IQBAL'S APPROACH TO THE QUR'AN

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The term *hierophany* was coined by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), one of the leading historians of religion in the twentieth-century, as a descriptive label for a wide variety of religious phenomena. A hierophany may be defined as the manifestation or revelation of "the Sacred" in an otherwise mundane aspect of reality– a time, a place, an object, a movement, a gesture, a person– by virtue of which that aspect of reality is experienced as *sacred* by a particular community of believers.[1] Since whatever is experienced as sacred also symbolizes what is most real, all hierophanies are characterized by extraordinary *power*. A sacred text, whether written or oral, represents a *hierophany*; as such, it is experienced as the carrier or locus of immense power.

This essay is about Iqbal's approach to the Qur'an. It began with a reference to Mircea Eliade because his notion of hierophany can give us a conceptual handle on the phenomenon called *scripture*– which is a particular kind of sacred text– of which the Holy Qur'an is a special instance. Because sacred texts represent hierophanies, they cannot be approached in the way we routinely approach mundane or profane texts. They have to be handled with care; the readers have to exercise great respect by being mindful of the extraordinary power that can flow from these texts.

To approach a sacred text is very much like walking the proverbial bridge over hell that is said to be thinner than a hair's breadth and sharper than a sword's edge. The main function of the Qur'an is to provide guidance, but a great deal depends on the reader. Approaching the Qur'an requires a delicate balancing act whose successful execution is rewarded by the paradise of guidance, but a single wrong step can plunge the reader into the depths of misguidance. Typically, two kinds of errors are most dangerous: First, the readers may arrogate to themselves a superior, but entirely fictional, vantage point from where they would judge the sacred text and find it deficient in

[1] Mircea Eliade. 1961. *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York.

multiple ways. Second, the readers may convince themselves that their particular understanding transcends any distorting interference and is therefore identical with the one "correct" meaning permitted by the sacred text itself. In both scenarios of error, the *relationship* between the readers and the sacred text would effectively come to a dead end, mainly due to the perceived absence on the part of the readers of any possibility of fresh discoveries or meaningful encounters. On the other hand, readers who avoid these errors find themselves in a situation of perpetual tension, an obvious sign that their relationship with the sacred text is alive and well.

We explore Iqbal's approach to the Qur'an in this essay because it can serve as a model for how to avoid the above errors and how to develop and maintain a living relationship with the Qur'an. It can also help us appreciate the delicate balancing act that Iqbal himself performed with respect to the Qur'an.

A perusal of Iqbal's biography makes it clear that he had virtually grown up with the Qur'an. The practice of starting children's education by teaching them how to read and recite the Qur'an has now become an endangered remnant of the Islamic past, but it was fully alive in nineteenth-century India. Iqbal began his formal education in a local mosque at the wonderful age of four years and four months by learning to recognize and repeat the words and sounds of the Holy Qur'an. In subsequent decades, the Qur'an would remain a central part of his intellectual and devotional life, shaping his thinking patterns and opening up new vistas for his philosophical and poetic explorations. Until his death in 1938, Iqbal did not abandon the daily practice of reciting the Qur'an both in and outside of the liturgical prayer, particularly in the meditative solitude of his early morning vigils. All accounts agree that the relationship between the man and the scripture became increasingly intimate and emotional in his mature years.

Iqbal's approach to the Qur'an is thoroughly experiential– firmly grounded in his life-long practice of reciting the Qur'an and pondering upon its meanings. In this living relationship, Iqbal posed questions to the Qur'an and received answers that not only challenged him but also shaped and directed the yearnings of his soul. In traditional Islamic terms, Iqbal's approach to the Qur'an was based on personal realization and insight (*tahqiq*)

as opposed to conformity to authoritative teachings or interpretations (*taqlid*). The roots of this experiential approach are to be found, most significantly, in his childhood. They seem to have originated in a shift of perspective that was suggested to him by his pious and mystically inclined father, Shaykh Nur Muhammad. The shift of perspective is apparently a simple one, but it seems to have had a profound and long-lasting influence on how Iqbal would relate to the Qur'an and how its teachings would come to shape his own thinking patterns.

Having witnessed his young son's habit of reciting the Qur'an after the pre-dawn prayer, Shaykh Nur Muhammad once said: "Son! Whenever you recite the Qur'an, do so as if it is being revealed to you. By reading the Qur'an like this, it will soon permeate your very being."[2]

This incident was verbally recounted by Iqbal only a few months before his death; the timing itself seems to indicate that he had, in fact, taken his father's advice to heart.[3] Iqbal had already expressed in an Urdu couplet this notion of reading the scripture with an attitude of maximum receptivity, with a mind that is open and willing to be shaped by whatever it happens to receive, as a necessary condition for untangling the knotty problems and questions both of scriptural interpretation and of human existence itself.[4]

ترے ضمیر پہ جب تک نہ ہو نزول کتاب
گرہ کشا ہے نہ رازی نہ صاحب کشاف

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[2] Quoted in Sayyid Nazir Niyazi, 1971. *Iqbal kay Huzur*, pp. 60 and 61. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan. Translation from the original Urdu is my own.

