

REVISITING IQBAL'S INTELLECTUAL
LEGACY: IN CONTEXT OF 1ST LECTURE
OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

Allama Iqbal's poetry and prose, particularly his seminal work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, remains a rich intellectual resource offering profound insights into spiritual and ethical life. Iqbal's lectures, delivered in response to a Westernized audience grappling with uncertainty about Islam's teachings, address themes that resonate today, particularly in the context of modern challenges. In an age where materialism, ideological confusion, and skepticism toward religious truths dominate, there is a pressing need to revisit Iqbal's thoughts for guidance. Iqbal emphasizes that spiritual insight, achievable through discipline and hard work, serves as a key to understanding both individual and societal dilemmas. His lectures explore how Islam, through its unified approach to the spiritual and material realms, offers answers to modern intellectual and existential questions. Iqbal identifies three critical issues: the implications of scientific discoveries, the dominance of materialism, and the misinterpretation of Sufism. He critiques how Sufism's essence has been distorted, reducing its role in empowering Muslims for active engagement in life. Iqbal's intellectual framework revolves around spiritual observation, deeply rooted in Sufism, as a legitimate source of knowledge. He highlights the need to integrate spiritual insight with modern scientific understanding and suggests that faith-based spiritual observation can drive moral behavior, providing strength to uphold high ethical standards. In his lectures, Iqbal distinguishes spiritual observation from empirical sciences, placing it in its own unique category. Iqbal also stresses that moral perfection aligns individuals with the divine plan, allowing them to transcend the duality of matter and spirit. He advocates for the practical transformation of faith into action, guided by figures like Rumi and Ibn Arabi, whose teachings provide key principles for spiritual development. Iqbal calls for a revival of Islamic Sufism, emphasizing that spiritual observation must be adapted to contemporary intellectual frameworks, making it accessible and meaningful for today's challenges. His work ultimately seeks to reassert the relevance of Islam as a dynamic and comprehensive worldview that harmonizes spiritual and material aspects of life.

Allama Iqbal's poetry and prose, particularly his Lectures, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, form an intellectual and cultural treasure that continues to offer life-affirming insights. In light of evolving circumstances, it is essential to revisit and re-interpret Iqbal's writings in the context of current challenges. When Iqbal delivered his Lectures, his audience consisted of those deeply influenced by Western intellectual thought, many of whom were uncertain about Islam's foundational teachings and concepts. Consequently, the themes Iqbal addressed and the manner in which he presented them were shaped by the demands of his time.

Today, the task before us is to explore how Iqbal's ideas, as conveyed in his Lectures, can be harnessed to address the unique challenges we face. While the issues that preoccupied Iqbal's original audience may differ from those confronting readers today, the need for guidance remains. Contemporary challenges go beyond mere fascination with Western thought. They now encompass questions about the purpose of collective existence after independence, a weakening belief in the ideological foundation upon which this nation was established, and the diminishing relevance of traditional religious and spiritual institutions. Additionally, there is an increasing skepticism regarding religious truths.

The pressing question now is: how can Iqbal's thought provide solutions to these modern dilemmas? Iqbal emphasized that spiritual insight is not attainable without dedication, hard work, and disciplined effort. Achieving spiritual insight requires the establishment of a clear framework that meets these demands, guiding us toward understanding and addressing the challenges of our time.

The central aim of the ideas presented by Allama Iqbal in his Lectures is to demonstrate the relevance and authenticity of Islam in light of the evolving trends in civilization, knowledge, and thought worldwide.¹ Iqbal outlines several reasons for this necessity:

1. Modern Scientific Developments and Discoveries: As humanity gains mastery over the environment and the universe, new perspectives emerge that challenge traditional views. Man's growing control over the forces of nature, coupled with new scientific experiences, is transforming the way old problems are understood. A fresh perspective and approach are required to address longstanding issues. Human intellect is now expanding beyond the traditional

limits of time, space, and causality. With the advancement of scientific thought, particularly after Einstein's theory of relativity, our understanding of knowledge, perception, and the universe has changed.²

2. Dominance of Materialism : Another significant factor was the materialistic ideology promoted by communist Russia during Iqbal's time, which aggressively propagated atheism and anti-Islamic sentiments. This materialistic emphasis, though rooted in communism, persists in various forms even today. Iqbal recognized the need to counter this narrative and reaffirm the spiritual and ethical foundations of Islam in response to materialist ideologies that continue to influence modern society.³

3- Misinterpretation of Sufism- A Historical Crisis : Sufism, which once served as a profound spiritual force for awakening the inner life of Muslims, was misinterpreted over time, leading to negative consequences. Instead of fostering inner strength and active participation in life, it became associated with false monasticism, ignorance, and spiritual slavery.⁴ Allama Iqbal noted that the mystical approach which had been the most vibrant expression of religious life in both the East and the West during the Middle Ages, had now largely failed. This failure, particularly in the Muslim world, stemmed from the distortion of Sufi teachings.

