Seeing, Knowing, Believing: Iqbal on Faith in the Modern World

Basit B. Koshul*

Abstract: Iqbal saw an intimate relationship between the modern crisis of faith and modernist epistemology. Hence, as a solution, he tried to articulate an epistemology that meets the critical rigour of modern philosophical and scientific thinking. It also attempts to account for the reality and verity of religious experience as the most subtle and reliable source of knowledge. Iqbal's proposed epistemology is rooted in the Qurʿānic narrative and the interpretation of this narrative by the "more genuine schools of Sufism." He combines the insights garnered from a study of these "religious" sources with his first-hand understanding of modern philosophic and scientific thought to recover and represent an understanding of "knowledge" that is a companion, not an adversary, to "faith."

Writing in the earlier part of the twentieth century, Iqbal was acutely aware of the fact that modern society was facing a crisis of faith. While some of Iqbal's contemporaries were similarly aware of this crisis, he was probably more aware than anyone else regarding the root cause of this crisis. As the title of the very first chapter of *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought* indicates, Iqbal saw an intimate relationship between the modern crisis of faith and modernist epistemology. In the chapter titled "Knowledge and Religious Experience," Iqbal tries to articulate an epistemology that, on the one hand, meets the critical rigor of modern philosophical and scientific thinking. On the other hand, this very same epistemology attempts to account for the reality and verity of religious experience as not only a possible, but also the most subtle and reliable source of knowledge. Iqbal's proposed epistemology is rooted in the Qurʿānic narrative and the interpretation of this narrative by the "more genuine schools of Sufism." He combines the insights garnered from a study of these "religious" sources with his first-hand understanding of modern philosophic and scientific thought to recover and re-present an understanding of "knowledge" that is a companion to "faith" rather than its adversary. In the following pages, Iqbal's project will be placed in its

* Dr. Basit B. Koshul is lecturer in Comparative Religion at Concordia College, Minnesota, U.S.A. E-mail: bbk3d@virginia.edu

historical setting and described in more detail with respect to its critique
and correction of traditional religious and scientific epistemology.

The Setting

The fact that modern society was facing an existential crisis of faith was
recognized by almost all leading thinkers in the beginning of the
twentieth century. For some (e.g., Freud), this was a very healthy
development and the harbinger of a golden era in human history. For
others (e.g., Jung), this development was a deeply disturbing reality that
presaged the onset of tragic and terrifying events in the near future.
Even though there were some dissenting voices, the demise of religion
was seen as a positive development by most of the leading intellectuals
in the beginning of the twentieth century. This attitude was based on the
claim that the scientific way of knowing (or scientific epistemology) had
proven itself to be far superior to the religious way of knowing (or
religious epistemology). It was assumed that "faith commitments" were
incompatible with "disinterested objectivity" – and it was only detached,
disinterested investigation of phenomena that could lead to accurate and
reliable knowledge claims.[1] Since religion was based on faith
claims/commitments and science required detached objectivity; the
progress of one required the disintegration of the other.[2]

This antagonistic view of religion and science was accepted as a
given by the "secular" or "modernist" circles in university settings. The
medieval definition of religion and spiritual experience accepted in
religious circles further reinforced this antagonism. Medieval religious
thought defined religiousity as the acceptance of a particular
interpretation of certain dogmatic theological claims, combined with
leading a life according to a particular interpretation of certain legal
obligations. Any "disinterested" or "detached" analysis of the inherited
traditional interpretations was seen as a dangerous move towards
irreligiousity and any critical analysis of these interpretations was seen
as a manifestation of irreligiousity. This is another way of saying that
taqlīd was the accepted norm regarding issues of ʿaqīdah and fiqh.[3] The
quest for spiritual enlightenment was seen as being practically divorced
from concerns with all given reality.[4] This disregard for the given reality
was so profound that the seeker's own personhood was seen as an
obstacle that had to be overcome in order to attain spiritual
enlightenment. This is another way of saying that fanā fī Allāh was seen
as the ultimate goal of the spiritual quest. An uncritical acceptance of
received tradition, combined with seeing no spiritual worth in
engagement with the given material reality characterized the dominant
understanding of religion in traditional Muslim society at the beginning
of the twentieth century. If there was no room for critical
thought/analysis in religious thought and if spiritual enlightenment (the

ultimate goal of religiousity) saw no value in the given material reality, then it was indeed the case that the progress of science required the disintegration of religion.

