IQBAL AND ECUMENISM: THE INESCAPABILITY OF LOVE

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Issues concerning interfaith dialogue have become, in our times, both politically charged and global in scope. This intensifies the spiritual sensitivity which has always characterised interfaith relations. What, if anything, can we learn from the poet-philosopher of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, Muhammad Iqbal, as regards these issues of burning contemporary relevance? Although there is no particular essay or poem or treatise in the works of Iqbal addressed specifically to the theme of interfaith dialogue, ecumenism or the religious Other, it is nonetheless possible to discern in Iqbal's scattered writings certain trajectories which, if followed, can be of considerable value to those engaged in interfaith dialogue. One of these trajectories, which we might call that of "communal realism", or "exoteric solidarity", can assist proponents of dialogue who are struggling to reconcile a spiritual vision with a concrete exigency: a vision of the unity of religions on the level of ultimate principles with the practical requirements of dialogue in the actual world of competing and often conflicting religious communities.

The second principal trajectory which Iqbal's corpus opens us to is that deriving from a metaphysical or ontological conception of love. Released from its entanglement with emotion and the self, from race, nation and even religion, the principle of love in Iqbal's vision generates a disinterested attitude embracing all– Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and non-believers alike. The criterion for evaluating an individual is shorn of all superficial features of outward labels, affiliations, and is instead rigorously centred on the very being of that individual, and one *is*, according to Iqbal, in the measure that one loves that which is. Since the ultimate reality of God is beauty, the whole of creation which streams forth from the beautiful Creator is beautiful, hence lovable: "He who made beautiful everything which He created" (Qur'an 32:7). Man, being the most perfect of all creatures, becomes lovable by virtue of his *fitra*, his original nature, which bears the traces of the supreme archetype of his own beauty, that of *al-Fātir*, the

Creator/Originator. The spirit of Iqbal's ecumenism thus comes to embrace all human beings in a form of Islamic "humanism" which, in contrast to its western caricature,[37] sees through each and every human being to the divinity in whose image that being was created. This is a spiritual humanism which loves the human in function of one's love of God, and in proportion to one's attunement to that love.

To begin with, we should define our terms, and distinguish between the two senses of the word "ecumenism": the first relates to a spirit of universality or unity within one's religion; the second, to a spirit of universality or unity that brings together all religions. Iqbal has something important to say regarding both types of ecumenism; and one can argue that his success in upholding a spirit of ecumenism in relation to the non-Muslim 'Other' derives in large part from his keen awareness of the need to be as ecumenical or inclusive as possible in relation to his own fellow Muslims. In other words, to be truly "inclusive" means to include not just the Other in your vision of unity, but also those within your own community who uphold exclusivist attitudes– that is, the overwhelming majority of believers. To exclude exclusivists is to fall into exclusivism oneself.[38]

This is closely connected to one of the most evident causes of the limited success of interfaith dialogue in our times: those who most need to be engaged in dialogue– conservative upholders of the normative Tradition– are

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[37] George Makdisi argues forcefully that the rise of humanism in the West was in large part forged under the influence of Islamic conceptions of the human being. In support of this argument he cites such founding humanist texts as*The Dignity of Man* by Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), a document regarded as the very epitome of the Renaissance outlook: 'I have read, revered fathers, in the works of the Arabs, that when Abdala the Saracen was asked what he regarded as most to be wondered at one the world's stage… he answered that there is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man.' Makdisi asserts that the reference must be to 'Abd Allāh Qutayba (d.889) from whose book, *Khalq al-Insān* (The Creation of Man) the quotation in question comes; this book was widely published in both East and West. See Makdisi,*The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh University Press: 1990), p.301 ff.

[38] See our *The Other in the Light of the One– The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge, ITS: 2006), for extensive discussion of this principle.

precisely those who are excluded from the conference halls and debating chambers of dialogue; while those who really do not need to engage in dialogue– the liberal minority– are the ones who fill those halls and chambers. There is, thus, plenty of dialogue taking place, but it largely takes the form of preaching to the converted. Majoritarian attitudes are left to become increasingly rigid and mutually exclusive, while the liberals– and perhaps the mystics– of the different religious traditions come ever closer together in harmonious agreement. Bridges are indeed being built, but between individuals of different faiths whose impact upon their respective faith-communities is limited, largely because they are not seen as fully representative of their communities, at best, and as having betrayed their communities, at worst.

Iqbal cannot be categorised either as a conservative or as a liberal; this is because he can be described as both. Herein lies one of the potentially fruitful paradoxes of his work: he opens up ossified conservative thought by expounding liberal ideas, and opposes the corrosive effects of extreme liberalism– *qua* ideology– by administering a dose of what he calls in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, "healthy conservative criticism". On the one hand:

> We heartily welcome the liberal movement in modern Islam; but it must also be admitted that the appearance of liberal ideas in Islam constitutes also the most critical moment in the history of Islam. Liberalism has the tendency to act as a force of disintegration, and the race-idea which appears to be working in modern Islam with greater force than ever, may ultimately wipe off the broad human outlook which Muslim people have imbibed from their religion. Further, our religious and political reformers in their zeal for liberalism may overstep the proper limits of reform in the absence of a check on their youthful fervour. [39]

On the other:

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[39] *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1981), p. 162.

