# IQBAL AND THE WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS

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Our conference marks the 100th anniversary of Iqbal's study in Cambridge and Munich. In this paper I am interested principally in his study of European philosophy, which extended far beyond his sojourn in Europe. I propose to look at the question of Iqbal's relation to Western philosophy through the lens of his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*[115]. This series of seven lectures in English, published in Lahore in 1930, reveal not only a deep knowledge of the long tradition of European philosophy, but a concern to address late modern questions posed by his contemporaries. The *Reconstruction* shows broad engagement with several figures who are widely read today, including most notably William James, Friedrich Nietzsche, Alfred North Whitehead and Henri Bergson.

We can distinguish two over-arching questions.

First, what was Iqbal's interest in Western philosophy?

Second, what is our interest in Iqbal's relation to Western philosophy?

The first question invites some study of Iqbal's use of other philosophers' arguments. Which arguments does he draw on and rehearse? How do his understandings of their work compare to other interpretations at that time, and to the interpretations of commentators today? In the case of the *Reconstruction* this task is unmanageably hard, because Iqbal's references are generally short. He tends to cite philosophers to illustrate a general point he is making, or to support a broad argument. They are largely cited as

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[115] Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. Saeed Shiekh (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture and IAP, 1986 [1934]). Citations will be to page numbers in this volume.

authorities to confirm a point, and it is very rare to find Iqbal drawing on a chain of reasoning in an extended fashion. This should not be so surprising: Iqbal was a distinguished lawyer. It is quite appropriate for a lawyer to cite previous judgements on an issue as support for a case he is making. I wonder if there is a tendency for Iqbal to treat other philosophers' arguments as analogous to legal judgements, rather than as chains of reasoning that can be adapted, extended or corrected to solve new problems. It is noticeable that Iqbal rarely corrects another philosopher's argument. One can see this in the cases of Nietzsche and Bergson. In disagreeing with Nietzsche he tends not to reconstruct and correct Nietzsche's reasoning, but rather to voice disagreement with Nietzsche's views broadly conceived. This is most clearly evident in the final lecture in which he says of Nietzsche's philosophy that it 'remained unproductive for want of expert external guidance in his spiritual life' (p.154). This is not an argument about Nietzsche's relation to previous philosophy, nor a claim about any particular argument advanced by Nietzsche, nor a claim about the kind of argumentation Nietzsche pursued. It is an observation about Nietzsche the man, as he appears in his writings. And its purpose is to support Iqbal's wider claim about the need for intellectual life to be guided by 'spiritual' concerns. In the case of Bergson, as we shall see, his objection is very general: namely, that the Bergsonian individual lacks a *telos*. Again it is not the detail of the argumentation that is addressed, but an overarching character that for Iqbal needs correcting.

One lesson to be learned here is that there are severe challenges for anyone who seeks to produce a detailed account of Iqbal's relation to James, Nietzsche, Whitehead, Bergson or indeed any other figure in the Western tradition. One can catalogue his references to them, certainly. And one can build a picture of his use of them to support particular points he is making. But it is difficult to discover the kinds of extended engagement that might permit more subtle judgements.

This is not the end of the matter, however. A fuller account, which I shall not pursue here, would look at the ways in which our four Western philosophers, for example– James, Nietzsche, Whitehead, Bergson– were read in the 1920s, and compare this to the renewed interest in their work today in the light of later developments. I am thinking of recent American pragmatism which has changed our view of James, of Heidegger's influential

interpretation of Nietzsche first published in 1961, Deleuze's influential accounts of both Nietzsche and Bergson in 1962 and 1966, and various reappraisals of Whitehead and process thought in the light of changing conceptions of temporality in theology. One might then situate Iqbal within this comparative frame. Such an endeavour would be most interesting, not least because of Iqbal's vision of reality as a living organic materiality, and his insistence that religion is not about thoughts, feelings or actions, but a matter of what he calls the 'whole man'. This has powerful resonances in certain kinds of post-Deleuzian Christian theology which stress the vitality of creation and which, in substantial agreement with Iqbal, voice strong criticisms of forms of description which portray creation and human agency as an already dead network of causes and effects. Drawing out some of these connections would be an invaluable part of any attempt to evaluate 'Iqbal the Contemporary'.

I wish, however, to return to a different dimension to my two questions: what was Iqbal's interest in Western philosophy; and what is our interest in his relation to Western philosophy?

