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Reconstructing Islam in a Post-metaphysical Age: Muhammad Iqbal's Interpretation of Immortality

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According to Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the Indian philosopher and poet, the greatest political problem facing Muslims is the sense of disenchantment or loss of meaning that accompanies the spread of modern thought. For Iqbal, one of the greatest modern poets in the Urdu and Persian languages, and also the spiritual father of Pakistan, modern science and philosophy have made it difficult to believe in Islam. In particular, the traditional understanding of an immortal soul destined either for heaven, with its gardens, rivers, and *houri*, or hell, with its fires and torments, may now appear illusory or mythical. As a consequence, the Islamic teaching about how to approach the meaning of one's mortality is no longer capable of providing either guidance to the individual or a source of shared meaning for the community, despite the persistent need for both. This essay examines Iqbal's response to this challenge. I rely for the most part on his main philosophic work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (2012).

The problem of the meaning of mortality is one that is felt widely. As Iqbal notes, 'No age has produced so much literature on the question of immortality as our own, and this literature is continually increasing in spite of the victories of modern Materialism' (2012: 89). As Roxanne Euben (1997a, 1997b, 1999) notes, in response to this challenge many Islamic thinkers have rejected Western rationalism wholesale or attempted to allow for scientific progress, but only within certain sanctioned boundaries. Rather than with-

drawing into an obscurantist fundamentalism, however, Iqbal faces these issues directly. His interpretation of immortality is a key part of his effort to provide, on the model of Rumi and Goethe, a new understanding of Islam in light of modern thought. It is not an attempt to refute modern science, nor is it part of an attempt to reject modern individualism or the modern state, but to show the continuity of these modern developments with the trajectory of previous Muslim thought as well as to open a path for the future progress of religion.

Both contemporary liberalism and modern natural science, following in the wake of post-Enlightenment philosophy, eschew any metaphysical framework that can govern individuals, or establish positive rules about the right way to live. Iqbal, who accepts for the most part the truth of modern science and the inevitability of liberalism, offers an interpretation of immortality that relies on post-Einsteinian physics, is non-metaphysical but teleological, and is ambiguous enough to remain open to individual interpretation and creativity. His goal in doing so is to provide an interpretation of Islam that is more believable, and that can serve as the basis of shared meaning for Muslims in a liberal age. At the same time, and paradoxically, his interpretation is an attempt to allow for the individual autonomy and spontaneity that characterise much modern Western philosophy. The key, and perhaps most challenging, issue in his project is that of human finitude.

Iqbal believes that no account of the meaning of mortality can be convincing in the modern age if it is not open to individual interpretation. He thus manages to retain Islam as a source of meaning only by rendering its account of the afterlife ambiguous. For Iqbal this interpretation is not a capitulation to modernity, but rather an opportunity for Islam to reach, for the first time, its highest stage of development and its fullest flourishing.

While other scholars (for example, Esposito 1983; Diagne 2001) have studied Iqbal's work as a constructive and perhaps democratic response to modernity, few have recognised the central importance to his thought of his interpretation of immortality. This is likely to be because the complexity of this interpretation tends to mislead commentators in one of two ways. On one side, Iqbal could mean by 'immortality' simply, 'performing deeds which leave their mark on history' (Khundmiri 2001: 187). On the other hand, he could be describing a purely spiritual journey into other realms of existence.

As Schimmel (1989: 277) claims, ‘For the faithful in Iqbal’s sense death is nothing but a door opening towards new possibilities.’

Neither of these readings is entirely wrong. Achieving immortality, according to Iqbal, does in part mean making a contribution to the progress of humankind and one’s community, but it also involves something akin to a spiritual journey. Neither of these, however, can be taken as conventionally understood. The core of immortality for Iqbal, in fact, is the tension between the two. This chapter explores and explains what exactly Iqbal means when he speaks of this tension. I find that immortality for Iqbal is the tension between personal immortality, understood as the experience of time as pure duration rather than serial time, and becoming an active contributor to the evolution of humankind. I will, thus, first consider the meaning of personal immortality, and then immortality through history and evolution, and, finally, immortality as the tension between these two.

This interpretation of immortality represents an attempt to adapt Islam to modern, post-foundational thought in order to retain its vitality. The challenge of discovering the meaning of human mortality, of course, is a problem not only for Muslims, and Iqbal’s attempt to re-interpret his own culture and religious tradition may be an indication of how others could or will approach the question of meaning – both within and outside the West.

Personal Immortality: Relativity, Time and Mysticism

As with the tenets of any major religion, the concept of immortality in Islam has been subject to various interpretations and controversies over the centuries. Iqbal’s interpretation, however, strays widely from the traditional view of his own time and goes beyond the terms of previous theological debates in Islam. A brief sketch of what could be called the traditional view will help to bring out the originality of Iqbal’s thought. We are fortunate to have Abul A’la Mawdudi’s ([1932] 1997) work, *Towards Understanding Islam*, to help us in this regard. This small booklet is an attempt to explain the fundamentals of the religion in clear and simple terms to young Indian Muslims, and is therefore a snapshot of an accepted and generally uncontroversial view of various theological concepts from one of Iqbal’s contemporaries – one, moreover, whom Iqbal knew and respected. According to Mir (2006: 15), Iqbal, ‘invited Abu l-A’la Mawdudi – later founder of the religious political party

Jama'at i Islami – to undertake the reconstruction of Islamic jurisprudential thought along certain designated lines (the project did not take off because of Iqbal's death a short time later)'. Mawdudi explains the fifth pillar of Islam, belief in life after death, thus:

