

Iqbal's metaphysics of culture and the Arab awakening

Shahzad Qaiser

The Arab awakening is a unique happening, which is giving us a moment of reflection to revisit our values and philosophies. The Arab Spring is being studied from different perspectives. Our perspective essentially rooted in Eastern metaphysics. It also enlightens us in understanding the polarisation between Eastern and Western values and philosophies. It is essential to understand the dimensions of this polarisation, in order to comprehend the reality of cultural diversity and integration in the contemporary context of Arab transformation.

Knowledge beyond sense-experience?

Man has been blessed with knowledge, in order to remain journeying on the path of righteousness without going astray. He has been endowed with freedom so that he could create goodness in the cosmos by virtue of his thought, feeling, word and deed. But he has not succeeded at times to live up to the higher possibilities of his cosmic existence. It has led to imbalance both in the individual and society. The struggle of Truth against falsehood, Justice against injustice and Freedom against bondage has not come to an end in the history of Man. It continues to take different cultural forms in different ages and countries.

Man, in the scenario of cultural history, has tried to understand his self, the cosmos and God at different levels and with different orientations. His journey continues with series of affirmations and negations. One of his foremost concerns has been to grapple with the problem of knowledge. Epistemology (science of knowledge) has generally guided him to ontology (science of being). Is there any possibility of a world beyond our ordinary empirical world? Are there possibilities of knowledge within man beyond his sense-experience? These are essentially two interrelated primordial questions, at times nameless, which to all intents and purposes have been found in their varied formulations in different cultures. They shall continue to remain so till the end of times. The Eastern metaphysical, religious and philosophical traditions have given affirmative answers to these questions, while the philosophies of the modern West including materialism, dialectical materialism, positivism, logical positivism, atheistic existentialism, and certain forms of linguistic philosophy have denied the transcendent world and any transcendent source of knowledge.

Kant's answer

Kant raised a very important question in the history of human thought in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: Is metaphysics possible? He denied the possibility of metaphysics. He considered only sense-experience and pure reason as valid forms of knowledge. According to him, there was no way to reach the Reality beyond Appearance. He banished God, freedom and immortality from the realm of knowledge. His *Critique of Practical Reason* accepted them merely as postulates without any connectivity with knowledge. His question had posed a great challenge to the metaphysical or the traditional world.

Many thinkers in different cultures accepted this challenge including Iqbal (1877-1938) who is one of the most dynamic thinkers in the world of Islam. He was well versed both with Eastern and Western thought. He combined in himself both traditional knowledge and modern learning. He was deeply steeped in the Eastern tradition and had a thorough understanding of Greek thought, Western philosophy and Sciences. He carefully studied the German Philosopher Kant and keenly perceived the subtle trends of modern philosophy in the West. He turned Kant's philosophical question: Is metaphysics possible, to the religious one: Is Religion Possible. Iqbal answered in the affirmative and thereby developed his own religious metaphysics. His traditional understanding, coupled with deeper study of modern philosophy and modern psychology, made him critically examine Kantian assumptions. He found no cogent reason in Kant's reservations about knowing the ultimate Reality. Iqbal did not accept sense-experience as the only source of knowledge. He considered heart-perception as a higher form of knowledge, which complemented sense-perception.

Knowledge and culture

The problem of knowledge has its direct and indirect bearings on the understanding of culture and its various expressions. The term culture is impregnated with different meanings and there is no universal definition of it, which could be acceptable to all. It poses a fundamental problem but at the same time it is commended for keeping it an open issue. Thinkers belonging to diverse cultures are approaching the issue from different perspectives and are thus enriching the subject field. The contemporary bent of mind is manifesting a tendency of treating the concept of culture in a more holistic, comprehensive and wider sense. It is realizing the need to have a broader definition of culture including social, ideational and artistic aspects reflecting the whole life of a given society. The Chinese, for instance, have attached a much wider meaning to the word culture including the event of Cultural Revolution. They have assigned a comprehensive and decisive role to the cultural aspects of their lives, but still they are oblivious of the metaphysical and transcendent aspects of their traditional culture.

