Intellectual Discourse, 2002
Vol 10, No 2, 171-179

Iqbal's Ideas Regarding the New Perceptions of Space and Time

Azizan Baharuddin*

Abstract: In the context of Islam the subject of science and belief has always been part of its *élan vital.* From hundreds of Qurʿānic verses, Muslim scholars and thinkers have embarked on the exercise to understand scripture in the light of His creation (the study of nature or science). When talking about space and time in the empirical and spiritual sense it is indeed these "signs" that Iqbal was interested in. This paper presents some of the ideas Iqbal had elaborated upon regarding religion and science especially on the subject of the meaning and spiritual implications of the concepts of space and time.

In today's world the issue of the relationship between science and religious belief deserves serious attention because of the increasing awareness that the philosophy of pure reductionism and materialism is insufficient to meet human needs.[1] Instead, the belief that reductionist accounts of natural phenomena must always be complemented by holistic perspectives has gained ground especially through an awareness among the public of ecological interdependencies.[2]

In the past, religious beliefs were able to operate within science, giving it sanction, hypotheses for theory selection as well as regulating its methods and applications. However, such mutual relevancies between science and religion suffered setbacks, largely from perspectives such as Freudian. Freud's critique of religion had the "effect of disqualifying religious belief from functioning as a complement to the conclusions of science."[3]

However, the tides began to turn at the beginning of the century whence as a result of "unexpected" discoveries in physics which had been dubbed as bringing about "the second scientific revolution," new revelation came to the fore with regards the nature of reality and with it

* Dr. Azizan Baharuddin is Professor in the Department of Science and Technology and the Director of the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya. E-Mail: azizan.b@lycos.com

the relationship between man, nature and God.[4] For many commentators the developments in physics had the impact of showing:

> the complementarity between scientific and religious discourses; holistic conceptions of reality; and the relevance of human values in influencing priorities for scientific research and directing applications of science and technology.[5]

One of the effects of the ensuing "paradigm shift" in the West has also been the belief that it is science that substantiates, if not confirms, the need/wisdom of a holistic (both religious belief and science are necessary) world view. To not only achieve harmony but also to survive, it is critical that science and its application be regulated by values that have largely been ignored in the West.

In the context of Islam, the subject of science and belief has always been part of its *élan vital*. From hundreds of Qur'ānic verses scholars and thinkers like Ibn Ṭufayl, al-Ghazālī and many others have embarked on the exercise to understand scripture in the light of His creation (the study of nature or science).

> And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours; verily in these are signs for those who know (Al-Qur'ān, Al-Rum: 22).

When talking about space and time in the empirical and spiritual sense it is indeed these "signs" that Iqbal was interested in. In this paper I will present some of the ideas which Iqbal had elaborated upon regarding religion and science in general and on the subject of the meaning and spiritual implications of the concepts of space and time in particular. Although Muhammad Iqbal is primarily known as a poet-philosopher, he was also a very serious natural theologian and that one of his overarching concern was the relationship between Religion and Science.

Forces Shaping Iqbal's Thought

For Iqbal, the new science and its ensuing philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century led him to believe that religious-spiritual experience is objective and that a rational account of it can be given. In the preface to *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* he wrote:

> religion today requires a method physiologically less violent and more suited to a coherent type of mind. In the absence of such a method the demand for a scientific form of religious knowledge is only natural.[6]

Two major contributory factors in the development of this thought seem to be the socio-political apathy of the Muslims in general as well as the

so-called overt materialism or "soullessness" of the post-industrial Western man. The second factor was the development in physics with its attending relativistic view of nature for which he found "sanctification" from his spiritual mentors.

It can also be seen that in the evolution of his ideas, Iqbal was very much a product of his time in terms of the influence of the prevalent Western science and philosophy which, if we look at the history of science, was undergoing a revolutionary change, especially in physics. Iqbal was not directly involved with science *per se*. However, this did not detract from the substance of his natural theological efforts (i.e., harmonizing or merging science with religion). Taking his cue from scientists and philosophers as diverse as William James, Bergson, Whitehead, Nietzsche, Spengler, Mc Taggart, Einstein, Addington and Haldane amongst others, he embarked on a reinterpretation of mysticism and Islamic religious thought in the light of modern knowledge in general.

In his theology he employed three main scientific concepts, the meanings of which were both undergoing revolutionary change – as is evident from the writings of scientists, philosophers and theologians at the turn of the century. These were the concepts of evolution, space and time which were fast developing into the ideas of emergent evolution and relativistic space-time, respectively. It is not surprising that these two concepts caught so much of Iqbal's attention, because as he was trying to show, they were key concepts in deep-religious experience as well.

From an analysis of his writings it would not be an exaggeration to say that the new physics enabled the natural theology of Iqbal to come into full bloom. For him, deep spiritual experience or mysticism was itself the subject of integration with science. On the whole, Iqbal can be seen to be wanting to fulfill two objectives via his discourse of science and religion:

1. To provide a new theology for the increasingly Westernised and scientific-oriented Muslim of the twentieth century and later.
2. To naturalise what hitherto had been considered super natural by arguing that Islamic mysticism should be understood in terms of religious psychology accessible to all.