The self-definition and self-understanding of religion and science, as articulated by the leading proponents of each, was such that the two were placed in an antagonistic relationship with each other.[5] The root cause of this antagonism was the claim that religious knowledge was incompatible with critical inquiry and scientific knowledge was incompatible with faith commitments.[6] In other words, religious knowledge rejected the defining characteristic of scientific inquiry (critical, objective analysis of material reality) and scientific knowledge rejected the very foundations of religion (faith claims/commitments). The relationship between this self-understanding of religion and science at the beginning of the 20th century and the resultant crisis of faith is quite apparent. For Iqbal, any genuine attempt to address the modern crisis of faith required that this self-understanding on the part of the two camps be rectified. In other words, an alternative epistemology had to be formulated in order to arrest the decline of religious faith.

It speaks to Iqbal's personal genius and intuitional gifts that he utilizes resources from within each of the two traditions (i.e. the religious and the scientific) to demonstrate the flaw in their respective understanding of "knowledge." Going back to the *sīrah* of the Prophet (SAS) and then citing the works of leading spiritual masters in the Islamic tradition, Iqbal demonstrates that critical inquiry is not only a part of the religious quest, it may be its most crucial component.[7] He also cites a variety of Qur'ānic passages that demonstrate that the Qur'ān sees sensual engagement with and critical reflection on the given material reality in the world of nature to be an essential component of an individual's spiritual growth.[8] Conversely, Iqbal cites the work of Bergson and Whitehead to demonstrate that the attempts of modern science to completely divorce rationality from faith is a misguided adventure that does great injustice to the issue at hand.[9] Iqbal cites Whitehead as saying that "the ages of faith are the ages of rationalism" and he cites Bergson as noting that the intuition is only a higher type of intellect. It is worth repeating that in criticizing and correcting the accepted religious and scientific understanding of knowledge, Iqbal utilizes resources from within the very tradition that he is criticising. While it is not the purpose of this study to delve into Iqbal's methodology, the foregoing comments serve as precursors to the following discussion on his specific critique of the traditional religious and traditional scientific definitions of "knowledge."

Correcting the Religious Definition of Knowledge

Iqbal notes that distrust of the world of the senses and disregard for the non-human world of nature is a defining characteristic of classical Greek philosophy. In their attempt to understand the origin, nature and fate of the human being, the Greek philosophers posited that one needed to study only the human being and the human world. For them, the study of the non-human world contained nothing of significant value in the human attempt at self-understanding. This disregard for the non-human world is best expressed by Socrates. Contrasting Socrates' attitude with the Qur'ānic narrative in this regard, Iqbal notes:

> Socrates concentrated his attention on the human world alone. To him, the proper study of man was man and not the world of plants, insects, and stars. How unlike the spirit of the Qur'ān, which sees in the humble bee a recipient of Divine inspiration and constantly calls upon the reader to observe the perpetual change of the winds, the alternation of day and night, the clouds, the starry heavens, and the planets swimming through infinite space![10]

This disregard for the world of nature on the part of Socrates was taken further in the work of Plato. For Plato, the human senses could be easily fooled and therefore could not serve as reliable sources of knowledge. This point was further affirmed by Aristotle. Once again, the Greek attitude towards human sense perception is at odds with the Qur'ānic narrative. As Iqbal points out:

> As a true disciple of Socrates, Plato despised sense-perception which, in his view, yielded merely opinion and no real knowledge. How unlike the Qur'ān, which regards 'hearing' and 'sight' as the most valuable Divine gifts and declares them to be accountable to God for their activity in this world.[11]