If we cannot make any original contribution to the general thought of Islam, we may, by healthy conservative criticism, serve at least as a check on the rapid movement of liberalism in the world of Islam."[40]

He wants the Muslim world to wake up from its slumber and embrace the present, but the embrace must be inspired by love of the Islamic tradition; the mutable world of forms must be fashioned by the immutable sources of the faith: the Qur'ān and the Sunna. Here also, he defies categorisation: he cannot easily be slotted into the terms of the "modernist/traditionalist" dichotomy, for his aim was clearly to act as a check on unbridled modernist imitation of the West, and as a catalyst for the revival of traditional thought in Islam. It is for this reason that one finds him criticised by reformers for being too traditional and by traditionalists for being too modern. For example one historian of modern India, Ikram, writes that Iqbal began by being a true "reformer" supporting all needed innovations and changes to Islamic institutions, but ends up disappointed at Iqbal's "energetic advocacy of unreformed orthodoxy".[41]

What Ikram refers to as "unreformed orthodoxy" is the quintessential– and thus immutable, hence, by definition, "unreformable"– sources of the

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[40] Ibid, p. 153.

[41] Ikram, *Modern Muslim India*, p. 182. Iqbal might be viewed as a quasi-traditional, quasi-modern thinker, whose very ambiguity contributed to the effectiveness of his effort to act as a check on excessive modernisation and westernisation in the name of a revival of the spirit of Islam. In a world strained by the tension between modernising trends undermining the Islamic ethos, and defensive traditionalist reflexes betraying that ethos, his work had to partake of both domains of thought, modern and traditional, if it was to have any real impact on a community which was being pulled in both directions at once. What Frithjof Schuon says in regard to Vivekananda and modern Hinduism can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to Iqbal and modern Islam: 'In "modernizing" Hinduism, Vivekananda did at the same time "Hinduize" modernism, if one may so put it, and by that means some of its destructive impetus was neutralized... No doubt some will object that any modernization, whether "Hinduizing" or not, will by its very nature always end in a loss of spiritual values. This is true, but an influence which for any reason retards this process has nonetheless its usefulness. It is clearly impossible to liken a Vivekananda and a Gandhi to the creator of the "New Turkey" or any other protagonists of extreme modernism'. F. Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Madras: Ganesh, 1959), p.43.

Islamic revelation, the Qur'ān and the Sunna. It is undeniable that Iqbal's attachment to these two spiritual realities is deep and his advocacy of them is "energetic"; indeed, the beauty and profundity with which he poetically manifests his love of the Qur'ān and the Prophet constitute one of the hallmarks of his life's work. One should add that it was precisely this evident love of these quintessential sources of Islam which galvanized and continues to galvanize Muslims of the subcontinent wishing to remain faithful to Islam in the face of the unavoidable challenges of modernity. If Iqbal deemed modernisation to be inexorable, he nonetheless insisted that the spiritual fundamentals of the Islamic tradition were indispensable. For many modernising Muslims this synthesis was effective: he made a significant contribution to the process by which a measure of traditional piety was maintained by Muslim elites, a piety which often attenuated or calibrated their modernistic tendencies.

It is also Iqbal's fidelity to these two dimensions of the Islamic revelation which defines his basic attitude both to the religious Other, and to the religious Self – or to its communitarian expression, the Umma. For within the Qur'ān and Sunna, one can discern two distinct but related elements: an eloquent articulation of the *universal* spirit of ecumenism, on the one hand; and a hard-headed reminder of the indispensability of the *particular* spirit needed to fashion a specific community, on the other. There are the prerogatives of mystical, inward or esoteric truths, accessible to a minority, on the one hand; and the rights of theological, formal or exoteric principles, essential for the community as a whole, on the other.

In addressing each level, the universal and the particular, in the light of the other, Iqbal manages to overcome one of the main obstacles confronting dialogue: reaching out to the Other without alienating the Self. It is relatively easy to argue in favour of a common core of characteristics uniting all religions; one might also benefit from a spiritual vision of the inner unity of all religions. But then, one has to face a more subtle and challenging task: that of acquitting oneself of the charge of having sacrificed the specific, irreducible, unique aspects of one's own religion at the altar of the putative spiritual quintessence of all religions. This is the charge effectively levelled at those who follow the school of thought associated with John Hick, the influential proponent of one form of 'religious pluralism'. Hick, quite

admirably, would like to see all believers coming together in mutual tolerance and harmony, but this harmony comes with a high price: a discarding of the most distinctive aspects of one's beliefs, if these beliefs imply that one's religion is unique, thus normative and binding on all. For Christians, the idea of Christ being God incarnate must be shed, for example; because: 'If Jesus was God incarnate, the Christian religion is unique in having been founded by God in person.'[42] Among Muslim pluralists, Hasan Askari, discloses the logical consequence of conforming to this model of pluralism. He argues that 'Islam', understood as the principle of 'primordial and universal submission' *abolishes* 'the particular and the historical Islam'.[43] It is against just this kind of degradation of the particular for the sake of the universal that Iqbal fought an, as it were, preventative war: he would insist on upholding and respecting– not abolishing– the particular and historical realities of the Islamic tradition, even while affirming and celebrating the universal principle of 'Islam' which encompasses all religions in its loving embrace.

Askari and other Muslim pluralists would be accused of having gone so far in their acceptance of the Other that they have undermined their own credibility as representatives of Islam– they represent only themselves, not any normative Islamic tradition, so it would be argued. The conservative upholders of the Islamic faith would insist on fidelity to the community of Muslims based on this faith articulated within a clearly defined identity. In this connection, what Iqbal says about 'communalism' acquires particular relevance to the question of ecumenism.

In his famous Allahabad address of 1930 Iqbal refers to two types of communalism, the lower and the higher. The lower is defined in negative

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[42] See John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate– Christology in a Pluralistic World* (London: SCM Press, 1993, p.287). See our *The Other in the Light of the One*, section entitled 'Nasr's Universalism vs Hick's Pluralism'. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, following Frithjof Scuon et al, insists on the uniqueness of each religion, even while upholding the 'transcendent unity' of all religions: there is unity as regards the transcendent essence, but not uniformity as regards the non-transcendent forms: each is distinctive and unique.