The life of this world and of all that is in it will come to an end on an appointed day. Everything will be annihilated. This day is called the day of reckoning or the last day. All the human beings who lived in the world since its inception will be restored to life and will be presented before God Who will sit in court on that day. This is called 'Resurrection.' (Mawdudi 1997: 102)

God will then judge each individual, and, '[t]hose who emerge successful in this judgment will go to Paradise and the doors of eternal bliss will be opened to them. Those who are condemned and deserve punishment will be sent to Hell – the abode of fire and torture' (Mawdudi 2006: 102). The importance of belief in this article for Mawdudi cannot be overstated. 'Denial of life after death,' he says, 'makes all other beliefs meaningless.' He adds, 'If you reflect still deeper, you will come to the conclusion that belief in life after death is the greatest determining factor in the life of a man. Its acceptance or rejection determines the entire course of his life and behavior' (103, 104).

The mandatory nature of belief in resurrection and a day of judgment meant that any non-literal interpretation of the concept was controversial and potentially dangerous. What debates did take place on the topic revolved around whether the individual would return to life in his own body, some other body, or in a purely incorporeal form, and whether the gardens and rivers of paradise and the fires of hell described in the Qur'an were meant literally or as representations of inexpressible spiritual pleasures and torments. Perhaps the most famous debate about the nature of resurrection is that between Averroës in his *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (1954), and Ghazali (2000) in his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. For a classic discussion of the permitted ways of interpreting the Qur'an, and in particular the extreme caution that one had to take in interpreting resurrection and the afterlife, see Averroës (2008: 8–12).

For Iqbal, however, the core of the debate shifts to questions about humankind's destiny and the nature of temporality. As he says, the survival

of the ego requires 'a change in our attitude towards time and space', and '[t]he resurrection, therefore, is not an external event. It is the consummation of a life-process within the ego' (2012: 96).

In order to fully appreciate the meaning of such statements, we must understand this change in emphasis as Iqbal's response to the perceived challenge that modern science and philosophy pose to traditional belief. Rather than a denial or refutation of science, this response is rather an appropriation of it, along with certain elements of Sufism, with a view to providing a new foundation for belief in the modern context. This redirection of the Islamic tradition is at the heart of Iqbal's reconstruction of religious thought, and is the impetus behind his interpretation of immortality. The religious experience is unknown to modern man because of his 'habits of concrete thought' and his suspicion that such experiences are likely illusory (xlv). Because of this, 'the demand for a scientific form of religious knowledge is only natural', and Iqbal has 'tried to meet, even though partially, this urgent demand by attempting to reconstruct Muslim religious philosophy with due regard to the philosophical traditions of Islam and the more recent developments in the various domains of human knowledge' (ibid.).

There are two main points about Iqbal's approach to modern thought that serve as essential foreground to his account of immortality. The first is the Islamic provenance of Western empiricism, essential because it demonstrates that his reconstruction is not a capitulation to alien Western modes of thought, but the re-appropriation of a line of thought that was erroneously dropped by earlier Muslim scholars. As he says, 'During all the centuries of our intellectual stupor Europe has been seriously thinking on the great problems in which the philosophers and scientists of Islam were so keenly interested' (6). Specifically, the empirical and experimental methods are originally Islamic: 'the point to note is the general empirical attitude of the Qur'an which engendered in its followers a feeling of reverence for the actual and ultimately made them the founders of modern science' (11). This account of the origins of modern science also frees Islamic thought from the frequent accusation that it was essentially Greek or Magian in character: 'the birth of the method of observation and experiment in Islam was due not to a compromise with Greek thought but to a prolonged intellectual warfare with it' (104; see also Iqbal 1964). For example, Iqbal argues that Roger Bacon, and

even Francis Bacon, ultimately derived their empiricism from the Muslim universities of Spain. Iqbal quotes Briffault approvingly to the effect that '[n] either Roger Bacon nor his later namesake has any title to be credited with having introduced the experimental method' (Iqbal 2012: 103; see also Iqbal 2008b: 168). The second point is that science in Iqbal's time was undercutting its own materialist foundations, thereby admitting its inability to refute certain religious tenets and leaving more room for the possibility of their truth.

In contrast, modern Muslim thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb have identified modern science and philosophy as the greatest threat to their religion. While Iqbal agrees that Western thought poses a challenge to Islam, he also sees it as a great opportunity for the revitalisation of religious thought. 'The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history,' he says, 'is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West' (Iqbal 2012: 6). But, he adds:

There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam. Our only fear is that the dazzling exterior of European culture may arrest our movement and we may fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture. (Iqbal 2012: 6)

Indeed, Iqbal was particularly well placed to appreciate what was happening at the forefront of European thought. He studied philosophy in England and Germany from 1905 to 1908, receiving his BA from the University of Cambridge and a PhD from the University of Munich in 1907, and continued to keep abreast of scientific developments in Europe during one of the most dramatic periods of its history (Mir 2006: 8).

Through his observation of these developments, he was in a position to note that physics had found it necessary to 'criticize its own foundations' and had 'found reason to break its own idol, and the empirical attitude which appeared to necessitate scientific materialism has finally ended in a revolt against matter' (Iqbal 2012: 27). Modern, post-rational thought, for Iqbal, began with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and was foreshadowed by Berkeley (28). However, Kant also denied the possibility of acquiring any knowledge of God. With developments such as Einstein's theory of Relativity

and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, however, 'the case for a system of rational theology is not so bad as Kant was led to think' (144). According to Iqbal, 'modern science utters its agreement with Berkeley's criticism which it once regarded as an attack on its very foundation' (28). He goes so far as to say that 'modern science and philosophy, becoming more exact, is [*sic*] furnishing rational foundations for certain religious beliefs, which the 18th and 19th centuries' science rejected as absurd and incredible' (Iqbal 2008b: 188–9).