Culture, in an essential sense, mirrors the whole life of a given society over a larger period of time. It tends to give an all-embracing cultural meaning to things and events. This cultural perception is the manifestation of the foundational frame of reference, which a culture provides to its votaries. Metaphysically speaking, it is an inwardness, which assumes outward forms. Epistemology and Ontology, among other things, are essential ingredients of a given culture. They differentiate a transcendent culture from the ephemeral or the evanescent one. This distinction helps us in understanding the essential characteristics of different cultures. The varied cultural perceptions lead to the phenomena of cultural diversity. It is the inner reach of a culture, which in the last analysis, brings out its vitality to integrate divergent trends of different cultures within its bosom.

Iqbal has added a very instructive chapter on the spirit of Muslim culture. Islamic Culture is a transcendent and traditional culture embracing the permanent and dynamic aspects of life. Its uniqueness consists in its capacity and strength to absorb elements from different cultures. A study of this process of transformation or continuity clearly spells out the vigour of Islam as a universal tradition. It has the ability to creatively assimilate different

points of views and different levels of reality. Islamic tradition or Islamic civilization is not windowless. It has appropriated elements of different civilizations and cultures, which have been in consonance with its essential doctrine. In short, Islam legitimizes many a cultural forms and retains them for the development of an integral vision. Iqbal expresses the view of Horton in these words: “A Muslim has always adjusted his religious outlook to the elements of culture which he assimilated from the people that surrounded him”.¹

Transcendence of God and pantheism

A study of culture from the historical perspective by applying the historical method alone does not take us to the heart of a culture. It has to be coupled with a methodology, which makes us aware of the inner structural reality of a culture. It helps us to understand its spirit. It has to be looked from within and not merely from outside. The cultural studies have to keep an important fact in mind about the Eastern metaphysical concepts, which hardly find a parallel in Western philosophical thinking. The metaphysical concept of Oneness of Being (wahdat al wujud), for example, which is the foundation of both pure and traditional metaphysics is mistakenly equated with the Western philosophical concept of pantheism. The students of Eastern metaphysics fully understand that the doctrine of Oneness of Being, unlike pantheism, does not deny the transcendence of God. There is no room of pantheism in traditional forms of thinking. Likewise, the concepts of freedom, equality and fraternity are qualitatively different in the Eastern and Western cultures. The Qur’anic concept of Justice (Adl) is not merely social but it embraces the whole cosmos. The political concept of nationalism is also differently construed in these cultures.

The idea of nationalism, Iqbal says, has created variety but has also been exaggerated. He calls this idea as “non-temporal, non-spatial”. He does not take the idea of national unity as a very durable force either. He considers the brotherhood of man, the only dependable unity, which is above race, nationality, colour or language. He says: “Islam is neither Nationalism nor Imperialism but a League of Nations which recognizes artificial boundaries and racial distinctions for facility of reference only and not for restricting the social horizon of its members”.²

The traditional, cultural or social institutions are linked to the metaphysical or religious principles. There is a traditional hierarchy of values, which cannot be understood merely on the horizontal plane. The Islamic tradition, for example, is both metaphysical and religious. The social institutions of Islam including the institution of family are founded on its religious aspect. “In Islam, tradition exists under two distinct aspects, one of which is religious it is upon this aspect that the general body of social institutions is dependent--while the other aspect which is purely Oriental, is wholly metaphysical”.³ According to Iqbal, “the Qur’an

¹ Iqbal, Muhammad *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1965, p. 130.

² Ibid., p. 126.

³ Guenon, Rene *An Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, Luzac and Company London, 1945, p.90

considers it necessary to unite religion and state, ethics and politics in a single revelation”⁴. The traditional cultures attachment to an intellectual or religious doctrine gives meaning to all these institutions. The role of men and women in complementing each other finds its due place in a traditional society. No cultural or social institution in the traditional world is autonomous. The modern conception of traditional societies is quite wide off the mark. It tends to adjudge the traditional culture from the modern standards. They can only be studied from their respective ideal standards in the spirit of wholeness. Unless we understand diversity, it is not possible to talk of integration.

The modern humanistic culture is essentially, characterized by the absence of the metaphysical principle. It is pertinent to note that whatever form humanism has taken---atheistic, evolutionary, agnostic, scientific and existential---it has essentially agreed to reduce everything to the purely human elements and thereby to exclude everything, which transcends the human plane. This point has to be constantly kept in view while we are dealing with the subject of cultural diversity and integration.

