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ABSTRACT

While he appears to have been a relentless critic of secularism as a liberal ideal, the celebrated Indian poet and philosopher Mohammad Iqbal might also be considered among its more important non-European theorists. Globally one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century, Iqbal started publishing in its first decade, reaching the height of his power and popularity during the inter-war period until he died in Lahore in 1938. He studied philosophy as well as Arabic and Persian thought in Lahore, Cambridge, and Munich, and drew extensively upon European as much as Asian thinkers. I will argue here that Iqbal followed an important tradition of pre-modern philosophy by thinking about the relationship between politics and theology in esoteric terms.

KEYWORDS

Iqbal; secularism; Islam; esotericism; freedom; theology; politics

While he appears to have been a relentless critic of secularism as a liberal ideal, the celebrated Indian poet and philosopher Mohammad Iqbal might also be considered among its more important non-European theorists. Globally one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century, Iqbal started publishing in its first decade, reaching the height of his power and popularity during the inter-war period until he died in Lahore in 1938. He studied philosophy as well as Arabic and Persian thought in Lahore, Cambridge, and Munich, and drew extensively upon European as much as Asian thinkers. I will argue here that Iqbal followed an important tradition of pre-modern philosophy by thinking about the relationship between politics and theology in esoteric terms.

Like his younger contemporary Leo Strauss, a philosopher he never knew, Iqbal thought esotericism was crucial in preventing the violent and mutually destructive character of any direct relationship between politics and theology. For if politics, like the philosophy that sought to inform it, was a necessary site of human freedom, theology or religion was equally inevitable as a form of social authority as much as popular opinion.[1] Strauss retrieved this idea from medieval Islamic and Judeo-Islamic philosophy, but Iqbal, for whom it was part of a still living tradition, rarely felt the need to describe the political work of esotericism. It is nevertheless signaled everywhere in his work, most obviously in the profuse use he made of words like secrecy, mystery, and concealment in his poetry.

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[1]In the huge literature on Strauss, the work of Daniel Tanguay provides one of the most serious discussions of his esotericism and its roots. For a good introduction to this theme see Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*.

There were a number of occasions when Iqbal both noted and criticized esotericism, when describing the attitude of Sufis whose otherwise admirable intellectual freedom, he thought, was achieved by hollowing out Islam's dogmatic form. But in some of his writing such as *Stray Thoughts*, Iqbal's notebook from 1910, he could also proclaim, "The attitude of toleration and even conformity without belief in dogma is probably the most incomprehensible thing to the vulgar mind. If such is your attitude, keep quiet and never try to defend your position."[2] The conventional aim of esotericism, of course, was to protect the autonomy if not freedom of philosophical and political thought from theological authority and popular opinion. But by refusing to deny the latter altogether esotericism became its protector as well.

Iqbal was a secular thinker precisely because he would protect politics and theology from each other, unlike the usual interpretation of his work and that of modern Muslim thought in general, for which the two are to be brought together into an undifferentiated unity. After all, the now stereotyped claim that Islam, unlike Christianity, does not separate church and state was what made esotericism and its form of criticism possible in the first place, entailing as it did the simultaneous acknowledgment and suspicion of this relationship. But before exploring his vision of the relations between them, I want to describe how it was the liberal attempt to separate these institutions that Iqbal thought a deeply theological move, one whose hegemony he considered it vital to disrupt.

Secular metaphysics

Iqbal's criticism of the liberal state and its secular division of society into public and private domains emerged from the very particular situation of colonial India. Like the Jews of Amsterdam and Europe more broadly, to whom he often referred, Iqbal saw India's Muslims as being ontologically rather than merely politically or economically threatened by the development of a national state on the European model. In such a state Muslims were condemned forever to the position of a minority trapped within the private sphere of a liberal constitution, with their public lives not only part of a majoritarian culture by default, but alienated from and thus destructive of Islam as a form of ethical solidarity rather than the mere doctrine and ritual to which it was reduced by a bifurcated liberal polity. So in his presidential address to the annual session of the All-India Muslim League in 1930, Iqbal pointed out that,

> The religious ideal of Islam, therefore, is organically related to the social order which it has created. The rejection of one will eventually involve the rejection of the other. Therefore the construction of a polity on national lines, if it means a displacement of the Islamic principle of solidarity, is simply unthinkable to a Muslim. This is a matter which at the present moment directly concerns the Muslims of India.[3]

Initially proceeding along the lines of Marx's famous essay on the Jewish Question, but also Strauss's views on Jewish emancipation, Iqbal's argument soon moved in another direction by going on to consider both the metaphysical foundations of liberalism and the different ways in which Muslims had dealt with the problems it posed. Iqbal traced

[2]"Stray Thoughts (1)," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 77.
[3]"Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League at Allahabad on the 29th December, 1930," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 167.

