

## **Iqbal's Interpretation of the Legend of the Fall: A Critique**

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**Abstract:** Modernism in religion or modernist approach to religion involves demythologisation in one or the other form, to a lesser or greater degree. Iqbal's approach to Islam can be considered as modernist and his attempt at demythologising the Qur'ānic myths is in line with this approach. A detailed critique of his interpretation (demythologisation) of the Qur'ānic narrative of genesis is attempted from the traditionalist viewpoint. Islam's incompatibility with modern scientific project and sensibility that informs demythologisation movement is foregrounded. Iqbal does not take full cognisance of the metaphysical dimensions of the Qur'ānic narrative and appropriates certain modern scientific notions in his interpretation of the legend.

**Keywords:** Fall, demythologisation, perennialist, rationalism, modernism

Iqbal is perhaps the greatest demythologiser of Islam in the Indian subcontinent after Sir Syed. He shared the modernist rationalist humanist spirit of the West to a significant extent. In his Herculean task of reconciling – the Islamic and Western cognitive universes – he appropriated the former in terms of the latter. His reinterpretation of the story of creation of man from a demythologising perspective is here critically approached from a mystical-metaphysical/transcendentalist perspective. Iqbal believes that the fall of Adam represents the exercise of free will (not transgression), and that as such it represents the birth of self-consciousness.

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## **Transcendence and Demythologisation**

It is ultimately the belief in the meta-narrative of modern science that has primarily contributed to modern man's disbelief in traditional "myths" and "legends" and the hierarchy of existence. It is modern man's acceptance of evolutionism and reductionist methodology of modern science that compels him to demythologise the traditional religious "myths" and "legends." Iqbal shared to some extent modern man's faith in science and its claim to know the truth. This contributed towards his demythologising project. Demythologisation involves stripping religion of its mystery and of its transcendental reference. It seeks to explain supernatural content and reference in traditional myths like the creation myths in different traditions. According to demythologisation, the Bible's reference to this world and the otherworld is to be interpreted as really referring to this world. The Bible speaks of man rather than what transcends man and any transcendental reference in scriptures needs to be reinterpreted if not rejected.

We need to distinguish two different attitudes towards demythologisation. We may say that religion refers to secular and worldly realities, but we may affirm that religion refers rather to the transcendental realities which are expressed in terms which we understand, and which represent the scientific and intellectual level of the period in which the revelation took place, as Syed Vahidudin notes.<sup>1</sup> He rightly remarks about Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Iqbal that their approach to "legends" and "myths" is conditioned by the former attitude. He says "Syed Ahmad Khan and Iqbal no less, completely ignore their transcendental character and demythologise them in a way which if carried out consistently would strip revelation of all its contents."<sup>2</sup> The primarily metaphysical import of these legends and myths is hardly found in Iqbal's reading (dictated by psycho-anthropological and evolutionist framework). Syed Vahidudin rightly says, "Iqbal's biologically oriented approach needs to be supplemented by the deeper metaphysical analysis of the key concepts of Islamic theology."<sup>3</sup> However, Iqbal's demythologisation does not go as far as those of the Christian demythologisers like Bultman (with whom the demythologisation movement is associated), and Muslim secular theologians such as Niaz Fatehpuri, who interpreted eschatological data as applying to this life primarily

and denied that miracles have ever happened or angels or higher beings than spatiotemporal ones exist. Iqbal does not go as far as Sir Syed, who flatly denied that miracles contravene natural laws and argued that all Qur'ānic references should be interpreted in relation to the higher realms of being, and that supernatural events really refer to empirical realities which modern scientific reason can study. Iqbal had little room for mysticism which claims direct access to higher supersensory realms. His poetry also reveals a very different Iqbal (none orthodox) than the demythologiser Iqbal of *Reconstruction* and this complicates any exposition of Iqbal's viewpoint. He is essentially a mystical thinker for whom the spatiotemporal or sensory world is related to the 'Spirit,' and can be transcended and in fact, is transcended in love and experience of what he calls appreciative self as distinct from efficient self which is empirical. He is primarily an intuition centred metaphysical thinker rather than an advocate of rationalism and naturalism that ultimately negates transcendence.

