Muhammad Iqbal's Politics of Spiritual Democracy

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Abstract

This article explains Muhammad Iqbal's politics of spiritual democracy and examines its applications to Pakistan and the contemporary world. Almost an official doctrine has emerged that Pakistan's creation is the result of Iqbal's philosophy. If it is the result of the intended or unintended consequences of Iqbal's philosophy, the question is whether Pakistan has adopted the version of his democracy. Iqbal's 'spiritual democracy' stands contrary to the European model of democracy. European democracy, according to Iqbal, is materialistic and acquires the interests of the individual rather than the interests of humanity. Iqbal used the expression "spiritual democracy" only once in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, but he did not explain it. Although Iqbal used the expressions: spiritual democracy, Muslim democracy, and Islamic democracy, interchangeably in his writings, he developed his idea of spiritual democracy by drawing on the key values of Islamic ethics, notably freedom, equality, and fraternity that posit the idea of an ideal society by discarding racial, cultural, ethnic, or linguistic disparities for acquiring the common good of humanity. This article explains four theses of Iqbal's moral and political philosophy to make sense of his model of spiritual democracy: First, human beings have the potential to legislate laws to make this world livable. Second, all human beings are equal in the moral sense. Third, human beings are free and responsible agents. Fourth, human beings have fraternal relationships with each other. So, the article explains the salient features of Iqbal's politics of spiritual democracy and determines its implications for Pakistan, and the contemporary world.

Keywords: Iqbal studies, spiritual democracy (Islamic / Muslim democracy), European democracy, Muslim philosophy, Muslim political thought.

1. Introduction

This article explicates Muhammad Iqbal's notion of spiritual democracy and evaluates its implications for Pakistan, in particular, and the contemporary world, in general. Democracy is a political process that not only helps elect governments but also helps make collective decisions in all aspects of social life to acquire the common good. Democracy is noble if it respects people's rights. Iqbal is an ardent advocate of democracy, and he developed his account of democracy called spiritual democracy. Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy is worthwhile in such a world in which people mostly prefer material interests over spiritual interests. Iqbal's idea of spiritual democracy is a key for creating and sustaining a humane world. In this article, I will explain what is Iqbal's notion of spiritual democracy and why Pakistan could not adopt it.

Although Iqbal belonged to the first half of the twentieth century, his philosophical ideas are still relevant to the twenty-first century. Charles Taylor, a leading communitarian Canadian philosopher, writes: "We must reread Iqbal. For a time, we could imagine him forgotten, consigned to the oubliettes with the other figures of Islamic 'modernism' from the beginning of this century. But he had to come back."[1] I endorse Taylor's claim that Iqbal's philosophy is significantly substantial to warrant re-examination. Describing Iqbal, Taylor reiterates, "It is the voice of a man who has left behind all identitarian rigidity, who has 'broken all the idols of tribe and caste' to address himself to all human beings. But an unhappy accident has meant that this voice was buried, both in the general forgetting of Islamic modernism and in the very country that he named before its existence, Pakistan, whose multiple rigidities – political, religious, military – constitute a continual refutation of the very essence of his thought."[2] Taylor shows his discontent that Iqbal's philosophy could not be recognised in the Islamic world and in the very country, Pakistan, which is regarded as the outcome of his political philosophy. I agree with Taylor that the Islamic world, in general, and Pakistan, in particular, could not adopt Iqbal's account of democracy in letter and spirit.

Iqbal is a stern critic of the European model of democracy. He contends that the foundation of European democracy is centred on materialistic philosophy that protects the interest of particular individuals or groups. In contrast, Iqbal proposes a model of spiritual democracy for the entire humanity.[3] Iqbal writes, "Let the Muslim of today appreciate his position, reconstruct his social life in the light of ultimate principles, and evolve, out

of the hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, that *spiritual democracy* [Italic added] which is the ultimate aim of Islam."[4] Iqbal wants to resolve the recurrent challenges to humanity. K. G. Saiyidain states that Iqbal earnestly seeks solutions for the "Problems of freedom and international relations, of socialism, capitalism and dictatorship, of the advantages and the limitations of democracy, of the relationship between the East and the West, of the values implicit in the Islamic view of life, of the nature and development of individuality, of the qualities that constitute the good character and the conditions conducive to the creation of the 'good life'."[5] I endorse Saiyidain's claim that Iqbal's model of spiritual democracy is an adequate approach to resolving national and global challenges. Iqbal believes that the materialistic philosophy of life is the primary cause of the decadence of Western civilisation. The two world wars in the twentieth century reveal that Iqbal's claim is not incorrect. Yet, there are two central questions: what is spiritual democracy, and how does Iqbal defend it?

