Harbour Bridge to apologize for their treatment of the aborigines while the sky written word SORRY floated above the Sydney Opera House.

Encountered face-to-face, the hungry were fed, the naked were clothed, and widows and orphans were provided for as means allowed, but there human obligations ended. Injustices that were built into institutions (if such injustices were even recognized) were not human beings' responsibility.⁴²

Modernity changed this attitude. Accelerating travel and trade brought encounters between peoples whose societal structures were very different from one another, and these differences showed that such institutions were not like natural laws after all; they were humanly devised and could therefore be critiqued. The French Revolution put this prospect to a historic test; scrapping the divine right of kings, it set out to create a society built on liberty, equality, and fraternity. In Iqbal's view the experiment failed and the backlash was immediate, but its premise – that societies are malleable – survived.

Modernity's Social Shortcomings

Modernity deserves credit for that discovery, and (if we wished) we might excuse it for its poor handling of its discovery on grounds that it was working with a new idea. The record itself, however, is by Postmodern standards, deplorable. Iqbal would argue that under the pretext of shouldering “the white man's burden” to minister to “lesser breeds without the law”, it ensconced colonialism, which raped Asia and Africa, hit its nadir in the Opium Wars of 1841-42, and ended by subjecting the entire civilized world to Western domination.⁴³

42 Perhaps because for those institutions were considered to be God-given and unalterable. People regarded them in the way we regard laws of nature – as givens to be worked with, not criticized.

⁴³ David Hume is commonly credited with having the clearest head of all the great philosophers, but I (Huston Smith) read that somewhere in his correspondence (I have not been able to find the passage) he wrote that the worst white man is better than the best black man. What I can report firsthand is signs posted in parks of the international settlements in Shanghai, where I attended high school, that read, “No dogs or Chinese allowed”. With a virgin continent to rape, the United States did not need colonies, but this did not keep it from hunting down the Native Americans, continuing the institution of slavery, annexing Puerto Rico and Hawaii, and establishing “protectorates” in the Philippines and several other places.

Having dealt with nature and society, let us turn now to the third inescapable issue that human beings must face: the Big Picture.

Modernity's Metaphysical Shortcomings

Iqbal would argue that Modernity was metaphysically sloppy. Ravished by science's accomplishments, it elevated the scientific method to "our sacral mode of knowing" (Alex Comfort), and because that mode registers nothing that is without a material component, immaterial realities at first dropped from view and then (as the position hardened) were denied existence. In the distinction registered earlier, this was metaphysics reduced to cosmology.⁴⁴ Modernity's Big Picture is materialism, as we noted in Iqbal's observation earlier, or (in its more plausible version) naturalism, which acknowledges that there are immaterial things – thoughts and feelings, for example – while insisting that those things are totally dependent on matter. Iqbal would argue that both versions are stunted when compared with the traditional outlook. It is important to understand that neither materialism nor naturalism is required by anything science has discovered in the way of actual facts. Iqbal would argue that we have slid into this smallest of metaphysical positions for psychological, not logical, reasons.

Postmodernity's Metaphysical Shortcomings

As for Postmodernity, it sets itself against the very idea of such a thing as the Big Picture. It got off on the right foot by critiquing the truncated worldview of the Enlightenment, but from that reasonable beginning it plunged on to argue unreasonably that worldviews (often derisively referred to as *grand narratives*) are misguided in principle.⁴⁵ Stated in the in-house idiom

⁴⁴ When Carl Sagan opened his television series, *Cosmos*, by announcing that "the Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be", he presented that unargued assumption as if it were a scientific fact.