If the study of the world of nature was of no practical use in the human quest for knowledge and if human beings could not trust their sense perception as they are trying to acquire knowledge, then the question emerges: how is knowledge to be attained? The response was a method of speculation pioneered by the Hellenic thinkers (i.e. the Stoics, Epicureans and most notably Plotinus) that shunned the study of the material/real in their attempt to understand the spiritual/ideal. This method eventually found its way into Muslim religious life and, after the fall of Baghdad in 1258, became the defining characteristic of Muslim intellectual life. Iqbal notes that ascetic Sufism (in contrast to the "more genuine schools of Sufism") "gradually developed under the influences of a non-Islamic character, a purely speculative side" that consciously shunned sensual engagement with the given material and social reality in its quest for spiritual enlightenment.[12] This attitude fostered a virtual disregard for the real/material in the Muslim's quest to understand the

spiritual/ideal. Iqbal describes the consequences of the spread of speculative thought among the Muslim intellectual elite in these words:

> This spirit of total other-worldliness in later Sufism obscured men's vision of a very important aspect of Islam as a social polity, and offering the prospect of unrestrained thought on its speculative side, it attracted and finally absorbed the best minds in Islam.[13]

The disregard for the real/material and the spread of speculative thought in medieval Muslim thought was combined with a static view of life and disregard for the dynamic aspect of human existence. The dichotomy between the real/material and ideal/spiritual was complemented by a dichotomy between temporal flux and eternal immutability. It is indeed the case that the fundamental teachings of Islam are based upon eternal and immutable principles. But at the same time the Qur'ān stresses the fact that temporal flux provides invaluable insights into the true nature and meaning of these eternal, immutable principles. This temporal flux manifests itself in a variety of ways: the constant alteration of night and day, the changing fortunes among individuals and nations, the change of seasons, the different stages in the human being's biological development, etc. From the Qur'ānic perspective all of these temporal changes in the material domain of existence contain signs of the eternal, spiritual domain of existence.

Iqbal notes that while the spiritual basis of life is rooted in the eternal, its manifestation takes place in the temporal flux of the material world. The relationship between temporal flux (which is imperfect and flawed) and the eternal, immutable (which is perfect and without blemish) is complementary, not mutually exclusive. Iqbal describes the complementary nature of this relationship as follows:

> The ultimate spiritual basis of all life, as conceived by Islam, is eternal and reveals itself in variety and change. A society based on such a conception of Reality must reconcile, in its life, the categories of permanence and change. It must possess eternal principles to regulate its collective life, for the eternal gives us a foothold in the world of perpetual change. But eternal principles when they are understood to exclude all possibilities of change which, according to the Qur'ān, is one of the greatest 'signs' of God, tend to immobilize what is essentially mobile in its nature.[14]

Iqbal posits that a Qur'ānic understanding of the relationship between the temporal and eternal manifested itself in Muslim intellectual life in the practice of *ijtihād* - which is the "principle of movement in the structure of Islam." He goes on to give a more detailed description of

ijtihād:

> The word literally means to exert. In the terminology of Islamic law, it means to exert with a view to form an independent judgement on a legal question. The idea, I believe, has its origin in a well-known verse of the Qur'ān - 'And those who exert We show Our path.'[15]

The practice of *ijtihād* which was a defining characteristic of early Muslim intellectual life practically ceased by the end of the Abbasid period. The formulation, formalization and institutionalization of the four accepted legal schools of thought brought the practice of *ijtihād* to an end. There was unanimity among the four schools that only the original founders of the schools were competent enough to carry out *ijtihād* in its widest sense. After the founders had exposited the fundamental principles of Islamic jurisprudence, only relative *ijtihād* could take place within the confines of those principles. By rigorously defining the boundaries within which legal thought could legitimately take place, and definitively setting one domain of legal thought beyond critical scrutiny (i.e. issues related to the founding principles of the schools of jurisprudence), the medieval doctors of law severely delimited the "principle of movement in Islam." Iqbal posits that this delimitation "seems exceedingly strange in a system of law based mainly on the groundwork provided by the Qur'ān which embodies an essentially dynamic outlook on life."[16] For Iqbal, the practical end of *ijtihād* among Muslim scholars signals the formalization of the conceptual divide between the temporal and the eternal. The dynamism of the temporal domain of reality is irrelevant for an individual's understanding of and relationship to the eternal/spiritual domain of reality.[17] The stagnation of Muslim society in the medieval period is in no small part the result of this attitude.