Under this distorted form, Sufism no longer inspired the common person to develop their inner life and engage actively in the world. Instead, it promoted passivity, detachment from worldly responsibilities, and an acceptance of ignorance and spiritual subjugation. The dynamic role of Sufism, which had once preserved the vitality of Islamic civilization, was diminished to the point where it no longer served the common man. Rather than preparing individuals to participate in history and contribute to societal progress, it taught resignation and contentment with the status quo.

This decline in Sufism's role was especially evident during the period of Western imperialism in the subcontinent. The distorted version of Sufism was manipulated to strip Muslims of the true spirit of *Jihad* (struggle) and *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning), depriving them of the vigor needed to resist colonialism and engage in meaningful progress. Iqbal highlighted this misinterpretation as a critical issue, urging a revival of Sufism's true purpose—reinvigorating the spiritual and practical life of Muslims.⁵

Allama Iqbal emphasizes that the purpose of the Holy Qur'an is to cultivate a deep and holistic awareness of the various dimensions of human existence, particularly in relation to God and the universe. This awareness is grounded in the principle of unity,

which Islam articulates in a comprehensive manner. Iqbal outlines the following key points regarding this concept of unity:

1. Unity Between Spiritual and Material Realms : Iqbal asserts that Islam does not reject the spiritual aspect; rather, it builds upon them in a more comprehensive way. In Islam, the spiritual principle that governs the relationship between man and God is not detached from the material world, but rather intertwined with it. ⁶ Islam teaches that the material world is not in conflict with spirituality; instead, external materialism is illuminated and guided by the light of spirituality. Therefore, true spiritual development requires aligning our connection with the external forces of the material world through our inner spiritual light. This unified approach integrates both spiritual and material aspects of existence, creating a balanced and holistic worldview. ⁷

2. The Interconnection of the Ideal and the Real : Iqbal emphasizes that the material and spiritual aspects of the universe are not contradictory, but deeply connected. He argues that the ideal (spiritual) and the real (material) are not in opposition, but rather the ideal gives life and meaning to the real. The real, or material existence, draws its vitality from the ideal, and without this connection, life becomes fragmented and divided. The ideal infuses the real with purpose, and through this relationship, we can gain deeper understanding and realization of the ideal. This balance between the ideal and the real is crucial for maintaining the organic unity of life. ⁸

3. Islam's Unified Approach to Reality : In Islam, there is no separation between the mathematical exterior (the measurable aspects of the universe) and the biological interior (the life forces within). Similarly, there is no division between the subject (the individual) and the object (the material world). Unlike other religious or spiritual systems that may separate or conflict the spiritual self from the material world, Islam emphasizes their mutual relationship. Islam provides a path through which humanity can conquer and harmonize the material world using a realistic, spiritually guided approach. Iqbal stresses that the unity of life, as outlined by Islam, affirms man's relationship with both God and the universe, ensuring that the ideal and the real are in harmony. ⁹

Iqbal further elaborates on this concept in his social and political thought, where he asserts that the religious objectives of Islam are organically linked to its social order. He stresses this unity in his famous Allahabad Lecture, where he declares that Islam's religious goals are directly tied to its social and political structures. This, according to Iqbal, reflects the Islamic understanding of life as an

integrated whole, where spiritual, social, and material realms work in concert to promote human progress and development. Iqbal says:

The religious ideal of Islam is, therefore, organically related to the social order which it has created.¹⁰

To fully grasp the essence of the first Lecture, it is essential to consider the following key points:

1. Purpose and Context of the Lectures : It is important to understand why these Lectures were delivered, their overarching purpose, and the specific questions they addressed. What were the pressing issues that Allama Iqbal sought to resolve through his discussions? The Lectures were aimed at answering critical questions related to the relationship between religion, modernity, and evolving intellectual trends, providing guidance in a time of ideological confusion.

