

IQBAL'S RECONSTRUCTION: AN
ANALYSIS OF IQBAL'S PHILOSOPHY AND
THE SYNTHESIS OF EASTERN TRADITION
WITH WESTERN MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Allama Muhammad Iqbal's seminal work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, highlighting his efforts to reconcile Islamic traditions with Western knowledge while preserving the chronological and textual essence of Islam. It delves into Iqbal's dynamic vision of Islamic modernism, which emphasizes a proactive reinterpretation of Islam in a 20th-century context, allowing for both spiritual and socio-political growth. The distinction between modernity, modernism, and modernization in relation to Iqbal's philosophy is examined, showcasing his synthesis of rationality and metaphysical beliefs while maintaining a critical stance towards Western influence. Fazlur Rahman's perspectives on Iqbal's complex relationship with Western intellectualism and his advocacy for a revival of Islam are also considered. The article outlines how Iqbal integrated Eastern and Western thought, blending his poetic and philosophical expressions to promote a critical yet adaptive interpretation of Islamic and Western ideas, rejecting blind imitation and conservatism. Iqbal's work underscores the necessity for reformation and reinterpretation within Islam, rooted in its original ethos and adapted to contemporary challenges. By advocating for a new *ilm-ul-kalam* (Islamic theology) founded on modern scientific and philosophical principles, Iqbal sought to align Islamic beliefs with empirical sciences, emphasizing a holistic understanding of reality. His views on the convergence of religion and science, the restructuring of Islamic faith, and the socio-political revival of the Muslim world are examined in-depth, alongside his critique of rigid nationalism and traditionalist stagnation. The article concludes by recognizing Iqbal's influence as a modern Muslim reformer and intellectual bridge between Eastern and Western thought, who envisioned the revival of Islam through intellectual, moral, and political awakening. His legacy is one of inspiration and a call for Muslims to shape their destiny by reconnecting with the dynamic, spiritual essence of Islam, balancing tradition with modern realities.

In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* Iqbal tried to reconcile the Islamic traditions with Western knowledge without uprooting the chronological and textual proportions and tradition. According to Fazlur Rahman, “Muhammad Iqbal, for instance, wrote his *Reconstruction of Religion Thought in Islam*, which contained sweeping reform proposals in English—a language not understood by the masses or the ‘*Ulama*’, and kept his powerful and moving poetry—meant for the common man—mainly free of such reforms.¹ The significance of Iqbal’s Islamic modernism is, “a dynamic worldview and an activist reinterpretation of the religion of Islam in the twentieth century perspective. To him, man himself and his world both are by nature free for creative movement.”²

To rise the fundamental question of modernity in Western pretext one has to distinguish between modernization and modernism and then Iqbal views can be traced. Modernity belongs to the whole social fabric, modernism to only art and modernization to ways of adopting modern methods, techniques at some or all segments of society. Epistemologically modernity (and consequently its other forms) is based on rational, authoritative, self-sufficient human self, negating metaphysical and traditional grounds. Iqbal poetry shows some similarities with western concept of modernism and his philosophy seeks to adopt modernity’s rationality, while preserving metaphysics. Iqbal does not accept loneliness, absurdity and meaninglessness of existentialism but he glorifies man’s individuality.” Iqbal ideas of modern world and modern man have been analyzed in the present studies. Iqbal argued that it is the realization of their destiny that the spiritual salvation and political emancipation of Muslims can be realized. Fazlur Rahman says:

Nevertheless, the young educated Muslim progressively felt the vacuum and was soon looking for quarters whence guidance for liberal Islamic thinking would emerge to fulfill his dream of running the modern state on the basis of Islam. This powerful desire had been generated in him by the tremendous call of Muhammad Iqbal who untiringly called the Muslim to rediscover his place in the world, not to follow the Western culture slavishly and to develop his spiritual and moral future for his own fountains.³

The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam and *Payam-i-Mashriq*, were without any doubt are the books which were written due to