[43] Hasan Askari, 'Within and Beyond the Experience of Religious Diversity', in *The Experience of Religious Diversity,* eds. J. Hick, H. Askari (Aldershot: Gower Press, 1985), p. 199.

terms, it is "inspired by a feeling of ill-will towards other communities"; such an attitude he says is "low and ignoble". In contrast to this kind of communalism, he asserts: "I entertain the highest respect for the customs, laws, religious and social institutions of other communities. Nay, it is my duty, according to the teachings of the Qur'ān, even to defend their places of worship if need be." Although he does not refer to the verse directly, he seems to be clearly alluding here to those verses which are considered by several commentators of the Qur'ān to have been the first to be revealed in relation to the permissibility of warfare, verses of the Sūrat al-Hajj (22: 38-39). In these verses, it is stated that if God had not repelled some people by means of others, then: "cloisters, churches, synagogues and mosques– places where God's Name is much invoked– would have been destroyed."

Iqbal is thus clearly invoking the spirit of truth common to all the revealed religions as a means of expressing the negation of ignoble communalism, and affirming by contrast a noble communalism, a spirit of solidarity that unites all believers. However, this higher, universal type of communalism has a God-given right to its specific, or exclusive character: "The principle that each group is entitled to free development on its own lines is not inspired by any feeling of narrow communalism. Yet I love the communal group which is the source of my life and behaviour, and which has formed me into what I am by giving me its religion, its literature, its thought, its culture, and thereby recreating its whole past as a living operative factor in my present consciousness."[44]

If defending the places of worship, and thus respecting the religions of the Other derives clearly from a Qur'ānic proof-text, so too does its apparent opposite: love for and devotion to a specific, thus exclusive, revealed tradition. This derives from, among many other verses that could be cited in this regard, the verse of the Sūrat al-Mā'ida (5:48), part of which reads as follows: "For each of you We have established a Law and a Path; and had God willed, He could have made you one community, but He willed it thus, in order to test you by means of that which He gave you. So compete with

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[44] Latif Ahmad Sherwani, (Ed.) *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, rept. 2009), p. 3.

one another in goodness, unto God is your return, and He will tell you about those things over which you differed."

Each Law and Path is unique and irreducible; both the diversity of paths and the irreducibility of each is affirmed here. Those who would dilute the specificity of revealed forms violate the divine intention which informs the particularity of each revealed form. Yes, the source of religious diversity and the summit of the diverse paths is One, but the paths must remain distinct, and to say distinct is to say exclusive. It is this combination between essential universality and formal exclusivity which characterises Iqbal's writings in relation to the religious Other, and which accounts for the fact that such widely divergent accounts are given of his position on this theme in secondary sources.

For example, on the one hand we have this criticism by Dickinson: "While Mr Iqbal's philosophy is universal, his application of it is particular and exclusive. Only Muslims are worthy of the Kingdom. The rest of the world is either to be absorbed or excluded."[45]

The opposite opinion is given by Haywood: "The last way to think of Iqbal is as a Pakistani poet. Rather does he speak for Islam universally and for the common ground between Islam and the other major world religions."[46] He further argues: "… a large proportion of the verses in his work is truly gnomic poetry– *hikmah*, wisdom in the highest sense of the word. Moreover, they are not wisdom only to Muslims or to Orientals, but to men of every creed and race. This is one of Iqbal's great achievements, that he bridged the common ground in the great religious and philosophical systems of the world."

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[45] Cited by Rajmohan Gandhi, *Eight Lives*, p.64, citing Riffat Hassan in Malik, ed, *Iqbal*, p.150.

[46] John Haywood, 'The Wisdom of Muhammad Iqbal—Some Considerations of Form and Content' in *The Sword and the Sceptre* ed. Riffat Hassan (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1977), p.162. Cited by Muhammad Suheyl Umar, *That I may See and Tell": The Significance of Iqbal's Wisdom Poetry (*Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2002), p.11.

Both opinions can be buttressed with supportive evidence. We shall look at some of the universal aspects of Iqbal's wisdom shortly, but first, turning to Dickinson's criticism, it is not difficult to see how he arrived at his conclusion; for Iqbal's works, in particular his poems, are sprinkled with a kind of Muslim triumphalism, the heroic feats of the Muslims often being extolled at the expense of Hindus, Christians and idolaters. Iqbal's reply to Dickinson, however, should be carefully noted: "The humanitarian ideal is always universal in poetry and philosophy, but if you work it out in actual life, you must start with a society exclusive in the sense of having a creed and well-defined outline, but ever enlarging its limits by example and persuasion. Such a society in my belief is Islam."[47]

Now Dickinson might well retort that Iqbal's admission that he wishes Islam to ever enlarge its limits proves the point that he, Dickinson, is making. It is Islam that must prevail ultimately, even if the means engaged be peaceful persuasion. In Iqbal's defence, one might put forward the following argument: it is only on the basis of manifesting solidarity with this basic premise of the conservative bedrock of the Islamic faith that one can seriously pose as a representative of that faith in dialogue with the Other; it is only by upholding the belief, so central to the majoritarian, conservative community, that one must propagate Islam, bearing witness to it to all peoples, that one can meaningfully open up that conservative community to such values as respect and tolerance for the religious Other, appreciation of the truth, the wisdom, and the holiness residing in the religions of the Other. Someone who does not believe that his faith is worth sharing with others is someone who cannot be taken seriously as a representative of that faith. One has to start from within a faith, Iqbal seems to be saying, and then to open up the universal dimensions latent therein; following those universal trajectories, one comes to embrace all human beings by means of the unconditional love which flows throughout the veins of the universe, for love is what sustains the universe, according to the poetic vision of Islam enjoyed by Iqbal. This love is not just real, it is also realizable: it is not just one with the nature of ultimate reality, it is also rendered accessible and assimilable by the very faith of Islam, practised in depth, and taken utterly seriously in all its particularities, in all its irreducible uniqueness.