[3] According to above citation, Iqbal recounted this event on January 10, 1938.

[4] Muhammad Iqbal, 1990. *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Urdu), p. 402. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan.

Iqbal had quoted his father anonymously in prose as well, when he wrote that "no understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it is actually revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet."[5]

Why is personal experience such a crucial element for understanding the Holy Qur'an? Written texts, especially sacred and authoritative ones, have a tendency to appear static and fixed in a way that seems to allow only a single set of "correct" meanings. This apparent rigidity of written texts and their seemingly monolithic message stem not from the texts themselves but from the unique configuration of situations, perceptions, and needs that shape the "horizon" of particular interpretive communities. It is only when the readers pay constant attention to the flux of their own experiences in relation to their encounters with the sacred text that they come to appreciate the dynamic character not only of their experiences but also, and more importantly, of the text itself. As they learn to pay attention, moment by moment, to what the text says and how it makes them feel and react depending on their unique state in that moment, they come to see the kaleidoscopic character of their interactions with the text. The insistence on a single "correct" understanding then becomes impossible to maintain, and it is increasingly replaced by a joyful anticipation of fresh meanings as the sacred text begins to reveal some of its infinite possibilities.

To approach the Qur'an with an attitude of maximum receptivity and openness allows it to be "revealed" to the reader's heart in a way that is roughly analogous to the way it was "revealed" to the heart of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. The main effort required on the part of the reader is really a non-effort; the reader has to stop trying to force the sacred text to say what makes sense within the reader's existing "horizon" shaped by the reader's perspectives and expectations. While the latter always plays an important role in how the sacred text is received, it is of greater importance to allow the infinite "horizon" of the text to take the lead, as much as possible. The entire process succeeds or fails depending upon the readers' ability to remain "present" in the experience, attentive to all the details and nuances of their interactions with the sacred text. When they

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[5] *Reconstruction*, p. 143.

allow the Qur'an to be "revealed" to their hearts while they maintain an attitude of maximum receptivity, they minimize the interference of their potentially distorting prejudices, their ego-based desires, and their expectations of what the Qur'an "should" be saying. The readers are then ready to receive, willing to be surprised and influenced and shaped, open to a genuine encounter with a living reality that is experienced as a "thou."

Another reason why sacred texts may appear fixed and monolithic is because particular interpretive communities sometimes rely too heavily on the rational aspects of language and disregard or minimize its emotional and non-discursive aspects. When traditional Muslims maintain that the Qur'an cannot be translated, they often do so because of their deep appreciation for the non-rational qualities of the Islamic scripture– qualities that may occasionally be experienced through the sound of recitation, for example, but that cannot be satisfactorily expressed in ordinary language. What is actually experienced in body sensations is surely of a more vibrant character and has a far larger range of variation than what can be subsequently captured through the relatively rigid categories of discursive thought. Iqbal's preferred medium of communication– poetry– is obviously a better avenue for the expression of sensuous, embodied, emotional, and intuitive experiences than is ordinary language. Indeed, the apparent conflict or opposition between reason and intuition was one of Iqbal's favourite themes; in fact, he recounted the incident about his father's advice while trying to illustrate that "the Qur'an can enter consciousness through the heart as well as through the mind,"[6] that is, through both rational and non-rational channels. Several years earlier, Iqbal had suggested something similar to a friend who had experienced the presence of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, in one of his dreams. In a letter dated 1922, Iqbal wrote that one should regularly recite the Qur'an in order that one may establish a close relationship with the Prophet. He suggested that the point of such recitation was not intellectual edification but spiritual and emotional connection with the Prophet, the original recipient of the Qur'anic revelation. In Iqbal's own words, "For generating the Muhammadan relationship it is not necessarily

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[6] *Iqbal kay Huzur*, p. 57.

implied that the meaning of the Qur'an should be perfectly clear. It is sufficient to read it with pure devotion and sincerity of the heart."[7]

One may object that the above statements of Iqbal are merely theoretical observations made from an objective distance, but a closer acquaintance with his life and personality would quickly dispel that impression. It is much more likely that Iqbal's own experience of the Qur'an was in fact mediated both "through the heart" and "through the mind," and that he himself had approached the Qur'an with such a receptive attitude that can only be captured in the word "revelation."

Iqbal's experiential approach to the Islamic scripture is not unrelated to the fact that his interpretations of the Qur'an tend to be highly imaginative and original, but without being contrived. While benefitting from classical commentaries, Iqbal was comfortable enough in his deep familiarity with the Qur'an to be able to argue for fresh and traditionally unprecedented meanings; he was able to do so with a significant amount of confidence that, however, never came close to dogmatism.

