RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Our era represents novel opportunities and challenges arising from the new proximity that our technology and imagination affords. We all are in contact through e-mail and the web with people around the world, in an almost limitless and effortless way, transforming communication into a virtual nearness undreamed of even in the 20th century. We travel by plane from continent to continent, and are less than a day away from most centers of population and culture– indeed, the vast majority of the participants in the Cambridge conference traveled by air from afar. And the nearness of cultures arises less from technology, than through the collaboration of people from diverse societies. This is an age of immigration, of changes in where people live, and with whom they can work, study and pray.

If we did not value the close interaction, the proximity with others, we would not have developed nor use the web and the airplanes. Of course, we use these technologies for commerce, and even, alas, for military purposes, for political and national ambition, but also for science. Deeper than these uses for our new proximity, however, is a desire for relations that connect us with others across distinctions– not for a dissolution of everything into a globalized soup or a multinational corporate or consumer society –but a recovery and exploration of the distinctive visions of justice and of holiness, and the chance to learn from each other how to live well together.

In such a moment we are far beyond the context of the earlier part of the 20th century. Iqbal's world knew travel, but mostly by train and ship. It knew telecommunications in the form of wireless and radio. But in the colonial context, it already knew much about immigration, and perhaps most significantly, it was a world in which study and collaboration already produced new modes of proximity. The conference convened in Cambridge and London commemorated both Iqbal's own life and travels, but also the abundant and vital immigrant community of Pakistanis in the UK, as well as the ongoing engagement with Islamic studies at Cambridge University. E-

mail and intercontinental air travel are only repeating and expanding the opportunities that were already available one hundred years ago. And so they arise and flourish because of desires and exigencies that bind us with Iqbal's time and thought.

Thus as we look forward to the shape and indeed the task of Religion and Culture in the 21st Century, we take recourse to insights and visions from Iqbal's life and writings in order to think more deeply if not exclusively about the influences upon Iqbal's thought nor about the direct impact of his thought, but about the possibilities for creative, novel contributions from Iqbal's thought to our era.

My task in this short paper will be to begin with general reflections on the term Culture, and to proceed to the relation of poetry and language in culture. Here I refer to Iqbal as poet as 'opening the gates' of our souls to love.

In the second section, then, I will examine how the multiplicity of languages itself points to a multiplicity of cultures. The account of cultures, then, will require an attention to particularity– but one not identical with nationalisms. Here Iqbal's account of the contribution of Islamic culture to European culture alerts us to the logic of particularities and the fecundity of multiplicity.

In the third section, however, I turn to the first term, *Religion,* and here the desire for what transcends ourselves and our world finds an articulation. Poetry becomes prayer. But religion is not itself primarily a matter of cognition, but rather a realization of insight, by engendering particular social relations. In this moment, then, religion gains a place in relation to cultures as their orientation and also as a means of negotiating plurality.

The final issue, then, is to think about religions. For Iqbal religion meant not only Islam but also Christianity and Judaism, and in the context of the creation of Pakistan, Hinduism. The practical challenges of his political action are not my focus, but the recognition of plurality as more than a mere political fact, but rather a spiritual challenge (and opportunity) points to the future work for religion and cultures, or, as I will suggest, Religions and

Cultures. My suggestion is that Iqbal's insights into the relation of Islamic Culture and Religion can offer us valuable inspiration in thinking together about the way the proximity of religions offers not only challenges but also resources for developing the proximity of cultures. This raises the probing question for the 21st century: the meaning of the multiplicity of cultures. I will then focus on Religions and Cultures, and perhaps with all of those s's we will also begin to see the promise of the 'and'.

Section 1: Culture

Culture has a wide range of meanings. We might focus our attention on the rooms we sit in or more simply the food we enjoy at home. For our senses have all been educated by culture, and if there is a role for religion in the 21st century, it is to address culture itself, and to give a promise to the senses of what cannot be perceived, God. Culture, of course, is much more than art and beauty, but at its highest points, culture aspires to what exceeds our needs and so to what endows meaning on the world in which we live. I am no poet, and if I reflect on beauty and culture, it is as a philosopher, and here the tension is sharp. For culture, like religion, informs, or simply 'forms' the world in which we live. Philosophy is usually abstract, even distant, but culture begins with the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the chair you are sitting in, and the light that shines on this page you now read. If philosophy aspires to be universal, culture is individual, distinct one culture from another. I write as a philosopher about something, culture that does not aspire to philosophy. And if we can think about culture, we might then also think about religion– for it, too, is stretched between the universal and the individual, between the concrete experiences of this world and the absolute, absolved from the world.