The awe-inspiring scientific discoveries of the twentieth century, far from making religious experience impossible, have opened a new vista from which to understand the nature of religion. The claim that science has refuted religion is based on an outdated view of science for Iqbal. In fact, as we shall see below, it is only with these developments that Muslims are in a position to fully appreciate Islam.

Exploring these observations in detail would be far beyond the scope of this essay, as would any assessment of them. Key to Iqbal's interpretation of personal immortality is that matter, time, and space are no longer understood as universal and stable, and are thus more open to individual interpretation.

The relationship between matter and energy in Iqbal's time was unclear, as it is in our own. The theory that energy and matter are somehow interchangeable or equivalent opens the door, Iqbal believes, to the existence of a spiritual realm, which forms the basis of reality (Iqbal sees energy as the equivalent of spirit). In addition, the theory of Relativity of space and time inherently rejects previous materialism: "Substance" for modern Relativity Physics is not a persistent thing with variable states, but a system of inter-related events' (31). Time is similarly not static, but open in some sense to interpretation. Nature, he says is not static, 'but a structure of interrelated events out of whose mutual relations arise the concepts of space and time. And this is only another way of saying that space and time are interpretations which thought has put on the creative activity of the Ultimate Ego' (52). The individual's body and soul, too, are systems of interrelated actions (84).

Time and space, which have until recently been thought of as stable and universal, appear now as dependent on the perception and interpretation of the individual. This is, for Iqbal, one of the insights of Islam, which only now can be clarified: 'The Qur'an has no liking for abstract universals. It always

fixes its gaze on the concrete which the theory of Relativity has only recently taught modern philosophy to see' (64). The following passage is an example of how Iqbal brings these elements of modern thought and Islam together:

All that is secular is, therefore, sacred in the roots of its being. The greatest service that modern thought has rendered 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.' (Iqbal 2012: 123)

A key element of personal immortality, then, is freeing oneself from earlier interpretations of time as a series of events that can be plotted on a line, or what Iqbal, following Bergson, calls serial time. This serial view of time, as divided into past, present, and future, is the dominant interpretation that man places on the phenomenon, but Iqbal argues that we must think of immortality as a matter of intensity rather than extension. Iqbal calls this, as does Bergson, pure duration. Unfortunately, Iqbal says, it is 'impossible to express this inner experience of pure duration in words, for language is shaped on the serial time of our daily efficient self' (39). Bergson, wrestling with the same problem, describes it thus: 'Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances' (1944: 7). 'The appreciative self,' which perceives time as duration, Iqbal says, 'is more or less the corrective of the efficient self,' which perceives serial time, 'inasmuch as it synthesizes all the "heres" and "nows" – the small changes of space and time, indispensable to the efficient self – into the coherent wholeness of personality' (Iqbal 2012: 39). The perception of time as duration, moreover, is something that one only experiences in rare moments 'of profound meditation' (38; see also Iqbal 2008b: 182).

It is these rare experiences, which are essentially what many would call religious experiences, which constitute the core of immortality for Iqbal. As quoted above, he claims, 'The resurrection . . . is not an external event. It is the consummation of a life-process within the ego. Whether individual or universal it is nothing more than a kind of stock-taking of the ego's past

achievements and his future possibilities' (Iqbal 2012: 96). Iqbal likens this experience to that described by those who are close to death and see their lives passing before their eyes. Iqbal, then, implicitly denies that the individual can persist in serial time in anything like the traditional view of immortality. 'The Quran,' he claims, 'does not contemplate complete liberation from finitude as the highest state of human bliss. The "unceasing reward" of man consists in his gradual growth in self-possession, in uniqueness, and intensity of his activity as an ego' (93–4). The Qur'an also, he claims, makes it perfectly clear that there will be no return to this earth for the dead (93). Iqbal makes this controversial claim on the basis of what I take to be dubious interpretations of the Qur'an 19: 66–7, 23: 99–100, and 50: 3–4 (Iqbal 2012: 96, 93, 97).

Of course, modern science cannot establish any of the above, but can at most, for Iqbal, allow the possibility of this view of immortality. And although Iqbal seems to sidestep what for most is the crucial question, namely, whether the individual will survive with consciousness intact beyond the point of death, it is undeniably true that he is relying on a conception of time that is much closer to the scientifically verifiable truth than the ordinary person's understanding of past, present, and future. It is also true, however, that while mainstream contemporary physics has only strengthened Iqbal's case by theorising vibrating superstrings of energy as the foundation of the universe and ten or eleven dimensions (possibly including other time dimensions) as opposed to only four, it is very difficult to grasp this view of reality conceptually (Greene 2003: 111). In short, Kant's theory that space and time are a priori mental faculties, and the preconditions of thought, with only a tenuous or non-existent relation to reality, has been borne out by modern physics. So, even though modern science has rendered the traditional view of eternal life unbelievable for many, it has also, Iqbal is arguing, opened the door to new and awe-inspiring possibilities.

