

ISLAM

THE STRAIGHT PATH



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Islam to demonstrate its relevance and validity for modern life. On the one hand, he placed himself within the revivalist tradition of Shah Wali Allah by maintaining that a return to pristine Islam necessitated purifying Islam of many of the teachings and interpretations of the *ulama*. His goal was to

justify without any wavering, what I acknowledge to be the original religion of Islam which God and the messenger have disclosed, not that religion which the *ulama* and the preachers have fashioned.⁶⁰

On the other hand, he differed with Shah Wali Allah and other eighteenth-century revivalists in his method. His exercise of *ijtihad* was not simply to use reason to get back to original interpretations of Islam covered over by *ulama* scholasticism, but to boldly reinterpret Islam in light of its revealed sources.

The extent of his use of reason, the degree to which he reinterpreted Islam, and his borrowing from the West marked him off from revivalists of the previous century. However, Ahmad Khan did see a continuity between his own work and that of previous scholars. Just as in the past Muslim theology had developed out of the need to respond to a social context, so the Muslims of modern India required a new interpretation of Islam to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam and modern science: "Today we need, as in former days, a modern theology by which we either render futile the tenets of modern sciences or [show them to be] doubtful, or bring them into harmony with the doctrines of Islam." ⁶¹ Ahmad Khan's use of reason was far more rationalist than that of Muhammad Abduh. Muhammad Abduh believed that there was no necessary contradiction between true religion and science, but he believed that religion and reason functioned on two different levels or in two different spheres. Ahmad Khan, influenced by nineteenth-century European rationalism and natural philosophy, much of which he regarded as consonant with the rationalist principles of the Mutazila and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), believed that Islam was the religion of reason and nature. There could be no contradiction between the word of God and the work of God (nature): "If that religion is in conformity with human nature . . . then it is true." ⁶² Islam was in total harmony with the laws of nature and therefore compatible with modern scientific thought. These premises, reason and the laws of nature, governed Ahmad Khan's interpretation of the Quran and Sunna and his treatment of such questions as evolution, miracles, and the existence of angels. Though he maintained that the Quran was the final authority, in practice his rationalist approach meant that where a seeming conflict existed between text and reason, reason prevailed. Quranic texts

THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Two men dominate the Islamic modernist movement in India—Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98), a contemporary of al-Afghani and Abduh, and Muhammad Iqbal (1875–1938). As the eighteenth century had produced Islamic revivalists like Shah Wali Allah and Sayyid Ahmad Barelewi, the aftermath of the "Mutiny" of 1857, what some Indian historians have called the first war of independence, proved a turning point in Indian Muslim history. The threat to Muslim power, the decline of its society, the question of whether India was any longer a Muslim empire, were all moot points now. The war resulted in British rule and the end of Muslim dominance of India. The Muslim community stood defeated, powerless, and demoralized. Although both Hindus and Muslims had participated in the uprising, the British held the Muslims primarily responsible. In the aftermath, they questioned the loyalty of Muslims in a non-Muslim state. At the same time, the majority of the *ulama* would have nothing to do with these "enemies of Islam." Both British doubts about the loyalty of Muslims and Muslim withdrawal undermined the future of Indian Muslims vis-à-vis their British masters and the Hindu majority. Into the void stepped Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Like al-Afghani and Abduh, he was convinced that the survival of the Muslim community necessitated a bold reinterpretation of Islam and the acceptance, not rejection, of the best in Western thought. However, unlike al-Afghani and Rida, Ahmad Khan preached acceptance of the political reality of British rule and restricted his Islamic concerns to the Muslims of India. He was convinced that both political resistance and appeals to pan-Islam were impractical, given the political reality.

