

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT AND THE INTERPLAY
OF THOUGHT AND INTUITION IN
ALLAMA IQBAL'S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This article explores Allama Iqbal's profound reflections on the relationship between human thought, religious experience, and the foundations of faith-based life. Iqbal challenges the clear distinctions often made between thought and intuition, arguing that both stem from a common origin and are interlinked in their pursuit of understanding reality. He emphasizes that human thought, while bound by temporal limitations, is inherently dynamic and capable of transcending its perceived finitude to grasp infinite truths. Drawing on concepts such as "Unity of Being" from Sufi philosophy, Iqbal illustrates how thought can evolve beyond logic and merge with spiritual insight. He critiques the limitations imposed by philosophers like Kant and Ghazali, asserting that thought's essence is infinite and must be understood as such to pursue higher knowledge. Iqbal also elaborates on the heart as a means of acquiring divine knowledge, following Ghazali's ideas but with a deeper emphasis on spiritual experience validated through rational and result-based criteria. The heart's illumination, as described by Iqbal, provides access to truths beyond sensory perception and serves as a reliable source of spiritual knowledge. Furthermore, Iqbal discusses the role of faith as a stabilizing force in a challenging world, highlighting how spiritual conviction empowers human beings to overcome obstacles and fulfill their divine purpose. The article delves into Iqbal's assertion that religious experience should be comprehensible and subject to scrutiny, ensuring that religious experience does not become monopolized by a select few. He integrates modern psychological insights, particularly from William James, to describe the characteristics of spiritual experience and its validation. By intertwining intellectual and practical dimensions of faith, Iqbal presents a holistic vision where spiritual experiences shape both individual and collective life, manifesting divine attributes and fostering societal transformation.

In Allama Iqbal's philosophy, spiritual insight emerges as a dynamic interplay between thought and intuition, reflecting a holistic understanding of human consciousness and divine reality. Iqbal emphasizes that true spiritual experience cannot be limited to mere emotional states or abstract rationalizations; instead, it represents an integrated process where intuition and intellect converge to grasp higher truths. He asserts that intuition, often perceived as the heart's domain, is essential for accessing spiritual realities that transcend the limitations of rational thought. However, this does not imply a rejection of reason; rather, Iqbal envisions thought and intuition as complementary faculties. Intuition provides a direct, non-sequential understanding of divine presence and cosmic order, while rational thought articulates, interprets, and gives structure to these insights. This interplay allows spiritual experiences to be both deeply personal and communicable, transforming abstract metaphysical concepts into meaningful, lived realities. Iqbal's philosophy thus advocates for a balance where the intuitive experience of the heart informs the reflective capacities of the mind, fostering a comprehensive approach to understanding existence and the divine. Here are some significant aspects of religious experience and the affirmation of the faith-based foundation of life:

(i) Understanding the Nature of Human Thought and Faith

By stating that both thought and intuition (or spiritual insight) originate from the same root, Allama Iqbal views thought as an initial form of intuition, considering it a bridge leading to religious experience. When Imam Ghazali experienced the knowledge of the Divine after religious experience, he regarded intuition as the means to such knowledge, deeming thought to be finite and inadequate. However, Allama Iqbal disagrees with the notion of drawing a clear boundary between thought and intuition and categorizing them separately. According to Iqbal, thought and intuition are interconnected in their functioning. Thought operates within the realm of time, bound by temporal limitations, and thus is considered finite. However, to conclude from this that thought, being finite, cannot grasp the infinite reality of the Divine is based on a misunderstanding of how knowledge is transformed through thought.¹

Iqbal argues that while it is true that human logical understanding, which grasps reality in fragmented pieces, cannot merge what appear to be opposing or conflicting individualities into a coherent, final, and unified whole, this limitation is not a flaw in thought itself but a weakness in the logical direction of human thinking. Logical understanding is incapable of comprehending multiplicity as an integrated and orderly universe because its method of understanding relies on generalizing similarities between things, and all its generalizations are based on hypothetical concepts and units that do not affect the reality of perceived things. Moving away from the direction of logical understanding, thought, in its deeper movement, has the capacity to reach the truth of the infinite, though the finite concepts encountered along the way are only temporary and partial.

