

Muhammad Iqbal's Ethics of Reverence for Humanity in the Islamic Tradition

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Abstract

This article explains Muhammad Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity and determines how it fits with Islamic ethics. The cardinal goal of Islamic ethics is reverence for humanity. The Arabic expression 'Islam' means 'peace'. The cardinal claim of Islamic ethics is that human beings deserve reverence because they are created with the best conformation. The Arabic phrase *Ahsan al-Taqweem* refers to the best conformation, which means a wide range of unique physical, metaphysical, moral, aesthetic and cognitive potentials. From a broader perspective, Islamic ethics foster reverence for humanity based on three primary moral and political values: equality, freedom, and fraternity. Drawing on the Islamic tradition, Iqbal argues that all human beings are worthy of reverence irrespective of their racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic disparities because of their distinctive potentials, such as creativity, freedom, and knowledge. These potentials are preordained in human beings by birth. To develop these potentials, Iqbal posits his theory of egohood which fosters unique individuality. Under certain conditions, such as individual-society relationships, freedom, equality, and fraternity, Iqbal insists on developing these potentials to acquire the status of a perfect human. According to Iqbal, a perfect human is a God's vicegerent on earth, who collaborates with Him in creation. Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity emancipates human beings from poverty, war, violence, humiliation, discrimination, exploitation, hatred, and destruction. Yet, Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity furnishes human beings with prosperity, peace, self-respect, equality, dignity, friendship, fraternity, and survival on earth. Thus, Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity is consistent with Islam's ethics of reverence for humanity.

Keywords: egohood (selfhood, *khudi*, individuality), creativity, reverence, Islamic ethics, Muslim philosophy.

1. Introduction

Muhammad Iqbal brought about the same reformation in the Muslim world¹ in the twentieth century that Martin Luther brought about in Europe in the sixteenth century. Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani philosopher, claims that Iqbal is the only modern philosopher who developed a new Muslim metaphysics by drawing on Islamic and Western traditions.² Certainly, Rahman is correct because no other Muslim philosopher in the last five centuries could succeed in developing a similar or better philosophical framework than Iqbal. Iqbal's magisterial work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, furnishes an intellectual framework that is more immense, colossal, and thought-provoking than that of Al-Ghazali in the history of the Islamic tradition.³ Iqbal's framework undoubtedly brought about a Copernican revolution in Muslim philosophical thinking.⁴ Souleymane Bachir Diagne believes that if this work, *Reconstruction*, "had been written during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mun – from 813 to 832 – it would have had profound repercussions in all of the Islamic intellectual world."⁵ I endorse Diagne's claim that the future of the Islamic world under Iqbal's philosophical ideas would have been different from the existing one if it had been produced earlier. Iqbal strives to acquire reverence for humanity irrespective of people's racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic identities.

This article explains and defends Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity in the Islamic tradition. Reverence for humanity is the cardinal end of Iqbal's philosophical oeuvre.⁶ Immanuel Kant believes that human beings deserve reverence due to rationality, whereas Iqbal believes that human beings deserve reverence due to creativity.⁷ Like Kant's formula of humanity in ethics, Iqbal holds that treat others as if they were your brothers (sisters) without any distinction of race, colour, culture, or language.⁸ In this article, I have two aims: First, I will explain Iqbal's ethics of reverence. Second, to show how Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity fits with Islamic ethics. Iqbal believes that the key message of Islam is, "religion ... [is] neither national and racial, nor individual and private, but purely human and ... its purpose ... [is] to unite and organise [hu]mankind despite all its natural distinctions."⁹ Islam is a universal religion that gives reverence to all human beings. Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity protect all human beings from humiliation, exploitation, poverty, war, discrimination, or any kind of dehumanisation.¹⁰

2. The Ethics of Reverence for Humanity in the Islamic Tradition

The Arabic expression 'Islam' means 'peace'. The main thrust of Islamic ethics is reverence for humanity. The Holy Quran declares, "Now, indeed,

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We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above most of Our creation.”¹¹ ‘The children of Adam’ refers to humanity. Each human being has dignity. Islamic ethics asserts that human beings are worthy of reverence because they are created with the best conformation. The Arabic expression *Ahsan al-Taqweem* means the best conformation. The Quran states, “Verily, We create [hu]man in the best conformation.”¹² The ‘best conformation’ means that human beings inherit infinite physical, metaphysical, moral, political and cognitive schemes of potentialities. These potentials are preordained in humans by birth. To explain reverence for Adam (and his progeny), the Holy Quran states, “Yea, indeed, We have created you, and then formed you; and then We said unto the angels, “Prostrate yourselves before Adam!”¹³ In the verse, ‘Adam’ may have two meanings: First, this refers to the first person created by God. Second, this refers to all human persons, the children of Adam. Notably, God asks angels to prostrate themselves before Adam due to his distinctive potentials. However, the Quran does not reveal that Adam or his progeny is asked to prostrate before angels or any other creature. So, Islamic ethics gives reverence to human beings more than any creature in the universe.

