

AN UNFORTUNATE RESPONSE: IQBAL ON GUTAS

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This rejoinder is a further contribution to the debate begun by M. Iqbal and D. Gutas on the differing perspectives and methodological assumptions of faith-based and secular approaches to the study of the history of science in religious cultures. While the arguments presented are to some degree ad hominem, they do aim to highlight certain logical inconsistencies in the conceptualization of the role of religion in the study of science and in the revisionist portrayal of Islam as a causal agent that functions independently of its adherents.

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Muzaffar Iqbal's rebuttal (*Islam & Science*, Vol. 1, 2003, No.2) of Dimitri Gutas' "Islam and Science: Responding to a False Approach" (ib.) is an emotional reaction to what he explicitly calls a "frontal attack" on Islam (221). It is also a regrettable one. It is regrettable that Iqbal chose the polemical terms he did for his published response. It is regrettable that Iqbal is not prepared to explore that "secular" approach to the study of the history of religions for which he condemns Gutas' contribution to the question. But perhaps most regrettable is that Iqbal's insistent and unyielding interpretation of Islam will be neither of particular interest to contemporary historians of Islamic societies nor profitable for its intended Muslim audience.

Gutas makes two rather simple points in identifying what he terms a "false" approach to the question of there being a relationship between Islam and the scientific endeavors of past Muslims: (i) there is

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no “normative” or “essential” definition of Islam good for all times and places, so to use the term “Islam” without qualification when identifying a reason for scientific endeavors in Islamic civilizations is not a useful approach to historical analysis; and (ii) “Islam”, however construed, does not in itself have any historical agency: Since Islam is not a force of nature, there must necessarily be individuals who may employ rhetorical constructs drawn from their own religious beliefs or the beliefs of the majority of their contemporaries to effect change or, in this case, to encourage or discourage scientific investigation.

Gutas draws evidence for these postulates from two periods in Islamic history. The first period (and the one he knows most about) is the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, initiated and sustained by the ‘Abbāsid caliphate and scholarly circles of Baghdad in the ninth-eleventh centuries. Here, the primary agent of the translation movement is identified as the Caliph al-Ma’mūn who employed religious rhetoric to secure legitimation as ruler of the Islamic empire after his fratricidal rise to power. The second period, less precisely defined by Gutas, but covering broadly the eleventh-fourteenth centuries, is represented by key intellectuals of the Western lands of the Islamic world who evince marked differences of opinion on the religious suitability of the employment of Aristotelian logic as an epistemological tool. In both of his examples, Gutas seeks to present the multiple interpretations of Islamic sensibilities that were espoused by scholars and rulers to the entirely antithetical ends of promoting or opposing scientific inquiry based on the Greek rationalistic model.

As part of his larger theory, Gutas notes that the development of Islamic doctrines and beliefs was recognized as a historical, evolutionary process by early generations of Muslim thinkers and that the diversity of opinions that were recognized, debated and codified by the representatives of the various legal (and we may add: theological) schools of early Islam is indicative of those multiple approaches to the interpretation of the religion.

None of this is spectacularly revolutionary in scope, methodology or conclusion. We must assume that Gutas’ point lies in the very reiteration of this general scholarly approach to the history of Islamic intellectual trends and scientific developments. That he labels as false the theory that there is a causal relation between Islam, monolithically assumed, and science, largely ill-defined, gives us good reason to believe that error in scope or methodology of the question is what

Gutas wishes to highlight. This appears to be entirely reasonable and indeed is precisely what historians do; they question one another's hypotheses, methodological assumptions, and interpretive conclusions.

