

OSWALD SPENGLER AND MUHAMMAD
IQBAL: TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE
DISCOURSE ON CULTURAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

In the historical heat waves of intellectual revolution as experienced by the western culture, Oswald Spengler in his 'Decline of West' outlined a "Copernican View" of western culture and history of the western man. He dislodged the notion of 'centrality' of western culture. For him different culture-forms of 'mankind' possess equal status and symbolic significance with respect to each other. He proposed 'morphology' and 'physiognomy' of human cultures passing through endless cycles of formations and transformations, growth and decay, like the seasons of the weather or the growth of the plants and other living animals. He refuted a 'Darwinian-Durkheimian-Cometan' view of cultural phenomena to be studied by employing natural scientific methods. He denied 'causality' or 'objectivity' to the historical-cultural forms as it was understood in the studies of natural phenomena. Iqbal treated both Western culture and Islamic culture on equal 'critical' footing. He compared more realistically the weaknesses and strengths of both cultures. Iqbal didn't concede to Spengler's notion of a mutually exclusive historical origin and growth of cultures. He rather proposed in 'Reconstruction' a historical interdependence of human culture. Ideas and concepts of cultures can be translated and diffused into another culture life-form. Iqbal has discussed that 'religious experience' constitutes an epistemological foundation of Islamic culture. 'Religious experience' has as much claim to be an independent source of knowledge-acquisition as 'science' or 'philosophy' do. The ultimate principle of Reality is spiritual which is 'living' and reflected in temporal existence of the natural and historical world. He established this concept of Spiritual Reality by his 'intellectual test' and 'pragmatic test' in his lectures on 'Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam'.

I

Wittgenstein has remarked that western intellectual is engaged in an “epic,”¹ in his quest for understanding the ultimate goal of Western civilization. “Our civilization,” he opines, “is characterized by the word progress but it never really makes progress in the true sense of the word. Typically, it constructs. It keeps on building even more complicated structures.” These ever increasing “complicated structures” of Western culture show their ‘epic-like’ unfolding in diverse historical-cultural forms. What constitute the important characters of this epic like historical saga? It all began with Copernicus. He firstly proposed a ‘helio-centric’ theory of the heavenly bodies, challenging the ‘geocentric’ view of the cosmos. Copernicus asserted that it was the sun, which was the ‘centre’ of our ‘universe’ and not ‘earth,’ as was commonly held by the Christians and believers of Ptolemaic astronomy. At first this Copernican assertion appeared a simple intellectual principle. But it had profound cultural consequences for the commonly believed Christian religious view of the cosmos. It shattered the notion of the centrality of the mother earth in the Scheme of Natural Order of Things. It challenged a Christian dogma which constituted an article of faith for the Roman Catholic Church. Here was a first secular and rational view of the nature’s scheme of things, which sent shivers down the spine of western Christianity. This was the first intellectual ‘heresy’ of modern western culture. The ‘epic,’ of which Wittgenstein spoke about, began to be played on a large historical scale for the entire humanity to watch. After Copernicus, comes forth Galileo, who declared, on the basis of his ‘scientific’ investigations, and contrary to the Christian view that the earth moves. His scientific theory of motion challenged the idea of a static view of the world. Here was another ‘heresy.’ After this second character in the European ‘epic,’ one is astonished to see the entry of Descartes, who laid the foundations of a modern ‘philosophy’ by uttering the dictum of ‘cogito ergo sum,’ thereby placing ‘reason’ as the sole judge of human knowledge. He also dislodged ‘scholastic philosophy’ forever from the philosophical outlook of the western culture. Cartesian rationalism, propounded a human metaphysic of reality, contrary to the Divine metaphysic of Christianity, in which Bible, being the