the liberal separation of church and state into private and public spheres to Christianity, noting that the monastic institutions of the medieval church and its conception of religion as otherworldliness already implied such a partition. But it was only with the Reformation that this separation was formalized, leading to the ethical as much as political breakup of Europe. Rather than being a functional separation, therefore, Iqbal thought that the division of church and state was itself a metaphysical and Christian one between the material and the spiritual, a division that was itself perhaps an inheritance of Magian dualism:

> In Europe Christianity was understood to be a purely monastic order which gradually developed into a vast church-organisation, not against any system or polity of a secular nature, for the obvious reason that there was no such polity associated with Christianity. And Luther was perfectly justified in rising in revolt against this organisation; though, I think, he did not realise that in the peculiar conditions which obtained in Europe, his revolt would eventually mean the complete displacement of the universal ethics of Jesus by the growth of a plurality of national and hence narrower systems of ethics. […] If you begin with the conception of religion as complete other-worldliness, then what has happened to Christianity in Europe is perfectly natural. The universal ethics of Jesus is displaced by national systems of ethics and polity. The conclusion to which Europe is consequently driven is that religion is a private affair of the individual and has nothing to do with what is called man's temporal life. Islam does not bifurcate the unity of man into an irreconcilable duality of spirit and matter.[4]

Because it operated as a fundamentally metaphysical distinction, the separation of church and state and subsequently of public and private was not simply Christian (if not Magian) in a cultural or particular sense, but universalized in the form of capitalism. For as the realm of the material, the state or public arena became the site of a purely instrumental commerce as well as politics, whose most important vehicle came to be the nation-state, conceived as both the instantiation of materiality in the form of a people's collective property and as the juridical guarantor of the individual's right to ownership. For Iqbal, then, the nation-state was made possible by prying open a metaphysical distinction within Christianity, from which it emerged as the vehicle of a violent materiality over which the universal ethics of Jesus had little control, confined as it had been to private life:

> Europe uncritically accepted the duality of spirit and matter probably from Manichaean thought. Her best thinkers are realising this initial mistake today, but her statesmen are indirectly forcing the world to accept it as an unquestionable dogma. It is, then, this mistaken separation of spiritual and temporal which has largely influenced European religious and political thought and has resulted practically in the total exclusion of Christianity from the life of European States. The result is a set of mutually ill-adjusted States dominated by interests not human but national. And these mutually ill-adjusted States after trampling over the morals and convictions of Christianity, are today feeling the need of a federated Europe, i.e., the need of a unity which Christian church-organisation originally gave them, but which instead of reconstructing it in the light of Christ's vision of human brotherhood they considered it fit to destroy under the inspiration of Luther.[5]

It is important to note here that while Iqbal's discussion of the state took Hindu–Muslim disagreements in India as its point of departure, he never positioned these communities in opposition to each other, instead interpreting their conflicts in terms of the history of the nation-state and its role as the agent of capitalism in particular. If anything

[4]Ibid., 162–3.
[5]Ibid., 163–4.

he thought that the nation-state was even more destructive of Hindu society, based as he claimed it was on the distinctions of caste, than it was of the Muslim principle of solidarity. For this latter, he understood as being spiritual and ideal (or ideological, as a later generation of Muslim thinkers during the Cold War would say) in nature, given the absence of a metaphysical division of church and state in Islam. So in a polemical article of 1934 against the Ahmadis of the Punjab, a missionary group founded in the nineteenth century that he thought denied the ideal basis of Muslim solidarity, Iqbal pointed to the threat this attitude posed:

> Islam repudiates the race idea altogether and founds itself on the religious idea alone. Since Islam bases itself on the religious idea alone, a basis which is wholly spiritual and consequently far more ethereal than blood relationship, Muslim society is naturally much more sensitive to forces which it considers harmful to its integrity.[6]

Yet his wasn't a materialist account either, and was indeed set against such a way of understanding as itself part of the metaphysical distinction that had given rise to the modern state. Thus for Iqbal communism, while being admirable in its universality and quest for equality, remained nevertheless trapped in the same metaphysical problem as nationalism and imperialism, which he saw as the logical extension of the will to power and property that the nation-state embodied as much as accomplished. For by abolishing private property or rather by transferring its ownership to the state, since it could not simply be disowned, communism had made it an even more alien and oppressive presence in society and the lives of ordinary men and women. So in a course of lectures delivered in 1930 that were published in book form as *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal put nationalism and communism together as partisans of the material riven by an inner conflict between politics and theology, which was made all the more intense because the bifurcation of secularism meant that no formal relations subsisted between them:

> Both nationalism and atheistic socialism, at least in the present state of human adjustments, must draw upon the psychological forces of hate, suspicion, and resentment which tend to impoverish the soul of man and close up his hidden sources of spiritual energy. […] It is only by rising to a fresh vision of his origin and future, his whence and wither, that man will eventually triumph over a society motivated by an inhuman competition, and a civilization which has lost its spiritual unity by its inner conflict of religious and political values.[7]

