

THE STATUS OF INTERFAITH HARMONY  
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ALLAMA  
MUHAMMAD IQBAL

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the life and works of Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) within the context of interfaith harmony, emphasizing his deep commitment to Islam and respect for other religions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity. Iqbal's religious upbringing in Sialkot, his lifelong attachment to the Qur'an, and his intellectual openness shaped his philosophical outlook, which blended tradition with modernity. While deeply devoted to Islamic principles, Iqbal valued interfaith understanding and humanistic ideals. His friendships and intellectual exchanges spanned diverse communities, reflecting his belief in the importance of religious and cultural pluralism. Iqbal's intellectual journey, including his studies in Europe, reinforced his universalist tendencies, making him a bridge between Eastern and Western thought. Through his poetry and philosophical writings, Iqbal advocated for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and spiritual democracy, rooted in equality, freedom, and the transformation of Islamic ideals into a dynamic and just society. The article highlights Iqbal's vision for a pluralistic, egalitarian Islamic state, inspired by the Prophet Muhammad's model of Medina and centered on spiritual democracy, tolerance, and social justice.

Two matters are clearly evident from a study of the life and works of Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the poet-philosopher of Pakistan, in the context of interfaith harmony: first, that he was a highly conscious Muslim – devout by many measures – with an open and receptive mind, and, secondly, that he subscribed to the Islamic teaching of respecting all other religions of the world, particularly the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity.

Iqbal's parents had, as was the norm in Muslim households in nineteenth-century India, made him start his formal education in a local mosque in his native town of Sialkot at the tender age of four years, where he was taught how to read, recite, recognize and repeat the words and sounds of the Qur'an.<sup>1</sup> This virtual upbringing with the Qur'an – Iqbal never parted with the daily practice of reciting its verses in solitude right until his death – coupled with the spiritual leanings of his pious and simple parents, had given Iqbal a profoundly religious and mystical orientation, which he preserved for the rest of his life. All recognized biographers of Iqbal narrate, as Iqbal had himself recounted in later life, that Iqbal's father, once upon seeing his young son habitually reciting the Islamic scripture in an early morning vigil, advised Iqbal to read the Qur'an as if it were being revealed to him directly from God, for only then, according to the father, would his son truly understand it.<sup>2</sup> This not only left a deep impression on Iqbal, it also conditioned his outlook and attitude towards the Qur'an as that of "maximum receptivity, with a mind that is open and willing to be shaped by whatever it happens to receive, as a necessary condition for untangling the knotty problems and questions both of scriptural interpretation and of human existence itself."<sup>3</sup>

Iqbal's love for the Qur'an and the inspiration he constantly derived from it, are thus well known from his life and works. In his poetic expression, which undeniably serves as the medium through which he presents his thought processes, Iqbal pleads to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, "If indeed the mirror of my heart is without lustre, and if indeed there is anything in my words other than the Qur'an, then, O Prophet, rend the fabric of my thoughts, sweep clean the world of my offending thorn, choke in my breast the breath of life, remove my wicked mischief from the community of your followers, do not nurture the life of my

seed, do not provide me any portion from spring's fecund showers, disgrace me on the day of reckoning, and do not allow me the honour of kissing your feet."<sup>4</sup>

In equal measure, the life and works of Iqbal are also reflective of how deeply devoted he was to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, not just as one who had brought the Qur'an to the Muslims as Divine revelation, but also as one who was the perfect personification of the Qur'an that his community could follow. One of the innumerable expressions of this devotion is set out in Iqbal's renowned Urdu work *Bal-i Jibril* ('Gabriel's Wing', 1936) to the following effect:

He – the one who knew the ways of the truth,  
Was the seal of the prophets,  
And was the lord of all –  
The one who endowed the pathway's dust  
With the brilliant light of the Valley of Sinai.  
In the eyes of love and ecstasy, he is the First and the Last –  
He is the Qur'an, and he the Criterion.  
He is the Ya-Sin, and he the Ta-Ha!

Reference to 'the First and the Last' in the line above the penultimate one is taken from God being described as such in the Qur'an 57:3, Ya-Sin and Ta-Ha are the names of the thirtysixth and the twentieth Qur'anic suras respectively, and 'the Criterion' is one of the names of the Qur'an in 25:1.<sup>5</sup>

Iqbal's fundamental commitment in life was undoubtedly to the ideals of Islam, both from an intellectual as well as an emotional perspective. This commitment originated in his earliest training, and only grew with time, but he cannot be classified as a religious obscurantist.

