IQBAL REVIEW (67: 1)
(January– March 2026)
ISSN: P0021-0773
ISSN: E3006-9130

IQBAL'S QUESTIONS AND THE INTELLECTUAL PURSUIT OF A NEW SYNTHESIS

Dr. Shoeb Afridi
Hod English Department
Abbottabad Public School
Mansehra Road, Abbottabad
shoaibafridi66@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the intellectual genesis, method, and enduring significance of Muhammad Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, situating the Madras Lectures of 1929 as the culmination of a prolonged and deliberate engagement with the tensions between faith, reason, and modern knowledge. It argues that the *Reconstruction* was neither an ad hoc response to circumstance nor a defensive apology for tradition, but the outcome of sustained inquiry reflected in Iqbal's poetry, philosophy, and extensive correspondence with leading scholars. The study highlights Iqbal's dual mode of thought—poetic intuition and philosophical analysis—and shows how concepts such as *khudi*, ijtihad, and the dynamic nature of reality form the core of his intellectual vision. Particular attention is given to Iqbal's preparatory questions on revelation, consensus, law, time, space, authority, and ethics, revealing a method grounded in dialogue between classical Islamic disciplines

and modern science. The article further explores Iqbal's humanistic ethics, his reinterpretation of tawhid as creative process, and his insistence on action as the foundation of faith. Ultimately, the *Reconstruction* is presented as an open-ended project—a "new kalam"—that calls for continual renewal of Islamic thought through critical engagement, moral creativity, and intellectual freedom in the modern world.

Keywords:
Muhammad Iqbal, Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Khudi (Selfhood), Ijtihad, Faith and Reason, Modern Science and Islam, Time and Space, Islamic Jurisprudence, New Kalam, Creative Action

Introduction: The Birth of an Intellectual Vision

Iqbal's visit to Madras in 1929 and the celebrated lectures that followed are often described as a response to an external invitation. Yet, a closer look reveals that these lectures were the culmination of years of reflection on the relationship between faith, reason, and the destiny of humanity. The *Reconstruction* was not a spontaneous project; it was the fruition of a long internal dialogue that sought to reimagine Islam in a world transformed by science and modern philosophy. [1]

Iqbal's creative genius operated on two fronts—poetic and philosophical. In his poetry, he gave voice to the intuitive and spiritual dimensions of experience, while in his prose he pursued clarity and conceptual order. His thought resisted fragmentation; he envisioned existence as a unified whole. The concept of *khudi* (selfhood), which places human individuality at the center of spiritual and moral life, became the cornerstone of his philosophy. [2]

Poetry and Philosophy: Two Faces of Iqbal's Mind

Iqbal's intellectual life unfolded in two distinct yet interwoven modes. Poetry was his means of revelation, a way to express truths that reason alone could not contain. Philosophy, on the other hand, was his effort to verify and systematize those intuitions.

The apparent tension between his poetic and philosophical expressions—between the voice of passion and the rigor of intellect—is not contradiction but complementarity. His poetry sought to awaken life; his philosophy sought to understand it. For Iqbal, existence itself was the most profound philosophical question, one that demanded both intuition and reflection. His *Reconstruction* thus stands as a testament to the spiritual centrality of man and the creative role of intellect in realizing divine purpose.

Inquiry as Preparation: The Madras Questions

Chaudhry Rahmat ʿAli Khan, President of the Muslim Association of America, admired Iqbal deeply. In 1922, he presented him with a book entitled *Mohammadan Theories of Finance*, citing sources such as *al-Hidayah*, *Fiqh al-Akbar*, *Durr al-Mukhtar*, and *Musnad Imam Aʿzam*. [3] Abdullah Chughtai recounts that upon receiving this book, Iqbal

immersed himself in study and immediately raised questions demanding closer investigation.

The central issue was whether *ijmaʿ* (consensus) could abrogate Qurʾanic injunctions or the Sunnah. This led Iqbal to consult leading scholars—Sayyid Sulaiman Nadvi, Mufti Habib al-Rahman, and others. His inquiries soon expanded to questions on revelation, leadership, time and space, jurisprudence, religious symbols, and the authority of the Imam.