2. Iqbal's Understanding of European Democracy

Iqbal had a close study of European democracy. Iqbal argues that European democracy is materialistic because it is primarily based on economic benefits. In contrast, Islamic democracy is spiritual, and it focuses on the welfare of humanity. He infers the idea of spiritual democracy from his theory of egohood. When explaining his theory of egohood, Iqbal redefines human agency in a cosmopolitan sense, going beyond the disparities of race, colour, culture or nationality, which create human divisions.[6] Iqbal's theory of human agency refers to human persons as God's vicegerents on earth. Iqbal compares European democracy with Muslim democracy which he calls spiritual democracy. In a remark on the idea of Muslim Democracy, Iqbal writes:

> The Democracy of Europe – overshadowed by socialistic agitation and anarchical fear – originated mainly in the economic regeneration of European societies. Nietzsche, however, despises this "rule of the herd" and, hopeless of the plebian, he bases all higher cultures on the cultivation and growth of an Aristocracy of Supermen. But is the plebian so absolutely hopeless? The Democracy of Islam did not grow out of the extension of economic opportunity, it is a spiritual principle based on the assumption that every human being is a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character. Out of the plebian material Islam has formed men of the noblest type of life and power. Is

not, then, the Democracy of early Islam[7] an experimental refutation of the ideas of Nietzsche?[8]

Iqbal argues that European democracy supports the economic interests, not of the common people, but of the wealthy. Instead, Iqbal holds that the European democracy exploits the common person. By contrast, Iqbal's underpinning assumption of spiritual democracy is the idea that 'every human being is a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character'. A human being as a source of latent power could be an asset for the human world if the power is used in creative activities. Iqbal envisions people to be creative exploring and using this hidden power to shape the world for the common good.

In contrast, Islamic democracy acquires the common good. Islamic democracy holds the idea that every person has latent power, inherent potential, and different possibilities to reshape reality for the creation of a better world. In response to the Western aristocratic democracy, Iqbal holds that the Democracy of early Islam, which covers the prophet of Islam and his first four caliphs, promoted the downtrodden people of society because Islam is against the feudal and supports the weak.

3. Iqbal's Politics of Spiritual Democracy

Iqbal's political philosophy envisages an ideal state that is cosmopolitan in its structure and scope. This ideal state is the kingdom of God on earth, based on a kind of democracy, which Iqbal calls spiritual democracy. Iqbal's notion of the kingdom of God on earth is a political utopia which may be called *Islamic political cosmopolitanism*.[9] In *Iqbal Memorial Lecture*-2014 entitled "The Contemporary Ideological Conflict in the World of Islam", Fateh Muhammad Malik argues that the Arab world developed two contrasting interpretations of Islam: democratic and imperialistic. Iqbal supports democracy and rejects imperialism. Malik holds that the cause of the Arab Spring of the 2010s in the Middle East was a revolt against imperialism, exploitation, injustice, and humiliation. The Arab Spring, Malik believes, was based on Iqbal's philosophical ideas for promoting real democracy.[10]

Iqbal juxtaposes European democracy and spiritual democracy as follows: "so long as this so-called democracy[11], this accursed nationalism and this degraded imperialism are not shattered, so long as men do not demonstrate by their actions that they believe that the whole world is the family of God, so long as the distinctions of race, colour and geographical nationalities are not wiped out completely, they will never be able to lead a happy and

contented life and the beautiful ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity will never materialise."[12] Under the account of European democracy, the evils of nationalism and imperialism can be debunked. Moreover, the ideals of spiritual democracy, including liberty, equality and fraternity, cannot be achieved in the European model of democracy. So, Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy is cosmopolitan, which recognises all human beings without any distinction of national, racial, cultural, or linguistic identities to create a world society without any kind of division for acquiring humanity as a family of God.

Iqbal is satisfied with neither the East nor the West. He contends that the West has adopted a material interpretation and ignored the spiritual aspects of the universe, while the East [particularly the Islamic world] holds a spiritual interpretation of the universe but lacks the scientific outlook. Both parts of the world should learn from each other. Iqbal admires Western scientific achievements while criticising its materialistic outlook. Meanwhile, Iqbal dislikes the idleness of the East while he admires its spiritual aspects. Khalifa Abdul Hakim writes:

> He [Iqbal] came to the conclusion that as the lopsided material progress of the West was unethical and unspiritual, so, the religiosity of the East was a hollow and life-thwarting force. The realm of the spirit had to be rediscovered by the East as well as by the West. A good deal of science and technology of the West was valuable and the East was to learn it and adopt it to eliminate poverty, squalor, and disease, but the East must not repeat the mistake of worshipping material power as an end-in-itself. Physical sciences and the tremendous forces that they have unleashed must be harnessed to ethical and spiritual aims. A religious outlook alone can save humanity but this outlook itself requires re-examination and reconstruction.[13]

Being a critic of Western democracy, Iqbal undermines its materialistic approach to life. This does not mean that he eulogizes the East. According to Iqbal, the West should take the spiritual aspect from the East, and the East should take the scientific approach from the West. Spiritual democracy promotes ethical ideals of freedom, equality, and solidarity.

