

Islamic Modernism: the Case of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal

Muhammad Rasheed Arshad*

While human history has always been in a state of flux, the modern period is unique both because of the unprecedented speed of historical change and because of the hitherto untried direction in which it seems to be moving. For the first time during recorded history, religion is facing a real threat of extinction¹; the kind of change that history is demanding from religion is such that religion would lose its essence, its eternal element, if it were to give in to its demand. Refusing to change is not an option either.

This, in turn, is the question of modernity. How religion has to negotiate with the rising tide of unprecedented changes which arose with the advent of modernity. I shall discuss the approach of Allama Muhammad Iqbal in this regard. According to Charles Taylor, we must reread Iqbal. For a time, we could imagine him forgotten, consigned to the oubliettes with the other figures of Islamic 'modernism' from the beginning of this century. But he had to come back. There are effectively some transient 'modernisms' which try to adapt to a secular tradition to the fashion of the day. They create themselves within an immediate present, which they then find it hard to survive. There are others which start with a major detour, a return to sources, to discover how to be truly faithful to them in a novel historical situation. Iqbal's thought is of this second character, a rare and powerful realization of the genre in fact.²

We cannot fail, after referring so often to the 'modernist' current in which the Iqbalian philosophy is inscribed, to examine the primary notion of modernity. Firstly, by repeating that Iqbal quite particularly insists on the idea that this cannot be about a particular *content* to imitate³. And this refusal as much concerns the imitation of a tradition as an external model. Modernity here is thus not something which it would be a matter of a society conforming to, but, in a manner of speaking, a mirror held out to it. In a long and important reflection entitled 'Response to questions raised by Pandit J. L. Nehru',⁴ Iqbal returns to the notion of an appeal to modernity which is the internal movement of a society even if it is also to respond to the pressure of modern *ideas*⁵. It is thus that he considers, on the one hand, the personal history of modernist intellectuals in the Islamic world, like Al Afghânî and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, on the other, the transformations in

*Lecturer, Dept. of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Turkey. Just as, he declares, we cannot say that these intellectuals were Westernized when they were in the first place the outcrop of the old traditional school, we also—and he is responding directly to a statement of Nehru's—cannot say that the modernization undertaken in Turkey meant that this country had ceased to be Muslim. Whether it is a matter of the necessity of also having a materialist perspective on the world or other questions such as the use of Turkish language written in Roman characters or the abolition of the caliphate with the separation of Church and State, there is nothing in these, Iqbal says, that cannot be referred, ultimately, to an *internal* principle of movement, to the *ijtihad* of an Islamic country.⁶

Rather than a particular content that is modern, then, we can refer to an *attitude* of modernity, thus making use of an important and useful distinction employed by Michel Foucault, who specifies it as an *ethos*.⁷ An *ethos* that is both belonging and task, such indeed is the principle that is at work in modernist thought and that can be defined using the illustration he finds in Amir Ali's conclusions concerning the status of women in the Islamic world. When the author of the *Spirit of Islam* indicates that, on this issue, Islamic societies must move with the advances of civilization, it is not an appeal to conform to civilization or modernity. It is by knowing how to go back to Islamic history and to the *process of civilization* that it bears to constitute, in the present and for this time, its *sense*, which is to say the direction it indicates.⁸

Whether we regard him as a poet or a thinker or a statesman. Iqbal is pre-eminently the voice of Muslim culture in the modern world⁹. In its deepest and widest sense, culture implies an outlook on life, a *weltanschauung*, a pattern of thought and conduct manifesting itself in various aspects of civilization, particularly in the field of arts and sciences. It is essentially seeking concrete expression in space and time. In this sense, Iqbal is the outstanding spokesman we have of the cultural movement of Islam. Since the rise of Western civilization and the problems it has posed for the world of Islam during the last four centuries or so, the Muslims have not only had to face superior weapons and military technique of Western armies but also still a greater challenge from western ideas and values, the onslaught of which has been even more fierce than that of military forces¹⁰. The new imperialism of the west brought in its wake, Nationalism, racialism, capitalism and its antithesis, communism. The Muslims who, by that time, had been cut off from their cultural moorings, could hardly interpose any resistance to this invasion¹¹. As a result, the world of Islam lost its coherence and direction, and taking its inspiration from Europe, was reduced to a patch-work of nationalistic and racialistic states nourishing themselves each on its territory, on the

glories, real or imaginary, of the pre- Islamic period of their history. Iqbal has been at pains to point to the repeated appeals of the Qur'an to history and Nature, and to emphasize that the Muslims were the first to see the shortcomings of Greek syllogism and to develop and bring into use the inductive method of observation and experiment on which, their own scientific achievements were based and which they passed on to Europe when, as a result of political disintegration and the influence of a decadent mysticism, they had lost touch with the world of matter. One of the services that Iqbal has rendered to the World of Islam is to remind the Muslims that the modern Science and Technology, which unfortunately have become somewhat alien to the Muslim mind in our own day, are a part of the Muslim heritage, and in trying to acquire them to-day the Muslims are doing no more than reclaiming what belongs to them.¹²