### **Iqbal's View of Genesis**

Iqbal wishes to prove the Qur'ān's modern relevance and views it more in relation to modern spirit rather than other traditional scriptures. He uses the word 'legend' to refer to the key events in the Genesis narrative. Iqbal distinguishes between the Qur'ānic and other scriptural accounts. This is an assumption that could be contested by the perennialist traditionalist approach to Islam.<sup>4</sup> For him, the Qur'ān is essentially modern instead of being ancient or traditional as the traditionalists would argue. Iqbal makes the following questionable statement (from the traditionalist perspective) in this regard:

The Qur'ānic method of complete or partial transformation of legends in order to besoul them with new ideas, and this to adapt them to the advancing spirit of time, is an important point which has nearly always been overlooked both by Muslim and non-Muslim students of Islam.<sup>5</sup>

For Iqbal there is nothing in the Qur'ān which runs against the modern scientific empirical and inductive spirit. He holds that on the contrary, the Qur'ān endorses it. For him the birth of Islam is the birth of (modern scientific) inductive intellect. The Prophet of Islam stood

between the ancient and the modern world<sup>6</sup> and thus paved the way for modernity. If we read Schuon or Pallis on this issue and compare it to Iqbal's interpretation, it is obvious that there is a wide divergence between Iqbal's views and those of traditionalists.

Iqbal remarks that the object of the Qur'ān in dealing with these legends is seldom historical; it nearly always aims at giving them a universal moral or philosophical import. However, the Biblical account is historical – giving an account of Adam and Eve by way of a prelude to the history of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Iqbal, thus, tries to circumscribe the import of Biblical treatment of the myth. There have been appropriations of the Book of Genesis which show its universal philosophical and moral import. What Iqbal does for the Qur'ān, many modern writers have done for the Book of Genesis. There have been attempts at reconciling modern evolutionary anthropological and historical knowledge with the Biblical account. Iqbal seems to follow the fashionable modern and orthodox Muslim scholarship which, when comparing the Bible and the Qur'ān, usually denigrates the former. This attitude, a variety of Buciallism, as Ziauddin Sardar terms it in his *Explorations in the Islamic Science*, is against not only the facts but also against the Qur'ān as traditionalists like Nasr argues.<sup>8</sup> The Qur'ān often emphasises its certification of other religious scriptures and thus Muslims are duty bound not to reject them on one or the other ground, except in the case of proven concoction in the old scriptures which is almost impossible to prove. However, Muslims usually emphasise the point that Jews and Christians have falsified their scriptures. If this is true, it needs to be appreciated in the light of those Qur'ānic verses which are in accordance with other scriptures. The Qur'ān authenticates rather than abrogates other scriptures, although there are a few verses which accuse Jews and Christians of the falsification of Scripture. But the emphasis is on authentication rather than falsification and Muslim scholarship has a divided opinion on what is meant by falsification. The thesis that previous scriptures have been corrupted both in letter and meaning by later editors is not shared by some great Muslim authorities including Ibn Taymiyyah. In any case it is almost impossible to point to a particular passage and declare that it has been manipulated/falsified. That explains why Muslims maintain silence (if not openness and respect) towards the letter of previous scriptures.

Iqbal denies any cognitive or empirical or historical element in the Genesis story. Writing in a style reminiscent of some modern anthropologists like Fraser, he observes:

...confining ourselves to the Semitic form of the myth. It is highly probable that it arose out of the primitive man's desire to explain to himself the infinite misery of his plight in an uncongenial environment, which abounded in disease and death and obstructed him on all sides in his endeavor to maintain himself.<sup>9</sup>

The Qur'ānic view of creation starts from the first man who is a prophet and thus endowed with the highest intellectual and moral capabilities. He was not primitive in the sense evolutionists think. Iqbal primarily emphasises the biological and psychological dimensions and relegating to the background profound spiritual or religious and existential dimensions. From the traditionalist perspective, it is modern man rather than the so-called primitive man who deserves the derogatory title of primitive man.

### **Interpretation of Adam**

Iqbal also makes a vital distinction between the Qur'ānic use of the words *Insān* and Adam. He argues that the word Adam is used more as a concept than as the name of an actual human individual. He cites the Qur'ānic verse (*Sūrat al-A'rāf*, 7: 11) as a warrant for it. However, he has evolutionary theory in mind while making this unique exegesis. The verse he quotes "We created you; then fashioned you; then we told angels; prostrate yourself unto Adam" is interpretable and has been interpreted differently. Muslims, throughout their history, have believed, not quite unwarrantedly, in Adam as the name of a concrete human individual, the first man and a prophet. However, the term 'Adam' has also been used as a generic or symbolic term for 'Man.' The evolutionist account is difficult to square with the plain Qur'ānic narrative, especially the philosophical and religious connotations of the former. There are significant reasons why traditional Islam opposes the theory of evolution. The first man is seen by the Qur'ān as a vicegerent of God. Adam is the first *bashar* or *insān*. Man did not evolve (especially his spiritual faculty) according to the Qur'ānic world view. His bodily evolution could be conceded as Maurice Bucaille

argues in his *What is the Origin of Man: The Answers of Science and Holy Scriptures* from the Qur'ānic view point but his psychological and spiritual evolution cannot be unproblematically derived from the Qur'ān. Darwinism, especially its philosophical naturalism, is not reconcilable with the traditional Qur'ānic picture of man, his origin and destiny.

