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Freedom and Equality

From Iqbal's Philosophy to Sen'S Ethical Concerns

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Abstract and Keywords

For a diehard secularist, Amartya Sen may not appear to have much in common with Muhammad Iqbal, the poet and philosopher of the East who took great pride in his Muslim identity. This chapter argues that the two, although removed in time and space, actually had broad-ranging and overlapping intellectual interests in philosophy, economics, politics, and nationalism. The philosophy and economics that molded Iqbal's thinking in the first decade of the 20th century were obviously different from what Sen was exposed to half a century later. Yet there are some important parallels in their philosophical conceptions of human freedom and equality that merit identification and elucidation. In analyzing these, the chapter demonstrates that far from being a barrier, their divergent stands on religion create a fruitful tension that offers fresh insights into the relevance of their respective approaches to the problem of poverty and inequality in the contemporary world.
IN *Ilm-al-Iqtisad* (The Subject of Economics), his first and little-known book published in 1904, the poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) wondered whether poverty was intrinsic to the natural order of things. “Is it not possible for every human being to be free of the pain of poverty?” he asked. Could the hushed sounds of suffering coming from the streets and alleys be silenced once and for all so that the heart-wrenching scenes of human destitution and degradation were wiped off the face of the earth? The eradication of poverty depended to a large extent on the ethical capabilities of human beings and was, therefore, beyond the scope of economics. A knowledge of economics was nevertheless essential for even the beginning of a solution to the problem of poverty. This was especially true of India, where rampant poverty co-existed with widespread illiteracy. Ignorant about the reasons for their economic ailments, Indians had been unable to initiate basic social welfare schemes. Human history was testimony to the terrible fate that awaited nations oblivious to their cultural and economic conditions (Iqbal 1904/2004: 21–2).

(p.453) Iqbal's endeavor to learn the rudimentary principles of economics was motivated by pragmatism quite as much as by the desire to discover the root causes of human suffering. After doing a B.A. in English, Arabic and philosophy, he completed his Master’s degree in philosophy. He wrote *Ilm al-Iqtisad* while teaching at the University Oriental College in Lahore, where, in addition to translating several English works into Urdu, he taught various subjects, including economics. A compendium of lecture notes with hints of Marxist influence which he later denied for fear of being declared an Islamic heretic, the book is less important for its content than for the insights it provides into Iqbal's early intellectual preoccupations. By the time of his departure for England in 1905, he was a rising star in literary circles, lauded for his evocative Urdu poetry about love for the territorial homeland. But his exploratory foray into the prohibitive world of theoretical economics had gone unnoticed, even though *Ilm al-Iqtisad* appeared in the same year as his hugely popular *Tarana-i-Hindi*, which remains the best-known patriotic narration of the ideal of the Indian nation. While studying at Trinity College, Cambridge, Iqbal is said to have been
concerned about becoming too immersed in philosophy. Looking for intellectual breadth to better balance his personality, he spent hours in the University Library reading books on economics (Iqbal 1904/2004: 7). The effort bore fruit not in any further writings on economics but in poems composed over a long and distinguished literary career. In these poems Iqbal blended his understanding of economics with observations on life through the shifting lens of a God-centered humanism that was Muslim and also uniquely his own.

I. Reason, Religion and Ethics
Apart from sharing the same alma mater of Cambridge University, a diehard rationalist wary of religion like Amartya Sen may not appear to have much in common with the poet and philosopher of the East who self-consciously steeped himself in his Muslim identity. But then the badge of greatness worn by two of South Asia’s best-known thinkers is an important commonality, as are their broad-ranging and overlapping intellectual interests in philosophy, economics, politics and nationalism. The philosophy and economics that molded Iqbal's thinking in the first decade of the twentieth century were markedly different from what Sen mastered half a century later. Yet there are some broad and interesting parallels in their philosophical conceptions of human freedom and equality that merit identification and elucidation. Instead of being a barrier, their divergent stands on religion can lend a fruitful tension to a consideration of their respective approaches to the problem of poverty and inequality in the modern world.

(p.454) Iqbal’s philosophy of freedom and equality was motivated by many of the same ethical concerns that prompted Amartya Sen to write Development as Freedom (Sen 1999). Since everyone wants the capability to live a good life that they can truly value, Sen calls in this book for an expansive view of the idea of development as human freedom rather than simply economic growth. On this view, the quality of life should not be measured by wealth or the availability of constitutional freedoms but by the quality of health, education, life expectancy and civic life. In order for the good life based on genuine freedom to be realized, development policies have to be aimed at enhancing the capabilities of people so that
they can influence politicians and bureaucrats. Only when its impact on politics is fully exploited through the empowerment of the people does development contribute to human freedom.

