Iqbal and the Critique of Other-Worldliness

By

Talim Aktar

Research Scholar

Centre for Political Studies

Jawahar lal Nehru University

India

Iqbal criticizes the project of western modernity for concentrating its focus only on the affairs of this world and not aiming to realize the spiritual goals for individuality. Iqbal suggests that modernity is one that aims at realizing the spiritual ideals and for him it can be realized only by means of actualizing the 'kingdom of god' on the earth. The 'kingdom of god' signifies the ideal community of the 'unique individuals' which one realizes by being akin to the most 'unique individual' i.e. God himself.

The ideal community of Islam is also viewed as the pan-Islamic community. However, this article only deal with the idea of other-worldliness and the manner in which Iqbal juxtapose his understanding of Islam in the backdrop of this idea.

The Western Other-Worldliness and its Consequences for the Community – The Iqbalian Perspective

Iqbal constructs his conception of community in the backdrop of the spirit and matter divide quite central to the making of the western civilization. Iqbal believes that such a dichotomous understanding of spirit and matter has severe consequences for the community as it either leads to eulogizing of the community which is trapped into the material world or one which is concerned only with the world existing elsewhere.

Iqbal suggests that in the case of the western civilization both these consequences are applicable. This section of the article deals with Iqbal's perspective on the 'other-worldliness' of the western civilization and its consequences for the community. Before we actually dwell on this point, it is worth mentioning that Iqbal believes that the 'other-worldly' character of

the western civilization owes a lot to Plato's philosophy. Plato distinguishes between the sensuous and super-sensuous world, i.e. the world of ideas, and emphasizes that real world is the world of ideas and the objects which we see around us are mere copies of their ideas. Thus, Plato in eulogizing the world of ideas propagates an idealism which takes the individual away from the hard realities of this world.

Iqbal in his philosophical poem The Secrets of the Self caution us against the dangers of distinguishing the ideal world from the real. He criticizes Plato for worshipping idealism and argues that, 'my criticism of Plato is directed against those philosophical systems which hold up death rather than life as their ideal systems which ignore the greatest obstruction to life, namely, matter, and teach us to run away from it instead of absorbing it.'[1] Iqbal regards Plato a 'sheep in man's clothing'[2] which misleads us and take us away from the material realities of this- world.

Iqbal argues that Greek civilization had influenced the world of Islam in many ways. He believed that the rise and the growth of ascetic Sufism in the world of Islam is due to the influence of the Greeks. Iqbal criticizes the growth of ascetic Sufism and believes that the other- worldly character of this particular kind of Sufism 'obscure man's vision of a very important aspect of Islam as social polity.'[3]

Iqbal further emphasizes that the purpose of Islam is of actualizing the ideal. He argues that the 'Kingdom of God' on the earth, by which he means the, 'democracy of more or less unique individuals',[4] can be realized only by developing certain characteristics which are akin to God. Thus, for Iqbal, the real purpose of Islam lies in encompassing both the ideal and the real worlds, which are not dichotomous but in fact are parts of one reality i.e. Islam.

---

[1]Muhammad Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self* (tr.) R.A. Nicholson, London: Macmillan, 1920, p. 22.
[2]Iqbal in section VI of *The Secrets of the Self*, discusses the story of the tiger and the sheep. The tiger signifies the Islamic community whereas as sheep is the signifier of the Platonic idealism. Iqbal points out that the sheep is so cunning that it convinces the tiger to do certain acts which destroys the natural strength of the tiger. The lesson of the story is that the idealism propagated by Plato leads to the breeding of the 'other-worldliness' in the world of the Islam and 'obscures man's vision of very important aspect of Islam as social polity'. p. 57.
[3]Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Srinagar: Gulshan Publishers, 2003, p. 160.
[4]Muhammad Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self* (tr.) R.A. Nicholson, London: Macmillan, 1920, p. 28.

The other-worldly character of western civilization, particularly of Christianity is also vehemently attacked by Iqbal. He argues that the failure of western civilization i.e. Christianity is largely due to its other-worldliness. Iqbal argues that Christianity, unlike Islam failed to become civil society. In his words, 'the primitive Christianity was founded not as a political or a civic unit, but as a monastic order in the profane world, having nothing to do with civil affairs...'[5]

Iqbal believed that the negligence of Christianity in the matters governing the civil life of the individual had severe consequences for its conception of community. Iqbal in his text, 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam' argues that Christianity, 'by setting up an ideal of other-worldliness, no doubt, did succeed in spiritualizing life but its individualism could see no spiritual value in the complexity of human social relations.'[6] Thus, Iqbal believed that in order to understand the complexities of human relationship society requires legal laws, which Christianity does not possess.

