

# IMPACT OF MODERN PHYSICS ON IQBAL'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

**Dr. Sobia Tahir\***

***Abstract:** Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was deeply influenced by the findings of the Modern Physics in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was quite enthusiastic regarding reinterpretation /reconstruction of religious thought in the light of latest discoveries in the field. This paper intends to maintain that Iqbal's aims and objectives were political in nature. He explained the Islamic theological concepts in accordance with the Modern Physics in order to establish an Islamic State in South Asia. He did this very skillfully with the help of theories of Einstein in which, matter no longer possessed the central stage as in the past. He abolished the distinction of the Church and the State. In this way he not only checked the path of Secularism but also supported his political ideology religiously, philosophically and scientifically. His famous concept of "Spiritual Democracy" has same foundations. He strictly believes in the republican spirit of Islam.*

**Keywords:** Modern Physics, Matter, Spiritual, Ultimate Reality, State, Church.

**Objective 01:** To establish conclusively the deep link between Modern Physics and Political Thought of Iqbal;

**Objective 02:** To dispel the general misconception that Iqbal was an anti-democracy thinker as is mostly perceived through his Urdu/Persian poetry.

---

\* Dr. SobiaTahir is an assistant Professor Department of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan

*Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is such a monumental achievement of Muhammad Iqbal that it has been stimulating strong intellectual ripples in the world of Philosophy even 90 years after its publication. It would be better to say that some of the problems highlighted in it are gaining more significance with the passage of time. Iqbal is known as the dreamer of Pakistan, perhaps the first person who thought about the partition of India into Hindu and Muslim entities. When he elaborated his notion of a separate Muslim homeland, he definitely had very clear and well defined ideas about the would-be political system of the State. He was quite well aware of the nature of that State too. Iqbal has presented a coherent and structured Political Philosophy. This paper would discuss the origin, source and fountainhead of his political thought. This central claim of this paper is that Political Theory of Iqbal is based on Modern Physics. It will be supported by arguments in the subsequent discussion. 20<sup>th</sup> century was the declared century of Physics in which the said discipline revolutionized the world without any fear of contradiction. For Iqbal, Modern Physics proved itself a herald of a fresh world-view. Mohammad Iqbal was so enthusiastic regarding the disclosures of Modern Physics that he was ready to revise and reconstruct religious and theological thought in its light and he did so in his amazing compendium. His following quote won't be out of context here.

“The theory of Einstein has brought a new vision of the universe and suggests new ways of looking at the problems common both to religion and Philosophy.....it is necessary in an independent spirit, what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and, if necessary, reconstruction of religious thought in Islam.”<sup>1</sup>

To which extent this approach is legitimate and justified, is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Here it would suffice to say that Modern Physics fascinated and mesmerized Iqbal because it gave him immense space to support his cherished ideals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of the Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 2006) ,6.

What actually was very significant for Iqbal was the dissolution of the duality between the mind and matter. The new Physics, nevertheless, drastically changed the old ideas of space and time and most of all matter. Matter, definitely lost that prestigious position it has enjoyed in Science and Philosophy till 19<sup>th</sup> century. Renowned philosopher and distinguished mathematician Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) also acknowledged that the traditional theory of materialism was wholly untenable. What was that old theory? Simply that matter was eternal and objective and did not depend on any mind for its existence. It could neither be created nor destroyed; it had hard and fast laws of its own which it always observed and compelled all other to obey. Matter followed a strong nexus of cause and effect which was unbreakable and all the inhabitants of the Universe including human beings were subject to its strict laws. However, after the retreat of matter at the hands of Modern Physics, Iqbal has joyfully exclaimed,

“Thus Physics, finding it necessary to criticize its own foundations, eventually found reason to break its own idol, and the empirical attitude which appeared to necessitate scientific materialism has finally ended in a revolt against matter.”<sup>2</sup>

This degradation of matter testifies and confirms Iqbal’s own views, for whom ultimate character of reality is spiritual<sup>3</sup>. It would be interesting to note here that Iqbal drank deep from German Idealism, which also declared consciousness as the ultimate reality and identified it with ego, energy and spirit. This point will be discussed a little bit later in the context of Hegel. Why is Iqbal so eager to prove ultimate reality as spiritual and what are his motives and objectives to employ modern Physics so fondly in the interpretation of religion in general and Islam in particular? We shall find the answer soon, while examining his political thought. Iqbal being a great scholar and an extremely well-read person has handled all the possible ideas available very skillfully to knit his orderly system. The theories he has examined and used as supportive arguments indeed are quite facilitating in establishing an Islamic State. Iqbal has paid rich tribute to *Ash’arites* and their Atomic Theory which, according to him, is closer not only to Modern

---

<sup>2</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 27.