Given the central place of the Qur'an in Muslim societies, there is nothing unusual in scholars or laypeople appealing to the Islamic scripture in order to support various theological, ethical, and even scientific positions; frequently, however, such appeals are based on eccentric readings of de-contextualized verses. In contrast, Iqbal's interpretations tended to be remarkably grounded in his understanding of the broader intentions behind specific Qur'anic verses. One gets the distinct impression that Iqbal was not quoting the Qur'an in order to strengthen his own position, but that his position had resulted from a personal encounter with the scripture.[8] Borrowing William

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[7] Sheikh Ataullah (Ed.), 2005. *Iqbal Nama: Majmu'ah Makatib-i Iqbal*, p. 582. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan. English translation is by Annemarie Schimmel, 1989. *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, p. 222. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan. (First published in 1963 by Brill)

[8] According to Mustansir Mir, "a reader of the *Reconstruction* cannot but be struck by the centrality of the Qur'an to Iqbal's thought. All Muslim thinkers– whether theologians, legists, philosophers, or others– appeal to the Qur'an as the ultimate sanction for their thought,

James' terminology, it seems as if Iqbal's understanding of the Qur'an was not merely "knowledge about," but that his close personal relationship with the Qur'an over several decades had generated a more direct "acquaintance knowledge" for him. This is a non-discursive awareness of the *spirit* of the Qur'an, a unified vision of the Qur'anic purpose taken as a whole, that allowed him on several occasions to assert with great confidence whether a particular notion or belief was Qur'anic or not.

To say that Iqbal's approach to the Qur'an was essentially experiential does not imply that his understanding of the Islamic scripture developed in the self-referential privacy of his own subjective universe. On the contrary, it developed in and through an ongoing conversation with some of the greatest intellects and noblest souls, both from the distant past and the contemporary present, representing a variety of religious and cultural traditions. Iqbal had a very active and vibrant inner life, but his social life was no less dynamic. Iqbal's active involvement in civic affairs, his meetings and correspondence with students, scholars and leaders, and his keen habits of voracious reading on a variety of subjects– all of these ensured that his encounters with the Qur'an were constantly nourished by a dialogic relationship with the objective world. He had a strong faith in the truth of the Qur'an, but that faith never amounted to an exclusivist claim to supersession or a rejection of everything "other." Iqbal believed the Qur'an to be "the ultimate repository of truths, including those that have already entered human consciousness and those that have yet to do so." Yet, this belief did not lead him to adopt an obstinate, I-am-right-you-are-wrong type of closed-mindedness, for he also said that "irrespective of whether these truths are expressed by [Sayyid Muhammad] Sanussi or by [Vladimir] Lenin, truths are truths" and that "the point is to understand and accept them" irrespective of how they are reached and from whose tongue they are heard. For Iqbal, all truths, regardless of their immediate origin, were Qur'anic truths.[9] For a faithful Muslim, truths

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even though they may differ in their approach to and interpretation of the Qur'an. …Unlike some of the other Muslim philosophers, who use Qur'anic verses as pegs on which to hang ideas that have little or nothing to do with the letter or spirit of the Qur'an, Iqbal draws his fundamental inspiration from the Qur'an." Mustansir Mir, 2006. *Iqbal*, pp. 112-113. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan.

[9] *Iqbal kay Huzur*, p. 58.

established by science, for example, ought to have as much value as truths expressed by the prophetic revelation. If religion is to be a call toward absolute Truth, then accepting some truths while rejecting others would be the ultimate hypocrisy.

Iqbal avoided the trap of a rigid closed-mindedness by approaching the Qur'an as a *living* scripture– one that revealed its infinite possibilities according to the capacities of the reading community and its willingness to change and grow. Nor did he sympathize with the reductionist claim that the world had progressed too far ahead for an old religious text to be of any further use. Iqbal was insistent in his judgment that the Qur'an remained unsurpassed as a source of guidance; he was convinced that the more human knowledge and understanding would advance, the more generously the Qur'an would reveal its hidden treasures, particularly to those most in tune with its spirit.

Iqbal was very conscious of the extent to which his own thought was indebted to the Qur'an. Without being condescending, he was able to express with candour that his message was nothing other than the articulation of the Qur'an.

مرده بود از آب حیوان گفتمش — سری از اسرار قرآن گفتمش
سبز کشت نابسامانم مکن — بهره گیر از ابر نیسانم مکن
گفت بر ما بندد افسون فرنگ — هست غوغایش ز قانون فرنگ
خشک گردان باده در انگور من — زهر ریز اندر مے کافور من
گر دلم آئینهٔ بی جوہر است — ور بحرفم غیر قرآن مضمر است
روز محشر خوار و رسوا کن مرا — بی نصیب از بوسهٔ پا کن مرا
پردهٔ ناموس فکرم چاک کن — این خیابان را ز خارم پاک کن
گر در اسرار قرآن سفته ام — با مسلمانان اگر حق گفته ام
تنگ کن رخت حیات اندر برم — اہل ملت را نگہدار از شرم
عرض کن پیش خدای عزوجل — عشق من گردد هم آغوش عمل