What he saw of life in the advanced capitalist world during his three-year sojourn in Europe led Iqbal to broadly similar conclusions about the imperative of basing his ethics on the foundations of freedom and equality. Yet he launched a far more stringent critique of Western materialism than anything that Sen would embrace in his conception of a good and fulfilling life. Some of this difference must be explained by the context of pre-First World War Europe rather than any intrinsic contradiction between Iqbal's emphasis on religion and Sen's on reason. Alienated by the materialistic excesses of early twentieth-century Europe, Iqbal wrote, in a poem in his anthology *Bang-i-Dara*:

> Men of the West! The country of God is not a shop.  
> What you take to be real is a counterfeit coin.  
> Your civilization will commit suicide with its own dagger.  
> A nest built on a fragile branch cannot last long.

(Iqbal n.d: 169–70)

Written in 1907, the poem is one of the earliest expressions of Iqbal's disquiet with the epidemic of “isms” that, together with the mechanization of life in Europe, constrained his sense of individual freedom. He was repulsed by capitalism's merciless exploitation of labor and thoroughly put off by the signs of excessive rationalism creeping into European thought along with the menacing tide of nationalistic bigotry.

Embarking with aplomb on the pursuit of knowledge, Iqbal, after completing his studies at Cambridge, went on to obtain a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Heidelberg. Given his humble middle-class background, the degree at best ensured him a professorial position with a modest salary. Looking for something more, Iqbal followed the example of several of his countrymen by doing his bar-at-law in London. He also taught at the London School of Commerce and passed an honors examination in economics and political science. Feeling relatively *(p.455)* more empowered with his educational investments, Iqbal returned to India in 1908 and started a law practice in Lahore. But his first love was poetry,
with philosophy a distant second. Frustrated at having to work for a living, he channeled his creative energies into poetry, fulminating against Western materialism, rationalism and imperialism with the help of Islamic idioms and themes.

In April 1908, Iqbal gave his maiden lecture in English at Lahore, in which he spelled out what he believed were the principal ethical and political ideals of Islam. Speaking as a critical student of comparative religion rather than a teacher or expositor of Islam, he tried approaching the subject from a “thoroughly humane standpoint”. He did not “doubt the fact of Divine Revelation as the final basis of Religion” but “prefer[red] to employ expressions of a more scientific content” (Iqbal 1908: 1D). The nub of his argument was that of all the religious systems, Islam took the most positive view of the human capacity to transform the world for the better. This was unlike the life-denying pessimism of Buddhism, which portrays human beings as utterly helpless in the face of universal pain. Christianity too sees nature as evil and considers human beings to be inherently prone to sin.

Zoroastrianism views the world as a constant struggle between the forces of good and evil. While taking pain, sin and the struggle against evil seriously, the Qur'an does not teach Muslims to look upon the world as a painful place where only sin and evil can prevail: “Islam believes in the efficacy of well-directed action” and the standpoint of Islam must be described as “melioristic”, which is “the ultimate presupposition of all human effort at scientific discovery and social progress” (2E).

For Iqbal, the central proposition regulating the structure of Islam is that there is fear in nature which human beings must overcome. Islam regards human beings as naturally good and peaceful and seeks to free them from this fear by inviting them to put their faith in God: “The highest stage of man's ethical progress is reached when he becomes absolutely free from fear and grief” (2E; italics in original). Islam's main ethical ideal, therefore, is to empower man with the will to knowledge so that he can gradually transcend his fear of nature. It is this ceaseless effort towards ethical realization that gives human beings their sense of personality and makes them aware of themselves as a source of power. Whatever “intensifies the sense of individuality in man is good, and that which enfeebles it is bad” (2H). With soaring optimism, Iqbal declared: “Give a
man a keen sense of respect for his own personality, and let him move fearless and free in the immensity of God's earth, and he shall respect the personalities of others and become perfectly virtuous” (2H).

While Buddhism and Christianity regarded self-renunciation, poverty and other forms of unworldliness as virtues, Islam saw them as weakening human individuality. Poverty in Islam is a vice—the Qur'an (28.77) exhorts Muslims not to forget (p. 456) their share in this world (21). As free, equal and responsible individuals, human beings are the makers of their own destiny and require no mediator between themselves and God. Islam rejects the Christian doctrines of redemption and the infallibility of the Church because these assume the “insufficiency of human personality” and create a dependency that Iqbal saw as “obstructing the ethical progress of man” (2J). The ethical ideal of Islam in a nutshell is “a strong Will in a strong Body” (3E).