<sup>3</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 31.

Physics but also to the Spirit of *Qur'an*. Just see his fervor when he asserts in the third lecture of *Reconstruction*, “The Conception of God and the Meaning of Prayer”,

“ I regard the Ash'arite thought on the point as a genuine effort to develop on the basis of an Ultimate Will or Energy a theory of creation which with all its shortcomings, far more true to the spirit of *Qur'an* than the Aristotelian idea of a fixed universe”.<sup>4</sup>

Any vigilant and serious reader may not ignore here the word “Energy” spelled with capital E. In the same lecture, after a little while he says in the continuation of the same idea,

“The atom becomes or rather looks spatialized when it receives the quality of existence. Regarded as a phase of Divine Energy, it is essentially spiritual. The *Nafsis* the pure act; the body is only the act become visible and hence measurable.”<sup>5</sup>

The quotes 4 and 5 above are certainly very difficult for the readers who are not profoundly familiar with Muslim Philosophy and Theology. Theology is an effort to bring religion at par with philosophy and science. Before moving further , it will be essential to tell the readers who were *Ash'arites*, what was their worldview and how was it in accordance with the spirit of *Qur'an* and Modern Physics. To be as brief and simple as possible, it will be fruitful to explain that two major theological schools of thought in the History of Islam are *Mu'tazilites* and *Ash'arites*. They flourished in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE . There are following five basic principles on which *Mu'tazilites* and *Ash'arites* differed from each other:

- (1) The problem of attributes.
- (2) The problem of the beatific vision.
- (3) The problem of promise and threat.

---

<sup>4</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction* ,56.

<sup>5</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 57.

(4) The problem of creation of the actions of man.

(5) The problem of the will of God.<sup>6</sup>

However, at present, these points are outside the purview of the current paper; we are concerned here with their respective world-views which bear close connection with our study.

The *Mu'tazilites* or the Rationalist of Islam were heavily influenced by Greek Philosophy. They believed in an objective, scientific and mechanical world which followed hard and fast "natural laws". Therefore, their universe was static, closed and disciplined. Hence, as a logical conclusion of their belief they denied miracles and any further growth in the world. It must be noted that this notion of a neat, orderly, uniform, regular and fixed universe was very much in consonance with the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotelian view is known as "Classical" idea of the world. Somehow or the other it was supported by the Classical or Newtonian Physics too which also believed in a complete and closed universe with objective time and space.

On the contrary *Ash'arites* were the traditionalists and their theology is still the official theology of the entire Muslim World. In order to restore the unrestricted will of God and accommodate miracles, they were in need of a new worldview which should be "anti-classical" or contrary to the Greek world. *Ash'arites* for the first time introduced Metaphysics in Theology.

"Al-Ash'ari's theological system was, thus, considered to be incomplete without a support from metaphysics. The system was fully developed by the later Ash'arites, particularly by Qadi Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Tayyyibal-Baqillani who was one of the greatest among them. He was a Basrite, but he made Baghdad his permanent residence and died there in 403/1013. He was a great original thinker and wrote many valuable books on theology and various other subjects. He made use of some purely metaphysical propositions in his theological investigations, such as substance is an individual unity, accident has only a momentary existence and cannot

---

<sup>6</sup> M. M. Sharif, ed., *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Karachi: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 239.

exist in quality, and perfect vacuum is possible, and thus gave the school a metaphysical foundation<sup>7</sup>,

*Ash'arite* presented the idea of a universe in their famous Atomic Theory in 8<sup>th</sup> century CE which has been referred to by Iqbal above. It is quite amazing that some of their purely speculative ideas, have great resemblance with the findings of Modern Physics which made the case of Iqbal very strong. This is the main and primary reason, why was he literally in love with Modern Physics and wished to *reconstruct* every system of thought in the light of the same.