The role of reason in the modern West

The Western civilization has had a great and rich intellectual heritage but the modern West revolted against its own Christian tradition and the ancient world in severing its links from Heavens. Resultantly, epistemology came to consider sense-experience as the sole source of knowledge and ontology followed suit by considering the visible world as the only level of being. The role of reason consisted only in cohering data received from the empirical world. The vertical levels of knowledge and being were displaced by the horizontal ones. The modern man cramped himself in his thought and emotion by becoming oblivious of the sacred and the transcendent, which he had banished both from knowledge and being. Modernism displaced traditional ethics with the modern one.

The intellectual and spiritual principles of morality were negated and morality became autonomous in being tied to human finitude. As a consequence, modernism started becoming irreverent to the metaphysical idea of Eastern Vision. It enmeshed itself in the political philosophies of Power, instead. Nietzsche’s philosophy spearheaded the modernist value of brute force, which ultimately led to an unbridgeable gulf between power and vision. Vision was displaced with power devoid of all reverence to the traditional values of Truth, Justice, Freedom and Love. It was in this scenario that the nation-States resorted to the First World War and the Second one, the reverberations of which are still audible in the corridors of many nations and communities. The suffering from this political oppression continues in our times in different hidden and open forms. The sense of injustice done to the people in many parts of the world is not mere history but is a living reality of the oppressed people.

The unity of vision and power

⁴ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1965, p.132.

Iqbal considered history as an important source of knowledge. He learnt many lessons from the Philosophy of History. His primary task was to emancipate the Muslim Ummah in particular and human society in general. He acknowledged the pride of the modern age on its progress in knowledge and its scientific advancements but questioned its different political and social forms. He says: “The modern age prides itself on its progress in knowledge and its matchless scientific developments. No doubt, the pride is justified. Today space and time are being annihilated and man is achieving amazing successes in unveiling the secrets of nature and harnessing its forces to his own service. But in spite of all these developments, the tyranny of imperialism struts abroad, covering its face in the masks of Democracy, Nationalism, Communism, Fascism and heaven knows what else besides”.⁵

The problem of Jerusalem

The modernist political forces shaping themselves in his times made him see the modern West drunk with power and unleashing on different feeble nations and communities. He envisions a unity of wisdom and power. He says: “Through wisdom alone comes power; and when power abandons the ways of wisdom and relies upon itself alone, its end is death”.⁶ The plight of the Muslims, on the other hand, exhibited powerlessness. He presented a recipe to both East and West in these emphatic words: “Vision without power does bring moral elevation but cannot give a lasting culture. Power without vision tends to become destructive and inhuman. Both must combine for the spiritual expansion of humanity”.⁷

The modern West armed with weapons of sheer might created the problem of Jerusalem. It is not possible to fully understand the current Arab Spring without a reference to this issue. Iqbal attempted to awaken the higher consciousness on Jerusalem, through his prose and poetry in the spirit of righteousness. Iqbal voiced the thoughts and feelings of the Muslim Ummah and the conscience of the world in presenting the case of the Palestinians at that time. He fully opposed the Peel Commission Report, which recommended the idea of partitioning Palestine. He still had hopes that sense of justice and fair play will make the British abstain from doing injustice to the people of Palestine. He also wanted the Arab leaders to rise to the occasion but his hopes did not materialise. He died in 1938 while the British were in control of Palestine under the Mandate system (1922-1948) of the League of Nations, and promoting wider scale immigration of the Jews into Palestine in line with the Balfour Declaration. He did not live to see the partitioning of Palestine in 1948 by a Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly and the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel. It was not only what was done by the Western powers but the way it was done drew a big question mark on the integrity of modern world institutions and their capacity to provide justice.

⁵ Latif Ahmed Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings & Statements of Iqbal*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2009, p. 298.

⁶ Ibid., p. 292.

⁷ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1965, p. 73.