So let us begin with a brief view of culture, and in particular art. Let culture stand for all of the ways that we form the world, the human institutions, practices, production of things and systems– and to distinguish culture from economics for our purposes, let the guiding principles of the world we are concerned with be centered around people and their ways of making sense of the world. Culture forms people, and in so doing depends on things, systems, means of production, and so forth. All of our experience, thus, as human beings, arises from culture. Such a view, moreover, is

profoundly dubious about the value of wild nature and of the assumption of any 'natural' kind of experience. Certainly in our time culture has formed even our access to the waves, the mountains, the whales and seals, even to the desert. But in so far as we seek an objectivity that transcends our culture in the wilderness, it stands not simply as a 'product' packaged by culture, but rather as a specific response to the normal condition: that we are cultured.

Our senses, as well as our environment, are constructed through human creativity, reflecting not just simple desires, but rather, desires for social relations and for what stands beyond us. Again, however venal and commercial our culture becomes, it is animated by desires that leave traces throughout culture. Thus in every meal, there is the desire for fellowship and even, for a satisfaction that sustains us in our bodies but not merely that sustains our bodies. It takes great efforts and systems, agriculture, transportation, careful cooking and serving, ploughs, trains, ovens, plates and much more to serve and to enjoy a good meal (and even a cheap and fast and easy meal).

Idolatry is that danger when culture perverts our desires and offers false satisfaction, turning our aspiration into a complacency. For in general, the risk of culture is that whatever forms it takes will be gasped too tightly, will be held as absolute, as bearing the full meaning of things. In idolatry, desire fixes on the object, and hides both the one for whom the thing was created and also the reach beyond the specific object. It is possible for culture to offer false desires and to teach us to rest in the objects. It is not possible to paint a portrait without running the risk that it will divert desire to the painting and not see it as a painting for someone of something. It is not possible, even, to cook a meal without running the risk that someone will eat it with a fixation on the food itself and not on the desires we have to share with others.

Beyond culinary arts, there are arts that form our desires by developing the desires for others and for what transcends our merely material conditions. Those arts do not (in the mode I indicated above) abstract from our bodies, but work with our eyes, our ears, and other senses. The education of our sensibility attunes us to how there is more to the desire of each sense. Culture creates new ranges of sensibility– not just a new spice (although that

too), but new ways of seeing and hearing. Education, then, becomes both a matter of learning to think differently, drawing on our desire to learn; it also becomes a creativity of new experiences and a disciplining of our desires to reach beyond our current culture and world.

Poetry has a distinctive and prized place in all of culture. For words are not things, but are animated by our desire for each other and for what is other than the words themselves. Poetry can illuminate the desire for more than the word in the word; not by silence, but by the word itself. Poetry teaches us to hear beyond the words, not simply in them. But if all sensibility is cultured, and is engendered by desires that lead beyond the objects of the senses, that culture addresses the social and transcendent dimensions of our experience, then poetry takes as its medium language itself. And what is that? How does language hold a distinctive place in culture? First of all it is addressed to others. While we are accustomed to think of the first relation in language being to the thing named, to what language refers to; I would say that words are first *to* someone and in that relation are they *about* something. Now one might say that all of culture, including the design of the chairs you are sitting upon, is to someone (or for us), and that in so far as the legs of the chair are designed to bear us, their leginess, indeed the chair-ness itself, all derives from our needs to relax and to have our weight relieved.

Language, however, is our prime way of sharing things in culture. It has the capacity to give and to take, to instruct and to offer experience as a representation. It presents the world to others, and it represents the world, too. But poetry is the way that language shows the work of language itself– not in a closed self-reflexivity, but rather in an opening out of the way that language (and signs in general) move beyond themselves.

The task for language is its absence of materiality. It is invisible, and forms culture without manipulating things. As such, language engages our desire for what exceeds, offering us a way to reach beyond, and also replacing the visible with the invisible. Poetry challenges us to not rest satisfied with words as words; it challenge us to move beyond images. Here the critique of idolatry emerges most forcefully. For poetry displaces its images and so increases the desire for what exceeds words, and even what exceeds the visible. Poetry displays language at play, language challenging the visibility of

everything that can be named by words, letting us question the power of language to name, to locate our desire in a thing.

Perhaps the key insight that language is capable of motion more readily than other aspects of culture, that one can displace one word with another, and that as such, language is iconoclastic more than most of the high and low forms of culture is no longer so secure– for from moving pictures to television, to our current moment of virtual reality and life on the web, we now have visual media that also participate in these dynamics of displacement. Doesn't a wiki or even a regular website disturb the desire that diverts into idolizing the image? If language is key, in the 21st century, it will be because it is still the medium in which interactions occur (whether on the phone or the web, or in the cinema)– or at least, it is the medium where the challenge to the fixity of the desired object is most disrupted.