Unfortunately Indian Muslims had neither the strength of character nor the physical prowess to attain the ethical ideal laid down for them by Islam. Iqbal ascribed this to the visible absence of “life-force” due to the “decay of the religious spirit”, which along with political causes beyond their control had instilled an abject sense of dependence among Muslims in India. Lacking the spirit of initiative, Muslims with their “indifferent commercial morality” failed miserably in business (4B). The goal of educated Muslims was government service, which in a colonized country like India undermined human individuality (4D). As a result, the community faced ruin: the poor had no capital to invest; the middle classes did not start joint economic ventures, due to mutual distrust; and the rich considered commerce and trade beneath their dignity. “Economic dependence,” in Iqbal's opinion, was a “prolific mother of all the various forms of evils” (4D).

There was no immediate solution in sight. Iqbal did not have much faith in “education as understood in this country”, but it was the only thing Muslims could fall back on (4E). The real question was, what sort of an education? Anticipating Amartya Sen's capabilities argument, Iqbal noted that an education which had “no direct bearing on the particular type of character ... you want to develop is absolutely worthless” (4F). The education being imparted in India might ensure its
recipients a livelihood if they managed to wangle a job in the upper echelons of the colonial bureaucracy. Yet an education restricted to the few was no solution:

It is the masses who constitute the backbone of a nation. They ought to be better fed, better housed; and properly educated. Life is not bread and butter alone; it is something more. *It is the healthy character that reflects the national ideal in all its aspects.*

(4F; italics in original)

Educated Muslims were alienated from Islam and knew nothing of their own history. Schools and colleges proceeded on the “false assumption that the ideal of education is the training of human intellect rather than human will” (4H). The superficiality of the educational system in British India was also having an adverse affect on Hindus, who were producing “political idealists whose false reading of history” was causing social disruption (4H). For Indians truly to come into their own, they had to establish educational institutions where their social and historical traditions could be revived: “A living nation is alive” only insofar as it “never forgets its dead” (4G). Iqbal warned Indian Muslims that the world got rid of nations incapable of resolving their difficulties.

II. Islam, Europe and Modernity

Indian Muslims were in a pitiful condition because they had forgotten their dead as well as the ethical ideals of Islam, their distinguishing mark. Membership in the community of Islam was not based on geography but in identity of belief. The only limitation on the liberty granted to the individual Muslim was the interest of the community as the embodiment of Islam. Democracy is the “best form of government for such a community”, Iqbal contended, because its primary ideal is “to let a man develop all the possibilities of his nature by allowing him as much freedom as practicable” (6C). Although democracy was “the most important aspect of Islam as a political ideal”, Muslims had done nothing for the political improvement of Asia: they had left it to a Western nation to revitalize Asia politically (6C). This was most unfortunate when seen in light of the two main political ideals of Islam: (1) a “horror of personal authority” as an impediment to the freedom of human individuality, and (2) the principle of equality, which, by acting as a “leveling force”, had helped
make the early Muslims one of the greatest political powers in the world (6E). Instead of freedom, equality and the intrinsic organic unity of Islam, Indian Muslims in their shackles had “out-Hindued the Hindu himself” by practicing a kind of “double caste system” which left them bitterly divided along sectarian lines (6F).

Although Iqbal acknowledged the disparity between Islamic ideals and Muslim practice, his critics have used it to prepare a long charge sheet against him. A common accusation is that far from elaborating its ideals, he distorted Islam by gratuitously borrowing ideas from Western philosophy. For instance, his celebration of individual freedom is often attributed to his exposure to philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche. Straddling the worlds of Islamic and Western philosophy with consummate skill, Iqbal could detect commonalities where others found incompatibilities, even as he criticized and reformulated their main tenets in accordance with the needs of his own times. It is one thing to suggest that after studying Western philosophy, which he grasped much better than most of his contemporaries in India, Iqbal was led to highlight neglected aspects of the Islamic tradition. But to suggest that he was insufficiently grounded in the Islamic tradition is grossly unfair. Iqbal never ceased bemoaning the slavish imitation of the West by his coreligionists: (p.458)

So blazing hot is the wine of modern civilization,
The Muslim’s earthen body has erupted into flames.
Borrowed light has turned a speck of dust into a fire-fly,
How marvelous is the trickery of the resplendent sun!
New ways have changed the temperament of the youth,
Such beauty, such awakening, such freedom, such fearlessness!

What a bundle of pleasures the new life has brought:
Rivalry, marketing conscience, impatience, greed.
The Muslim assembly is sparkling in the light of the new candle,
But my ancient wisdom is telling the moths:
“O moth! You've derived warmth from the candle's light; Try burning in your own fire like me if you have any warmth of heart”.

(Iqbal n.d.: 272)

Being rooted in his own tradition did not mean closing his mind to new ideas, far less to the cross-fertilization that had taken place historically between Western and Islamic thought. What irked Iqbal was the failure of Western philosophers to acknowledge their intellectual debt to the early Muslims. So if his nostalgia for the past glories of Islam was a bit excessive, it was for reasons other than false pride:

Why cry over sovereignty, it was a temporary thing; There's no escaping the established principles of the world. But those pearls of wisdom, those books of our ancestors, Seeing them in Europe, rent the heart asunder.