We can thus see in the attitude of modernity the imperative for a reading of history that would reconstitute its intention, according to the conditions and demands of the present and with the end of continuing to open the future by always further increasing the freedom of each and all¹³. It is this attitude, expressed with the greatest philosophical clarity in Muhammad Iqbal's work, which is at the foundation of the great constitutive themes of modernist Islamic thought¹⁴. Such an attitude is evident in its different representatives: the necessity of promoting the capacity of judging for oneself by making use of reason, reason as a faculty allowing a man to pursue the intention of religion which only in this way can address the whole of humanity, since thanks to reason the temporary can be distinguished from the permanent, the universal from the particular, etc.

One way to conceptualize Iqbal's intellectual project as a whole is to think of it in terms of his desire to re-establish religion, Islam in particular, on rational foundations¹⁵. Iqbal is well aware that philosophical inquiry, like scientific inquiry, is destined to remain provisional and open-ended, with no possibility of, or even any need for, a final resolution. On the other hand, he argues that "the essential aim of religion" is not a ceaseless and endless inquiry into the nature of truth, but "the transformation and guidance of man's inner and outer life."¹⁶ Philosophy, like science, can hope to grow forever at a leisurely pace by means of extensive self-criticism and self-correction; it has literally all the time in the world to pursue truth.

Religious beliefs, on the other hand, are meant to be acted upon, they shape values that organize everyday behavior¹⁷. Since action and behavior cannot be postponed indefinitely, or to any significant extent even in the short-term, the religious enterprise is necessarily characterized

by the quality of immediate relevance. At the same time, as Iqbal notes, it would be hazardous to justify one's actions and behaviors on "the basis of a doubtful principle of conduct"¹⁸ and furthermore, it would be unsatisfactory to assume religious truth only because such an assumption helps "to regulate thought and conduct."¹⁹ Because of its practical nature, as opposed to the theoretical nature of both philosophy and science, religion has a much greater need as well as desire, not to mention urgency, to establish itself on rational foundations while searching for objective truth that has relevance for human transformation and guidance²⁰.

Since these "rational foundations" upon which religion is to be established are themselves neither fixed, nor stable, but are directly dependent on the shifting states of human knowledge and understanding the process whereby the religious beliefs establish themselves rationally must be an ongoing one²¹. In other words, it is the cumulative human endeavor in the disciplines of philosophy and science that help produce the "rational foundations" upon which religion seeks to establish itself. As development in philosophy and science tend to transform and refine those foundations, they provide new opportunities and challenges for religion to make appropriate adjustments in its own quest. Theology has been performing this necessary and practical function of reconciling what Iqbal calls "the oppositions of experience"²² within every religious community. An opposition of experience is a disparity or disharmony between the regions of human experience. As each new development in human knowledge and understanding brought up a previously unrecognized opposition of experience or introduced a new twist into an ancient one, theology responded to the ensuing crisis by offering some form of reconciliation.

Two caveats are in order. First, even though Iqbal's intellectual project is a form of theology, due to the practical nature of religious concerns this term should be understood as a broadly conceived intellectual endeavor inseparable from applied ethics²³. Second, Iqbal's concern with Islam is illustrative of his concern with the spiritual growth and expansion of humanity as such, not an indication of the parochialism²⁴. Being a Muslim, it is natural that Iqbal's primary focus is on reconciling the oppositions of experience that he encounters within his own Islamic context; in terms of applied ethics, to re-establish Islam on rational foundations holds the promise of re-constructing the Muslim self, both individual and collective, after its disintegration in the recent past²⁵. Yet, there is a universal significance to Iqbal's work as well. Just as the Muslim individual cannot achieve an optimal self-growth in isolation from his/her community, the Muslim community is also incapable of achieving

such growth for itself in isolation from the larger human community²⁶. The interconnected nature of reality is such that human spiritual growth and expansion will either occur for everyone, or it will occur for no one.