Iqbal emphasizes that thought, in its essential nature, is not static but dynamic. It is not rigid, but rather evolving and alive. Drawing from the well-known concept of "Unity of Being" (*Wahdat al-Wujud*) in Sufi thought, Iqbal compares thought to a seed, which contains the essence of a tree from the beginning as a condensed reality, and its manifestation unfolds gradually, stage by stage.²

Thought expresses itself in its entirety, but when we understand it within the framework of time, it appears to us in two distinct ways with precise specifications:

a) These specifications do not hold meaning in themselves but derive their meaning from the larger whole, of which they are expressive aspects. The Qur'an refers to this whole as the "Preserved Tablet" (*Lauh-e-Mahfuz*), which signifies that level of knowledge where all indeterminate possibilities exist as a present and actual reality.

b) These meanings manifest themselves in continuous time through a sequence of finite concepts. Thus, they seem to grow as a unity that was already present within them, but due to the limitations and inadequacy of our understanding, we perceive them as fragmented. The truth is, without the element of infinity in the movement of knowledge, the very concept of finite thought would be impossible.³

Allama Iqbal does not agree with the views of Kant and Ghazali that thought cannot transcend its finitude during the acquisition of knowledge.⁴ In other words, thought is finite only when it studies and observes facts in fragments from a logical perspective. But as soon as it rises above the constraints of logic and begins to

encompass realities, it becomes infinite in its essence and activity. Iqbal asserts that the finite elements of nature, or in other words, the finite components of nature, are separate and distinct from each other. However, thought, in its entirety, is not like this. In its totality, thought possesses the attributes of infinity and is not bound by the narrow confines of individuality in its essential nature.

There is no reality beyond thought's infinite nature that does not embrace this infiniteness; even in the activities of life, thought can break through its finite boundaries and reach its hidden and potential infinity. If thought did not have the capacity to transcend finitude and access the infinite, the concept of thought's finitude would not exist. This aspect—that thought is, in essence, infinite—keeps the flame of desire alive within it and drives it tirelessly along the path of boundless pursuit.

Therefore, to consider thought as limited or incomplete is incorrect because, by its nature, disposition, and function, it is equivalent to the finite merging with the infinite.⁵

(ii) The Heart and the Faith

Allama Iqbal, following in the footsteps of Imam Ghazali, describes the heart as an inner intuition or insight that transcends reason for the knowledge of the Divine. He explains this concept using Maulana Rumi's words, saying that the heart receives direct illumination from the sun of reality. Through the heart, we can connect with aspects of reality that are beyond the limits of the five senses.⁶

Allama Iqbal states that, according to the Holy Quran, the heart is also a means of acquiring knowledge. The information it provides is never incorrect. This means that knowledge gained through the heart, if subjected to the processes of purification and discipline—previously discussed in the context of Surah Ash-Shams—leads to accurate conclusions. However, the heart is not some mystical entity; it is simply another way of knowing reality, just as other means of reaching the truth are available to us. The difference is that the senses usually do not play a role in this process. The observation gained through the heart is just as concrete and real as any other experience. The fact that knowledge acquired through the heart is beyond the physical senses does not diminish its value. If we consider this principle, we see that, in the early stages of human development, all observations were considered supernatural. Gradually, human necessities enabled

interpretations and explanations of these experiences, eventually leading us to form our current understanding of nature.

Allama Iqbal asserts that when the universal reality becomes part of our perception and observation, it takes on a specific form through our interpretation, but it can enter our consciousness through other channels as well. This universal reality holds many possibilities for interpretation. If we examine human history, inspired and mystical literature shows us that religious experience has always had a dominant influence on human history. Therefore, it cannot be dismissed as mere illusion simply because it is not obtained through the usual sensory processes. Instead, the effects and outcomes of spiritual experiences should serve as the basis for evaluating their validity.