What then accounts for Iqbal's response? An attentive reader will note that, while Iqbal begins his rebuttal by stating that he will ignore the "mocking tone" of Gutas' article and focus on his arguments, Iqbal is unable to restrain his indignation at that perceived tone. This is evident in the adjectives and adverbs that his prose regularly disgorges: "mocking" (twice), "mockingly", "mockery", "sarcastic" (twice), "derisive", "insolently". Iqbal is correct to argue (if optimistically in his own case) that a scholar's "tone" should not form the basis of a response. Generally, we should try to avoid both the assumption that we have correctly identified such a "tone" as well as any identification of the intention of that "tone". Another reader might readily assume the "tone" of Gutas' article to be one of exasperation at having to engage illogicality yet again, or he might perceive the "tone" to be insouciant or mischievous. Whatever the case, nothing constructive emerges from engaging debate on the basis of perceived "tone". Indeed to begin one's counter-arguments from such emotional reaction to "tone" almost entirely ensures that those arguments will fail to persuade, constructed as they are in the haste of anger. We must generously assume that this is the reason why Iqbal's arguments are in fact so poor. For, if Iqbal does consider his arguments convincing, the reader of his rebuttal is required to entertain the possibilities either that Iqbal has no conception of what constitutes the historian's craft or that he is lunging at shadows cast not by that craft but by opponents of his own creation.

But first we must evaluate Iqbal's arguments. Iqbal's response to the thesis that Islam as a religion is a historical phenomenon regularly reshaped by the multiple interpretations of its believers is to maintain there is a "core", "reified", "essential inner reality", a "metaphysical, metahistorical" message of Islam. He identifies this as the recognition of one divine being. Iqbal then interprets this core message to mean that there is a creator who created all things, both visible and invisible, that all pass away and are then judged by this creator. This interpretation Iqbal calls the "basic elements" of Islam. So, Iqbal argues that both that "core" message and those "basic elements" with which he elucidates the "core" are not subject to historical evolution.

As proof of this conclusion, Iqbal notes that the “core”, at any rate, is shared by all monotheisms, and as proof of this fact, Iqbal cites verses from the Qur’ān (223-4).

Now it is not entirely unfair to point out at this juncture that we would be hard-pressed to identify this “core” message as the causal agent for scientific investigation among Muslims of the ninth to twenty-first centuries. It is equally not unfair to observe that Iqbal has subjected that “core”, “metahistorical” essence of Islam to interpretive elaboration based on his intertextual analysis of Qur’ānic passages. The first observation suggests that even if one chooses to identify an “essential” Islam, it does not provide either logical or historical evidence for the argument of agency in the history of science. The second observation suggests that Iqbal has done what Muslims have done since the Prophet’s time: he has interpreted that “essential” message as something more expansive and, perhaps but not necessarily, as something that would lead Iqbal to believe, do, say or think something. Neither of the points Iqbal makes (i.e., the core of Islam is *this* and this means *that*) is unassailable, but, significantly, they do provide evidence of Gutas’ very thesis.

More unfortunate, however, is Iqbal’s “proof” in his argument for a common history of a monotheist message, and this may as well be said before proceeding much further: there is little point in using the Qur’ān, or indeed the ḥadīth (232), or indeed any scripture of any religion, as a proof-text for one’s thesis when engaging in debate with anyone who does not share one’s belief in the divine or semi-divine nature of those texts. The non-believing historian will not accept from Iqbal, the believer, the proof-text of “revelation” for establishing mutually acceptable premises, or terms designed to hold truth-value, for a debate concerning the history of religions. In fact, even beyond the constraints of such a debate, Iqbal’s proof is reducible to tautology: The message of the Qur’ān is “metahistorical”—defined as “recurrent in all monotheist messages”—because the message of the Qur’ān says the message of the Qur’ān is metahistorical. The only way to break this logical conundrum is through faith, but an article of faith cannot serve as a premise for an argument based ostensibly on reason.

To proceed with the development of Iqbal’s reasoning. As part of his argument against the evolutionary character of the message of Islam, and here specifically against the evidence Gutas presents, scil. that early Muslims recognized that evolutionary character because

they themselves plotted an evolution in the revelation (in the “occasions of revelation” literature), Iqbal next maintains (224) that distinct from the “essential core” of Islam is the “Law” given to the Prophet Muhammad, which he characterizes as pertinent to “moral conduct” (226), and that these “moral conduct” laws “in no way “constrained the essential core of Islam” (ib.), which he now defines in yet more expansive terms as belief in God’s oneness, eschatological doctrines, and angels.