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[47] R. Gandhi, op. cit., p.65. citing Riffat Hassan, in Malik, ed., Iqbal, p.150.

This would appear to be the inner spiritual message of Iqbal's claim that to "work it out in actual life, you must start with a society exclusive in the sense of having a creed and well-defined outline, but ever enlarging its limits by example and persuasion."

The extent to which Iqbal was sensitive to this duty of performing *da'wa* for Islam is clear in many places in his poetry. For example, in his *Rumūz-i Bīkhudī* (The Mysteries of Selflessness):

I tremble for thy shame, when on the Day

Of Reckoning that Glory of all time

Shall question thee: "Thou tookest from my lips

The word of Truth, and wherefore hast thou failed

To pass my message on to other men?"[48]

And again:

Allahu Akbar! This the secret holds

Of thy existence; wherefore let it be

Thy purpose to preserve and propagate

No other God. If thou a Muslim art,

Till all the world proclaims the Name of God

Thou canst not rest one moment.

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[48] *The Mysteries of Selflessness (Rumūz-i Bīkhudī*), tr. A.J. Arberry (London: John Murray, 1953), p.56.

Knowest thou not

The verse in Holy Scripture, calling thee

To be a people just, God's witnesses?[49]

Iqbal is thus manifesting solidarity with the basic belief that one must bear witness to Islam as the normative tradition. Without manifesting this solidarity, there is the danger that one will be excluded by the exclusivists; if one does not manifest a degree of exclusivism, one's open-ended inclusivism would itself be excluded by those who most need to be won over to the cause of inclusivism. Iqbal reveals his sensitivity to this aspect of his "dialogical" situation. For example, in a letter written on April 12th, 1925, he said:

> I had written an English essay on Ijtihad, which was read in a meeting here… but some people called me a Kafir… In these days in India, one must move with very great circumspection.[50]

As regards the relationship between Iqbal's awareness of the sensitivities of the community, on the one hand, and his expression of ecumenical attitudes on the other, we have this telling statement. Note carefully what he says here about tolerance of the Other in relation to what he calls "dogma", that is, the formal theological tenets upheld by the majority of his fellow-Muslims:

> The attitude of toleration… without belief in dogma is probably the most incomprehensible thing to the vulgar mind. If such is your attitude, keep quiet and never try to defend your position.[51]

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[49] Ibid., p.54. The words in italics are from the Qur'an, 4: 135.

[50] Gandhi, p.68, Ikram, *Modern Muslim India,* p.183, letter of April 12, 1925 to Akbar Najibabadi.

In other words, act on this principle in your private life, by all means, but do not formally propose and espouse tolerance in the public domain of religio-political dialogue unless you undergird it strongly with Islamic dogma. This is clearly what Iqbal did, as he says, regarding his own private life. He wrote the following in a letter on 28 March, 1909:

> I have myself been of the view that religious differences should disappear from this country, and even now act on this principle in my private life. But now I think that the preservation of their separate national entities is desirable for both the Hindus and the Muslims. The vision of a common nationhood for India is a beautiful ideal and has a poetic appeal… but appears incapable of fulfilment.[52]

It may well be that one of the reasons why Iqbal ceased to believe in the practicability of his "vision of a common nationhood for India" was his grim evaluation of what he calls "the modern Hindu":

> It seems that the ideal of political freedom which is an absolutely new experience to him has seized his entire soul ... He will be transformed into an absolutely new people–new in the sense that he will no longer find himself dominated by the ethical ideals of his ancestors whose sublime fancies have been a source of perpetual consolation to many a distressed mind.[53]

This change in the mentality governing Hindus, Iqbal would argue, constitutes a shift from the higher to the lower form of communalism, one in which the noble "ethical ideals" of the tradition are submerged by fanaticism, in the strict sense of the term. Adherence to the ethical ideals of one's tradition is a source of tolerance, according to Iqbal, but then comes a

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[51] *Stray Reflections– The Private Notebook of Muhammad Iqbal*, eds. Javid Iqbal and Khurram Shafique (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2006), p.117, no.99 'Conformity Without Dogma'.

[52] Gandhi, p.54, Citing Iqbal, in Ikram, *Modern Muslim India*, p.170. Letter of March 28, 1909

[53] *Stray Reflections* op. cit., p.39, no.23 'The Modern Hindu'.

somewhat paradoxical nuance: these ideals do need to be conditioned by a form of communalism– the positive or noble aspect of communalism, which he refers to in terms of '*asabiyya*. This principle is of particular sociological significance and is given its deepest application by the great Muslim historian and philosopher, Ibn Khaldūn. This key term in his corpus ought to be translated "solidarity" rather than "fanaticism", this latter being Iqbal's rather extreme translation. "Fanaticism" is more properly the translation of the Arabic *ta'assub*:

> All nations accuse us of fanaticism. I admit the charge– I go further and say that we are justified in our fanaticism. Translated in the language of biology, fanaticism is nothing but the principle of individuation working in the case of the group. In this sense all forms of life are more or less fanatical, and ought to be so, if they care for their collective life. And as a matter of fact all nations are fanatical… Fanaticism is patriotism for religion; patriotism is fanaticism for country.[54]

Iqbal's "*asabiyya*"– group solidarity" rather than "fanaticism"– is in accord with the spirit of 5:48– for each community, there is a specific, thus, an exclusive way, a way which must perforce exclude other ways, as regards outward forms, including formal beliefs, and not just rites and rituals. But alongside this formal exclusivism there is an essential or mystical inclusivism. This combination of two apparently opposed elements reflects the Qur'ān itself: many verses can be cited in support of both aspects, and each is, therefore, to be seen as complementing and not contradicting the other.