For Iqbal, religious thought, as expounded by its leading proponents in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, suffered from some serious shortcomings. On the one hand, traditional Muslim spirituality was defined by speculative thought and disregard for the material world of nature. On the other hand, traditional Muslim legal thought was defined by *taqlīd* to principles formulated centuries before and disregard for historical changes that had taken place since then and the historical contingencies that existed in the present. On both accounts the defining characteristics of medieval Muslim religiosity ran contrary to the teachings of the Qur'ān. The speculative nature of medieval Muslim spirituality ran counter to the Qur'ānic attitude towards the material world of nature. The *taqlīdi* nature of medieval Muslim legal thought and the end of *ijtihād* ran counter to the Qur'ānic attitude towards time and temporal flux.[18] Iqbal's critique and correction of the medieval Islamic understanding of knowledge is summed up in the poem *"Sufi sey"* (To the Sufi) in *Zarb-e-Kaleem*.

Correcting the Scientific Definition of Knowledge

Iqbal acknowledges the fact that there is a difference between religion and philosophy (as asserted by modernist philosophy) in the very opening paragraph of *The Reconstruction*. Philosophy is based on a purely rational method of free inquiry that suspects all authority. Religion is based upon faith. Iqbal, however, notes that:

> It cannot be denied that faith is more than mere feeling. It has something like a cognitive content, and the existence of rival parties - scholastics and mystics - in the history of religion shows that idea is a vital element in religion.[19]

It is a great mistake on the part of modern philosophy to assume that all elements of religious thought are completely devoid of cognitive elements. The modernist division between religion and science is rooted in the Enlightenment assertion that (religious) faith is devoid of all (scientific) rationality. Some modernist thinkers have gone so far as to assert that Religion and religious thought are manifestations of the irrational *par excellance*, while scientific inquiry is the most authentic manifestation of rationality.[20] Iqbal challenges this assumption by noting that that historically speaking religion learned to value reason long before modern science. He states:

> In view of its function, religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science. Science may ignore a rational metaphysics; indeed it has ignored it so far. Religion can hardly afford the search for a reconciliation of the oppositions of experience and a justification of the environment in which humanity finds itself.[21]

At this point Iqbal quotes Whitehead as saying "the ages of faith are the ages of rationalism." While religious faith has historically cultivated (and has been cultivated by) rationality, "to rationalize faith is not to admit the superiority of philosophy over religion" (ibid). This is due to the fact that:

> Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action. It is the expression of the whole man. Thus, in the evaluation of religion, philosophy must recognize the central position of religion and has no other alternative but to admit it as something focal in the process of reflective synthesis.[22]

The real difference between science and religion is not that one is based upon reason and rationality, while the other is completely devoid of it. For Iqbal, the real difference between the two is that one primarily employs reason to study particular segments of reality, while the other

primarily employs intuition to facilitate a holistic encounter with reality. This suggests that the relationship between reason and intuition (and by extension between science and religion) is not one of mutually exclusivity or antagonism, but rather of mutual complementarity. But this complemetarity is not to be mistaken for "sameness." While Iqbal asserts that there is a rational dimension of religious thought, just as there is a rational dimension of scientific thought, he is also cautious in carefully identifying the distinguishing features of the two. Iqbal notes:

> Nor is there any reason to suppose that thought and intuition are essentially opposed to each other. They spring from the same root and complement each other. The one grasps Reality piecemeal, the other grasps it in its wholeness. The one fixes its gaze on the eternal, the other on the temporal aspect of Reality. The one is present enjoyment of the whole of Reality; the other aims at traversing the whole for exclusive observation. Both are in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation. Both seek visions of the same Reality which reveals itself to them in accordance with their function in life.[23]

At this point Iqbal affirms Bergson's assertion that intuition is only a higher kind of intellect.