Western influence on Iqbal thought. He blended Eastern and Western thoughts skillfully. His poetry and prose has serious manifestation on Islamic traditions and Western modernity. He pleaded in his writing for a critical interpretation of Western and Islamic thought. Iqbal challenged blind imitation, conservatism, and blind acceptance of Western modernity. Fazlur Rahman says:

The foregoing analysis of Iqbal's thought and motivations also helps to explain his contradictory stand on the West. Actually, he did not always address the West as such as alone but Westernism as well. Thus when he says in his first Lecture that the Muslim world is intellectually moving Westward with rapidity and encourages this movement, he is primarily addressing Westernism. He is therefore, so far, intellectually a Modernist, although ethically a revivalist, as we have seen. But when addressing the West, he condemned its intellectualism in such strong terms, that he positively discouraged intellectual Westernism and so Modernism—an ironical lesson indeed. And it is also related irony, of no less import, that the book which set out to reconstruct religious thought for the world would-be Modernist, should, by what it actually says, leave little room for thought at all. ⁴

Iqbal pivotal thesis cannot be expected to be found in Iqbal himself, although it's sufficiently strong yet partial formulations and indications are interspersed everywhere in his writings. The primary reason is that Iqbal is a thinker and not an interpreter. In order to interpret someone the interpreter has to give what he regards as the kernel of the interpretee's message. ⁵ Fazlur Rahman says:

It appears that when during his studies in the West, Iqbal began developing a positive philosophy of life under which he evolved definite attitude to this world, this involved if it did not even presuppose, an acute perception and awareness of Reality; that is to say Iqbal had become conscious of a Reality that was essentially demanded both of itself and of others. ⁶

While discussing Iqbal's multivalence, Fazlur Rahman noted that while he rejected Western ethics and society generally, he was, at intellectual level, still a Modernist Westernist, although we noted too that by declaring Western thought to be basically void of spiritual direction, he has necessarily discouraged intellectual and philosophical Westernism as well. The most salient feature of the subsequent outlook has a total rejection of Western intellectualism in favour of a new future of Islam. ⁷

Iqbal defended Muslims against rigid nationalism. He gives importance to Islam as a religion and as a civilization. He has firm faith on the Prophet Muhammad's project of Islam, which he

started in Arabia in seventh century, and there has a deep influence of the Qur'an in his poetry. In *The Reconstruction of Religion Thought in Islam* Iqbal quoted mostly, is from the Qur'an:

Of a large number of passages quoted from it, about seventy-seven, generally set apart from the main text, carry numbered references to Qur'anic *Surahs* and verses. The unnumbered passages from the Qur'an, about fifty or so, given within the text are comparatively briefer—sometimes very brief, merely calling attention to a unique expression of the Qur'an.⁸

Islam holds the key to the realization of destiny, for faith is central to a Muslim's life. It is religion that defines human existence, and it is through religion that man may raise to greater heights. That height is predicated on rediscovery of the true faith and that rediscovery is in turn tied to the reconstruction of the Islamic community.⁹ Like other Islamic modernism, Iqbal found the ideal polity in the early history of Islam. It was in the "Muhammadan" community that Muslims had reached the pinnacle of their spiritual and worldly power—the full realization of human destiny. It was that vision of the past that guided his prescription for the future. He became convinced that man was able to realize the full potential of his destiny only in the context of the revival of Islam, in an order wherein the perfection of the soul would be reflected in the excellence of social relations.¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, who says:

Much more significant, however, was the thinking of Muhammad Iqbal whose message, delivered in moving poetry, summoned the Muslims to rise and shape their own destiny. Iqbal sought inspiration from his image of the pristine Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an—a spiritually creative and dynamic Islam which he saw buried under negative, non Arab forms of medieval *Sufism* and dead formulas of the *Kalam* on the one hand and, on the other, beguiled by the superficial creativity of the West, which had lost the purpose of life amid its tumultuous and riotous technology, and threatened to numb the moral faculties of man.