2. The Dynamic Nature of the Qur'an's Worldview : According to Iqbal, the Qur'anic worldview is anti-classical, meaning that it does not view the universe as static or finalized. Rather, the Qur'an presents the universe as dynamic, constantly evolving, and marked by continuous creation. The present age requires a re-examination of the relationship between God, the universe, and humanity based on the consciousness imparted by the Qur'an. It is essential to redefine humanity's role in light of these changing perceptions of the universe and provide a solid foundation for moral and ethical character development in today's world.

3. Spiritual Basis and Rational Understanding : The comprehensive foundation for this understanding is spiritual, and its effects can be observed in the material world. The question arises: how can we comprehend this spiritual basis using rational, logical, and emotional observation? Iqbal argues that spirituality is not an abstract concept but one that can be approached through reason, emotion, and logic. By using these faculties, it is possible to recognize the interconnectedness of the material and spiritual realms, thereby gaining a more profound understanding of the universe and our place within it.

4. Spiritual Observation as Knowledge: The foundation of knowledge discussed by Allama Iqbal is supported and validated through spiritual observation, a phenomenon deeply rooted in Sufism. In the context of Iqbal's Lectures, the term "religion" does not refer to religion in its conventional sense, but rather to the spiritual system of Islam, specifically Sufism.¹¹ Iqbal's aim in the first Lecture is to establish spiritual observation, or religious experience, as a legitimate and authentic source of knowledge. He seeks to demonstrate that revelation, as a form of spiritual insight, is the

ultimate guide for humanity. This spiritual observation, therefore, is not only central to Iqbal's purpose but also engages with contemporary intellectual challenges.

5. The Ethical Power of Spiritual Observation: The knowledge gained through spiritual observation is essential for the ethical foundation of life. The motivation, courage, passion, and willingness to sacrifice required to uphold high moral values and priorities are not derived from intellectual reasoning alone but are driven by the spiritual force of religion. The religious spirit empowers individuals to practice such elevated moral standards in a meaningful way.¹²

6. Distinction of Spiritual Observation as a Unique Source of Knowledge beyond Western Thought: In his first Lecture, Iqbal discusses the characteristics of religious experience by referencing William James to address the concerns of a Westernized audience. However, Iqbal clarifies that these characteristics, while necessary for the time, do not represent the full scope of spiritual observation. They are not intended to serve as definitive descriptions of spiritual phenomena. Iqbal not only addresses the potential criticisms of these characteristics but also distinguishes spiritual observation as a distinct source of knowledge, separate from the empirical sciences such as physics, chemistry, or psychology. Despite being informed by modern scientific thought, Iqbal places spiritual observation in its own unique category, as he explains further in subsequent discussions.

7. Moral Perfection and Spiritual Dominion: The firm foundation of spiritual observation is rooted in morality, which is why Sufism is often described as the embodiment of pure ethics. A person who attains moral perfection becomes eligible to align with the divine will or participate in the divine plan. High moral standards, along with the alignment of one's inner and outer self, enable a person to transcend the duality of matter and spirit. Attributes like kindness, forgiveness, and benevolence are essential for conquering the universe in a spiritual sense. According to Allama Iqbal, these qualities allow individuals to embody divine attributes and, in accordance with God's will, unlock the potential to govern and influence the universe.

8. From Belief to Action: Spiritual observation is about transforming faith from mere conceptual belief into a tangible and active reality of life. It is not limited to theoretical discussions or academic debates but requires a continuous moral and practical struggle. This struggle must be undertaken under the guidance of experienced teachers who have already traversed these spiritual stages. Iqbal himself regarded Maulana Rumi as his spiritual guide,

and Rumi's *Masnavi* provides key principles for navigating this journey. Additionally, the teachings of the great Sufi master Sheikh Akbar Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, particularly in his work *Futubat al-Makkiyya*, offer detailed insights and interpretations on these guiding principles.

9. Living Faith Through Spiritual Observation- A Path to Divine Connection and Universal Understanding: Thus, spiritual observation is not an isolated intellectual exercise; it is a lived, moral practice that enables individuals to actualize their faith, leading to a deeper connection with the divine and a greater understanding of the universe and their role within it.

10. Reviving Islamic Sufism: an Approach to Spiritual Observation and Knowledge: In these Lectures, Allama Iqbal laid the groundwork for the revival of Islamic Sufism by establishing spiritual observation as a legitimate source of knowledge. He emphasized the need to develop methods of spiritual observation that align with the intellectual framework of the modern mind, rather than relying solely on extraordinary effort and struggle. Iqbal recognized that these methods should be accessible and relatable to contemporary individuals, allowing them to understand and adopt this approach. Finding the answer to what these methods entail is essential for guiding individuals on the path of spiritual realization in today's world.

