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## **The Liberal Movement in Modern Islam**

*[The following passage is taken from the sixth lecture, “The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam,” in Muhammad Iqbal’s The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. It caps off Iqbal’s discussion of certain developments that took place in Turkey in the early part of the twentieth century. After World War I, Turkey, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, made a conscious break with its traditional Islamic past and embarked on a program of Westernization along avowedly secular lines. After examining some of the major tendencies in the religio-political thought of modern Turkey, Iqbal offers general observations on the liberal movement in twentieth-century Islam. Iqbal’s reaction to Turkey’s radical change of course under Atatürk was, unlike the reaction of most Muslims, quite nuanced. Generally, the Muslims living in that era saw the matter in terms of black and white, which is to say that were profoundly saddened by and strongly disapproved of the developments that had taken place in Turkey. As for Iqbal, he, certainly, was unhappy with Turkey’s sharp break with the rich Islamic cultural tradition. At the same time, like a realist, he recognized that, the change of course having taken place, Turkey, while unable to go back to an earlier age, could now look forward to regenerating herself and developing her potential in ways hitherto undreamt of. Thus, if, on the one hand, Iqbal expectantly noticed signs of change on the Turkish—by extension, on the Islamic—horizon, then, on the other hand, he was apprehensive of the rise, in the Islamic world, of an unbridled liberalism that would compromise the integrity of Islam’s fundamental outlook.]*

We heartily welcome the liberal movement in modern Islam, but it must also be admitted 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 to-day 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 to-day 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.

Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*,  
ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and  
Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 129–130

### Innovative Action is Adam's Glory

[The following poem is taken from Muhammad Iqbal's *Zabūr-i 'Ajam* ("Psalms of Persia"), Part II. The poem, which speaks of Iqbal's understanding of his role in Muslim society, has a fairly high degree of thematic unity. In couplet 1, Iqbal claims that his message has breathed new life into the Muslim body politic—has transformed dried-up grass into jasmine, as he puts it. Couplet 2 employs a different metaphor to present the same idea of Iqbal's distinctive contribution to society. Couplet 3, using a yet different image, explains that Iqbal, as a representative of the human race, is superior to the angels in respect of his lofty thought and noble action. Couplet 4 reemphasizes the distinction of Adam, or of humanity, this time comparing human beings favorably with heavenly bodies, which have been, since time immemorial, slavishly revolving in fixed orbits, whereas human beings are always willing and eager to venture into uncharted areas of activity. This couplet, unlike the first three, does not refer explicitly to the poet, but the reference is potentially present, since the distinction between Adam and the poet is blurred in the couplet. Couplet 5, again, refers to the poet explicitly. The concluding couplet seems to be a general command, but, as we will see in the commentary on it (see below), the reference to the poet himself is not altogether absent from this couplet either.]

دم مرا صفت با فرو دین کرد  
کیا ہزار سرسکھ چو پای سپین کرد  
نمود لالہ و صحرائشین ز خون ما ہم  
چن اکڈ بادہ لعلی برساتکین کرد  
بلند بال چن انم کہ بر سپر برین  
ہزار بار مرانوریان کین کرد  
فروع آدم خاکی زمانہ کار بہت  
مہ دستارہ کسند نخ پیش ازین کرد  
چراغ خویش با فرو ختم کہ دست کلیم  
درین زمانہ نہان یراستین کرد

در آبجدہ و یاری خضر و ان<sup>مطلب</sup>

کہ روز سقر نیاکان چنین کرد

### Translation

My breath was made like the spring breeze;  
My tears turned dried-up grass into jasmine-like flowers.<sup>1</sup>

To my pure blood is due the appearance of the desert tulip,  
Insomuch as pearl-red wine was poured into my cup.<sup>2</sup>

I have such high-flying wings that, in the highest heaven,  
The angels have a thousand times sought to ambush me.<sup>3</sup>

The glory of earthly Adam is due to innovative action;  
The moon and the stars are doing what they have done before.<sup>4</sup>

I have lit up my own lamp, since, in this age,  
The hand of Moses has been placed inside the sleeve.<sup>5</sup>

Fall prostrate, and do not seek the friendship of the Chosroes,  
For that is what our ancestors did in their days of poverty.<sup>6</sup>