But for Iqbal the problem of property, a subsidiary form of the material as a metaphysical category, went well beyond either public or private ownership. Property was also entrenched epistemologically in discursive thinking, which operated by separating its subject from an object to be known and therefore exploited as a thing. Addressing the problem posed by property, then, required far more than the equally materialist and in fact impossible task of abolishing it. Crucial instead was the adoption of a non-materialist or spiritually defined politics as well as everyday practice of life, and the eventual abandonment of discursive thinking altogether. This was, of course, a tall order, and called for a primarily ethical transformation, one that Iqbal thought possible in colonized countries

[6]"Qadianis and Orthodox Muslims," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 249.
[7]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 188–9.

like India, where property had not yet been so generalized as to define all social relations. Like his contemporary Gandhi, in other words, Iqbal saw the ideal or spiritual as possessing a force in India's impoverished, hierarchical and religious society that it no longer had in Europe. And while this notion no doubt owed something to the stereotype of a "spiritual East," Indian thinkers like Gandhi and Iqbal made it into something quite distinctive both intellectually and politically.

The contradictions of Indian society, then, which is to say its curious mixture of asceticism, sacrifice, greed, and violence, offered in Iqbal's view a demonstration of the fact that property had not yet been so generalized as to define human relations there. This was especially true of the interests that characterized liberal states, which defined identities as versions of private or collective property whose interactions were to be regulated by commercial as much as political forms of contract. Referring to these contradictions in his presidential address to the annual session of the All-India Muslim Conference in 1932, Iqbal noted,

> These phenomena, however, are merely premonitions of a coming storm, which is likely to sweep over the whole of India and the rest of Asia. This is the inevitable outcome of a wholly political civilization which has looked upon man as a thing to be exploited and not as a personality to be developed and enlarged by purely cultural forces. The peoples of Asia are bound to rise against the acquisitive economy which the West has developed and imposed on the nations of the East.[8]

Persia for Greece

One of the ways in which India stood as an illustration of Asia as an alternative to European history, was in the fact that its political units were defined not by the materialistic factors of class or race so much as by the ideal or ethical and intellectual ones named by caste and religion. As was true of religious disputes in India, such an idea-based politics was by no means devoid of violence but for Iqbal it was nevertheless a more hopeful and productive one, whose disintegration in the face of colonial liberalism had only exacerbated communal conflict there. While Iqbal joined a number of his compatriots, Hindu as well as Muslim, in pointing to India's very "backwardness" as a sign of her inability to be assimilated into capitalism's modernity, however, he could not simply rely upon this to guarantee the country's freedom, or indeed that of Islam with which he thought it was linked.

In his address to the Muslim League in 1930, Iqbal noted that India was important for Islam not only because it possessed the world's largest Muslim population, but also due to the fact that its social and religious diversity meant the country could be seen as Asia if not the world in miniature. To resolve the problem of political coexistence in India, therefore, would be to provide a model for the world at large.[9] But this proved to be a promise difficult to fulfill, and Iqbal eventually settled for a kind of internal redistribution of the country into a federation of Hindu- and Muslim-dominated states. Crucial about this unsatisfying compromise was that it was meant not simply to secure the material interests

[8]Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim Conference at Lahore on the 21st March, 1932," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 212.

[9]Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League at Allahabad on the 29th December, 1930," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 193.

of India's Muslims, but instead afford them the autonomy to modernize Islam by divesting it of what he called its inheritance of Arabian imperialism:

> I therefore demand the formation of a consolidated Muslim State in the best interest of India and Islam. For India it means security and peace resulting from an internal balance of power; for Islam an opportunity to rid itself of the stamp that Arabian imperialism was forced to give it, to mobilize its law, its education, its culture, and to bring them into closer contact with its own original spirit and with the spirit of modern times.[10]

Similar to his compromise on India's future, Iqbal's view of Muslim politics elsewhere ended up dominated by the vision of an alternative international order that he sometimes called an Eastern League of Nations, in which the nation-state he so disliked was circumscribed but not extinguished. Given his failure to imagine or realistically propose a truly alternative politics, Iqbal resolved instead to set the stage intellectually for a yet unknown future. This entailed providing a philosophical and historical background to his criticism of the liberal state, and describing how people outside Christian Europe came to think differently about the relationship of politics and theology in a way that did not reduce it to one between the spiritual and material. Iqbal's most abstract but also fulsome discussion of this theme was in his thesis, published in 1908 under the title *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*.

Although he ended up rejecting a number of his formulations in this text subsequently (or in my view decided to broach them in more esoteric fashion), almost all of the themes Iqbal went on to consider later in his career find their origin here. The text can be understood as describing the interaction of two kinds of dualism: the Persian one between light and darkness and the Greek one of God and matter (which would eventually become that of the spiritual and material). Beginning with Zoroaster and ending with Bahaullah, the founder of modern-day Bahaism, the *Metaphysics* places the whole of Islamic thought between these two figures, as if to emphasize its links with a broader and shared conceptual universe which included Vedantic Hinduism in particular.