world of Lord, constituted a spiritual paradigm of reality. This was questioned by Descartes, whose 'dualism' has ever since it emerged, remained a dominant epistemological view which either inspired or reduced to heap the major philosophical outpourings of the Western philosophers. Fourth important character in European 'epic,' happened to be an Englishman, Sir Isaac Newton. He completely revolutionized the concept of the 'natural philosophy.' He ushered a new stage in the development of western culture by his laws of classical physics. He proposed a mechanical view of the natural phenomena, which obeyed the principle of causality inwardly, thus paving a way out for a Prime Mover, a God to control or direct the world of Nature. Newtonian science and Cartesian rational philosophy, found its supreme synthesis in the person of Immanuel Kant. No one has been more significant and influential in the development of modern western culture, than this 'Uncanny Scot of Konigsberg.' Born to strict Puritan parents, he bade farewell to the notion of 'metaphysics' of Absolute Being and the place of God in the mundane affairs of human beings. His 'Critique of Pure Reason' not only showed way to the reason to recognize its 'limits' and 'antinomies,' but also shrug off any claims to provide a metaphysic of reality to the modern man. The only sure knowledge was the knowledge gained by the 'sense-perception,' on which science was built. In his 'Copernican Revolution' in philosophy, he endorsed Newtonian mechanics as the paradigm of new metaphysic of reality established by the instrument of human reason and rejecting a Christian metaphysic of reality and knowledge. Kantian synthesis was an epistemological metamorphosis of Western philosophy and its view of reality. This revolution also spread into political, moral, and psychological domains. In the birth pangs of 'Enlightenment,' Voltaire was another important character of this European 'epic.' He vehemently criticized the foundations of political and religious corruption of the 'ancient regime.' His writings inspired generations of men and women in Europe to take their destiny in their own hands and decide their political, civil, and social life, in accordance with the norms of reason, instead following the corrupt practices and authority of Kings and Pastors. Karl Marx was another important character in this West European historical epic. He argued that 'economic forces' determined not only course of history, it influenced, rather conditioned, everything else found in the human societies, be it art, music, religious ideas, heroes, literature, poetry, symbolism etc. He maintained that economic forces, determined the intellectual forms and not vice versa. He therefore, argued that the movement of historical-cultural forms was inexplicably rooted in the

conflicting economic interest of different classes. 'History of mankind is a history of class-wars', was his clarion call in the Communist Manifesto. But, it was Charles Darwin, who dislodged the Christian dogma from its penultimate superiority. His theory of 'natural selection,' provided an 'evolutionary' interpretation to the origin of life on the earth, including man himself, instead of a theory of 'Creation,' as ordained by the Christian religious views. This was a serious blow to the notion of man as the centre stage of all creative activity going on in the natural and social worlds. It took a life time for Nietzsche to pronounce the 'death of God' as a cultural reality of the western man's world. But Sigmund Freud went far deeper in his psychological theory. He dislodged human 'ego' from the centre of his existential structure, which controlled, motivated and organized his being. This ego gave him coherence, consistency and constancy in his relationships with nature and the cosmos. Freud said, it was not 'ego,' but the 'unconscious mind' behind a dark, repressed, complex labyrinth of desires, mostly unfulfilled, which 'directed' the psychological existence of man. In the historical heat waves of these currents of intellectual revolution as experienced by the western culture, Oswald Spengler in his 'Decline of West' outlined a "Copernican View"² of western culture and history of the western man. He dislodged the notion of 'centrality' of western culture. For him different culture-forms of 'mankind' possess equal status and symbolic significance with respect to each other. He proposed 'morphology' and 'physiognomy' of human cultures passing through endless cycles of formations and transformations, growth and decay, like the seasons of the weather or the growth of the plants and other living animals. He refuted a 'Darwinian-Durkhiemian-Cometan' view of cultural phenomena to be studied by employing natural scientific methods. He denied 'causality' or 'objectivity' to the historical-cultural forms as it was understood in the studies of natural phenomena. He talked about the 'destiny-principle' governing the structures of historical-cultural growth and decay, forever trapped in the flux of time and change. The 'becoming' was continuously unfolded in the historical-cultural forms, especially in music, drama, poetry and literature, contrary to the 'become' of the natural world, forever frozen and condemned to the realm of 'objectivity' of science. He talked about the 'living nature' of history in relation to the 'dead nature' of science. His ideas were 'new' and revolutionary, rather 'Copernican,' in outlook in the studies of cultural and historical forms, as unfolding on the stage of world-history. Therefore, historians like Collingwood, Toynbee,³ and others have shown little sympathy towards his 'ideas' on history and culture, who

were mainly engaged in a 'scientific,' natural science like methodological study of cultural-historical world. So, this is an 'epic' in which western man and his culture-form is perpetually engrossed, very complex, very diverse, highly passionate, and very much down to earth material-secular and human world view, which require profound effort to infer its symbolic-complexities. How one compares ideas of Spengler, grown in this volatile cultural world, with Iqbal, a man though fully conversant and adapt in western intellectual tradition, never lost grip of the inherently spiritual world-view of his Islamic culture. This is a rather trying to say the unsayable, which happens to be complex and manifold. Before attempting an analysis of comparative features of Spengler and Iqbal's concept of culture, let us see what was happening in the Islamic world, in terms of its cultural-historical forms on intellectual-spiritual plane.