### Commentary

<sup>1</sup>**My breath . . . flowers.** Iqbal likens his breath to the west wind (*bād-i Farwadīn*) and his tears to the following spring showers that quicken the dead earth by causing flowers and vegetation to grow. The west wind brings the promise of a new life, and the rains translate that promise into reality. Iqbal is, of course, using a metaphor: Just as the spring rains, coming on the heels of the west wind, transform desiccated grass into beautiful, sweet-smelling jasmine plants, so his work, Iqbal claims, has had a transformative effect on the inertia-marked and hope-starved life of the Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent—indeed, of the Muslims of the world at large. The couplet indicates Iqbal’s awareness of the powerful influence that his thought, expressed in beautiful language, had exercised on the hearts and minds of his Muslim audiences, whom he sought to motivate to work for the revival of the lost glory of Islam.

The word “breath” (*dam*) in the couplet alludes to the motif, frequently encountered in Persian and Urdu poetry, of the life-giving breath of Jesus (*dam-i ‘Īsā*, “the breath of Jesus,” is a familiar phrase in that poetry). The motif is religious in origin: Qur’ān 3:49 and 5:110 say that Jesus revived people from the dead; they also describe Jesus as forming clay birds and bringing them to life by breathing into them (cf. such Biblical passages as John 11:38–44, which presents Jesus as reviving Lazarus from the dead, and Luke 7:11–15, which relates how Jesus revived a young man who had died).

What is true of Iqbal’s breath is also true of his tears. Qur’ān 21:30 says that God made all living things by means of water, and Iqbal, again employing a metaphor, says that his tears have life-generating properties: It was Iqbal’s profound grief over the abject state of Muslim society and his earnest concern for the betterment of that society that caused him to shed tears—that is, to compose moving, sorrow-filled poetry—that worked the miracle of changing the drought-stricken intellectual and spiritual landscape of the Muslim world into the jasmine-land of fresh, innovative thought.

It is tempting to compare Iqbal’s couplet with parts of the “Ode to the West Wind” of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822). Shelley conceives of the west wind both as a destructive and as a constructive force, and here the difference between Iqbal’s couplet and Shelley’s poem is obvious, for Iqbal’s exclusive focus, unlike Shelley’s, is the gentler, creative aspect of the west wind (nor should one forget that Shelley’s European west

wind is more violent than Iqbal's Eastern *bād-i Farwadīn*). But, as in Shelley, so in Iqbal, the west wind has a regenerative property and, used as a metaphor, has connotations of a much-hoped-for societal renaissance. To the rhetorical question asked in the concluding line of Shelley's poem—"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"—Iqbal would already seem to have responded in a loud and clear voice: No, the winter cannot be far behind! As to the question, whether, while composing this couplet, Iqbal had Shelley's poem in mind, one cannot give a firm answer. But Iqbal's intimate knowledge of English literature and the strongly allusive nature of his poetry would suggest that the idea of Iqbal having Shelley's poem in the back of his mind while composing this couplet is not wholly improbable.

A literal rendering of the sentence construction used in each of the two hemistichs of the Persian couplet would yield the following translation:

They made my breath like the spring breeze:  
Through my tears, they turned dried-up grass into jasmine-like flowers.

In this translation, the plural pronoun "they," which is embedded in the Persian verb *kardand*, refers to something like the Fates—not necessarily the Fates of Greek mythology, but the Fates conceived as a power with predisposing influence or as a power regarded as the source of a gift or the cause of a disability. Since its identity is not clearly delineated, that power may, in a given context, be assigned an identity appropriate to that context. In an Islamic religious or poetic context, it may be construed as representing, in a general and somewhat loose sense, the Divine will, though care must be taken not to take that power either to represent fatalism or to imply philosophic determinism. Iqbal is only saying that he has been given the gift of bringing about a profound transformation in society—of replacing inertia with movement, despair with hope, and pessimism with optimism.

The sentence construction used in the Persian couplet also occurs in the second and fifth couplets of the original. The comment just made about the first couplet would, therefore, apply to these two other couplets as well.

<sup>2</sup>**To my . . . cup.** This couplet makes reference to the mythopoetic belief, conceptually akin to reincarnationist thought, that beautiful beings and things, after they become extinct and become part of the earth, resurface in such attractive forms as flowers. The Indian Urdu poet Asadullāh Ghālib (1796–1869) says (*Dīwān-i Ghālib*, ed. Ḥāmid 'Alī Khān [Lahore: Al-Fayṣal, 1995], 90):

*Sab kahān kuchh lālah o gul meñ numāyāñ ho ga'ññ  
Khāk meñ kyā ṣūrateñ hoñ gī kih pinhāñ ho ga'ññ*

(Not all, only a few have become visible in tulips and roses.  
What lovely faces they must be, the ones that went hiding into the dust!)