Iqbal was sure that he spoke to his Muslim audience nothing but the secrets of the Qur'an, though his critics were claiming that he was offering them the poisonous spells of Europe. In poetic imagination, Iqbal took his case to the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, pleading: If indeed the mirror of my heart is without lustre, and if indeed there is anything in my words other than the Qur'an, then, O Prophet, rend the fabric of my thoughts, sweep clean the world of my offending thorn, choke in my breast the breath of life, remove my wicked mischief from the community of your followers, do not nurture the life of my seed, do not provide me any portion from spring's fecund showers, disgrace me on the day of reckoning, and do not allow me the honour of kissing your feet. On the other hand, if I have threaded in my poems the pearls of the sweet mysteries of the Qur'an, and if what I have said to my fellow Muslims is true, then do supplicate that God may bestow on my loving passion the wealth of virtuous action.[10]

The reader has to take seriously the fact that Iqbal uttered the above words as he imagined himself in the presence of his beloved prophet. He wouldn't make such claims if he wasn't absolutely sure of the source of his teachings and message. Indeed, there are no poetic exaggerations or rhetorical trappings in these verses; Iqbal was being very literal.

Arguing against all divisive forms of ethnic or territorial nationalism, Iqbal insisted on the need to re-organize the community of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, on its original foundations, i.e., the love of a transcendent ideal. He maintained that individual Muslims will not be able to organize themselves into that ideal community without their firm adherence to the Qur'an.

هستی مسلم ز آئین است و بس　　باطن دین نبی این است و بس

رهزنان از حفظ او رهبر شدند　　از کتابی صاحب دفتر شدند

تو همی دانی که آئین تو چیست؟　　زیر گردون سر تمکین تو چیست؟

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[10] Muhammad Iqbal, 1990. *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Farsi), pp. 173-174. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan.

دشت پیمایان ز تاب یک چراغ صد تجلی از علوم اندر دماغ
آن کتاب زنده قرآن حکیم حکمت او لایزال است و قدیم
بنگر آن سرمایه ی آمال ما گنجد اندر سینه ی اطفال ما
نسخه ی اسرار تکوین حیات بی ثبات از قوتش گیرد ثبات
ای گرفتار رسوم ایمان تو شیوه های کافری زندان تو
حرف او را ریب نی تبدیل نی آیه اش شرمنده ی تأویل نی
گر تو میخواهی مسلمان زیستن نیست ممکن جز بقرآن زیستن
پخته تر سودای خام از زور او در فتد با سنگ ، جام از زور او
از تلاوت بر تو حق دارد کتاب تو ازو کامی که میخواهی بیاب

نوع انسان را پیام آخرین
حامل او رحمة للعالمین

Identifying the Qur'an as the integrating and unifying constitution of the Muslim community, Iqbal expressed his conviction that the wisdom of the Qur'an offered the secrets of fashioning life. The Qur'an, he said, was a living text whose wisdom was eternal and everlasting, whose power could help the weak and feeble to establish themselves firmly and the worthless to attain authentic worth; its words were beyond doubt and change; its verses needed no forced or convoluted interpretation; raw desire could attain maturity through its strength; it was the final divine message to humanity, and its bearer, Muhammad, a mercy to the worlds. The message of the Qur'an transformed human hearts; it had turned highwaymen into guides of humankind, and rude desert-dwellers into pioneers of new sciences; this Qur'an, the source of our hopes and aspirations, resides in our children's hearts. Addressing his Muslim audience, Iqbal minced no words in pointing out that they were enslaved in empty ritualism, imprisoned by the charms of disbelief. He told them in clear terms: Know that if you wish to live the life of a Muslim, then you have no

choice but to live in accordance with the Qur'an. It is your duty to recite the Book and find in it the purpose that you are seeking.[11]

As the above paraphrase shows, the ideal relationship that Iqbal envisioned between a Muslim and the Holy Qur'an– no doubt a reflection of his own encounters with the Islamic scripture– was a vibrant and challenging one. What lessons can we draw from these verses? The Qur'an has an extraordinary power to transform its readers and to help them realize their full potential, but the readers must take the initiative by aligning themselves as much as possible with the demands and imperatives of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is not an ancient manuscript that sits passively on the table as the reader excavates its meaning with the help of a dictionary and a magnifying glass; instead, one must establish a vital relationship with the Qur'an, a mutual connection that should be pulsating with energy and possibilities. The Qur'an shares its infinite treasures of wisdom and transformative power only to the extent that the readers are ready to rise to its challenges. Iqbal compared the Qur'an to a mirror and to a scale through which individuals could evaluate their own character and judge their own performance. [12]

ز قـــرآ ن پـــیش خـــود آئینـــه آویـــز
دگرگـــون گشـــته ئـــی از خـــویش بگریـــز
تـــــرازوئے بنـــــه کـــــردار خـــــود را
قیامتهـــــای پیشـــــین را برانگیـــــز

Iqbal was convinced that the condition of the Muslim ummah did not reflect negatively on the Qur'an. While some were quick to blame the "backwardness" of the Muslims on their adherence to the "outdated" teachings of the Qur'an, Iqbal asserted that the Qur'an had not exhausted even a tiny fraction of its limitless possibilities. For him, there still existed in

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[11] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Persian), pp. 131-135.