Iqbal due to his evolutionist approach is forced to demythologise in rationalist terms the profoundly pertinent traditional myths or symbols of the Qur'ān. Syed Vahidudin has justifiably taken Iqbal to task for his demythologising attitude. He aptly remarks:

Iqbal doesn't accept the Qur'ānic legends at their face value but offers some very stimulating observations. But in his fervor for demythologisation, he completely secularises the Qur'ānic motives and their transcendental dimension is lost sight of.<sup>10</sup>

Iqbal says that the word 'Adam' is reserved by the Qur'ān for man as God's vicegerent. But strictly speaking, the word 'Adam' in this sense is used in the Qur'ān only in *Sūrat al-Baqarah* 2: 30-31, as Saeed Sheikh also notes in his annotation of Iqbal's lectures.<sup>11</sup> Iqbal adopts this selective exclusionist way of reading the Qur'ān throughout his discussion on the Qur'ānic legend of the Fall.

### **Interpretation of the Garden of Eden**

Iqbal interprets the word *jannah* in connection with Adam's primordial abode as the "conception of a primitive state in which man is practically unrelated to his environment and consequently does not feel the sting of human wants the birth of which alone marks the beginning of human culture."<sup>12</sup> However, as Vahidudin remarks: "While it is perfectly legitimate to raise the question whether the *jannah* which man has lost is identical with the *Jannah* to which the righteous are destined, it is not legitimate to convert it into an earthly abode."<sup>13</sup> Vahidudin's remarks on Iqbal's concept of Hell and Heaven apply also here. He says:

In any case the transempirical reference can only be dispensed with at the risk of alienating oneself from the Qur'ānic frame of reference. The alienation from the source of the religious experience is, indeed, the risk which all efforts

at demythologisation with reference to different religious traditions are exposed to.<sup>14</sup>

Iqbal, if we read between the lines, seems to deny the reality of the Fall altogether. Man has not fallen from any heavenly Edenic abode to this earth. He was in and has grown from the earth. The earth greets man.<sup>15</sup> It is man's very home. Iqbal is quite contented with this earthly home and asks God to wait for him.<sup>16</sup> The Qur'ān says that man was created in trouble and that he was thrown out, disgraced, from paradise to this earth. The earth by no means appears to be his original home.<sup>17</sup> There was definitely some kind of fall and definitely man has been punished in some significant sense for his original act of disobedience. Man did lose something worthwhile by eating the forbidden fruit. It was not an unmixed blessing for him to lose his original home. Adam wept bitterly and mourned this loss, as the Prophet's traditions testify. This fall may have been some kind of rise or gain as Iqbal says, but from purely religious or spiritual viewpoint it was definitely a fall, a loss, and Adam committed a great sin by eating this forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve did usurp the Divine privilege. They placed themselves outside the Divine centre and cut themselves off in practice, though in an illusory sense, from God.

### **The Fall as the Ascent of Man**

Iqbal appears to welcome the Fall and sees it as the birth of self-consciousness-man's defining attribute and precious treasure. To quote him:

...the Qur'ānic legend of the Fall has nothing to do with the first appearance of man on this planet. Its purpose is rather to indicate man's rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience. The Fall does not mean any moral depravity, it is man's transition from simple consciousness to first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of personal causality in one's own being. Man's first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice and that is why according to the Qur'ānic narration Adam's first transgression was foreign.<sup>18</sup>

This is, in fact, an apology for man's primordial act of disobedience. This is conceding the fallen man's view of things and could be interpreted as the denial of the Fall altogether. This is stretching the humanist modernist appropriation of scripture to its farthest limits. This is, I fear, totally inadmissible from the Qur'anic or traditional religious viewpoint. Countless volumes have been written on the Fall and its relation to the problem of evil. Iqbal has taken a very problematic position vis-à-vis the problem of evil because he denies any significant connection between 'evil' and the Fall. Profound Christian insights into the nature of evil and sin are denied at one stroke by Iqbal. Indeed the word 'sin' with its traditional connotations hardly ever occurs in Iqbalian philosophy. He denies man's primordial sin and he denies any sin in the subsequent history of mankind. The Qur'ān has to be drastically reinterpreted and indeed new canons of its interpretation evolved for deriving such notions from it. A religious or psychological perspective on moral evil starts from man's primordial propensity to evil. The doctrine of original sin has profound psychological and existential truth. Even thoroughly secularised modern man is unable to deny it. Man's moral fallibility and instinctual propensity towards evil is a fact which Iqbal cannot satisfactorily explain. Religion accounts for it by positing evil in the very constitution of things; in his Fall. The fallen state is indeed evil. Religion takes some kind of fall for granted. It is only then that it speaks of Deliverance, Nirvana, Salvation, Grace, Mercy and Heaven. Although Islam does not share the Hellenistic-Christian-Nietzschean sense of the tragic and evil, it emphasises man's ingratitude and his unheedful attitude towards divine summons. The fruits of man's rejection of God and his moral depravity are gathered in the Qur'anic account of numerous ruined cities or habitations of man. Iqbal has too sanguine an estimate of man's goodness. True to the humanistic tradition, he does not fully recognise the dark reality of sin or *ẓulm* to which the Qur'ān testifies. In rejecting the Christian doctrine of original sin he seems to forget Qur'anic reservations on man's perfection and goodness and its testifying to inexplicable wickedness of man as displayed in his moral record in history. He caricatures the Christian approach, whose profound moral and psychological insights he misses. He writes: "Nor does the Qur'ān regard the earth as a torture hall where an elementally wicked humanity is imprisoned for an original act of