However, although science has opened the door to the possibilities that Iqbal sketches, it is nonetheless fundamentally unserious, in that it cannot make any assertions about the meaning of existence or how to live, and thus must be supplemented by religious thought (Iqbal 2012: 145). In particular, science does not give enough weight to the role of creative thought, both that of man and God, in its account of space and time (to be discussed in more detail in the following section). It is important to stress here, however, that

although Iqbal does not think that modern science gives a completely true account of reality, he accepts that it is true, or, in other words, it offers us truth, although not the whole truth. As he says, ‘The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge’ (78). And because the sciences all take a partial view of reality rather than a comprehensive view, religion has nothing to fear from them: ‘Thus religion, which demands the whole of Reality and for this reason must occupy a central place in any synthesis of all the data of human experience, has no reason to be afraid of any sectional views of Reality’ (34).

Iqbal has recourse to certain elements of Sufism to complete his picture of personal immortality. Although Sufism has anticipated many of the discoveries of modern science, Iqbal also sees it as deeply flawed in several respects. Its chief flaw is stagnation and an emphasis on asceticism and withdrawal from an active life (xlv, 6). The Sufis of Iqbal’s time, he says, ‘owing to their ignorance of the modern mind, have become absolutely incapable of receiving any fresh inspiration from modern thought and experience’ (xlv). Some Sufis also erred in denying human individuality and assuming that the highest stage of spiritual development would result in the individual being subsumed like a drop in the ocean. It is important to note here, however, that this was not Rumi’s view, and that this is in part what attracted Iqbal to his poetry (88). This is also not the view of Ishraqi philosophy that, Iqbal says, holds that

[d]eath does not put an end to the spiritual progress of the soul. The individual souls, after death, are not unified into one soul, but continue different from each other in proportion to the illumination they received during their companionship with physical organisms. (Iqbal 1964: 113)

Still, earlier Sufis, and especially the poet Iraqi, came quite close to espousing something like the post-Einsteinian view of space and time. In particular, Iraqi posited that the human soul could reach higher and higher stages of awareness, until it reached ‘[d]ivine space which is absolutely free from all dimensions and constitutes the meeting point of all infinities’ (Iqbal 2012: 109). Where Iraqi went wrong, according to Iqbal, is his belief that time does not change, but that the universe considered as a multi-dimensional object

is entirely static. As with modern science, Iraqi failed to understand that '[t]he philosophical path that leads to God as the omni-psyche of the universe lies through the discovery of living thought as the ultimate principle of space-time' (110). And further, 'Both Kant and Ghazali failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its own finitude . . . It is in the life of the apparently alien that thought demolishes the walls of finitude and enjoys its potential infinitude' (5).

In short, Sufism was correct to claim that one could ascend towards direct contact with the divine through various stages of spiritual progress, but it was incorrect when it claimed that this progress could reach an end. Rather, immortality, for Iqbal, depends on continuous action. In a passage reminiscent of Tennyson's 'Ulysses', he urges, 'Do not seek the limit, Being has none of it, to reach any limit is to become devoid of life. Never to reach the limit is life everlasting, voyage alone is life immortal' (Iqbal cited in Khundmiri 2001: 173–4). It is only through constant engagement with the world that man can reach higher degrees of intensity, expand his ego, and win immortality. All our actions are either 'ego-sustaining' or 'ego dissolving', and only through ego-sustaining acts can the individual win immortality and fortify himself against 'the shock that dissolution brings' (Iqbal 2012: 95).

It is on the basis of this view of immortality that Iqbal reinterprets heaven and hell. Both of these, he argues, 'are states, not localities. Their descriptions in the Quran are visual representations of an inner fact' (98). Those who have not done what is necessary to achieve immortality will experience hell as 'the painful realization of one's failure as a man' (*ibid.*). This realisation can be construed narrowly as a failure to contribute anything lasting to one's community or to humankind. For Khundmiri, immortality in Iqbal's sense is 'possible only by raising oneself beyond the threshold of the present and performing deeds which leave their mark on history' (2001: 187). Many of Iqbal's statements support this view, such as his claims that '[s]truggle and combat give eternal life' (2000: 141). The character of the actions required to win or lose one's immortality will thus be the topic of the following section.

History, Evolution and the Finality of the Prophet

In claiming that the individual will not return to the earth after death, and admitting that she will not persist as an individual consciousness indefinitely

in time (as usually understood), Iqbal seems to offer a fairly bleak vision of immortality. This is not entirely misleading. There is in Iqbal's poetry and thought a strong element of the poetic view that immortality can be achieved through one's works, and that there is a certain melancholy pleasure in contemplating one's future impact. In an echo of Shakespeare's paean for eternal lines to time, Iqbal proclaims:

How many a poet after his death
 Opened our eyes when his own were closed,
 And journeyed forth again from nothingness
 When Roses blossomed o'er the earth of his grave!
 . . .
 No one hath told the secret which I will tell
 Or threaded a pearl of thought like mine.
 Come if thou would'st know the secret of everlasting life!
 Come if thou would'st win both heaven and earth! (Iqbal 2008a: 22, 23)

The poet's desire for immortality through his or her works, however, is only the starting point for Iqbal. On the side of personal immortality, the contemplative pleasure of the poet (or author, or political actor, or community member, and so on) must be seen in light of Iqbal's analysis of time and intensity of perception as discussed above. But while Iqbal agrees with Bergson about the need to conceive of time as pure duration, he faults Bergson for failing to see the inherent purposive nature of thought: '[Bergson] ignores that the unity of consciousness has a forward looking aspect. Life is only a series of acts of attention, and an act of attention is inexplicable without reference to a purpose, conscious or unconscious' (Iqbal 2012: 42). It is through working towards a purpose and working towards the advancement of humanity that the individual attains immortality and earns the right to the type of experience discussed above. Exploring what Iqbal means by purpose and advancement is essential to understanding his assertion that '[i]t is open to man, according to the Qur'an, to belong to the meaning of the universe and become immortal' (94).

