Authenticity & Islamic Liberalism
Excerpts

Indeed, whenever, we talk of God or His actions we come across an opaque wall of noetic ambiguity or vacuity (in religious language, a sense of mystery and bafflement). We should thus not demand or expect noetic transparency when we use religious language. Beliefs that God 'exists' or that God 'revealed' the Quran are thus beliefs in a very different sense from beliefs like 'snakes exist' or 'Mohan revealed this secret to Sohan'. We know more or less exactly the situation in which the above sentences would be accepted as true even if we may not be able to give an exact analysis of their meaning, as desired by the British philosopher, Moore. Moreover, if someone were to deny such beliefs, we know how to establish them. In other words, we know both what they designate and how they are tested as true or false. But such is not the case where the word 'God' is used. We know neither what beliefs about God actually connote; nor how such beliefs could be made plausible, if not actually proved

In the final analysis religious faith is an existential conviction, which may dawn suddenly or gradually, like love, rather than a belief, which could be inductively or deductively established or proved. Again, the religious response to the universe is strikingly similar to, though not identical with or totally reducible to, the aesthetic response. Significantly, the Quran repeatedly exhorts man to reflect upon the beauty and wonder of nature and also of man's own inner self. The verses of the Quran and the phenomena of nature both are called 'ayat' or signs which may evoke and reinforce faith in God for one who seeks truth with humility and sincerity. Consider the following Quranic verses:

(3:190-191)
Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the difference of night and day are tokens (of His sovereignty) for men of understanding, such as remember Allah, standing, sitting, and reclining and consider the creation of the heavens and the earth and say: Our Lord thou created not in vain, Glory be to thee: Preserve us from the doom of fire.

The Quran is certainly not a textbook of natural and social science, even as it is not a magic book of ritual recitation for attaining one's worldly desires and objectives. The Quran can be no substitute for the laborious learning process of observation, experiment, formulation of hypotheses and their verification in the field of inductive knowledge and of the rigorous grasp of logical connections in the field of deductive knowledge. The Quran makes no difference to, and leaves untouched, the pursuit of inductive and deductive truth, which falls in the domain of natural and social sciences. Nor does the Quran prove or claim to prove the basic beliefs which constitute the content of 'faith in the unseen'—the existence of God, revelation, life after death, and so on.

The Quran approaches such matters in an evocative rather than in a ratiocinative manner, and rightly so. The Quran exhorts man to look at nature and into himself and reflect again and again on the mystery of creation and holds out, to the sincere seeker, the promise of attainment of truth. This is quite different from deducing God's existence from a self-evident truth or set of truths. Indeed, the Quran dispels the illusion of the power of reason to prove or disprove the contents of 'faith in the unseen' (iman bil ghaib).

Apart from the importance of correctly grasping the Quranic approach to the above matters, discovering the right method of semantic interpretation of the Quranic text is the crux of the matter. Though classical Islamic scholars and divines have done valuable work in this field, much greater labors and more refined analytical techniques and tools are needed for dealing with this crucial issue.7

Keeping in view the above distinction in the Quranic themes of the Meccan and Medinian periods, it is, perhaps, advisable to study the Quran, neither in the present conventional order, nor in the strictly chronological order (as advocated by some western scholars and commentators), but to focus one's attention, by and large, upon the Meccan verses prior to reading the Medinian ones. There cannot be any rigid plan of reading the Quran, just as there cannot be any one perfect or ideal plan of enjoying the beauties of nature. One must discover for oneself the order proper for his own reading. This will be readily appreciated once we realize that the Quran is not a systematic book with interconnected chapters, but rather a universe to which one should respond in his own authentic manner. I, for one, suggest that after finishing the first and second surahs one reads surah 57, Al-Hadid (The Iron), and after that the surahs composing the last part numbered thirty. This should be followed by the shorter surahs composing parts 25-29. The reader may then turn to the longer surahs composing parts 3-5. This much reading would cover exactly one-third of the contents of the Quran. The remaining two-thirds of the Quran can be studied in any order whatsoever.

Turning to the sphere of religion, 'authentic faith/religious belief' means that the faith of a person springs from his 'heart' without any doubt, pretence, hypocrisy or motive of worldly reward (as distinct from spiritual salvation). In other words, the profession of faith corresponds with a genuine belief, attitude or response without any pose, desire to impress, deceive, gain any advantage exclusively linked with the profession of belief, and so on.

Authentic faith leads to either willing or spontaneous action in accordance with the requirements of the faith without cajoling, coercing, or luring the agent into the desired action. Authenticity is a matter of degrees and the highest degree of authenticity leads to spontaneous action, while a relatively lower degree of authenticity leads to willing action by the agent. The total absence of appropriate action, or action performed out of fear of

worldly punishment or lure of worldly reward signifies the lack of authentic faith behind the verbalization of a creed. In other words, faith is active commitment, or an inner state of 'being' ever turning into 'doing' by virtue of an inner motivational nisus or necessity quite independent of fear or hope of gain.

