

PREFACE

Iqbal is one of the pre-eminent writers of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Indeed, the attention he has received from numerous writers, translators, and critics from Western as well as Islamic countries testifies to his stature as a world literary figure. While his primary reputation is that of a poet, Iqbal has not lacked admirers for his philosophical thought. He has in fact been called “the most serious Muslim philosophical thinker of modern times.” The all-important appellation of “poet-philosopher” is thus well deserved: Iqbal’s poetry and philosophy do not exist in isolation from each other; they are integrally related, his poetry serving as a vehicle for his thought.

As the famous Cambridge scholar A. J. Arberry had once remarked, “Poets have played a prominent, in some instances indeed a leading part, in that most exciting drama of modern times, the revolt against internal corruption, and against external domination, intellectual as well as political.” Iqbal is the best articulated Muslim response to totalizing claims of Modernity that the Islamic world has produced in the 20th century. His response to the worldview of Modernity 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 of Religious Thought in Islam* 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, or contemplative poetry or inspired poetry in modern times.
- As a political activist/social reformer— rising up to his social responsibility, his calling at a critical phase of history.

It is a well known biographical note that Iqbal spent three years in Europe during 1905-08. He began his graduate studies at the University of Cambridge, went on to the University of Munich to get his PhD and then returned to London to attain a Bar at Law from Lincoln’s Inn. In 1905, he arrived in Cambridge, entering Trinity College as a research scholar as, in the

early part of the twentieth century, Cambridge was a renowned centre of Arabic and Persian studies. The European phase of Iqbal's life is notable for several reasons. During this period, Iqbal gave almost exclusive attention to his studies; never before or after was he to lead such an intense academic life. His devotion showed results— three degrees from three prestigious schools in three years was a remarkable feat by any standard; something that none of his contemporaries and fellow students in England— Jinnah, Gandhi, Nehru— managed to accomplish. But that was only the outward part of it. Something more profound and important than these feats of academic excellence was realized— a full awareness of the conceptual shift that the enlightenment project and modernity's worldview had brought in human thought, the damage that it had done to the academia, and the means of repairing related ills. The present Seminar tries to explore the significance of this important phase of Iqbal's intellectual career.

His stay in Europe proved to be a crucial turning point in his intellectual development. Even though he was already an accomplished poet and thinker before his departure for Europe, it was only after his return that his work began to display the universalistic characteristics that make it the perfect bridge between the East and the West. This sets Iqbal apart from acculturated liberal Muslim thinkers for whom exposure to Western ideas becomes an occasion for a wholesale critique of the Islamic tradition. At the same time Iqbal's immersion in the Western academy gave him the analytical tools and methods he would later use to subject the received Islamic tradition to critical scrutiny. This sets Iqbal apart from dogmatic zealots who see nothing problematic in the received tradition and nothing of value in the modern academy. Iqbal's constructive-critical engagement with the Islamic tradition in the aftermath of his studies in Europe is complemented by a constructive-critical engagement with modern Western thought.

In addition to a direct response to Goethe's *Divan* (in the form of *Payam-i-Mashriq*) and direct dialogue with McTaggart, Iqbal appropriated the ideas of thinkers like Bergson, Whitehead, James, Dewey (and others). He combined their insights with Muslim thinkers like Rumi, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn 'Arabi, Shatibi (and others) to offer a proposal for the "reconstruction of religious thought in Islam." If read carefully this proposal is a response to not only a

particular condition in the Islamic tradition, it also speaks to a crisis within the modern Western philosophical tradition.

Iqbal's vision seeks to go beyond the Kantian critique of pure reason, practical reason and judgment, and argues for not just the possibility of metaphysics but an affirmation of religion. In other words, while Iqbal is a Muslim from the East, he is also acutely aware of the rupture in modern Western philosophy and offers a constructive proposal for healing this rupture.