Like his Salafi coreligionists in the Middle East, Sayyid Ahmad Khan believed that the survival of Islam depended on the rejection of unquestioned acceptance (*taqlid*) of medieval interpretations of Islam and the exercise of *ijtihad* in order to produce fresh interpretations of

questions that future generations would continue to grapple with. His modernist orientation remained a major alternative influence to that of the more traditional *ulama*, influencing the education and outlook of many Muslim elite leaders in the subcontinent.⁶⁴ Ahmad Khan's place and importance in the chain of Indian reformist thought was acknowledged by the man whose name would come to be synonymous with Islamic reform in the twentieth century, Muhammad Iqbal:

[Ahmad Khan was the] first modern Muslim to catch a glimpse of the positive character of the age that was coming. . . . But the real greatness of the man consists in the fact that he was the first Indian Muslim who felt the need for a fresh orientation of Islam and worked for it.⁶⁵

Muhammad Iqbal (1875–1938) represented the next phase in modern Islam. He combined an early Islamic education with advanced degrees from Cambridge and Munich in philosophy and law. In a sense, he represented the best of what Sayyid Ahmad Khan might have wished. Although by the twentieth century the situation in the Indian subcontinent had changed from that of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's age, Muslims, who were now obtaining modern educations, still lived in a society whose *ulama* generally preached an Islam that did not adequately address modern realities.

No wonder then that the younger generation . . . demand a fresh orientation of their faith. With the reawakening of Islam, therefore, it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has taught and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision, and if necessary, reconstruction of theological thought in Islam.⁶⁶

Muslim corporate identity also continued to be an important issue. However, it was not one of loyalty to the British raj, but instead, independence and national identity. The Muslim community was divided over the question of Muslim participation in the Indian independence movement. Many had joined with Hindus in the Congress party and pressed for the creation of a single, secular nation-state. Others increasingly argued that, given strong communal sentiments and politics, India's Muslim minority would face a serious threat to its identity and survival in a predominantly Hindu secular state. As with much of Islamic history, and certainly the history of Islamic revival and reform movements, religious reflection and interpretation were conditioned by and intertwined with the political life of the community.

Muhammad Iqbal's profession was the law; his passion, writing poetry and prose; his lifelong concern, Muslim religious and political sur-

that contained miraculous or supernatural language were interpreted metaphorically or allegorically, since miracles were contrary to the laws of nature. Yet, even here, he used his interpretation of the Quran to support his rationalist position: "I do not deny the possibility of miracles because they are against reason, but because the Quran does not support the happening of events or occurrences that are against the laws of nature or violate the usual course of things."⁶³ Ahmad Khan also took a hard, critical look at the traditions of the Prophet. He questioned the historicity and authenticity of many, if not most, traditions, much as the noted scholars Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht would later do. He advocated a critical reexamination of the *hadith*, including those in the two major collections of Muslim and Bukhari, and the acceptance of only those that could be traced directly to the Prophet himself.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's approach to Islamic reform was both theoretical and practical. In addition to his prolific writings, which included a multivolume commentary on the Quran, he recognized the need for practical implementation through educational reforms. He established a translation society to make Western scientific thought more accessible, and founded the Anglo-Muhammadan Oriental College at Aligarh (renamed in 1920 Aligarh Muslim University), modeled on Cambridge University. Through these and other educational societies and journals, he promoted Western education in Muslim India. Like al-Afghani and Abduh, he realized that the future of the Muslim community depended on the ability to produce a new generation of leaders equipped to face the challenges and demands of modernity and the West. However, his strong affinity for the West, symbolized by his adoption of a European lifestyle and his acceptance of knighthood from Queen Victoria of England, undermined his influence. Many of the *ulama* and anticolonialists dismissed "Sir" Sayyid's loyalism and reformism as political and cultural capitulation to the British.

While Ahmad Khan did not produce the integrated curriculum to educate his version of the new Muslim leader or the new science of theology he had deemed so necessary for the future survival of the Muslim community, he did contribute to the spirit of reform in the subcontinent. An heir to the heritage of Wali Allah, he expanded and, in the end, took Islamic reform in new directions, extending its scope to include a rationalist reinterpretation of the Quran and a reevaluation of Prophetic traditions and the law. The issues that his work raised regarding the relationship of Islam to modern Western thought, the place and role of reason in interpreting religion, and the relationship of the Muslim community to the Hindu community were real