Allama Iqbal argues that there is no justification for accepting general human experiences as reality while dismissing spiritual experiences as mere emotional or sentimental phenomena. The truths of religious experience are just as valid as other human experiences. As far as the acquisition of knowledge through interpretation is concerned, all truths are equally firm. The field of human experience, which includes religious experience, cannot be ignored, nor should it be viewed critically as a form of irreverence.⁷

(iii) The Necessity of Faith for Perseverance in Life's Challenges

Allama Iqbal writes that the environment in which humans are placed is filled with difficulties and obstacles. By nature, humans are restless beings, willing to abandon everything to achieve their goals. They are ready to pay any price if they are presented with new opportunities to express themselves. Though they possess many weaknesses and shortcomings, humans have been made rulers over nature. The greatness of humans in the entire universe is rooted in the fact that they accepted the burden of trust, which, according to the Qur'an, even the heavens, earth, and mountains declined to bear:

Indeed, We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid of it. Yet, man undertook to bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant. (Al-Ahzab, 33:72)

Although humans, by their origin and eventual end, are finite beings in this world, they are not without purpose. Humans have been created with a purpose that, in comparison to the entire universe, makes them beings with a mission to fulfill. Furthermore,

in the life to come, they are accountable for the completion of this purpose:

Does man think that he will be left without purpose? Was he not a drop of sperm emitted? Then he became a clot of blood, and Allah created and perfected him. Then He made him in pairs, male and female. Is He not able to give life to the dead? (Al-Qiyamah, 75:36-40)

To achieve this purpose, humans have been given the ability to improve the things around them and redirect them toward new goals. One aspect of their dominion over the universe is that when they face obstacles in their environment in pursuit of their goals, it does not eliminate their potential. Instead, within their being, they have hidden reservoirs of life and energy,⁸ which can restore their joy and strength, propelling them toward their goals with renewed vigor. Though human existence is more delicate than a rose petal, the environment in which they live is full of hardships, challenges, and barriers.⁹

In such an environment, it is their conviction, born from faith, that serves as the source of their strength and vitality.

(iv) The Aspect of Religious Experience and Understanding

Allama Iqbal states that when religious experience is the foundation of a person's conviction and power of action, it is essential that it not be devoid of understanding. In other words, religious experience is a state of perception in which an aspect of comprehension is present, and it can be presented to others as an understandable concept,¹⁰ even though the full details of its occurrence cannot be fully communicated.

At this point, Iqbal addresses a concern for the general human intellect by stating that the results of religious experience should be subject to free inquiry and criticism. If religious experience were limited to an experience that only a few could interpret or explain, it would become entirely personal and individual. This would lead to a situation where religion is monopolized by a select few, which is not the case. To assess the validity of religious experience, we possess standards that are just as reliable in their credibility as the criteria used to evaluate the results of other fields of knowledge.

Although, throughout the history of Sufism, spiritual experiences and observations have been subjected to rigorous critical evaluation, Iqbal, with consideration for the convenience of the reader's understanding, presents two main criteria for evaluating religious experience: rational and result-based.¹¹

The rational criterion is related to philosophical critique and interpretation, where an issue is examined and interpreted without any assumptions, and it is determined whether our interpretations ultimately lead us to the truth that is revealed through religious experience. The result-based criterion concerns the effects, outcomes, and fruits of religious experience. The first criterion is used by scholars and philosophers, while the second is applied by the Prophets.

Allama Iqbal elaborates on the first criterion for assessing religious experience in detail in his second lecture.¹²

Characteristics of Religious Experience:

Allama Iqbal, following the approach of modern psychology and William James, outlines the characteristics of religious experience. However, before mentioning these characteristics, it is important to clarify the following points:

a) What is the central theme of the lectures of *the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*?

b) What does Allama Iqbal mean by religious experience or religious experience?

a) What is the central theme of the lectures?

