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## "Reassessing Iqbal's Intellectual Legacy: A Critical Examination of Misinterpretations in 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam'"

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### Abstract

Allama Iqbal's seminal work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, has been a subject of extensive scholarly discussion. Among its critiques, Altaf Ahmad Azmi's *Khutbat-e-Iqbal: A Study* stands out for its contentious assertions regarding Iqbal's philosophical and theological positions. This article critically examines Azmi's claims, particularly his allegations that Iqbal's interpretations of Quranic verses were superficial and misaligned with Islamic orthodoxy. Drawing on Iqbal's own writings, letters, and scholarly evaluations, this study refutes Azmi's arguments by demonstrating Iqbal's deep engagement with the Quran and his commitment to integrating Islamic thought with contemporary philosophical discourse. Additionally, the article highlights the misrepresentations of Iqbal's views on *wahdat al-wujud* and his engagement with Western intellectual traditions. By providing a balanced reassessment, this work reaffirms Iqbal's role as a profound thinker whose intellectual contributions continue to shape modern Islamic thought.

### Keywords

Allama Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Islamic philosophy, Quranic hermeneutics, *wahdat al-wujud*,

modernist Islamic thought, Altaf Ahmad Azmi, critique of Iqbal, philosophy of religion, intellectual history.

In 1929, Allama Iqbal was invited by the Madras Muslim Association to deliver a series of lectures on the revitalization of Islamic thought. He presented six lectures in total—three in Madras and the remaining three in Aligarh. These lectures were later repeated in Mysore and Hyderabad Deccan. Initially compiled and published in Lahore in 1930, the collection underwent revisions and was reissued by Oxford University Press in 1934 under the title *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. This edition featured modifications to the text along with the inclusion of a seventh lecture, which Iqbal had delivered in 1932 at the Aristotelian Society in London.

Altaf Ahmad Azmi's book, *Khutbat-e-Iqbal: A Study*, first published in India in 1999, spans roughly 275 pages and offers an assessment of Iqbal's lectures compiled in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. However, branding it as a "critical analysis" may not be entirely accurate; a more precise description would be a work focused on finding faults, as it predominantly highlights what the author perceives as errors in Iqbal's philosophy. From the outset, Azmi's opposition to the concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of existence) is evident. In the preface, he states:

"Iqbal's views align completely with those of Shaykh Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, and both are steeped in disbelief and polytheism. May Allah forgive Iqbal. His lectures are riddled with ideas that unmistakably fall into the realm of heresy." (1)

Such remarks echo the traditionalist critiques Iqbal faced during his lifetime. After outlining what he sees as major flaws in Iqbal's thought, Azmi further claims:

“A significant flaw in Iqbal’s methodology is his neglect of the contextual meaning of Quranic verses when formulating his arguments. His interpretations rely on superficial readings of verses he found relevant, often building his reasoning on fragile premises. It is clear that meanings were sometimes extracted forcefully, and in certain cases, even deliberately altered. As a result, his arguments based on Quranic texts are invalid.” (2)

Azmi asserts that Iqbal aimed to integrate Islamic philosophy with contemporary thought but ultimately fell short in achieving this goal (p. 5). He further contends that Iqbal neither possessed a profound understanding of the Quran nor engaged in deep contemplation of its meanings (3).

These excerpts are cited here to highlight the basis of Azmi’s critique. However, contrary to his claims, Iqbal’s profound engagement with the Quran is well-documented. In a letter dated July 1, 1917, addressed to Maulana Ghulam Rasul, Iqbal himself wrote:

“It is only by Allah’s immense grace that He has granted me insight into the hidden wisdom of the Quran. For fifteen years, I have devoted myself to its study, contemplating certain verses for months, even years.” (4)

This demonstrates that Iqbal’s reflections on the Quran were far from superficial, contradicting the assumptions put forth in *Khutbat-e-Iqbal: A Study*.