Iqbal points out towards the speculative side of the other-worldliness and argues that the other- worldliness in its speculative side is a 'form of free thought and in alliance with rationalism.'[7] He thinks that due to the speculative nature of Christian other-worldliness, Christianity lacks the concrete principles which can direct the social, political and economic life of the individual and the community. He argues that the problem of other-wordiness is unlikely to arise in the world of Islam because in Islam there is no distinction based on the spiritual and the temporal and the life of the Islamic society itself is governed by the spiritual laws of the shari' a[8] enshrined in the Koran and Hadis.[9]

Thus, Iqbal believed that Christianity in its quest for other-worldliness has totally overlooked the social and the political life of the community and has failed to inculcate concrete legal

---

[5]Ibid., p. 165.
[6]Ibid., p.176.
[7]Ibid., p.159.
[8]In general terms, a prophetic religion in its totality, within Muslim discourse it refers to the rules and the regulation derived mainly from the Quran and Hadis.
[9]It refers to those laws which are derived from the tradition of Prophet Mohammad especially his oral narratives and the acts which he approved during his life.

laws which could have otherwise regulated the life of the community in the changed circumstances. Iqbal argues that only those civilizations which posses the characteristics of permanence and change can survive in the changing circumstances. He argues that the failure of Christianity and the stagnancy in Islam is due to their inability to posses the characteristic of permanence and change. He invokes the doctrine of 'permanence and change' to evaluate both Christianity and Islam an aspect which is discussed below.

Western Civilization and Iqbal's 'Doctrine of Permanence and Change

In the changed circumstances, Iqbal believed that only that civilization would thrive which possesses the characteristic of permanence and change. According to the 'doctrine of permanence and change', he argued that a civilization should not only evolve with the changing time but it should also keep its eternal principles intact. According to him, the failure of early Christianity and the stagnancy in the world of Islam were due to their inability to adhere with the doctrine of the permanence and change.

Iqbal in his text The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam thought that the failure of Christianity was on account of its inability to breed the universal system based on the eternal principles, which could unify humanity. He felt that only Islam provides an emotional system of unifying humanity. He argued that unlike Christianity Islam rejected blood-relationship as the basis of human unity and it did not believe in the ties based on caste, colour and creed. Iqbal emphasized that the 'psychological foundation of human unity becomes possible only with the perception that human life is spiritual in its origin,'[10] which means that there is one god and human beings should be responsible to God rather to anyone else.

According to him, Humanity aspires for the common goal of spiritual emancipation and the purpose of Islam is to help humanity in realizing its goals. He thought that the spiritual emancipation of humanity can be realized by adhering to the Islamic principle of Tauhid. The principle of tauhid forms the practical basis of human unity and it treats Islam as a polity in which individual's loyalty is only to God and not to the throne. God, according to Iqbal, is

---

[10]Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Srinagar: Gulshan Publishers, 2003, p. 155.

'the ultimate spiritual basis of all life, loyalty to God virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal nature.'[11] For him, '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.'[12]

For him, any civilization should posses the eternal principles in order 'to regulate its collective life, for the eternal gives us a foothold in the world of perpetual change.'[13] However, Iqbal's quest for the eternal principles should not be understood that he subscribed to the status-quo and was not concerned with the changing circumstances. He argued that, '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 a check on their youthful fervor.[14] Thus while welcoming the change as manifested through the march of liberalism in the world of Islam, Iqbal cautions Muslim leaders of its consequences.

He felt that Islamic civilization should learn from the experiences of the West and not repeat the mistakes committed by it. He argues that, "we are today passing through the period similar to that of the Protestant revolution in Europe, and the lessons which the rise and outcome of Luther's movement teaches should not be lost on us. A careful study 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 the system 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 Europe situation still more intolerable. It is the duty of the leaders of

---

[11]Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Srinagar: Gulshan Publishers, 2003, p. 156.
[12]Ibid., p. 157.
[13]Ibid.
[14]Ibid., pp. 172-173.

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 the clear insight into the ultimate aim of Islam as a social polity.'[15]

Thus, from the above discussion it can be argued that Iqbal criticizes the Western civilization, particularly Christianity, for its inability to sustain its universal ethics which in the post-Reformation period came to be replaced by the fissiparous national ethics. Iqbal argues that it was due to the replacement of the universal ethics of the Christianity with the national ethics that the great European war erupted. Iqbal urges Islamic civilization to comprehend the real consequences of the uncritical march of the Reformation in the Western civilization before realizing the goal of Islam as the social policy.

Thus, Iqbal believed that the community should possess the characteristic of permanence and change and he begins to constructs his notion of community based on this principle.

Conclusion

This paper aims to highlight Iqbal's critique of other-worldiness. In this paper it has been argued that Iqbal's rejection of other-worldliness enable him to postulate particular understanding of community which is premised on the principle of permanence and change. He believed that in order to protect themselves as an ideal community all civilization should possess certain eternal principles and at the same time they should evolve themselves in changed circumstances.

---

[15]Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Srinagar: Gulshan Publishers, 2003, p. 173.