Islam claims two kinds of rights: God’s rights (*Haqooq Allah*) and people’s rights (*Haqooq al-Ibad*). God’s rights refer to the duties revealed through prophets and their scriptures, which human persons, as His creature, ought to obey. This is a vertical relationship between God and humans. However, the ‘rights of people’ refer to the right to life, right to freedom, equality before the law, social justice, right to a fair trial, right to political and legal security, right to self-respect, right to hospitality, right to equal opportunities to resources, right to freedom of expression, right of faith, right to form and organise a group, right to trade, right to choice of profession, protection of minority rights, right to participate into political affairs, right to marriage and create family, right to education and right to privacy. These are social, moral, political, economic, legal, and cultural rights. The ethics of reverence for humanity is primarily related to the rights of people (*Haqooq al-Ibad*).¹⁴

Islam gives reverence to all human beings without any distinction of race, colour, or language. In his last pilgrimage at Makkah, the Holy prophet of Islam, Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) declared, “O humankind! your God is one and your father (Adam) is one. An Arab has neither any superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab. Moreover, a white has neither any superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white except in good conduct.”¹⁵ Being equal to one

another means that all human persons are owed reverence because they are the progeny of one father, Adam. Being the children of Adam, people cannot warrant tribal, racial, or colour-based discrimination. Any discrimination against people based on race and colour is morally wrong. Nevertheless, moral conduct makes one superior to others who act in less morally good ways. Also, the Holy Quran states, "O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another."¹⁶ The Holy Quran asserts that God has created human creatures from one male (Adam) and one female (Eve), and made their nations and tribes, not for their status but just for the sake of their recognition in society. Distinctions in tribes or nations do not make people superior or inferior. Yet, moral conduct can make one superior to others. So, Islam gives reverence to all human beings and condemns any racial, colour, or ethnic discrimination in social life.

3. Iqbal's Ethics of Reverence for Humanity

Iqbal takes 'humanity' as the progeny of Adam, human agency, the Divine's best creation and Divine's vicegerents. Iqbal's ethics fosters reverence for humanity in the sense that it promotes the possibilities of the development of human potentials. Fazlur Rahman believes that modernist scholars envisage Islam promoting rational and scientific faculties in human beings to build human civilisation and make human development.¹⁷ Rahman has rightly pointed out that the real role of Islam is to be beacon light for human development, and one of those scholars who promotes human development is Iqbal. Sheila McDonough holds that Iqbal was a better theoretician than an administrator, and he wanted to make the development of his people.¹⁸ In a poem, 'Adam', in *Zarb-e-Kalim*, Iqbal articulates:

The talisman wrought from mud and clay,
Whom we give the name of man,
Is mystery known to God alone,
Its essence true we cannot scan.

...

If you do not get much disturbed,
To you this truth I may unroll,
That man, God's image, on the earth,
Is neither frame of clay nor soul.¹⁹

In this poem, Iqbal posits a theomorphic idea of a human who transcends body and mind. If humans bear a God's image, they can acquire His potential, such as creativity, knowledge, and justice. So, humans are owed reverence due to the divinity in them.

Iqbal holds that human beings deserve reverence regardless of their castes, colours, and creeds because of their distinctive potentials.²⁰ In his *magnum opus* poem, *Javed Nama* (The Book of Eternity), Iqbal posits the idea of reverence for humanity in two places. First, Iqbal states that reverence for one another is a key to human civilisation. Iqbal articulates:

The status of a human being is higher than the heavens,
The basis of real civilisation is reverence for humanity.²¹

Iqbal believes that the status of the human person is immeasurable in this colossal universe. To say something is immeasurable is to recognise its value. The status of human beings in the universe is unbelievable, which may be considered a wonder, miracle or a crown of all creatures. Iqbal also asserts that the ethics of reverence for humanity underpins human civilisation; without it, it is just a playground of beasts.

Second, Iqbal's idea of reverence for humanity is essential for human civilisation; without it, no one can recognise one's status of being a human being. Iqbal states:

Reverence for a human being is humanity,
Be aware of the status of the human being,
Human beings develop in a firm relationship with one another,
Follow the footsteps of friendship.²²

In these verses, Iqbal explains how reverence is vital for humanity to recognise one's status as a human being and the significance of social capital and the value of friendship in the human world. In Iqbal's ethics, each member of humanity has worth and deserves reverence. He appeals to human beings to recognise their human status in this gigantic universe. Iqbal also emphasises that solid social capital based on friendship is vital for human development. Thus, the cardinal message in *Javed Nama* is that youth should be more creative and make this world a better place for all humanity.²³