In a correspondence with Sheikh Ejaz Ahmed, Iqbal stated: "I place greater emphasis on the Quran because I have personally witnessed its transformative impact." In a similar vein, he shared with Muhammad Hussain Arshi: "For quite some time, I have ceased reading other books. If I engage with any text, it is either the Quran or Rumi’s Masnavi." Abdul Salam Nadvi underscores Iqbal’s profound dedication to the Quran, noting:

"Following Dr. Iqbal's demise, his collection of books was bequeathed to the library of Islamia College, Lahore, as per his instructions. Among these was a personal copy of the Quran, which he left to his son, Javed. Close associates of Dr. Iqbal recall that he would recite this Quran each morning with such intensity, devotion, and emotional depth that tears would stream down his face, often dampening the pages. After completing his recitation, he would lay the Quran under the sun to dry the tear-stained pages." (5)

Such accounts vividly illustrate Iqbal's profound connection with the Quran. Yet, Altaf Ahmad Azmi frequently attempts to cast doubt on Iqbal's mastery of Arabic. Dr. Muhammad Akram Chaudhry, in his essay "The Quran as the Source of Iqbal's Thought", counters Azmi's assertions:

"Altaf Ahmad Azmi alleges that Iqbal lacked a deep understanding of Arabic. This accusation is unfounded, given that Iqbal served as a McLeod Arabic Reader at Punjab University and Oriental College for four years before pursuing studies in Europe. Additionally, he collaborated with Orientalists at European universities as a professor of Arabic. To claim that a postgraduate-level instructor of Arabic language and literature was ignorant of Arabic is not only baseless but also a critique made without merit." (6)

At the outset of his inaugural lecture, Iqbal invoked a prophetic supplication: "O Allah, unveil to me the true nature of things." Azmi contends that Iqbal misquoted this prayer, arguing that it bears no relation to the essence of things. However, this supplication is well-documented in scholarly sources, rendering Azmi's objection invalid.

Azmi further argues that Iqbal's call for Muslims to critically reevaluate and reinterpret their beliefs to align with modern thought reflects an undue influence of Western philosophy. However, Azmi fails to recognize that Iqbal's intent was not to discard Islamic principles but to reinterpret them in a manner that remains meaningful and accessible in contemporary times.

In his lectures, Iqbal referenced nearly 88 Quranic verses, employing the Quran in three distinct ways:

1. Directly quoting verses or their segments,
2. Incorporating Quranic concepts into his discourse,
3. Drawing inspiration from Quranic themes to develop his ideas.

Azmi frequently disputes Iqbal's interpretations, at times accusing him of misrepresentation. For example, Iqbal cited Surah Ad-Dukhan:

"We did not create the heavens and the earth and all that lies between them in vain. We created them with a profound purpose, but most people do not comprehend this." (Surah Ad-Dukhan, 44:38-39) (7)

Azmi criticizes Iqbal's interpretation, claiming that he conflated the term "bil-haqq" with the Sufi concept of "haqq" (ultimate truth). However, Salahuddin Ayyubi refutes Azmi, clarifying that Iqbal translated "bil-haqq" as "for a serious purpose" rather than equating it with the Sufi notion of "haqq". Ayyubi questions how Azmi could misinterpret Iqbal's clear and precise explanation.

Azmi's critique of Iqbal's lectures often stems from misinterpretation or an excessively critical stance. Iqbal's profound engagement with

the Quran and his integration of its themes into his philosophical discourse remain evident throughout his works.

Regarding a particular verse, Azmi asserts that its context pertains exclusively to the Day of Judgment, i.e., life after death. However, Iqbal interprets it as evidence of the universe's evolutionary nature. While the verse indeed references life after death, this concept itself serves as a testament to the universe's ongoing evolution, reinforcing the notion that creation is an unending process, persisting even beyond death.