In his presidential address to the All-India Muslim Conference in 1932, Iqbal had described the political problem of India philosophically by saying that,

> The problem of ancient Indian thought was how the one became many without sacrificing its oneness. To-day this problem has come down from its ethical heights to the grosser plane of our political life, and we have to solve it in its reversed form, i.e., how the many can become one without sacrificing its plural character.[11]

But it was in the *Metaphysics* that this thought was elaborated in purely philosophical terms, since like its Aryan brother in India, ancient Persian thought was also defined by the relationship of intellectual unity (understood as good) and natural diversity (seen as evil), which threatened to be resolved into a dualism that sacrificed the tense connection between the two. Realizing that such a dualism would limit and finally destroy the possibility of philosophical understanding, for which the category of unity was crucial, Zoroaster sought to include the principle of differentiation within that of unity itself:

[10]Ibid., 173.
[11]Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim Conference at Lahore on the 21st March, 1932," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 197.

> But to maintain that there are "twin" spirits – creators of reality and nonreality – and at the same time to hold that these two spirits are united in the Supreme Being, is virtually to say that the principle of evil constitutes a part of the very essence of God; and the conflict between good and evil is nothing more than the struggle of God against Himself.[12]

In his later work, Iqbal would celebrate this absorption of the negative as the principle of movement from within, which he variously identified with evil and error as positive factors in their own way or Satan seen as a heroic figure. In the *Metaphysics*, Iqbal was interested in Zoroaster's limited development of this (non) dualism or *Advaita* in the language of the Vedanta, which in a typically cosmopolitan gesture demonstrating a rejection of all racial or civilizational limits he also compared to the ideas of the seventeenth-century German mystic Jacob Boehme. It took the Arab conquest of Persia and the coming of Islam to inadvertently and in a rather Hegelian way fulfill the promise of Zoroastrian thought, even if in the short term it was suppressed not only by Semitic ideas but the Greek dualism of God and matter that the Arabs also brought with them. For in battling dialectically with the emphasis on the concrete that both Semitic religion and Greek philosophy shared, Persian thought was able to absorb rather than merely reject its negativity, and thus become capable of exercising power over it:

> The political revolution brought about by the Arab conquest marks the beginning of interaction between the Aryan and the Semitic, and we find that the Persian, though he lets the surface of his life become largely semitised, quietly converts Islam to his own Aryan habits of thought. In the west the sober Hellenic intellect interpreted another Semitic religion – Christianity; and the results of interpretation in both cases are strikingly similar. In each case the aim of the interpreting intellect is to soften the extreme rigidity of an absolute law imposed on the individual from without; in one word it is an endeavour to internalise the external. This process of transformation began with the study of Greek thought which, though combined with other causes, hindered the growth of native speculation, yet marked a transition from the purely objective attitude of Pre-Islamic Persian Philosophy to the subjective attitude of later thinkers. It is, I believe, largely due to the influence of foreign thought that the old monistic tendency when it reasserted itself about the end of the 8th century, assumed a much more spiritual aspect; and, in its later development, revivified and spiritualised the old Iranian dualism of Light and Darkness.[13]

It is clear that what he called Greek dualism was a forerunner of the distinction between spiritual and material of which Iqbal would be so critical later in his career. And it is also evident that unlike so many contemporary European as well as Muslim intellectuals, he was not interested in fitting Islam into the hegemonic narrative of Hellenistic philosophy, but instead drew upon the ancient rivalry of Greece and Persia to argue that Muslim thought was eventually aligned with the latter. Iqbal thought that by appropriating negation and so turning it into an inner principle of movement, the crude mechanism of external causality could be rejected for relations conceived in ethical and philosophical terms, of which Zoroastrianism's relationship of light and darkness served as the first example. He describes its elaboration in later Iranian philosophy in the following way:

> The "not-light" (darkness) is not something distinct proceeding from an independent source. It is an error of the representatives of the Magian religion to suppose that Light and Darkness are two distinct realities created by two distinct creative agencies. The ancient philosophers of Persia were not dualists like the Zoroastrian priests who, on the ground of the principle that

[12]Iqbal, *Metaphysics*, 4–5.
[13]Ibid., 21–2.