Because of what Capra and others like Bergson call the limitation of our ordinary language, Iqbal very often expressed this part of his thought metaphysically and poetically. Thus, Iqbal tried to coax his

people and Muslims in general out of their inertness. At the same time he also saw that his ideas could form a working hypothesis of a unified understanding of the meaning of Reality – the two main components of which he understood to be man and God or the "ego" and the "Super Ego."[7]

Iqbal spent a good number of years in the west especially Germany where he worked for his doctoral degree. Partly the result of the new findings in physics at the turn of the century as well as such works as exemplified in O. Spengler's *Decline of the West*, there was in Germany at that time a general anti-rationalistic attitude. The prevailing intellectual atmosphere could have helped him to renew his sense of appreciation of his own tradition, especially the Sufistic, which contains discussions of the concepts of time, causality and evolution. But also convinced of the value of science and reason, he realised that what he had to do was to make his religion, especially its mystical side, more empirical. In this as we shall see later, he owed a great deal to the recently discovered relativistic conception of matter, space and time.[8]

Intuition, Consciousness, Space and Time

There is no doubt that in Iqbal's thinking we can see the realisation of the significance for religion of the discoveries of the new science. The focus of our attention would be on *how* he tried to 'reconcile' the new science at the turn of the century with what he understood Islam to be. He did this by partly enriching the interpretations of scriptural verses in the light of scientific and spiritual ideas. As mentioned, we can see him fulfilling this task especially in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.[9]

A few words is necessary here concerning his usage of the term religion. Religion, to Iqbal, is incomplete without mysticism or *taṣawwuf* which stands for a deep knowledge and personal experience of the reality of God and the *sharī'ah* which is the basis of all of one's actions. Dissociating himself from its usual connotation of pantheism and life-denying qualities, Iqbal strove to "empiricise" and legitimise mysticism in the light of the new science of the early twentieth century. Some of the theological issues discernible or discussed in his works included the questions of free will and determinism, life after death, heaven and hell, problem of pain and suffering, the meaning of evil and Satan, evolution as well as reason and intuition. In all of his explanations of the religious, intuitive and metaphysical, Iqbal was always logical, thorough and persuasive. Some of his major ideas as expounded in his *Reconstruction* and which bear the most direct

relevance to our discussion of the concept of space and time include, for example, his idea on *intuition in relation to consciousness, time and space.*

In his essay "Introduction to Metaphysics," Bergson asserted that it is intuition as opposed to analysis that enables us to reach the reality of a thing. Intuition "can give us direct, though not sensual contact with reality; direct, meaning that it dispenses with abstract concepts." The intuitive insight which he contrasted with analytical thinking can embrace various phenomena of which mystical union is a privileged instance. In contrast to the mainstream of European philosophy Bergson also believed that metaphysics is both possible and can be built on the basis of the existing stock of empirical science, if only we are willing to discard prejudices. To Iqbal as well as Bergson, life is time and time is consciousness, or self of which there are two aspects – the "appreciative" and the "efficient." The efficient self enters into relation with the world of space.[10]

But because we are often too absorbed with the external order of things we seldom get a glimpse of the appreciative self, which is the inner center of experience. We can, however, reach it, says Iqbal, in moments of profound meditation. Unlike the determinists, for whom time is like a machine that unwinds a film reel which has been there all along, with its entire story, Iqbal and Bergson asserted that "the life of the universe is a creative process, whereby something new and thus unpredictable appears at every moment." Bergson's idea of time is also different from the time of physics (Newtonian) which sees time also like a type of space breakable into homogeneous segments sitting next to each other in an indefinitely long line. This to Iqbal is 'artificial' time; real time, or what he called *duree*, is not divisible, is direct experience" and it is possible through memory or consciousness. Both Bergson and Iqbal point to the limitation of language in describing this profound self. In his *Creative Evolution,* Bergson said: " ... language cannot grasp it without immobilizing its mobility or pure *duree* (duration)."[11]

However, both believed that our intelligence can still make an effort to go beyond itself and our language, built as it is on spatial relationships, can overcome to some extent its limitations and open a path to another understanding of reality; i.e., via poetic and symbolic language. This is in fact what Bergson tried to do. Iqbal, as we already know, wrote mostly in verse.

To Iqbal, therefore, intuition, which is a "glimpse" of the profound self or the window as it were to Reality, is possible, is valid and can be

communicated – albeit not as directly and simply as objective knowledge. This can be seen from his description in *The Reconstruction*:

> The unity of the appreciative ego is a unity in which every experience permeates the whole... It appears that time for the appreciative self is a single 'now' which the efficient self in its traffic with the world of space pulverizes into a series of nows like pearl beads on a thread.[12]

Iqbal then tried to use this idea to interpret the Qur'ānic verse that talks about the time duration involved in creation. Creation, if apprehended intellectually, lasts through thousands of years, yet one divine day, says the Qur'ān, is equal to one thousand years and in the verse 54:50 the whole creation is a single indivisible act "swift as twinkling of an eye." In other words, the "time" mentioned in the Qur'ān can be better understood in terms of the single "now" of the appreciative self as he had explained it.