The context in which Iqbal makes this distinction concerns the question of what precisely early Muslims were attempting to understand about the revelation of the Qur’ān. Gutas maintains that by situating the sections of revelation in historical contexts, they were recognizing that the message of Islam was evolutionary. Iqbal maintains that early Muslims were “situating *certain legal aspects* of the Qur’ānic revelation in their historical context” (ib., italics added) and not the “metahistorical” message of Islam itself. So now Iqbal has drawn a boundary between what he perceives to be different categories of the text of the Qur’ān: in one category, we have the “core” message of Islam; in the other, we have “moral conduct” laws (as these “legal aspects” are defined by Iqbal). The first category is not subject to interpretation based on a thesis of historical evolution; the second category is, and was, subject to such interpretation. In other words, we now have at least a distinction being made between the “message” of the Qur’ān, timeless and unchanging and subject to a universally consistent interpretation (according to Iqbal), and the “moral conduct” laws, which are subject to historical evolution in themselves, and thus presumably open to further evolution of interpretation. It is not at all clear to the historian that all Muslims at all times would agree with this division, if only because it suggests that at least part of the revelation of Islam is time-specific. And it is certainly not the case that early Muslim exegetes restricted their investigation of the “occasions of revelation” to “moral conduct” laws or “legal aspects” of the Qur’ān.

But Iqbal then immediately contracts his own textual division of the Qur’ān in order to argue that Islam has historical agency. He states: “From birth to death and from the rites of marriage to the most mundane aspects of daily life, the life of a Muslim is continuously directed, guided and influenced by the Qur’ān” (226). This seems to be a reasonable statement, though in no way indicative

of innate historical agency. However, the contentious would ask: if the “moral conduct” laws of the Qur’ān are evolutionary and thus subject to interpretation, how does that “guidance” change with the changing interpretations of the “moral conduct” laws of the timeless message? But perhaps Iqbal would not include the rites associated in the Qur’ān with birth, marriage, death, and mundane aspects of life as part of its “moral conduct” laws. Iqbal returns to this theme again in his essay, but before exploring further its implications, we should first address two charges against Gutas which Iqbal raises in this context.

First, Iqbal accuses Gutas of “impos[ing] his own understanding of religion upon a religious tradition that claims to be the heir of all previous revelations” (224). Since the most obvious rejoinder to this charge is to observe that Iqbal has done precisely the same in his definition(s) of the “core” message of Islam and in his interpretive distinction between that “core” and the “moral conduct” laws of Islam, two conclusions seem warranted. One, since Iqbal has himself undertaken just such an imposition of his own understanding of Islam, he has provided evidence for Gutas’ observation that different people in different times define Islam in different ways. Two, if such imposition is permissible for Iqbal but impermissible for Gutas, what might be the real intention of such accusation? My sense is that Iqbal has positioned himself as gatekeeper of his religion, speaking as authoritative representative of his religion and denying others, especially non-believers, any rights of interpretation. This is an old phenomenon but one that has become more pervasive in the “multicultural” “secular” “West” where the fear of loss of identity often leads to rigidity of doctrine and stance (see the result of this in the ominous charge outlined below). There are two ways to address such fear and rigidity: it can be engaged and assuaged, or it can be ignored. The latter option becomes increasingly attractive to academic historians as the opposition becomes more focused on the issue of a perceived link between “authority” and “authenticity” (= Muslim) on the part of gatekeepers like Iqbal. The first option is no longer possible, since it legitimates the self-defined position of the gatekeeper.

Iqbal’s second accusation is directly linked to this construction of identity. He accuses Gutas of “violat[ing] the dictates of a civil discourse on a sacred text” (225). This borders on irrationality. Gutas in fact offers the greatest respect a secular humanist historian may

offer: the interpretation of the past on the basis of what he deems to be universal criteria of investigation. Since Gutas is not a Muslim, how would Iqbal prefer he engage in historical analysis in a way acceptable to Muslims? By observing Iqbal's dictates of conduct? What are these dictates? That Gutas pretend to accept the postulates of the believer? This is absurd. If Iqbal is granted the right to define the contours of academic "behavior" on the basis of what Iqbal perceives to be civil or uncivil, the result would be a debate based on an untruth: we must all pretend to be Muslims in order to abide by Iqbal's circumscription of the possibilities available for developing the terms of analysis. And lest we imagine that this is solely a concern for non-believers, we should understand clearly what Iqbal is demanding of his colleagues: that we be the kind of Muslims *he* deems Muslims should be.

