

Iqbal and Muslim Unity

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Abstract: This paper examines the views of Mohd. Iqbal concerning Muslims and analyzes his ideas to attain Muslim unity. Iqbal, known as the poet-philosopher of Pakistan, was not a narrow nationalist and his vision was not limited to Pakistan. Iqbal's vision was ummatic and hence he should be referred to as "the poet philosopher of Muslim unity." He had a distinct conception of Muslim unity and suggested clear cut guidelines to attain that cherished goal. These ideas were as much relevant to his times as they are relevant to the contemporary Muslim world which is characterized by disunity.

Muslims, according to the Qur'ān, form one brotherhood because they are fused together by their belief in *tawhīd*, *risālah* and *ākhirah*. The Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAS) require Muslims to work for the unity of the Ummah. They are required by the Qur'ān to be merciful towards each other (48:29) and, according to the Prophet (SAS), they are like the body such that if one part is injured, the whole body shivers in pain. Unfortunately, Muslims are not practicing this injunction of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAS). Instead of Muslims being united in mercy towards each other, and feeling the pain and misery of other Muslims (like in Chechnya, Palestine, and Kashmir), they are enjoying their material comforts of life or, at best, passing their time debating the issue of Muslim unity. In the meantime, Muslim misery and sufferings continue. It is sad to see Muslim governments collaborating with non-Muslims to inflict damage and sufferings to their fellow Muslims. In Muslim majority areas, Muslim groups are fighting against each other. In countries where they form minorities, Muslims are divided against themselves and are therefore, subjected to discrimination, humiliation, and persecution. In short, Muslims are divided along religious, political, ethnic, cultural, racial, linguistic, and sectarian lines. Muslims possess the richest resources of the world and the most fertile lands of the earth. Yet, they are the most vulnerable and the most dependent people on earth. The reason, among others, is Muslim disunity.

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This disunity among Muslims is against the teachings of the Qur'ān which unequivocally calls upon all Muslims:

And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves. And remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you; for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace, you became brethren (3:103).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the problem of Muslim disunity and the way to overcome this problem. This is done by referring to the ideas of 'Allāmah Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal. In specific terms, this paper examines the views of Iqbal concerning Muslim unity and analyses his ideas to attain Muslim unity. Pakistan has acknowledged ownership of Iqbal and he is also generally known as the poet-philosopher of Pakistan. This gives the wrong impression that Iqbal was a narrow nationalist whose vision was limited to Pakistan. It is argued in this paper that Iqbal's vision was Ummatic and hence he should be referred to as "the poet philosopher of Muslim unity." The paper is divided into three sections. First, it provides a synoptic view of Iqbal's life and times. This is followed by his conception of Muslim unity. The third section discusses Iqbal's ideas on the requirements of Muslim unity. The concluding section summarizes the arguments presented above in the three preceding sections with some personal observations related to Muslim unity.

Iqbal: A Brief Biography

Muhammad Iqbal was born in 1877 in Sialkot, Punjab.¹ His parents were devout Muslims and his father was known for Sufi (mystic) leanings. In his childhood, "Iqbal spent his infancy in growing, questioning, playing, amidst a loving family."² The family's socialization and the religious atmosphere prepared Iqbal to struggle in the cause of Islam from early childhood. He studied at Sialkot Mission College and continued his education in Lahore. Iqbal graduated with English Literature, Philosophy and Arabic as his subjects. He received his M.A. in Philosophy in 1889 from Punjab University. Later, he was appointed as a Lecturer in History, Philosophy and Political Science at Oriental College, Lahore. He then moved to Government College to teach Philosophy and English Literature. By that time he won recognition as a rising star on the firmament of Urdu Literature.

Iqbal proceeded to Europe for higher studies in 1905 and stayed there for three years to study philosophy and law at Cambridge and Munich University. He earned a Ph.D. for his dissertation titled *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* which was published in 1908 in London. Meanwhile, he passed the qualifying examination for lawyers.

