

Lecture 1: Reviving Islamic Ethos

ملنا ان الله يحل بيه المرء و قلبه و اوه اليه^{as} كما يحييكم و ^{as}يا ايها الذين امنى استجبوا لله و للرسول اذا د
تحشرون. "القران:س- 8/آيه 42

"O 'Believers! Obey God and His Messenger when He calls you to that which gives you life and know that God comes in between man and his 'heart' and that He it is to whom you will be gathered." (The Qur'an, 8:24)

Previously, I intended to talk about the philosophy of martyrdom on this day, commemorating the fortieth day of Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala, Historically, this is the occasion when those who cherish their empathy for the great martyr's journey to the shrine of Imam Husain (as)¹, in the manner of Jabar Bin Abdullah Ansari, the first pilgrim. This had to be postponed until a later date.

During the last three session here (at the Hussainiyeh Irshad Lecture Hall, Tehran), it has been suggested that I should give a one-half-hour talk on Allamah Iqbal, the great Islamic thinker, and his outline of The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam¹ a book published at Lahore (about fifty years ago). Considering that the topic merited careful preparation and not one but a series of Lectures, a separate program was arranged, resulting in this and the subsequent lectures.

Iqbal's book: "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam " is a compendium of seven lectures:

- (1) Knowledge and Religious Experience
- (2) The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience
- (3) The Conception of God and the Meaning of Prayer
- (4) The Human Ego-Man's Freedom and immortality of the Soul
- (5) The Spirit of Muslim Culture

(6) The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam and

(7) Is Religion Possible?

All the lectures were apparently addressed to intellectual gatherings. Their intellectual content is rather of a high caliber. These are of not only religious, but scientific and sociological interest. The theme underlying these is the same as that of the title of his book. This lecture, too, concentrates on the same subject of reviving Islamic ethos.

Iqbal's close familiarity with Europe was derived also from his higher studies there. His modern education, including scientific orientation, is reflected in his clear thinking, acknowledged by Europeans, too. No doubt, this criticism of European civilization was not based on any vague imagination of the conditions there. Neither is his appreciation of the intellectual and scientific assimilation of modern sciences by Muslim youth.

At the same time, Iqbal emphasized the need to make a clear distinction between the intellectual (or scientific) and the materialistic manifestations of European culture and civilization. He frequently warned against any servile or blind acceptance of the materialistic values of the West with their dire consequences for mankind. He pointed out that intellect alone could not save mankind from the dangers posed by the materialistic west. It is vital for mankind to recognize the salutary impact of spirituality, conscience and faith. Nevertheless, he endorsed European scientific knowledge as analogous to the wholesome inductive and empirical growth of Islamic thought and sciences, inhibited centuries ago among Muslim.

I do not wish to claim that everything Iqbal said was beyond criticism and that his views limited the subject-matter in any way. Nevertheless, he offered the best he could think of, which per se deserved every appreciation. Now, to quote from his book:

"The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history, however, is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam. Our only fear is that the dazzling exterior of European culture may arrest our movement and we may fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture. During all the centuries of our intellectual stupor Europe has been seriously thinking on the great problems in which the philosophers and scientists of Islam were so keenly interested."²

The import of the foregoing revolves on the distinction he makes between European Science and Civilization. It is predicated on our acceptance of the intellectual and scientific progress achieved in Europe and nothing more.

Elsewhere, Iqbal says:

"The idealism of Europe never became a living factor in her life and the result is a perverted ego seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies whose sole function is to exploit the poor in the interest of the rich. Believe me, Europe today is the greatest hindrance in the way of man's ethical advancement.

"The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which, speaking from the inmost depths of life, internalizes its own apparent externality. With him the spiritual basis of life is a matter of conviction for which even the least enlightened man among us can easily lay down his life; and in view of the basic idea of Islam that there can be no further revelation binding on man, we ought to be spiritually one of the most emancipated peoples on the earth."[3](#)

Briefly, what Iqbal says is to the effect that Islam offers mankind the spiritual content of religious belief based on revelation, which can deeply influence the human spirit. Accordingly, if Islam offers freedom justice and human rights, these are possibilities based on a guarantee of accomplishment through proper conditioning of the human spirit, whereas the "isms" evolved in or claimed by Europe lack such a guarantee.