We have seen above that Iqbal regards immortality as something that one must earn through action. This sentiment can be interpreted in a narrowly political manner, in the sense that by acting to defend one's community or

religion, one is making a direct contribution to the longevity of the community, and thus actively becoming a part of something that will outlast the individual. In one of Iqbal's annual addresses as president of the All India Muslim League, he argues that 'that which really matters is a man's faith, his culture, his historical tradition. These are the things which, in my eyes, are worth living for and dying for' (Iqbal 2008: 31).

When Iqbal speaks of achieving immortality by becoming a part of the meaning of the universe, however, he is speaking primarily about his theories of evolution and history as these relate to humankind and Islam. As with his ideas about temporality, his understanding of history is a unique amalgam of science, Continental Philosophy, and Islamic theology in addition to his own thought. Prior to Charles Darwin, Muslim thinkers had already worked out a theory of evolution. The Persian philosopher Ibn Maskawaih (d. 1030 AD) posited that life had evolved through increasingly complex types of plants, to animals, and finally to man (Iqbal 2012: 107). The poet Rumi presented this theory most famously in a passage that Iqbal claims '[n]o cultured Muslim can read . . . without a thrill of joy' (147). Unlike Darwin's theory, however, Rumi speculates that the process of evolution will continue beyond man as he is currently known, towards another goal:

Beyond the clouds, beyond the sky,
In realms where none may change or die –
In angel form; and then away
Beyond the bounds of night and day,
And Life and Death, unseen or seen,
Where all that is hath ever been seen,
As One and Whole. (Rumi cited in Iqbal 2012: 148)

The most significant difference between the view of Islamic and Western thinkers on evolution, according to Iqbal, is the positive and hopeful view of the former and the 'secret despair' that 'hides itself behind the screen of scientific terminology' of the latter (Iqbal 2012: 148). This despair stems from the assumption that humankind has no real future. Iqbal quotes the early twentieth-century sociologist Edward Cary Hayes to the effect that 'there now appears to be no scientific basis for the idea that the present rich complexity of human endowment will ever be materially exceeded' (Hayes cited in Iqbal

2012: 148). Similarly, although Iqbal admires Nietzsche's emphasis on life and vitality and his hope for the emergence of a future superman he claims that Nietzsche was ultimately subject to the same despair as his scientific peers, since, '[h]is enthusiasm for the future of man ended in the doctrine of eternal recurrence – perhaps the most hopeless idea of immortality ever formed by man' (ibid.; compare to Iqbal 2008b: 161 (essay on Nietzsche and Rumi)).

Nietzsche 'was a failure' according to Iqbal (2012: 154). Although he was perhaps the best-equipped man in Europe for prophetic vision and was driven by an understanding of 'the Divine in man', he failed because he had no spiritual guidance and no solid tradition on which to found his vision (ibid.). Christianity had been obliterated under the weight of modern science and criticism and could not therefore play the role that Iqbal sees for Islam as a guiding principle in directing man's future evolutionary progress. This limitation drove Nietzsche to fight the inevitably democratic character of man's future: 'Instead of looking for a spiritual rule which would develop the Divine even in a plebeian and thus open up before him an infinite future, Nietzsche was driven to seek the realization of his vision in such schemes as aristocratic radicalism' (ibid.). As mentioned above, however, Iqbal did admire Nietzsche's emphasis on action and the need for man to play an active role in his future development, as well as the need for constant revaluations of values (Iqbal 2008: 121).

At a certain point, a point we have now reached according to Iqbal, man comes to play an active role in his own evolution (118). It is partly through this participation that man can achieve immortality by becoming a part of the meaning of the universe. At this point, however, evolution is no longer a matter of physical change, but of mental and spiritual development (Iqbal 2012: 85). Iqbal puts it thus:

It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes. And in this process of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him, provided man takes the initiative: 'Verily God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves' [Quran] 13:11. (Iqbal 2012: 10)

The deepest and most significant aspect of Iqbal's immortality involves the tension between this individual participation in history or evolution and the personal immortality of the individual. But before we can fully appreciate the significance of what Iqbal (2008b: 183) calls 'the tension of the ego', we must spell out more clearly Iqbal's view of history and the accompanying and highly unorthodox understanding of the finality of Muhammad's prophethood.

There are three stages of history, or religion, thus far, according to Iqbal. These three stages are, 'Faith', 'Thought', and 'Discovery' (Iqbal 2012: 143). In the first stage, man was ruled by the visions of prophets or those like prophets who provided, 'ready-made judgements, choices and ways of action' (100). Both individuals and peoples in the age of faith, 'must accept [religious discipline] as an unconditional command without any rational understanding of the ultimate meaning or purpose of that command' (ibid.). This period, which Iqbal calls the 'minority of mankind' and the time when he was in 'leading strings', came to an end with the birth of inductive reason, 'which alone makes man master of his environment . . . and when once born . . . must be reinforced by inhibiting the growth of other modes of knowledge' (ibid.).

