

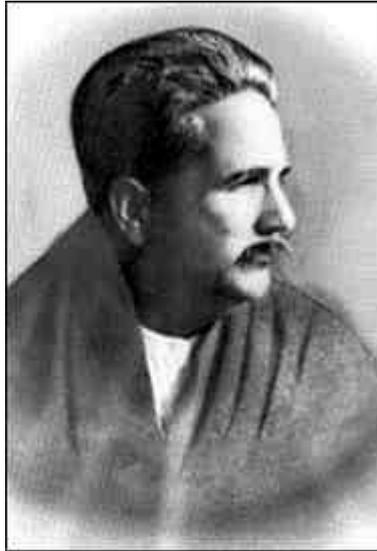
# Oxford rekindles the light of Iqbal

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**Muhammad Sabieh Anwar**

**Do we need to look to the West to acknowledge the many sides of one of our greatest thinkers?**

Pakistanis sometimes claim ownership of Iqbal. But while venerating him, they often lose sight of his wisdom and poetical finesse – concentrating only on his vital symbolism as a poet of the nation. This sometimes transforms Iqbal into a mere ‘courtier poet’. Whereas his works have been hailed as a great driving force in the revolutionary history of Iran, our curricula only pay a muted tribute to his reformist, revivalist and rationalistic appeal. One wonders why Iqbal is subject to this selective appreciation. The rulers



throughout Pakistan’s chequered political history dread his calls of defiance, but use him, at the same time, in upholding their national pride. The *imam* in the pulpit freely cites his verse, but fails to recognize his spirit of reconstruction. Schoolteachers relate to their pupils when Iqbal speaks of the past glory of Muslims but would, at best, avoid speaking about his open criticism of Eastern political systems. The aversion of the English-speaking elite to the Muslim thinker is clear – to them, religion is a private undertaking. The intolerance of the Muslim jurist is clearer – to them, religious jurisdiction is a sacred appointment, beyond the need for any modern reinterpretation.

Appreciating Iqbal in the West is ever more difficult as people grapple with the very idea of religion and God. As religion plays a diminishing role in the lives of Western communities, Iqbal’s message will not be received with much enthusiasm. With these mixed feelings in mind, Oxford University held a symposium entitled *Mera Payam Aur* (My Message is Unique) on 24 May this year. The aim was to touch upon both his poetry and philosophy, with emphasis on the latter’s relevance to modern times.

The Pakistan Discussion Forum arranged the event. It was established in 2001 by some zealous Pakistani Rhodes Scholars studying at Oxford University. Its main objective was to encourage discussion on the myriad challenges facing Pakistan and other Muslim or developing countries, as well as to encourage cross-pollination between Eastern and Western civilizations.

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- [Common Pak-Afghan go...](#)

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- [Life Style](#)
- [Tribute](#)
- [Insight](#)
- [Scene](#)
- [Heritage](#)
- [Issue](#)
- [Location](#)
- [Focus](#)
- [The face of reality](#)
- [Return of the native](#)
- [Loose talk](#)
- [Portrait of the man of cu...](#)

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- [Sending troops to Iraq: I operational perspective](#)
- [Bush-Cheney '04, Inc.](#)
- [Letter from Tehran](#)
- [Holy Cow](#)
- [The Greater Thal Canal c...](#)

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- ["I want to Islamise the v...](#)
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- [The politics behind MMA'](#)

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- [True Lies](#)
- [Diary of a Social Butterfl...](#)
- [Deglobalisation without t...](#)
- [Porto Alegre: there is life globalization](#)
- [Such Gup](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Nuggets](#)
- [Top Ten](#)

As the audience were seating themselves in the Nissan Lecture Theatre in St Antony's College, they were greeted by recitations of Iqbal's poetry, prepared by the Iqbal Academy, Pakistan. Then I gave an introduction to the symposium, bringing out the international relevance and timeless appeal of Iqbal's message. I discussed what makes Iqbal different; his audacious conversations with God; his characteristic poetic terminology; his concept of the self, the *khudi*; his remarkable blend of honour and detachment, of intellect and love; and his emphasis on human fate augmenting heavenly fate. Iqbal insisted his poems were not romantic lullabies, they were a slogan of valour, action and self-realization. This message was not to be confined to one nation, he insisted, but transcends all geography. I then read my translation of the poem *Itija-e-Musafir* (The Prayer of the Wayfarer) from *Bang-e-Dara*, where Iqbal is embarking on his westward journey (although he studied at Cambridge, not Oxford, but nevertheless...) in search of education, and makes a profound prayer. This prayer has an acute relevance to scholars like myself, scholars who left their homeland to seek knowledge in the West.