If we were to identify a theme that pervades all of Iqbal's lectures, it would be "religious experience" or "religious experience." Iqbal's Lectures themselves are a reflection of his own religious experience, expressed in an effective and comprehensive intellectual form. A look at the period when the lectures were composed supports this notion. During this time, the Islamic community faced several practical and intellectual challenges. In response, Iqbal was engaging both poetically and in prose, pouring extraordinary creative energy into reinterpreting the teachings of Islam. This is evident in the intensity of his efforts. In a letter to Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, dated March 18, 1926, Iqbal wrote:

Some of the thoughts are the result of the modern philosophical perspective, for which the old Persian style of expression is not helpful. For expressing certain impressions, words do not seem adequate.¹³

When Iqbal visited South India for his lectures, during a stay in Bombay on January 3, 1929, Begum Hashim Ismail sent him a copy of Goethe's *Faust* and requested that he write a verse on it in his own hand. Even though Iqbal had come to deliver lectures on philosophical topics, what he wrote reveals his inclination toward

inquiry and observation rather than abstract philosophy. Iqbal penned:

I have erased philosophy and discourse from the tablet of my heart;
I have opened my soul to the lancet of inquiry.¹⁴

This aspect of the Lectures is further demonstrated by a statement made by Syed Nazir Niazi, as mentioned in Dr. Rafiuddin Hashmi's book *Iqbal Studies: Understanding and Analysis*. Professor Israr Ahmad Suharwardi, in his autobiography *Sarmaya-e-Hayat* (Gujranwala, 1996), writes:

Nazir Niazi was assigned to teach our MA Islamic Studies class the Lectures of Madras. His first lecture was both fascinating and instructive. He claimed that he had discussed most of the difficult sections of the Lectures with Allama Iqbal himself. He had translated the Lectures from English to Urdu, which is both reputable and well-known. In his introductory lecture, he said something unusual about the Lectures. He stated that these Lectures were Iqbal's most difficult work. 'Don't expect me to solve all the difficult passages for you, as I am not entirely clear about some of the most complex parts myself, even after contemplating them for twenty years. Some passages remain ambiguous. I presented these difficult sections to Allama Iqbal himself for clarification, but he smiled and said, "Nazir! These are the sections that, even when I reflect on them, do not become entirely clear to me. I wrote these parts in a mystical state of intuition. They are all intuitive, not intellectual. You can only grasp them through intuition. Keep reading them, and if you ever experience a mystical state like mine, these meanings will reveal themselves to you like a discovery. But even then, you will only be able to feel them, not express or communicate them.'" So, gentlemen, I still haven't attained that intuition.¹⁵

These details clarify that in the composition and arrangement of Iqbal's Lectures, there was not only an intellectual and scholarly effort, but also a kind of religious or psychological experiential endeavor involved. Thus, two aspects of Iqbal's Lectures come to the forefront: first, the Lectures themselves represent a form of religious experience, and second, they provide a detailed account of religious experience. It is essential that the "religious experience" described in the Lectures be explained in light of Iqbal's own thoughts. This is because, when an attempt is made to interpret Iqbal's concepts and terminology solely in the context of intellectual tradition and other philosophical ideas—without considering Iqbal's own perspective—it only leads to misconceptions.

It is important to ensure that the understanding of Iqbal's thought is derived from his own poetic and prose works, and to

explore how his ideas can be applied to the contemporary cultural landscape. Determining the meaning and significance of Iqbal's ideas should be the first priority, with accepting or rejecting them being secondary.

The centrality of religious experience in the Lectures is so all-encompassing that when Iqbal describes religious experience, he brings the entirety of life within its scope. He uses the natural order, scientific principles, and discoveries as the foundation for religious experience.¹⁶ He then elevates this religious experience from an individual level to a collective and social level—for example, through the establishment of spiritual democracy or the final point of the Allahabad Address. In this way, religious experience operates on two levels in Iqbal's thought:

1. At the intellectual level, in the form of revelation and inspiration.

2. At the practical level, by manifesting divine attributes and producing tangible results in the external world.

At the individual level, the experience and understanding of theological truths strengthen and solidify conviction, while at the collective level, this helps form a civilization with the power of religion. Allama Iqbal demonstrates the validity of this concept by providing examples from individual, intellectual, conscious, and collective life. In this way, the Divine appears as an omnipotent and active presence in human life, and every action in life becomes part of religious experience. Religious experience is no longer limited to religious practices in the traditional sense. To assess the possibilities and scope of religious experience, Iqbal believes it is essential to understand its meaning.

b) What does Allama Iqbal mean by religious experience or religious experience?