> the one cannot cause to emanate from itself more than one, assigned two independent sources to Light and Darkness. The relation between them is not that of contrariety, but of existence and non-existence. The affirmation of Light necessarily posits its own negation – Darkness, which it must illuminate in order to be itself. This Primordial Light is the source of all motion. But its motion is not change of place; it is due to the *love* of illumination which constitutes its very essence, and stirs is up, as it were, to quicken all things into life, by pouring out its own rays into their being.[14]

By the time he wrote *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal had abandoned (or concealed) his references to ancient Indian or Persian thought, and now contrasted Greek philosophy directly with Islamic ideas. But his argument otherwise remained the same, its only innovation being a much greater focus on Islam's supposedly modern concern for infinity, with Iqbal writing that,

> The ideal of the Greeks, as Spengler tells us, was proportion, not infinity. The physical presentness of the finite with its well-defined limits alone absorbed the mind of the Greeks. In the history of Muslim culture, on the other hand, we find that both in the realms of pure intellect, and religious psychology, by which I mean higher Sufiism, the ideal revealed is the possession and enjoyment of the infinite.[15]

Following the model set by Oswald Spengler in his post-war best-seller, *The Decline of the West*, Iqbal, who was otherwise very critical of him, illustrated what he considered Muslim civilization's anti-classical emphasis on infinity by referring to such things as Islamic atomism's rejection of pre-existing space and its conception of an expanding universe.

Iqbal's world of reference now included physicists like Einstein, whose ideas about relativity and a space-time continuum he used to demonstrate the falsity of materialism and its crude notions of causality. The principle of infinity he claimed had been philosophically elaborated by Muslim thinkers was important because it rendered the violence of pure instrumentality provincial and meaningless, given that its zero-sum games could only make sense in a limited or proportional universe as part of what one might call economical thinking. Similarly, the infinite reduced discursive knowledge to irrelevance, and made possible relations based on ethical and philosophical factors instead. Indeed Iqbal maintained that in the absence of materialism's object, it was possible to imagine the universe as an ascending series of egos whose relations were dialogical in character, writing that, "Only that is, strictly speaking, real which is directly conscious of its own reality."[16]

Space, time, and freedom

Already in the *Metaphysics*, Iqbal had commented on the relationship between space and time and noted the latter's priority in it, commenting that,

> Motion is only an aspect of time. It is the summing up of the elements of time, which, as externalised, is motion. The distinction of past, present, and future is made only for the sake of convenience, and does not exist in the nature of time. We cannot conceive the beginning of time; for the supposed beginning would be a point of time itself. Time and motion, therefore, are both eternal.[17]

[14]Ibid., 99–100.
[15]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 132.
[16]Ibid., 72.
[17]Iqbal, *Metaphysics*, 106.

But whereas he cited the *Sharh-i Anwariyya* of Muhammad Sharif of Herat for this notion, its reappearance in the *Reconstruction* was attributed to figures like Einstein and his sometime intellectual opponent, the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Space and time now became crucial to Iqbal's vision of politics and its relationship with theology, and he sought to demonstrate that it was the former that defined the materialist conception of liberalism.

The liberal state's division into public and private, then, represented not only a metaphysical distinction between the material and the spiritual realms, but fundamentally also a spatial rather than temporal one. Instead of being taken together as part of a continuum, in the way both modern physics and Persian philosophy did, Iqbal thought that liberalism had made time into an independent principle of the spiritual world in private life. And against this, he sought to contrast the temporal axis that he thought defined the relationship of politics and theology in Islam. Interestingly for a self-proclaimed Sunni thinker, Iqbal always proffered the Shia doctrine of *imamat* or hereditary religious leadership as his chief example of Islam's temporal rather than spatial distinction between politics and theology. So in a 1911 article in the *Hindustan Review* on "Political Thought in Islam," he described the occultation of the twelfth imam in the following way:

> Whether the Imam really disappeared or not, I do not know; but it is obvious that the dogma is a clever way of separating the Church and the State. The absent Imam […] is absolute authority in all matters; the present executive authorities are, therefore, only guardians of the estate which really belongs to the Imam, who, as such, inherits the property of deceased intestates in case they leave no heirs. It will therefore be seen that the authority of the Shah of Persia is limited by the authority of the Mullas – the representatives of the absent Imam. As a mere guardian of the estate he is subject to the religious authority though as the chief executive authority he is free to adopt any measure for the good of the estate. It is not, therefore, surprising that the Mullas took an active part in the recent constitutional reforms in Persia.[18]

While he seemed pleased in this article with the active participation of the Shia clergy in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution of Iran, by the time he came to write the *Reconstruction*, Iqbal called dangerous the separation of powers in that country's constitution that gave the religious class a supervisory role in legislation.[19] What interested him was not the mutual limitation that religious and political authorities exercised against each other in such an arrangement, but instead the fact that it was the temporal deferral of the imam's reign that made politics possible in a necessarily imperfect and so secular world. In this sense, the monarch's virtue acted as a kind of *katechon* restraining the coming of God's rule on earth. Unlike in its Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian usage, for Iqbal this restraining function was meant to defer not the coming of the Antichrist but very explicitly divine justice itself. In an open letter to Jawaharlal Nehru on the Ahmadis, he identified the Shia theory of politics with a deferral of the theological world as such, and in describing the distinction upon which it was based as a functional rather than metaphysical one, also assimilating it to Sunni ideas of the state:

[18]Iqbal, "Political Thought in Islam," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 72–3.
[19]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 175.