He believes that the "isms" have failed to change European nature or make it truly human. In other words, Europeans' concern for human welfare is oriented to what they think, and not what or how they feel in their inner spirit or conscience. An average European may advocate humanitarianism without necessarily practicing it. He may speak about human rights without the corollary of respect for man. Based on his favorite 'ism', he may uphold human liberty. However, this does not necessarily mean his intrinsic appreciation of or belief in it. He may endorse the need for equality and justice for all men, but not conscientiously.

According to Iqbal, the European perplexity is one of a spiritual kind, arising from the secular nature of democracies, which tend to exploit the poor and favor the rich. All the contradictory "isms" evolved in Europe about any lasting impact in this regard. No wonder, Iqbal calls upon Muslims, especially the impressionable young, to be wary of getting misled or lost by any 'isms'.

Furthermore, Iqbal points out that modern European culture and civilization carries deficiencies which do not occur in the true Islamic counterparts.

For one thing, Islam does not represent a culture based on intellectual and materialistic considerations or values only, as in the cases of Europe. Iqbal then proceeds to explain some basic merits of Islamic culture. To quote Iqbal again:

"...Humanity needs three things today – a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis. Modern Europe has, no doubt idealistic systems on these lines, but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bring that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influenced man while religion has always elevated individuals and transformed whole societies..."[4](#)

True, what the world needs today is a spiritual interpretation, not a materialistic one. Materialism has perplexed mankind, so that no idea can be imbibed, as well as belief. An attitude devoid of spirituality considers everything in the world from a materialistic standpoint. It views the world from a materialistic standpoint. It views the world as if were deaf, dumb, stupid, foolish, or lacking in purposefulness and even unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Its value judgements are irrespective of morality. It views human life in a goalless perspective, as if man was created in vain and there is no question nurturing the human spirit.

In the above context, the Qur'an asks:

***"What?! Then, did you think that we had created you in vain and you shall not be returned to Us?
(23:115)***

Indeed, there is justice in the purpose of creation in which the need for rectitude is not ignored. The world can see and hear. It manifests awareness and wisdom. (The Qur'an, 2:255). Imperative as it is that a spiritual interpretation of the universe is arrived at, this by itself can hardly be effective enough.

With regard to the spiritual emancipation of man, this concept is unlike that of Christianity, for it calls for a belief in the internal and external interactions for achieving comprehensive development of personality. This is necessary for developing or enhancing one's personal talents, as well.

As for fundamental principles, Iqbal refers to those of Islam in the context of achieving human excellence, in the fields of individual and collective endeavor both. After all, Islam's universal significance is widely acknowledged, especially with regard to its spiritual interpretation.

What Iqbal regards as his purpose and believes to be the mission of every enlightened Muslim is promotion of the basic Islamic principles of universal significance. Appropriate concern for the principles is considered basic to human excellence. This aspect is highlighted in his poem, too.

In his poems recited in these sessions here, here, you surely noticed how severely Iqbal deprecated any blind imitation of the West by Muslims. Secondly, he expressed in his poems all that he could and should have about Islam. Thirdly, he posed the question whether or not a true Islamic spirit is alive among the Muslims today.

Iqbal thinks that a way Islam is "alive" and "dead" both. It is alive in its outward manifestation, such as the call to prayer, rushing to the mosques at prayer times, the funeral rites and the birth ceremony, including the names chosen, such as Muhammad, Hasan, Abdur Rahim and Abdur Rahman. However, the spirit of Islam is practically non-existent among Muslims, it is virtually dead in the Muslim society.

Nevertheless, Iqbal emphasizes that Islam itself is alive. Only the spirit of Muslims and their ethos is to be revived. Islamic revival is meant in this sense. Otherwise, the Qur'an is there, and the Prophet (S)⁵'s Sunnah (Traditions), as well. Both these continue to offer exemplary guidance, while the world had not

been able to produce or evidence anything better.

The Qur'an is not something like Ptolemy's Astronomy that could be replaced by a better theory. It is not any rudimentary theory concerning Nature that can be superseded by modern science. This fact testifies to the lasting vitality of Islam.

Then, what is wrong with the Muslims? The trouble or malaise concerns the way Muslims? The trouble or malaise concerns the way Muslims have come to think about Islam and themselves. They treat Islam in an ineffective or dead manner. It is like burying a living seed deep in the soil, in a way wonder, the seed remains unproductive, bringing forth no root, or shoot, or plant, its potential for fruition remains ineffective.