By then Iqbal had become a learned scholar proficient in philosophy, law and literature besides having a good command of several foreign languages. He served as a teacher in the London School of Commerce and passed the Honours Examination in Economics and Political Science. During his stay at Cambridge, Iqbal “took active part in the meetings of the Islamic Society, which some Indian Muslims had organized in London, and was one of those who were responsible for changing its name to Pan-Islamic Society.”³ In addition, Iqbal read widely and also wrote and lectured on Islamic subjects, which added to his popularity and fame in literary circles. During the same period, Iqbal traveled to Italy, Spain and other countries on the Continent. Iqbal returned to India in 1908. He practiced law from 1908 to 1934, when ill health compelled him to give up his practice. This also was the period when he took an active part in Indian politics and helped Muslims chart a new course, which ultimately culminated in the emergence of Pakistan as the largest Muslim state in 1947. All through this period, he devoted more time to philosophy and literature than to legal profession.

Iqbal witnessed Italy’s attack on Tripoli in 1911 and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). These events were a great setback for the Muslim world. He resented the policies of the British government which led to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and weakening of the Muslim world. Iqbal was greatly distressed. In his mood of anger and frustration, he wrote a number of stirring poems, which together with portraying the anguish of Muslims were severely critical of the West. The spirit of change is evident in poems like *Bilad-i-Islamiah* (the lands of Islam), *Wataniat* (Nationalism), *Tehzib-i-Hazir* (Modern civilization) and *Huzur-i-Risalat Ma’ab Mein* (In the Presence of Sacred Prophet). In these poems, Iqbal deplors the attitude of Muslim leaders who lay a claim to Islamic leadership and yet are devoid of a genuine spiritual attachment to the blessed Prophet. Likewise, Iqbal was shaken by the tragic events of World War I and the disaster the Muslims had to face. *Khizr-i-Rah* (The Guide) occupies the place of pride among the poems he wrote during this period. *Bang-i-Dara* (The Caravan Bell) published in 1929 has held a place of honor in Urdu poetry and world poetry.

Iqbal preferred Persian for poetic expression because its circle was wider than that of Urdu in Muslim India. His Persian works, *Asrar-i-khudi* (Secrets of the Self), *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi* (Mysteries of Selflessness), *Payam-i-Mashriq* (Message of the East), and *Javed Namah* (The Song of Eternity) belong to the same period of his life. Iqbal was deeply concerned with the progressive decline of the Muslim society all over the world. He, therefore, wrote seriously on the

reconstruction of religious thought in Islam. He examined Islamic thought in all its aspects, and attempted to present Qur'ānic interpretations in the light of twentieth century requirements in a coherent form. Iqbal's works are regarded highly and are being continuously studied in academies in many parts of Europe.

Iqbal on Nationalism and Islamic Universalism

The objective of giving a thumbnail account of Iqbal's life was to emphasize the fact that Iqbal's thinking has undergone many changes and it can conveniently be divided into three parts: The young Iqbalian phase, the period from his childhood till he left India for Europe. The European phase, the period of his stay in Europe, that radically altered his thinking on social and political problems. Finally, the adult Iqbalian phase, the period beginning from his return to India till his death in 1938.

The poems written during the young Iqbalian phase are marked by a spirit of ardent nationalism. He even emerged, according to Ikram, as "the champion of the new rising nationalism of India."⁴ His appeal throughout was for the union of the two great communities, which together formed what he thought was one Indian nation. The great and golden past of India stirred his youthful imagination. His great desire was the extinction of bigotry and fanaticism. In his poem entitled *Taranah-e-Hindi* (Indian anthem) belonging to that era, he says:

Religion does not teach people to bear animosity to one another;
We are Indians and India is our motherland.⁵

Taranah-i-Hindi, according to Cantwell Smith, "is today loved as a national anthem by thousands of all communities in India."⁶ Likewise, poems like *Himalah* and *Naya Shiwala* (New Temple) voice the sentiments of a staunch nationalist with a fervent plea for unity of Hindus and Muslims. This idealistic view of an Indian Nation composed of Hindus and Muslims living in amity and brotherhood was a temporary and a very short-lived phase.