In the second period, the age of thought, which Iqbal characterises much as Kant does as humankind's emergence from immaturity, man closes himself off to the sort of non-rational knowledge to which the prophets had access and seeks the foundation of religion, 'in a kind of metaphysics – a logically consistent view of the world with God as a part of that view' (Iqbal 2012: 143). But while Western philosophers such as Hegel believed that this development marked the beginning of the end of history, for Iqbal it was only the midway point. The sense of despair that accompanies Darwin's theory of evolution is matched by Hegel's grim statements about the 'slaughter-bench' of History (2004: 21). For Iqbal, this is the 'unwarranted modern assumption that man's present structure, mental as well as physiological, is the last word on biological evolution, and that death, regarded as a biological event, has no constructive meaning' (2012: 97).

For Iqbal, the erosion of the foundations of modern rationalism and metaphysics, and the accompanying sense of crisis in the West, represents another historical turning point. In this period, religion will reemerge in a

new form to guide both the potentially dangerous course of modern science and the future moral development of the individual. This new period not only opens the door to a stage of development that is higher than those that have gone before, but it represents, for the first time in history, an opportunity for Muslims to realise the true meaning of Islam. 'The storm from the West,' he says, 'has transformed Muslims into real Muslims' (cited in Mir 2006: 9). The following passage offers a glimpse of how this combination of a new beginning and simultaneous return to the origins of Islam, as well as the corresponding understanding of immortality, all fit together for Iqbal:

Neither the technique of medieval mysticism, nor nationalism, nor atheistic socialism can cure the ills of a despairing humanity. Surely the present moment is one of great crisis in the history of modern culture. The modern world stands in need of biological renewal. And religion, which in its higher manifestations is neither dogma, nor priesthood, nor ritual, can alone ethically prepare the modern man for the burden of the great responsibility which the advancement of modern science necessarily involves, and restore to him that attitude of faith which makes him capable of winning a personality here and retaining it in the hereafter. It is only by rising to a fresh vision of his origin and future, his whence and wither, that man will eventually triumph over a society motivated by an inhuman competition, and a civilization which has lost its spiritual unity by its inner conflict of religious and political values. (Iqbal 2012: 149)

The fresh vision Iqbal discusses, which is the subject of the following section, is only possible through what he calls the tension of the ego and personal revelation, a concept that seems to pose a serious challenge to one of the most fundamental tenets of Islam. The notion that the modern individual can receive some sort of revelation is a direct contradiction of Islam's teaching that Muhammad was the final prophet and that no new prophet can emerge. Mawdudi sums up this basic article of faith as follows: 'there will be no prophet appearing in the future, nor will any new religious system be revealed. The fact is Muhammad's teaching are [*sic*] meant for all the children of Adam, are sent for the entire human race, and are valid until the end of time' (1997: 75). Schimmel has noticed this problem and set it down to an oversight on Iqbal's part:

Yet it cannot be denied . . . that from this interpretation of the eternally fresh possibilities of life there could emerge a contradiction to the Islamic dogma of the finality of the prophethood which Iqbal has maintained otherwise so strictly. But it seems that the poet-philosopher has not thought of these possible implications of his theory of an eternal development. (Schimmel 1989: 290)

Schimmel, however, fails to understand Iqbal's conception of history. Iqbal does, indeed, firmly adhere to the principle of the finality of the prophet, but only in the sense that after Muhammad no further prophecy is necessary because man will eventually be able to think for himself, and use his own reason to determine the best ethical and political laws, and ultimately receive revelation on his own. Muhammad's prophecy is the turning point between the period of faith and the period of thought, Iqbal argues, and this is an essential part of his claim that empirical science is Islamic in its origins. Iqbal puts it thus: 'In [Muhammad] life discovers other sources of knowledge suitable to its new direction. The birth of Islam . . . is the birth of inductive intellect. *In Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need for its own abolition*' (Iqbal 2012: 101, emphasis added).¹ It is only in the modern period, however, the age of discovery, when inductive reason has reached its limit, that man is in a position to set aside the literal teachings of the Qur'an and, as Iqbal does, reconstruct Islam as a religion that is more open to individual interpretation and creativity. It is through this understanding of Islam that Iqbal is able to interpret immortality as being dependent on personal revelation and a tension in the ego between individual immortality and immortality through becoming part of the meaning of the universe.

The Tension in the Ego, Personal Revelation and the Third Age of Religion

Iqbal's description of a third age of religion and its accompanying concept of immortality is an attempt to create a new teleological source of meaning based on the cultural and religious traditions of Islam. But while this description is rooted in Islamic tradition it is at the same time faithful to the scientific spirit and liberal values of modernity and is therefore non-metaphysical and relies on a constant revaluation and creative individual and political interpretation

of those traditions. This new interpretation of religion relies on what Iqbal calls the tension of the ego. This is a tension between one's drive towards shaping the future based on personal experience and interpretation, and one's rootedness in a community and religious tradition that always shapes one's efforts. As Iqbal puts it:

The life of the ego is a kind of tension caused by the ego invading the environment and the environment invading the ego. The ego does not stand outside the arena of mutual invasion. It is present in it as a directive energy and is formed and disciplined by its own experience. (Iqbal 2012: 82)

It is the tension between individual aspirations and the community that is the real key to possible immortality: 'Personally, I regard immortality as an inspiration and not something eternally achieved. Man is a candidate for immortal life which involves a ceaseless struggle in maintaining the tension of the ego' (Iqbal 2008b: 183). Thus, Iqbal's understanding of immortality involves the tension between one's striving for personal immortality, which depends on a different perception of time and something like religious experience, and one's contribution to shaping the as yet unforeseeable future course of one's society and of humankind as a whole.