According to Allama Iqbal, the initial stage of religious experience is connecting with a source beyond sensory perception and illuminating one's consciousness with its grace.¹⁷ In the state of religious experience or religious experience, we can perceive reality beyond the confines and capacity of our limited self. As Allama Iqbal explained, referencing Professor Hawking, the Sufi's soul experiences the manifestation of eternal reality in the form of a powerful surge. This means that religious experience is both a process of receiving guidance from the Divine manifestations and transmitting that guidance to others. This is why Iqbal differentiates

this from ordinary psychological processes, stating that the knowledge gained from religious inspiration cannot be proven or understood through conventional psychological methods.¹⁸

The ultimate form of religious experience is the development of divine attributes in the one experiencing it. History testifies that the expression of this experience has been seen in phrases such as: "Ana al-Haq" ("I am the Truth") by Mansur al-Hallaj, "Ana al-Dahr" ("I am Time") by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), "I am the speaking Qur'an" by Ali (RA), and "I am the magnificent" by Bayazid Bastami.¹⁹ In the higher Sufi tradition of Islam, this experience of unity does not mean the annihilation of the finite self into the infinite, but rather the infinite self embracing the finite:

In God's will, the Sufi's will is lost.

How can this be made comprehensible to the common man?²⁰

Iqbal explains that this is not self-negation but life and limitless power, which knows no obstacles. It enables a person to calmly perform their prayers even amidst the barrage of bullets.²¹

In his Lectures, Allama Iqbal refers to religious experience in various contexts using different terminologies, including:

actual experience¹, aesthetic experience², concrete experience³, concrete living experience⁴, conscious experience⁵, corrective experience⁶, higher experience⁷, Holy Prophet's experience⁸, human experience⁹, immediate experience¹⁰, inner experience¹¹, living experience¹², mystic experience¹³, natural experience¹⁴, non-emotional experience¹⁵, normal experience¹⁶, original experience¹⁷, outer experience¹⁸, past and present experience¹⁹, personal experience²⁰, political experience²¹, psychic experiences²², psychic, mystical, or super-natural experience²³, purposive experience²⁴, religious experience²⁵, self experienced²⁶, sense-experience²⁷, social experience²⁸, spatial and temporal aspects of experience²⁹, spatial experience³⁰, spiritual experience³¹, sufistic experience³², super-natural experience³³, unitary experience³⁴, unitive experience³⁵.²²

Conclusion

Allama Iqbal's exploration of religious experience and the faith-based foundation of life provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between thought, intuition, and faith. Iqbal emphasizes that thought, though finite in its logical form, possesses the potential to transcend its limitations and grasp infinite realities when directed toward deeper spiritual insight. He refutes the rigid separation of thought and intuition, asserting their

interconnectedness in the pursuit of ultimate truth. This synthesis allows for a more profound comprehension of reality, highlighting the evolving and infinite nature of human consciousness.

Iqbal further asserts that the heart serves as a vital channel for spiritual knowledge, transcending the sensory realm to access divine realities. He draws from Islamic and Sufi traditions to argue that religious experience, validated through both rational and outcome-based criteria, holds equal significance to conventional forms of knowledge. By acknowledging the importance of faith, Iqbal addresses the resilience required to navigate life's challenges, emphasizing that spiritual conviction empowers individuals to overcome obstacles and fulfill their higher purpose.

In bridging the gap between rational inquiry and spiritual experience, Iqbal advocates for an integrated approach where religious experience encompasses both individual and societal dimensions. This approach transforms faith into a living, active force that shapes civilizations and manifests divine attributes in human life. Ultimately, Iqbal's vision calls for a reassessment of spiritual experiences as legitimate and impactful forms of knowledge, urging a balance between intellectual understanding and heartfelt spiritual engagement.