It is not surprising, in any case, that poetry is a privileged cultural form throughout the world, and also in Muslim cultures. I am trying, in a somewhat awkward way to situate the specificity of poetry within the realm of culture as a way of orienting ourselves to Iqbal and to the future. And at this particular moment, I wish to engage Iqbal as poet, within the narrow linguistic limitations I have. There is much significant scholarship on Iqbal as poet, but I will limit myself to catching only a small insight. The problem is compounded because Iqbal wrote in diverse languages and genres– and in many ways, as far as an amateur can tell, he was performing much of the work of culture that I have been outlining. But if I turn to one of his masterpieces, "The Mosque of Cordoba", I think we can see in his poem the dynamic that I have been discussing about culture and the desire for what transcends.

The passing of time is a key element in all of Iqbal's thought, and so the appearance of a thing (or of a word) must negotiate with its temporality. In January 1931, he visited the mosque of Cordoba and composed a poem to the mosque, a mosque which was made into a Cathedral. And yet it still stands, and he was permitted to pray there.

All Art's wonders arise only to vanish once more;

All things built on this earth sink as if built on sand! (*Poems,* p.98)

The standing stone is not permanent, but, exceeds itself. In peels of language, Iqbal proclaims love:

Yet, in this frame of things, gleams of immortal life

Show where some servant of God wrought into some high shape

Work whose perfection is still bright with the splendor of Love--

Love, the well-spring of life; Love, on which death has no claim. (*Ibid)*

The love itself is not the object, but it shines with splendor in this mosque, in the beauty of the walls and arches. The building thus shows something beyond itself, the love which itself transcends the passing away of time, of life. I leave aside the much more complex question of to whom the building reveals the love beyond itself– for once it was Muslim, and now it is Christian, and in both cases it is a place for prayer.

But the peels of language, the poetry that he writes, has a distinctive relation to the building itself. Iqbal writes

Shrine of Cordoba! from Love, all your existence is sprung.

Love that can know no end, stranger to Then-and-Now.

Color of stone and brick, music and song or speech,

Only the heart's warm blood feeds such marvels of craft;

Flint with one drop of that blood turns to a beating heart--

Melody, mirth and joy gush out of warm heart's-blood.

Yours the soul-quickening pile, mine the soul-kindling verse,

Yours to knock at men's hearts, mine to open their gates. (*Ibid.* p 100-2)

It is the relation of the *stone* and *brick* to the *song* and *speech*, the *pile* to the *verse*, that interests me here. For in both cases, they emerge from love and they draw on the *warm heart's blood*, on the passion of love. The key issue is what they can achieve in their limited existence. And here is the contrast that fashions our theme of culture:

For the building *knocks at men's hearts*– it is a call, an attempt to get in, to quicken them. To see the building as an opening, a place for love to generate life in the soul. But poetry, the prayer, instead strives *to open their gates.* The chiasmus is clear: not knocking at the gates and opening the hearts, but rather, knocking at the heart and opening the gate– with words. The building knocks– it resounds with a call. The words open gates: that is the gate that shows the way to love to life.

This poem is a remarkable anthem to a building, a mosque where once Muslims met to pray. The building was not a fortress or a factory or a palace or a home, but a place devoted to the knocking of the call from love. The poem, however, is able to open our gates to the power of the mosque, to articulate (even in its own passing through time) the way that culture calls us beyond the object, beyond the function, beyond its present.

Section 2: Languages and Cultures

"The Mosque of Cordoba" was written in Urdu (a form of Hindi written in Arabic script, with close affinities to Arabic and Persian). Iqbal spoke and wrote in several languages– he became adept at many languages because he wished to speak to different people– to the English, of course– because they were not only his intellectual community in Cambridge, but also the rulers of his homeland. But he also engaged the Persian traditions of poetry in Farsi; the world of thought and contemporary political issues in Urdu; the Islamic tradition in Arabic; the scholarly world in German, and his mother tongue, Punjabi. So many languages with so many different communities to address. So let me note, at this juncture that poetry because of its subtle engagement with a specific language, is the hardest to translate. Its iconoclastic capacity depends on the distinctive dangers of its specific language. And so, for all

lovers of Iqbal's poetry, my apologies for working solely with an English translation.