sin.”<sup>19</sup> Humanity has, indeed, something profoundly wrong with it. Even if not elementally wicked, there is still a stubborn element of wickedness in man. The earth may not be a torture chamber but man is not here on a holiday. Even heaven is not a holiday as Iqbal himself admits.<sup>20</sup> Man is indeed created in trouble according to the Qur’ān. This world if not the vale of tears is definitely the vale of ‘soul-making’ as Iqbal also concedes. But difficult and painful indeed is this soul making. Man wins immortality or heaven at very great cost. Most men seem too weak to pay the necessary cost. Many egos, as Iqbal concedes, may suffer dissolution. Our soul making odyssey is littered with too many failures and is accompanied by too much pain. So this world is, to assert the obvious fact, a kind of torture hall where men are involved in painful ‘soul-making.’ This may be interpreted as punishment if one wishes. The trial man is facing in this life or this world for the winning of personality, to use an Iqbalian phrase, is hard indeed. Most men succumb giving their souls to Satan, being deluded and tempted by Satan or Mara. ‘Most men will go to hell,’ the Qur’ān affirms.

### **Man the Transgressor**

Man has foolishly accepted the trust of personality according to the Qur’ān. What religion conveys through the legends of the Fall and an emphasis on moral evil and thus a need for God’s Grace or *Faql* and Mercy and His role in man’s deliverance or salvation is not fully appreciated by Iqbal. The Qur’ān, in line with all traditional religions, emphasizes the great significance of evil. Shabir Akhtar in his *A Faith for All Seasons* illustrates the meaning of the Qur’ān’s profound symbolism of the legend of the Fall (which Iqbal misses) and its emphasis on the darker face of human nature. This is in remarkable congruence with both the Christian and Buddhist emphasis on moral and physical evil in the world. The Qur’ān, no less than the Torah and the New Testament, condemns any excessively sanguine estimate of the purely human potential for self-perfectibility through obedience to the revealed law.

Man who is vicegerent of God and inheritor of the divine kingdom, worthy of the immortal life, nobler than angels, made in the image of God, is built of not only the noblest stuff (Iqbal mostly sees only this part of the picture) but also the vilest of clay. He is

inclined to evil and reduced to the “lowest of the low and gravitates towards the ground” (*Sūrat al-A‘rāf*, 7: 176). Although he is the epitome of God’s creation, semi-divine and angels have prostrated before him according to the Qur’ān, he is also created weak (*Sūrat al-Nisā’*, 4: 28). His nature conceals a permanent emotional restlessness (*Sūrat al-An‘ām*, 6: 19), and Man is ‘made of haste’ (*Sūrat al-Isrā’*, 17: 11), impetuous, weak willed, foolish and short sighted. Man has a natural tendency to wrong doing. The human rejection of God and perverse heedlessness that litters the human history (of which the Qur’ān complains), question Iqbalian evolutionary meliorism and its Qur’ānic warrant. To quote Shabir Akhtar:

We have here the irrefutable testimony of the sacred volume itself. The picture is a lugubrious one, of an incorrigible humanity addicted to sin and ingratiated, never turning in repentance until their cup is full (*Sūrat Saba’*, 34: 15-19). An admittedly forbearing Sovereignty will not tolerate disobedience and obduracy. God warns; men disregard; and again. And then, Allah’s judgment comes suddenly while the sinners sleep the sleep and heedlessness: morning finds a generation fallen prostrate in its habitation (*Sūrat al-A‘rāf*, 7: 78).<sup>21</sup>

The significance of sin, or *ẓulm* in the Qur’ānic vocabulary, is not properly appreciated by modernist humanist writers like Iqbal. Satan, concedes the Qur’ān (*Sūrat Saba’*, 34: 20), was right in judging Man to be “rebellious.”