> Nor is the idea of separation of Church and State alien to Islam. The doctrine of the major occultation of the Imam in a sense affected this separation long ago in Shia Iran. The Islamic idea of the State must not be confounded with the European idea of the separation of Church and State. The former is only a division of functions as is clear from the gradual creation in the Muslim State of the office of Shaikh-ul-Islam and Ministers; the latter is based on the metaphysical dualism of spirit and matter.[20]

But Iqbal did not leave the Sunni theory of state here, and though he wrote a great deal more about such "functional" details and separations in the theory of the Caliphate, which he was happy to conceive of as a democratic assembly in modern times, his most important and also most controversial contribution had to do with the idea of prophetic finality. If the temporality of Shia political theory, then, was premised upon the deferral of the imamate into an indefinite future, for Sunnis, who repudiated the imamate's apostolic succession, it was founded on the ending of divine revelation with Muhammad in the past. So in the *Reconstruction* Iqbal describes the Prophet as putting an end to divine intervention in the world and so leaving it free for humanity's political, philosophical and other activities:

> [T]he Prophet of Islam seems to stand between the ancient and the modern world. In so far as the source of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the ancient world; in so far as the spirit of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the modern world. […] In Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its own abolition. This involves the keen perception that life cannot for ever be kept in leading strings; that in order to achieve full self-consciousness man must finally be thrown back on his own resources.[21]

It was because the Ahmadis allegedly rejected this idea of human freedom in claiming their founder to be another prophet that Iqbal found the group so offensive. And while he sometimes included the Sufi reverence for saints in this kind of censure, it is interesting that the Shia, who after all believe in an apostolic succession to Muhammad, never stand accused. This might be due not only to their symbolic, not to say esoteric, affirmation of prophetic finality, but more importantly to the occultation of the imam, who therefore makes man's political as much as intellectual freedom possible. Of course there was nothing preventing the Ahmadis from following such a course either, but for Iqbal their very claim to prophecy, however limited and indeed familiar it might have been in Islamic history, proved to be an intolerable one because it seemed to reject the esotericism that both excused and made intellectual and political freedom possible.

Given his earlier allegiance to this group, as well as his brother and nephew's continuing membership in it, there was no doubt something deeply personal about Iqbal's rejection of the Ahmadis. But intellectually its polemical force emerges out of the desire to limit the reach of theology in Muslim life, which Iqbal thought resulted from the Ahmadis' religious justification of colonial rule by claiming prophetic authority over its private domain alone. Now of course many Muslims made both political and religious arguments for loyalty to the colonial state, but for Iqbal what distinguished the Ahmadis was their appeal to revelation, which was why he saw in the group not a heresy so much as a highly traditional invocation of theology, writing to refute Nehru's criticism of such controversies as merely sectarian by making exactly the opposite point:

[20]Iqbal, "Reply to Questions Raised by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 284.
[21]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 126.

> Muslim politicians whose eyes were mainly fixed on the realities of the situation succeeded in winning over a section of the *ulama* to adopt a line of theological argument which, as they thought, suited the situation; but it was not easy to conquer by mere logic the beliefs which had ruled for centuries the conscience of the masses of Islam in India. In such a situation logic can either proceed on the ground of political expediency or on the lines of a fresh orientation of texts and traditions. In either case the argument will fail to appeal to the masses. To the intensely religious masses of Islam only one thing can make a conclusive appeal, and that is divine authority. For an effective eradication of orthodox beliefs it was found necessary to find a revelational basis for a politically suitable orientation of theological doctrines […]. This revelational basis is provided by Ahmadism.[22]

Indeed Iqbal was if anything admiring of heresy, and dismissed Nehru's mischievous query about why another loyalist, the Aga Khan, was an acceptable Muslim despite being imam of the Ismailis, a Shia sect that was perhaps the most heretical one in Islamic history. Of course the Ismailis, who interestingly had always been recognized as the most esoteric branch of Islam, nevertheless acknowledged the Prophet's finality. But Iqbal had also defended them in the *Metaphysics* for holding together absolute freedom and absolute authority, or in other words politics and theology, despite if not because of their revolt against Islam itself, writing that, "The Ismailia movement then is one aspect of the persistent battle which the intellectually independent Persian waged against the religious and political ideals of Islam."[23]

The same admiration of philosophical and political independence can be seen in the praises Iqbal lavished upon the Babi movement and its culmination in Bahaism, which was roughly contemporaneous to that of the Ahmadis. Far more persecuted in Iran than the Ahmadis were in India, Iqbal considered the Bahais to be the product of Islamic philosophy while acknowledging what traditionally would have been considered their "apostasy" or rather forsaking of Islam. And if in the *Metaphysics* he described Bahaism as an essentially Ismaili movement, in the *Reconstruction* Iqbal also considered the Babis to be, like the Sanusis and the Pan-Islamists, intellectual descendants of Wahhabism, which is to say a "Persian reflex of Arabian Protestantism."[24] Wahhabism itself he saw as the first Muslim movement in modern times to reject the authority of the past, despite what Iqbal recognized as its uncritical and highly conservative character; and in relating Babism to it he very deliberately undid both the theological and scholarly narratives which would keep such groups apart and opposed in sectarian terms.