vival and reform. From the time he returned from his doctoral studies in Europe, he devoted himself to the revival of Indian Islam. He did this both as a poet-philosopher, and more reluctantly, as a politician. He placed himself within the revivalist tradition of Ahmad Sirhindi, Shah Wali Allah, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, while addressing the questions of Islamic modernism. Islam and the Muslim community were in danger; they remained in decay and decline, were politically powerless, morally corrupted, and culturally backward. All of this, for Iqbal, stood in sharp contrast with the inner nature of Islam, which was dynamic and creative. Drawing on his Islamic heritage and influenced by his study of Western philosophy (Hegel, Bergson, Fichte, Nietzsche), he developed his own synthesis and interpretation of Islam in response to the sociohistorical conditions and events of his time. Nowhere is this synthesis of East and West more evident than in Iqbal's dynamic concept of the self. Rejecting Plato's static universe and those aspects of Sufism that denied the affirmation of the self in the world, Iqbal, utilizing the Quran, developed a dynamic *Weltanschauung* in his theory of selfhood that embraced all reality: individual self, society, and God. For Iqbal, the relationship of God to Islamic society and the Muslim to society incorporates both permanence and change. God, the ultimate or absolute self, has a creative, dynamic life that is both permanent and changing, as creation is the unfolding of the inner possibilities of God in a single and yet continuing act. The individual, the basic unit of Muslim society, is Quranically (2:30) charged as God's vicegerent with the mission of carrying out God's will on earth. Muslims share in this ongoing process of creation, bringing order out of chaos, by endeavoring to produce the model society to be emulated by others. An interdependence exists; the individual is elevated through the community, and the community is organized by the individual.

At the heart of Iqbal's vision of Islam is the unity of God (*tawhid*). The oneness of God applies not only to the nature of God but also to His relationship to the world. As God is the one creator, sustainer, and judge of the universe, so too His will or law governs every aspect of His creation and is to be realized in every area of life. This belief is the basis for Iqbal's view of the community as a religious-political state and of the supremacy of Islamic law in Muslim society. Based on the Prophetic tradition that "the whole of this earth is a mosque" and on Muhammad's role as Prophet as well as head of the Medinan state, Iqbal concluded, "All that is secular is therefore sacred in the roots of its being."⁶⁷ There is no bifurcation of the spiritual and the temporal.

Church and state are not two sides of the same thing, for Islam is a single, unanalyzable reality.⁶⁸ Nowhere is this more evident than in Islamic law. Iqbal reasserted the Sharia's role as the comprehensive guideline for a society of believers and the need for it to be reintroduced into Muslim societies. During the nineteenth century, Islamic law, with the exception of family law, had been displaced in many Muslim countries by European codes. In the Indian subcontinent, the interaction of Islamic law and British law had produced Anglo-Muhammadan law, much of which was based on British common law. For Iqbal, Islamic law was central to the unity and life of the Muslim community: "When a community forsakes its Law, its parts are severed, like scattered dust. The being of the Muslim rests alone on Law, which is in truth the inner core of the Apostle's faith."⁶⁹

Convinced that the survival of Islam and the Muslim community's role as a political and moral force in South Asia were dependent on the centrality of Islamic law, Iqbal emphasized to his friend and coworker Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League party and the founder of Pakistan, the need for a Muslim state or states in India. However, Iqbal did not have in mind the simple restoration of law as it was delineated in the doctrines of the law schools. For Iqbal, just as God has a creative, dynamic life that is both permanent and changing, Islam's way of life as interpreted in Islamic law is itself dynamic and open to change: "[T]he early doctors of law taking their cue from this groundwork evolved a number of legal systems. But with all their comprehensiveness, these systems are after all individual interpretations and as such can not claim any finality."⁷⁰

Iqbal distinguished between eternal, immutable principles of the Sharia and those regulations that were the product of human interpretation and thus subject to change. He regarded the condition of Islam as a "dogmatic slumber" that had resulted in five hundred years of immobility due to the blind following of tradition and believed that the restoration of Islamic vitality required the "reconstruction" of the sources of Islamic law. While acknowledging the role of the *ulama* in the past, Iqbal blamed them for the conservatism that had characterized Islam since the fall of Baghdad. With their perpetuation of what he called the fiction of the closing of the door of *ijtihad*, these scholar-guardians of Islam, who were the followers of those who had developed Islamic law, stopped the dynamic process of reinterpretation and reapplication of Islamic principles to new situations. Instead, they were content to simply perpetuate established traditions. Iqbal rejected the centuries-long tendency to regard Islamic law as fixed and sacrosanct. Like other Islamic revivalists