> And our Command is but a single (act) – like the twinkling of an eye (Al-Qur'ān, 54:50).

"Pure time" as revealed by a deeper analysis of our conscious experience is not a string of separate reversible instants; it is an organic whole in which the past is not left behind, but is moving along with, and operating in the present, and the future is given to it only in the sense that it is present in its nature as an open possibility.

As has been mentioned, and as will become more obvious, Iqbal's main concern was to understand the nature of the "Ultimate Reality"; i.e., to "know" God. According to the classification of knowledge by al-Fārābī (1870–950), al-Ghazzālī (1058–1111) and Quṭb al–Dīn al-Shirāz (1236–1311) for example the highest knowledge is the knowledge of God. It is for the sake of the knowledge of God that all other forms of knowledge is sought.[13] We have also mentioned that the keys to that understanding are the concepts of space and time.

To Iqbal, "nature is not a static fact situated in a dynamic void, but a structure of events possessing the character of a continuous creative flow which thought cuts up into isolated immobilities out of whose relations arise the concepts of space with time." It is a process of becoming. Nature is seen more as an event or series of events rather than as a "thing" or "things"; i.e., "the universe which seems to us to be a collection of things is not a solid stuff occupying a void. It is not a thing but an act." In today's quantum physics, the "act" is motion or movement caused by changes in energy states.

Although matter exists, it is not that which is "elementally incapable of evolving the synthesis we call life and mind and needing a transcendental diety to impregnate it with the sentient and mental." Iqbal defined matter as "a colony of egos" of a low order out of which emerges the ego of higher order, when their association and interaction reaches a certain degree of coordination.

Iqbal believed therefore that an analysis of conscious experience throws light on the nature of matter, space and time. The point is that just as he wanted to show the continuity between the physical and the spiritual under the common heading of experience, so too via the preceding ideas he wanted to show the continuation between matter and consciousness. An important feature of consciousness is its mutability. As Bergson said:

> I pass from state to state. I am warm or cold, I am merry or sad, I work or I do nothing, I look at what is around me or I think of something else. Sensations, feelings and volitions, ideas – such are the changes into which my existence is divided...I change, without ceasing.[14]

The "I" is synonymous with consciousness.

From Nature to God – Proofs for the Existence of God

Iqbal believed that reality is spiritual and consists of only selves or monads or 'egos.' The monads range from the completely active to the almost inert. No created monad is completely inactive and none is completely active, but those at the lowest end of the scale would be mere matter, if they were anything. God is the only completely active monad. Iqbal believed that there are degrees of consciousness. He said:

> Every atom of Divine energy, however low in the scale of existence, is an ego. But there are degrees in the expression of egohood. Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches its perfection in man. This perfection is in the form of potentiality which if man does not submit himself to the creator will not become manifest.[15]

For Iqbal, the universe is made of ego-unities which are living, fluid and dynamic. They are in constant flux. They exist in a kind of tension with their environment, due to their mutual invasion of each other. Therefore, the universe is growing and is not an already completed product which left the hands of its maker ages ago, and is now lying stretched out in space as a dead mass of matter to which "time does nothing, and consequently is nothing." Instead, "the movement of life as an organic growth involves a progressive synthesis of its various stages. Without

this synthesis it will cease to be an organic growth." In other words life is determined by ends and the presence of ends means that it must be permeated by a higher consciousness which is the ultimate Self or Divine Ego.[16]

Concluding Remarks

In practical terms, what has been glimpsed briefly from Iqbal's ideas regarding space and time can perhaps be translated into a programme that could fill up the gap in the purpose of our life. Following from this, the purpose of our life on earth is to reach that state of the ideal good or consciousness which will make us fit to exist in the next life. In doing this and in striving we become the best we can be or that we are. As David Ash says in his concluding remark:

> Our Mission on Earth is to become who we really are. To come into a higher state [compare with Iqbal's 'egohood'], we do not have to forsake the world .... rather, we need to grow both in consciousness and creativity. We need to develop our being as well as our doing. We require inner as well as worldly knowledge. We need to achieve a balance between earthly pleasures (and the pursuance of) the divine purpose for which our lives are intended.[17]

Notes

1. John Hedley Brooke, *Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 321.

2. Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society and The Rising Culture* (London: Flamingo, 1995).

3. John H. Brooke, *Religion and Science.*

4. Robert Wright "Science, Man and God," *Time*, 4 January, 1993, 43.

5. John H. Brooke, *Religion and Science,* 322.

6. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989).

7. Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

8. Azizan Baharuddin, "Islam and Science: Some Neglected Perspectives" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Lancaster, 1989), 242.

9. Ibid.

10. Kolakowsky, *Bergson,* 3.

11. Ibid.

12. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* 65.

13. Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Kajian Dasar, 1992), 270

14. Muhammad Iqbal, "A Plea for a Deeper Study of Muslim Scientists," *Islamic Culture*, 3, no. 2 (April 1929): 210-229.

15. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* 71-72.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 184.