[12] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Persian), p. 816.

the Qur'an the possibilities for creating a hundred new worlds; to realize some of these possibilities, he said, one must learn to "burn" in its verses.[13]

صد جهان باقی است در قرآن هنوز
اندر آیاتش یکی خود را بسوز

Inspired by the transformative experience of having his own thought set ablaze by the Qur'an, Iqbal became convinced that whenever old ways stop producing desired results it becomes a religious duty to explore new ones. In times of decline and stagnation, it is no longer advisable to keep affirming the legitimacy of traditionally established authorities; when such authorities become incapable of providing new inspirations, one must turn to the wisdom of the Qur'an in order to seek fresh sources of vitality. [14]

به بند صوفی و ملا اسیری
حیات از حکمت قرآن نگیری

From his own experience, Iqbal knew that the Qur'an contained innumerable sources for the continuous renewal of life. The meanings of the Qur'an that most of the traditionally established authorities were offering, Iqbal contended, were so far removed from the Qur'anic spirit that even God and Muhammad and Gabriel would be astounded to hear them.[15]

ز من بر صوفی و ملا سلامی
که پیغام خدا گفتند ما را
ولی تأویل شان در حیرت انداخت

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[13] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Persian), p. 748.

[14] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Persian), p. 816.

[15] Ibid.

خدا و جبرئیل و مصطفی را

Unable or unwilling to let go of their inertia, these authorities would not respond to the open challenge that the Qur'an throws at them– the challenge to actively transform their souls and to radically alter their world. Instead of changing themselves and taking up the hard work of changing the world, they would rather take the easier route of changing the Qur'an; they would interpret the Qur'an in a way that justifies their own inertia while maintaining their authority.[16]

خود بدلتے نہیں، قرآں کو بدل دیتے ہیں
ہوئے کس درجہ فقیہان حرم بے توفیق

Any child of the Enlightenment would denounce the uncritical continuation of the past. When Iqbal took that stand, however, he argued from an explicitly Qur'anic perspective.[17]

طرفگی ہا در نہاد کائنات
نیست از تقلید، تقویم حیات

زندہ دل خلاق اعصار و دہور
جانش از تقلید گردد بی حضور
چون مسلمانان اگر داری جگر
در ضمیر خویش و در قرآن نگر
صد جہان تازہ در آیات اوست

[16] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Urdu), p. 534.

[17] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Persian), p. 539.

عصرہا پیچیدہ در آنات اوست
یک جہانش عصر حاضر را بس است
گیر اگر در سینہ دل معنی رس است

Muslim sages had long recognized that there was no repetition in God's self-disclosure; every moment was absolutely original because it represented an entirely fresh configuration of the infinite divine possibilities, otherwise known as the "Hidden Treasure." Iqbal too asserted that the essential nature of reality was change, and originality was at the root of all creation. From this theological insight he drew important implications for history and society. A living heart constantly brings forth new worlds, and the spirit cannot be nourished by blind imitation. If you posses the courage of a true Muslim, Iqbal said, take a closer look at your own soul and at the Qur'an, for a hundred new worlds are waiting in its verses and entire centuries are hidden in its moments. One such world will suffice for repairing all the ills of the present age; so seize that world if you possess a meaning-grasping heart!

بندۂ مومن ز آیات خداست
ہر جہان اندر بر او چون قباست
چون کہن گردد جہانے در برش
می دہد قرآن جہانی دیگرش

For Iqbal, the transformative power of the Qur'an started with the individual and his/her community but was capable of extending its influence over entire epochs. He contended that a true believer was a sign among God's countless signs. A believer wears the world as a garment; when one world grows old and shredded, the Qur'an bestows upon the believer a fresh new world to wear.

The above discussion of Iqbal's experiential approach to the Qur'an brings into focus an important element of his personality: Iqbal had a *mystical* temperament. This temperament was so pervasive in his life and thought that it must be taken seriously in any critical evaluation of his work. To say that

Iqbal was primarily a poet is as inadequate an approach to his work as to say that he was primarily a philosopher; even "poet-philosopher" will not do. Instead, students of Iqbal should recognize that Iqbal was first and foremost a mystic, because this is exactly how he had described himself in both prose and poetry.[18] If we are to take Iqbal seriously, we are required to recognize him primarily in terms which he had repeatedly employed to describe his own personality. These terms indicate that Iqbal saw himself as a mystic in the first place and only instrumentally as a poet or a philosopher. Being a mystic by temperament, Iqbal's basic vision was the result of intuitive insights rooted in personal experiences of one kind or another– including mystical experiences– and his poetry and philosophy were merely the means through which he attempted to understand, articulate, and communicate his vision both to himself and to others. If we accept that Iqbal was a mystic before he was anything else, not only the role of personal experience in Iqbal's thought will receive the attention that it deserves, but many of the shallow critiques that have judged his work at ordinary standards of philosophy or poetry will become redundant as well.