Here we begin to shift our register, for, like a good philosopher, I have been speaking about language and about poetry. But now we must consider that there are languages. And this concrete reality is more disruptive: if language has a key role in forming culture, then the discovery that there are languages must be linked to the observation that there is not culture, but many cultures. And while it is not obvious that languages are in any sort of contest or conflict, it may well seem that we are in a constant struggle of cultures. The challenge of translation displays how each language forms our experience and displays certain kinds of possibilities for experience and action, but most of the time we do not see this as a struggle for control. True, some have argued for one universal language, but the 21st century dawns with keen insights into the need for many languages, and for poetry in each, and for the study of each. Perhaps a philosopher may be forgiven the desire for a single universal language; a poet could not be. Iqbal wrote poetry in different languages, and in a key aspect, in different cultures. To most of us in the early part of the 21st century, this is a sign of his relevance, indeed, of a kind of urgency to be found in poetry. For if the topics are those of eternal truth and desire for what transcends us, the poets write in diverse traditions and tongues because each culture brings its own important contribution to our world where we are near many others.

But I think that it is fair to say that what makes our time most challenged and most promising is that new proximity. We may meet in a conversation, across real cultural differences. Iqbal is not the first multi-cultural person, but his fluency in very different cultures contributed directly to his genius. And as we proceed into this century, it is well to learn multiple cultures, multiple languages, and to see how there is an abundance of ways of interpreting the world.

Section 3: Religion

But, you ask, so much culture, and so little comment about religion? It is in the context of desire and poetry that I draw a bridge to religion (and as should be clear, to religions). For the very depth of the relation of culture

and desire ultimately finds its strongest reality in religion, and the realm of poetry in prayer. In religion, the desire for the other person and for what transcends us is discerned as the love for God. Such desire is not a separate sphere of culture, but is born throughout our cultures, and animates all culture. But religion can name that desire, and can refuse the distraction of idolatry. It is not that religion has the answer for culture's desire– religion fans the desire that breathes in culture. It increases desire and purifies it. And so in prayer, the poet achieves an escape from the distraction of things, and even from that of words.

But religion is not simply a mystical desire. In one lengthy discussion of culture, Iqbal focuses on the spirit of Muslim culture as arising from Prophecy. While the mystic and prophet share a distinctive experience of vision, the prophet "seeks opportunities of redirecting or refashioning the forces of collective life." (*Reconstruction,* 125). Muslim culture begins in the task of the prophet. What Iqbal offers, in the early part of the 20th century, is an account of the contribution of Islam to Western culture as primarily a matter of science and knowledge. He articulates something much deeper than influence or connection; rather, a specific appeal to reasoning about both nature and history– an appeal that offers a deeper ground for induction, for empiricism, for attention to the concrete. I have focused on the aesthetic dimension of culture, which culminates in poetry, but in his account of Spirit of Muslim Culture he is looking for a way to identify cultural specificity to the medieval Islamic discovery that the world is dynamic, and that access to truth will lie through the concrete. I am not keen to evaluate his specific historical claim about the way that the Modern West both found and lost its compass. But what interests me is how his account of Muslim culture can dignify the concrete without losing the desire for the transcendent. Consider the following passage:

> But we must not forget that this system-building in the ancient world was the work of abstract thought which cannot go beyond the systematization of vague religious beliefs and traditions, and gives us no hold on the concrete situations of life. (*Reconstruction,* 126).

The challenge then is how to take up the concrete situations of life, and indeed, in a specific resonance with pragmatism, to test religious experience

"by its fruits" (*Ibid.* 27). Were mystic experience enough, there would be no need for this ultimate test, founded on prophecy; were abstract systems enough, we would not find in Muslim culture the attention to concrete things in mathematics, physics, and biology; nor to human history in its specificity. For Iqbal, the key to all of this enquiry and verification lies in the revolution in ontology that sets the world in motion in time. A dynamic world, reflecting in its every change infinite love, requires attention as such, and not primarily through abstraction and a priori categories.

I wish to focus our attention, at the start of the 21st Century, on the promise of the multiplicity of concrete situations of life, and on the ways that cultures can negotiate and articulate these multiplicities. Clearly for Iqbal, the religious dimension of culture oriented and engendered the features that made each culture different. His interpretation of Muslim Culture can help us distribute our attention over the variety of concrete situations of life, in order to think better about the multiplicity of religions as well as cultures.

Like cultures, religions speak their own languages. I would not say one language-one culture-one religion. Rather, for some religions there are many languages. For Christianity: Greek and Latin, and English, too, of course. For Judaism: Hebrew and Aramaic, Ladino and Yiddish, Arabic and French and German and even English. And for Islam: Arabic, of course, but also Farsi, and Urdu, and Punjabi, and again, English. The languages of poetry are like streams that flow into the lakes of the religions. There may be a dominant stream, but these (and other religions as well) are confluences of multiple cultures. And in each case, the religion gives sustenance to the cultures, and inspires the desires that exceed the mere needs of humanity.