Iqbal's intellectual preparation for the *Reconstruction Lectures* can be traced through his extensive correspondence and questioning of leading scholars.[4] He inquired of Sayyid Sulaiman Nadvi; he discussed the matter with Mufti Habib al-Rahman Ludhianwi and Maulvi Muhammad Amin Ludhianwi in Ludhiana, and with Maulvi Sayyid Talhah, Maulana Asghar ʿAli Ruhi, and Maulana Ghulam Murshid in Lahore. His inquiries ranged across theology, jurisprudence, and science, revealing a restless mind probing the limits of inherited knowledge.

Iqbal's intellectual purposes, and a few of these questions are here reproduced. [5]

- "Some among the Muslims, employing the sciences of dialectics (*ʿilm al-munaẓara*) and optics (*maraya*), have attempted to prove that the vision of Almighty God is possible. Where may this discussion be found? My inquiry concerning the beatific vision was motivated by the hope that perhaps in such a debate some point might emerge that could shed light upon Einstein's revolutionary 'theory of light.' This impression was reinforced by a treatise of Ibn Rushd, who excerpted a passage from Abuʾl-Maʿali. The latter's view closely resembles that of Einstein—though in the case of Abuʾl-Maʿali it is but a conjecture, whereas Einstein has demonstrated it mathematically."
- "Can the *ijmaʿ* of the community abrogate a Qurʾanic ordinance? For example, the period of suckling is, by explicit Qurʾanic text, two years. May it be shortened or lengthened? Can the prescribed shares of inheritance be increased or decreased? According to some Hanafites and Muʿtazilites, the

consensus of the community bears such authority. Is this claim referenced in Muslim juridical literature? You have stated that jurists deemed it permissible for *ijmaʿ* to specify the general purport of a text. Is there an instance of such specification or generalization? Can it be exercised only by the Companions' consensus, or may subsequent scholars also undertake it? If, after the Companions, such instances exist in Muslim history, kindly inform me. What, precisely, is meant by specification or generalization of a ruling? If a Companion's ruling appears contrary to the text, is it to be presumed that a repealing ruling was known to them? Has any such instance been recorded where the Companions enforced a ruling in contravention of a Qurʾanic text?"

- "If the Messenger of the Lord of the Worlds (peace be upon him) provided an answer by virtue of revelation, it is binding upon the community and part of the Qurʾan itself. But if he replied by reasoning alone, without revelation being involved, is that likewise binding? If so, would it follow that all of the Prophet's reasonings are revelation, thereby effacing any distinction between Qurʾan and Hadith?"
- "The Prophet (peace be upon him) had two aspects: prophethood (*nubuwwah*) and leadership (*imamah*). In the first, his commands and deductions from the Qurʾan are included; the basis of *ijtihad* lies in human reason, experience, and observation. Is this also revelation? If so, what proof exists?"
- "What, in psychological terms, constitutes *wahy ghayr matluw* (unrecited revelation)? Was the distinction between *wahy matluw* and *wahy ghayr matluw* recognized in the Prophet's age, or formulated later?"
- "The Prophet (peace be upon him) consulted his Companions regarding the call to prayer (*adhan*). Does such consultation belong to prophethood or to leadership?"
- "In the Torah, are the prescribed shares of inheritance eternal and immutable? Or is it only the principle that is immutable, while the specific shares may be altered according to circumstances?"

- "Explain the verse of bequest (*waṣiyyah*)."
- "Does the *Imam* have authority to suspend a prescribed *hadd* of the Qurʾan—such as the penalty for theft—and replace it with another? Which verse grants such authority? Is the *Imam* a single person, or may a collective body fulfill his role? Should each Muslim country have its own *Imam*, or must the entire Muslim world be united under one? If the latter, how can this be realized amid present sectarian divisions?"
- "'Umar (may God be pleased with him) adopted a particular procedure regarding divorce. If he had such authority in the Sharʿi sense, upon what was it founded? In the terminology of our age, did the Islamic Constitution empower him thus?"
- "Jurists maintain that a husband's right of divorce may be transferred to the wife herself, to her relatives, or to another person. Is this ruling based upon Qurʾan or Hadith? Imam Abu Hanifah holds that even if a child is born two years after divorce or the husband's death, the presumption is not of illegitimacy. Upon what is this principle based? Is it a rule of evidence or a law in itself?"
- "In *Shams Bazighah* and *Ṣadra*, various opinions on the reality of time are cited, including one declaring 'time is God.' In Bukhari, too, there is a hadith: *la tasubbuʾl-dahr* ('Do not curse Time'). Did any Muslim philosopher adopt this doctrine? Where is it discussed? Moses ben Simeon, a medieval Jewish philosopher, wrote that God has no future but creates time moment by moment. Since Simeon studied at Córdoba, is this doctrine but a borrowing from Muslim thought?"
- "Maulana Shibli has quoted a phrase concerning *shaʿaʾir* (religious symbols) and *irtifaqat* (social institutions):