Iqbal revisits Islamic thought critically and suggests a thorough reconstruction in light of the latest knowledge to meet contemporary challenges. Iqbal's argument of the reconstruction of Islamic religious thought holds that it should be reformed in the context of all kinds of acquired knowledge of its time, which consists of knowledge of science, social sciences, humanities and arts. In his life Iqbal comprehended Albert

Einstein's theories of physics, which were very recent at that time. There has been a tremendous development in all fields, especially science, physics, biology, geology, space science and computer science, particularly artificial intelligence. In social sciences, there have been emerged numerous theories, such as game theory, decision theory, social capital theory, rational choice theory. There are great developments in all forms of knowledge. Iqbal's argument is worthwhile to revisit religious thought with the contemporary knowledge to cope with the contemporary challenges in the Muslim world in particular and the entire world in general.

Islam promotes an account of society in which the individual and society are subject to moral development. Iqbal states, "if the purpose of human society is to ensure peace and security for the nations and to transform their present social organism into a single social order, then one cannot think of any other social order than that of Islam."²⁴ The moral reformation of this social order cannot be possible without the development of the individual. According to Iqbal, "Islam does not aim at the moral reformation of the individual alone; it also aims at a gradual but fundamental revolution in the social life of mankind, which should altogether change its national and racial viewpoint and create in its place a purely human consciousness."²⁵ Islam fosters a balanced view of the development of individual and society.

Iqbal holds that the fall of humans from Eden to earth, "... does not mean any moral depravity; it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of personal causality in one's own being."²⁶ Iqbal believes that the fall of humans from heaven to earth was an opportunity with advantages and disadvantages.²⁷ The advantages are that the individuals have a chance to develop their own egohood and the social world into an ideal state. The disadvantage is that if humans fail to develop egohood, individuals could spoil life on Earth. I explain Iqbal's two theses: First, humans are God's vicegerents on earth. Second, humans are God's co-workers in creation on earth.

The first thesis holds that humans beings are God's vicegerents on earth that means that only they are endowed with role among all creatures. If one is selected for a particular role, one has the capacity to perform that role. If human beings are God's vicegerents on earth, they deserve reverence. Iqbal infers the idea of God's vicegerency from a verse of the Holy Quran, which reveals that He talks to angels about the creation of human beings. The Holy Quran states, "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: I will create a vicegerent on earth. They said: Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief

therein and shed blood? ...He said, I know, what ye know not."²⁸ God disagrees with angels on the potentials of human beings. The Holy Quran affirms that human beings are moral beings. If human beings are God's vicegerent on earth, they are not ordinary creatures. They are capable of being God's vicegerents because of their human potential. Being a God's vicegerent is the embodiment of human development. Iqbal's idea of a developed human is God's vicegerent on earth. Iqbal sees divinity in human persons, enabling them to create the kingdom of God for a peaceful co-existence on earth.²⁹

The second thesis asserts that humans are God's co-workers in creation on Earth.³⁰ Iqbal writes, "The distinctive grace of [hu]man is that [s]he alone, of all the living creatures, has become an active participant in the creative activity of his Maker."³¹ To say human persons are God's co-workers means they are capable of creation. Being a God's collaborator is a matter of creativity. Iqbal holds that every human has worth because of unique individuality, which eventually fosters creativity. To explain his idea of creativity, Iqbal posits the idea of *khudi* or egohood. *Khudi* is a metaphysical notion that refers to individuality. Iqbal's philosophy seeks how to develop human's *khudi*. In a broader sense, the development of human individuality means reverence for humanity. Reverence for individuality means opening up all possibilities for development.³² Developing one's individuality means developing one's capacities and powers.³³ Iqbal argues that "Man must give preference to 'ego sustaining' deeds and eschew those which are 'ego-destroying or corrupting'. And the principle of ego-sustaining deed is defined *as respect for the ego in myself as well in the others*."³⁴ Iqbal's notion of *khudi* (egohood) respects every person's individuality. He holds that the essence of human personality is the individual and unique ego. Iqbal states, "The whole system of Islamic ethics is based on the idea of individuality; anything which tends to repress the healthy development of individuality is quite inconsistent with the spirit of Islamic law and ethics."³⁵ Iqbal's claim that the development of individuality is consistent with Islamic ethics. Thus, Iqbal argues that the development of *khudi* is the reverence for humanity.

Iqbal argues that creativity is a criterion of reverence for humanity. In "Iqbal's Conception of Good Character", K. G. Saiyidain states that Iqbal's idea of "creativity is the most valuable and distinctive gift of [hu]man through which he has been able to transform his crude world and fill it with what order and beauty it can claim."³⁶ Saiyidain's argument is valid that creativity is a crucial human potential that plays a significant role in reshaping, reconstructing, and renewing the outer and the inner human

world. In *Iqbal's Educational Philosophy*, Saiyidain reiterates, "Man's creativity is not confined to the reshaping of matter alone; he also has "the capacity to build a much vaster world in the depths of his own inner being, wherein he discovers sources of infinite joy and inspiration" – in art and poetry, literature and science, philosophy and religion."³⁷ So, creativity manifests itself in many ways.

