

Iqbal and Islamic Thought

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Though much has been written on Muslim thought in the modern period, according to H. A. R. Gibb, “One looks in vain for any systematic analysis of new currents of thought in the Muslim world.” This is because almost all the books written in English or French fall in the category of apologetics which seek either to defend Islam or show its conformity with contemporary thinking. In Gibb’s judgment, the “Outstanding exception is ... Sir Muhammad Iqbal, who in his six lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* faces outright the question of reformulating the basic ideas of Muslim theology” and demands “a fresh examination of the fundamentals of Islamic belief.”

Gibb refers to the following passage in which “a new formulation of Islamic theology is openly proclaimed by Iqbal”: “Nor can the concepts of theological systems, draped in the terminology of a practically dead metaphysics, be of any help to those who happen to possess a different intellectual background. The task before the modern Muslim is, therefore, immense. He has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us.”

In W.C. Smith’s view, theologically, Iqbal “wrought the most important and the most necessary revolution of modern times.” He did this by making God not merely transcendent but also immanent. Elaborating upon this point Smith states, “The revolution of immanence lies in this, that it puts God back into the world. Iqbal’s God is in the world, now, with us, facing our problems from within, creating a new and better world with us and through us. Religion is life. And life, this mundane material life, is religious. The present world, of matter, time and space is good. God himself, and all the values, rewards, ideals and objectives of religion become transferred to the empirical world. Correspondingly, the will of God is not something imposed from without to be accepted resignedly, but surges within (and) is to be absorbed and acted upon.” Gibb also considers Iqbal’s lectures to be “the first (and so far the only) thoroughgoing attempt to state the theology of Islam in modern immanentist terms.”

Throughout his writings, Iqbal laid great emphasis on humanity's creative capability. He said "both God and man live by perpetual creation. The artist is an associate of God and feels the contact of time and eternity in his soul." Iqbal constantly stresses the role that a human being plays in shaping "his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes. And in this process of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him, provided man takes the initiative."

Gibb observed insightfully that the theology that Iqbal was aiming to reconstruct was not the orthodox theology of Islam but the Sufi theology. In my view, Iqbal was trying to reform contemporary Sufi thinking and practices in the light of his understanding of the Qur'anic perspective on the relationship of humanity to God and creation. He was a reformer not only of Sufi theology but also of what was taken by many to be Sufi ethic. In a sense, Iqbal is a mystic in revolt against mysticism.

He protests unceasingly and vehemently against the ideal of passive contemplation and self-renunciation so dear to many mystics. He refers to the Qur'an's emphasis on "deed" and says that it is contrary to the true spirit of Islam to turn away from the joy and struggle of actual living and seek refuge in otherworldliness. Iqbal's Ideal Person does not retreat from the world but regards it as the training ground for spiritual development.

Despite all his attacks on what he calls "degenerate Sufism," Iqbal belongs, as A. J. Arberry has stated, "to the history of Sufism, to which he made both scientific and practical contributions." Iqbal acknowledges his indebtedness to "higher Sufism" which did so much to check hypocrisy and artifice in religion. In a letter to Professor Nicholson, he stated that his philosophy of "*khudi*" was a "direct development out of the experience and speculation of old Muslim Sufis and thinkers." Arberry rightly observes that eager as Iqbal was to purge Islam of all alien obscurantist elements, in formulating his own philosophy "not only did he turn back to Rumi and the medieval mystics to discover antecedents within Islam for the system for which he sought acceptance, but he cast his thoughts in the mould of Sufi allegory that has been sanctified by centuries of Persian poetry."

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