'The symbols of religion are those manifest matters by which a community is distinguished—circumcision, reverence for mosques, the call to prayer, Friday worship, congregational prayer.'

Is this Shah Wali Allah's own exposition? According to him, *irtifaqat* encompass all socially beneficial measures—for example, injunctions on marriage and divorce. If so, no unified social order

would remain, as each Muslim country would follow its own customs. Kindly clarify."

- "In *al-Kalam*, Shibli quotes from *Hujjatullah al-Baligbah* (p. 321), translating:

'There is no easier way than that, regarding symbols, penal laws, and regulations, the customs of the people among whom the Imam has arisen be taken into account, and that later generations not be treated with undue rigidity concerning these ordinances.' What is here meant by *shaʿaʾir*? Which rites or codes fall under it? Has Shah Wali Allah defined it explicitly elsewhere? He also employs *irtifaqat*, which Shibli sometimes renders as "arrangements" and elsewhere as "accepted conventions." What precisely was his intent? Shah Wali Allah classifies four categories of *irtifaqat*, including social matters such as marriage and divorce. Did he thereby hold that even in such matters undue rigidity should not be exercised?"

- "In Ibn ʿArabi's *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* or elsewhere, where does he discuss the reality of time? Have other Sufi sages treated the subject? From the mutakallimun (scholastic theologians), in which works may such debates be found? Who were the eminent Ashʿari theologians in India? Besides Mulla Jawnpuri, did any philosophers arise among Indian Muslims? Kindly provide their names and works. Who was the Muslim philosopher of Phulwari who wrote on philosophy, and where may his work be obtained?
- "What of Mawlawi Nur al-Islam's Arabic treatise on *makan* (space) preserved in Rampur? In what language is it, and to what period does he belong? Is it manuscript or printed?"
- The problems of time and space remain profoundly complex. The objections raised by the scholastic theologians against philosophers appear to rebound upon their own positions. Mawlawi Sayyid Barkat Ahmad attempted resolution by distinguishing *dahr* (eternal duration) from *zaman* (time), yet the matter remains exceedingly difficult. If *dahr* be eternal and abiding, and none other than God Almighty, what then is *makan* (space)? Just as time reflects *dahr*, so too must space be a reflection of it. Thus, the essence of both is *dahr*. Is this

conception consonant with Ibn ʿArabi's view? Did he also discourse upon *makan*, and what relation did he establish between space and *dahr*? Iqbal observed: "I have studied the question of time and space, and it appears that the Muslim philosophers of India reflected deeply upon it, thereby offering a definition of *ghawr o fikr* (reflection). This is a task you should pursue."

- "You have written that the leader of an Islamic state may, upon perceiving that certain legal permissions lead to corruption, temporarily prohibit them, even abrogating some obligations. Where is this referenced? Was *mutʿa* (temporary marriage) annulled by ʿUmar after being practiced previously? If so, may a contemporary ruler do the same? Please enumerate those issues where judgment lies with the *Imam*. Among Qurʾanic punishments, how does he exercise discretion?"
- "You cite continuous practice (*tawatur ʿamal*) as exemplified in prayer, yet Malikis and Shiʿa differ in prayer-forms. How did such divergences arise? What are the principles for expanding the *Imam*'s authority in explicit decrees? If expansion is possible, is restriction also? Provide historical precedent, if any."
- "According to the Qurʾan, who is the true owner of land? What was the jurists' opinion? Did Qazi Mubarak issue a fatwa on this matter? If an Islamic state (e.g., Russia) declared land state-owned, would this accord with Shariʿa? Is such a matter within the *Imam*'s discretion?"
- "The word *nabi* carries two meanings: a bringer of tidings (spelled with hamzah: *nabiʾ*) and one who stands on an elevated station (without hamzah). Raghib al-Isfahani in his *Mufradat* cites a hadith where the Prophet صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم said: 'I am a *nabi* without hamzah.' In the Qurʾan, all Prophets are without hamzah. If so, how is the conventional English rendering 'Prophet'—meaning one who brings tidings—accurate?"