Iqbal references the first verse of Surah Fatir in his discussion of the universe:

"Praise be to Allah, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, Who made the angels messengers with wings, two, three, or four. He increases in creation whatever He wills. Indeed, Allah is over all things competent." (Surah Fatir: 1)(8)

Azmi critiques Iqbal's interpretation, arguing that he employs this verse to suggest that the universe is not static but continuously expanding. Azmi questions how this verse relates to the progression and expansion of the universe, asserting that it solely pertains to the creation of angels. However, the phrase "He increases in creation whatever He wills" suggests broader implications, warranting deeper reflection.

In his first lecture, Iqbal contends that the Quran mentions the heart (*qalb*) and mind (*fu'ad*) alongside sensory faculties like hearing and sight, attributing to them the capacity for perception and understanding. Therefore, the knowledge acquired through *fu'ad* is as valid as that gained through sensory experience. Iqbal asserts that spiritual experiences, despite being non-sensory, hold authenticity comparable to other human experiences.

Azmi disputes Iqbal's conclusions, claiming they align more with mystic interpretations and lack empirical authenticity. He argues that such experiences, while personally meaningful, remain unverifiable to others. This perspective, however, dismisses the broader epistemological possibilities Iqbal explores.

In his second lecture, Iqbal discusses destiny (*taqdeer*) in relation to time and space, substantiating his views with Quranic references. Azmi disagrees, arguing that Iqbal's concept of destiny contains contradictions rooted in his understanding of time. According to Azmi, Iqbal's assertion that all potentialities exist in an undetermined state, manifesting sequentially in the external world, is flawed. Azmi maintains that all events exist in God's infinite knowledge in their specific forms, unfolding precisely according to His predetermined plan. He insists this view aligns with the true Quranic or Islamic concept of destiny.

For Iqbal, however, the universe remains incomplete, with God continuously adding to it. He views time not as a predetermined path but as something individuals shape through their choices. In Iqbal's perspective, God presents numerous possible destinies, and each decision taken by an individual constitutes the realization of one among many potential fates. Addressing Azmi's critique, Dr. Javed Iqbal remarks:

"Iqbal's perspective on destiny aligns more closely with the Qadariyya school of thought within classical Islamic theology. Azmi critiques Iqbal from a determinist stance, arguing from a limited Qadariyya perspective. Iqbal rejects the traditional Islamic notion of destiny as fixed fate (*qadar* or *qismat*), believing such ideas have contributed to the stagnation and decline of the Muslim community."(9)

Azmi further criticizes Iqbal's application of Quranic verses to support his concept of time, particularly those mentioning the alternation of

day and night as divine signs. He argues that such verses bear no direct connection to the philosophical problem of time. While a literal interpretation might not explicitly link these verses to time and space, Iqbal sees the Quranic language as expansive, capable of accommodating interpretations that evolve with intellectual progress.

In his third lecture, Iqbal interprets Surah Ikhlas, deriving from the verse *lam yalid wa lam yulad* ("He begets not, nor is He begotten") the concept that true individuality is self-sufficient, not reliant on external factors. Birth from another entity, he argues, signifies a lack of complete individuality.

Azmi challenges this interpretation, asserting that Iqbal's portrayal of God as the "Perfect Individual" misrepresents Surah Ikhlas. According to Azmi, the Surah emphasizes God's oneness and self-sufficiency rather than individuality in the philosophical sense Iqbal proposes.

A recurring issue in Azmi's critique is his attempt to confine Iqbal within traditional interpretative frameworks. He questions why Iqbal does not adhere strictly to conventional exegeses. While Surah Ikhlas undeniably highlights divine singularity (*Ahadiyyah*), Iqbal does not dispute this but instead extends its implications by incorporating philosophical insights. Azmi, however, seems to overlook that Quranic verses transcend specific historical interpretations and personal assumptions.

Azmi acknowledges the depth of Iqbal's interpretation of Adam's narrative in his third lecture. However, he objects to Iqbal's understanding of worship, arguing that his perspective deviates from traditional religious views. Iqbal, rather than rejecting conventional forms of worship, presents a nuanced view that expands its objectives without negating its established practices.