Alternately, it is like a sapling transplanted upside down with its roots in the air and its stem below the soil, so that one may imagine it to be both alive and dead;

Hazrat Ali (as) was deeply concerned about any equivocal adherence to Islam on part of successive generations of Muslims. He considered it analogous to wearing a fur coat inside out. A fur coat is useful in winter, however, if it is worn inside out, the protective warmth that outside fur gives is lost; moreover, a garment worn inside out looks rather comical.

According to the above observation of Imam Ali (as), practicing Islam in an equivocal manner is not right. It is tantamount to following Islam and not professing it at the same time. Any lack of dynamic commitment to Islam would not serve the interests of Muslims. Without a well-motivated adherence to Islam, a Muslim's religious standing is comparable to a pest-ridden and withering tree, which looks almost dead.

Equivocal adherence to Islam comes about when a Muslim fails to assimilate it in full and in depth. When one's practice of the religion is deficient, merely praising Islamic culture and criticizing that of Europe will be meaningless. It will be native to expect the rest of the world to follow us. Even if we succeed in bringing others to our fold, they will only look like us –half dead!

Now let us examine the teachings of the Qur'an which give Islamic thought its intrinsic vitality. The Qur'an invites human beings to imbibe the truths enunciated in Islam, to enliven or revive their spirits (8:24), The Prophet of Islam (S) is like a precursor of the angel, Israfeel, who will blow the horn on the day of Resurrection. For, the Prophet(S)'s call has been aimed at spiritual revival, too.

The Qur'an makes a distinction between the living and the dead, when it says:

"Nor are the living equal with the dead. Lo! God makes who He wills (able) to hear, and you cannot reach those who are in the graves." (35:22)

No learned man or philosopher would claim a self-contained definition of the true nature and purpose of life. However, one can always try to define life based on its cognizable effects. Accordingly, we may

consider life to be a reality with an unknown essence, which is characterized by awareness and movement. Thus, the more aware and dynamic a person is the more alive he is.

In other words, if one harbors ignorance and prefers inactivity, one is bound to remain more static. Let us examine whether or not we are more inclined towards vital exertion, or to death-like inactivity.

In the experience of one of my observant friends, our society would appear to treat inertness or inactivity with a sort of respectability, as if it prefers stagnation to any dynamic progress. He illustrated his opinion by referring to his childhood experience of a social phenomenon which he called: 'the logic of the smoky train'. He explained:

"As a child I lived in the town of Rey. In those days we did not have the same railway operations network as we have today. There existed only the steam locomotive haulages between Tehran and Rey. When a train stopped at Rey, urchins gathered around it. They looked at it with awe and wondered at its formidable strangeness. This spell lasted as long as the train stood there, but the moment it began to depart, the children ran behind it and threw stones at it!

I could not understand the children's peculiar behavior, especially as to why they disliked the train when it was moving and looked respectfully at it when it was standing. This was a puzzle for me until I grew up and entered the society at large. Then I realized that 'that smoky train logic' was true of us in general. As long as a person is silent and inactive, he is treated respectfully. However, as soon as he begins to walk away or exerts himself his observers turn hostile enough to maltreat him. This is a sign of a dead society. For, a live society respects its articulate and dynamic members."

So much about our society's alleged aversion to dynamic progress. Yet, the vital need for solidarity in our Muslim society cannot be overemphasized. No doubt, a society 'dies' when it acts in potentially hostile ways leading to disunity and disintegration. The Muslim society is practically dead today because of the internal differences, which situation is unduly exploited by the sly enemy.

Muslim solidarity is highlighted in the saying of the Prophet of Islam (S), as follows:

"...They are like devout people who are alive with their faith, and cherish their love and sympathy for each other, so that any pain suffered by one is others."

The concerted action arising from mutual understanding and sympathy among Muslims described above is analogous to that of blood corpuscles against any infection of the human body. Their action results in fever, when the affected part of the body becomes swollen. Then abnormal temperature affects the entire body as the blood corpuscles intensify their activity against the infection. This is a sign of life. All this happens before a physician can properly diagnose the infection, even with the help of his radiologist colleague.

Are we Muslims acting in our society in a concerted manner, so that if one part of the Islamic world

community is affected, the others come to its aid and join in restoring its health?

Five centuries ago, Andalusia was an integral part of the Muslim world. It was seized from the Muslims who were taken unaware. The world community of Muslims had failed to realize that they were about to lose a vital and dynamic part of Islamic culture and civilization. Preoccupied as they were with Shi'a/Sunni-oriented internal conflicts, they could not anticipate the Andalusian calamity.