During his stay in Europe, he absorbed new ideas which were anti-thesis to his earlier political philosophy. Iqbal's three-year stay in Europe brought about "a good deal of change in his mental attitude."⁷ The absence of religious sentiments on the one hand and the presence of hollow materialism on the other repelled him. Greedy and selfish competition between man and man, and between nation and nation could not be the basis of a society of which Iqbal was dreaming. He found the idea of nationalism inadequate to solve the problems of humanity. Nationalism tends to narrow down human outlook, and fetters

human sympathies. "From nationalism thoughts naturally move towards the idea that mankind has been so sharply divided into nations that it is impossible to bring about unity between them."⁸

Nationalism, as conceived in the West, suggests a dualism and a separation of church and state. Islam does not confine itself only to the religious aspects of its votaries. It is a religious, political, moral, social and economic system and none of these aspects can be stressed to the detriment of the others. As Iqbal puts it:

It is a mistake to suppose that the idea of state is more dominant and rules all other ideas embodied in the system of Islam. In Islam the spiritual and the temporal are not two distinct domains.... In Islam it is the same reality which appears as church looked at from one point of view and state from another. It is not true to say that church and state are two sides or facets of the same thing, Islam is a single unanalysable reality which is one or the other as your point of view varies.⁹

He condemned the nationalism of the West as binding individuals together not on the basis of mental and spiritual affinity and the harmony of ideals but on the outward ties of race, language and blood. He discarded the concept of nationalism as a continuation of tribal mentality. Nationalism had torn the whole continent apart, and the Muslim states were the major victims of European national bigotry and aggression. Iqbal felt repelled by this and thus began the next phase of his thinking in which he advocated the idea of social organizations which derive their binding force from the ethical principles of the divine sources that integrate human beings rather than divide them. He became so convinced of this position that he said: "Of all the modern [false] gods, the one that is the most prominent is *waṭan*; that what constitutes its clothing is the shroud of religion."¹⁰

His perspective was no longer confined to India. It had been extended to cover the entire world of Islam, which knows no bounds of territory, race or caste. The following lines express his new mood:

Our essence is not bound to any place;
The vigour of our wine is not contained
In any bowl; Chinese and Indian
Alike the shard that constitutes our jar,
Turkish and Syrian alike the clay
Forming our body; neither is our heart
Of India, or Syria or Rum,
Nor any fatherland do we profess Except Islam.¹¹

Unity of Muslim countries rather than unity of different communities had now become his obsession. In his opinion all Muslims in the world

have one Prophet, one faith, one Belief, one Ka'bah, and one Qur'ān. He saw no reason why they should not all be united as one universal entity. In a short poem entitled *Al Ard Lillāh*, he puts the same words in the mouth of Ṭāriq bin Ziyād: "Every country is our country because it is the country of our God."

Iqbal was no longer writing for Indian Muslims alone but for his co-religionists scattered all over the world. He had switched from Urdu to Persian to make his message available to the largest number of the adherents of Islam. His message was the message of Islam.

Iqbal used the word *millah* to denote a community based on faith and transcendental moral principles. This *millah* has several characteristics. One, the *millah* is directly linked to the idea of *tawhīd* (unity and universality of God) and *risālah* (Prophethood). The principle of the unity of God demands loyalty to Allah (SWT). This principle seeks to unify the diverse elements and groups comprising the Islamic *millah*. The doctrine of *tawhīd* carried with it a principle of action and forms the basis of the advancement of humanity. It brings a new sense of courage and frees the outlook of man from fear and superstition. The object of *risalah* is to establish the fundamental unity of mankind on the basis of equality, liberty and fraternity.