### **The Role of Satan**

Iqbal does not properly appreciate the disturbing role of Satan in the legend of the Fall. He has no more role, at least in the *Reconstruction*, than to lead Man away from his pursuit of inductive knowledge and keeping him ignorant of the joy of perpetual growth and expansion.<sup>22</sup> The only way to correct man’s Faustian tendency of seeking short cuts to knowledge was to place him in an environment which however painful, was better suited to the unfolding of his intellectual faculties, in Iqbal’s account.<sup>23</sup> This environment is our present painful physical environment. Thus Iqbal relegates to the background the whole problem of moral evil and Satan’s role in it. Man’s universal rejection of prophets and his

consequent condemnation to hell – “painful realisation of one’s failure as a man” – is time and again lamented in the Qur’ān. This dimension of evil and consequence of Man’s Fall are largely ignored by Iqbal. Iqbal overemphasises man’s epistemological dimension in this context. For him, knowledge – not the knowledge of God or gnosis but the empirical knowledge gained primarily through inductive intellect – is the *raison d’être* of man’s existence as if knowledge will deliver men out of ignorance, out of the hell he is in. Amongst the numerous adjectives the Qur’ān uses against man he mentions only his being hasty (*‘ajūl*) by nature in this connection. Iqbal reduces the key religious issue of the Fall to only an issue of getting knowledge.

### Symbolism of the Edenic Tree

Against the orthodox Christian and Islamic conception of this tree that takes it as a symbol for knowledge of good and evil, Iqbal believes with Madame Blavatsky that this tree is a cryptic symbol for occult knowledge. Some Christians have even argued that this forbidden fruit is modern scientific knowledge. Iqbal argues exactly the opposite. It is not Man’s intellectual faculty but his spiritual faculty that is the subject of the legend of the Fall. Man’s knowledge – and not his spirit – is the concern of Iqbal in his treatment of the legend of the Fall. Iqbal reduces the metaphysical issue to an epistemological one. Iqbal’s demythologising tendency is also evident in his interpretation of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Eternity. Here is displayed the Freudian influence on Iqbal. He says:

The eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree of eternity is life’s resort to sex-differentiation by which it multiplies itself with a view to circumvent total extinction. It is as if life says to death. If you sweep away one generation of living things, I will produce another.<sup>24</sup>

The legitimacy of this interpretation cannot be ruled out but one must recognise the profound transcendental or metaphysical significance of this symbolism. Otherwise one risks overlooking the Qur’ān’s motive in alluding to such things. There have been many beautiful interpretations of this symbol of the Tree of Eternity. Sexual connotations have been almost universally emphasised by sacred scriptures as well as by secular interpretations. However, sex

has to be understood not in the usually accepted narrow sense of the term but in a wider context that involves Man's whole being and thus has metaphysical dimensions as well. Iqbal says that "the Qur'ān rejects the phallic symbolism of ancient art, but suggests the original sexual act by the birth of the sense of shame disclosed in Adam's anxiety to cover the nakedness of his body."<sup>25</sup> There seems to be a contradiction in this statement. How could the Qur'ān reject phallic symbolism when it also points to an original sexual act? The traditionalist scholars have argued for analogous terminology of all sacred scriptures. Schuon's interpretation of the Pen or *Qalam* of the Qur'ān as a phallic symbol like other traditions, shows the essential orthodoxy of phallic symbolism to which the Qur'ān also subscribes.

### **Appropriation of Sufistic Interpretation**

Iqbal, if we keep his poetic output in mind, is in important respects only appropriating Sufi ideas in his interpretation of the Fall, Sin and Satan. His positive appropriation of Satan is one of the most profound things in Iqbal and we can find enough precedents for this in Sufism. The earth, seen from nirvanic viewpoint, is indeed our home. Eternity is here and now. Paradise is a matter of perception. Everything is Infinite if we cleanse our perception as Blake remarked. Zen has upheld the notion that heaven is this world when looked at from a divine perspective or eternity. There is no pain, no sorrow for those who have penetrated the essences, who have seen through the appearances. Essences are decipherable through phenomena. The world of ideas is not separate or disjointed from the world of phenomena. Aristotle seems closer to the Qur'ānic spirit than Plato when he asserts essences show through the world of phenomena. The Qur'ānic is farthest from the Manichean view that sees no God or His manifestation in the world of matter. The universe is a symbol of God. God is the Manifest Truth. Wherever we turn, there is the Face of God. Things are metaphysically transparent. The God of Islam is not only the Hidden but also *al-Zāhir* (The Manifest). *Samsara* is *nirvana*. This very earth is the Garden of Eden. Seeing things transcends the distinction between this world and another world, *samsara* and *nirvana*, good and evil and in fact all distinctions which are conceded only as relative reality at a dualistic plane. Gnosis consists in transcending this dualistic consciousness. Seeing everything in God or through God transforms the world into a