(Iqbal n.d.: 234)

He longed to awaken his fellow Muslims from their slumber so that they could reclaim their heritage, revitalize their present and build a future that was truly worthy of the teachings of Islam. In his own words:

How can the transient scene of grief frighten me? I am confident of the destiny of my millat [nation]. My world is free of the component of despair; The news of complete victory is the secret of my zeal. Yes, it is true I keep my eye on the times long gone, I tell an old story to the assembly's audience. Memory of the past is the elixir for my life, My past is the interpretation of my future. I keep that uplifting period before me, I see tomorrow in the mirror of yesterday.

(Iqbal n.d.: 249–50)

Even when absolved of the unpardonable sin of interpreting Islam in light of Western thought, Iqbal has been reprimanded for misinterpreting the Qur'anic (p.459) conception of God’s
omniscience and its implications for individual human freedom (Fazli 2005). This is a far more serious charge since it calls into question the very basis of Iqbal's theory of individual freedom in Islam. The criticism takes its main cues from two debates within the Islamic tradition: (1) between Mutazilite rationalists and Asharite proponents of predestination, over human free choice versus God's omniscience; and (2) over God's immanence versus God's transcendence. At its simplest, the Mutazilites maintained that God had bestowed on human beings a rational free will to decide between good and evil. The Asharites saw this as a denial of God's omniscience and, in the most extreme expressions of their position, argued that there was nothing human beings could do without the foreknowledge and approval of God. This was the kiss of death to any conception of an Islamic ethics, since there can be no moral responsibility in the absence of free choice. The tussle over God's immanence and transcendence revolved around the question of how similar creation is to its creator. Those who upheld divine immanence rarely implied that God is in the material world, as their detractors alleged in labeling them pantheists, but rather maintained that the world itself is inexplicably immersed in God. Iqbal's position on both these questions is of considerable significance in understanding his attitude towards human freedom and equality.

In his mature philosophy, espoused in seven lectures given between 1929 and 1932 and published as The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Iqbal avoided entangling himself in the sterile debate on whether God's absolute omniscience is incompatible with human freedom. Instead he focused on the issue of divine knowledge as living creative action, rejecting notions of God's omniscience as either fixed or passive. Iqbal dismissed the theological controversy surrounding predestination as "pure speculation with no eye to the spontaneity of life". The idea of history as a predetermined order of events allowed no room for "novelty and initiation"; it saved God's foreknowledge of the future at the expense of his freedom. Having retrieved the idea of divine freedom as a spontaneous and unplanned creative act, Iqbal reconciled it with individual human freedom by arguing that human freedom was conferred by God so that human beings could share life, power, and freedom with God (Iqbal 1930/1996: 74–5). His detractors have alleged that he deliberately fudged the Qur'anic view of divine foreknowledge.
in order to construct a philosophical argument in favor of freedom and originality in creation. In their estimation, Iqbal's reconstruction of Islamic religious thought failed because in addition to confusing divine foreknowledge with predestination, he committed the cardinal sin of falling into the trap of pantheism by privileging God's immanence over his transcendence (Fazli 2005).

Others have dismissed these objections on the grounds that the core of Iqbal's philosophy is to be found in his poetry and not in the *Reconstruction* lectures. The truth is that his thought crosses both genres and cannot be arbitrarily compartmentalized. A more forceful line of defense has come from the pre-eminent scholar of Islam, Fazlur Rahman, who called for Iqbal to be rescued from the "posthumous tyranny of interpretation". Describing him as a "great representative thinker of Islam" and not an interpreter, Rahman noted that Iqbal did not identify the central theme in his thought. This has made him acutely vulnerable to misappropriation by advocates of various ideological positions, "ranging from naked Communism to a class conservatism that is an unmistakable voice from the grave". According to Rahman, Iqbal's philosophical system revolves around the notion of reality as a dynamic, creative and ever-expanding spiritual and moral act. This is precisely the idea of God in the Qur'an, a God who bestows upon human beings the "power-in-righteousness" and the "creativity-for-goodness" (Rahman 1963: 439–40, 443).

Without going into the theological and metaphysical nuances of Iqbal's philosophy, it will suffice to say that the binding thread in his poetic and philosophic corpus is the idea of human freedom centered on *khudi*, literally the self or personality, a term which he uses to refer to the self-conscious and dynamic individual. Giving the Qur'anic view of the story of creation in his third *Reconstruction* lecture, he argued that it had nothing to do with the notion of original sin. The main purpose of the Qur'anic story of creation is "to indicate man's rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience". Man's first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice, which is why God forgave the transgression. It was Adam's eagerness to know what was forbidden, as are the occult sciences in Islam, that resulted in his being placed in an environment which, however painful,
was better suited to the development of his intellectual faculties. This was not a punishment so much as an attempt to defeat Satan's object of keeping man "ignorant of the joy of perpetual growth and expansion". Islam places a high value on the individuality and uniqueness of man, who is given the freedom of choice to interpret and master nature, thereby further amplifying his freedom (Iqbal 1930/1996: 78–80).