To say that Iqbal was essentially a mystic is not intended to introduce any supernatural or mysterious element in the discussion. Notwithstanding the many stereotypes attached to this word, it is being used here strictly in accordance with Iqbal's own usage. It is important to note that Iqbal had insisted on the *continuity* of mystic consciousness with ordinary rational consciousness; for him, the only difference between the two was the minimal role of rational analysis in the mystic state which leads to the quality of "wholeness" in such experience as opposed to the more commonly encountered "piecemeal" quality in ordinary experience.[19] In accordance with Iqbal's usage of this word, to be in a mystic state simply means to experience the underlying *unity* of reality in some sense, the latter being an inherent quality of objective reality and not merely an impression created by the

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[18] Muhammad Rafiuddin, "Iqbal's Idea of the Self" in M. Saeed Sheikh (ed.) 1972. *Studies in Iqbal's Thought and Art*, p. 76. Lahore: Bazm-i-Iqbal. (First published in the January 1963 issue of the quarterly *Iqbal*)

[19] *Reconstruction*, pp. 14-15.

mystic's transient subjective state. For Iqbal, the reality which is encountered as pieces and fragments in ordinary experience is the same reality which is encountered as unified and whole in mystic experience. As such, experiencing an altered or unusual state of mind is not a necessary condition for the actualization of mystic consciousness; the ability to perceive wholeness and unity does not require a cessation of thought, for such ability is already immanent in thought. To identify someone as a mystic simply indicates that the person is prone to use this natural ability more frequently and/or more profoundly than the vast majority of his or her peers. In fact, all creative acts depend on the ability to acquire a sense of the unified wholeness of things, and this is as true of great philosophers and scientists as it is true of religious and artistic geniuses.

To have a mystical temperament indicates that one's primary and preferred method of achieving certainty is personal experience, as opposed to philosophical reasoning or acceptance of authoritative pronouncements. Iqbal's mystical orientation can be clearly observed in how he addressed philosophical issues surrounding the nature of the Qur'anic revelation, as discussed in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Iqbal accepted the Qur'an as divine speech that had appeared in history as the product of the religious experiences of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, lasting for some twenty-three years in the early seventh century. But what exactly was revealed to the Arabian prophet? Regarding the "old theological controversy about verbal revelation" in classical Islam, Iqbal contended that "idea and word both simultaneously emerge out of the womb of feeling," and that it was only "logical understanding" that treated them as "mutually isolated" and hence created the riddle in the first place. He suggested, in other words, that instead of applying logical understanding to the question of verbal revelation, we should use another procedure or approach that would avoid such a dichotomy. Arguing for the epistemological value of "intuition," Iqbal sought to bridge another dichotomy, this one separating intuition from thought/intellect. Iqbal contended that intuition was nothing other than thought "in its deeper movement"[20] or, quoting Henri Bergson, "only a higher form of intellect."[21]

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[20] *Reconstruction*, p. 5.

Twenty years earlier, Iqbal had already noted in his doctoral dissertation that, in the Sufi perspective, the transformation of feeling was more fundamental than the transformation of the will or of understanding, for "will and understanding are only specialized forms" of feeling.[22] What we call "understanding" and "willing," in other words, are to be treated as modalities of what must be a more basic level of experience, i.e., "feeling." We recognize particular ideas only because of the distinctive feelings with which they have become associated in our experiences.

For Iqbal, then, feeling and idea are two "aspects of the same unit of inner experience."[23] All knowledge and understanding, in other words, is ultimately grounded in experience, an insight that makes the feeling/idea distinction appear artificial. In an informal discussion with a European sceptic, Iqbal is reported to have said that his own acceptance of the verbal revelation of the Qur'an was a matter of personal experience rather than religious dogma, adding that he himself "has composed his poems under the spells of poetic inspiration" and that "surely, Prophetic revelations are far more exalted."[24]

In comparing his own experience of poetic inspiration with Prophet Muhammad's experience of receiving divine revelation, Iqbal was positing both similarity and difference. The two experiences are similar enough for one to be the basis for accepting the possibility and reality of the other; at the same time, the experience of poetic inspiration is obviously at a much lower rung of the hierarchical ladder whose absolute zenith is represented by true prophetic revelation. Still, it would not be wrong to say that the two kinds of

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[21] *Reconstruction*, p. 2.

[22] Muhammad Iqbal, 2004. *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, p. 95. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. (First published by Luzac & Co., London, in 1908)

[23] *Reconstruction*, p. 17.

[24] Quoted by M. Saeed Sheikh, *Reconstruction*, p. 161.

experiences– one of them fairly common while the other exceedingly rare– occupy the same continuum of knowledge-yielding inner experiences.

It is reasonable to speculate that many of Iqbal's own ideas had originated as feelings that emerged from the rich and restless matrix of his inner life. To say that Iqbal was essentially a mystic is to emphasize this feature of his temperament, nothing more.