veritable heaven, a theophany. Metaphysical understanding of *tawhīd* or the Unitarian/nondualistic interpretation of God to which Sufism subscribes maintains that the world is God's show and there is no sin, no evil, no Satan in the ultimate analysis. God is the only Doer. Both good and evil are from Him, as the orthodox creed affirms. God alone is truly or wholly real for God is Reality from the traditional metaphysical perspective. However, as long as one is caught up in the world of appearances and sees things outside God, one is necessarily condemned to suffer and live in the fragmentary world created by mind/thought that takes distinctions to be real. Iqbal's embracing of this world, his yes-saying attitude is understandable in the tradition of *tawhīdic* worldview of Islam whose deeper dimensions are experienced by Sufis/gnostics alone. It appears that in his poetry, Iqbal has profound insights informed by his essentially mystical sensibility. However, the problem is that Iqbal is perceived – with some reason – as a dualistic thinker who critiqued strictly nondualistic understanding of *tawhīd*. He did not embrace pure metaphysics as understood by perennialists. His poetical intuitions, despite his dualistic theological and philosophical commitments, are mystical and nondualistic. There is much originality and insight in Iqbal's observations but then we need to apply a nondualistic or Unitarian interpretation which he, however, critiqued severely in his different writings.

It needs to be made clear that Iqbal cannot be bracketed with those demythologisers who deny hierarchy of existence and are committed to naturalism. Though his exegesis of certain traditional myths reveals the influence of a demythologising methodology he remains fundamentally a metaphysician and quite an orthodox believer in Islam. He believes, as both his poetical and prose works show, in the ontological reality of traditional religious symbols. For him, the spirit rather than the body, consciousness rather than matter, the invisible rather than the visible are the primary realities. He had a firm belief in miracles. He never questioned the traditional belief in angels. Hell and Heaven were as real as this world: in fact, rather more real. Declaring them as states does not mean denying their reality. However, when it comes to rational philosophical treatment of traditional symbols he is too apologetic in his translation of these things in such terms that modern man who is committed to positivist evolutionist rationalist scientific world view can understand. He did

not concede that there can hardly be any compromise with modern scientific methodological and philosophical commitments. He did not have a metaphysically strong traditional intellectual perspective. He had to address a secular disbelieving age and hoped to appeal to it by making serious concessions to its spirit.

Islam emphasizes quite different elements in the story of Adam's fall. For Islam, the earth is not meant to be a place of punishment but soul-making. The ego could perfect certain modes of his life only in an environment that the earth provided. The earth was not designed as an interrogation centre. It is man's home albeit a temporary home. Islam does not emphasise perversion of will as the Christians did. Disobedience did not mean unforgivable transgression. Islam is not sin centric and guilt centric. Here, intelligence/knowledge saves. The Qur'ān links salvation to knowledge by saying that it is only the knowers who fear God. In Islam, man is primarily a vicegerent of God rather than a sinning creature in need of repentance. Iqbal's interpretation, for all its problems, is in keeping with these insights of Islam and thus a very important contribution in its own right.

### **Comparison with Abduh and Sir Syed**

We will now briefly take up Sir Syed's and Muhammed Abduh's demythologising approach to the legend of the Fall. Sir Syed does not recognise the existence of the angelic realm and interprets angels and Iblīs from a naturalistic standpoint as natural or psychological forces. He deems the whole story of Adam as metaphorical and interprets the various characters in the story in varied ways. To quote him:

The story of Adam, Iblīs and the angels in the reality is not a story of some happening. It is rather a metaphorical explanation of interplay of good and evil forces within man. There are several other such metaphors in the Qur'ān.

The term Satan or Iblīs in the Qur'ān does not denote any essentially physical existence, but denotes evil or devilish forces concealed within man.<sup>26</sup>

Thus metaphysical or transcendental reference is rejected by Sir Syed. Modern science and evolutionary biology and the advocates

of demythologisation would hardly find anything objectionable in Sir Syed's account.

Muhammad Abduh has dealt with the narrative of genesis in greater detail than Sir Syed has done. He attempted to categorise the verses pertaining to the creation of Prophet Adam as ambiguous and held the story of Adam to be allegorical through certain farfetched interpretations. Though he, like Afghani, critiqued Sir Syed as a naturalist he cannot himself be exonerated from this charge. In fact, (as Shihabuddin Nadvi has pointed out) he appears to be a bigger naturalist than Sir Syed.<sup>27</sup> His following remarks speak loudly about his demythologising exegesis:

*Jannat* or Heaven could be more appropriately interpreted as pleasure, ease and happiness. It is also correct to say that Adam denotes the whole mankind as a clan is known by the name of his father.