⁴⁵ In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean Francois Lyotard goes so far as to define postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives", a synonym for metaphysics. The incredulity takes three forms that grow increasingly shrill as they proceed. Postmodern minimalism contents itself with pointing out that we have no consensual worldview today; "we have no maps and don't know how to make them." Mainline Postmodernism adds, "and never again will we have a consensual worldview, such as prevailed in the Middle Ages, Elizabethan England, or

Postmodernists are fond of, worldviews “totalize” by “marginalizing” minority viewpoints. They are oppressive in principle and should be resolutely resisted. If hardcore Postmodernism were accurate in this charge one should stop in one’s tracks, but it has not proved that it is accurate – it merely assumes that it is accurate and rests its case on examples of oppression that, of course, are not lacking. Iqbal would argue that what has not been demonstrated is the impossibility of a worldview that builds the rights of minorities into its foundations as an essential building block. There is irony here, for the very Postmodernism that is dismissing the possibility of a comprehensive humane outlook is working toward the creation of such through its fairness revolution – its insistence that everybody be given an equal chance at the goods of life. The deeper fact, however, is that to have or not to have a worldview is not an option, for peripheral vision always conditions what we are attending to focally, and in conceptual “seeing” the periphery has no cut off. The only choice we have is to be consciously aware of our worldviews and criticize them where they need criticizing, or let them work on us unnoticed and acquiesce to living unexamined lives.

Tradition’s Metaphysical Excellence

Neither Modernity nor Postmodernism handled the metaphysical problem well. It is, of course, no proof that Tradition handled it better. But there is a unanimous view. We have mentioned earlier that a common metaphysical “spine” underlies the differences in the theologies of the world’s great religions. If mainline and polemical Postmodernism were to recede, the obsession with life’s social dimension that they saddled us with would relax and we would find ourselves able to think ontologically again and see what Iqbal has emphasized in his writings time and again; the universality of the traditional worldview. An important consequence of this would be that we would then perceive how much religious outlooks have in common. For one thing, they all situate the manifest, visible world within a larger, invisible whole.⁴⁶ The further unanimous claim of religious cosmologies, though, finds

seventeenth century New England; we now know too well how little the human mind can know”. Hardcore Postmodernism carries this trajectory to its logical limit by adding, “good riddance!”

⁴⁶ This is of particular interest at the moment because currently science does the same. Dark matter doesn’t impact any of science’s detectors, and the current recipe for the universe is

no echo in science, for (being a value judgment) it is beyond science's reach. Not only is the invisible real; regions of it are more real and of greater worth than the visible, material world.

This is a very basic insight that informs Iqbal's worldview. He is on the side of Tradition in this regard. The inclusive, presiding paradigm for Tradition is the Great Chain of Being, composed of links ranging in hierarchical order from meagre existents up to the *ens perfectissimum*; and the foremost student of that concept, Arthur Lovejoy, reported that "most educated persons everywhere accepted [it] without question down to late in the eighteenth century".⁴⁷ To that endorsement, Ken Wilber has added that the Great Chain of Being is "so overwhelmingly widespread...that it is either the single greatest intellectual error ever to appear in humankind's history – an error so colossally widespread as to literally stagger the mind – or it is the single most accurate reflection of reality yet to appear."⁴⁸

An obvious moral emerges from what has been said. If we run a strainer through our past to lift from each of its three periods the gold it contains and let its dross sink back into the sands of history what do we get? In the light of Iqbal's views Modernity's gold i.e. science is certain to figure importantly in the third millennium, and Postmodernity's focus on justice likewise stands a good chance of continuing. It is the worldview of Tradition that is in jeopardy and must be rehabilitated if it is to survive. Being more specific, the present challenge to the Muslim world is reversed in the sense that it must learn to be tolerant of a world which threatens its very existence without losing its identity and the secularized West must learn the very difficult lesson that its Modern and Postmodern understanding of man and the world is not universal. Moreover, since religion does not acknowledge any principles

"70 parts cold dark matter, about 30 parts hot dark matter, and just a pinch for all the rest the matter detectable to scientific instruments." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 October 1992, A 16.)

⁴⁷ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 59. Ernst Cassirer corroborates Lovejoy on this point: "The most important legacy of ancient speculation was the concept and general picture of a graduated cosmos" (*Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 9).

⁴⁸ Ken Wilber, "The Great Chain of Being," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 33 No. 3 (summer 1993), p. 53.

higher than its own, not even the survival of the human race, if asked to establish peace, it will do so in its own way or not at all.