According to Iqbal, the dynamism of the original Islamic ethos lost its momentum about five hundred years ago, so that the successive generations of Muslims become increasingly apathetic towards their common purposes of advancement. The latest in this continuing negative trend has been the noticeable apathy in the case of the Palestine. The world Muslims remain unable to exert themselves in any effective manner of meeting the enemy's challenge.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the early Muslims did achieve world-wide solidarity in response to the Prophet's teaching to the effect that a Muslim who, on being implored by any his co-religionists for help, refused to assist in any way, can no longer be regarded as an adherent to Islam. After all, striving for integrity and wellbeing of the community of world Muslims (even by concerted action to ensure justice and humanity) is essentially a natural function, in the same way as man's body the whole of which "suffers sleeplessness and finds no rest while struggling against the disease."

No doubt, it is high time that we promote the revival of Islamic ethos so that we are able to project improved understanding of Islam. We should critically examine ourselves just in case we have been 'wearing the Islamic garment inside out'. Of course, a person is less likely to see himself or herself as others see him or her. Still, that person may well benefit from a friendly hint that others may offer.

With regard to the fine point raised by a friend here, as to whether or not all this appreciation of Iqbal is a sign of eulogizing the dead, the answer is in the negative, since the greatness of personalities is not affected by any consideration as to whether they are alive or dead. However, what our friend may have implied was the need to appreciate living personages, who are no less distinguished, if not more deserving, than Iqbal.

In the above context, let me mention Allamah Tabatabai, the great scholar, to whom we could not do full justice by way of appreciation in the short time at our disposal now. Suffice it to say that he is a man whose works have such analytical depth that may not be discovered until a hundred years from now. Actually, why should we not now begin to evaluate him? For, he had been a truly great servant of Islam and Muslims.

Allamah Tabatabai has been a symbol of moral courage and intellectual integrity. He attained the noblest levels of piety and refinement. He attained the noblest levels of piety and refinement. I have been in personal touch with him for many years and I have benefitted greatly from this rapport. He has produced one of the best interpretations of the Qur'an entitled: "Tafseer al-Mizan". It is, in many respects, the best of its kind produced by Shi'a and Sunni scholars since the early Islamic centuries. This

is so notwithstanding the fact that the Qur'an is so full of meaning and significance that no interpreter can really do full justice to it, while dealing with its particular aspects and indications.

A septuagenarian with even one-hundredth of Allamah Tabatabai's contributions is normally honored and respected by people. Then, the much more esteem Allamah certainly deserves greater recognition knowledge and wisdom. We do not have to wait a hundred years so that we can benefit from his contributions in an analytical manner.

A major difference between the present and the former times is that individuals can be introduced to the public relatively more efficiently through the printed word and mass media. No wonder, Allamah Tabatabai became well-known not only in Iran but abroad, as well, His book "Tafseer al-Mizan" has been reprinted several times in Beirut without so much as an intimation to him. His works had been recognized by orientalists of the West, many of whom made it a point to visit the Allamah.

Allal al-Fassi, a noted scholar of the Islamic world came to Iran recently. From Tehran he proceeded to Qom for an hour's visit with the ailing Allamah Tabatabai, after the visit, Allal al-Fassi came out of the 'Allamah's house deeply impressed and visibly moved.

One of Allamah Tabatabai's last engagements concerned our Palestinian brothers whose rights cannot be denied even by the Americans. The Allamah together with two others (including the author), co-sponsored the opening of several accounts in three banks and their branches, to receive voluntary financial contributions for helping the Palestinian brothers. This was meant to invoke the sympathy and solidarity of all Muslims. In purely monetary terms, the contributions by Iranians could hardly match that of even a couple of American Jews with monopolistic access to usurious exploitation of the world.

Nevertheless, even a ten-Rial contribution is a token of one's faith in Islam. It was said of Prophet Ibrahim (as) that he was thrown into a pit of fire, when a bird was found filling its beak with water and dropping it on the fire! Of what use could be the few drops in extinguishing a fire? However, in this parable the bird (said to be a nightingale) could well be showing its faith and attachment to the Prophet (S).

[1.](#) (as): May Allah's Peace and Benediction be upon him/her/them.

[2.](#) Muhammad Iqbal: "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam", Ashraf Printers, Lahore, Reprint 1982, 7

[3.](#) Ibid. p. 179-180

[4.](#) Ibid. p. 179.

[5.](#) (S): May Allah's Peace and Benediction be upon him and His Immaculate Family.

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