There is no predetermined goal towards which history is moving for Iqbal, who consequently regards his own thinking as provisional (Iqbal 2012: 44). It was the view that Islam is intensely fatalistic, on the part of many Muslims as well as outside observers such as Spengler, which led to the stultification and ossification of belief. This tendency only intensified under the pressures of modern materialism (Spengler 2006: 299). While Iqbal acknowledges that 'the idea of destiny runs throughout the Qur'an', this does not mean that Islam views the world 'as a rigid system of cause and effect' (Iqbal 2012: 87). What Iqbal calls the higher fatalism of the Qur'an is in fact the experience of the tension of the ego spoken of above. As he says in the following difficult passage:

The vital [way of making the world our own] is the absolute acceptance of the inevitable necessity of life, regarded as a whole, which in evolving its inner richness creates serial time. This vital way of appropriating the universe is what the Qur'an describes as Iman [faith]. Iman is not merely

a passive belief in one or more propositions of a certain kind; it is a living assurance begotten of a rare experience. Strong personalities alone are capable of rising to this experience and the higher 'Fatalism' implied in it. (Iqbal 2012: 87)

This experience, Iqbal goes on to say, 'is a vital fact', which 'can embody itself only in a world-making or world-shaking act; and in this form alone the content of this timeless experience can diffuse itself in the time movement, and make itself effectively visible to the eye of history' (Iqbal 2012: 145). These two quotations are attempts on Iqbal's part to describe what he means by the tension of the ego, or the meeting point between experiencing serial time and time as pure duration. It means having some experience of eternity, but realising that life requires participation in the world as a finite individual, and not withdrawal from it. The individual must play an active role in helping his society and humankind, despite his mortality.

It is in this light that Iqbal explains heaven and hell. These, as we have seen, are states of mind. Hell is punishment for inactivity, and the realisation that one has not done anything with lasting significance. It 'is not a pit of everlasting torture inflicted by a revengeful God' since there is no afterlife, as traditionally believed according to Iqbal, but 'it is a corrective experience' (Iqbal 2012: 98). Heaven, on the other hand, 'is the joy of triumph over the forces of disintegration', but is not a state of rest or inactivity, for, 'the recipient of Divine illumination is not merely a passive recipient. Every act of a free ego creates a new situation, and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding' (ibid.). The notion of a wrathful God who metes out severe punishments and great rewards is, for Iqbal, no longer believable. This view is the result of Magian influences that have been adopted by both Islamic thinkers and those such as Spengler, and Iqbal goes to great lengths to disprove this notion (114ff.). This view, not surprisingly, is the source of some consternation among commentators because it denies the everlasting punishment for sin that appears to be outlined in the Qur'an (see, for example, Ashraf 2003: 75–85).

Achieving immortality, then, requires purposive and creative activity. More concretely, humankind can achieve this through the active engagement of every individual, as well as the occasional appearance of 'an inspiring

personality, the birth of a new ideal, or a universal religious reform' (Iqbal 2008b: 117). Iqbal sees himself as acting in such a role, and consciously emulates others he sees as having done so, especially Rumi and Goethe. 'The world of today,' he says, 'needs a Rumi to create an attitude of hope, and to kindle the fire of enthusiasm for life' (Iqbal 2012: 97). Without constant reinterpretation or revaluation in Nietzsche's sense, religion becomes essentially worthless as a real source of meaning.

We can note in passing that there is a striking affinity between Iqbal's response to modern thought and Heidegger's later work, in which he argues that art, and especially poetry, is somehow the 'saving power' that will emerge to check the danger of modern technology.² It is poetry's ability to shed new light on its subject and its openness to individual interpretation that, for Iqbal, allows it to keep the Islamic tradition alive.

Here, however, Iqbal faces another challenge from Islamic theology. After the destruction of Baghdad in the mid-thirteenth century, many of the religious schools of Islam declared that there could be no further innovation in religion or interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the Qur'an. Iqbal devotes a chapter to this development and concludes, 'The closing of the door of Itjihad is pure fiction', saying that interpretation 'within the limits of the revealed texts, is absolutely free' (141).

But Iqbal takes the notion of *ijtihad* one step further by claiming that individuals not only need freedom in order to interpret the Qur'an, but personal revelation as well. The age of thought, which is coming to a close, has proven that 'pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring' (Iqbal 2012: 142). This personal revelation, he says, speaks 'from the inmost depths of life' and 'internalizes its own apparent externality' (ibid.). This, again, is not only a radical innovation, according to Iqbal, but also the emergence of the true meaning of Islam:

Early Muslims emerging out of the spiritual slavery of pre-Islamic Asia were not in a position to realize the true significance of this basic idea. 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. (Iqbal 2012: 142)

Iqbal finds support for this unorthodox idea in the words of 'a Muslim Sufi' who claims that 'no understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it is actually revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet' (Iqbal 2012: 143).

By receiving personal revelation, 'the individual achieves a free personality, not by releasing himself from the fetters of law, but by discovering the ultimate source of law within the depths of his own consciousness' (ibid.). By claiming that Muslims can receive revelation on their own, based on their own interpretation of the Qur'an, and thus be masters of their own spiritual development, Iqbal is denying the legal aspect of the Qur'an, which, it should go without saying, is also a controversial sentiment. The purpose of the Qur'an, Iqbal claims more than once, 'is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe', and is therefore 'not a legal code'. Similarly, the descriptions of the afterlife in the Qur'an are 'representations of an inner fact' and not meant to be read literally (98).