Another premise for historical inquiry that Iqbal demands of his colleagues muddles somewhat the internal logic of his interpretation of Islam. Iqbal maintains that the "notion of a transhistorical and transcendent God" who created humans with a natural disposition to recognize God is a "quality" identifiable in the "natural constitution of humanity" (227). Now, first, this is just fuzzy: it is not clear how the "notion" is a "quality", let alone how this "notion-quality" is something "borne out" by man's "natural constitution". Second, it makes Islam sound like something subject to biological evolution, insofar as its "core meaning" is related to man's "natural constitution". While sociobiologists might recognize this, at least in the area of religious ritual, and indeed would investigate the evolution of Islam in precisely these terms, we may strongly doubt that this is Iqbal's intention. Third, there is absolutely nothing about this "postulate" that need necessarily be granted by a secular humanist historian. In other words, there is no possibility that Iqbal the Muslim can engage in discussion with the secular humanist historian, either on what Islam may or may not be, or indeed on the real question: the relation between Iqbal's interpretation of Islam and scientific endeavors. Finally, because Iqbal has so reified the concept of Islam, he next has necessarily to separate it from its practitioners: he says no "polity" emerging "in the historical existence of the Muslim community" should be "confused" with the "essential core" of Islam (*ib.*). We are left with living breathing Muslims that have no necessary connection with Islam! Or at least Iqbal's Islam. And if Muslims have no necessary connection with Islam, what of their scientific endeavors?

This, then, is Iqbal's formulation of Islam: Islam is the recognition of one God; that recognition is a constituent part of human nature; but no "polity" of Muslims emerging in history should be confused with Islam. The illogicality of this formulation should immediately be evident (it removes human nature, and thus "Islam", from human "polities"). But there is a much more serious problem with the formulation, because Iqbal wants it to serve as a historical agent that determines the actions of "polities" of believers who engage in scientific endeavors, but that historical agent is not be confused with (i.e. equated with?, associated with?) those "polities".

How, then, does Iqbal retrieve his "Islam" as "historical agent"? He provides two additional arguments against Gutas.

Iqbal quotes from Gutas' argument that Islam "is an ideology of a particular, historically determined society". Iqbal rightly understands this statement to be connected to Gutas' assertion that Islam in itself is "inert and has no historical agency". Iqbal decries this as not only wrong but purposely so. In response, he provides both a description of the rhetorical brilliance of the Qur'ān which "seizes the human heart" and "draws intellect" (*sic*) as well as a description of the rituals of Islam that he argues "pulsate with movement" to argue against the "inert" quality Gutas assigns to essentialized Islam (232). So Iqbal identifies rhetoric and ritual as arguing against Gutas' assertion, but seems unaware that he has himself contributed to Gutas' argument of Islam as inert in itself.

This is evident in both examples, since Iqbal assumes a *participant* in this rhetorical brilliance and this pulsating ritual: the believer—presumably in this case himself—who responds to these aspects of Islam in his particular way. If neither my heart is "seized by" the rhetorical characteristics of the Qur'ān nor my body "pulsates" with movement when engaging in the rituals of worship, does "Islam" then not act upon me? Can there be agency if nought is affected? Not in the real sense of agency, no. Iqbal's characterizations of Islam as an agent requires a participant, or rather, one who is affected—and this is precisely Gutas' point: historical agency rests in humans, who have, interpret, and manipulate, ideas. Now, we might like to argue against Gutas that once there is a believer who invests Islam with some agency in his life, then Islam does indeed have agency: the believer may do or say something as a result of his engagement with the precepts of Islam. But first we should be aware that this is what Gutas is arguing