There is an other way in which Iqbal achieves that grand synthesis and that overarching view, some times with greater success. It is through the medium of his poetically mediated thought in his Urdu and Persian poetry which transmits the ethos in a captivating manner. Sapiential poetry or wisdom poetry is a means and a vehicle for the expression of truth and it complements logic in that it deals with forms of knowledge which are not accessible to the unaided logical faculties of man.

It is, therefore, significant and not a matter of mere coincidence that the words which denote poetry or poetic activity in all the major Islamic languages⁴⁹ and the word which denotes consciousness (*shu'ur*) share the common trilateral verbal root *sh. 'r* which means 'to become aware of', 'to be conscious of'. It perfectly speaks for the conceptual underpinning of poetry in the Islamic civilization.

The most central and total manifestation of the Divine Consciousness, a self-disclosure (*tajalli*) of the Divine Attribute of Knowledge (*'ilm*), is the human intelligence. In the same way, it is only man, which has the gift of speech because he alone among earthly creatures is made in the image of God⁵⁰ in a direct and integral manner. It is the summit and perfection of human intelligence and, therefore, of human consciousness. Speech is as it

⁴⁹In Arabic, Persian it is the word *shī'r*, as well as its various constructs and derivatives which denote poetry. Similar is the case of Urdu, Turkish and most of the regional languages of the Islamic lands. Poet, in all these languages, is called *shā'ir* which again is a derivative form of the same root implying "the conscious one, some one who is aware, the person with cognition".

⁵⁰The Biblical expression says "in the image of God". In the Islamic tradition it appears in the following Hadith report "*kbalaq Allahu 'l-Adama 'ala Suratibi*". See Bukhari, *Al-Sabih*, "Istidhan", 1; Muslim, *Al- Al-Sabih*, "Birr", 115, "Jannah", 28; A'Amad bin Hanbal, *Musnad*, Vol. II, 244, 251, 315, 323. Also see Ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futubat al Makkiyyab*, Dar Sadir, Beirut, n.d., Vol. II, p. 124, p. 490. For an illuminating exposition of the implications of the statement in terms of the Divine Attributes see Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, Suhail Academy, Lahore, 2000, p. 120.

were the immaterial, though sensory, body of our will and our understanding.⁵¹ Similarly, human speech or human language attains to its full plenitude or perfect deployment in poetry. If the summit and perfection of human consciousness is human language, then poetry or the poetic art could likewise be termed as the summit and perfection of human language. This necessarily entails that, not only in the Islamic traditional perspective but also in the traditional oriental theories of art, poetry is a conscious activity never separated from the Intellect.

Let us return to the question of the worldview, the big picture and the presiding paradigm for Tradition of a hierarchical view of reality. Already at the opening of the last century, when Postmodernism had not yet emerged on the scene, Yeats was warning that things were falling apart, that the centre didn't hold. Gertrude Stein followed him by noting that "in the twentieth century nothing is in agreement with anything else", and Ezra Pound saw man as "hurling himself at indomitable chaos" – the most durable line from the play *Green Pastures* has been, "Everything that's tied down is coming loose". T. S. Eliot found "The Wasteland" and "The Hollow Men" as appropriate metaphors for the outward and the inward aspects of our predicament.⁵² Poetry of first magnitude or great poetry itself works as a bridge and with inevitable particularities always carries an aspect of universality. It brings you face to face with questions that are truly perennial human questions and not just Muslim or Christian or Hindu questions; who am I? What does it mean to be human? Where have I come from? Where am I going? What is this universe and how am I related to it? Great poetry may seem grounded in a certain particular idiom or a specific universe of discourse but it always opens out onto the universal. Let me illustrate it with reference to T. S. Eliot whom I have just mentioned. *Ash Wednesday* derives its title from the Catholic ritual of the same name– a ritual that devout Catholics still do in Pakistan as well as some of their counterparts among the Muslim ascetics. But the poem speaks

⁵¹It may, however, be remembered that speech is not necessarily exteriorized; the articulated thought also involves language.