I have already indicated that one of Iqbal's interests was the practice of citing philosophers in support of a particular case, treating them as authoritative previous judgements on analogous cases. But I think there is something deeper here too, which can draw us in to the second question as to what we might learn from Iqbal in his relations to Western philosophy.

Iqbal can be fruitfully read as a reparative reasoner. By this I mean one who is concerned with named problems in the world, and with the resources available for repairing them. Iqbal names certain problems in the world, which I will elaborate shortly. He then goes on to consider various resources for repairing those problems. And, crucially, the *Resconstruction* identifies problems with those reparative resources, and sets about repairing them.

There are thus three broad levels at work, and showing how they operate offers an illuminating account of the *Reconstruction*. Those levels are:

Level one: problems in the world

Level two: systems of repair

Level three: problems in systems of repair

After exploring these a little - which begins answering the question, 'what was Iqbal's interest in Western philosophy?' - we will turn to some reflections on his method, which begins answering the question, 'what is our interest in Iqbal's relation to Western philosophy?'

**Problems in the World**

Iqbal identifies several problems in the world that call for repair. The three that stand out most vividly relate to different focal distances in his field of vision: Islamic law, the state, and the individual.

In relation to Islamic law, Iqbal identifies as problematic the tendency in some schools to treat their traditions as substantially complete, and to claim that they do not need to adapt or change in the light of new circumstances (p.133). This robs them of their ability to guide those who live in new circumstances.

In relation to the state, Iqbal identifies as problematic the difficulty of reconciling the universal reach of Islam with the particularities of individual nation states. I detect two tendencies in Iqbal's statement of the problems. The first is to emphasise how local non-Islamic habits have tended to distort the universal character of the ethical ideals of Islam (p.124). The second is to suggest that some Islamic states have sought to dominate others, in a way that inhibits the flourishing of the less powerful states (p.126). The first tendency leads Iqbal to call for a more truly universal form of Islam, freed of the distorting effects of parochialism. The second tendency leads him to call for mutual recognition of individual states, so that they can all become strong together and form something like an Islamic league of nations. It was this insight, of course, that led Iqbal to call for an independent state for Muslims in British India.

In relation to the individual, Iqbal holds up as a warning the image of Friedrich Nietzsche: a brilliant, incisive genius whose course of life was

determined solely from within, and thus lacked the necessary discipline and guidance that comes from seeking spiritual direction (p.154). As we shall see, Nietzsche here is the archetypal European man, a Bergsonian man, genuinely full of life, but lacking a telos.

Each of these problems in the world– in law, in the state, in the individual– call for repair, drawing on cultural systems of repair whose purpose is to give the kinds of account of law, of the state, of the individual that can heal suffering in the world.

**Systems of Repair**

The *Reconstruction* is concerned with philosophy as a system of repair, and with religion as a system of repair. It is of course concerned with much more than this, as the extraordinary fifth lecture– 'The Spirit of Muslim Culture'– beautifully demonstrates. It's one of the most moving accounts of divine excess and abundance of life. But here I want to concentrate on the reparative dimension. The relation between philosophy and religion is one of the concerns of the *Reconstruction* throughout, extending into a variety of contexts of discussion, and so it is not a straightforward matter to articulate it. Nonetheless there are some indications.

Iqbal opens the *Reconstruction* with an account of a conflict between 'reason' and 'faith'. Now any student of the history of philosophy knows that this conflict takes many forms. In the Christian tradition, consider some snapshots: of Augustine in 400 CE, Aquinas in 1250 CE and the Pantheism Controversy in Germany in the 1780s. The relation between 'ratio' and 'fides', or 'Vernunft' and 'Glaube', plays out very differently in the three cases. The first question to pose to Iqbal here is: which version of 'faith and reason' is being played out? Iqbal says of reason (or simply of 'philosophy' sometimes) that it has the following characters:

(a) it is purely rational

(b) it suspects authority

(c) it is merely critical and fails to make positive claims

(d) it grasps Reality piecemeal

He says of faith (or simply of 'religion' sometimes) that it is marked by the following:

(a) it has something like a cognitive content

(b) its doctrines are systems of general truths for directing life

(c) it is something focal in reflection

(d) it grasps Reality in its wholeness.

