

Iqbal's Commentary on *Sūrat al-Ikhlās*

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Abstract: In the concluding part of *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*, Iqbal offers a commentary (*tafsīr*) on the 112th *sūrah* of the Qur'ān. While not a Qur'ānic commentary in the conventional sense of the term, Iqbal's discussion of the individual verses of the *sūrah* seeks to bring out the practical and social implications of the Islamic message of the oneness of God (*tawhīd*): Divine unity should teach Muslims the lesson of social cohesion; God's being the Refuge should lead them to put their trust in God and reject fatalism; that God neither begets nor is begotten should make them repudiate lineage as the basis of unity; and God's uniqueness should encourage them to become matchless among the world's nations. *Tawhīd*, in other words, ought to become the controlling principle in the actual life of Muslims. Hortatory in character, Iqbal's *tafsīr* of the Qur'ānic *sūrah* is integrally related to the general philosophy of life and society that Iqbal presents in his works.

The concluding part of Iqbal's poetical work *Rumuz-i Bikhudi* (The Mysteries of Selflessness)¹ includes a commentary on *Sūrat al-Ikhlās*,² the 112th chapter of the Qur'ān. The *Rumuz* is a companion *mathnawi* to *Asrar-i Khudi* (The Secrets of the Self),³ the two poems elucidating the concept for which, perhaps, Iqbal is best known - the concept of *khudi* (selfhood). This paper deals with the aforementioned commentary, which Iqbal describes as the gist or summary (*Khulāṣah*) of *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*.⁴

Iqbal calls his commentary *tafsīr*, which, of course, is the standard technical term for Qur'ānic commentary. Iqbal's appropriation of the term in a book of poetry is significant in that, though he never claimed to be a *mufasssīr* (Qur'ānic exegete), he obviously wants his *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Ikhlās* to be taken seriously. Iqbal is not interested in offering a commentary *à la tradition exégétique*. He makes no attempt to discuss the *sūrah*'s grammar or theology, the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) purporting to elucidate the *sūrah*'s background or context, or the well-known authorities' interpretations of the *sūrah*. Instead, he offers,

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from a perspective all his own, comments on the Muslim community's unenviable situation in the world and suggestions for the community's reorientation and uplift. Iqbal's poetry is strewn with Qur'ānic references. In his *tafsīr* on *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, he goes beyond citing or alluding to this or that Qur'ānic phrase or passage and undertakes to write a commentary on a complete, albeit short, *sūrah*. It will be helpful to begin by providing a translation of the *sūrah*:

Say, He - God - is One.
 God is the Refuge.
 He did not beget and He is not begotten.
 And there is none who is His peer.

As can be seen, the *sūrah*'s main theme is *tawhīd* (oneness of God), the most fundamental of all Islamic doctrines. In more than one *hadīth*, the Prophet Muhammad (SAS) termed the *sūrah* one-third of the Qur'ān.⁵ According to one explanation of this statement, *tawhīd* constitutes one of the three cardinal tenets of Islam (the other two being prophecy and the afterlife), each accounting for one-third of the complete faith.⁶

The *Sūrah*: Verse-by-Verse Analysis

Each of the four sections of the *Khulāṣah* is titled after one of the four verses of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*. The first section, "*Qul Huwa Allāhu Aḥad*" ("Say, 'He - God - is One'"), opens with a narration of a dream in which Iqbal solicits Abu Bakr, one of the most trusted companions of the Prophet Muhammad (SAS), for advice on ameliorating the Muslims' wretched condition in the world. Abu Bakr, in response, directs Iqbal to study *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*: "Find honour and glory in the *sūrah* of *Ikhlāṣ*" (*RB* 156, last verse). Abu Bakr instructs Iqbal - and, through him, all Muslims - to learn the meaning of *tawhīd*, to drop such narrowly-conceived badges of identification as Turk and Afghan, and to create a unified and cohesive Muslim nation. "You have created a hundred nations out of a single nation" (*RB* 157, vs. 10), Abu Bakr says to Iqbal, admonishing the latter to put the lessons of *tawhīd* into practice (*RB* 157, last two verses):

