



Iqbal's Process Relational Worldview; An Islamic Response to Modern Challenges

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Abstract

Process thought is already known in the Muslim intellectual world, however, always remained as part of the Western speculative tradition, and not well received by Muslim thinkers. The reason might lie in the fact that the process model of God is far too antithetical to the classical divine image in the monotheistic religions, and all the more in Islam. Christian process theology has been criticized by Muslim thinkers for, according to them, the process thought ignores the major divine attributes of perfection – by attributing process and change to God – and absoluteness – namely omnipotence and omniscience.

However, my hypothesis here is that we can talk of “Islamic process metaphysics” and of “Islamic process God”, and that we can find enough evidence in the Qur’an and in the rich Islamic literature to substantiate this claim. I am justified in doing that for I can present a Muslim thinker in whose system of thought one can find enough process elements as to nominate him as the Muslim process thinker and his metaphysics as the due philosophical foundation for proposing a new Islamic theology. Muhammad Iqbal, a Muslim thinker, who standing in his own Islamic tradition and relying on the Qur’an, due to being well-versed in the Western philosophical thought, provides a novel metaphysics that can well serve as the foundation for a new Islamic philosophico-theological system, unprecedented in the Muslim thought. Iqbal’s understanding of the world, humanity, and God-human-world relationship resonates very much with the process worldview. In both systems movement and change, panexperientialism, non-sensationalism, panpsychism and interrelatedness seem to be the key factors.¹ Both regard reality as an evolving, organic whole composed of creative, self-determined and free individuals. As for God, both systems have a panentheistic understanding of the God-world relationship, and attribute change and process also to God – since he is closely related to the world, he moves and changes as the world evolves and grows.

In this contribution, after presenting the process elements of the Iqbalian world view, I can show how Iqbal sets into dialogue the Western thought tradition – in this case, the process thought –

¹ Here I am using the process terminology to name the common concepts between the two thought systems. Although Iqbal himself did not employ these words, for the sake of clarity, I use the process terms in talking of the process concepts and elements found in Iqbal’s works.



with the Qur'anic and the Islamic tradition, and produces his own novel metaphysics, which despite being indebted to both traditions, is still uniquely his.

Iqbal's novel process worldview finds all the more importance when one observes that the Islamic classical metaphysics fails to function anymore in face of today's serious challenges. The relevance of religion to today's world and the seemingly irresolvable conflict between religion and certain modern questions are controversial issues in today's discussions – both social as well as academic. Some Muslim thinkers have been trying to engage with these questions and contribute to these discussions, however the interest in and the attempt to come up with new Islamic metaphysical systems – which is the necessary first step to address the new issues – is meager, if at all. It is why, therefore, that I believe, that the Muslim speculative tradition fails to properly and coherently address today's questions and engage actively and productively with the discussions, due to basing their arguments on a classical world view. So long as they go content with the classical metaphysics, which is in its very nature, highly hierarchical, static and theocentric and androcentric, they fail to respond satisfactorily to today's live questions of human rights, women's rights and ecological crisis, among others.

However, I am of the firm conviction, that one can find a due relevance to the issues and challenges of today's world in Muhammad Iqbal's thought. For one, because Iqbal's ontological system encourages a process, relational worldview, in which “consciousness”, “creativity” and “life” take center stage, rather “God” (an abstract theocentrism; thus, the charge of ontotheology) or “man” (androcentrism). Starting his metaphysics from the inner experience of the “human subject” of his/ her “being in the world”, at the heart of Iqbal's philosophy lies the existentialist conviction that reality is ultimately expressible purely in terms of a conscious “ego”. And for second, Iqbal's strong anthropology – and by way of laying the major part of the responsibility for the future of the world on human being – helps us find a way to make human more considerate and thoughtful of his surrounding environment and of other human beings – by way of defying any escapism and fatalism. Therefore, it is my firm conviction that Iqbal's neo-classical metaphysics is not only more helpful and relevant to today's world, but also logically more tenable in addressing and responding to many of the live philosophico-theological questions. In other words, his metaphysics, compared to other Islamic metaphysics, is much more tenable and helpful, in that it can help us better address live questions, on the theoretical as well as practical level, including environmental crises and women's rights.

My main hypothesis is that these challenges and crises are basically encouraged by the make-up of the classical metaphysics, which places “*man*” at the center of the created world, the crown of creation, for whom and whose service everything else is made, and over which he is to dominate and make use of, for his own purposes. And not just that, but also his placement at the top of the chain of creation, to which “*woman*” comes just as the second. This – which is one of the main



tenants of the classical theistic metaphysics – is strongly criticized by neo-classical theism as well as eco-feminism, among others.

In Iqbal's process, relational worldview, human (regardless of his sex and gender) and nature (including all its parts, no matter how trivial on the chain of existence) are one and united, since all are conceived as "egos"; the whole world is a big cosmic community, whose members – from the sub-atomic particles to God – are self-sufficient and self-determined egos (and thus creative), with graded levels of consciousness and freedom. God in this cosmic community is the Absolute Ego, the source of life and creativity, towards whom all creatures are striving. This brings all forms of life – from humans to the subatomic particles – to the same level and hence transforms the classical anthropocentric and hierarchical worldview into a rather leveled and life-centered world view. On the other hand, by replacing the classical masculine divine attributes of absoluteness (including the highly problematic attributes of omniscience and omnipotence) with the feminine attributes of creativity and life, it results in a not just rather feminine worldview but also a more feminine divine image. This way, it can be a corrective to the classical androcentric metaphysics, by suggesting a biocentric alternative.