II

When West Europe was transforming itself from the 'Western Christendom' to a modern, secular, worldly, materialistic, democratic, western republican, who put their 'faith' as well as hope in the 'discoveries of science, philosophy, art, music, mathematics, biology, and physics for their future course of existence from the 15th century onward; Muslims in the east were establishing politically dynamic empires of India, in Iran and Turkey. Babar, Shah Abbas and Suleiman the Magnificent inspired and guided the hearts of not only Muslims but west was also enchanted by the 'marvels' of the east. There Muslim empires in the east, especially in the aftermath of the fall of the Spanish Empire on the Iberian Peninsula, galvanized the future hopes of Muslims all around the world. Consolidation of political rule led to cultural growth and development in these respective societies. In Islamic Mughal India, creative energy of Muslims coming form Iran, Arabia, Central Asia and Tashkent, led to the birth of a new civil society in India. Original 'discoveries' and contributions were made in the field of architecture,⁴ music,⁵ poetry,⁶ literature,⁷ history,⁸ and Sufism.⁹ However, all these areas of creative cultural-expressions were deeply influenced and directed by the religious, spiritual and Sufi thought. While western world was undergoing 'intellectual' revolutions of different kinds, Islamic world was experiencing 'spiritual revolutions,' one after the other. Firstly, it was Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (B 1564 – India), who lived during the reign of Emperors Akbar and his son Jahangir. He exposed his Sufi metaphysics of 'wahdat-ul-shahud' He reinvigorated the 'spiritual,' religious existence of the Muslims, not only in India, but his spiritual ideas also spread to central Asia, Turkey, and even Arabia by his

disciples. He was a profound synthesizer of religious-philosophical doctrines in the Islamic world. He particularly transformed the 'cultural' influence of the 'unificationist' doctrine of 'wahdat-ul-wajud' school of Ibn e Arabi by propounding a comparable Sufi doctrine of 'wahdat-ul-shahud'. He refuted the 'unificationist' tendencies of the philosophy of 'wahdat,' thereby providing a new psychology of 'religious experience,' in which God and man maintained their separate identities in the wake of mystic experience of union. This idea led to profound social, cultural, and political convulsions, in the body-politic of Indian Muslims. He protected not only the religious identity of the Islamic culture in South Asia, but also provided a historical antecedent of 'Muslim identity' which according to some, led to the genesis of Islamic Republic of Pakistan.¹⁰

Islamic east underwent another 'spiritual' revolution in the 18th century; in Arabia led by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab, in India Shah Waliullah of Delhi, in North Africa Muhammad bin Ali Al-Sanussi, all aimed at in varying degrees and from different intellectual motivations of the 'purification' of Islam and Islamic society, restoring its moral and spiritual balance as enshrined in Quran and Sunnah, with a creative religious response to the immanent danger of western 'colonialism,' facing the survival of Islamic culture as an historical reality. Although these religious Ulemas failed in the cultural-social aspect of their teaching, albeit, somehow, they were able to put off the 'decline' of Islamic culture, which happened to be mainly 'religious' and sustain its continuous growth, development and hold in the Islamic cultural life-form. They worked in their own way to manage the ongoing political 'decay' of Islamic political authority, which they feared, might have grave and serious consequences for the cultural life of these societies; this, they could not achieve. However, it was in the religious-spiritual sphere that they galvanized their creative energies and were able to successfully cultivate the religious doctrine of a Muslim's unique place in the world and his 'moral' mission as a recipient of the Last Word of God, i.e. the Quran to guide and lead the rest of humanity spiritually. 'Colonialism' was eventually triumphant in the Islamic world, owing more to 'internal decay of these societies than to any unique ability of the western colonizers'. Even the humdrum of Mughal 'disintegration' in South Asia and overpowering of Muslim state by an alien nation, hitherto inexperienced by them, could not stop the birth of new cultural form-expression, i.e. the birth of Urdu language. This amply showed the inner dynamic cultural spirit of the Muslims of South Asia. This was the language in which even Iqbal

found his creative surges satisfied and became an instrument of expression of his philosophical, poetic, and literary ideas. Despite the political domination of the Muslim culture by an alien colonial power, its volatile spiritual and creative energy, which was rooted in its unique sense of 'identity,' could not be overtaken by the newcomers. It was in these volatile conditions that Iqbal attempted his 'reconstruction' of religious thought in Islam, which happened to be monumental, and historical in its impact upon the minds of young Muslims, who were reaching for a new 'intellectual'¹¹ vision in the wake of an external colonial rule, coupled with a challenge from its secular materialistic-scientific world-view. Iqbal's interpretation of Islamic culture in "Reconstruction," thus paved the way for what, he himself described an "Islamic Renaissance,"¹² which he believed to be historically inevitable and set forth to happen by Destiny.