That the Qur'an must constantly be reinterpreted and that each individual can receive personal revelation raises an unsettling question about the nature of immortality. Despite Iqbal's discussion of the topic in terms of one's perception of time and involvement in societal progress, he ultimately leaves it up to personal interpretation to determine what it means to be immortal. Even in terms of his analysis of time, Iqbal's interpretation does not lend itself to any clear understanding of how the individual is to think about his own finitude. As Whittemore puts it, 'Iqbal is at pains to stress his conviction that the individual is neither in time nor eternity lost in time' (1956: 692). This ambiguity is clearest in the following passage:

The nature of the universe is such that it is open to it to maintain in some other way [than corporeal resurrection] the kind of individuality necessary for the final working out of human action, even after the disintegration of what appears to specify his individuality in his present environment. What that other way is we do not know. Nor do we gain any further insight into the nature of the 'second creation' [Quran 29:20] by associating it with some kind of body, no matter how subtle it may be. The analogies of the Qur'an only suggest it as a fact; they are not meant to reveal its nature and character. (Iqbal 2012: 97f.)

Although this may appear as a grave weakness in Iqbal's theory, this ambiguity is in fact one of its strengths. It is an attempt to reconstruct religious thought in a way that will make it more believable and more of a living factor in the lives of Muslims. Offering a concrete description of what the afterlife will be like based on a fully worked out metaphysical framework would, perhaps paradoxically, likely make Iqbal's interpretation less believable rather than more so. Ibn Rushd (Averroës), he says, 'approached the question of immortality from a purely metaphysical point of view, and, I venture to think, achieved no results' (Iqbal 2012: 89). This is, in part, he says, because

if mere belief in certain prepositions of Metaphysical import is the only thing that ultimately determines the structure of the Muslim Community, is it not an extremely unsafe basis especially before the advance of modern knowledge, with its habits of Rationalism and criticism? (Iqbal 2008b: 124)

And further, 'Purely metaphysical arguments, however, cannot give us a positive belief in personal immortality' (Iqbal 2012: 89). Iqbal's interpretation, then, is in keeping with his recognition that traditional religious belief is difficult in part because of its metaphysical assertions in an age that has lost all faith in metaphysics.

Conclusion

Liberalism, for Iqbal, was inevitable. He did not view it as an entirely negative development, but as a challenge that offered an opportunity for progress within Islam (Iqbal 2008b: 4). As with any living religion, Islam has always had to change and adapt to changing circumstances, as Iqbal knows. The challenge from modern thought, however, is greater in that it poses an obstacle to belief itself. Iqbal downplays the legal aspect of the Qur'an in part because the question on his intended audience's mind increasingly was not, 'What do I have to do to get into heaven and avoid hell?' but 'Does anything I do matter at all?'

The traditional account of the afterlife can no longer serve as a guide for the individual or community, and, Iqbal believes, no arguments, however persuasive, can change this state of affairs. Iqbal, rather, tries to revive the religious experience, free from any conventional list of rewards and punishments, through a sense of awe at the disparity between humankind's

perception and reality. In some sense, it is by keeping abreast of what is happening at the edges of theoretical physics and understanding the Qur'an in light of these developments that one can have such an experience. But, rather than withdrawing into asceticism, this sort of confrontation with temporality must be tempered by an engagement with one's community. The experience of time as pure duration should be followed by one's active participation in serial time.

Iqbal understood that India was not going to revert to what it once was after the eventual British withdrawal, but was going to become a fully modern state with Western institutions. In his Presidential Address delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim Conference, Lahore, 21 March 1932, Iqbal stated, 'The present struggle in India is sometimes described as India's revolt against the West. I do not think it is a revolt against the West; for the people of India are demanding the very institutions which the West stands for' (Iqbal 2008b: 43). The place of Islam in this modern context was, then, an imminent and practical concern. Rather than attempting to preserve religion as something antiquated that needs protection from modern thought, Iqbal presents Islam as something that is only now on the verge of coming within humankind's ken. Fully grasping Islam, and especially the meaning of one's mortality, will only be possible with the help of advanced theoretical physics and the interpretive powers of the greatest poets. As a living religion, Iqbal teaches, Islam is inexhaustible, and thus cannot be reduced to a superstition or an unbelievable myth by the advance of modern science. Put another way, Islam can only remain a vital force if it remains beyond the horizon of modern thought.

The fundamentalist approach, which Iqbal opposes, in fact agrees with certain strands of modern thought, in that it, too, treats religion as something that must be hived off from modernity and protected in a static and antique form. An integral part of the fundamentalist view is that religious laws are immutable and apply to every individual. Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of Iqbal's interpretation of Islam is that the religion is no longer seen as immutable and that it is open to individual interpretation. The implication here is that it is in some sense open to the individual to interpret what exactly his or her fate will be after death. This is, perhaps paradoxically, the only way that religion can continue to guide its adherents in the post-metaphysical age.

Notes

1. It is also worth noting that Iqbal sees prophecy as an entirely natural phenomenon, and one that may perhaps characterise psychopaths. He suggests that Muhammad may have been such a psychopath, along with Nietzsche (Iqbal 2012: 150ff.). Iqbal cites Ibn Khaldun in support of the view that prophecy is a natural psychological phenomenon (see Ibn Khaldun 1969: 70ff.).
2. See, for example, Heidegger's essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', in which he quotes Holderlin to the effect that, 'where the danger is, grows/The saving power also' (1993: 340). Iqbal, however, would likely level the same criticism at Heidegger that he does at Nietzsche – namely that his philosophy is not grounded in a spiritual tradition, but in vague notions of culture.

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