Within the particular, Islamic context of Iqbal's intellectual project, two factors make him recognize the importance as well as the difficulty of re-establishing Islam on rational foundations: first, the relative stagnation in Islamic theology during the last five hundred years or so, and second, the radical change in philosophical premises brought about by the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. The way in which he goes about dealing with these challenges is highly instructive, not only for contemporary Muslims concerned with the revival and revitalization of Islamic culture but also for any community that faces the challenge of reconciling oppositions of experience in its own context²⁷. To identify Iqbal's basic approach, I turn to the work of Peter Berger, a contemporary sociologist of religion. In the late 1970's, Berger argued that religion has three fundamental choices in how it deals with the secularizing influence of modernity; these he called the deductive, the reductive, and the inductive options. Berger's typology may appear simplistic today, but it remains a useful guide for charting the encounter between religion and modernity, as well as for appreciating the unique significance of Iqbal's approach. In the following paragraphs, I summarize the three options.²⁸

The deductive option, according to Berger, "is to reassert the authority of a religious tradition in the face of modern secularity."²⁹ In this option, the representatives of religion refuse engagement or compromise with contrasting or alternative view being espoused by the modern secular society, insisting on the unchanging truth of the traditional meanings of their religious beliefs and practices, and asserting that contrasting views and practices must be rejected as partially or totally wrong. In extreme cases, this option can lead to the intellectual isolation of the religious community that chooses to follow it, as well as a tendency toward "fundamentalism". Within this option, what differentiates traditionalism or religious conservatism from full-blown fundamentalism is the much greater influence of modernity in the latter case, since traditions are themselves composites rather than monolithic, the deductive option is an appropriation of selected parts of the tradition as opposed to a commitment to the entire range of ideas and experiences embodied in it. Even though proponents of the deductive option may not acknowledge their debt, their choice of privileging certain parts of the tradition over others is in direct response to what they see as the most threatening aspects of the modern challenge.

Next in Berger's typology is the reductive option. According to Berger, to choose the reductive option is "to reinterpret the tradition in terms of modern secularity, which in turn is taken to be a compelling necessity of participating in modern consciousness."³⁰ In this option, the desire not to miss the advantages of mainstream secular society leads the representatives of religion to reinterpret the tradition in light of prevailing modern views. Initially, the intention is to be critically cautious and selective in the reinterpretation but gradually more and bigger compromises are made with increasing frequency and boldness. In the end, religion becomes so secularized and de-mythologized that it appears as just another version of modern secularity. The problem originates in the motive that drives the reductive option. i.e., the desire to participate in the benefits and advantages of secular modernity, as opposed to the desire for maintaining a commitment to the religious tradition in the face of rapid social and cultural change.

Berger's third type is the inductive option. For Berger, the "inductive option is to turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmation, one's own experience to whatever extent this is possible, and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions."³¹ In this option, an effort is made to build religious faith on the basis of concrete human experience, including the religious experiences of all varieties. One must argue on the basis of "empirical evidence," which implies "taking the human experience as the starting point of religious reflection and using the methods of the historian to uncover those human experiences that have become embodied in the various religious traditions."³² In the end, Berger shows an inclination towards this third option; partly for a different set of reasons, it turns out that Iqbal also chooses the inductive option.

While the above description of the deductive, reductive, and the inductive options are relatively straightforward, to identify a particular argument or position in terms of one of these options may not be a simple procedure; in some cases very similar to identical conclusions may result from the independent application of each of the three options. To identify each option as such, the inquirer must pay attention to how a conclusion is reached, more or less irrespective of what that conclusion may be. This calls for an analysis of the underlying logic or reasoning style of each of these three options. Since Berger himself did not explore this aspect of his typology, I suggest that Bruce Lawrence's formulation of the nature of modern thinking be used to enhance the precision of Berger's three options. In his study of fundamentalism, Lawrence argues that "the formulation and exposition of intuitively conceived, implicitly held dyadic constructs is the gist of modern thinking." (Lawrence, 30) He shows that

these “dyadic constructs” can be handled in one of two ways. “Contraries pose sharp differences... but they never allow the contrast to exclude the possibility of rapprochement and even, from time to time, inversion.” This is not true of contradictions, which are “incommensurate opposites,” so, between them, there can be no “dialectical or sympathetic interaction but only stark juxtaposition,” no communication or compromise but endless hostility.³³ For Lawrence, the tendency to handle dyadic constructs as contradictories is a feature common in many forms of modernity and fundamentalism.