Iqbal himself writes elsewhere in *Zabūr-i 'Ajam* (Part II; *Kullīyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, page 420: poem 67, couplet 2):

*Fishāñ yak jur'ah bar khāk-i chaman az bādah-i la'lī  
Kih az bīm-i khizāñ bīgānah rūyad nargis u lālah*

(Sprinkle a sipful of pearl-red wine on the dusty surface of the garden,  
For, indifferent to the fear of autumn grow the narcissus and the tulip.)

That is, while no signs of vegetation can be seen on the dusty ground of the garden at this time, flowers sometimes grow out of season as well. Sprinkle a little red wine on the ground, therefore, and you might see that wine transmuted into pretty narcissi and tulips. Nor will these flowers be lacking in beauty and charm, for they will grow without being weighed down by the fear of the onset of autumn at a later time.

To come back to the couplet under discussion: Iqbal is saying that he drank pearl-red wine that was poured into his cup as his portion during his earthly existence and, after his death and internment, that wine, which once coursed through his veins as blood, resurfaced as a brilliant red tulip of the desert. The Persian phrase *lālah-i ṣahrā-nishīn* in the first hemistich would literally translate as "the tulip that sits in or inhabits

the desert.” The desert tulip, a favorite motif in Iqbal’s poetry, carries connotations of strength, independence, and beauty. By emerging in an inhospitable environment, it gives proof of its ability to overcome opposition; by relying, like a nomad, on its inner resources for survival, it shows its self-reliance and self-sufficiency; and, by putting forth bright and lovely petals, it displays its beauty, which is further set off by the starkness of the surroundings. Since Iqbal identifies himself with the desert tulip, he can be seen as claiming for himself the qualities that he attributes to the flower: his environment, marked by total passivity, could not have accounted for the dynamic message he stood for; his one-man struggle to change Muslim society evidenced his self-confidence; and the beautiful poetry he composed in the service of his message accounted for the profound aesthetic appeal of his work.

In this couplet, Iqbal, following a familiar convention of Persian and Urdu poetry, assumes that he is already deceased. The assumption serves a certain purpose: it erases the dividing line between life and death, knitting the present and the future into a single continuum and, as a result, conferring on the poet a sort of omniscience that enables him to make observations from a certain vantage point. In the couplet under discussion, the assumption makes it possible for Iqbal to offer a poetic etiology of the desert tulip.

<sup>3</sup>**I have . . . me.** The poet is such a high flier that even the angels are unable to reach the heights to which he has attained. Since the angels reside in the heavens, it follows that the poet’s flying haunt lies beyond the heavens. On numerous occasions, the angels have tried, but failed, to ambush him. In making this remark, the poet hints that the angels, having failed to rise to his stature in a fair, competitive manner, have grown jealous of him and have used questionable means to ensnare and defeat him.

In referring to the angels’ attempt to waylay him, Iqbal is quite possibly alluding to Qur’ān 2:40, in which the angels, upon being told by God of His plan to appoint a caliph, or vicegerent, on earth, ask God whether He intends to appoint one who might misuse his caliphal powers and create mischief, even shed blood. Keeping theology aside, we may interpret the angels’ question as having arisen from a certain sense of jealousy, for they do seem to be a little surprised that the caliphate of the earth should be handed over to a newly created, upstart species whereas they themselves have been serving God and glorifying Him for a long time and, as such, are good prospective candidates for the caliphate in question. In the above-cited Qur’ānic verse, God’s answer to the angels’ remark is “I know what you do not know.” This answer implies that the creation of a new species—that of human beings—is intended to fulfill a special purpose that has, despite the angels’ worship and glorification of God, not, until now, been fulfilled. In light of the next couplet of the poem, that purpose may be identified as innovative action: God wishes to bring into existence a species of living, thinking beings who would refuse to be content with routine, habit, or custom and would always seek new arenas for the display of their creative abilities (see commentary on the next couplet).

The whole statement about the poet’s flight in regions higher than the heavens is a metaphor for the poet’s—or, in general terms, man’s—special distinction: Their desire always to make new achievements allows human beings to fly higher than angels can and, as such, renders them superior to angels.