An authentic Muslim/Christian/Hindu is a person, who inwardly accepts, for its own sake, the system of beliefs, values, obligations and behavior patterns deemed to be the central core of the religion, and acts accordingly. If, however, the person inwardly dissents from some feature of the system but freely, that is, without any extraneous motive of fear or reward, opts to defer to the system (because of the overwhelming depth appeal of the system as a whole) and also moulds his actions accordingly, he too may be said to be an authentic believer. If, however, such a person remains in a state of inner doubt, tension and indecision or ignores the conflict between his inner responses and some feature of the system, or tries to rationalize the stipulated 'higher wisdom' of the system by arguments which he (in his heart of hearts) rejects, he would cease to be an authentic believer.

Fear of others leads to lack of communication with others or social alienation, while fear of one's own inner freedom leads to lack of communication with one's deepest self or self-alienation—a condition in which men live, think and act in conformity with external norms and expectations. Such men profess beliefs and values, religious or secular, without the joy of commitment and the satisfaction of sincere action, and then they run after compensatory substitutes like sensual pleasure, organizational power, prestige and similar goals.

The self-integrated and authentic person, on the other hand, (no matter what religion he may profess) communicates with his own deepest centre and also that of others for whom he feels a sense of human kinship and ontological harmony overriding all difference of caste, color or creed. Such a person is self-integrated, socially integrated and cosmically integrated, radiating spiritual peace and cosmic love as a flower gives fragrance to all without questioning their caste, color or creed. His beliefs and values are not apparel, which he can discard to suit his own convenience or that of others, out of fear or favor, but a part of his bones, as it were.

The remarkable progress of the natural and the social sciences during the modern age has enormously increased the range of man's free choice in dealing with nature and society both. For instance, man can now control his population growth and, hopefully, even the sex of his progeny, conquer disease and poverty, make deserts bloom or colonize the moon. Likewise, man can now abolish monarchy, dis-establish the church, nationalize the means of production, equalize the sexes, discontinue free elections and last but not least (if he so chooses) banish God from his ideal society. The novel feature of the human situation in the contemporary period is that he can banish religion without

giving up morality, philosophy, art, literature, in brief, the various elements of the good life. This degree of freedom was just not possible a few centuries earlier, since all the above aspects of the good life formed an integral part of religion, which functioned as a total map of the good life. Moreover, individual liberty was very restricted, and no one could freely criticize the mores of his group with impunity. Today he may do so fully, in theory, and largely, in practice, in all democratic societies. Today man can claim to pursue morality without God or religion as is done in communist society, or by secular humanists like Mill, Russell, Dewey and others.

Well versed in both Islamic and Western thought, Iqbal was the most gifted and qualified Muslim luminary of the age to nourish and foster Sir Syed's nascent Islamic liberalism in the light of modern thought. And, indeed, he did attempt to do this in his famous work, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. Unlike Sir Syed's confused rationalism, Iqbal put forward a systematic theory of knowledge, which does justice to the claims of reason as well as intuition or feeling, holding that it is wrong to dismiss feeling as mere subjective emotion devoid of any epistemic status. His rejection of the proofs of God's existence and his avowedly existentialist approach to religious faith is a definite advance upon Sir Syed's religious rationalism. This existentialism could well have flowered into full-fledged Islamic liberalism, as defined in this essay, if Iqbal could have wielded greater historical and sociological perspicacity. But, instead, Iqbal reversed Sir Syed's religious liberalism in regard to the crucial issue of the proper jurisdiction of religion.

Though Iqbal could be called an Islamic liberal, in a broad sense, his liberalism remained ambivalent and halting because he neglected the sociology of religion. Despite a fairly wide range of his central argument in his attempted reconstruction of religious thought, Iqbal nowhere raised the crucial problem of the function of religion in the contemporary human situation. By and large, Iqbal accepted the totalist approach to Islam. Rejecting the more or less unconscious thrust of Sir Syed's thinking in the direction of a pragmatic separation between the church and the state, Iqbal once again, forcefully and categorically, affirmed the doctrine of the organic unity of the church and the state as the differentia of Islam, and held that without such unity religion loses all social relevance and becomes mere ritualism. This meant dismissing without much ado Sir Syed's pioneering efforts to find religious legitimacy for 'functional secularism', that is, a secular approach for Muslims living in a plural society, in regard to political, economic, social and cultural matters.

My submission is that something more than tolerance is involved in a positive sharing and enjoying of an alternative world-view. It requires a certain conception of religious truth. It requires a whole philosophical, analytical and meta-philosophical background. If you think that religious truths are just like other propositions and are to be viewed in the

logic of truth or falsehood, then I don't agree with you. If I think Islam is true in the sense of Aristotelian logic, and Christianity is false, how can I enjoy different world-views? A lot of intellectual preparation has to go into it and that of course is not easy. But those intellectuals, philosophers or musicians, who are capable of doing it, have somehow realized the meaning of 'non-propositional' truth.