The traditional world comprising the great metaphysical and religious traditions of the world has been a mirror of cultural harmony in Jerusalem, which from the times of Caliph Umar has been mainly a sanctuary for the Muslims, Jews and Christians. But the disruptive forces of colonialism, in flagrant violation of the traditional principle of Justice (Adl), sowed seeds of disunity and as a consequence routed the centuries tested principle of cultural diversity and integration. The religious divide among the Jews, Christians and Muslims has been traditional and a family affair in Palestine for a greater part of several centuries. It is modernism, which initiated a political divide amongst them in violence of the traditional spirit. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the breaking of the Arabian world in fragments, and the tearing apart of the Muslim fabric of being at the hands of the Western might had created great problems for the Arab world. The forces of Imperialism, which earlier not only subjugated the Arabs, but in the same vein imposed such rulers on them or supported them till their end was in sight, continued an era of suppressing the people. The transformation in the Arab world is essentially an awakening against the oppressors who have exploited their people in the name of religion or modernism and whose roots go back to the Imperialist designs. The dark night of the Arab world is having its dawn, and people are finding happiness in their new found freedom.

Transformation only from within

The desperate attempt of the modern West to impose modernism on humanity in different forms is widening the gulf between people living in different parts of the world. There can never be a 'Clash of Civilizations,' even if one of the civilizations ceases to be a civilization by turning into a 'sensitive culture'. Civilizations by their very definition are vertically tied with Heavens, and they have inherent strength to absorb even the greatest horizontal shocks. They are attuned to 'dispel evil with good'. But the agenda of demolishing the traditional world can lead to cultural contradictions without any possibility of integration. There is no denying the fact that certain oppressive things, due to fallible human elements, have crept up in the traditional societies in the forms of cruel customs, naïve beliefs and outworn practices. But they are not only against the sensitivity of the contemporary man but they contradict the tradition itself.

However, the very idea of reforming such a society on modern standards is highly counter-productive. A traditional society can only be creatively transformed from within in consonance with its own permanent Ideals inherent in its respective tradition. The traditional society has no reservations in imbibing the wisdom of humanity in its task of reconstruction, which is in consonance with its essential spirit. The best way for the modern world is to sincerely refrain from modernising the traditional world and let it flower from within. Rather, the modern West needs to rediscover its own Christian tradition and thereby initiate a genuine dialogue with the traditional societies. A pure traditional society is no threat either to the modern West or to humanity. Rather, it is a guarantor of universal peace and harmony.

The Spirit creates unity

The principle of spirituality is the foundation of humanity. The role of spirituality is crucial in cementing the bonds of mankind. Iqbal says: "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.”⁸ There are certain segments of Muslim Community, which are becoming more and more ritualistic and militant. The aforesaid trends are generally, manifest in all those schools of thought, which are directly or indirectly aversive to Sufi doctrines, methods and practices. Mere clinging to the exoteric aspects of religion at the cost of its esoteric or spiritual dimension, leads to conflicts within a religious perspective and also contradictions among other religious perspectives. Such religious behaviour is inconsistent with the idea of ‘the transcendent unity of religions’ and the metaphysical principle of ‘unity in diversity.’ It is the need of the hour that the younger generations of the Arab world are awakened to their common intellectual and spiritual heritage. It is the spiritual element of a traditional society, which can prove to be a unifying force. It will foster unity in a tradition and help foster unity amongst other traditions of the world. It has the capacity to embrace the whole humanity, nay the whole creation. The Spirit creates unity. Anything other than it is divisive. One cannot reach unity by adding multiplicity. Spirituality is essential for the survival and development of both the individual and society.

Iqbal, in this context, regards the idea of Tawhid or unity of God necessary for the emancipation of an individual and society. It is an idea, which ensures equality, solidarity and freedom. It stands for eliminating all forms of human exploitation. The Islamic concept of State endeavours to translate these ideals into socio-political reality. Iqbal is essentially concerned with alleviating the sufferings of the common man. One of his principal political visions has been to bring out the spiritual principle of the inherent dignity of man, which rules out any form of racial, social, cultural or religious discrimination in an Islamic State. He desires a society based on the principles of social justice, cultural harmony and universal brotherhood. He says: “The essence of *Tauhid*, as a working idea, is equality, solidarity, and freedom. The state, from the Islamic standpoint, is an endeavour to transform these ideal principles into space-time forces, an aspiration to realize them in a definite human organization.”⁹