<sup>4</sup>**The glory . . . before.** The distinction of human beings consists in their constant endeavor to explore fresh avenues of thought and action. The inanimate world, of which the moon and the stars are major and conspicuous representatives, is caught up in the same old routine of cyclicity. The moon and the stars have been in motion for millions of years, but they have never stepped out of their designated orbits. Monotony marks their existence, and they are incapable of accomplishing anything new. Human beings, on the other hand, are always innovating, are always wishing to break from precedent, and are always aspiring to make new discoveries. In physical or spatial terms, man may be stationed on the earth below, and the moon and the stars, in the heavens above. But, in respect of his adventurous spirit, his urge to sail the uncharted waters, and his wish to encounter the new and the novel, the earthly Adam has a clear edge over the stars and the moon—just as he has an edge over the angels, as the preceding couplet stated.

The word “glory” in the first hemistich is a rendering of the Persian word *furūgh*, whose twin meanings of “shine” and “prosperity” are equally applicable in the present context: The moon and the stars may possess physical luster, but they do not thrive or prosper in the sense of making any significant achievements. Human beings may not have the shine of the moon and the stars, but they possess another kind of luster—namely, the capacity for innovative action, and, in this sense, they easily “outshine” the moon and the stars.

<sup>5</sup>**I have . . . sleeve.** Both the Bible (Exodus 4:6–7) and the Qurʾān (27:12 and elsewhere) report that one of the miracles which God gave Moses to enable him to confront Pharaoh was the miracle of the white hand: Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he brought it forth, it had turned bright. Interpreting Moses' white hand as a source of light and guidance, Iqbal remarks that the age of miracles has passed, and, therefore, the guiding light radiating from Moses' hand is no longer available—that hand now hidden inside Moses' sleeve and unlikely to be brought forth. Accordingly, Iqbal has decided to draw on the light of his own lamp—that is, on his own intellect and conscience—for guidance in his undertakings: drawing on the light of his intellect and conscience, he will make bold to perform, for his age, miracle-like feats. The couplet implies that, while figures like Moses will no longer arise in history to provide faultless, revelation-based guidance, figures like Pharaoh will continue to appear on the scene of the world and that the challenges posed by these figures will have to be met through the vision, ingenuity, and resourcefulness of nonprophetic personalities. The couplet, then, is an exhortation to ordinary members of the human race to rely on their own resources to solve the problems and enigmas of life. The couplet does not imply or hint, however, that the extant prophetic guidance has become superfluous in the present age. It does seem to be alluding to one of the major themes of Iqbal's works, namely, that of the finality of prophethood. Iqbal writes in "The Spirit of Muslim Culture," the fifth lecture of *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (ed. M. Saeed Sheikh [Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989], 101):

The birth of Islam . . . is the birth of inductive intellect. 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.

The second hemistich of Iqbal's verse may be construed a little differently, in which case the thrust of the couplet's meaning will change somewhat. The hemistich may be interpreted to mean that the modern secular age has, by expelling religion from most spheres of life, caused the fonts of spiritual guidance to dry up, leaving sensitive souls no choice but to draw on their inner resources for survival in a hostile environment. There is also the hint that, in an earlier age, the shining hand of Moses provided guidance to a whole community of believers, but, in the absence of such guidance, individual members of a community now must depend on the light of their individual lamps to guide them through the dark paths of existence. In other words, the onslaught of secular forces has, today, forced people with religious and spiritual inclinations to seek their own lights.

The statement, in the second hemistich, about the hiding of Moses' hand may also be interpreted to mean that, today, those presumed capable of leading the Muslim community have lost their ability to lead, leaving the ordinary members of the community to their own devices, these individuals, consequently, having had to light their own lamps—having had to fall back on their own resources, that is—to find their way through life. As Iqbal says in another poem of *Zabūr-i 'Ajam* (Part II; *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, page 423: poem 75, couplet 1):

*Khud rā kunam sujūdī, dayr u ḥaram na-mandah*  
*Īñ dar 'Arab na-māndah, āñ dar 'Ajam na-māndah*

(I bow down before myself—there is no temple or Ka'bah left:  
This one is missing in Arabia, that one in the other lands.)