It should be noted at this point that Iqbal's effort to include exclusivism is in accord with many of the great representatives of the Sufi tradition. In particular, one thinks of the metaphysical principle enunciated by Ibn 'Arabī: part of the completeness of being is the existence of incompleteness within it, failing which the completeness of being would be incomplete by virtue of the absence of incompleteness within it. This principle implies that a true

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[54] *Stray Reflections*, p.33 no. 18 'Fanaticism'. Khurram Shafique, one of the editors of this volume notes that this reflection was incorporated into journal, *The Muslim Community*, in 1910. The word *'asabiyya* is given as the translation of 'fanaticism'.

universality is expressed, and not contradicted, by the particular; in terms of hermeneutics, it comes to mean that the inclusivist "reading" of verses of scripture must allow for the relative validity of exclusivist interpretations of the same.[55] Iqbal's solidarity with the Muslim community, his empathy with its '*asabiyya*, his bearing witness to his faith, and his sincere effort to engage in traditional *da'wa*, are not therefore to be seen simply as concessions to exoteric orthodoxy– still less as a simplistic "advocacy of unreformed orthodoxy" as Ikram put it; rather, these "religious" attitudes are but the formal expressions of inner spiritual dispositions which have reverberations that transcend the horizontal boundaries of exoteric Muslim orthodoxy, as will be clear shortly. What needs to be stressed here is that it is precisely his solidarity with orthodoxy that makes it more conceivable for orthodox Muslims to countenance, and possibly participate in, the universal vision of the poet. The universality of his vision can enter more effectively into the worldview of the orthodox precisely because it is an inclusivism which does not mount an abrasive challenge to their exclusivism, but is on the contrary deftly woven into the texture of an exclusivism with which they can identify in a primary way. On the basis of this initial identification with the poet's vision of "exclusivist" Islam, the exclusivist Muslim is more likely to find his exclusivism refined and calibrated by the poet's inclusivism. Appreciation of this point should help reveal the extent to which Ikram's accusation against Iqbal is unjust; conversely, it helps also to show the extent to which an inclusivism indifferent to the sensitivities of exclusivism will be severely handicapped if not vitiated by its own implicit exclusivism: it becomes a form of apparent inclusivism which is in reality an exlusivism, precisely in the measure that it excludes exclusivism.

For some this will appear contradictory and not simply paradoxical, as it does for the mullah in Iqbal's autobiographical poem, "Piety and Antinomianism (*Zuhd aur Rindi*)". In this poem, the mullah is baffled by the contradictions in Iqbal: he never misses a prayer, and yet listens to music; he refuses to call the Hindus disbelievers, and yet his Muslim orthodoxy is beyond question; he is clearly a member of the Sunni community, but has

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[55] See our *The Other in the Light of the One* for elaboration on the interfaith implications of this ontological principle.

Shi'i sympathies. Iqbal, far from resolving the contradictions, revels in them, and playfully asks the mullah to let him know if he can find the real Iqbal:

The mullah complains:

He thinks a Hindu not a heathen [kāfir], I'm told,

A most casuistical notion to hold

In the morning devotions [tilāwat, i.e., recitation of the Qur'ān], at evening the fiddle [gānā, i.e., singing],

I have never been able to fathom this riddle …"

Then Iqbal replies:

"I too long to know the Iqbal of reality,

And often shed tears at this wall of duality

To Iqbal of Iqbal little knowledge is given;

I say this not in jesting– not jesting, by Heaven!"[56]

Such are the paradoxes which are unavoidable, if one wishes to make a serious attempt to open up the minds of orthodox conservatives to broader horizons of thought, on the one hand, without provoking violent defensive reflexes from them by proposing too "unorthodox" a position, on the other.

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Let us now turn our attention to some concrete examples of Iqbal's universal vision. One should say immediately that many pages of his major

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[56] *Poems from Iqbal*, tr. V.G. Kiernan (Karachi: Iqbal Academy/Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.8-9.

philosophical work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, can be read as an ecumenical text insofar as what is being defended, promoted and expounded is religious thought as such and not just Islamic religious thought. This is most clearly evident in his final chapter, number 7, entitled "Is Religion Possible". The whole of this chapter is a refutation of one of the most serious critiques to which religion– all religion– has been subjected in the modern period, that of Immanuel Kant. The essence of his argument against Kant is summed up in this sentence:

> The evidence of religious experts in all ages and countries is that there are potential types of consciousness lying close to our normal consciousness. If these types of consciousness open up possibilities of life-giving and knowledge-yielding experience, the question of the possibility of religion as a form of higher experience is a perfectly legitimate one, and demands our serious attention.[57]

What Iqbal means by "religious experts" is clearly the mystics of the different religions, to which he refers as providers of the most important type of evidence which can refute Kant. Here we see a clear sign of his ecumenism, his recognition of the equivalence of the mystics of all faiths, united in their affirmation of a unique, absolute, Reality, accessible not through reason unaided, but through spiritual intuition and mystical disclosure.