The world has been created by human beings themselves. Iqbal believes that the world in which we live is still a work in progress. If this world were a finished product, developing it would not be needed. People undertake the task of making the imperfect world a perfect one and reconstructing it as they want it to be. Saiyidain remarks, "he [Iqbal] is also challenged and

enthused by the 'glory' of this imperfect world which man has been enjoined to remake nearer to his heart's desire."[14] This imperfect world requires a democratic collective action to rebuild it with people's own choice. Considerably, this perfection is in accordance with people's own will. Iqbal does not want to reconstruct a particular nation but the entire human world. To acquire the universal application, Iqbal draws on the religion of Islam. Riffat Hassan states, "Iqbal begins with Islam because he regards it as a universal religion that repudiates the idea of race, colour, and country and does not separate humanity's religious and political life."[15] Consequently, Iqbal embraces the central ideals of Islam to remake the social world democratically.

Iqbal used the expression, 'spiritual democracy', only once in his entire philosophical writings. Javed Majeed contends that Iqbal did not explain the term "spiritual".[16] Indeed, Iqbal did not explain 'spiritual' in particular and 'spiritual democracy' in general substantially. Yet, Iqbal's writings contain evidence that helps explain his account of spiritual democracy. Contextualising the evidence, I explain Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy. In his work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* Iqbal defines 'spiritual' in contrast to 'temporal'. Iqbal writes, "An act is temporal or profane if it is done in a spirit of detachment from the infinite complexity of life behind it; it is spiritual if it is inspired by that complexity."[17] There is a strong affinity of Iqbal's and Hegel's approaches to understanding the reality. Hegel's explanation of ideas of abstract and concrete helps explain Iqbal's explanation of spiritual and temporal. According to Hegel, a holistic understanding of reality is concrete, while its partial understanding is abstract.[18] Like Hegel's idea of abstract, 'temporal' gives a partial understanding of reality, while 'spiritual' means a holistic understanding of reality. 'Spiritual' makes a nexus between the self with the *whole*. In a crude sense, spiritual means to be part of the entire universe. With this sense of the spiritual, Iqbal's social, moral, and political vision can be comprehended as cosmopolitan. So, spiritual democracy seeks dialogue across social, cultural, racial, linguistic, religious, and national borders for the advancement of humanity.

Iqbal states, "Humanity needs three things today – a 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."[19] What is a spiritual interpretation of the universe? Iqbal's definition of the 'spiritual' reveals that 'spiritual interpretation' means the holistic understanding of the universe, in which nothing is separate from it. This

universe is not alien to us, it is within us. Similarly, 'spiritual emancipation of the individual' means that discriminating against people based on their racial, cultural, and ethnic disparities is temporal, and their emancipation is to recognise them are as members of the human community. Human fraternity, freedom and equality are the basic principles, which direct the evolution of human society. So, Iqbal insists on the spiritual understanding of the universe and humanity epistemologically and ethically.

Democracy and nationalism are linked with one another. Iqbal is a democrat because he holds that nationalism is one factor that creates problems for humanity. Nationalism can be a temporary solution to unite people in a boundary, but this solution is not the ultimate one. According to Iqbal, "Nationalism is [a] need only as a stage in social development. The ultimate aim must be international, a world federation in some form or other."[20] In a letter to Reynold A. Nicholson (1921), Iqbal states:

> Since I find that the idea of nationality based on race or territory is making headway in the world of Islam, and since I fear that the Muslims, losing sight of their own ideal of universal humanity, are being lured by the idea of a territorial nationality, I feel it is my duty as a Muslim and as a lover of all humankind, to remind them of their true function in the evolution of mankind. Tribal or national organizations on the lines of race or territory are only temporary phases in the enfoldment and upbringing of collective life.[21]

Iqbal reluctantly accepts nationalism as a temporary stage to eventually achieve a cosmopolitan state. Iqbal is right that nationalism causes hurdles for the development of humanity.