Let us have a concise glance on the ideas of *Ash'arites* which may explain not only their views but also the underlying reason for Iqbal's fascination with them. *Ash'arites*, contrary to the *Mu'tazilites* and Greek philosophers believed in the boundless creative energy of God (Allah), Who was quite capable of adding anything new to His creation. His universe is not complete but is in the process of *becoming*, therefore, is expanding. Following verse from the Holy Book is quoted as a proof of this claim:

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ فَاطِرِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ جَاعِلِ الْمَلَائِكَةِ رُسُلًا أُولَى أَجْنَحٍ مَتَنَى وَثَلَّثَ وَرَبَعَ يَزِيدُ فِي الْخَلْقِ  
مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

“All praise is for Allah; the Originator of the heavens Who made angles His messengers with wings- two, three and four. He increases in His creation whatever He wills. Verily Allah is capable of doing everything”.<sup>8</sup>

God is active and operational in the universe in the form of Energy. *Ash'arites* propounded a highly subjective view of time, space, rest, motion and matter. Surprisingly their purely religious motives were testified by Modern Physics which had absolutely no theological, moral or political agenda at all. However, its findings were very skillfully manipulated by Iqbal for religious and political purposes.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sharif, *A History*, 271.

<sup>8</sup> *Al-Qur'an*, 35:1

According to *Ash'arites*, Allah Almighty has created everything of atoms which do not have any mass, they are transitory, ephemeral and impermanent. In order to create and sustain the bodies ( both organic and inorganic) Allah perpetually sends these atoms to the world. When He ceases to send fresh atoms to a body, it perishes or dies. Following verse of Holy Quran supports their claim

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا عِنْدَنَا خَزَائِنُهُ وَمَا نُنَزِّلُهُ إِلَّا بِقَدَرٍ مَعْلُومٍ

“There is not a thing but the stores (for its life and sustenance) are with Us, and We do not send it down except in due, determined measure”<sup>9</sup>.

These verses strengthened the position of Iqbal firmly who himself was greatly inspired by Modern Physics. It is quite clear that the main purpose and underlying principle of Iqbal is to prove that Ultimate Reality or Divine Being is somehow or the other *Energy*. Its act of creation is also continuous, a one single act without any breach. However, when we the human beings perceive it broken into fragments with intervals; it is actually due to our mental apparatus because our thought is incapable of conceiving anything without the help of space-time framework.

Iqbal is actually trying his best to remove the dualism of body and spirit and mind and matter. This duality was first introduced into Philosophy by Plotinus (204/5-270 CE) in order to bring Platonic Idealism under the influence of Christianity.

“Another singular aspect of the philosophy of Plotinus is that it affirms the existence of a separated soul<sup>10</sup>.”

This duality of soul and body led towards the distinction of the pure and mundane in the realm of existence. Subsequently purity was taken over by the Church and profane worldly

---

<sup>9</sup> *Al-Qur'an*, 15:21

<sup>10</sup> Gwenaëlle Aubry, “ Metaphysics of soul and self in Plotinus” in *The Routledge Hand Book of Neoplatonism*, eds., Pauliina Remes , Svetla Slaveva-Griffin (London: Routledge and CRC Press, 2014), 311.

matters became the affairs of the State. The consequent conflict and clash of the Church and State finally ended in the separation of religion and State and emergence of Secularism in Europe.

Iqbal, however, wished to have a separate Muslim Homeland in India for which he has expressed his explicit desire in his famous Allahabad address of 1930. In order to provide a justification for such a State which may be established in the name of Islam and where no such conflict may arise between the State and the religion; it was necessary to deplete and diminish the difference of matter and spirit.

In his famous lecture on *Ijtehad*, under the title of “Principal of Movement in the Structure of Islam”, Iqbal has given his final note or conclusion in these words,

“Humanity needs three things to-day---spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import, directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis.”<sup>11</sup>

He has ended his great address on the following wish,

“Let the Muslim of to-day appreciate his position .....and evolve, out of the hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, that **spiritual democracy** which is the ultimate aim of Islam.”<sup>12</sup>

*Spiritual Democracy* is a novel and interesting phrase, we have never heard before. Democracy is a variant name for popular government or an elected / representative dispensation which is chosen by people and runs the State on their behalf. However, it was never divided into material or mental, physical or spiritual by anyone before Iqbal. What is meant by spiritual democracy, we are going to see soon. It is the most original and novel idea of Iqbal.

---

<sup>11</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 142.

<sup>12</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 142.