Second, this community is universal and therefore, non-territorial. A Muslim belongs only partially to the territory he is born in. His real identity is his *millah*, the community of believers under the leadership of Muhammad (SAS). Iqbal is of the view that:

If one were bound with a place, the result will be utter destruction, you should live like a fish in the ocean independent of country. In the parlance of politics, "country" means something different; and according to the sayings of the Prophet, "country" is something else.¹²

Third, the Muslim *millah* is not based on nationalism because, as he says, nationalism destroys the roots of Islamic nationality and divides God's creation into nationalism.

Fourth, the Muslim *millah* is global in context. Iqbal says in his *Taranah-i-Milli* (Milli anthem),

China and Arabia are ours, so is India ours
We are Muslims and the whole world is our country.¹³

Finally, the idea of unity of Muslim *millah* does not mean abolishing the nation-states. The nation-states within the larger framework of *millah* and humanity are quite logical, indeed necessary. In this respect, Iqbal was particularly impressed by the resurgence of Turkish nationhood,

although critical of some of its extreme aspects. In other words, Iqbal was not thinking of Muslim unity in the abstract. He took the existing reality into consideration and tried to mould it to the greatest advantage of Islam. Thus he advises the Muslims:

For the present every Muslim nation must sink into her own deeper self, temporarily focus her vision on herself alone, until all are strong and powerful to form a living family of republics.... Islam is neither nationalism nor imperialism but a League of Nations which recognizes artificial boundaries and racial distinctions for facility of reference only, and not for restricting the social horizon of its members.¹⁴

Thus, for Iqbal, Islamic *millah* is a nation *sui generis* because it was founded on monotheism. Therefore, it transcends all barriers of race, colour, language, and territory. In fact, it aims at achieving integration of all mankind into a moral body for excellence. To Iqbal:

This is the purpose of Nature, that is also the secret of being a Muslim.
World encompassing brotherhood, and abundance of Love.
Break the images of colour, race, and get lost in the community, So that
there may be neither Turk, nor Iranian, nor Afghani.¹⁵

Individual: The Essence of the *Millah*

The *millah* is composed of individual Muslims who are capable of recognizing their selves and the purpose of their creation. The real cause of Muslim deterioration is *nafi-i-khudi*, the lack of self-cognizance, and Iqbal suggests *isbat-i-khudi*, self-recognition, as its remedy. *Khudi* is used by Iqbal in a philosophical sense to mean recognition of one's self. According to Iqbal, man is a unique being endowed with self-hood, primordial knowledge of God, and a unique distinction of free-will. On the basis of these characteristics he has been endowed with vicegerency of God on earth.

In order to reach his full potential, man has to pass through three stages of development. The first stage is development of the understanding of self and one's uniqueness, and one's status in the universe. The universe has been created for man, and he has a unique place in the scheme of things. That he should be conscious of this status is the first step in the development of his selfhood or *khudi*. Development of *khudi* also requires the understanding of the Creator, because the place man has achieved is given to him by God. Nothing can be achieved without obedience to the laws as ordained by God. The second stage of development is for man to learn self-control in accordance with the laws of God. If *khudi* is properly disciplined by obedience and self-control and rightly cultivated, it develops a

personality worthy of representing God on earth. The vicegerency of Allah is the ultimate destination of Man as the supreme creation of God. This is the stage of a perfect man, a stage that is reached by the prophets.

The morning breeze has given the message
 That men who are aware of the self
 Hold the royal station
 Thine life springs from it, and
 Thine honour is contingent upon it
 With self awareness, one attains royalty
 And devoid of it, only disgrace.¹⁶

Development of *khudi* does not mean evolution of human beings into some sort of super man as conceived by Nietzsche. Nietzsche gave the idea of super man as being amoral, and a law unto himself – such a being is capable of destruction, and enforcement of his own will over others, not really capable of constructive activities.