Iqbal found it surprising that this "unity of human consciousness which constitutes the centre of human personality never really became a point of interest in the history of Muslim thought". He blamed this on the intellectual orientation of the Greeks, Jews, Zoroastrians and Nestorians, who influenced Muslim theological thought with their dualistic conception of the relationship between body and soul. Islamic Sufism, however, understood the intrinsically ethical nature of this unity of inner experience and found its most dramatic expression in the words of great martyr-saint Mansur al-Hallaj: "I am the creative truth." Iqbal conceded that this sort of mystical experience was not communicable or accessible to everyone. This was all the more reason why modern Muslims had to try to comprehend Islam's teachings on the unity of the human personality, its freedom and capacity to act in a creative and purposeful way to alter reality. The task was a daunting one and the "only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude", even if it meant arriving at conclusions that were different from those in the West (87–9).

This was not an overture to cultural relativism of a narrow and bigoted sort. Iqbal believed that Islam, with its conception of the unity of creation (tawhid), was meant for all of humanity and not simply Muslims. Islam was the "birth of inductive intellect", he claimed, which "alone makes man master of his environment". Prophecy not only reached its perfection in Islam but found cause to pronounce its own abolition. The reason for this was that "life cannot for ever be kept in leading strings" and to achieve "full self-consciousness, man must finally be thrown back on his own resources". Echoing the secularization thesis, according to which man assumes responsibility for his own life, Iqbal declared that the end of priesthood and hereditary kingship in Islam, the Qur'an's repeated mention of reason and experience as well as the emphasis on nature and history as sources of human knowledge, are "all different aspects of the same idea of
finality”. This did not mean that there was no room for mystical experience, or that emotion must make way for reason. The inner self and the outer world are both considered sources of knowledge in the Qur’an. By encouraging the development of “an independent critical attitude towards mystic experience” Islam proclaims the end of all personal authority claiming a supernatural origin. The desacralization of individual authority opens up fresh vistas of knowledge in the realm of inner experience. It follows the desacralization of nature implicit in the first half of the Islamic confessional—la ilaha ilallah (There is no God but God)—which aims at creating “the spirit of a critical observation of man’s outer experience by divesting the forces of nature of that Divine character with which earlier cultures had clothed them” (113).
III. Negation and Affirmation

Foreshadowing by several decades Sen's position against uncritical acceptance of beliefs, Iqbal asserted that the principle of doubt was the beginning of all knowledge (114). And the opening word in the Muslim creed, \textit{la}—literally “there is no God”— was a statement of that doubt. Without the power of negation in the \textit{la}, the affirmation of God in \textit{ilaha ilallah} loses its true meaning. The dialectical tension between the negative and the positive constituted the driving force in human history (see Schimmel 1989: 89–91). Iqbal lamented that Muslims could no longer deploy the power of negation to attain positive self-realization. Pious protestations of God’s unity without unified inner action simply confused the form of the Islamic creed with its true substance. In criticizing the self-denying otherworldliness that had crept into the Islamic mystical tradition, Iqbal wanted to see self-affirming and independent-minded individuals engaged in concerted collective action to bring about purposeful and positive change in the world.

(p.462) Discussing the implications of his philosophical insights, Iqbal noted that the foundational principle of Islam was \textit{tawhid}. The Islamic polity was “only a practical means of making this principle a living factor in the intellectual and emotional life of mankind”. It demanded loyalty to God—the ultimate and eternal spiritual basis of all life—not to thrones or any other form of human authority. The Qur’an balanced the immutability of the unity of creation with \textit{ijtihad}, literally “independent reasoning”, the principle of movement in Islam allowing Muslims to adjust to social change without discarding divine guidance. Requiring self-concentrated endeavor and just the right balance between inductive reasoning and intuitive knowledge, \textit{ijtihad} was the inner mental struggle through which Muslims could retrieve the ethical virtues embodied in the Qur’anic revelation. It offered the only hope to Muslims at a time when subjugation to Western imperialism had stripped them of freedom to question and say “no” (Iqbal 1930/1996: 129–30).