His acceptance of humanity at large is widely acknowledged, his closest friends extended beyond Muslims to include Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs, and his poetry contains acknowledgement or praise of numerous well-known ancient and modern religious Others, including Rama and Guru Nanak, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Goethe, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Einstein, and Napoleon, Marx, Lenin, and Mussolini.<sup>6</sup>

When Iqbal lost his wife in 1935, and, as an ailing man, was left behind with a young son aged eleven years and a little daughter aged five years, he had no qualms about appointing a German woman of Christian faith as his children's governess. Ironically, when that governess, upon a visit to the missionary school in

Lahore which Iqbal's daughter was attending, came to know that Muslim children were being taught the Bible in one of the classes, protested against it and pressed upon Iqbal to withdraw his daughter from that school, Iqbal overruled the governess, saying that his daughter should understand the basic principles of other religions, and directing that a Muslim teacher could be employed to teach the Qur'an to his daughter at home.<sup>7</sup>

For the sake of biographical completeness, after his initial training in the Qur'an school, Iqbal completed his (what would now be the equivalent of) high school education at the Scotch Mission College in Sialkot in 1895, and, at the age of eighteen, moved to Lahore's famous Government College, from where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1897, studying English, philosophy, and Arabic, and thereafter a master's degree in philosophy in 1899, culminating in his appointment as reader and researcher in the same institution, all under the tutelage of Sir Thomas Arnold (1864–1930), who was a key early influence on Iqbal's intellectual orientation. By 1905, when Iqbal embarked on a three-year sojourn to Europe for further studies, he had already gained recognition as an accomplished poet and thinker in pre-independence India, and, in these three intense years, he remarkably earned three degrees from three prestigious institutions – a master's degree from Trinity College, Cambridge, a doctorate from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, and a bar-at-law from Lincoln's Inn, London (which none of his famous contemporaries like Jinnah, Gandhi, or Nehru could accomplish in such short time). The notable scholars with whom Iqbal interacted while in Europe included Reynold A. Nicholson (1868–1945), who specialized in Islamic literature and mysticism (and also translated one of Iqbal's Persian works later), and the metaphysician John McTaggart (1866–1945). It was thus only after his return from Europe that Iqbal's work started to show its universalistic tendencies “that make it the perfect bridge between the East and the West.”<sup>8</sup>

While some would choose to highlight a so-called “fruitful paradox” that Iqbal was neither a conservative nor a liberal (because he can be classified as both) due to his opening up of ossified conservative thought by expounding liberal ideas on the one hand, and his opposition to the corrosive effects of extreme liberalism on the other hand,<sup>9</sup> it is perhaps more apt to call Iqbal a “re-constructionist” or being “one who seeks to blend tradition with modernity in an effort to reform society.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, Iqbal's interpretations of the Qur'an tend to be inspired and original,

without being contrived, and while he benefited from classical explanations, he was comfortable enough in his deep familiarity with the Qur'an to be able to argue for fresh, dynamic meanings with a confidence that never ventured into dogmatism – his approach being “based on personal realization and insight (tahqiq) as opposed to conformity to authoritative teachings or interpretations (taqlid).”<sup>11</sup>

In the historical address that Iqbal delivered at Allahabad in 1930 wherein he presented the idea of a separate homeland for the Muslims of India (which later came about in the shape of Pakistan in 1947), he forthrightly proclaims, “A community which is inspired by feelings of illwill towards other communities is low and ignoble. I entertain the highest respect for the customs, laws, religious and social institutions of other communities. Nay, it is my duty, according to the teaching of the Qur'an, even to defend their places of worship.”<sup>12</sup> Although Iqbal makes no direct reference, this statement is based on the Qur'an in 20:40, where God declares, “If God had not created the group (of Muslims) to ward off the others from aggression, then churches, synagogues, oratories and mosques where God is worshipped most, would have been destroyed.”

Iqbal also hastens to add, “Yet I love the communal group which is the source of my life and behaviour, and which has formed me what I am by giving me its religion, its literature, its thought, its culture, and thereby recreating its whole past as a living operative factor, in my present consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> This, the supposed opposite, contrasting from the defence and respect of the places of worship of other communities, to the love and devotion involving a specific and exclusive community, is also derived from the Qur'an in, among others, 5:28, which reads, in relevant part, “For each of you, We have established a law and a path, and had God willed, He could have made you one community, but He willed it thus in order to test you by means of that which He gave you. So compete with one another in goodness, unto God is your return, and He will tell you about those things over which you differed.”