If we have a glance on a political set-up formulated by Iqbal, including form of government, electorate, democracy and roles and functions of a Muslim Assembly or Parliament; we find a sort of unified train of reasoning in his system, as he clearly presents his case:

“The essence of *Tauhid*, as a working idea is equality, solidarity and freedom. The state, from the Islamic standpoint, is an endeavor to transform these ideal principles into space-time forces, an aspiration to realize them in a definite human organization.....The Ultimate Reality, according to the Qur’an, is spiritual, and its life consists in temporal activity. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is, therefore, sacred in the roots of its being. The greatest service that modern thought has rendered to Islam, and as a matter of fact to all religion, consists in its criticism of what we call material or natural---a criticism which discloses that the merely material has no substance until we discover it rooted in the spiritual. There is no such thing as profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self-realization of the spirit”.<sup>13</sup>

The passage means that an Islamic State is one wherein Ultimate Reality or God realizes Its immense creative possibilities through material manifestations in space and time. The idea is not difficult to understand since any student of philosophy may identify Hegel speaking through the diction of Iqbal. This is but a blend of Absolute Idealism and Modern Physics. We may not discuss here Hegel’s philosophy thoroughly because of two reasons. One is paucity of space and the other is that here we have to focus on Modern Physics only. However, for the interest of readers a few quotes are being presented. They would also support our claim that Iqbal was deeply influenced by Classical German Idealism. These would also help us to explain spiritual democracy.

---

<sup>13</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 122-123.

“The Idea has within itself the determination of its self-consciousness.....Thus it is God’s own eternal life.....Thus it becomes Ego. The Absolute Idea is thus, on the one hand, substantial fullness of content and, on the other hand, abstract free volition.....The acme of freedom, when referred to the Glory of God as to the Absolute Idea which recognizes what ought to be-- is the soil on which the spiritual element of knowledge as such is falling<sup>14</sup>.”

Hegel further elaborates that what becomes of this Absolute Idea when it recognizes what it should be or ought to be. It manifests itself in the form of “ State”. State is the ultimate destination where the Absolute or Universal Idea completes its great journey. The actual high-brow language of Hegel narrates it as follows:

“The Universal Idea manifests in the State..... Thus Spirit is essentially Energy .....The manifestation of Spirit is its actual self-determination, and this is the element of its concrete nature. Spirit which does not determine itself is an abstraction of the intellect. The manifestation of Spirit is its self-determination, and it is this manifestation that we have to investigate in the form of States and individuals”<sup>15</sup>.

Let us come back to Iqbal again. In this sense explained above, the State is a theocracy and God materializes His ultimate aims through it, but He does so in the realm of matter, space and time. In the parlance of Physics, He is *Energy*. And *Energy* and *Spirit* are exactly the same for Iqbal and for Hegel. Therefore, after such extensive and intensive speculation it is justified to conclude that there is no difference between the body and the soul or matter and mind. Since no such dualism exists in Islam, thus there is no issue of the separation between the Church and the State. Here he has achieved his objective by abolishing the distinction of the secular and the sacred, mind and body and, matter and spirit by employing Modern Physics and has finished

---

<sup>14</sup> , George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History a General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *Reason in History*, 16.

forever the duality of the Church and the State. The Spiritual Reality or the God is the ultimate Head of the State; however, His representative is not like Pope who is a despot, dictator or an infallible king. Hence this benevolent Spiritual form of Government, in which real power belongs to God, Who is **The Spirit**; is **Spiritual Democracy**. The next questions are: Then how should the State be run by human beings? What will be the mode of governance of this Spiritual Democracy?

According to the Sunni Law, the appointment of an Imam or *Khalifah* is absolutely indispensable. “The first question”, in the opinion of Iqbal is,

“That arises in this connexion is this---Should the Caliphate be vested in a single person? Turkey’s *Ijtehad* is that according to the spirit of Islam the Caliphate or Imamate can be vested in the body of persons, or an elected Assembly. The religious doctors of Islam in Egypt and India, as far as I know, have not yet expressed themselves on this point. Personally I believe the Turkish view is perfectly sound. It is hardly necessary to argue this point. The republican form of Government is not only thoroughly consistent with the spirit of Islam, but has also become a necessity in view of the new forces that are set free in the world of Islam.”<sup>16</sup>

Though Iqbal has not explained about the “new forces” set free in the world of Islam, yet it is quite heartening that he has not only acknowledged the worth of democratic regime but has also recommended it for the Muslim World and declared it in accordance with the spirit of Islam. Conversely in his Urdu and Persian poetry he has expressed very negative ideas about democracy, and, nevertheless, censured it. In a well-known Urdu couplet of his he declared it a system in which people are ‘counted’ and not ‘weighed’. In his famous Persian verse he compared the popular voters with asses and said that millions of asses may not be equal to one human. Unfortunately these ideas of Iqbal were highly appreciated and publicized by the