Be one, and make *tawhīd* manifest;
 Turn its absent into present through action.
 The joy of faith is enhanced by action;
 The faith that is not rendered into action is dead.⁷

The second section, "*Allāhu al-Ṣamad*" ("God is the Refuge"), opens with these verses (*RB* 158, vss. 1-2):

If you have set your heart on *Allāhu al-Ṣamad*,
 You have jumped outside the pale of causation.
 The bondsman of God is not slave to causation;
 Life, to him, is not the revolution of a water-wheel.

According to Iqbal, belief in God as the Refuge requires that Muslims put their ultimate trust not in the mechanical and lifeless system of causation but in the Living God Who is the maker and controller of that system, this trust necessitating rejection of fatalism. Iqbal goes on to say to his Muslim addressees: Stop complaining of the vicissitudes of fate, do not beg others for help, live a simple life with few wants, and learn to rely on yourself, placing your unflinching trust in God alone. He cites the example of the founder of a major Sunni legal school, Malik b. Anas (d. 796), who turned down the Abbasid caliph Harun's request to leave Madinah and settle down in Baghdad to teach *ḥadīth* to the caliph. Iqbal calls upon Muslims to liberate their minds and their culture from the bondage of other nations and to realise that, being the sun, they do not need to borrow light from stars.

The third section, "*Lam Yalid wa-lam Yūlad*" ("He did not beget and He is not begotten"), critiques lineage as the defining attribute of a Muslim. Iqbal says that the Muslim nation is above "colour and blood" (*RB* 162, vs. 1); that a Muslim should be like the Prophet's Companion Salman, who, in response to a question, identified himself as Salman, son of Islam (*RB* 162, vs. 3); and that Muslims belong to the nation of Abraham (*RB* 162, vs. 7), who repudiated all blood relationships and geographical bonds, making total, unqualified submission to God. Iqbal writes (*RB* 163, vss. 6-7):

Our bond is not Turkey or Arabia;
Our bond is not constrained by lineage.
We have set our hearts on the beloved of the Hijaz,
And on that account are we closely linked to one another.

The "beloved of the Hijaz" is the Prophet Muhammad (SAS), the focal point of Muslim unity. Iqbal concludes the section with these words (*RB* 163, last verse):

Anyone who is kept in fetters by land or ancestry
Lacks all idea of *lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*.

In the fourth section, "*Wa-lam Yakun lahū Kufuwān Aḥad*" ("And there is none who is His peer"), Iqbal says that, like God, Muslims, too, should be peerless (*RB* 164, vss. 6-7):

Strengthen your bond with *lam yakun*,
That you may become matchless among the nations.
He Whose Being is One and Who has no peer,
His bondsman, too, will be ill at ease with a peer.

But the true Muslim is not vainglorious. He seeks to distinguish himself in respect of positive human qualities (*RB* 165, vs. 3):

Great are his forgiveness, justice, generosity, and favour;
Even in his use of force he is benevolent.

Thus, Muslims should cultivate qualities that would set them apart and above the rest of the world. Instead of blaming fate or destiny for their abject position in the world, they should transform their life by returning to something they have long abandoned—namely, the Qur’ān, which is the true source of their strength and which can lift them back up from the dusty earth to celestial heights (*RB* 165, last two verses):

You, who are lying on the ground like dew,
Under your arm you have a Living Book.
How long will you make your home in the dust?
Pick up your stuff and toss it up to the heavens.