- "What is the root of *nar* (fire)? What is the root of *najat* (salvation), and what are its implications?" [6]

These questions were not detached academic exercises but conscious efforts to prepare an intellectual foundation for rethinking Islam in light of modern knowledge. They also reveal Iqbal's method: a dialogue between *ʿilm al-kalam* (theology) and the sciences of his own age. [7]

From the study of these questions, one glimpses the kinds of issues confronting Iqbal when he embarked upon the preparation of his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Such problems were encountered by the common believer and the erudite scholar alike. Iqbal embraced these intellectual and doctrinal challenges as a necessary undertaking. The structures shaped by scientific empiricism, and the tensions these generated with the symbols of religion, gave rise to perplexities that demanded serious engagement.

Reconstruction as a Historical Imperative

Iqbal's project was neither a defense of tradition nor an imitation of the West. It was an attempt to renew the intellectual vitality of Islam by bringing it into conversation with the modern worldview. The scientific revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—especially in physics—had transformed conceptions of matter, energy, and causality. To Iqbal, these developments created new opportunities to reconcile faith with reason.

He criticized the stagnation of Muslim jurisprudence, which had turned dynamic interpretation into rigid repetition. *Ijtihad*, for Iqbal, was the principle that kept Islam alive through time. His call for its revival was not a demand for novelty but for restoring the spirit of movement that characterized early Muslim thought. The *Reconstruction* thus sought to reignite that creative energy within the intellectual structure of Islam. [8]

Man, God, and the Freedom to Create

At the heart of Iqbal's philosophy lies the idea of man as a co-creator in the unfolding of divine purpose. Rejecting the determinism of materialist science and the passivity of certain mystical schools,

Iqbal portrayed humanity as God's *khalifah*—a being endowed with moral will and creative power. [9]

For him, reality was not static substance but dynamic process. Existence was in perpetual motion, evolving toward greater self-consciousness. This conception of life as movement—of being as becoming—allowed him to reinterpret *tawhid* (divine unity) in light of modern ideas of relativity and change. The *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* therefore stands as a philosophy of renewal, a theology of action grounded in the Qur'anic vision of life as creative struggle. [10]

Ethics and Society: Iqbal's Humanism

Iqbal's reflections during his South Indian lectures, particularly in his addresses to women's associations, highlight his progressive ethical vision. He viewed equality between men and women as a Qur'anic principle rather than a modern concession.

Interpreting the verse *ar-rijalu qawwamuna ʿala'n-nisaʾ*, Iqbal argued that "qawwam" signifies protection and responsibility, not superiority. He emphasized that both genders share equal moral and social worth, differing only in function, not dignity. He urged Muslim societies to reform their legal and social practices concerning marriage, inheritance, and education to realign them with Islam's original spirit of justice and balance. [11]

The Journey and Its Symbolism

Iqbal's physical journey—from Madras to Mysore, Hyderabad, and finally Aligarh—mirrors his intellectual journey toward synthesis. His lectures, delivered amid immense political and professional responsibilities, were products of extraordinary discipline and inner focus. [12]

He did not view the revival of Islam as a political project alone but as an intellectual and moral reawakening. His *Reconstruction Lectures* represent this synthesis of intellect, imagination, and historical awareness. They are the articulation of a consciousness that seeks to reconcile the demands of faith with the realities of modern life.

Toward a New Kalam: The Continuing Legacy

Through the *Reconstruction*, Iqbal laid the groundwork for what scholars such as Syed Zafarul Hasan later described as "a new science of *kalam*." His aim was not merely to harmonize theology with science but to build a transformative framework that could sustain creative religious thought in the modern age. [13]

By situating Islamic intellectual tradition within the evolving landscape of modern philosophy, Iqbal demonstrated that faith must remain dynamic and responsive to new horizons of knowledge. He urged Muslims to engage critically with both their own heritage and the intellectual trends of the West—not to imitate either, but to renew themselves through thoughtful synthesis.