---

<sup>16</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 124-125.

dictators and non-representative governments of Pakistan. Hence Iqbal was portrayed as a reactionary intellectual who does not believe in the collective wisdom of the masses. He very often mentions democracy as ‘Western democracy’ whose face is bright but the inner-self is dark as night and it is worse than the brutalities of Chnagaizh. At one place he has considered monarchy and ‘democratic drama or sport’ as one and the same thing. These inconsistencies have damaged his reputation very much as a progressive thinker and he has been generally high-jacked by the intransigent elements, right-wingers, religious extremists and despots. His real revolutionary spirit has been kept hidden from the people. If we study his views in the perspective of *Ijma*, the third source of legal reasoning in Islam; we would honestly judge that he does believe in the validity of public opinion.

In order to fully understand the political thought of Iqbal it is necessary to understand his opinion on *Ijma* which is the third source of law in Islam and stands for the consensus of scholars on a specific issue or problem regarding which no precedence may be found in either *Qur’an* or *Hadith*. Iqbal has shown regret on the matter that such a significant source of law has almost remained practically dead and the Muslim *Ummah* has not derived befitting benefit from it.

“It is, however, extremely satisfactory to note that the pressure of world-forces and the political experience of European nations are impressing on the mind of modern Islam the value and possibilities of the idea of *Ijma*. The growth of republican spirit and the gradual formation of legislative assemblies in Muslim lands constitute a great step in advance. The transfer of the power of *Ijtehad* from individual representatives of schools to a Muslim legislative Assembly which, in view of the growth of opposing sects, is the only possible form *Ijma* can take in modern times.....In India, however, difficulties are likely to arise for it is doubtful whether non-Muslim legislative assembly can exercise the power of *Ijtehad*. ”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 138.

The last line requires special attention. Basically this was the view behind his famous address of Allahabad in 1930, wherein he presented the idea of a federation of the Muslim majority provinces. This was the way he wanted to safeguard Islam in the peninsula and also pave the ground for would-be *Ijtehad*. His exact words are as follows,

“I, therefore, demand the formation of a consolidated Muslim state in the best interest of India and Islam. For India it means security and peace resulting from an internal balance of power; for Islam an opportunity to rid itself of the stamp of that Arabian Imperialism was forced to give it, to mobilize its law, its education, its culture, and to bring them into closer contact with its own original spirit and with the spirit of modern times.”<sup>18</sup>.

The political situation in the Muslim World and the proposed role of *Ijma* attracted Iqbal's attraction as early as in 1908. He wrote an article “Islam and Caliphate” which was published in *Sociological Review*, London. The main emphasis of Iqbal in this article was the same that the institution of Caliphate is republican in nature, essence and spirit. It is an elected form of government based on public opinion. According to Iqbal, Islamic political thought evolved around two major principles:

The Muslim Commonwealth is based on the absolute equality of all Muslims in the eyes of Law. There is no privileged class, no priesthood, no caste system; As per the Law of Islam, *there is no distinction between the Church and the State. The State with us is not a combination of religious and secular authority, but is a unity in which no such distinction exists.* The Caliph is not necessarily high priest of Islam. He is not the representative of God on earth.<sup>19</sup>Iqbal defined *Ijma* as a principle which had all the characteristics of a legislative institution. According to Iqbal, the trust of political governance is vested into the Muslim *Ummah*, and not in any single individual. Through elections the collective will of the *Ummah* expresses itself in the form of elected forum. He has written as quoted by Dr. Muhammad Khalid Masud,

---

<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Iqbal's Reconstruction of Ijtehad*(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan,1995), 119-120.

<sup>19</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*,139.

“It is clear that the fundamental principle laid down in the Qur’an is the principle of election’.<sup>20</sup>

Now it is clear to a great extent that Iqbal has a very strong and well-framed political ideology which he wished to propel vigorously and in its formulation he generously took inspiration from three major sources:

Modern Physics;

Hegel’s Absolute Idealism; and

The concept of *Ijmain* legislation

However, the greatest inspiration came from Modern Physics which facilitated him to remove the hurdles caused by the duality of Matter and Spirit, and, which he applied with utmost ability to abolish the distinction of the Church and the State; hence not only checked the path of Secularism but also created a strong justification for an Islamic State in South Asia. Since without an independent State in the region, neither *Ijma* nor Spiritual Democracy were possible. For all this his philosophical insight, depth and breadth of his study, his sharp vision and insight in all the branches of knowledge are laudable.

---

<sup>20</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 139.