<sup>6</sup>**Fall prostrate . . . poverty.** That is, fall prostrate before God, the only real power in the universe, and do not try to win the favor of worldly powers like Chosroes or Caesars, for the feared might of such individuals is fake at worst and transient at best. In another poem in *Zabūr-i 'Ajam* (Part II; *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, page 415: poem 56, couplet 2), Iqbal says:

*Ba-dargāh-i salāṭīñ tā kujā īñ chihrahsā'ī-hā*  
*Bī'āmūz az khudā-i khwīsh nāz-i kibriyā'ī-hā*

(For how long this grinding of the face at the sultans' threshold?  
Learn from your God the endearing art of taking pride in yourself.)

And in yet another poem in *Zabūr-i 'Ajām* (Part II; *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, page 411: poem 46, couplet 2), Iqbal says:

*Zi āstānah-i sulṭān kinārah mī-gīram*  
*Nah kāfirām kih parastam khudā-i bī tawfīq*

(I steer clear of the threshold of sultans;  
I am no infidel to worship impotent gods.)

In a well-known couplet of *Zarb-i Kalīm* (*Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū* [Lahore, Iqbal Academy, 1990], 550), Iqbal emphasizes the liberating effect of falling prostrate before—that is, of submitting exclusively to—God:

*Yih ek sajdah jise tū girān samajhtā hai*  
*Hazār sajde se detā hai ādamī ko najāt*

(This one prostration, which you consider too onerous,  
Saves man from performing a thousand prostrations.)

In the couplet under discussion, Iqbal invites his Muslim audience to follow in the footsteps of their great ancestors. Living in the heyday of Islam, those ancestors eschewed the company of kings and sultans and made humble submission to God: jealously guarding their honor and integrity, they refused to demean themselves by becoming tools in the hands of rulers in return for paltry gains. Instead of groveling before political authorities, they fell prostrate before and put their trust in the sovereign of the heavens and the earth—God. Iqbal implies that those ancestors were great precisely because they lived in a state of freedom and did not rely on rulers for support and patronage, and that if, today, Muslims wish to achieve greatness, then they must emulate their ancestors.

The phrase “days of poverty” calls for a note. The Persian phrase used in the original is *rūz-i faqr*. *Faqr*, literally “poverty,” is a technical term in Iqbal’s poetry. By *faqr*, Iqbal means the simple, austere, but dignified lifestyle of one who, since he has few needs, is not dependent on anyone for the satisfaction of those needs, is uninterested in hobnobbing with people in authority, is willing to pay any price to defend his freedom and integrity, and maintains his serenity and composure in all types of circumstances, neither allowing good fortune to go to his head nor letting adversity put him down. Iqbal’s concept of *faqr* is grounded in a well-known saying of the Prophet Muḥammad—namely, *Al-faqrū fakhrī*, “Poverty is my pride.” The word *faqr* in this saying has all the above-mentioned connotations of austerity, contentment, self-sufficiency, dignity, and integrity. The great ancestors of Muslims appeared to live in a state of “poverty,” but, in fact, they ruled over the world.

Since Iqbal has a high regard for *faqr* and attributes it to the illustrious ancestors of Muslims, we can expect that Iqbal would like to be known as one possessing *faqr*. In a number of places in his poetry, indeed, Iqbal calls himself a *faqīr* (“one in a state of *faqr*,” the word *faqīr* being an active participle from the same root from which the word *faqr* is derived). A pertinent reference in this connection is the concluding couplet in the immediately preceding poem in *Zabūr-i 'Ajām* (Part II; *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*, page 416: poem 57, couplet 6), which is very similar in thought and vocabulary to the couplet under discussion here:

*Ḥalqah gird-i man zanīd ay pakarān-i āb u gil*  
*Ātishī dar sīnah dāram az niyāgān-i shumā*

(Make a circle round me, O creatures of water and clay,  
For, in my breast burns a fire borrowed from your ancestors.)

This couplet reminds one of the closing lines of the poem “Kubla Khan” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834):

Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Although the contexts of Iqbal's and Coleridge's poems are different, the two sets of lines each speak of a person who enjoys a privileged status and, on that account, deserves to be honored and revered. Again, in view of Iqbal's familiarity with English literature, it is not implausible that his "Make a circle round me" is an adaptation of Coleridge's "Weave a circle round him thrice."

*Mustansir Mir*

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## **Philosophy and Poetry**

Philosophy is a set of abstractions shivering in the cold night of human reason. The poet comes and warms them up into objectivity.

*Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections,  
ed. Javid Iqbal, revised and annotated by Khurram Ali Shafiqe  
(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2006).*

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