From this account we can say that the account of 'reason' has a strong resemblance to discussions in Germany in the 1780s: it is critical, sceptical and negative. But the account of 'faith' has more of a resemblance to accounts in France in the 1250s: it completes philosophy, offers an account of the whole, and can be seen to do so through doctrinal claims. It is also worth noting Iqbal's tendency to capitalise 'Reality', and to observe that its meaning is something like a divine intuition of all things as a whole. The claim that religion permits one to grasp Reality in its wholeness is roughly equivalent to the claim that religion is a matter of direct intuition of the whole. This seems to resemble Plato's account of the forms (where religion and philosophy are not distinct in the way they are for later Europeans).

The interpreter of Iqbal should thus beware too hastily thinking that it is obvious what Iqbal means by reason and faith, philosophy and religion, or Reality. It is a quite eclectic account. And if anyone should doubt this, then they need only read his interesting 'compare and contrast' account of Ghazali and Kant, as the text jumps with alarming ease between eleventh century Tus, in Persia and eighteenth century Königsberg, in Prussia.

Iqbal insists that philosophy and religion belong together and complement each other, in functioning as a system of repair for problems in the world. Religion 'stands in need of a rational foundation' and philosophy 'must recognise the central position of religion' (p.2). Clearly quite a lot hangs on what is meant by a 'rational foundation' and a 'central position' in these

claims. It is important, I think, to recognise what Iqbal does not mean. He does not mean that philosophy provides an independent basis for religion: he is not a Cartesian foundationalist. And he does not mean that religion trumps philosophy by dictating in advance what counts as rational, or by eliminating the rational altogether: he is not a Pietist either. Looked at one way, philosophy is about describing parts, and religion is about describing wholes, and the two belong together. His account thus resembles insights familiar in hermeneutics: you need to grasp wholes in order to understand parts, and you need to grasp parts in order to understand wholes.

So here I want to try out a hypothesis for a fruitful reading of this dimension of the *Reconstruction*. Philosophy and religion together, as a mutual interplay of grasping parts and wholes, form a system of repair for problems in the world, especially the problems of the tendency towards stagnation of law, the domination of some Islamic states by others and the directionlessness of modern persons: the social problems these cause, and the inability to address them satisfactorily.

**Problems in Systems of Repair**

There is something about the mutual interplay of philosophy and religion that is failing to repair problems in the world. This is not a general failure, but one that is, he says, particular to Islamic intellectual life. His baldest claim takes the following stark form: 'During the last five hundred years religious thought in Islam has been practically stationary' (p.6). He paints an arresting picture– a cartoon almost– of how this has come about. He divides European history into three phases. In the first, European thought is inspired by Islam. In the second, European culture develops the most important aspects of Islamic culture, while Islam itself ceases to be generative and starts to mirror Western moves, but with a delay. At the end of this second phase, which is the time in which Iqbal is writing, Islam has had centuries of intellectual stupor while the Europeans have been making mighty strides working out the problems bequeathed by the Islamic sages. The third phase stands before us: it is the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam– whence the title of this series of lectures.

There is no cause for smugness on either the European or the Islamic side. The 'dazzling exterior' of European culture, and the five centuries of European 'serious thinking' on the big problems lead precisely to the directionlessness of modern persons and a refusal to take religious life seriously as a logic of action; and Islam's intellectual stupor has meant that Islamic thinkers are launching themselves headlong towards precisely the European philosophy that has led to this spiritual cul-de-sac. Iqbal's diagnosis and cure in 1930 bear a striking similarity to that of John Milbank in our own time: Islam bequeaths to Christianity a series of problems which from 1300 onwards lead into an increasingly dark dead-end in which the meaningless 'secular' crowds out the meaningful 'religious'; the cure is for the 'spiritualisation' of philosophy (Iqbal) and the return of theology as queen of the sciences (Milbank).

The problem articulated by Iqbal is very serious. The system of repair– philosophy/religion– is either devoid of spirit (European philosophy) or stagnant (Islamic philosophy). It thus stands itself in need of repair.

And here is the crucial question: when philosophy/religion stand in need of repair, what can repair them?

Iqbal's answer is unequivocal: one must reach deep– into the deepest sources of repair in Islam. These are to be found in the Qur'an, *and in the patterns of reasoning which it generates in the Muslim community*.

His method is ambiguous and lends itself to two rival interpretations. One is a kind of natural theology, something like John Locke writing *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. The other is a kind of method of correlation, something like Paul Tillich writing his *Systematic Theology*.