and modernists, he believed that Muslims must once again reassert their right to *ijtihad*, to reinterpret and reapply Islam to changing social conditions. This right belonged to all qualified Muslims and not just the *ulama*. He believed that the traditional criteria used to designate one as an interpreter was both self-serving and shortsighted. The failure of the *ulama* to broaden their training left them ill prepared for resolving many new, modern issues. For these reasons, Iqbal extended and redefined *ijtihad* and *ijma*. He suggested that the right to interpret and apply Islam for the community be transferred from the *ulama* to a national assembly or legislature. This collective or corporate *ijtihad* would then constitute the authoritative consensus (*ijma*) of the community. In this way, he also transformed the meaning of consensus of the community from its traditional one, the agreement of the religious leaders and scholars, to the consensus of modern legislative assemblies, the majority of whose members would have a better knowledge of contemporary affairs. In addition, he recommended that, because of the complex nature of many modern problems, the legislature should seek the advice of experts from traditional and modern disciplines. Shortly after its establishment, Pakistan would establish such a council of experts, the Islamic Ideology Council. Iqbal's approach proved attractive to modernists as a way to enhance the legitimacy of parliamentary government and reforms in family law. However, threatened by an outlook that diminished their status and power in society, the *ulama* were resistant.

While Iqbal admired the accomplishments of the West—its dynamic spirit, intellectual tradition, and technology—he was critical of its excesses, such as European imperialism and colonialism, the economic exploitation of capitalism, the atheism of Marxism, and the moral bankruptcy of secularism. Therefore, he turned to the past to “rediscover” principles and values that could be employed to reconstruct an alternative Islamic model for modern Muslim society. This resulted in the discovery of Islamic versions of democracy and parliamentary government, precedents in Islamic belief that, through reinterpretation, could be used to develop Islamic equivalents to Western concepts and institutions. Thus, for example, Iqbal concluded that because of the centrality of such beliefs as the equality and brotherhood of believers, democracy was the most important political ideal in Islam. Though history, after the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, had prevented the community from realizing this Islamic ideal, it remains a duty for the Muslim community. That Iqbal did not believe that he was creating an Islamic rationale for simply copying Western values and institutions is strikingly evident in his conclusion that England embodied this “Muslim” quality:

Democracy has been the great mission of England in modern times . . . it is one aspect of our own political ideal that is being worked out in it. It is . . . the spirit of the British Empire that makes it the greatest Muhammadan Empire in the world.⁷¹

The very bases for Islamic democracy—the equality and brotherhood of all Muslims—militated against Iqbal's acceptance of the concept of nationalism. Although as a young man he had been an Indian nationalist, he returned from his studies in Europe committed to pan-Islamism. In addition to considering territorial nationalism as antithetical to the universal brotherhood established by Muhammad and embodied in the caliphate, he regarded nationalism as the tool used by colonialism to dismember the Muslim world. The political ideal of Islam was a transnational community that transcended ethnic, racial, and national ties; it was based on an inner cohesion that stemmed from the unity of the community's religiopolitical ideal. As with al-Afghani and others, Iqbal's pan-Islamic commitment was tempered by political realism. He accepted the need for Muslims to gain national independence, but believed that as a family of nations based on a common spiritual heritage, common ideals, and a common law—the Sharia—they should form their own League of Nations. He applied this rationale to the situation of Indian Muslims and in 1930 reluctantly concluded that internal Hindu-Muslim communal harmony was impossible. Iqbal became convinced that the threat of Hindu dominance in an independent India necessitated the establishment of a separate region or state for the Muslims of India in order to preserve their identity and distinctive way of life:

The nature of the Prophet's religious experience, as disclosed in the Quran, is wholly different [from that of Christianity]. It is individual experience creative of a social order. Its immediate outcome is the fundamentals of a polity with implicit legal concepts whose civic significance can not be belittled merely because their origin is revelational. The religious ideal of Islam is organically related to the social order which it has created. The rejection of the one will eventually involve the rejection of the other. Therefore the construction of a polity on [Indian] national lines, if it means a displacement of the Islamic principles of solidarity, is simply unthinkable to a Muslim.⁷²

If Sayyid Ahmad Khan had been the traditionally educated Muslim who sought to make modern Western liberal thought Islamically acceptable, Muhammad Iqbal was the modern, Western-educated Muslim who reinterpreted Islam in conjunction with Western thought to demonstrate its relevance as a viable alternative to Christian European and Marxist ideologies.