...Prohibited tree means evils and intransigence...The living in *jannah* and expulsion may be divinely ordained acts are destined to happen. The living and expulsion from *jannah* (heaven) denotes various stages such as childhood, an age when happiness is the sole preoccupation of man; so the childhood represents heavenly happiness. Thus the child lives in an eternally genial atmosphere as if in a garden where canals flow, birds chirp, dense trees spread their shades, and remain laden with fruits. The description of mate encompasses all human beings irrespective of being male or female.... Satanic temptations mean the evil spirit behind man. It is to show that man is by virtue of his sublime nature inclined towards virtues and only temptations lead him to vices. Expulsion from heaven means that man gets into difficulties by transgressing the laws of nature.<sup>28</sup>

In comparison to these attempts Iqbal's demythologisation is quite sophisticated and appropriates both modern knowledge and the Qur'ān from the perspective of his philosophy of ego.

Against all the claims of higher criticism and new demythologising interpretations the traditionalist Schuon – well known for his critique of the defining features of modernity, its progressivism and 'higher criticism,' and devastating dismissal of secular orientation of the Renaissance and rationalist reductionist

scientism besides his central idea of the transcendent unity of religions – assert that modern approaches are necessarily blind to the most fundamental symbolism that was quite clear to the ancients. We need not invoke modern thought at all in clarifying traditional symbols and narratives. The Qurʾān has no new ideas to put forward and like other traditional scriptures is a ‘space’ rather than a ‘time’<sup>29</sup> and it would, thus, reject the very idea of the advancing spirit of time. Advancing times only obscure the otherwise transparent meanings of scripture for the ancients. The farther we go from the Prophet’s age, the more difficult it becomes for the modernists to appreciate and understand traditional wisdom. The Renaissance (and modernity) represents another fall of Adam rather than his rise. According to perennialists, modern man has fallen in the double sense after the Renaissance so he is unable to understand symbolism in scripture and its profound significance. Modern thought that culminates in severing all ties with transcendence cannot but be blind to the dazzling truths expressed in mythological mode – modern existentialist versions of which are quite impoverished. Perennialists are not simpletons and literalists; they are symbolists and cannot be critiqued from either an anthropological or an evolutionary viewpoint. Myths are not historical in the ordinary sense of the term but transcend history and that makes them universal and perennially relevant. In its most universal terms Adam is potentially ‘every man’ and his fall is Man’s tendency to see things outside God, in terms of categories of good and evil and other such dualistic conceptions. Adam saw things and enjoyed them within God and thus had unfragmented vision. The Garden of Eden is the most advanced spiritual state where self-realisation is achieved and one is no longer under the dominion of desiring self and sorrow is no more. It is an achievement rather than a primitive state of consciousness. The story of the Fall is enacted in every moment in our lives, and if we could transcend this fallen state we could see things as they are, *in divinis*. We would no longer be alienated, complaining, suffering, desiring, and sinning creatures. However, the Fall is not a wholly negative thing and Iblīs has a positive function in the divine economy. The life of the Spirit is the life in the Garden of Eden. But to achieve other perfections and manifest all the attributes of God which the perfect man is supposed to do, we need to be subject to limitations that bodily life necessarily imposes and endure all the pains that the



flesh is heir to. The Fall is indeed a rise in the sense explicated here. Angels living in perpetual presence of God, knowing no joy and pain of struggle that life of the body and soul (in comparison with the life of the Spirit which is untrammelled peace, bliss and ceaseless contemplation of God) is not enviable for the perfect man, the Adam before the Fall or after regaining the paradise.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As we have seen, Iqbal reinterprets/reconstructs the traditional account to make the scriptural accounts plausible to modern mind. He brings Qur'ānic warrant and argues in the orthodox style for his viewpoint. His interpretation of the creation myth and especially the fall of Adam is unique and unprecedented in Islamic history. He almost denied the reality of the Fall by interpreting it as the rise of man. He has gone beyond the literal and traditional interpretations of the Genesis story. His version is at variance with the orthodox traditional account and with some modern accounts (like those inspired by existentialism) but is a brilliantly original and ingenious appropriation of scriptural and modern scientific approaches. Kenneth Cragg described (wrongly, if unqualified and generalised) the whole of *Reconstruction* as the wildest speculation and this is best illustrated by Iqbal's interpretation of the Fall and Sin. Iqbal is caught in other intractable problems like the problem of evil because of his unique interpretation of the role of Iblīs. An Iqbalian interpretation could not have been conceived in premodern times. It is obviously influenced by and addressed to primarily Western sensibility. How daringly nontraditional any reconstructionist attempt could be, of which Iqbal is the great protagonist in Islam, is here exemplified. If the project of reconstruction has any validity, such appropriations and constructions must be tolerated. If one takes modernism and modern knowledge seriously and from this vantage point approaches tradition, this is not a surprising appropriation. A respectful attitude towards the post-Renaissance Western tradition necessitates such drastic reconstruction of traditional religious thought in Islam. The most interesting point is the fact that Iqbal represents a blend or synthesis of widely divergent approaches – Freudian and the theosophist, Darwinian and the traditionalist or modern and the ancient. His genius is put to sharp test here. He derives momentous results and corollaries from his disturbingly