Thus, mystical consciousness is central to Iqbal's ecumenism, and it is this which enables him to refer reverentially to such figures as the Buddha, Guru Nanak, Jesus, and many other figures from diverse religions: they all point to one and the same reality. This reality is most often referred to by Iqbal in terms of love, and not simply knowledge. Or rather, the basic theme that seems to fashion his receptivity to the religious Other is the wisdom which flows from love: it is this interplay between wisdom and love that generates a deep appreciation or mystical attunement to the spiritual values animating traditions other than Islam.

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[57] *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1986), p.146.

As regards wisdom, we have this couplet from Iqbal's *Jāvīd-Nāma*, considered by many to be his masterpiece. The first line is a paraphrase of a Qur'ānic verse regarding wisdom or *hikma* (2:269), and the second is a paraphrase of a famous saying of the Prophet regarding the same ("wisdom is the lost camel of the believer; he has a right to it wherever he may find it"):

God has declared wisdom is a great good

wherever you may see this good, seize it.[58]

Iqbal's poetry is replete with examples of his grasp and application of wisdom from diverse spiritual traditions. One particularly striking example of his grasp of Advaita is given in his poem, *Naya Shivala* or "New Temple". This is from the Urdu collection, *Bāng-e Darā*. He berates the Brahmin for worshipping idols, but then adds: [59]

In each graven image you fancied God: I see

In each speck of dust of this land, divinity [trans. modified]

This is a remarkable couplet for one sees here a mirror-image of the Hindu and the Muslim conception of God: what the Hindu sees through the idol is *khudā*, whereas what Iqbal the Muslim sees in each speck of dust is a *devatā*.[60] So he is implicitly affirming the metaphysical validity of the Hindu

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[58] *Jāvīd-Nāma* tr. A.J. Arberry (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p.64.

[59] *Poems from Iqbal*, tr. V.G. Kiernan (Karachi: Iqbal Academy/Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 18: New Altar [*Naya Shivala*].

[60] Iqbal added the following note in the margin of the poem when it first appeared in the monthly magazine *Makhzan*, in 1902, explaining the expression "born of light", which referred to the angels:

> i.e. *devatā*. The word *devatā* means born of light in the Sanskrit language. It denotes a being made of light. This gives us to understand that the ancient Hindus regarded the *devatās* as created like all other creation and did not think of them as eternal

conception of God, that is, seeing through the created form to the uncreated Essence, seeing the *devatā* as an icon, not as an idol, transparent to the universal Essence above and beyond all forms; but he universalises this perception, thus implicitly saying to the Brahmin: see God in and through all forms, without exception, rather than enclosing Him within one or other particular form.[61] Thus, the aspect of divine immanence which justifies the Hindu conception of the *devatā* as a manifestation of divinity is coupled with a stress on the universality of this immanence; and it is this universality which opens up the dimension of divine immanence to its complementary pole, the dimension of divine transcendence: it is the one and only divine reality which is both immanent in all things and transcends all things. If immanence is restricted to some forms as opposed to others, then the dimension of transcendence is sacrificed: God's boundless reality is restricted within determinate relativities, and one commits the sin of *shirk*, polytheism, the worship of forms cut off from their divine source, forms which, thus, become idols.

The poem finishes with an affirmation of salvation for all in the new temple, and the terms he uses here are significant: [62]

Power and Peace [shakti and shanti] shall blend in the hymns the votary sings

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> beings. It meant for them, probably, the same that we denote by the word angel because angels, though having a luminous nature, are nevertheless created beings. Therefore, according to my lights, it would not be correct to accuse Hinduism guilty of polytheism. (Iqbal)

[61] This reminds us of Ibn al-'Arabī's way of interpreting the Qur'anic accusation of *kufr* in relation to Christians who say that 'truly God is Jesus, Son of Mary' (5:17). He points to the literal meaning of the word *kufr*, that is, 'covering up' or 'concealing', and writes that the Christians are called *kāfir*s in that they conceal God in the form of Jesus: the divine reality is 'covered over' by the human manifestation. He writes: 'The real error and unbelief in the full sense of the word is not in their saying "He is God", or "the son of Mary", but in their having turned aside from God by enclosing [God within one particular human form].' This is from Ibn al-'Arabī's *Fuṣūs al-ḥikam*; see R. Austin's translation, *Bezels of Wisdom* (New York, Paulist Press, 1980), p. 177, which we have modified here.

[62] *Poems from Iqbal,* op. cit., p.20.

For from love comes salvation [mukti] to all earth's living things [trans. modified].

Shakti, shanti and mukti: all are Hindu concepts deemed by the poet perfectly appropriate for the expression of the universal principles of divine power (for which he could have used *qudra* instead of *shakti*) sacred peace (for which he could have used *sakīna* instead of *shanti*) and salvation (*najāt* instead of *mukti*). The fact that he sees these terms as interchangeable shows clearly his implicit belief that the referents of these terms– those principles to which the words refer– are of universal scope; the names will differ from tradition to tradition, but the objects named are one and the same. The universal realities alluded to are objectively identical, it is human language– and with it, culture and even religion– which outwardly and formally differentiates those self-same spiritual realities.

Returning to the *Jāvīd-Nāma*, Iqbal has no problem about expressing divine wisdom through Jahān-Dost,[63] that is, Vishwa-mitra, author/revealer of the *Gayatri-mantra* in the *Rig Veda*, considered the holiest verse of the Vedas, second only to the mantra *Om*; and author of the whole of the third *mandala* of the *Rig Veda* which includes the *Gayatri-mantra*.[64]

He asked, 'The commons' religion?' I said, 'Just hearsay.'
He asked, 'The gnostics' religion?' I said, 'True seeing.'

گفت دین عامیاں؟ گفتم شنید
گفت دین عارفاں؟ گفتم که دید

My words brought much pleasure to his soul,
and he disclosed to me delightful subtleties.