In his earlier writings, Iqbal also rejects violence, sectarianism, and class distinctions in terms as categorical as the foregoing rejection of ill-will towards other religions:

The truth is that Islam is essentially a religion of peace...All the wars undertaken during the lifetime of the Prophet were defensive...Even in defensive wars he forbids wanton cruelty to the vanquished...The ideal of Islam is to secure social peace at any cost. All methods of violent change in society are condemned in the most unmistakable language...<sup>14</sup>

Religious adventurers set up different sects and fraternities, ever quarrelling with one another; and then there are castes and sub-castes... ..we are suffering from a double caste system – the religious caste system, sectarianism, and the social caste system... ..I condemn this accursed religious and social sectarianism; I condemn it in the name of God, in the name of humanity, in the name of Moses, in the name of Jesus Christ, and in the name of him – a thrill of emotion passes through the very fibre of my soul when I think of that exalted name – yes, in the name of him who brought the final message of freedom and equality to mankind.....Fight not for the interpretations of the truth when the truth itself is in danger. It is foolish to complain of stumbling when you walk in the darkness of the night. Let all come forward and contribute their respective shares in the great toll of the nation. Let the idols of class distinctions and sectarianism be smashed forever...<sup>15</sup>

Iqbal defines Islam as a philosopher as opposed to a theologian, and in this perception Islam, as a religion and as a culture, is humanistic and egalitarian. Critically appreciative of early Islamic history, Iqbal firmly believes that the City State of Medina, as established and led by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the exemplar of the original purity of Islam and an embodiment of the model Islamic state. By bringing together the *Muhajirin* (those who migrated) from Makkah and the *Ansar* (the helpers) of Medina into his *Ummah*, he laid the foundations of “Muslim nationality” centered around a common spiritual aspiration instead of a common race, language, and territory.<sup>16</sup>

The valley of Yathrib, which formed part of the City State established in Medina, had, in addition to a Muslim population, Jewish, Christian and pagan inhabitants. In order to keep the City State strong and independent, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, deemed it necessary to maintain equality among all of its citizens so that they could assist each other in defending their common territory. Accordingly, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, after consulting with the other communities, issued *Mithaq-e-Madina* (the Covenant of Medina) as the first known written constitution in the world. Comprised of forty-seven articles, the first twenty-three of which govern the rights and duties of Muslims inter se, and the remaining twenty-four of which deal with relations of Muslims with Jews and other inhabitants of the City State of Medina, *Mithaq-e-Madina* on the one hand joined the *Muhajirin* and the *Ansar* into a bond of common faith, and on the other hand gave the non-Muslims freedom of their respective religions and properties, thereby joining them together into the *Ummah* on the basis of humanity, patriotism and the need for the combined defence of a common territory.

*Mithaq-e-Madina*, as conceived by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was not only an attempt on his part to establish a pluralistic society, it also brought into existence a “federal” state as the conduct of the non-Muslim tribes was governed by their own laws, just as that of the Muslims was governed by the Shari’a – the Islamic laws – and the non-Muslims enjoyed complete political and religious autonomy in their own regions.

In Iqbal’s view, while the model Islamic state under the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and his immediate successors did produce the desired results, it later went off course, with disastrous consequences, even though, occasionally, the model was partially revived, leading Muslims to make remarkable achievements in diverse areas. As the political system degenerated from Caliphate to kingship, justice-based Shari’a was replaced with a system of treachery and palace intrigues. The resultant decadence and barrenness of the Ummah thus becomes Iqbal’s main pre-occupation.<sup>17</sup> His writings acknowledge that both Judaism and Christianity have a place within the Islamic civilization, and Muslims are obliged to protect the synagogues and churches and other Jewish and Christian sanctuaries – it was a calamity for the Spanish Jews when the Christians re-conquered Spain.<sup>18</sup>

Among his series of lectures comprising his pioneering work and profoundly original synthesis of ideas, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, the lecture titled “The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam” alludes to the modern day Islamic polity that would be consonant with Iqbal’s reform agenda. Iqbal posits that since the Divine Reality in Islam – God – expresses itself in variety and change as the eternal spiritual ground of all life, an Islamic society must therefore also reconcile eternal principles with the possibilities of change, for which purpose it must have a mediatory principle of movement.<sup>19</sup> In Islam, that principle of movement is Ijtihad or the exercise of independent reasoning, which, by definition, is a dynamic process rendered static in practice. In furtherance of his ideas, Iqbal asserts, “Let the Muslim of today appreciate his position, reconstruct his social life in the light of ultimate principles, and evolve, out of the hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, that spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam.”<sup>20</sup>

Iqbal furnishes his explanation of this polity in the same lecture as neither being secular nor theocratic in nature, but one that is driven by spirituality, equality, and humaneness:



The essence of Tauhid, as a working idea, is equality, solidarity, and freedom. The State, from the Islamic standpoint, is an endeavour to transform these ideal principles into space-time forces, an aspiration to realize them in a definite human organization. It is in this sense alone that the state in Islam is a theocracy, not in the sense that it is headed by a representative of God on earth who can always screen his despotic will behind his supposed infallibility. The critics of Islam have lost sight of this important consideration. The Ultimate Reality, according to the Qur'an, is spiritual, and its life consists in its temporal activity. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is, therefore, sacred in the roots of its being. The greatest service that modern thought has rendered to Islam, and as a matter of fact to all religion, consists in its criticism of what we call material or natural - a criticism which discloses that the merely material has no substance until we discover it rooted in the spiritual. There is no such thing as a profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self-realization of spirit. All is holy ground. As the Prophet so beautifully puts it: 'The whole of this earth is a mosque.'<sup>21</sup> The State, according to Islam, is only an effort to realize the spiritual in a human organization. But in this sense all State, not based on mere domination and aiming at the realization of ideal principles, is theocratic.<sup>22</sup>

In practically elaborating upon this Iqbalian concept of spiritual democracy, the basic model of *Mitbaq-e-Madina* invariably serves as guiding light, and the main features of Iqbal's modern Islamic state are expressed to be: (a) a democracy; (b) Parliament to legislate through Ijtihad; (c) functional separation between religious establishment and State Organs; (d) Islamic criminal law need not be enforced dogmatically; (e) interest free banking need not be enforced so that free market economy is promoted; (f) the State must protect the economic rights of landless tenants and workers, and impose tax on agricultural produce; (g) the State must also protect and determine the minimum wages of industrial workers and provide them medical care and assure compensation upon retirement; (h) to strengthen national integration in a Muslim majority state, the principle of joint electorates can be adopted; and (i) while spiritual democracy remains undefined, it is meant to stand for equality of citizens regardless of their race, religion, or creed.<sup>23</sup>

Concluding in the words of Mustansir Mir, a study of Iqbal's life and works reveals that "he was interested in practically everything that life had to offer. He read much, he thought much, he dreamed much, and he hoped much; he corresponded with many people, and he had made close friendships with many people from many different communities and nationalities, and, above all, he was open

to new ideas. His readers find his works inspiring. No less inspiring to them is his decidedly positive attitude to life.”<sup>24</sup>

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Ahmed Afzaal, “Iqbal’s Approach to the Qur’an”, in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary, eds. Muhammad Suheyl Umar and Basit Bilal Koshul (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2010), p. 8.
- <sup>2</sup> Mustansir Mir, Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2006), p. 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Ahmed Afzaal, “Iqbal’s Approach to the Qur’an”, in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Mustansir Mir, Iqbal op. cit. p. 47.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 13–14 and pp. 22–23.
- <sup>7</sup> Javid Iqbal, Encounters with Destiny: Autobiographical Reflections a translation of Apna Grebaan Chaak by Hafeez Malik and Nasira Iqbal (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 30–31.
- <sup>8</sup> Muhammad Suheyl Umar and Basit Bilal Koshul, “Preface” in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. p. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Raza Shah Kazemi, “Iqbal and Ecumenism: The Inescapability of Love”, in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. pp. 28–29.
- <sup>10</sup> Eqbal Ahmed, “Islam and Politics” in The Islamic Impact, Syracuse University, 1984, as cited by Javid Iqbal, “Iqbal’s View of Ijtihad and a Modern Islamic State” in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. p. 167.
- <sup>11</sup> Ahmed Afzaal, “Iqbal’s Approach to the Qur’an”, in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. p. 8 and p. 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, “Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League, 29th December 1930”, in Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal, ed. Latif Ahmed Sherwani (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 5th Edition 2009), p. 9.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 9–10.
- <sup>14</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal”, in Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal, op. cit. pp. 111–113.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 116–7.
- <sup>16</sup> Javid Iqbal, Islam and Pakistan’s Identity (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Vanguard Books Limited, 2003), p. 7.
- <sup>17</sup> Mustansir Mir, Iqbal op. cit. p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup> Muhammad Suheyl Umar, “Unlocking the Doors: Perspectives on Settled Convictions: Changes and Challenges” in The Religious Other: Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2nd Edition 2009), p. 348.
- <sup>19</sup> Mustansir Mir, Iqbal op. cit. p. 91.
- <sup>20</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, ed. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1996) p. 179-80 as cited by Javid Iqbal, “Iqbal’s View of Ijtihad and a Modern Islamic State” in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. p. 167.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 169.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Javid Iqbal, “Iqbal’s View of Ijtihad and a Modern Islamic State” in Muhammad Iqbal: A Contemporary op. cit. p. 168.
- <sup>24</sup> Mustansir Mir, Iqbal op. cit. p. 147.