Yet, Iqbal was no ordinary mystic, for he was also concerned with the objective verification of the data of personal mystical experience. Even if one feels maximum certainty regarding the knowledge one has gained through such an experience, that knowledge ought to be approached with a healthy attitude of scepticism. If "the elimination of the satanic from the Divine" is a religious imperative, then the exercise of scientific suspicion is an unavoidable religious need.[25] A mystical experience may provide a reliable foundation for action to the mystic in question, but it does no such service to anyone else due to the innumerable possibilities of misrecognition and illusion that are inherent in such experiences as well as in their interpretations. A privately apprehended truth is no truth at all, unless it is shared within a broader community, subjected to critical examination on the basis of agreed-upon criteria, and is either publically verified or at least fails repeated attempts at falsification. For Iqbal, there were two agreed-upon criteria for such critical examination, which he called "the intellectual test and the pragmatic test." Just as no claim of a scientific nature is accepted by the scientific community without proper testing, the religious community must also be critically inclined in the same way with respect to claims of a religious nature. In fact, because religious truths– unlike scientific truths– have direct and immediate implications for human action, the religious community ought to be even more rigorous and vigilant in its critical examination than the scientific community.

For Iqbal, the Qur'an was a product of a special type of inner experience, the nature of which may be distinguished from that of unitary experience as such, not so much in terms of phenomenology but, rather, in terms of

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[25] *Reconstruction*, p. 19.

historical consequences.[26] By definition, the prophetic experiences of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, are inaccessible to us, just as they were inaccessible to the men and women of his own time and place. Yet, these experiences were not mere subjective states. For Iqbal, every feeling is characterized by a "cognitive element" that tends to express itself in "the form of idea."[27] Such self-expression is not a phenomenon that can be deliberately imposed upon a feeling, as it were, from the outside; on the contrary, it is in the very nature of a feeling that it "seeks to fulfil its destiny in idea."[28] The cognitive element of a prophetic experience, by definition, must manifest itself in this way; the idea associated with the feeling "fulfils its destiny" by developing "out of itself its own visible garment," i.e., a specific verbal form most suitable for its self-expression. Insofar as feeling is inseparable from idea, and idea emerges from feeling already dressed in a particular verbal garment, Iqbal was able to say that "in a sense the word is also revealed."[29]

In the case of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, the totality of feelings-ideas-words that emerged from his religious experiences over a period of twenty-three years are now available to us in the form of the Qur'anic text. From both a religious and a scientific viewpoint, the critical question is this: How do we know that the Qur'an really is what it claims to be? As a matter of principle and methodology, Iqbal insisted that no religious experience could be taken as self-evident or self-authenticating, just as no sense experience would yield truth without proper interpretation and verification. "The facts of religious experience," according to Iqbal," are facts among other facts of human experience and, in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation, one fact is as good as another."[30] By agreeing to treat the data of

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[26] *Reconstruction*, p. 100.

[27] *Reconstruction*, p. 17.

[28] *Reconstruction*, p. 18.

[29] *Reconstruction*, p. 18.

[30] *Reconstruction*, p. 13.

the prophetic experience of revelation on the same level as that of the everyday sensory experience, Iqbal made a bold but powerful move; in effect, he exposed the Qur'an to the criticism of the scientific method.

To say that in terms of their knowledge-yielding potential one fact is as good as another is to treat prophetic revelation as any other natural phenomenon. For Iqbal, this was more than a matter of principle or methodology only; he had seen that the sharp distinction that theology posited between the natural and the supernatural domains of reality was of very limited value. According to Iqbal, the distinction between these two domains of reality was not so much ontological as it was pragmatic; it emerged gradually over the course of human evolution because it offered a survival advantage. "To the primitive man," Iqbal wrote, "all experience was supernatural." The pragmatic need to interpret one's experience in other ways resulted from the pressure of the "immediate necessities of life," and it was this process of interpretation that led to the gradual emergence in human consciousness of what is now called "nature."[31] As a pragmatic tool that helps in the organization of life, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural was never without value. In fact, the human faculty of "logical understanding," a product of our ordinary rational consciousness, inevitably produces this view. As an indication of the emergence of logical or rational consciousness, the human "discovery" of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural has been rightly seen as one of the decisive events leading to the birth of civilization.[32]

Relying solely upon ordinary rational consciousness, then, the appearance of prophetic revelation in history tends to be taken as a supernatural

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[31] *Reconstruction*, p. 13.

[32] Eric Voegelin contends that the "cosmological worldview" is a primordial and trans-cultural phenomenon found in the early stages of all civilizations. Living within this worldview, human beings experience themselves as participating in a single reality that is inside them as well as embraces them from the outside. In this outlook, everything is quasi-magical; what is today thought of as natural forces appear to have will and feelings. Eric Voegelin, 1956. *Order and History: Israel and Revelation*, pp. 3-5, and *passim*. Colombia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

intervention into the usual workings of the natural world; it is seen as an alien phenomenon that may evoke amazement but must remain incomprehensible in principle. But what if there are genuine modes of consciousness besides the one that creates our logical understanding? Having affirmed the reality of mystic consciousness and its insight into the organic wholeness of reality, Iqbal argued that there was another, more productive, way of looking at prophetic revelation. A perspective informed by mystic consciousness acknowledges the essential *continuity* between the natural and the supernatural realms; furthermore, it shows us that there is only one reality. It also recognizes a similar continuity between inner or mystical experience and outer or sensory experience, in addition to maintaining that it is the same reality that is manifested in both kinds of experiences. Once the gulf between the natural and the supernatural has been so bridged, the claim that prophetic revelation is either self-authenticating or that it requires a method of evaluation unique to itself becomes untenable. Similarly, the claim that the supernatural domain of reality is completely inaccessible to the vast majority of human beings also becomes indefensible. At this point, Iqbal posited that the scientific method was as relevant to the evaluation of the data of inner experience as it was to the data of outer experience. In other words, "the intellectual test and the pragmatic test" were the only tools we could legitimately use for the critical evaluation of the knowledge-yielding potential of empirical data– irrespective of whether that data originated in sensory or mystical experiences, and whether they pertained to natural or supernatural domains of reality.[33]