Lowes Dickinson, an orientalist, contends that Iqbal considers only Muslims in the kingdom of God.[22] In a letter to Nicholson, Iqbal replies: "The object of my Persian poems is not to make out a case for Islam; my aim is simply to discover a universal social reconstruction, and in this endeavour, I find it philosophically impossible to ignore a social system which exists with the express object of doing away with all the distinctions of caste, rank, and race; and which, while keeping a watchful eye on the affairs of this world, fosters a spirit of unworldliness so absolutely essential to man in his relations with his neighbours."[23] Iqbal's argument asserts two things: Iqbal's philosophy is universal, and it is for all human beings.

Iqbal's interview with *The Bombay Chronicle,* provides another evidence that Iqbal is against parochial nationalism. He states, "I consider it against

the higher ideal of Islam. Islam is not a creed. It is a social code. It has solved the colour problem. It wants to turn the minds of people into a single channel. It originally conceived the unity and the spiritual resemblance among the members of the human race. Nationalism as at present understood and practiced comes in the way of the realization of that ideal, and that is my argument against Nationalism."[24] According to Hakim, Iqbal believes, "Territorial or racial nationalism is foreign to the spirit of Islam; it originated in the West. He [Iqbal] was convinced … that it would be a tragically retrograde step if the Muslim world began to try to remedy its frustrations by replacing the global Islamic sentiment by aggressive nationalism of the Western type."[25] Hakim's argument is correct. So, Iqbal's model of spiritual democracy is consistent with cosmopolitanism. To explain Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy, I explain his three theses: First, human persons can legislate. Second, there is human unity. Third, human persons are free and responsible agents.

3.1 Legislation

In "The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam"[26], Iqbal holds that one of the central principles of Muslim democracy is *Ijtihad* (legislation).[27] The key idea to understanding Iqbal's notion of spiritual democracy is the idea of human's ability to legislate. Like Kant's notion of free will as a legislative will, Iqbal insists on legislation's significance in resolving the recurring challenges to humanity. Iqbal mentions three schools of Law that support three degrees of *Ijtihad*: First, this kind of Ijtihad gives complete authority to legislators to legislate. This degree of legislation is essentially limited to the creators of the school. The second degree of *Ijtihad* is limited as compared to the first form, and it is practised within the limits of a particular school. The third kind of *Ijtihad* is confined to those legal matters left unsettled by the school's founders.[8] Iqbal argues that legislators should be given complete authority.[28]

Iqbal argues that human persons ought to make significant legislation following the values of Islam. The cardinal values of Islam are freedom[29], equality[30], and fraternity. Fraternity is vital to know whether Iqbal's idea of the kingdom of God is only for Muslims or it is for the entire humanity. He does not say the Muslim fraternity, but the human fraternity.[31] Iqbal posits a significant claim that people treat one another as brothers in the kingdom of God.[32] Why Iqbal believes that spiritual democracy could be helpful for the welfare of the human world? Iqbal thought that the political system in traditional Islam is static, but it needs to be dynamic to meet the challenges of the times. Sheila McDonough writes, "He (Iqbal) wanted Muslims to have

the freedom to take the responsibility for re-interpreting the basic principles of Islam in a practical and effective way."[33] To defend his argument, Iqbal uses two political systems in Turkey, the nationalist party and the reformative party. The problem of sacred and profane is central between both parties. Iqbal refuted the nationalist party while he supported the reformative party and explained that what is secular is sacred.

3.2 Human Equality

Iqbal is an ardent supporter of human equality. The idea of human equality is centred on the idea of human fraternity. The idea of human unity is one of the central foundations of Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy. The key thesis is that all human beings are equal. In Iqbal's works, several arguments support the notion of human equality. Following the Islamic tradition, Iqbal states, "In the interests of a universal unification of [hu]mankind the Quran ignores their minor differences and says: 'Come let us unite on what is common to us all'."[34] The question is what is common among us. One of the ideas that is or could be common among all human persons in the world is the oneness of Ultimate Reality. This Reality is the Final principle, Supreme Ego or God. In the Islamic tradition, the expression *Tauhid* refers to unity of being[35], which means the oneness of God. The argument is that *Tauhid* implies human equality.

Shagufta Begum reiterates Iqbal's account of *Tauhid* as a working idea of equality, freedom and solidarity.[36] Iqbal states, "Islam, as a polity, is only a practical means of making this principle a living factor in the intellectual and emotional life of mankind."[37] So, the notion of *Tauhid* has particular significance in the religion of Islam. In contrast, in nationalism what unites people together is race, nationality, colour, or language. Iqbal writes, "Islam certainly aims at absorption. This absorption is to be achieved, not by territorial conquest, but by the simplicity of its teaching, its appeal to the common sense of mankind."[38] So, drawing on Islam, Iqbal supports the idea of human equality.