III

The future of mankind, as it appears today, rests on this single most urgent historical condition; that how West and Islam, representatives of two different views of culture, can establish a mutually comprehensible cultural exchange-process, which could lead to "mutual-harmonies" – instead of "clash of civilizations,"¹³ Spengler and Iqbal both belong to each of these intellectually divergent culture-souls, how, then, their philosophies of culture can be compared. Comparison is always a much generalized form of critical understanding of others point of view, yet it does occur within a cultural paradigm and its relationship vis-à-vis other forms of cultural paradigms. Within this general theoretical assumption, that divergent cultural paradigm can be compared philosophically due to an inward desire of human beings to do so; we now undertake critical analysis of some of the comparable features of their 'philosophies' of culture.

Both of them have argued that 'culture' is essentially a 'living' thing, like an organism or a plant, having a definite temporal life-span, through which it passes. Spengler having derived his theoretical illumination mostly from Goethean concept of 'metamorphosis,'¹⁴ rejected a 'natural science' and causally governed interpretation of cultural-historical forms. Spengler argued that 'after a culture-soul has found full life-form expression, it ripens, matures and then withers away'. Each 'culture-soul' is unique, exclusive, independent with regard to other 'culture-souls' and is rooted in a 'mother-regions,' from which it receives its inspiration and spiritual energy. Categories of cognition of a culture can't be understood by other cultures. Principle of temporality, of time instead of space, of continuous formations and transformations, of change and decay,

influence and direct the course of a culture. It is a time-directed, irreversible activity. In this manner, “destiny-idea” works out the irrevocable historical end of every culture. He remarks that European mind has excluded the study of the ‘living,’ ‘historical,’ ‘physiognomic’ in favor of the ‘dead,’ ‘natural’ and ‘systematic’ sciences. ‘History,’ he claims, provide us a ‘morphology’ of culture-forms of mankind, and thus qualifies as an independent source of knowledge, a mode of understanding the structure of reality, and the inner feeling of a culture-soul. Spengler, on the basis of his ‘physiognomic’ interpretation of culture life-forms, comes up with a three fold categorization of culture-soul, representing a particular culture life-form. These are:

- i. Classical or Apollonian soul, which in his opinion is fundamentally static and ‘proportion’ being a symbolic-form of its space-idea.
- ii. Faustian soul, of modern western culture is inherently dynamic and ‘infinite’ space, being a symbolic-form of its space-idea.
- iii. Magian soul, in which he has included Judaism, Christianity, Chaldean religion and Zoroastrianism along with Islam as being its last representative, is inherently very ‘religious,’ dualistic, apocalyptic, and ancient-‘cavern’ being a symbolic-form of its space idea.

All these culture-forms have a clear-cut notion of ‘Destiny’ or ‘Time,’ which govern their life-styles; with the difference that in ‘Faustian culture’ time have assumed its real ‘dynamic,’ ‘directional,’ irreversible’ and real ‘chronological,’ ‘historical’ character, while in ‘Apollonian culture’ time is essentially static, nothing moves, like the closed-off Greek ‘cosmos.’ In the ‘Magian culture,’ however, time has a different character. It is ‘cavernous-time,’ it moves in ‘epochal’ fashion, a continuous repetition of good and evil forces struggling with each other. He however, strangely classifies Islam as part of this ‘magian culture,’ category owing to his theoretical inability to perceive the ‘dynamic’ culture-soul of Islam and its creative view of the world, which is essentially different in structure and substance from Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. He has misunderstood the ‘cultural movement’¹⁵ of Islam, which has historically curbed the wave of ‘magian’-emotion from its cultural outlook by abolishing the institution of prophecy in its idea of “finality of prophet hood.”¹⁶

Contrary to Spengler’s inspiration, Iqbal’s ‘organic’ view of culture grew out of three intellectual sources. He made a theoretical juxtaposition of:

- i. social Darwinianism and post-Darwinian biology,¹⁷
- ii. critical-rational philosophy,¹⁸
- iii. concept of religious experience as defined in Islamic philosophical and Sufi tradition.¹⁹