⁵² It is not surprising, therefore, that when in her last interview Rebecca West was asked to name the dominant mood of our time, she replied, "A desperate search for a pattern." The search is desperate because it seems futile to look for a pattern when reality has become, in Roland Barth's vivid image, kaleidoscopic. With every tick of the clock the pieces of experience come down in new array.

to a universal human question, the essential question of the transience of human life and its destiny beyond the grave.

Iqbal, though standing as an outpost of the sensibility and the worldview which the great masters⁵³ of traditional Islamic literature adhered to, was at the same time a man of the modern age.⁵⁴ His way of handling the big picture is interesting. The idea of a graded universe, of the multiple levels of reality – visible, invisible and beyond – run through all of his poetry but it becomes very prominent when it comes to his magisterial Persian magnum opus *Javid Nama* which in its epic sweep not only encompasses the multiple levels of being but also works across worldviews, civilizations and epochs. To catch glimpse of it we can have a look at the staggering variety of figures that appear in the *Javid Nama* – the Zaratustra, ancient Persian sage, the Indian sage, Buddha, Christ, Rumi, Tosltai, Afghani, Saeed Halim, Ancient gods, Pharaoh, Kichtner, Mahdi Sudani, the Maritian sage, Hallaj, Ghalib and Tahira, Iblis, Nietzsche, Ali Hamadani, Ghani, Abdali, Tipu. At the face of it *Javid Nama* looks like an Islamic universe of discourse but always opens out onto the universal through these characters.

Let us look at a more specific example. In *Javid Nama* when Zinda – Rud reaches the sphere of Mars, he meets a Maritian sage. In the five pages that follow in the form of a dialogue, Iqbal talks about subjects ranging from the human vocation, epistemology, relationship between the divine and the human, social and economic justice and the ecological problem always

⁵³ Like ‘Attar, Sana’i, Rumi and Jami.

⁵⁴ This point has always been emphasized in most of the studies of Iqbal’s mind and art. As a random sample, read the following. “A typical example of modern use of traditional forms is the poetry of Mohammed Iqbal, who utilised mainly forms inherited from Persian and Urdu poetry...He used traditional imagery but filled it with new content, and it seems clear that his listeners would scarcely have accepted his daring message had he told it in free verse or in images taken from English or German tradition. People– literate or illiterate– were so used to certain rhythms, rhyme forms and images that their use facilitated Iqbal’s work tremendously.” Annemarie Schimmel, *The Two Colored Brocade*, Chapel Hill, 1992, p. 35. From the other end of the world we hear the comment, “like Abraham, he came out of the fire alive, that is, with his Muslim identity intact despite his Western education and his engaging the West in the frontier of philosophy.” Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, Time Books, K. L./Singapore, 1996, p. 35.

keeping an eye on the Big Picture and with reference to the multicultural dimension.

RUMI

I am of the skies, my companion is of the earth,
intoxicated, yet he has not tasted the veins of the vine;
a man intrepid, his name is Zinda-Rud,
his drunkenness derived from contemplating existence.
We who have chanced thus upon your city
are in the world, yet free from the world.
In our quest for ever new apparitions
be our companion on the road for a little time.

THE MARTIAN SAGE

These are the environs of Marghadin of Barkhiya —
Barkhiya is the name of our ancestor.
Farzmarz, the tempter to all evil,
came up to Barkhiya once in Paradise;
‘How can you remain here content?’ he cried.
‘For many ages you have been dominated by God.
There is a world far better than your abode,

compared with which Paradise itself is but a moment's springtide;
that world is loftier than all other worlds,
that world is more sublime than spacelessness.
God Himself knows nothing of that world;
I have never seen a world more free.
God does not interfere in its ordering,
it has no Book, no Prophet, no Gabriel,
no circumambulations, no prostrations there,
no prayers, no thanksgivings.'
Barkhiya replied, 'Depart, you sorcerer,
pour your own image upon that world!'
Since our ancestor did not succumb to his guile
God entrusted to us another world.
So enter this God-given kingdom;
behold Marghadin and its laws and customs.