The Social Message of *Tawhīd*

What shall we make of Iqbal’s *tafsīr* of the *sūrah*? Iqbal’s essential thesis is simple enough: Only by translating the tenet of *tawhīd* into a concrete, social reality can the Muslims become truly independent and earn the status of a dignified and successful community in the world. “The Qur’ān,” Iqbal remarks in the Preface to his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, “is a book which emphasizes ‘deed’ rather than ‘idea.’”⁸ It should be remembered, though, that nowhere does Iqbal accord absolute preference to deed over idea; his chief concern, in both his prose and his poetical works, is to relate idea to deed, to emphasize that thought has value only insofar as it leads to action. Iqbal’s *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* should be seen in this light. *Tawhīd* ought to be more than a profession of faith; it must become entrenched in the very core of a Muslim’s being: “Lodge in your heart what you have uttered with your lips” (*RB* 157, vs. 9). Unless *tawhīd* becomes an operative principle in the real life of Muslims, orientating their conduct in all spheres of activity; unless it raises them above their petty and pernicious ethnic and sectarian divisions; and unless it serves them as a source of inspiration for creating a society on the derivative principles of universalism, egalitarianism, self-reliance, and creativity, its potential will not have been actualized, and the Muslims will not have fulfilled their mission as a religious community. In a word, Iqbal wishes to transform *tawhīd* from an abstract concept to a practical, living reality.

From this explanation of the thesis of the *Khulāṣah*, it is clear that Iqbal’s *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* is hardly a *tafsīr* in the conventional sense of the word. About the only resemblance Iqbal’s *tafsīr* has to classical *tafsīr* is a superficial one - namely, the verse-by-verse explication of the *sūrah*. Nor does it have many points of contact with modern *tafsīr* as such,⁹ except insofar as it seeks to generate a practical outlook or attitude on the part of Muslims by exhorting them to create a

social correlative to the doctrinal imperative of *tawhīd*. Iqbal uses his *tafsīr* of the *sūrah* to put across some of his major philosophical ideas and concepts. But, then, what justification does Iqbal have to call his exposition of those ideas *tafsīr*? We have already said that Iqbal never claimed to be a *mufassir*, and it would not be right to say that, by using the word *tafsīr* for his commentary, he is insinuating that he is one. The only answer to the question just raised, then, is that Iqbal regards his overall philosophy of life, of *khudi*, and of society as derived from the Qur'ān and that he extends the meaning of *tafsīr* to include theses and statements which make up some of the structural elements of that philosophy.¹⁰ Nor is Iqbal's view entirely unjustified, as the following section will show.

Qur'ānic Correspondences

Each of the four sections of the *Khulāṣah* expresses a main idea. Following the sequence of the sections in which the ideas occur (see second section, "The *Sūrah*: Verse-by-Verse Analysis," above) and the sequence of the verses of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* to which the sections correspond, the ideas can be stated as a series of desiderata:

- a. Muslims must become a unified and cohesive community (section 1 of *Khulāṣah*; verse 1 of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*).
- b. Muslims must become self-reliant, reposing their trust in God alone (section 2; verse 2).
- c. Muslims must substitute Islam for lineage or ethnicity as the basis of their unity (section 3; verse 3).
- d. Muslims must seek to become preeminent in the world as representatives of truth and dispensers of justice (section 4; verse 4).

For each of these statements, abundant supporting evidence can be cited from the Qur'ān. A few verses that readily come to mind are as follows:

- i. And hold on to the Chord of God, all together, and do not become divided (3:103).
- ii. And this is your community—a single community—and I am your Lord, so worship Me (21:92; see also 23:53).
- iii. But once you have made a resolve; put your trust in God (3:159).
- iv. The believers are but brothers (49:10).
- v. And you are the best community that has been brought forth for the sake of people: you command what is right and forbid what is wrong (3:110; see also 3:104).
- vi. And cooperate with one another in respect of piety and righteousness, but do not cooperate with one another in respect of sin and transgression (5:2).

As to Iqbal's principal thesis in the *Khulāṣah*, namely, that the theory of *tawhīd* must be translated into practice of *tawhīd*, it would suffice to cite Qur'ān 4:1:

O people, fear your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created from it its mate and scattered about, from the two, men and women. And fear God, in Whose name you ask one another for help, and familial bonds. Indeed, God is keeping watch over you.