Summary of the First Lecture

The starting point of this Lecture is centered around fundamental questions regarding the nature of the universe, our relationship with it, and our attitude toward it. Understanding the universe in its true form and accurately defining humanity's place within it are crucial concerns. Allama Iqbal argues that only religion offers a comprehensive answer to these questions. The primary goal of religion is to transform and guide both the inner and outer aspects of human life. Therefore, understanding the essential truths necessary to grasp the fundamental teachings of religion is crucial for developing a complete understanding of our existence and purpose. At the outset of the first Lecture, Allama Iqbal outlines the objectives, which extend beyond simply understanding religious beliefs. He emphasizes the necessity of reinterpreting religious truths in light of modern scientific discoveries and evolving research. The rise of scientific thinking has led to challenges from anti-religious ideas, particularly due to the growing influence of materialism, as exemplified by communist Russia in its subcontinental neighborhood. Additionally, Muslim thinkers, swayed by modern material trends, have begun adopting ideas that conflict with

Qur'anic teachings. With the increasing fear of Western intellectual dominance, it has become crucial to address the need for a modern reformation of Islamic thought to counter these influences and present Islam as a relevant and dynamic worldview in the contemporary era.

One of the key purposes of the Lectures is to present Islam as a universal message for all of humanity. The exploration and understanding of the rational foundations of the universe were initiated by the Holy Prophet himself. The Holy Qur'an provides the spiritual framework that defines humanity's relationship with both the universe and God. According to the Qur'an, there is no conflict or contradiction between the spiritual and material realms. Humanity is entrusted with a creative role and the ability to fulfill God's divine purposes. However, in the past, Muslim thought struggled to fully comprehend and articulate these profound concepts within the Qur'an. This lack of understanding led to an over-reliance on Greek philosophical thought, which caused the life-affirming and dynamic aspects of the Qur'anic message to remain obscured from the perspective of many Muslim thinkers.

The spiritual foundation of man's relationship with God is both understandable and observable. Through faith, an individual can establish a connection with God and acquire knowledge of Him. Human thought plays a significant role in realizing the truth of faith. Faith is not merely a concept; it is a lived practice. Religion is not just an abstract idea or an empty belief system; it is a living, empirical reality. In Islam, there is no contradiction between objectivity and reality. The comprehensibility and observability of the spiritual basis of man's relationship with God are evident in the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), who introduced the understanding of psychological conditions and phenomena. The process of turning faith into an experiential reality is rooted in Islamic thought, rather than being influenced by Western philosophies. This difference highlights a key distinction between the methods of Kant and Al-Ghazali, with Islamic methodology providing a more holistic approach to faith and experience.

This Lecture demonstrates that spiritual observation affirms the faith-based foundation of life. Human thought, through the heart, possesses the unique ability to grasp the reality and efficacy of faith. It is faith, rather than mere rational arguments, that enables individuals to face life's challenges with resilience. The world is full of suffering, and navigating it successfully cannot be achieved solely through rational rules, standards, or measures; spiritual observation is essential for attaining stability. While spiritual observation provides

certainty about our inner foundation and connection with the Self, it is also rich with insight.

In explaining the characteristics of spiritual observation, Allama Iqbal references William James, likely to address the intellectual capacity of his audience at the time. However, while discussing James' views, Allama also critiques several aspects, deeming them insufficient for fully understanding religious experience. He argues that religious passion and spiritual observation cannot be validated as knowledge through mere psychological analysis. This, he notes, is the same failure encountered by modern psychologists like John Locke and David Hume, whose approaches also fell short in capturing the true essence of spiritual experience. The limitations of the characteristics described by William James become evident when we consider that they cannot be applied to the centuries-long religious experiences of Islamic Sufism, nor do they offer any scientific or moral utility. Allama Iqbal himself did not provide examples of this nature in his Lectures. It appears that the concept of spiritual observation, as discussed by Allama, and exemplified through the practical experience of Islamic civilization, needs to be redefined. A clear and structured method for understanding and applying spiritual observation must be established to ensure its relevance and practicality in the modern context.

Main Points of the First Lecture

In the first Lecture, Allama Iqbal outlines the following key points:

1. Purpose of the Lectures :

(i) Understanding the core truths of religion is essential for achieving higher ideals in our lives.

(ii) A new interpretation of religious facts is crucial in light of modern scientific discoveries.

(iii) There is a need to confront the challenges posed by materialism and anti-religious ideologies, particularly from communist Russia.