TOUR OF THE CITY OF MARGHADIN

Marghadin and those lofty edifices —
what can I say of that noble city?

Its inhabitants sweet of speech as honey,
comely their faces, gentle their manners, simple their apparel,
their thoughts innocent of the burning fever of gain,
they were intimate with the secrets of the sun's alchemy;
who so of them desires silver or gold gathers it from light,
even as we gather salt from the briny sea.

The aim of science and art there is service,
no one weighs work done against gold;
no one is even acquainted with dinars and dirhams,
these idols may not enter the sanctuary.

The demon of the machine has no power over nature,
the skies are not blackened by smoke;
the lamp of the hard-toiling farmer is always bright,
he is secure from the plundering of the landlords,
his tillage is not a struggle for water,
his harvest is his own, no other shares in it.

In that world there are no armies, no squadrons,
none gains his livelihood by killing and murder;

In Marghadin no pen wins lustre
from inscribing and disseminating lies;
in the market places there is no clamour of the workless,
no whining of beggars afflicts the ear.

THE MARTIAN SAGE

No one here is a mendicant or destitute,
slave and master, ruler and ruled, here are none.

ZINDA-RUD

Mendicant and destitute are so by God's decree,
by God's decree ruler and ruled;
none but God is the creator of destiny
and against destiny human design is powerless.

THE MARTIAN SAGE

If your heart bleeds on account of one destiny,
petition God to decree another destiny;
if you pray for a new destiny, that is lawful,
seeing that God's destinies are infinite.
Earthlings have gambled away the coin of selfhood,

not comprehending the subtle meaning of destiny;

its subtlety is contained in a single phrase —

‘If you transform yourself, it too will be transformed.’

Be dust, and fate will give you the winds;

be a stone, and it will hurl you against glass.

Are you a dew-drop? Your destiny is to perish;

are you an ocean? Your destiny is to endure.

Every moment you are fashioning new Lats and Manats;

inconstant one, do you look for constancy from idols?

So long as your faith is to accord not with your self

the world of your thoughts is your prison;

toil without treasure such is destiny;

treasure without toil such is destiny!

If this is the foundation of faith, ignorant fellow,

then the needy will become still more in need.

Woe to that religion which lulls you to sleep

and still holds you in sleep profound!

Is this religion, or magic and enchantment?

Is this religion, or a grain of opium?

Do you know whence comes the penetrating nature,
whence came this houri into your tenement of clay?

Do you know whence comes the sages' power of thought,
whence the potency of prayer in God's interlocutors?

Do you know whence came this heart, and its visitations,
whence these arts, these miracles?

Do you have fire of speech? That comes not from you;
do you have flame of action? That comes not from you.

All this is an overflow of the springtime of nature,
nature which derives from nature's Creator.

What is life? A mine of gems;
you are the trustee, its owner is Another.

A radiant nature glorifies the man of God,
to serve all God's creatures, that is his aim —

Service belongs to the wont and way of prophethood;
to seek a reward for service is mere commerce.

Even so this wind, earth, cloud, field,

orchard, meadow, palace, street, stones, bricks —

you who say, ‘Our property is of ourselves’,

ignorant one, all this belongs to God.

If you regard God’s earth as your own,

then what means the verse, Work not corruption?

Adam’s sons have given their hearts to Iblis,

and from Iblis I have seen only corruption.

None should convert a trust to his own use;

blessed is he who renders God’s property up to God.

You have carried off what does not belong to you;

my soul sorrows for so unworthy a deed.

If you own a thing, that is meet and right,

but if you do not, say yourself, how is that proper?

Return to God the property of God

so that you may loose the knot of your involvement;

for why is there poverty and want under heaven’s arch?

Because you say what is the Lord’s belongs to you.

The man who has not leaped forth from water and clay

has shattered his own glass with his own stone.

You who cannot tell goal from path,

the value of every thing is measured by the regard.

So long as the pearl is your property, it is a pearl,

otherwise it is a pebble, worth less than a farthing.

View the world otherwise, and it will become other,

this earth and heaven will be transformed.