Encouragement from Iqbal to Europe

Iqbal deems the integration of the principles of permanence and change necessary for the development of cultural consciousness. He is a philosopher of transforming man’s inner and outer world. He brings this fact in these emphatic words: “The ultimate spiritual basis of all life, as conceived by Islam, is eternal and reveals itself in variety and change. A society based on such a conception of Reality must reconcile, in its life, the categories of permanence and change. It must possess eternal principles to regulate its collective life, for the eternal gives us a foothold in the world of perpetual change. But eternal principles when they are understood to exclude all possibilities of change which, according to the Qur’an, is one of the greatest ‘signs’ of God, tend to immobilize what is essentially mobile in its nature”.¹⁰ The crisis of the

⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

⁹ Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

European world in political and social sciences is due to its ascribing solely to the reality of change, at the cost of negating the principle of permanence. And the immobility of Islam for the past several centuries is due to ascribing only to the principle of permanence, at the cost of negating the reality of change. He considers Islamic law as essentially dynamic and not stationary. He advocates 'Ijtihad' in order for the Muslims to integrate the categories of permanence and change in their lives, and thereby solve their problems in consonance with the Divine Will.

The Arabs need to integrate the principles of permanence and change in their individual and collective lives in consonance with the vision of Iqbal. They have to understand that the principle of permanence cannot be equated with the static and the stationary since it does not exclude the reality of change. And in order to bring change in their systems, they should not become oblivious of the reality of permanence and the conservative elements of their culture, which confer identity on them. The Arab Spring has to reiterate the primordial lesson that the negation of transcendence makes the mundane reality disconnected from the metaphysical values of truth, beauty and love. Love of humanity, for example, remains stranded on the psychosocial sphere without any spiritual connectivity. It lacks the vigour to create universal brotherhood. It is the manifestation of the Divine in the human, which makes real love possible. Likewise, attempts to establish social justice, equality and freedom without spiritual love do not thrive in fullness.

The traditional society sanctifies social and cultural values essentially from the perspective of transcendence by simultaneously making concerted efforts to overcome disvalues. It does not remain passive in the face of oppression but struggles against it in the spirit of love. It is pertinent to note that Khawaja Ghulam Farid, a Sufi poet belonging to Southern Punjab, openly takes stand against all forms of oppressions including the political one, in consonance with the concept of metaphysical justice. But he acts by virtue of love and not hatred in order to emancipate both the individual and society. It is transcendent love, which essentially gives higher meaning to struggle against oppression. The tradition legitimizes self-defence in the spirit of love but does not allow any form of violence.

In the end, it is significant to mention Iqbal's guidance to the Turks who were emancipating themselves from the oppressive structures of their society. His views are relevant to the Arab Spring as well. In his Lecture on the Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam he, among other things, mentions the plight of most Muslim countries of his times in these words: "They are mechanically repeating old values, whereas the Turk is on the way to creating new values. He has passed through great experiences which have revealed his deeper self to him. In him life has begun to move, change, and amplify, giving birth to new desires, bringing new difficulties and suggesting new interpretations".¹¹

However, he cautions the Turks and his caution is equally applicable to the younger generations of the Arab world, which are awakening from their dogmatic slumbers. He says: "We heartily welcome the liberal movement in modern Islam, but it must also be admitted

¹¹ Ibid., p. 129.

that the appearance of liberal ideas in Islam constitutes also the most critical moment in the history of Islam. Liberalism has a tendency to act as a force of disintegration and the race-idea which appears to be working in modern Islam with greater force than ever may ultimately wipe off the broad human outlook which Muslim people have imbibed from their religion. Further, our religious and political reformers in their zeal for liberalism may overstep the proper limits of reform in the absence of check on their youthful fervour.

“We are today passing through a period similar to that of the Protestant revolution in Europe, and the lesson which the rise and outcome of Luther’s movement teaches should not be lost on us. A careful reading of history shows that the Reformation was essentially a political movement, and the net result of it in Europe was a gradual displacement of the universal ethics of Christianity by systems of national ethics. The result of this tendency we have seen with our own eyes in the Great European War which, far from bringing any workable synthesis of the two opposing systems of ethics, has made the European situation still more intolerable. It is the duty of the leaders of the world of Islam today to understand the real meaning of what has happened in Europe, and then to move forward with self-control and a clear insight into the ultimate aims of Islam as a social polity”.¹²

¹² Ibid., p. 119.