According to Iqbal, the Turks alone among the Muslims had deployed the principle of \textit{ijtihad} in the service of their religious and political thought by broadening the scope of \textit{ijtihad} with the help of modern philosophical ideas. While lauding their efforts, Iqbal thought the Turks had erred in concluding that the idea of the state rather than religion was dominant in
Islam. The spiritual and temporal in Islam were not separate spheres of activities. The “nature of an act, however secular in its import, is determined by the attitude of mind with which the agent does it”. As “a single unanalysable reality”, Islam rejects the bifurcation of matter and spirit, or of mind and soul, as contrary to man's inherent organic unity: “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” (135–6).

Modern thought had established beyond any shadow of a doubt that the material world was firmly grounded in the spiritual. There was “no such thing as a profane world”. The secular was “sacred in the roots of its being”. The Prophet of Islam had put it beautifully: “The whole of this earth is a mosque.” A state from the Islamic point of view was needed only to “realize the spiritual in human organization”. As the main working idea in Islam, tawhid translated into “equality, solidarity and freedom”. It was incumbent upon the state “to endeavour to transform these ideal principles” into reality by constructing “a definite human organization” based on Islamic precepts. “It was in this alone”, Iqbal claimed, “that the State in Islam is a theocracy.” Islam was against any form of government “headed by a representative of God on earth who can always screen his despotic will behind his supposed infallibility”. This was what had pitted the Christian state against the Church and a solution had to be found by separating the political from the religious. In Islam there was no established church from which the state could separate. Moreover, “Islam was from the very beginning a civil society, having received from the Quran a set of simple legal principles which, like the twelve tables of the Romans, carried ... great potentialities of expansion and development by interpretation” (136–8).

(p.463) By abolishing the caliphate in 1924, the Turkish Grand National Assembly had shown how the right to independent reasoning could be exercised in modern times. A republican form of government was wholly consistent with the spirit of Islam and an imperative of the time. Though unsure about the ultimate fate of the nationalist ideal in the Muslim world, Iqbal was of the view that for now “every Muslim nation must sink into her own deeper self, temporarily focus her vision on herself alone, until all are strong and powerful to form a living family of republics”. The idealist in him wanted to
think that God was “slowly bringing home ... the truth that 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”. But the pragmatist in him could see that in the absence of “true and living unity”, mere “symbolic overlordship” had little meaning. So he proposed vesting the right of *ijtihad* in an elected Muslim assembly, which “in view of the growth of opposing sects” in Islam was the “only possible form *ijma* can take in modern times” (138, 140, 152).

The poet in Iqbal never ceased to be inspired by Islamic teachings on universal brotherhood, which he considered a better ideal for humanity than the arbitrary boundaries drawn by the protagonists of territorial nationalism. Yet he never accepted a false dichotomy between love of country and love of humanity, between patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Appropriating poet-philosophers like Iqbal or Rabindranath Tagore for a version of cosmopolitanism based on abstract reason alone, as has been done in Western writing on the subject (e.g. Nussbaum and Cohen 2002), strips their thought of its richness. What humanity needed, Iqbal contended, was a spiritual emancipation of the individual based on universal principles for the spiritual evolution of human society. Europe had become the “greatest hindrance” to “man's ethical advancement” because its idealistic systems were built on pure reason, devoid of the “fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring”. For Muslims, on the other hand, the “spiritual basis of life is a matter of conviction for which even the least enlightened man ... can lay down his life”. Given that the basic idea in Islam was that there would be no further revelation, Muslims “ought to be spiritually one of the most emancipated peoples on earth”. But emerging from the “spiritual slavery” of pre-Islamic Arabia, the early Muslim community failed to appreciate the true significance of the idea of the finality of prophecy. If contemporary Muslims were to grasp this point and reconstruct their social life according to the ethical principles outlined in the Qur'an, they might yet attain that “spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam” (Iqbal 1930/1996: 156–7).
Critics have scoffed at Iqbal's concept of a “spiritual democracy”, describing it as “ornamental prose” aimed at awakening the spirit of struggle among Indian Muslims but devoid of any concrete guidelines on how to establish such a form of government (Ahmed 2002: 87–8). A poetic visionary, Iqbal was clearly more interested in changing hearts and minds than in detailing the nuts and bolts of a system (p.464) of government where authority was to be exercised in the name of God rather than ordinary mortals. From the perspective of the history of ideas, the concept of a “spiritual democracy” represents the crystallization of Iqbal's views on human freedom and equality. For a fuller exposition of “spiritual democracy”, one has to turn to his poetry, which, contrary to what some of his detractors have suggested, is organically linked to his philosophy. This is evident in Iqbal's treatment of two key personalities in contemporary Muslim history—Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1839–1897), the Persian propagandist and political activist, and Said Halim Pasha (1863–1921), the Turkish modernist reformer—in both the Reconstruction lectures and his poetic magnum opus, the Javid-nama.