3.3 Human Freedom

In Iqbal's model of spiritual democracy, freedom is a significant value that helps make decisions in social life and government without fear. Iqbal explains, "Islam the hard crust which has immobilized an essentially dynamic outlook on life, and to rediscover the original verities of freedom, equality, and solidarity to rebuild our moral, social, and political ideals out of their original simplicity and universality"[39]. Freedom is both a moral and political value. If freedom is promoted in a social landscape, people can

contribute their benign role to the welfare of humanity. Freedom is not for a particular group but for all people worldwide. According to Taylor, "we all need to hear him [Iqbal] again, citizens of the West, Muslims, and those from his native India, where a form of Hindu chauvinism rages in our times that exceeds his worst fears."[40] Taylor's claim to take guidance from Iqbal in such a society where a majority subjugates a minority is vital. Iqbal wants to emancipate humanity from the clutches of bigotry to acquire the common good. Thus, freedom is indispensable for practicing a vibrant democracy.

3.4 Human Solidarity

Iqbal is an ardent supporter of human solidarity. Islam "recognizes the worth of the individual as such and rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human solidarity. Blood-relationship is earth-rootedness. The search for a purely psychological foundation of human solidarity becomes possible only with the perception that all human life is spiritual in its origin."[41] I agree with the claim that this is not a blood relationship but a spiritual bond that makes human solidarity possible. In a poem entitled 'Makkah and Geneva', in *Zarb-e-Kalim*, Iqbal compares the Western strategy of League of Nations with the Islamic idea of human unity. Iqbal articulates:

The league of nations is fashioned in the contemporary epoch,
No one could envision the human unity.
The goal of West's strategy is to create division among nations,
The sole end of Islam is human unity.
Makkah asks a question from Geneva:
Ought there be a unity of nations or a human unity? [42]

The idea of human unity cannot be acquired without the idea of human solidarity. In *Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal*, Iqbal believes in "the absolute equality of all the members of the community."[43] Iqbal writes, "There is no privileged class, no priesthood, no caste system"[44] in Islam. In a new year message, "brotherhood of man", Iqbal articulates that brotherhood is the only dependable unity among human persons which is beyond nationality, colour, race or language. Thus, spiritual democracy promotes human solidarity.

Taylor's concern is correct that Pakistan could not adopt the real spirit of Iqbal's account of democracy in particular, and his ideas in general. As explained above, Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy is based on three key moral and political values: equality, freedom, and solidarity. Since the inception of Pakistan, the socio-political and religious agencies backed by

the state apparatus have been misinterpreting Iqbal's cosmopolitan and humanistic philosophy. They interpret Iqbal's philosophy, in terms of parochial nationalism and anti-cosmopolitanism, and reconstruct a kind of social metaphysics by embarking on particular religious, linguistic, and cultural identities, which Iqbal rejects. Iqbal's philosophy breaks all the identities of tribe, caste, race, colour, or language and recognises all human beings as members of the human family. Thus, Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy is a gateway to Islamic modernism and global peace.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I investigated Iqbal's account of spiritual democracy. Iqbal's theory of spiritual democracy includes both moral and political elements. On the one hand, it acknowledges that people can transcend differences in race, culture, language, religion, and ethnicity. On the other hand, it holds that all human beings have the right to participate in the democratic process and create a good social reality. Iqbal holds that life in the West is focused on the material, meaning people pursue their self-interests. That is why capitalism suits Western life. Iqbal anticipated that Europe would face a catastrophe due to a materialistic outlook and the absence of ethical and spiritual values.[45] Thus, Iqbal criticises materialist values while supporting spiritual values. Two world wars in the twentieth century and the 9/11 attacks in USA are the result of such materialism.[46]

Iqbal's theory of democracy presents a political Islamic tradition in a cosmopolitan sense. Iqbal emphasises the Islamic tradition's fundamental moral and political values for democratic decision-making. Equality, freedom, and solidarity are among the core values of Muslim democracy. Iqbal's idea of spiritual democracy emphasizes human agency above and beyond differences in race, nationality, language, and color. Iqbal's concept of spiritual democracy does not favour geographical primacy. The state of Pakistan could not interpret and adopt Iqbal's philosophy. Iqbal's philosophy is vital for a good society. Therefore, spiritual democracy is a way to create a cosmopolitan society on earth where all people can coexist peacefully as if they are equal members of humanity.

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30 See section 3.2 for detailed discussion on the idea of equality.

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