In his fourth lecture, Iqbal discusses the development of *khudi* (selfhood) and its ultimate culmination. He asserts that its highest perfection is the ability of an individual soul to maintain its distinct identity even in direct proximity to the Ultimate Reality. He cites the Quranic verse:

"The eye neither swerved nor exceeded the limit." (Surah An-Najm: 17)

This verse, describing the Prophet Muhammad's experience during the *Mi'raj* (Ascension), serves as a testament to Iqbal's vision of a perfected selfhood that retains its integrity while engaging with the Divine. Azmi, however, remains skeptical, preferring a more conventional theological interpretation.

Ultimately, Azmi's critiques often reflect a rigid adherence to traditional interpretations, whereas Iqbal's approach seeks to harmonize Quranic insights with contemporary thought. Rather than contradicting the Quran, Iqbal's interpretations strive to uncover its dynamic relevance across intellectual eras.

Azmi critiques Iqbal's use of a particular verse, arguing that it does not convey the meaning attributed to it by Iqbal. He expresses disappointment that a thinker of Iqbal's stature based his argument on a traditional narrative, which Azmi believes misinterprets the verse as referring to the Prophet's vision of God. Instead, Azmi cites verses 5–10 of Surah An-Najm to assert that these verses describe the Prophet's vision of the Angel Gabriel, not God. While many exegetes support this interpretation, others, particularly within Sufi traditions, see verses 12–17 as referring to the Prophet's vision of the Divine.

Azmi deliberately emphasizes the earlier verses related to Gabriel to portray Iqbal's interpretation as a significant error. Renowned exegete Maulana Muhammad Shafi concurs that verses 1–11 refer to

the vision of Gabriel, while verses 12–18 pertain to the Mi'raj and Isra (the Night Journey). Although scholars disagree on the interpretation of verses 11–18, Azmi selectively references the earlier verses to support his claim that Iqbal was mistaken. Scholar Muhammad Khizr Husain criticizes Azmi's approach, arguing that his rigid insistence on his own interpretation and reluctance to acknowledge differing views reflect an unwarranted inflexibility. The historical debate among the Prophet's companions regarding the details of the Mi'raj further underscores the need for interpretive openness.(10)

In his sixth lecture, Iqbal cites the example of Mu'adh ibn Jabal, whom the Prophet appointed as a governor in Yemen. When asked how he would adjudicate legal matters, Mu'adh replied that he would rely first on the Quran, then on the Prophet's Sunnah, and if both proved insufficient, he would apply independent reasoning (ijtihad). (11)

Azmi disputes the authenticity of this narration, arguing that Islam does not permit personal reasoning in legal matters. He attributes this addition to individuals who sought to elevate individual reasoning to the status of a legal source. (12)

However, Azmi's claim contradicts the views of numerous Islamic scholars who consider this narration foundational to the principle of ijtihad. While he dismisses portions of the narration as a fabrication, many scholars uphold it as a legitimate basis for independent reasoning in Islamic jurisprudence.

Azmi's critique reflects a rigid interpretive stance that seeks to confine both Iqbal's ideas and broader Islamic thought within narrowly defined parameters, leaving little room for intellectual and theological expansion.

Azmi also objects to Iqbal's proposal regarding ijma (consensus), in which Iqbal suggests that an elected assembly of the Muslim public

should oversee ijma. Azmi finds this proposal inadequate, arguing that most elected representatives lack sufficient knowledge of Islamic law and its principles. Dr. Javed Iqbal responds by clarifying that Iqbal's proposal includes not only scholars (ulama) but also non-scholars and legal experts proficient in both Islamic and modern jurisprudence. Azmi himself concedes that a council of Islamic legal experts should handle this responsibility, with the public assembly approving laws after due deliberation. Furthermore, Iqbal explicitly favors this arrangement.(13)