In the lectures, Iqbal singled out Jamaluddin al-Afghani as the one Muslim whose keen insights into the history of Islamic thought and life, “combined with a broad vision engendered by his wide experience of men and manners…made him a living link between the past and the future”. If only Afghani had been able to channel his “indefatigable but divided energy” into studying Islam, Muslims, “intellectually speaking, would have been on a much more solid ground today”. In the same vein, Iqbal hailed Halim Pasha for recognizing that Islam was “a unity of the eternal verities of freedom, equality and solidarity” which refused to be limited to any specific territory (Iqbal 1930/1996: 89, 137). But the Turkish Grand Vizier also realized that the ethical ideals of Islam had been lost sight of on account of local influences:

The only alternative open to us, then, is to tear off from Islam the hard crust which has immobilized an essentially dynamic outlook on life, and to rediscover the original verities of freedom, equality, and solidarity with a view to rebuild our moral, social, and political ideals out of their original simplicity and universality. (138)
Looking to rediscover Islam’s lost dynamism and universal ethical goals, Iqbal took his poetry to new heights in the *Javid-nama*, which is inspired by the Prophet’s ascension to the heavens and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. With the master of mysticism Jalaluddin Rumi as his guide, the poet’s imaginary spiritual journey through the heavens brings him into contact with several luminaries with whom he discusses the state of the world in general and that of Muslims in particular. During his stop on the planet Mercury, he encounters his two heroes—al-Afghani and Halim Pasha—with whom he has an engaging conversation on European notions of territorial nationalism, communism, capitalism, imperialism, nationalism and democracy. Afghani, the paragon of Islamic universalism, gives Iqbal a succinct assessment of the contradiction between the unity of body and soul and human freedom, and the artificial distinctions of territorial nationalism:

The Lord of the West, cunning from head to toe, taught the people of religion the concept of Country.  

(p.465)

He thinks of the centre, while you are at discord —  
give up this talk of Syria, Palestine, Iraq!  
........  
What is religion? To rise up from the face of the dust  
so that the pure soul may become aware of itself!  
........  
Man of reason, the soul is not contained in dimensions;  
the free man is a stranger to every fetter and chain,  
the free man rails against the dark earth  
for it beseems not the falcon to act like a mouse.  
This handful of earth to which you give the name “country”,  
this so-called Egypt, and Iran, and Yemen—  
there is a relationship between a country and its people  
in that it is out of its soil that a nation rises;  
but if you look carefully at this relationship  
you will descry a subtlety finer than a hair.

(Iqbal 1932/1966: 55–6)
Along with the denial of human unity and freedom, Europe had fostered the soul-destroying ideologies of communism and capitalism. In Afghani's estimation, the author of *Das Kapital* was a believer at heart but an infidel in mind. There was implicit truth in Marx's philosophy but he had lost sight of the whole picture:

... Communism has nothing to do save with the body.  
The religion of that prophet who knew not truth is founded upon equality of the belly;  

........  
Capitalism too is a fattening of the body,  

........  
The soul of both is impatient and intolerant, both of them know not God, and deceive mankind.  
One lives by production, the other by taxation and man is a glass caught between these two stones.  
The one puts to rout science, religion, art, the other robs body of soul, the hand of bread.

(57)

Continuing the attack, Afghani elaborated upon Islam's teachings on equality and respect for human beings, who were asked to honor body and soul so that they can soar to the loftiest heights of creativity and self-fulfillment. Those who believed in God need no station in life. As servants of God, they were free, needed no slaves and were slaves to none. Their kingdom and laws came from God. While the self-seeking mind only thought of its own welfare, God's revelation considered the welfare and profit of all. When someone other than God decided what was right and wrong, the strong man tyrannized the weak:  

(62)  

What results from the laws and constitutions of kings?  
Fat lords of the manor, peasants lean as spindles!  
Woe to the constitution of the democracy of Europe!
Afghani condemned Europe for talking up democracy at home but spreading its imperial tentacles to steal the goods of other countries:

God has called the earth simply our “enjoyment”,
this valueless “enjoyment” is gratis, gratis.
You landowner, take a wise hint from me:
take from the land your food and grave, but take it not.

(62–3)

The kingdom of the world belonged to those who only knew the phrase “one God” and lived a life of such poverty that they radiated the light of spirituality. In his message to the Russians inviting them to accept the Qur’anic revelation, Afghani applauded them for breaking the back of imperial rule, as had the Muslims. But the Russian people had to turn this “no” into a living affirmation, otherwise their new world order could not rest on a firm foundation:

Find yourself by abandoning Europe!
If you are apprised by the Westerners’ cunning
give up the wolf, take on the lion's trade.
What is wolfishness? The search for food and means;
the Lion of the Lord seeks freedom and death.
Without the Koran, the lion is a wolf;
the poverty of the Koran is the root of empire.
The poverty of the Koran is the mingling of meditation and reason—
I have never seen reason perfect without meditation.