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[63] *Jāvīd-Nāma*, op.cit., pp.40-43.

[64] Iqbal added a note in the margin of the poem when it first appeared in the monthly magazine *Makhẓan*, in 1902, introducing this ancient and famous supplication from the Reg Veda explaining the symbolism of light in the poem through its corresponding ideas in Sufism at the Qur'anic terminology.

Iqbal proceeds with 9 sayings from this *'ārif-i hindī'*, or Hindu sage, among which the following is to be carefully noted:

The infidel with a wakeful heart praying to an idol

is better than a religious man asleep in the sanctuary.[65]

کافر بیدار دل پیش صنم
به ز دیندارے که خفت اندر حرم!

Let us now turn to love, and to the way in which Iqbal's universal vision of love brings together not just believers of different faiths, but extends even to disbelievers, who remain, despite their lack of faith, images of being; and being, for Iqbal, is love:

Noble sir, do you know what it is, to be?

It is to take one's share of the beauty of God's Essence.

چیست بودن دانی اے مرد نجیب؟
از جمال ذات حق بردن نصیب!

Creating? It is to search for a beloved,

To display oneself to another being.[66]

These lines evoke the words of the "holy utterance" oft-repeated in Sufi metaphysics. God says: "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known so I

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[65] Ibid., p.42.

[66] Ibid., p.138.

created."[67] Authentic being is nothing other than participation in the beauty of that "hidden treasure", to become one of the jewels of that treasure, in the measure of one's capacity to realize the beauty of the Real– *jamāl-e zāt-e haqq*. It is important to stress here the combination of the notions of *jamāl*, beauty– relating to love– and *haqq*, the Real, the True– relating to knowledge. The wisdom which allows one to perceive the truth of other faiths is the fruit of both knowledge and love: knowledge deepened by love furnishes the soul with a sense of the sacred, allowing one to perceive the transcendent source and the sacred ramifications of concepts and forms of the traditions of the Other. This is the wisdom of which the Prophet spoke when he referred to it as a "lost camel": it is lost, insofar as it is alien and unknown, but is nonetheless one's own– the believer has a right to possess it– insofar as it derives from the one and only source of wisdom–*al-Hakīm*, the Wise; and it is one's own because it resonates with the deepest dimensions of one's intellect, with which it is ultimately at one: the wisdom perceived by the intellect cannot be other than the consciousness by which it is perceived. Wisdom is thus "owned" by the intellect which perceives and assimilates it, and, for its part, the intellect is "owned" by the wisdom which is calling out to be assimilated. Conversely, love clarified and given focus by knowledge ensures that discernment is not sacrificed in one's embrace of all in God. As will be seen below, one comes to love even the disbeliever, but one does not fail to discriminate between the humanity of the disbeliever, by virtue of which he is lovable, and the disbelief of the disbeliever, which cannot be loved.

Insofar as one enters into the spirit of love, then, one enters into the beauty of the Real, a reality which defines itself not only as love, but as a love

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[67] The saying of the 'hidden treasure' is not found in the canonical collections, its chain of transmission not being regarded as sound. However, various exoteric authorities do accept the soundness of its meaning, for it accords with the interpretation given by Ibn ʿAbbās of verse, 51: 56: 'I created the Jinn and mankind only that they might worship Me'. Ibn 'Abbās reports that 'knowledge' (*maʿrifa*), is what is meant by 'worship', so that the phrase *illā li-yaʿbudūni* (except that they might worship Me) becomes *illā li-yaʿrifūni* (except that they might know Me). Such exoteric scholars as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī have no difficulty in citing the saying, together with the implicit validation of its meaning by the comment of Ibn ʿAbbās. See the end of his commentary on 51: 56 in his *Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2001), vol. 10, p. 194.

which loves to "display itself to another being"– this display being the inner law of "creation". God loved to be known, hence He created. This view of love as streaming forth from the hidden essence of God, and leading back to the beauty of the Real, is entirely at one with the Sufi tradition, and it is this love which is constantly referred to as that inner transformative power which renders knowledge not only salvific but also sanctifying. Without love, knowledge is reduced to the shell of reason working on data received from without; this kind of knowledge cannot realize its inner harmony with beauty. But with love, knowledge is transformed into a mode of participation in the object known; and when the object to be known is God, the union between the subject and the object cannot but be that synthesis of love and knowledge which is the motivating force of the whole of creation: for God *loved* to be *known*. To know God is to know That which loved to be known, so an authentic knowledge of God is always and inexorably accompanied by love of God. Conversely: an authentic love of God will always result in knowledge of God, for this love becomes part of one's being, and it is only by virtue of a transformation of being that one can "know" God in the deepest sense.

In numerous places throughout Iqbal's poetry love is contrasted with knowledge in its lower form, that is, knowledge in the sense of reason. In the *Jāvīd-Nāma*, we have this clear distinction:

Man's reason is making assault on the world,
but his love makes assault on the Infinite.

…

Whoever becomes a lover of the beauty of the Essence

He is the master of all things in existence (tr. modified).[68]

Love is the law and ritual of life,

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[68] *Jāvīd-Nāma*, op. cit., p.26. (*Har-khe 'āshiq shud jamāl-i zāt rā; Ūst sayyed-i jumla-ye mawjūdāt rā*)

See for the original Persian text, *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl– Fārsī* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1994), p.489.

Religion the root of education; and religion is love…

Religion does not mature without love's schooling;

Learn religion from the company of the lords of love.[69]

Religion consists of burning from head to toe in aspiration:

Its consummation is love, courtesy its initiation

…

Soiling one's tongue with ill-speech is a sin

The disbeliever and the believer are alike creatures of God.