Just as it is a mistake to differentiate religion from science by asserting that one is completely divorced from rationality while the other is the perfect manifestation of rationality, it is a mistake to assert that science and religion are different because one is concerned with the study of concrete experience while the other is unconcerned about it. Both religion and science are fundamentally concerned with the study of concrete experience. The difference is that higher religious thought seeks critical and careful study of a type of concrete experience that lies beyond the jurisdiction of the natural and social sciences. Iqbal notes that the Qur'ān identifies the *fuād* or *qalb* (i.e., the spiritual heart) as being the interpreter of sense experience and also an "organ" of perception that is the recipient of supra-sensual experience. This "organ" brings human beings into contact with a domain of experience that is not open to sense organs, but which is nonetheless just as real and concrete as that which is experienced by the sense organs. Speaking of the *fuād/qalb*, Iqbal notes:

> It is, according to the Qur'ān, something which "sees," and its reports, if properly interpreted, are never false. We must not, however, regard it as a mysterious special faculty; it is rather a mode of dealing with Reality in which sensation in the physiological sense of the word, does not play any part.[24]

Just because sense perception, in the ordinary sense, is not involved in that which is experienced by the *fuād/qalb*, this does not mean that the experience of the *fuād/qalb* is any less real or concrete. Speaking of the experience of the *fuād/qalb*, Iqbal notes:

> Yet the vista of experience thus opened up to us is as real and concrete as any other experience. To describe it as psychic, mystical, or supernatural does not detract from value as experience...The revealed and mystic literature of mankind bears ample testimony to the fact that religious experience has been too enduring and dominant in the history of mankind to be rejected as mere illusion.[25]

Just as there is a degree of similarity and difference in the role and place of rationality in religious thought and scientific thought, there is a degree of similarity and difference regarding the religious and scientific encounter with concrete experience. To assert that one is primarily concerned with concrete experience and the other disregards it, as posited by Enlightenment philosophy, is to misunderstand the issue. Iqbal sums up the matter in these terms:

> Religion is not physics or chemistry seeking an explanation of Nature in terms of causation; it really aims at interpreting a totally different region of human experience—religious experience—the data of which cannot be reduced to the data of any other science. In fact, it must be said in justice to religion that it insisted on the necessity of concrete experience in religious life long before science learnt to do so. The conflict between the two is not due to the fact that one is, and the other is not, based on concrete experience. Both seek concrete experience as a point of departure.[26]

To the degree that religious faith contains elements of rational thought and values critical analysis of concrete experience, it shares important characteristics with scientific thought. To overlook these similarities and assert that religious knowledge is basically different from scientific knowledge is to fundamentally misunderstand the issue at hand. From Iqbal's perspective modern scientific thought ignores these similarities at its own peril. The obsession of modern science with a segmented study of the material/temporal has caused it to lose sight of the fact that the material/temporal is in fact a pointer or sign evidencing the spiritual/eternal. In failing to recognize that which the material/temporal is pointing towards, is to fundamentally misunderstand the meaning and significance of the material/temporal. The implications of this failure are simultaneously far-reaching and intimately personal. This is expressed by Iqbal in poetic verse in his poem *"Daur-e-Haḍir ka Insan"* (Modern Man) in *Zarb-e-Kaleem.*

> Love fled, Mind stung him like a snake; He could not
> Force it to vision's will;
> He sought the orbits of the stars, yet could not
> Travel his own thoughts' world;
> Entangled in the labyrinth of his learning,

Lost count of good and ill;
Enchained the sunbeams, yet his hand no dawn
Of life's dark night unfurled.