Notes and References

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- ¹ The idea that thought is essentially finite, and for this reason unable to capture the Infinite, is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge. *Reconstruction*, pp.4-5.
 - ² In its essential nature, then, thought is not static; it is dynamic and unfolds its internal infinitude in time like the seed which, from the very beginning, carries within itself the organic unity of the tree as a present fact. *Reconstruction*, p.5
 - ³ It is in fact the presence of the total Infinite in the movement of knowledge that makes finite thinking possible. *Reconstruction*, p.5
 - ⁴ Both Kant and Ghazali failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its own finitude. *Reconstruction*, p.5
 - ⁵ Its movement becomes possible only because of the implicit presence in its finite individuality of the infinite, which keeps alive within it the flame of aspiration and sustains it in its endless pursuit. It is a mistake to regard thought as inconclusive, for it too, in its own way, is a greeting of the finite with the infinite. *Reconstruction*, pp.4-5
 - ⁶ The 'heart' is a kind of inner intuition or insight which, in the beautiful words of Rumi, feeds on the rays of the sun and brings us into contact with aspects of Reality other than those open to sense-perception. *Reconstruction*, p.13
 - ⁷ *Reconstruction*, p.13.
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10.

- ⁹ *Reconstruction*, pp.9-10.
- ¹⁰ Religious experience, I have tried to maintain, is essentially a state of feeling with a cognitive aspect, the content of which cannot be communicated to others, except in the form of a judgement. *Reconstruction*, p.21
- ¹¹ *Reconstruction*, p.22.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.22.
- ¹³ *Iqbal Namah Majmo'a Makatib-i-Iqbal*, p. 157.
- ¹⁴ *Allama Iqbal ka Janabi Hind ka Safar*, p. 21.
- ¹⁵ *Iqbaliyat Tafbeem-wo-Tajziya*, p. 52, 53.
- ¹⁶ Science does not care whether its electron is a real entity or not. It may be a mere symbol, a mere convention. *Reconstruction*, p.145
- ¹⁷ The truth is that in a state of religious passion we know a factual reality in some sense outside the narrow circuit of our personality.... As Hawking says, it is the trooping invasion of the concrete fullness of Eternity into the soul of saint. pp.20-21.
- ¹⁸ A purely psychological method, therefore, cannot explain religious passion as a form of knowledge. *Reconstruction*, pp.20-21.
- ¹⁹ Devotional Sufism alone tried to understand the meaning of the unity of inner experience which the Qur'an declares to be one of the three sources of knowledge, the other two being History and Nature. The development of this experience in the religious life of Islam reached its culmination in the well-known words of Hallaj - 'I am the creative truth.' *Reconstruction*, p. 77
- ²⁰ *Kulliyat-i-Iqbal* (Persian), p. 62.
- ²¹ The fatalism implied in this attitude is not negation of the ego as Spengler seems to think; it is life and boundless power which recognizes no obstruction, and can make a man calmly offer his prayers when bullets are showering around him. *Reconstruction*, p.88
- ²² *Reconstruction*; 1, pp.63, 69, 90; 2, pp.26; 3, pp.4, 20, 20, 20; 4, pp.72; 5, pp.37, 37, 38, 38, 40, 40, 41, 42, 42, 42, 42, 43, 43, 43, 47, 47, 48, 61, 61, 61, 80, 80, 81, 81, 81, 110; 6, pp.98, 145; 7, pp.146; 8, pp.94, 101; 9, pp.12, 12, 12, 13, 13, 13, 14, 20, 20, 21, 34, 34, 72, 101, 145; 10, pp.15, 41; 11, pp.xxi, 77, 82, 101, 102, 153, 17, 38, 39, 47; 12, pp.xxi; 13, pp.4, 4, 14, 14, 14, 14, 14, 15, 15, 16, 16, 17, 18, 101, 101, 101, 101; 14- *ibid.*, pp.101; 15, pp.156; 16. *ibid.*, pp.14, 16, 149; 17, pp.150; 18, pp.101, 101; 19, pp.110; 20, pp.21, 149; 21, pp.125, 138; 22, pp.101; 23, pp.13; 24, pp.90; 25, pp.xxi, 1, 7, 13, 13, 14, 20, 21, 23, 26, 50, 87, 99, 99, 114, 145, 145, 152; 26, pp.15; 27, pp.150, 155, 26, 26; 28, pp.15, 16; 29, pp.110; 30, pp.36; 31, pp.153, 109, 109, 110; 32, pp.95; 33, pp.13; 34, pp.99, 99, 100; 35, p.87.