Humanity, human respect for human reality:

Be conscious of the station of humanity.

…

The slave of love who takes his path from God

Becomes a loving friend of both disbeliever and believer.[70]

بنده عشق از خدا گیرد طریق

می شود بر کافر و مومن شفیق!

Here we see some of the most radical implications of Iqbal's conception of love. It appears that the "slave of love" leaves behind the spirit of religious

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[69] *Kulliyāt*, p.585.

[70] *Kulliyāt*, p.672-673.

ecumenism and goes beyond the distinction between believer and disbeliever, embracing both of them in an equal love, both of them being equally human and thus equally lovable, whatever the beliefs or lack thereof, espoused. "Be conscious of the station of humanity", Iqbal tells us, as if to insist: the humanity of each human soul takes precedence over everything else pertaining to the human being, including his beliefs. This "station of humanity" is the *fitra*, referred to in the Qur'ān as follows: "So set your purpose for religion with unswerving devotion– the original nature created by God (*fitrat Allāh*), that according to which He created man. There is no altering God's creation. That is the right religion but most men know not" (30:30). The *fitra* can be seen as a trace, a proof, or a reflection of *al-Fātir*, the Originator; given that *al- Fātir* is itself none other than the divine Essence insofar as it engages in its originating, creating relationship with the human being, it follows that the *fitra* of each human being must reflect and "re-present"– in the sense of make present, and not just represent–the beauty and the love which the divine is in its ultimate nature. Each human being is human by virtue of that *fitra* which articulates human reality in terms of the divine; to speak of the *fitra*, the "station of humanity", is to speak of the creative power of divinity: the human proclaims and affirms the divine, without which it is not human. It is to this mystery that the angels bear witness when they prostrate before Adam,[71] and within which is hidden that by virtue of which every human being becomes lovable.

> So even if the disbeliever formally renounces belief in God, his own reality or spiritual "station" cannot be renounced, destroyed, or even fundamentally altered: in the verse (30:30) cited above, immediately after mention is made of the *fitra* we are told: "There is no altering God's creation". In other words, the *fitra* proper to humanity is both inalienable and immutable; by virtue of its very presence, inwardly and objectively, it takes priority over all actions, words performed outwardly and subjectively by the human being.[72] One is reminded here of Meister

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[71] Q 2:34 ff.

[72] According to the Prophet, it also takes priority over all outward religious affiliations: 'Every babe is born according to the *fitra;* its parents make it a Jew, a Christian or a Magian.'

Eckhart's famous dictum: "the more he blasphemes, the more he praises God". Less well known, but equally profound, is what Imam 'Alī says in one of his sermons: "Unto Him bear witness all things in existence, whatever the heart of the disbelieving disputant affirms" (*fa-huwa'lladhī tash-hadu lahu a'lāmu'l-wujūd, 'alā iqrār qalb dhī'l-juhūd*).[73] Thus, even the disbeliever becomes lovable, for he is perceived as a human being, first, and the human being *qua* human being, cannot but express, embody and reflect the beautiful reality of its Creator, whatever he may say or do. It is by virtue of this immutable, objective dimension of his own humanity that even the disbeliever "becomes a loving friend" to the true "slave of God who takes his path from God" as Iqbal put it. One whose path is derived from God sees that each human being can lead back to God along that same path.

In addition, we are told by the Qur'ān that "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). In light of this discussion we can see that this face of the Beloved is mirrored in the whole of creation, but it is found most perfectly reflected in the human being. The Adamic nature is the most perfectly polished mirror in which God can contemplate His own beauty. In the mystically celebrated opening chapter of his *Fusūs al- hikam*, Ibn al-'Arabī describes the Adamic mystery as follows: [74]

The Real wished to see the essences of His most beautiful names or, if you wish, to see His own Essence, in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole affair, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror...

We can be certain that Iqbal was keenly aware of this fundamental passage in the corpus of Ibn al-'Arabī. So many of his poems and indeed one of his

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[73] *Nahj al-balāgha,* ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Beirut: Muʾassasa al-Maʿārif li'l-Tabāʿa wa'l-Nashr, 1996) Sermon no.49, p.172.

[74] Translation (with minor modifications) by R. Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p.50.

earliest essays, dealing with the Sufi conception of "the Perfect Man" (*al-insān al-kāmil*),[75] leave us with no doubt that this kind of spiritual anthropology informed his perspective in a fundamental manner. The notion of the perfect man being the polished mirror in which God sees Himself in manifest mode must be combined with Iqbal's view of love and beauty as constituting the ultimate substance of the divine, in order to correctly situate his embrace even of the *kāfir*, thus manifesting not so much religious ecumenism as an uncompromisingly spiritual humanism: an anthropology which goes from the human to the divine; whose loving embrace of humanity is inspired by the inescapable beauty of divinity.

One feels sure that Iqbal was one of those devotees of what Ibn al-'Arabī and Rumi called "the religion of love".

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.[76]

Rumi, in similar vein, proclaims:[77]

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[75] As early as 1900 Iqbal wrote an essay in which he demonstrated his familiarity with this concept, 'The Doctrine of Absolute Unity as Expounded by Abdul Karim al-Jili' *Indian Antiquary*, Bombay, September 1900, pp. 237-46. See also the text of this article prepared by S. H. Razzaqi in his *Discourses of Iqbal*, (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2004).

[76] *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq– A Collection of Mystical Odes,* tr. R.A. Nicholson (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p. 52.

[77] *Mathnawī,* ed. Abd al-Hamīd Mashāyikh Tabātabāī (Tehran: Nashr-i Tulū', n.d.) II, line 1770.

The religious community of love is separate from all religions:

For lovers, the community and the religion is God.