As can be seen, this verse establishes an integral connection between belief in God and acts of piety and goodness.

In view of the foregoing, it will be agreed that Iqbal's use of *tafsīr* for his elucidation of the meaning of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* has warrant in the Qur'ān itself.

Parallels in *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*

From Iqbal's own description, one would expect that there are many parallels of thought and expression between the *Khulāṣah* and *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*,¹¹ and the expectation is well-founded. In the interest of brevity, only a few such parallels will be mentioned (the notations a, b, c, and d, from the preceding section of this paper are used for purposes of reference).¹²

- a. One of the sections in *Rumuz-i Bikhudi* speaks of *tawhīd* as the first of the pillars that sustain the Muslim community, presenting *tawhīd* as the *fons et origo* of religion, wisdom, code of conduct, power, and authority (*RB* 91, vs. 5).
- b. Belief in *tawhīd* liberates one from fear and despair, imbuing one with self-confidence, strengthening one's resolve (*RB* 94-95), and unleashing the "hundred floods that lie in our rivers" (*RB* 96, vs. 2).¹³ One of the sections of *Rumuz-i Bikhudi* describes how Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, who refused allegiance to anyone other than God and who had "a resolve as firm as mountains" (*RB* 111, vs. 3) gave his life rather than submit to tyranny (*RB* 109-111).
- c. The basis of Muslim unity is Islam, not birthplace; the bodies of Muslims may be from India, China, Turkey, and Syria, but their hearts are natives of Islam (*RB* 112, vss. 1-3).¹⁴
- d. The title of one of the sections of *Rumuz-i Bikhudi* gives "Preservation and Propagation of *tawhīd*" as the mandate of the worldwide Muslim community, reminding Muslims that the Qur'ān calls them (in 2:143) the "just community" and "witnesses over the nations" (*RB* 139, vss. 11-12).

Concluding Note

A normative phrase one frequently encounters in Islamic ethical and mystical literature is *takhalluq bi-akhlāqi Allāh* (cultivation of Divine attributes). The believers are expected to develop in themselves the attributes of God (this, of course, does not mean that they can, or should try to, become God in any sense). Iqbal's commentary on *Sūrat al-Ikhlās* can be read in light of the said phrase (once again, we will use the notations a through d):

- a. God is One; the Muslims, too, should become a united community.
- b. God is the Refuge of all; Muslims, too, should become the mainstay of humanity: "Be good incarnate to the people of the world" (*RB* 58, vs. 3).
- c. God neither begets nor is begotten; the Muslims, too, neither beget (that is, do not give rise to lines of heredity with special privileges) nor are begotten (that is, do not trace their "genealogical tree" to a particular racial group).
- d. God has no peers; Muslims, too, ought to strive to achieve a unique status in the world.

Notes

1. This work, which is in the form of a *mathnawi* (rhyming couplets), was first published in Lahore in 1918. It has been translated into English as *The Mystery of Selflessness* by A. J. Arberry (London: John Murrar, 1953) and into other languages. The references in this paper are to the text in the Sheikh Ghulam Ali edition of Iqbal's Persian works, *Kulliyat-i Iqbal—Farsi* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1973). I have given my own rendering of the verses cited from Iqbal's works, and also of the verses cited from the Qur'ān.

2. On the meaning of the *sūrah*'s name, see n. 6, below.

3. First published in 1915. The references, again, are to the Sheikh Ghulam Ali edition.

4. *Asrar-i Khudi* and *Rumuz-i Bikhudi* were intended by Iqbal to be complementary parts of a single work, and so they may be taken as a single *mathnawi*. There is a sense, then, in which the *Khulāṣah* can be called a gist of both works. In this paper, however, it is regarded as a summary of *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*, though a few references to *Asrar-i Khudi* will be made in order to show the overlap of content between the two works. The word *Khulāṣah* will henceforth be used as the collective name for the sections—four in all—that make up Iqbal's *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Ikhlās*. *AK* and *RB* are used as abbreviations of *Asrar-i Khudi* and *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*, respectively.

5. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab Fada'il al-Qur'an, bab Fadl Qul Huwa llahu Ahad.
6. Sayyid Mahmud al-Alusi, *Ruḥ al-Ma'ānī* (Beirut: Dar Ihyā' at-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1970?), 30 vols. in 15, 30:308-309. A word about the *surah's* name, *Ikhlas*: The Arabic verb *akhlaṣa* (root: *Kh-L-S*) means "to make pure, to dedicate oneself or something exclusively to someone or something." In the Qur'ān, the verb and the active participle from it, *mukhliṣ* (pl. *mukhliṣūn*), are often used (as in 2:139; 4:146; 7:29; 39:2) in the sense of offering sincere, single-minded allegiance, devotion, or service to God. One can say that the *sūrah* is called *Ikhhlās* because it represents the pure essence of Islamic religion and, at the same time, invites one to repose faith exclusively in the One God. Accordingly, some of the translations made of the *sūrah's* name are "Sincerity," "Sincere Religion," "Purity (of Faith)," "Pure Faith," "Pure Truth," and "Unity."
7. A question of interpretation arises at this point: Where does Abu Bakr leave off and Iqbal take over? It can be argued that Abu Bakr's counsel ends at advising Iqbal to study *Sūrat al-Ikhhlās* (vs. 6) and that the remainder of the *Khulāṣah* consists of Iqbal's own exposition, being the product of his reflection, at Abu Bakr's exhortation, on the *sūrah*. On the other hand, the break implied, on this view, between Abu Bakr's brief, one-verse counsel and Iqbal's exposition (beginning with vs. 7 and continuing to the end of the *Khulāṣah*) would appear to be a little too abrupt. Without claiming to have the final word on the issue, I have taken Abu Bakr's counsel to extend from vs. 6 of the *Khulāṣah* to the end of the section, after which, in my view, Iqbal takes over. But the discussion would seem to be more academic than substantive in nature.
8. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986), xxi.
9. For a brief treatment of the distinction between classical and modern *tafsīr*, see Mustansir Mir, "Tafsir," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4 vols., 4:174.
10. A study of all, or most, of the Qur'anic verses cited or alluded to by Iqbal in his works is likely to throw light on Iqbal's methodology in dealing with scriptural data.
11. Obviously, the *Khulāṣah* is not a complete summary of the contents of *Rumuz-i Bikhudi*, only a recountal of some of the important themes in the latter.
12. Needless to say, the scope of such parallels would increase greatly if one were to include Iqbal's other poetical works in one's investigation.
13. The fourth section (after the Introduction) of *Asrar-i Khudi* is entitled "Begging Enervates *Khudi*." In this section, Iqbal alludes to the incident in which 'Umar, the second caliph of Islam, dismounted from his camel to pick up his whip, which had dropped to the ground, though he could have asked someone to pick up the whip and hand it to him (*AK 24*, vs. 5). The section ends with the following verse (*AK 24*, last verse):

Be like a bubble on account of your manly dignity:
Even in an ocean, keep your cup inverted.

To briefly explain this verse: A bubble in water looks like an inverted—and empty—cup. To Iqbal, the bubble has such self-respect that, even in an ocean, it refuses to borrow any water from the ocean, signifying its unwillingness to do so by keeping its cup inverted. Iqbal uses the same image in the second section of the *Khulāṣah* (RB 161, vs. 9):

In this world, like a bubble, O wise one,
Cut off the access of strangers to your private chamber.

14. In *Asrar-i Khudi* (20, vs. 11), Muslims are enjoined to follow the Prophet Muhammad, who “rid them of the distinctions based on lineage.”