*"I say farewell to my garden, like a rose's scent,*

*Now I have submitted myself to the test of patience.*

*My desire to satiate my thirst of knowledge,*

*Is pushing me out of the gallery I call my homeland.*

*I am a solitary tree in a desert, my eyes are clung to the laden clouds,*

*Their shower can make me flower without the aid of the gardener.*

*O Lord, always keep me miles ahead of my kindred,*

*So that they can consider me as their destination.*

*O Lord, grant me the chance, once again, to lay my head at the feet of my parents,*

*By whose blessing, I possess the secret of love."*

Professor David Matthews, a renowned scholar on the languages of the subcontinent, gradually traversed the different phases in Iqbal's poetic upbringing – starting from his early years (the recitals organized by the *Anjuman-e-Punjab* in his college days), followed by his publications in Sheikh Abdul Qadir's magazine *Makhzan*. He presented a historical progression of Iqbal's metaphor and his poetic themes. He also spoke of Iqbal's massive popular charisma in a paper studded with beautiful readings from poems such as *Hamala* (The Himalays), *Saaqi Nama* (The Message of the Cupbearer) and *Eik Sham* (An evening – alongside

the banks of River Neckar, Hidelberg, Germany):

*“The moon’s light is silent,*

*The branches of every tree are silent.*

*The songsters of the valley are silent,*

*The green trees of the mountain are silent.*

*Nature has become unconscious,*

*It is sleeping in the night’s lap.*

*Some spell of serenity does exist,*

*That Neckar’s flow is also serene.*

*The caravan of stars is silent,*

*The caravan is moving without the bell.*

*Silent are the mountains, forest, river,*

*As if Nature is absorbed in deep meditation.*

*O Heart! You should also become silent,*

*And taking grief in your lap, must go to sleep.”*

The translation of all selections being read throughout the symposium, were being projected in the background. The display of the actual verse accompanied by the translation, synchronized with the rendition, gripped the audience’s attention. For the multicultural audience, language seemed to be no barrier!

*“O Lord! The aimlessly wandering nation of Islam faces the Ka’ba once again,*

*The wingless nightingale cannot resist its innate urge to fly,*

*The scent of love simmers in each and every bud in the garden,*

*The instrument awaits the pluck of the spectrum; so Lord! Please pluck its’ strings!*

Dr Yahya Michot, a fellow of Islamic Studies at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, discussed Iqbal’s religious reinvigoration in light of classical thought. In his paper *Mohammed Iqbal: Muslim thought for the*

*21st century?* Dr Michot claimed that Iqbal was the last great Muslim thinker in the lineage of illustrious intellectuals such as Ghazali, Razi and Shah Waliullah. He skilfully presented an overview of Iqbal's religious contributions and hailed them as a vitalizing spirit in the enervating pulse of modern Muslim intellectualism.

There was then a rendition of *Javid Nama*, by Dr Homa Katouzian of Exeter University. His exposition was in the *Dervish* style, common in Turkey, where artists use the style at Rumi's mausoleum. The *Javid Nama* is in fact a journey of ascension taken up by Iqbal, under the leadership of Rumi, during the course of which he comes across several figures of importance.

Dr Salman Asif, a literary critic well versed in subcontinental languages, recited a selection of Iqbal's Persian quatrains from *Payam-e-Mashriq* (Message of the East). He also talked about Iqbal's fondness for his homeland, and pointed out how he used Sanskrit vocabulary and figures of narrative from Hindu folklore and mythology. His choice of Persian verse highlighted Iqbal's concepts of never ending motion and mankind's supremacy as being the vicegerent of God.

The keynote speaker at the symposium was Reverend Keith Ward, a well known author and Chair of the Faculty of Theology at Oxford University. His book *God: A Guide for the Perplexed* has been a huge success in Britain. His paper was titled *Iqbal from a Western Philosophical Standpoint* – a difficult undertaking, but his clarity and objectivity, simplified complicated theological questions. Towards the end of the proceedings, his lively style and candid responses kept the audience engaged. He took up the novel task of explaining to his audience how Iqbal viewed God and how his outlook differed from a traditional Greek conception of the divine. Greek philosophy had upheld a static concept of God, a God who made the universe, set the laws of nature and then retired into the role of a passive supervision. This Greek picture of God is sometimes referred to as *Deus Otiosus*. Iqbal's concept of God, remarked Dr Ward, was inspired from the Quranic proposition:

تَسْتَغْفِرُ لَهُمْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ كُلَّ نَوْمٍ فَهُمْ مِنْ لَدُنْهِ

*“Every (creature) that is in the skies and the earth begs of Him. Every day He appears in a new majesty.” (Al-Quran 55:29)*

Keith Ward elaborated the verse and suggested that Iqbal considered God's creative energy as a dynamic driving force in the universe, unleashing itself in a multitude of ways, each passing day, each fleeting second. So God is present in full glory, for *all times*. The concepts of “now” and “then”; “past”, “present” and “future” lose meaning in Iqbal's temporal understanding of God. So God is approachable at all times – the means to approach him being fervent prayer. Professor Ward also

highlighted Iqbal's meaning of the concept of "prayer". He pointed out that Iqbal's theological understandings are in full accord with his pervasive ideas about free human will, never-ending motion and the principle of permanent change in the universe.

There was then a poignant tribute to the late Annemarie Schimmel, before the concluding address by Professor James Morris. He spoke of the perfect balance of beauty and content in all great works of art and philosophy. Then Bihani rapped up the event performing the exquisite ghazal *Kabhi Ay Haqeeqat-e-Muntazar* (O The Awaited Reality!):

*Whenever I place my head on the ground in humble prostration before the Lord!*

*The earth instantly speaks up: "What meaning does this prayer have, when idols inhabit your heart."*

Iqbal accused imperialism and capitalism of masquerading as democracy; he refutes the "medieval fancies of theologians"; he talks about reinvigorating the stagnated spirit of Muslim intellectualism by "creating a new spirit in a body grown too old". How do we put together the shards of Iqbal's thought? If we can open our hearts and minds, perhaps we can begin the task, without leaving the pieces which frighten or threaten us in the shadows.

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