Notes

1. The definition of "knowledge" as being the product of complete disinterested objective inquiry is related to, in the words of John Dewey, "quest for certainty," so assiduously sought after by Enlightenment intellectuals finds no equivalence in the religious tradition and is the peculiar product of "the Cartesian Anxiety." According to Ochs, "this hyperbolic need to know is associated, not with the human condition, but with a particular psychosocial condition in the modern West: associated with the absence of strong social bonds and functional traditions and thus, with the compensatory desire to salve the individual consciousness with rational certainty as substitute for relationship, behavioral purpose, and love." P. Ochs, "The Emergence of Postmodern Jewish Theology and Philosophy" in *Reviewing the Covenant: Eugene Borowitz and the Postmodern Renewal of Jewish Theology*, eds. Peter Ochs and Eugene Borowitz (New York, NY: SUNY Press, Albany, 2000), 6.

2. This dichotomous view of the relationship between religion and science, engendered by Enlightenment thought, found its most forceful nineteenth century critic in Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche the claim that science produces true objective knowledge is a statement of faith that cannot be justified rationally.

3. See Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan & Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 116-142.

4. While Iqbal acknowledges the fact that "the more genuine schools of Sufism" have best expressed and articulated the nature and evolution of "religious experience in Islam," he sees their latter day descendents (i.e., the dominant modes of Sufi thought in his own day) as having become ossified and stagnant. He attributes this ossification and stagnation in "ascetic Sufism" (in contrast to the "more genuine schools of Sufism) to the former's emphasis on purely speculative thought based upon (or leading to) the acceptance of a radical division between *zahir* and *batin*. On the alliance between rationalism and speculative, Sufism and the resultant disregard for the given concrete reality, see Ibid., 118-20.

5. The fact that this "antagonistic relationship" is based on the dichotomizing, modernist logic is detailed by Ochs in his paper on the rules for scriptural reasoning. Ochs posits that scriptural reasoning seeks to interrupt the pattern of inquiry engendered by two "antagonistic" poles of reasoning. One pole is *secular modernism*: "the tendency to reason by reducing all subjects of study according to certain simple conceptual patterns or models of reasoning." This pole may also be labeled *secular universalism*. The second pole is *anti-modern, religious orthodoxy* "that defines itself by negating the leading aspects of secular universalism thereby endorses the dichotomous logic that underlies

that universalism. Such reactionary orthodoxy gradually redistributes the terms of classical scriptural religion according to this dichotomizing logic." See Peter Ochs, "The Rules for Scriptural Reasoning," www.etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr.

6. Nancey Murphy has argued that both the modern liberal and modern fundamentalist interpretations of religion have produced equally inadequate responses to the epistemological challenge posed by modern science and philosophy. This is basically due to the fact that both responses have been articulated within the parameters set by modern philosophical discourse. See Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda.* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press Int. 1996).

7. See Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* 13.

8. Ibid., 7, 11.

9. Ibid., 2.

10. Ibid., 3.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 119.

13. Ibid., 119.

14. Ibid., 117.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 118.

17. Contemporary Christian and Jewish scholarship has also dealt with the religious/theological implications of the temporal vs. eternal dichotomy. See Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God,* vol. 1 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), Chs. 16 and 13; David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Both Jenson and Halivni, like Iqbal, note that for the most part the internalization of the Greek intellectual ethos was done subconsciously by the religious thinkers. They go on to note that a critical analysis of traditional religious thought – made possible by the tools of analysis of modern academic inquiry – is needed in order to recognize and correct these deleterious effects.

18. While Iqbal has offered a philosophical/historical critique and correction of medieval Muslim thought, Malek Bennabi has offered a similar critique and correction of the "post al-Muwahhid man" from a sociological/historical perspective. See Asma Rashid, "Iqbal and Malek Bennabi" in *Iqbal Centenary Papers,* vol. II (Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1977).

19. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* 1.

20. This point was crudely (but forcefully) articulated by Ludwig Feuerbach, in the middle of the nineteenth century, through a skillful synthesis of eighteenth century French rationalist/positivist thought and nineteenth century German Hegelian philosophy.

21. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* 2.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 13.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 20.