(iv) As Muslim thinkers are increasingly influenced by modern materialist trends and adopting views contrary to the Qur'an, a reformulation of religious thought is imperative in the contemporary era.

(v) It is vital to address the risk of being intellectually dominated by the West.

(vi) The primary aim of the Lectures is to present Islam as a universal message for all of humanity, offering guidance for life.

2. The Holy Qur'an's Perspective on the Relationship Between Man and the Universe

(i) Islam was the first to initiate research and interpretation on the rational foundation of the universe.

(ii) The Holy Qur'an establishes the universal spiritual foundation for the relationship between man, the universe, and God.

(iii) The Qur'an denies any conflict between the spiritual and material dimensions of existence.

(iv) Humanity possesses the capacity for creative activity and is entrusted with fulfilling God's purposes.

(v) In the past, Muslim thought deviated from the Qur'anic understanding of the universe, leading to a disconnect from its true teachings.

3. The Spiritual Basis of Man's Relationship with God is Understandable and Observable

(i) Through faith, a person can establish a relationship with God and gain knowledge of Him.

(ii) Human thought plays a crucial role in realizing the reality of faith.

(iii) Religion is not just a concept or empty belief; it is a living, experiential reality.

(iv) In Islam, there is no conflict or contradiction between the spiritual and material realms.

(v) The Prophet ﷺ laid the foundation for understanding psychological conditions and phenomena in Islam.

(vi) Islamic thought, rather than Western philosophies, offers a stronger basis for transforming faith into a lived experience.

(vii) There are key differences between the approaches of Kant and Al-Ghazali in understanding faith and reason.

4. Spiritual Observation Validates the Faith-Based Foundation of Life

(i) Human reason is the faculty that enables the perception of the reality and effectiveness of faith.

(ii) The heart is the center of thought that observes and comprehends the true reality of faith.

5. Facing Life's Challenges and Remaining Resilient is Achieved Through Faith, Not Rational Arguments

(i) Human stability amidst the trials and sufferings of life is made possible through the power of faith.

(ii) Spiritual observation and perception play a crucial role in providing the strength and insight needed to endure and overcome these challenges.

6. Characteristics of Spiritual Observation

- (i) The relationship between the characteristics of modern psychology and spiritual observation.
- (ii) Allama Iqbal critiques the characteristics outlined by William James and does not find them fully satisfactory in capturing the depth of spiritual observation.

Notes and References

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- ¹ I **propose** to undertake a philosophical discussion of some of the basic of ideas of Islam, in the hope that this may, at least, be helpful towards a proper understanding of the meaning of **Islam as a message to humanity**. Allama Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p.7
- ² *Reconstruction*, p.6.
- ³ *Reconstruction*, p.6.
- ⁴ *Reconstruction*, pp.148-149.
- ⁵ And in the Muslim East it has, perhaps, done far greater havoc than anywhere else. Far from reintegrating the forces of the average man's inner life, and thus preparing him for participation in the march of history, it [i.e. mysticism] has taught him a **false renunciation** and made him perfectly **contented** with his **ignorance and spiritual thralldom**. *Reconstruction*, pp.148-149
- ⁶ Islam fully agrees with this insight and supplements it by the further insight that the **illumination** of the new world thus revealed is not something foreign to the world of matter but **permeates it through and through**. *Reconstruction*, p.7
- ⁷ ... but by a proper adjustment of man's relation to these **forces** in view of the **light** received from the world **within**. *Reconstruction*, p.7
- ⁸ *Reconstruction*, p.7.
- ⁹ *Reconstruction*, pp.7-8.
- ¹⁰ Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, p.8.
- ¹¹ It is, then, in the sense of this last phase in the development of religious life that **I use the word religion** in the question that I now propose to raise. Religion in this sense is known by the unfortunate name of **Mysticism**, which is supposed to be a life-denying, fact-avoiding attitude of mind directly opposed to the radically empirical outlook of our times. Yet **higher religion**, which is only a search for a larger life, **is essentially experience** and recognized the necessity of experience as its foundation long before science learnt to do so. It is a genuine **effort to clarify human consciousness**, and is, as such, as critical of its level of experience as Naturalism is of its own level. *Reconstruction*, pp.143-144
- ¹² This is the reason why **pure thought** has so **little influenced men**, while **religion** has always **elevated individuals**, and transformed whole societies. The idealism of Europe never became a living factor in her life,The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas of the basis of a **revelation**, which, speaking from the **inmost depths of life**, internalizes its own apparent externality. *Reconstruction*, p.142