For Iqbal, prophetic revelation was a "natural" phenomenon, not only because it had to have happened within the confines of time and space and because it had to have involved embodied individuals who were embedded within their specific socio-cultural contexts; but also– and much more importantly– because revelation spoke not so much from the above and beyond as "from the inmost depths of life."[34] Insofar as the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural has been transcended, to say that

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[33] *Reconstruction*, p. 21.

[34] *Reconstruction*, p. 142.

such revelation is a part of nature is to view it as a vital and inherent constituent of reality– as opposed to something alien that is imposed upon our reality from the outside and possibly in opposition to its inherent tendencies. The ontological status of prophetic revelation is not enhanced by viewing it as a supernatural intervention from the outside; since the Qur'anic revelation is an act of divine guidance, it is best viewed as a natural expression of the inherent disposition of reality.

Iqbal pointed out that the Qur'an used the word revelation (or inspiration) with a variety of connotations, but that its essence was *divine guidance*. As a rule, guidance is needed by all creatures at every step of their existential journeys, from inanimate matter to plant to animal to human.[35] According to the Qur'an, each and every creature, no matter how small or big, does receive the precise guidance that it requires at every step of the way; the guidance is fine-tuned to each creature's particular needs, but it is also in accordance with God's overall cosmic plans. Since "The Guide" is one of the "most beautiful" divine names, to say that God provides guidance to all creatures is another way of saying that guidance is inscribed in the very fabric of reality.

Based on his reading of the Qur'an, Iqbal saw guidance as both natural and comprehensive. He viewed the phenomenon of divine guidance as a *continuum* in which the same essential reality would manifest in different levels and forms. Guidance, then, would include the physical and chemical properties of inanimate matter; the instinctive behaviour of living organisms, as encoded in their respective genomes; as well as the knowledge acquiring faculties that are more or less unique to humans, such as advanced symbolic language and the related capacity for abstract reasoning. Prophetic revelation, then, would be a relatively rare manifestation of an otherwise universal and ubiquitous phenomenon, and not a supernatural intrusion into our world that would have to be accepted on blind faith. This is another way of saying that for Iqbal, prophetic revelation was as much a result of the inherent disposition of nature/reality as the low reactivity of the noble gases, the tendency of water to flow downhill, the urge of an oak tree to produce

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[35] *Reconstruction*, p. 100.

acorns, or the desire of a bee to manufacture honey. In a short poem entitled "Revelation," Iqbal suggested the same notion as follows: [36]

عقل بے مایہ امامت کی سزاوار نہیں
راہبر ہو ظن و تخمیں تو زبوں کار حیات
فکر بے نور ترا، جذب عمل بے بنیاد
سخت مشکل ہے کہ روشن ہو شب تار حیات
خوب و ناخوب عمل کی ہو گرہ وا کیونکر
گر حیات آپ نہ ہو شارح اسرار حیات

For Iqbal, rationality alone was unworthy of leading humans for it could not solve the complex problems of life. How, he asked, could human beings ever hope to resolve the problem of distinguishing between good and evil, between right and wrong? The speculation and guesswork involved in the exercise of reason meant that rationality, on its own, could not illuminate the dark night of humanity or provide a solid and reliable foundation for behaviour. Yet, Iqbal contended that the inadequacy of human reason was no cause for despair, for it was in the nature of life itself that it would not leave its mysteries unexplained. It is the title of the poem that clarifies Iqbal's intent. The phenomenon of prophetic revelation is a manifestation of the inherent disposition of life– a synonym for nature/reality– to overcome any and all obstacles that it may encounter in its path.

Unlike theories of religious experience that draw their inspiration from Marx, Durkheim, or Freud, there is no reductionism involved in Iqbal's view of prophetic revelation. In his approach, the data of religious experience is given full respect as knowledge-yielding facts that ought to be taken seriously because they emerge from the very heart of reality– exactly at par with the facts encountered in any other domain of human experience. To treat these

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[36] *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Urdu), p. 551.

experiences as "natural" is not to reduce their significance or truth-value in any way; it is to give them their rightful place as epistemologically valid sources. To say that the data of religious experience must be critically examined is not to reject them as false; it is to approach them in the only possible way that holds the promise of transforming privately apprehended truths into publicly recognizable ones.

If Iqbal's preference for inner experience makes him a mystic, it can be argued that his insistence on critical examination makes him a scientist as well. How would such a person approach a sacred text like the Qur'an? The above discussion partially addresses this question, though a complete picture of Iqbal's delicate balancing act must await further inquiry.