But I wish to move beyond the collections of languages in religions, and suggest that for the 21st century we need to see that multi-culturalism also depends on a deep understanding of the multiplicity of religions. Here the bi-national solution that Iqbal championed reflects a keen insight about not the diversity of culture, but the diversity of religions, and how to protect that diversity. So if I may extend the metaphor, from the lakes, rivers flow to the sea– and just as the many streams irrigate the uplands, so the many rivers bring life to different communities. Contributions from various religious traditions to our world are like cultures grown on the banks of rivers. If

religions are the ways that cultures gain their truest direction, are able to name the sources of inspiration and of desire within culture, then the multiplicity of religions shows that there are different ways to name God and to purify our desires for God and for each other.

Within my world in North America, there is now a growing awareness that the abundance of cultures does not just mean that we can eat a different kind of food each night of the week, but that cultures require nurturing and support, and that if multiple cultures are encouraged, the common good is enhanced, because it is good to live in a place where people do things differently and contribute to a conversation across their differences, not only despite or without recognizing them. In Canada, especially, and Toronto most of all, multi-culturalism is a widely espoused perspective. I am not sure whether in other countries this is so embraced, nor do I think that most thinkers from the early 20th Century would have seen the *multi* as a positive condition.

But lest I slip into a jingoism, I must add that there is genuine confusion within my society about whether these cultures and ethnicities rest on religion, or can stand free from the diverse religions that seem to be the very root of these various cultures. This multi-culturalism is a descendant of liberal political theory, and it is struggling to take communal differences seriously, but cannot quite recognize the religious dimension to this endeavour. For Iqbal, while the role of language in culture was not at the center of his concept of culture, religion was unmistakably so. In his own life he held together many languages, and conversed with people from many cultures. He resisted the interpretation of nationalistic culture, and here he would have been much at home with the abundant diasporaic communities of our time. But is the multiplicity of religious cultures itself religiously desirable?

Section 4: Religions and Cultures

And so, I turn to Cambridge. Before I do, I wish to make a brief detour to Pakistan– to a complex society that engages directly the insights that cultures gain their full depth from religion, and if the political tensions map and do not map on top of the religious differences, the recognition that what might

have been a minority religion could thrive as religion in a separate institutionalized state is a dramatic and still difficult lesson from Iqbal.

But I turn to Cambridge because the Cambridge Inter-Faith Program is setting out a new path to embrace the diversity of the cultures of the world– by focusing on the diversity of religions. The Interfaith program does not set its goal as the formation of a single world religion, but rather the active and scholarly engagement with other religions, and in the first instance the Abrahamic ones. In that context several years ago I met Muhammad Suheyl Umar here in Cambridge. We met in a group called Scriptural Reasoning, where we were reading the holy writings of those three traditions. I am a philosopher but Umar is a man of great culture. And we met to learn from each other how our distinct religions interpreted their holy texts. Interpretation of scripture requires insights into poetry and language, as well as the rigors of conceptual thought– but it was not our interdisciplinary exchange that spawned our friendship, but our religious commitment to our own traditions and to the conversation with the other. We conversed over texts diverse in religion and in languages. In the fellowship of studying together we have begun to learn about each other's religions, and also about our cultures. But I wish to focus on the possibilities for multiple religions and the place of the university to foster this conversation. For what purifies our own traditions is this close engagement with another tradition, and the freedom of the university makes possible a level of interchange that in a civic setting might not be possible.

So as we face the future of Religion in the 21st century, then just as we are slowly learning to cherish and nourish the multiplicity of cultures, we can also learn to hold a deep conversation that preserves and supports the multiplicity of our religions. It may be for some that the tension between religions limits them to exchange and conversation at the more diffuse cultural level; but the deepest conversation awaits us between religions, and to hold that conversation will likely take the leadership of the university. By cultivating our desires to learn, a desire that can be purified in conversation across cultures and even more across religions, the university can teach us to find that deepest ground for the cultural conversation. And through the intensive study and comparison of languages, cultures, and religions, the university trains us to see that ignorance and idolatry are the sources of our

aversion to cherishing the bounty of the multiplicity we see in our world. Thus the word 'and' of my title shows us that the diversity of cultures points to the abundance of blessings in the diversity of religions, even as the abundance of religions nurtures the bounty of cultures.

And if Iqbal left Cambridge prepared to write the poetry that would one day fashion a dynamic for the founding of Pakistan, creating a new relation between religion and culture; then one hundred years later we can learn to create new relations between cultures and religions.