By using Lawrence’s argument to augment the precision of Berger’s typology, the following points may be noted. The deductive option tends to create sharp dichotomies by emphasizing those aspects of the religious tradition that appear as farthest away from modern secular sensibilities and by downplaying the significance of similarities or overlaps. This indicates an underlying logic or reasoning style that handles dyadic constructs predominantly in the contradictory mode. The same is true of the reductive option. Even though these two options appear as polar opposites in a sociological sense, both are in fact products of the same psychological tendencies, as revealed in their use of the same underlying logic. For the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, both the deductive and reductive options are particularly tempting because of the centrality in these traditions of a written scripture. A written scripture is experienced as fixed, closed, and unchanging; its teachings, when in terms of dyadic constructs, itself the hallmark of modern thinking. If such dyadic constructs are handled in the contradictory mode, they come to be viewed as incommensurate opposites offering stark either/or choices to the believers. Depending on whether one prefers the scriptural dictate or the imperative of secular modernity, one ends up choosing either the deductive or the reductive option. The deductive option inevitably leads into some form of fundamentalism while the reductive option produces different degrees of secularization. In contrast, the inductive option grounds itself in the entire range of human experience; as such, it implies the handling of dyadic constructs predominantly on the contrary mode, though without necessarily rejecting the value of the contradictory mode.

Why Iqbal decide in favor of the inductive option, given that the other two were more easily available to him? There were both negative and positive reasons for this choice. By the time Iqbal arrived in Cambridge, many Muslim societies, including his native India, had already experienced the onslaught of secular modernity in various degrees of intensity; first in the domain of politics, where they saw the increasing

domination of European colonial powers and the resulting disintegration of traditional Muslim institutions of education and law³⁴, and then in the domain of ideas, where they witnessed the gradual crumbling of medieval forms of Islamic theology in the face of western science and philosophy³⁵. The most common Muslim responses to the latter crisis during the nineteenth-century were along the lines of either the deductive or the reductive option. In Iqbal's native India, the twin intellectual movements of Deoband and Aligarh, both establishing themselves in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century, represent respectively the deductive and the reductive options. Both the trends influenced Iqbal, though, he was more exposed to Aligarh school of thought during his formative period through his various teachers and mentors³⁶. It was obvious to Iqbal from the beginning that the Deoband approach did not offer any viable solution to the challenge of secular modernity beyond the necessary service it was performing in terms of the preservation and continuation of the inherited tradition and its spiritual legacy³⁷. As a result, Iqbal was always more open to the Aligarh approach, at least in principle, though he also developed close relations with numerous classically trained ulama and continued to seek their guidance on specific issues³⁸. His independent and critical attitude made him recognize significant shortcomings in both the Aligarh and the Deoband approaches.

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, Iqbal's realization that the deductive and the reductive options were veritable dead-ends was already pushing him in the direction of a fresh alternative. While many Muslims would continue to follow these options in various guises and disguises throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, it was a sign of Iqbal's genius that he recognized the need to transcend both of these options well before their failures became obvious to most observers³⁹. Iqbal, therefore, went on to develop his own approach to the challenge of secular modernity, a remarkable actualization of Berger's inductive option.

We must note that, in addition to his dissatisfaction with the already tried-and-tested inductive and reductive options, there were at least three positive factors that account for Iqbal's preference for the inductive option. These include (1) his understanding of the nature of secular modernity, particularly modern science; (2) his understanding of the nature of religious resources that he had at his disposal, particularly the Quran and (3) the basic structure of his personality (most likely the morally oriented variety of the introverted intuitive type, in Jungian parlance) and the resulting temperament (independent and mystical).

Taken together, these three factors made it practically inevitable that Iqbal would pioneer the inductive option in modern Islam.⁴⁰

Iqbal avoids the deductive trap by approaching the Qur'an as a living scripture, one that reveals its inherent possibilities according to the needs and capacities of the reading community; one that identifies "change" as one of the great signs of God⁴¹.

Nor is he willing to accept the reductive claim that the world has progressed too far ahead for an ancient text to be of any further use. On the contrary, Iqbal is insistent in his judgment that Qur'an remains unsurpassed as a source of guidance; in fact, the more human knowledge and understanding advances, the more generously the Qur'an is willing to reveal its hidden treasures, particularly to those who are most in tune with its spirit. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Iqbal's appreciation of and devotion to the Qur'an is unparalleled among modern Muslim intellectuals⁴². Arguing against the reductive option that leans towards modern forms of ethnic or territorial nationalism, Iqbal insists on the need to re-organize the community of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, a community based on the love of a transcendent ideal⁴³. He maintains that individual Muslim will not be able to organize themselves into the community of Muhammad without adherence to and reliance upon the Qur'an.

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