Nietzsche's super man can be an individualist, but not a part of a cooperative endeavor, not a part of an organization or community required by the *millah*. *Khudi*, in the conception of Iqbal, is the name of several attributes found in an ideal character. These attributes include, among others, self-realisation, self-assertion, boldness, spirit of independence, sense of respect, noble idealism and action. The highest form of life is the *khudi* in which the individual draws closer and closer to God, until he is the complete person. Success lies in the struggle against all material forces, which hinder the progress of man. "The life of the Ego is a kind of tension caused by the Ego invading the environment, and the environment invading the Ego."¹⁷

When individuals develop their *khudi* to the optimum, they submit (what Iqbal calls *bekhudi*) to the *millah*, but remain animated with an intense love for action and freedom. Such individuals are a source of strength to the *millah* and the *millah* exalt their position. Thus, the individual and the *millah* reflect each other. The individual is elevated through the *millah*, and the *millah* is organized through individuals.

Conclusion

The most important theme of Iqbal's prose and poetry is Muslim unity. We find him lamenting the discord among Muslims on the basis of language, caste, creed, nationality and colour. He believed that such divisiveness is pulling the Muslims down to the meanest level. Consequently Muslims are not able to play their role as *khair al-ummah*, the best of community raised by God to guide mankind, to enjoy right,

forbid wrong and believe in Allah. Rather, the Muslim world is known only for its inner strife and division, its turbulence and self-contradictions. This is despite the fact that the Ummah counts over a billion, its territories are resource-rich, its potential in human, material and geo-political resources is the greatest. Most importantly, the Muslims have a faith – Islam – which is an integral and realistic religion. Most of the Muslim problems will be readily solved if the Muslims could forge unity among themselves. Iqbal was a pragmatist and accepted the fact that the Muslim world is divided into various territories. He, therefore, suggested that Muslim countries should assess their conditions, consider their geographical boundaries as a matter of administrative convenience, pool their resources together on the basis of love and brotherhood, and eventually form a family of republics or League of Nations. As Iqbal has said, there is only one Prophet (SAS) for all and one *Īmān* for all. There is also one *Ka'bah*, one Allah and one Qur'ān for all. How great it would be if Muslims also were one!¹⁸ Allah (S.W.T) has promised that if we unite, then we will regain our dignity, power, and glory (24:55). And Allah does not break His promise (2:80).

To conclude, Iqbal was great as a poet and profound as a thinker. In addition, he was a great religious reformer whose sole ambition was to see the Muslims unite and play a meaningful role in ushering a new, humane world order. The best tribute to this great scholar, activist and a reformer is to make a fresh resolve to do our utmost to realize his cherished desire of uniting the Muslim world. Allah (SWT) has promised:

And those who strive in Our (cause), We will certainly guide them to Our paths. For verily Allah is with those who do right (29:69).

NOTES

1. Scholars disagree about Iqbal's date of birth. According to some, Iqbal was born on February 22, 1873. However, "Iqbal gave the date of his birth as 3rd of Dhul-Qa'd, 1294 A.H., corresponding to 9th November 1877. Until strong evidence is forthcoming to prove this to be wrong this date must be accepted as the date of Iqbal's birth." S. A. Vahid, "Introduction" in Parveen Feroze Hassan, *The Political Philosophy of Iqbal* (Lahore: Publishers United, 1970), v.
2. Lini S. May, *Iqbal: His Life and Times* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1974), 43.
3. S. M. Ikram, *Modern Muslim India and the Birth of Pakistan (1858-1951)*

(Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965), 174.

4. Ibid., 172.

5. Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, Urdu* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1994), 110.

6. W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1947), 114.

7. Zafar Ishaq Ansari, "Iqbal and Nationalism", *Iqbal Review: Journal of the Iqbal Academy Pakistan*, 2, no.1 (April 1961), 67.

8. Shamloo ed., *Speeches and Statements of Iqbal* (Lahore: Al-Manar Academy, 1948), 237.

9. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, edited & annotated M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan & Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 122.

10. Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, Urdu*, 187.

11. M. Iqbal, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, tr., A. J. Arberry (London: John Murray, 1953), 29.

12. Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, Urdu*, 159.

13. Ibid.

14. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 126.

15. Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, Urdu*, 270.

16. Ibid., 233.

17. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 82.

18. Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal, Urdu*, 223.