Whatever personal reasons he had to disparage them, in other words, Iqbal castigated the Ahmadis not because they were heretics but rather the reverse, because they represented the dominance of theology in its most orthodox form. The finality of prophecy was so crucial for Iqbal because its esoteric interpretation entailed acknowledging the death of God and human freedom, of which politics was an important part. And so it is ironic but not surprising that the Muslims who subsequently took up Iqbal's position against the Ahmadis together with his argument, have sought to do nothing more than instantiate the power of theology and in fact the rule of God on earth. Indeed if anything anti-Ahmadi violence in Pakistan demonstrates the fundamental problem of political theology in the clearest way possible – by showing that its categories are connected but

[22]Iqbal, "Reply to Questions Raised by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru," in *Thoughts and Reflections*, 271–2.
[23]Iqbal, *Metaphysics*, 47.
[24]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 152.

also mutually destructive and must, therefore, be protected from each other. For who is to say if it is their subterranean recognition of its esoteric reality that at some level makes these Muslims so militant about Muhammad's finality?

Having argued that humanity had emerged as an historical actor for the first time with the coming of Islam, Iqbal was faced with the possibility of a newly emancipated mankind either destroying the religion that gave it birth or being annihilated by it. The possibility of man's freedom, therefore, was what paradoxically forced Iqbal to adopt a highly conservative position with regard to the very Islam whose transformation he was always recommending. And it was in this situation that esotericism became crucial as a way of protecting politics and theology from each other. But to think of esotericism in merely instrumental terms, as a deliberate lie, would be a mistake, since before the invention of modern politics as an autonomous practice separated from ethics, it was literally unthinkable as a category in its own right and could only constitute what in the more old-fashioned reaches of European political thought was called an *arcanum*.[25]

By Iqbal's day, of course, such a notion of politics was already a faded one, but esotericism continued to exist non-instrumentally in poetry, where otherwise audacious and even heretical statements could still be made – but also denied – by the aesthetic use of stock themes and levels of interpretation. Iqbal himself made routine use of such an esoteric writing as a poet, and it is remarkable how much he managed to get away with in so doing, especially in his frequent challenges to God and glorification of man as being nothing less than divine in his freedom. Esotericism functioned as a kind of open secret, whose role was to separate theology from politics and philosophy as the sites of intellectual and practical freedom, not in any spatial way but rather by a process of differential interpretation. And this meant that crucial to Iqbal's political vision was not any institutional arrangement so much as the free individual whose interpretation determined the character of any act:

> In Islam the spiritual and the temporal are not two distinct domains, and the nature of an act, however secular in its import, is determined by the attitude of mind with which the agent does it. It is the invisible mental background of the act which ultimately determines its character. An act is temporal or profane if it is done in a spirit of detachment from the infinite complexity of life behind it; it is spiritual if it is inspired by that complexity. In Islam it is the same reality which appears as the Church looked at from one point of view and the State from another. It is not true to say that the Church and the State are two sides of facets of the same thing. Islam is a single unanalysable reality which is one or the other as your point of view varies. The point is extremely far-reaching and a full elucidation of it will involve us in a highly philosophical discussion. Suffice it to say that this ancient mistake arose out of the bifurcation of the unity of man into two distinct and separate realities which somehow have a point of contact, but which are in essence opposed to each other.[26]

Despite holding decided opinions about the modern history of politics and theology in Islam, therefore, Iqbal's true concern was with the fostering of free individuals, and he seldom gave much weight to merely institutional projects. So he simultaneously supported and criticized Muslim liberalism as much as tradition. Indeed he was suspicious of the

[25]See for this Yavari, *Advice for the Sultan*.
[26]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 154.

attention Muslim thinkers continued paying to the preservation of their religion's social organization, approving though he was of it in many respects, writing that,

> Their leading idea was social order, and there is no doubt that they were partly right, because organization does to a certain extent counteract the forces of decay. But they did not see, and our modern Ulema do not see, that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the worth and power of individual men. […] The only effective power, therefore, that counteracts the forces of decay in a people is the rearing of self-concentrated individuals.[27]

Such an attitude, however, compels us to recognize that Iqbal was not really a political thinker at all, but instead one more interested in laying the conceptual foundation for human freedom in Islamic terms by lending it an alternative history.[28] And if the individual was so important for him, this was not simply because esotericism depended upon the interpretative action of such a figure, but also due to the fact that man's freedom was meant both to complement and even replace God's own. For the "death of God" entailed by prophetic finality had to lead inexorably to the divinity of man, if it was not to end in the complete vitiation of theology as such.[29] Iqbal sometimes described this apotheosis in terms of man's partnership with God – itself an idea taken from the Babi movement – but the Deity was a rival more than a partner, and Iqbal repeatedly imagined man's freedom as being achieved by refusing Him in what can be considered the first political act. Important about such a refusal, of course, was that it was predicated not upon any conflict over property but concerned with ideas and in fact the single most important political idea, that of freedom from external authority.