(68)

It was not as if Iqbal failed to see the irony of Afghani’s stirring account of the excellences of Islam. As the free-thinking living stream, he interrupted the Persian activist at one stage, exclaiming that if what he said was true then either the Muslims were dead or the Qur’an was dead. Said Halim Pasha used the opportunity to get in a word of his own, commenting that God’s religion had been rendered more “shameful than unbelief” because the “mullah is a believer trading in unfaith”. Oblivious to the message of the Qur’an, which he considered little more than a fable, and with no
share in the wisdom of the Prophet, the mullah was the black-hearted, visionless, tasteless, idle gossiper whose hairsplitting arguments had fragmented the community: (p.467)

Seminary and mullah, before the secrets of the Book,
are as one blind from birth before the light of the sun.
The infidel's religion is the plotting and planning of Holy War;
the mullah's religion is corruption in the Way of God.

(65)

IV. Conclusion: The Individual and the Collective
To conclude that the visible lack of freedom and equality in the Muslim world for the past several decades is not due to Islam but to Muslims having lost their moorings in a West-intoxicated, materialistic, self-serving and Godless world may seem a trifle too convenient. It will certainly fail to sway those who consider religion to be the major stumbling-block in the way of Muslims joining the rest of the world in the forward march towards enlightenment and “moderation”. But Iqbal's case for the revitalization of Islam's ethical ideals on freedom and equality does force one to pause and consider whether invoking the old oppositional framework between religion and secularism is really valid in this context. Without denying Iqbal's calculated projection of his Muslim identity, it would be unfortunate if his use of Islamic terminology were to dissuade us from understanding the logic he espouses with regard to issues of human freedom and equality.

Even as the religious paradigm separates Iqbal from Sen's secularism, there is evidence to suggest that they occupy considerable common ground on issues of freedom and equality. The primary refrain in Iqbal's philosophy and poetry is that of the dynamic, self-affirming individual working in conjunction with the collective for a richer, better balanced and more meaningful human existence. Like Sen, Iqbal advocated a needs-based approach to education, warning against the dangers of treating human beings as machines. Iqbal shared the Nobel laureate's acute concern for poverty and the future of the dispossessed as a living issue and not merely a philosophical one. Those who may be inclined to dismiss much of what Iqbal had to say about freedom and
equality as the idealistic musings of a man who was a poet and a philosopher need to be reminded that Iqbal also fancied himself a hands-on politician, eager and willing to tackle poverty and inequality through concrete political action.

It was with this intention that Iqbal wrote to Mohammed Ali Jinnah on 28 May 1937. “The problem of bread is becoming more and more acute”, he told the seasoned constitutional lawyer, who had returned from self-imposed exile in London to again take up the leadership of the All-India Muslim League. The Muslim was beginning to feel that he had been “going down and down during the last 200 years”. The common view was that this “poverty is due to Hindu money-lending or capitalism”, since the “perception that equality is? due to foreign rule has not yet fully come to him”. But it was “bound to come” and when it did, the “atheistic socialism of Jawahar Lal [Nehru] is not likely to receive much response from the Muslims”. The burning question of the day, as Iqbal saw it, was how “to solve the problem of Muslim poverty”. He was certain that “the whole future of the League depends on the League’s activity to solve this question”. If the League could “give no such promises”, Iqbal was quite certain that “the Muslim masses will remain indifferent to it as before”. He thought it fortunate that there was “a solution in the enforcement of the Laws of Islam and its further development in the light of modern ideas”. His close, sustained study of Islamic law had led him to believe that “if this system of Law is properly understood and applied, at last the right to subsistence is secured to everybody”. But the implementation of Islamic sharia was “impossible in this country without a free Muslim state or states”. It had been his “honest conviction for many years” and he still believed that this was “the only way to solve the problem of bread for Muslims as well as to secure a peaceful India” (Allana 1967: 129-30).

In the event Iqbal was more successful in inspiring the movement for a free Muslim state of Pakistan than in solving the problem of poverty and inequality for the majority of the subcontinent’s Muslims. This is why Amartya Sen, whose family came from Dhaka in what is now Bangladesh, was perhaps destined to meet the Pakistani economist, Mahbub-ul-Haq, in Cambridge, forge a lifelong friendship and lay the basis of what has come to be variously known as the entitlements, capabilities and human development approach. It is of course another matter whether the hopes and dreams
of these men, who pioneered the idea of quality over quantity as the ultimate goal of human development as freedom, remain to be fully realized. That idea, at least, is one undeniable thing that Amartya Sen has in common with the poetic visionary of Pakistan.

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Notes:
(1) Unless otherwise stated in the References, translations are my own.
(2) References to this lecture are by paragraph number of the Internet version.

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