Iqbal had, in a concrete sense, inherited the legacy of Sirhindi and Waliy Allah, his basic thought being but a restatement of Sirhindi's philosophy in twentieth century terms. And his own thought, in the same concrete sense, begot Pakistan. The thrust that had started with Sirhindi reached its final goal in altering the world map in August 1947.¹¹

Idealization of Islam went hand-in-hand with advocating religious reform. Iqbal argued that Islam can serve man only if it is reformed and reinterpreted in the image of its Muhammad ideal—and Iqbal's understanding of the west—while using the tools of

philosophical analysis and mystical wisdom. Iqbal did not view this exercise as innovation or reformation, but rediscovery and reconstruction of Islam.¹² Iqbal advocated that Islam should work boldly and courageously for the reconstruction through fresh experience. He was well aware that reconstruction has more severe features than simple alteration in modern state of affair in life. According to him, “humanity needs three things today - a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis. Modern Europe, has no doubt, built idealistic systems on these lines, but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influenced men while religion has always elevated individuals, and transformed whole societies.”¹³

Iqbal stress the call for enormous importance and requirement of developing a new *ilm-ul-kalam*, which should be based on modern knowledge and new scientific data, for the reconstruction of Islamic theology. Iqbal performed massive obligation by freeing Islamic theology from the sticky situation of Platonic thoughts and Aristotelian logic. He established the foundation of Islamic beliefs on modern experimental sciences which consist of physics, mathematics, biology and psychology.¹⁴ Iqbal distinctive roles in modern Islamic thought is of making comparable ‘God consciousnesses’ with modern science, which according to him is more valuable than sheer belief in God. He equalizes the scientist’s observation and research of nature and environment is in quest of familiarity with God, like mystic seek out in the act of pray.¹⁵ He asserts that “scientific observation of nature keeps us in close contact with the behavior of Reality (God), and thus sharpens our inner perception for a deeper vision of it.”¹⁶ This alone will add to his power over nature and give him that vision of the total-infinite which philosophy seeks but cannot find.”¹⁷

Iqbal hails the empirical exploration of science and gives glowing appreciation to the rational assumptions. He is not restricted to speculative rationalism or scientific empiricism or with both. Iqbal’s theory of knowledge comprises intuition as superior degree of perfection. Iqbal asserts that science generate genuine knowledge, he says, “we must not forget what we call science is not a single systematic view of Reality. It is a mass of sectional views of Reality – fragments of a total experience which do not seem to fit

together.”¹⁸ Science state a little bit regarding life, matter and mind but it did not solve how to make a relationship among them. It is plainly changeable to provide sacred vision of Reality.¹⁹ In this way science makes an artificial effort as it is choosy in selecting components of human experience and Reality which it examines. Iqbal describes, “Natural Science is by nature sectional; it cannot, if it is true to its own nature and function, set up its theory as a complete view of Reality.”²⁰ Science is selective in organization of knowledge. In this way Iqbal asserts that religion should not concern about science. Religion should take the essential place in the combination of all “data of human experience” and must receive the partly data from science because religion treat with the entire Reality. The main plan of Iqbal was restructuring, rationalization and reformation of the Islamic faith, that is, to rebuild perfect Muslim culture in which man has essential role and man would attain his highest ideals. He has central and key role in the perfect society. This was the task which begin with the perfection of man best exemplified in example of Prophet Muhammad himself- and culminated in the creation of the ideal social order, hence for Iqbal revival of faith at individual level was ineluctably tied to the creation of perfect Islamic society, which mean that the political fortunes of Muslim would again rise in only pursuant to a revival of Islam.²¹ Iqbal says:

The truth is that among the Muslim nations of today, Turkey alone has shaken off its dogmatic slumber, and attained to self-consciousness. She alone has claimed her right of intellectual freedom; she alone has passed from ideal to the real—a transition which entails keen intellectual and moral struggle. To her the growing complexities of a mobile and broadening life are sure to bring new situations suggesting new points of view, and necessitating fresh interpretations of principles which are only of an academic interest to a people who have never experienced the joy of spiritual expansion. It is, I think, the English thinker Hobbes who makes this acute observation that to have a succession of identical thoughts and feelings is to have no thoughts and feelings at all. Such is the lot of most Muslim countries today. They are mechanically repeating old values, whereas the Turk is on the way to creating new values. He has passed through great experiences which have revealed his deeper self to him. In him life has begun to move, change, and amplify, giving birth to new desires, bringing new difficulties and suggesting new interpretations. The question which confronts him today, and which is likely to confront other Muslim countries is the near future, is whether the Law of Islam is capable of evolution—a question which will require great intellectual effort, and is sure to be answered in the affirmative; provided the world of Islam approaches it in the spirit

of Omar—the first critical and independent mind in Islam who, at the last moments of the Prophet, had the moral courage to utter these remarkable words: ‘The Book of God is sufficient for us’.²²

Iqbal developed an ideology of which the fundamental thought and effect was to cleanse and develop human life in every sphere. His ideology cannot be bracketed in any ‘ism’. He can be interpreted differently. Many interpreters have seen him primarily a social reformer, although he was certainly not a socialist in the technically sense of the word. He did not know analytically and logically what is wrong with capitalism. But he was emotionally a socialist because he loved mankind.²³ As a staunch believer in a personal God, he was also theist. Believing that all existence is constituted of egos or selves are could claim him along with Rumi and Bergson as monodologist.²⁴

Iqbal dreamt of leading his people back to the original Arabian Islam, unstained by Hellenistic philosophy, and in this attempt he stands in the same line as the great theologian of eighteenth century. He is also close to them when he accuses the Sufis of indolence and considers their work dangerous for the community. He stresses for active participation in life. Without any doubt, modern Muslim world produced Iqbal, the most versatile genius. No other thinker of Indian Islam has become more widely known outside the sub-continent than Iqbal. But he is one of the reformers that emerged in the sub-continent during restless years between the two world wars. Iqbal expressed his ideas and feelings in Islamic framework and considerable part of his message has indirectly spoken to the Muslims for reawakening and revival. His ideas and writing was without any narrow minded and sectarian stuff. His ideology stresses for the dignity of life and its everlasting creativity and prosperity. He had recognized the creative need of life with love, which is a substance of institution. Man can reach the high heaven with the force of Love.²⁵

It can be concluded that Iqbal is perhaps the only personality in the recent history of Islam who is equally at home in modern history of Islam as well as in modern Western thought and eternal teaching of Islam. This fact, indeed, made him the only person qualified to take up the gigantic task of reconstructing the religious thought of Islam. He related Islamic thought to Western philosophy, and linked spiritual salvation to intellectual change and social development. Briefly, it may confidently assert that Iqbal was vitalist who believed in a dynamic, forward-looking approach towards life and life-problems. His goal was the renaissance of

Islam in all its pristine glory and simplicity, by facing the challenge of modern science and philosophy, and thereby to achieve the salvation of the whole of humanity not only in this world but also in the life to come as well. To the attainment of this ideal he passed into service both his philosophical insight and poetic acumen. The fact that the main goal Iqbal pursued throughout his life was renaissance of Islam can be substantiated both from his verse and philosophical prose works. His intense desire for the revival of moral social and political ideals of Islam finds passionate expression in his philosophical poems. Fazlur Rahman was inspired by the thinking of Iqbal, whose message delivered to the Muslims to raise and shape their own destiny and bring back the image of pristine Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. He felt immensely the need of that "*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*" which contained sweeping reform proposals was written in English Language, which is not mostly understood by masses and *Ulama*, who can benefit from the Iqbal's philosophy, while his powerful poetry meant for common people mainly free from such reform.

Notes and References

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⁶ Ibid. p.440.

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⁸ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. v.

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¹⁵ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, pp. 45, 73.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 72.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 73.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 33.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 33.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 36.

²¹ Nasr, S. Vali Raza, Allama Iqbal's Role in Islamic Resurgence, *Dawah Highlights*, Dawah Academy, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Vol. XIII, Issue 11, Nov. 2002, p. 29.

²² Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. 162.

²³ Smith, W. C., *Modern Islam in India*, Lahore, Chicago, 1947, p. 128.

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