Writing about mankind's inaugural claim to freedom in the story of Adam, Iqbal suggested that,

> The Fall does not mean any moral depravity; it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the 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 Quranic narration, Adam's first transgression was forgiven.[30]

This tangling with God gave both creature and creator such reality as they possessed, and made what Iqbal called the former's Ultimate Ego into a model for the latter's freedom. This was why Iqbal was so set against what he imagined to be the pantheism of monistic Sufism: not because it confused man with God but rather dissipated the individuality of both and therefore the possibility of conflict between them. At the intellectual level, this struggle resulted in a freedom whose social aspect was to be found in politics as a conflict of ideas, rather than in economics as a philosophically indeterminate one over resources. Thus he ended the *Reconstruction* with an English translation of a passage from his most important poetic work, the *Javid Nama* of 1932, putting the technical terms of Sufi

[27]Ibid., 151.
[28]The only scholar to recognize Iqbal's curiously non-political character and its implications for Muslim nationalism in India is the Cambridge historian Shruti Kapila, in a chapter, "The Philosophical Discovery of Muslim Sovereignty," of a book in progress with the title *Violent Fraternity: Politics in the Indian Age*.
[29]For one of the few serious considerations of how Iqbal addressed Nietzche's claim about the death of God in his work, see Bidar, *L'islam Face à la Mort de Dieu*.
[30]Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 85.

discourse left unmarked in the Persian original within quotation marks and so drawing attention to his continuing engagement with them:

> Art though in the stage of "life," or "death," or death-in-life'?
> Invoke the aid of three witnesses to verify thy "Station."
> The first witness is thine own consciousness –
> See thyself, then, with thine own light.
> The second witness is the consciousness of another ego –
> See thyself, then, with the light of an ego other than thee.
> The third witness is God's consciousness –
> See thyself, then, with God's light.
> If thou standest unshaken in front of this light,
> Consider thyself as living and eternal as He!
> That man alone is real who dares –
> Dares to see God face to face!
> What is "Ascension"? Only a search for a witness
> Who may finally confirm thy reality –
> A witness whose confirmation alone makes thee eternal.
> No one can stand unshaken in His presence;
> And he who can, verily he is pure gold.
> Art thou a mere particle of dust?
> Tighten the knot of thy ego;
> And hold fast to thy tiny being!
> How glorious to burnish one's ego
> And to test its lustre in the presence of the Sun!
> Re-chisel, then, thine ancient frame;
> And build up a new being.
> Such being is real being;
> Or else thy ego is a mere ring of smoke![31]

Precisely because he was so wedded to the ego and therefore to a dialogical but also competitive and oppositional conception of knowledge, for which no object but only subjects existed in an ethically, philosophically and indeed politically defined universe, Iqbal could not conceive of any completion or rather perfection in history. In other words, man's rivalry with God, like that of the Devil who was, in fact, his model in Iqbal's view, had to be eternal and so disallow humanity's final apotheosis. And quite apart from saving the honor of traditional Islamic theology in this way, Iqbal returned to what he understood as the Shia conception of salvation's infinite deferral in political life as a kind of *katechon*. His poetry is therefore replete with images incompletion, longing and unrequited love, whose tragic sensibility might itself have come from a Shia vision of Islam's history as one of loss and imperfection rather than the Sunni one of victory and accomplishment.

Of course, this focus on incompletion is itself another version of Iqbal's idea about the infinite journey of knowledge and life. Gandhi, starting from very different premises, also arrived at a similar conclusion in refusing historical or even personal closure of any kind,

[31] Ibid., 198–9.

while nevertheless firmly holding on to a conception of the perfect as a kind of regulatory ideal, one whose reality was to be found in striving alone. For Iqbal, this kind of tragic incompletion was not only the sign of man's freedom, but also gave rise to beauty in its very yearning. It was, therefore, the illustration of a purely human and even satanic freedom, something he rhetorically claimed God could never experience. And in this way he made aesthetic experience into a crucial site for man's freedom, one that both mirrored and evoked the still unavailable arena of political freedom defined in exactly the same way: by infinity rather than the economy of subject and object or public and private, by time rather than space, and by incompletion rather than perfection.

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