original approach to this key religious story. His insights into the Qur'ān are here revealed. The Qur'ān's multivocality and layered depths of meaning and its susceptibility to multiple interpretations is here fully exploited by Iqbal. One cannot but admire his close reading of the Qur'ān and his mastery of both the ancient and modern sources in this connection. Although he ignores relevant prophetic traditions, classical commentaries and much of the traditional wisdom in interpreting the story of genesis, this mastery is apparent.

Iqbal, unlike Schuon, does not possess the complex subtle metaphysical insights that alone clear the meanings of the legend of the Fall. Iqbal possesses some profound insights into the matter but as it is only metaphysics and esotericism that clears the meaning of the legend he ends up with problematic account of this key Qur'ānic story. He is too committed to the dualistic philosophical and theological, instead of a strictly Unitarian metaphysical and esoteric approach. He never leaves his individualism (and thus his anthropomorphism) in understanding religion which approached metaphysically transcends both as pure truth. Religion must therefore stand above all the individualities of existence, all mental constructions, all linguistic representations, and all merely human or individual limitations.

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## Notes

1. Syed Vahidudin, *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries*, ed. W. Christian Troll (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1986), vol. 3, 76.

2. *Ibid.*, 58.

3. *Ibid.*

4. The traditionalist perennialist perspective began to be enunciated in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century by the French metaphysician Rene Guenon, although its precepts are considered to be timeless and to be found in all authentic traditions. It is also known as Perennialism, the perennial philosophy, or *Sophia Perennis*. The other key figures of the traditionalist metaphysical school were French metaphysician Frithjof Schuon and the Ceylonese scholar A.K. Coomaraswamy. Other important figures in the traditionalist school include, among others, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Marco Pallis, W.N. Perry, Syed Hussain Nasr, Lord Northbourne, Leo Schaya, Philip Sherrard, Rama Coomaraswamy, Huston Smith, J.E., Brown and Charles

le Gai Eaton. There are many other scholars who have been profoundly influenced by it. This approach is metaphysical and esoteric. It advocates traditional sciences based on metaphysical principles. It reads profound symbolism in traditional myths and criticizes evolutionist reductionist naturalist rationalist approach that informs demythologisation.

5. M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. & annot. M. Saeed Sheikh (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 1997), 65.

6. *Ibid.*, 101-102.

7. *Ibid.*, 66.

8. Ziauddin Sardar, *Explorations in the Islamic Science* (London: Mansel Publishing, 1989).

9. *Ibid.*, 72.

10. Syed Vahidudin, *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries*, 59.

11. M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 170, ff. 48. This very selective reading of the Qur'ān is paralleled elsewhere in his lectures, e.g., he rejects eternity of hell, which occurs as refrain in the Qur'ān on the basis of Qur'ānic verse (*Sūrat al-Naba'*, 78: 23) which for him gives a sufficient warrant for such a bold thesis.

12. *Ibid.*, 67.

13. Syed Vahidudin, *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries*, 160.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

15. M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 67.

16. See Iqbal's poem *Roohi-arzi adam ko salam karti hay* (The spirit of earth greets Adam) in M. Iqbal, *Bali Jibriel* (collected in *Kuliyati Iqbal*) (Delhi: Kutub Khana Hamediya), 106-7.

17. See *Ibid.*, 4. In his *Kuliyati Iqbal* where the following famous lines occur: "Why had you driven me out in preeternity/World is too much with us, wait" (My translation).

18. M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 67-68.

19. *Ibid.*, 68.

20. *Ibid.*, 98.

21. Shabir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and Western Modernity* (London: Bellow Publishing, 1990), 163.

22. M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 69.

23. Ibid., 69.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 10.

26. Quoted in Altaf Hussain Hali, *Hayaate Javeed* (New Delhi: Taraqqi Urdu Board, 1979), 526.

27. M. Shihabuddin Nadvi, *Evolution and Creation* (Bangalore: Furqania Academy Trust, 1998), 80.

28. Quoted in Ibid., 80.

29. Schuon, Frithjof, *Understanding Islam*, George (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963), 30.