Iqbal treated both Western culture and Islamic culture on equal 'critical' footing. He compared more realistically the weaknesses and strengths of both cultures. Iqbal didn't concede to Spengler's notion of a mutually exclusive historical origin and growth of cultures. He rather proposed in 'Reconstruction' a historical interdependence of human culture. Ideas and concepts of cultures can be translated and diffused into another culture life-form. Iqbal has discussed that 'religious experience' constitutes an epistemological foundation of Islamic culture. 'Religious experience' has as much claim to be an independent source of knowledge-acquisition as 'science' or 'philosophy' do. The ultimate principle of Reality is spiritual which is 'living' and reflected in temporal existence of the natural and historical world. He established this concept of Spiritual Reality by his 'intellectual test' and 'pragmatic test' in his lectures on 'Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam'. This spiritual principle of Reality is Absolute Ego or God. God, or Eternal Being, provide a common principle of 'Tawhid,' which is psychologically manifold and critically established by the 'prophetic consciousnesses. The 'prophetic consciousnesses' shapes view of the universe for the Muslims. This Tawhidi doctrine was first pragmatically applied by the Prophet of Islam and his Companions who laid the foundations of Islamic culture historically. The practical soul of Arabs was cross-fertilized by the tender and imaginative soul of Aryan culture in Persia, which gave an impetus to the birth of new expression-forms in poetry, language, literature, architecture, and civilization-building. The Islamic culture-soul, in Iqbal's view, held an essentially religious dynamic, creative, interdependent, spiritual world-feeling. It has expressed its 'spirit' both in the studies of 'Nature' and 'History.' Iqbal claims that Quran, as a revealed text and basis of Islamic ideas, continuously exhorted the Muslim mind to reflect, think, observe, and evaluate the 'signs' of God in Nature, in universe, in sun, in the moon, in the alteration of days and nights, in the rise and fall of nations and societies, in the growth and decay of cultures, in the distinctions of races, tribes and languages. Iqbal has shown that Muslims rejected the classical Greek philosophical thought in the first century of their birth as it was contradictory to its dynamic spirit. This was because of the 'naturalism of Quran' and its 'empirical attitude' towards reality. This 'empirical attitude' of the Muslims was due to the teachings of Quran and the Prophet of

Islam. This he thought, made the Muslims to be the founders of modern science. He has shown that the scientific form-expression of modern western culture was the further extension of dynamic scientific works of Ibn Hazm, Ibn-i-Miskawiyah, Ibn Khaldun, and others. He rejected Spengler's claim that the mathematical concept of function was the exclusive product of western culture and 'chronological' ordering of historical phenomena was unique to it.²⁰ Iqbal has shown that due to its historical character, Islamic culture has since its birth made the study of changes and transformations in the people's life; one of its principal concern. Quran has described 'history' and 'nature' as two distinct sources of knowledge, along with 'religious experience.' Iqbal, nonetheless regretted the 'intellectual stupor' of Islamic world, in which it was trapped for the lost so many centuries, while west made significant scientific and intellectual discoveries on the basis of the scientific legacy of Muslim thinkers. He observes 'critically' that social, political thought in Europe is stagnant for the last 300 years, while 'legal' and 'religious' thought in Islamic world has been²¹ static for the same period. Western culture, with its 'dazzling exterior,' can thwart the understanding of Muslim mind for reaching towards deeper aspects of its spiritual 'inwardness.'²² He has discussed the possibility of a 'spiritual democracy'²³ organized on the principle of 'Tawhid,' steeped in human solidarity, equality, and freedom, contrary to the western 'nationalist' political theory of state and state organization, which was detrimental to the spiritual growth of human beings.²⁴

Western culture can learn from the 'ethical' and 'spiritual' grounds of Islam, on which it is confused, despite all claims to material-secular progress. Muslims can make a scientific-critical reevaluation of their 'religious' ideas of reality, of life, of death, of knowledge, as unfolding in the western world.²⁵ The 'Islamic Renaissance'²⁶ which, he spoke of in 'Reconstruction,' was fundamentally a new culture-form for the inherently religious world-view of Islamic culture in a contemporary idiom and styles. Iqbal questioned narrow cliché-type description of either western culture or Islamic culture. He proposed a program of intellectually beneficial exchange in both the world, leading towards a true growth of mankind in a cohesive fashion, both materially and spiritually. Iqbal cherished the vision of 'mutual harmonies' and not that of 'clash of civilizations.'

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