In the same lecture, Iqbal advocates granting women the right to delegated divorce (talaq tafwid). Azmi dismisses this idea as both contrary to the Quran and Sunnah and fundamentally unwise. He argues that while a man can divorce his wife without her consent, a woman does not have the right to separate from her husband without his approval. However, he accepts judicial annulment of marriage (fasakh), which requires a judge's intervention. (14) He categorically rejects talaq tafwid. Despite labeling Iqbal's view as inconsistent with the Quran and Sunnah, Azmi does not provide supporting references from hadith or Quranic verses. Dr. Javed Iqbal addresses this objection by explaining that, in Islam, marriage between an adult man and woman is a civil contract rather than a spiritual one. Therefore, the parties involved are free to mutually agree upon conditions, including the delegation of the right to divorce from the husband to the wife. There is no explicit prohibition of this arrangement in either the Quran or hadith. It was likely on this basis that Iqbal himself granted the right of talaq tafwid when officiating the marriage of M.D. Taseer and Christabel Taseer.(16)

Before analyzing Iqbal's lectures, Altaf Ahmad Azmi makes his personal bias against Iqbal abundantly clear. He remarks that Iqbal's lectures contain ideas bordering on disbelief and polytheism. Furthermore, he accuses Iqbal of deliberately distorting the meaning

of Quranic verses, thereby invalidating his arguments based on Quranic texts.

Such a preconceived stance inevitably shapes Azmi's critique of Iqbal's work. While Iqbal acknowledges in the preface to his lectures that his ideas are open to debate, criticism driven by a desire for notoriety as an opponent of Iqbal does little to diminish the significance of his philosophy. Regarding Azmi's critique, Muhammad Khizr Yasin provides a compelling assessment:

"This book represents a superficial interpretation of Iqbal's thought. The author's intellectual background is rooted in a specific religious framework that constrains his understanding and insight. While he claims to analyze Iqbal's ideas from a Quranic perspective, he reduces knowledge, truth, and experience to one-dimensional virtues limited by his own cognitive framework. For Azmi, Quranic verses lack semantic flexibility, and their application is confined to the narrow bounds of his understanding. It is evident that the author's theological perspective is neither philosophical nor grounded in any recognized scholarly tradition of religion."(16)

This evaluation underscores the limitations of Azmi's critique and highlights the importance of a broader, more flexible approach to interpreting both Iqbal's thought and Islamic scholarship as a whole.

### Conclusion

Allama Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* remains a cornerstone in modern Islamic intellectual discourse, offering a vision that bridges classical Islamic philosophy with contemporary thought. However, as seen in Altaf Ahmad Azmi's critique, misinterpretations of Iqbal's work continue to surface, often stemming from theological biases and a lack of engagement with the broader intellectual foundations of his arguments. This paper has demonstrated that Azmi's claims—particularly regarding Iqbal's

supposed misreading of the Quran, his engagement with *wahdat al-wujud*, and his philosophical methodology—are not only unfounded but also misrepresent the depth of Iqbal’s scholarship.

Iqbal’s approach was neither a wholesale adoption of Western philosophical ideas nor a rejection of Islamic tradition; rather, it was a profound effort to reinterpret Islamic thought in a manner that remains intellectually rigorous and spiritually enriching. His deep connection with the Quran, his meticulous approach to philosophical inquiry, and his commitment to a dynamic and evolving understanding of Islam are well-documented. The persistence of critiques such as Azmi’s, while a natural part of scholarly discourse, should be met with careful scrutiny rather than uncritical acceptance.

Ultimately, Iqbal’s intellectual legacy stands resilient against reductive critiques. His work continues to inspire scholars, theologians, and philosophers, underscoring the importance of intellectual openness and the need for a nuanced understanding of Islamic thought in the modern world. By addressing misinterpretations and reaffirming the depth of Iqbal’s engagement with Islam, we safeguard not only his intellectual contributions but also the broader pursuit of knowledge that he so passionately championed.

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