Creativity is a distinctive attribute that empowers the human ego and causes the evolution of the human world. In *The Humanist Tradition in Indian Educational Thought*, Saiyidain writes that a human person "becomes qualified to participate in the original, creative activity of the Universe. This raises his status and responsibility far above those of other living creatures."³⁸ Creativity makes human beings unique. The vital characteristics of human beings are imagination, creativity, and originality, which make them superior to all other creatures.³⁹ In *Javed Nama*, the voice of God reveals:

Are you alive? Be ardent, be creative!
Like us, grasp all horizons!
Piecemeal whatsoever is uncongenial!
Create a new world out of yourself!
A free man finds it irksome to live
In a world belonging to others!
Whoever has not the power to create,
In our mind, is an infidel, a heathen.⁴⁰

In these verses, Iqbal urges human beings to be creative beings because only creativity make them livable. Human beings have the capability to create new world. Iqbal differentiates between a believer and a non-believer solely on the standard of creativity. He determines the worth of an individual with the power of creativity and its contribution to human creations, including art, science, and culture.⁴¹

Iqbal holds that human beings should treat others as if they were their brothers (or sisters). In a new year message entitled, 'Brotherhood of Man', broadcast from the All India Radio on January 1, 1938, Iqbal articulates, "Remember, man can be maintained on this earth only by *honouring mankind* [italics added], and this world will remain a battleground of ferocious beasts of prey unless and until the educational forces of the whole world as directed to inculcating in man respect for mankind... Only one unity is dependable, and that unity is the *brotherhood of man* [italics added], which is above race, nationality, colour or language."⁴² Iqbal believes that

human beings can survive on earth only with the ethics of reverence for one another. So, ethics of reverence for humanity is inevitable for the sustainability of humanity.

Dignity is one of essential values for the ethics of reverence for humanity. Saiyidain states that Iqbal is “an impassioned champion of man’s freedom and dignity, of justice in social, national and international relationships and enemy of hypocrisy, mental sloth, obscurantism and the gospel of the easy life undermine men’s potential.”⁴³ Iqbal holds that the idea of human dignity is based on human nature. Hamid Ahmad Khan states, “The human dignity of human beings, in Iqbal’s thought, does not depend upon people’s social status, nation, race or colour but the greatness of human nature.”⁴⁴ I agree with Khan’s thesis that human nature is the foundation of human dignity in Iqbal’s thought. On the contrary, the exploitation of human beings based on social status, nation, race, or colour is inconsistent with the ethics of reverence for humanity.

Martin Heidegger contends that humans are thrown into this world to die. Iqbal holds that death is the renewal of the art of life. In a short span of time, humans make the best creations and arts on earth. Iqbal holds that the human after death, through creative capabilities and moral life on earth, shall stand before God with dignity, saying that thou granted me great responsibility and I have done it. For a very little mistake, thou threw me to earth from Eden. But look! I have made such magnificent works on your barren earth.⁴⁵ In the *Message of the East*, Iqbal describes a dialogue between God and human, both as creators:

You made the night and I the lamp,
And You the clay and I the cup;
You—desert, mountain-peak, and vale:
I—flower-bed, park, and orchard; I
Who grind a mirror out of stone,
Who brew from poison honey-drink.⁴⁶

The creative potentials of human persons make abundant creations in this world. Indeed, with their creative power, humans have brought about a revolution on the earth. There are great examples of creative human achievements, from moral, political, and legal progress to scientific discoveries and swimming in waters and flying into the air from Earth to other planets.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates Muhammad Iqbal's ethical standpoint of reverence for humanity and explains its link with Islamic ethics. Exploring Iqbal's notion of reverence for humanity in the Islamic tradition is significant for understanding the foundation of Islamic civilisation. The core argument of Iqbal's reverence for humanity is based on the claim that human beings deserve reverence because of distinctive potentials, notably creativity and knowledge. Iqbal starts his philosophy by explaining the idea of the human person and then turns to the ideal human society. To explain the ontology of the individual and society, Iqbal develops his theory of *khudi*, which refers to individuality. In a way, he holds that reverence for *khudi* is reverence for humanity. Significantly, Iqbal's standpoint of reverence is not just for Muslims but all of humanity. Iqbal draws on the integral values of Islamic ethics, including freedom, equality, and fraternity, to develop his argument of reverence for humanity. Iqbal's ethics of reverence for humanity squarely fits with Islamic ethics. It would be pertinent to mention that Iqbal's ethics of reverence is significant for politics, education, law, economics, science, and religion.

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