In this sense, Iqbal's call to *khudi*—the self's awakening—was also a call to collective renewal, to rediscover within human freedom the divine impulse toward creation and progress.[14]

These lectures embody a comprehensive re-interpretation of religious and spiritual truth. The most authoritative guide to their aims remains Iqbal's own preface, in which he emphasized:

1. The Qur'an insists upon the priority of action over thought. Since most people neither engage in deep reflection nor possess the capacity for it, steadfastness of faith must come through action. The field of action is thus indispensable for both collective and individual life. [15]
2. Reality is process, quality, and motion. Though sensation perceives it as external, the awakened self discovers identity between its own states and those of the universe. He who can master his inner states can also assimilate the outer world. [16]
3. Modern man confines thought to sense-perception. This habit, once adopted by early Muslims, later dulled their capacity to comprehend inner states of the soul. With the decline of Sufism's discipline, inner experience was discredited. Iqbal opposed its wholesale rejection, insisting that with renewed methods of critical examination, inner states could again reveal truth. [17]

4. The source of life is the unity of life. To reach this, a method familiar to modern man must be devised. Hence Iqbal advocates a psychological rather than a physical approach, turning the modern mind once more toward inner experience. [18]

5. Until such a methodology is established, these experiences should be studied with the aid of scientific explanation. It was thus that Iqbal himself pioneered such an attempt—now preserved for us in the form of seven lectures. [19]

Conclusion: The Unfinished Dialogue

Iqbal's *Reconstruction* remains one of the most significant intellectual ventures in modern Islamic thought. It is not a closed philosophical system but an open dialogue—between revelation and reason, spirit and science, faith and freedom.

By merging poetic imagination with philosophical depth, Iqbal charted a path for the Muslim mind to engage modernity without surrendering its spiritual core. His work continues to challenge us to think beyond inherited formulas, to act with moral courage, and to create anew in the face of changing times.

In its essence, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is not a conclusion—it is a beginning. It invites the reader to participate in an ongoing journey: the quest to understand, affirm, and transform both the self and the world in the light of divine purpose.

Notes and References

۱ سید مظفر حسین برنی، کلیات مکاتیب اقبال، مکتوب ۱۱ اکتوبر ۱۹۲۱، والیم ۲، ص ۳۸

2 Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, L-III

۳ چغتائی، محمد عبداللہ، علامہ اقبال کا جنوبی ہند کا سفر، اقبال اکادمی پاکستان، ص ۱۷

4 Iqbal's letter addressed to his sister, dated 8 December 1919, (Excerpt from Zinda Rud, Volume II, page 265).

۵ ڈاکٹر جاوید اقبال، زندہ رود، سنگ میل پبلیکیشنز، لاہور، ص ۴۱۵

۶ شیخ عطاء اللہ، اقبالنامہ، اقبال اکادمی پاکستان، لاہور، ص ۴۹-۵۰ اور ۱۱۶-۱۸۷

۷ ڈاکٹر جاوید اقبال، زندہ رود، ص ۴۳۵

۸ بشیر احمد ڈار، انوارِ اقبال، اقبال اکادمی پاکستان، لاہور، ص ۳۱۷

9 Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Discussion on Fate/Destiny

۱۰ ڈاکٹر جاوید اقبال، زندہ رود، ص ۴۴۳

۱۱ محمد رفیق افضل، گفتارِ اقبال، ص ۷۵-۸۴۔

۱۲ "نقوش"، اقبال نمبر، ستمبر ۱۹۷۷، ص ۵۷۲

۱۳ محمد سہیل عمر، خطبات اقبال نئے تناظر میں، اقبال اکادمی پاکستان، لاہور، ص

14 Dr. Javid Iqbal, *Zinda Rud*, Sang-e-Meel Publications, p.441 ; *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lecture: Human Ego and Immortality, p.

۱۵ ڈاکٹر جاوید اقبال، زندہ رود، ص ۴۳۵

۱۶ ایضاً، ص ۴۳۸

۱۷ ایضاً، ص ۴۳۷

18 Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Preface, p.

19 Ibid, p.