The method elaborated in the second lecture, 'The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience', is to line up a series of debates in philosophy from the rationalism of Descartes to the evocations of biological life-force of H.A.E. Driesch and Wildon Carr. The story told here is one of a transition from a view of nature as a static lifeless mechanism, to a view of nature as embodying a dynamic living principle. Iqbal's account strongly resembles that of his younger contemporary Ernst Bloch in this respect.

Having rehearsed these debates he goes on to show how the Qur'an itself embodies and elaborates a broadly Bergsonian view of time. The Qur'anic concept of *Taqdir* is juxtaposed to Bergson's concept of duration, and the two are allowed to illuminate each other. *Taqdir* is normally taken to refer to the doctrine of predestination; Iqbal prefers to render it 'destiny' and describes it as 'time freed from the net of causal sequence' (p.40). This Bergsonian account produces some interesting inflections of traditional attempts to speak of human free will in the context of divine predestination.

It is possible to mount a 'Lockean' critique of Iqbal, in the sense of a critique that finds Iqbal to be too much like the author of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. This critique would say that Iqbal first constructs an image of reality drawn from philosophy, and subsequently seeks to show that scripture agrees with, or at least does not contradict, this. In such an account Iqbal, intoxicated by Griesch, Bergson and others, attempts to show how the Qur'an confirms or at least does not contradict their accounts.

But such a critique is hard to sustain: one must notice that Iqbal is not uncritical of Bergson. He greatly appreciates Bergson's elaboration of the *élan vital*, but also finds Bergson to produce an unjustified dualism between will and thought (p.41). He suggests that human action, in Bergson's account, is too arbitrary, undirected, chaotic, unforeseeable. By contrast, the Qur'an provides an image of the teleology of all life towards God, and thus corrects Bergson's philosophy by preserving the moment of free action, but directing it towards the future. Iqbal vigorously rejects the idea that for Islam the universe is the outworking of a preconceived divine plan: 'nothing is more alien to the Quranic outlook', he says (p. 44).

This might indicate a more 'Tillichian' account of Iqbal, where philosophy poses certain questions, which it cannot solve, and theological reflection on scripture provides answers. Just as it would be interesting to know what Iqbal would have made of Ernst Bloch, it would be interesting to speculate how he would see his own method vis-à-vis Tillich's 'method of correlation'.

What is clear is that the repair of philosophy/religion– even the philosophy of Bergson which is perhaps, for Iqbal, the best philosophy that the Western tradition can offer– is a matter of turning to the Qur'an, and

allowing the patterns of reasoning which it generates in the community to reorient its thinking.

**Conclusion**

We began with two questions: about Iqbal's interest in Western philosophy, and about our interest in Iqbal's relation to that tradition. I have tried to suggest– in a skeletal and somewhat improvised way– that Iqbal's interest in Western philosophy has to do with (1) the ways in which modern European philosophy picks up and develops certain strands bequeathed to it by Islamic thought, (2) its inspiring gradual shift from a static ontology of lifeless cause and effect to a dynamic ontology of life's ungraspable excess and (3) its failure to match its ontological insights with an ethical vision of life directed spiritually towards God. Philosophy is a system of repair, but it stands itself in need of repair, and Iqbal mounts a series of arguments suggesting that a reconstruction of religious thought in Islam can help reorient Western philosophy at the same time as breathe new life into what he sees as a stagnating Islamic intellectual tradition.

What of our interest in Iqbal? I hope I have shown that it is not a purely historical interest. I've tried to make a strong case that Iqbal models a form of reasoning from scripture whose purpose is deeply reparative. It is not just a question of repairing problems in the world, but of drawing on an excess of divine life, attested in scripture, to repair philosophy itself. If we, too, live in a time when philosophy is failing to repair problems in the world– failing to do justice to religious life at a time when religious life, riven with painful conflicts, is informing nearly every area of social and cultural life– we might draw some encouragement from Iqbal.

We too, those of us who worship in religious traditions, have repairs to undertake. As for Iqbal, so for us, this will be a matter of reaching deep into our traditions to draw on the deepest sources of repair. Iqbal considers only the Qur'an as a possible source of repair, and here I think his successors may face challenges and opportunities that were scarcely imaginable in the 1930s. Learning from Iqbal will thus not be a matter merely of repeating him: his reconstructions in the early twentieth century should surely generate new reconstructions in the twenty-first. But that is not our task today. It is our

pleasure and honour to understand and learn from his wisdom, and to remember a figure known affectionately and respectfully by his heirs simply as 'The Allama': the scholar.