On 17th November 1931 Iqbal visited Cambridge again after a period of 23 years. A reception was given in his honour where some of his former teachers and Dr. Nicholson made their speeches and welcomed him since, by then, he had become Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal, the most accomplished poet of his age, a renowned thinker and a celebrated social activist. The advice that he offered to the students and other members of the Cambridge gathering at the end of his remarks made in the reception eloquently speak of the fact that he, having realized the ills of modernity, had formulated his vision of the systems of its repair that could be drawn from Tradition.

For all of these reasons (and more) it was worth commemorating the 100th anniversary of Iqbal's completion of his studies in Europe and reflecting on not only his personal accomplishments but also on his contemporary relevance. It is for this purpose that a Seminar titled "The Contemporary Relevance of Muhammad Iqbal"— *An International Seminar in Cambridge on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of Iqbal's Completion of his Studies in Europe* was held at the University of Cambridge (Trinity College) on 19th-20th June, 2008. The Seminar consisted of three sessions under the themes "The Relevance of Tradition," "The Promise of Modernity," and "Religion in the 21st Century." (Details of the event are given in the following pages). Nine papers were delivered at the seminar by scholars from Canada (1), USA (2), UK (3), and Pakistan (3). The theme of the seminar was the relevance of Iqbal's insights to contemporary discussions on the relationship between religion/modernity, east/west, and tradition/progress. A number of the papers noted, either explicitly or implicitly, that Iqbal's insights can enrich inter-civilizational dialogue as well as intra-civilizational dialogue. At the conclusion of the seminar there was general consensus that the proceedings had been

extremely successful. This consensus was based on the quality of the papers that were delivered and the level of discussion that the papers generated. This Volume, which replaces Vol. 49, No. 4 (Oct., 2008) of *Iqbal Review* assembles the papers presented at the Seminar at Cambridge augmented by some of the materials drawn from the Seminar “*Iqbal as a Bridge between the East and the West*, held earlier at the University of London by Iqbal Academy (UK) on 17th June 2008, in collaboration with the Iqbal Academy Pakistan.

Following is an overview of the insights that transpired from two days of intense deliberations on the theme.

- Iqbal was a man whose thought was focused on God, intensely engaged with the life of the Spirit. His entire project, in broad terms, related to the task of restoring God to the public and the private spheres, not in the way it is visualized and enacted nowadays, but in the more subtle and time-tested manner of elucidating the essential relationship between the human and the Divine; reaching for the human heart through his wisdom poetry and, through the medium of his Urdu and English prose, removing obstacles which make it difficult or impossible for the mind to understand. Intelligence has its rights, and these have not always been upheld by the representatives of religion. The mental faculties need to be appeased and re-assured. This is what Iqbal set out to do. Through his first hand encounter with the paradigm of Modernity in the West, especially at Cambridge, he had developed deep insights into the worldviews of Modernity and the overarching perspective that governed this important conceptual shift brought about in human thought.
- He had a tremendous capability of bringing different, even conflicting, perspectives into conversation.
- He was keenly aware of the ills of Modernity and, in a sense, presaged the debates that took centre stage after the advent of Postmodernism and are even ardently pursued in the present day Academy in the context of the Human Sciences as well as their relationship to Religion and Science. A large part of his poetical and prose works is focused on the deficiencies and shortcomings of the worldview of Modernity and its radical departure from the “human collectivity” with regard to

the view of Reality of which we can speak for the entire Premodern world in the singular and may claim 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.

- He was also sensitive to and clearly conscious of the limitations of the sources of wisdom at the disposal of the worldview of Modernity and its inadequacy to map certain regions of Reality, to register certain types/modes of knowledge and to successfully deal with and provide guidance for certain aspects of human life.
- Iqbal has something to offer to philosophy, he has something to offer to science and he has something to offer to religion; to repair the ills in their respective domains by tapping at the sources of wisdom offered by Tradition. That is what makes him relevant today and for the future.

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RELEVANCE OF TRADITION