(believers make “Islam”), and second we should observe that what the believer may do or say as a result of that agency is entirely up to the believer and, more pertinently in the context of the debate about Islam and science, that believer may or may not engage in scientific exploration as a result of his engagement with the ideas of Islam. Thus, the argument needs to be reiterated: There is no necessary, randomly replicable, variant-controllable causal nexus between one’s belief in Islam and one’s study of science. Again, what Iqbal has done is to reduce the concept of Islam by requiring that it have a particular kind of effect on the believer. We might assume that it is out of sincere motives that Iqbal inadvertently asserts this unfortunate interpretation of Islam, but the disastrous consequences of his assertion should not be overlooked. It is quixotic enough to demand that one’s faith be logical or rationalistic, but to assign a necessary causal impact to the religion itself in one particular area of human activity (here, science) is almost horrifically doomed to failure. This is so because if that causal agency does not produce the result Iqbal demands of it (scientific investigation on the part of all Muslims), the very truth of the religion may be called into question. And it is important to note here that this is Iqbal’s doing, not “Islam’s”.

The other argument Iqbal produces to assert the innate agency of Islam is in fact only an occasion for further denunciation. Arguing against Gutas’ thesis that Islam in itself exercised no historical agency on the policies of the ‘Abbāsid caliphs in directing the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, Iqbal states that locating the investigation in the ‘Abbāsid court is “facile” (228) and charges Gutas with failing in his academic responsibility to indicate his sources. Iqbal does not pursue his rebuttal here any further; his response is derailed by the accusation of academic dishonesty and another, much more ominous charge.

First, to address Iqbal’s accusation that Gutas omits reference to his historical sources, it should be noted that Gutas cites his own 1998 publication *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* which, truth be told, is almost entirely concerned with analysis of the textual sources selected by Gutas for his theory of the trajectory of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. There is a host of evidence in that publication. It is a regular practice of scholars to refer to more detailed treatments in their earlier publications rather than reproduce that evidence at length in another more constricted forum. Indeed, Iqbal engages in

the same practice when he cuts short his discussion of the “nexus between Islam and science” by referring to an earlier publication of his own at the end of this very section.

Gutas’ reference to his own past scholarship goes unmentioned by Iqbal perhaps because he chooses to develop a different polemic on the back of his charges against Gutas. This is the more ominous charge. Singling out another publication cited by Gutas, Iqbal damns its author, whom he identifies as a Muslim, as an “arrogant”, “uprooted” Muslim created in the “secular dogmatic factory” of Western academia (229-30).¹ Here, then, is a Muslim (at least so identified as such by Iqbal) whose views on the historical agency of Islam in the development of science do not coincide with those of Iqbal; but the reason this Muslim does not share Iqbal’s views is because, according to Iqbal, he has been corrupted by the West. This is neither a new nor particularly compelling approach to the dialogue of co-religionists. But it does say more than Iqbal may have wished about his own views of that West in which, we should note, he has founded his Center for Islam and Science. More importantly, however, we should be very disturbed by Iqbal’s denunciation of this respected scholar of intellectual history. What Iqbal is saying here is that not only must the non-believer endorse my interpretation of Islam but also other Muslims must adhere to it; otherwise, I will condemn them as less Muslim than I am and attribute the reason for that deficiency to the corrupting influences of this secular West. To what path of action or belief can such a stance possibly lead? Instead of answering that question, we should again not be hasty. Iqbal most likely was earnest in his distress and his distress led him to the outermost edge of absolute dogmatism; he surely could not endorse what his argument against his co-religionist entails.

1. Editor’s note: Here Reisman obfuscates the issue by confusing criticism of the secular approach to the history of Islamic science in the said article, with personal condemnation of the author of the quoted article. Specifically, the actual citation speaks of the “arrogance that is so prevalent in the Western academia” (p. 228, not 229) in reference to the study of Islamic scientific enterprise—making no reference whatsoever to Ahmad Dallal (a dear friend and a member of the International Editorial Advisory Board of this journal) as “arrogant”.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer Iqbal my own earnest advice. If you wish to engage in the academic investigation of Islamic intellectual history, you will have to accept that “revelation” or divinely inspired “canon” of whatever form, as a believer construes it, does not constitute historical evidence, as academic historians construe it. If you wish *not* to engage in the academic investigation of Islamic intellectual history, it would be better not to demonize historians, believing or non-believing, who do, or their views, or any “tone” you may possibly misconstrue. Next, it is always wiser to articulate one’s religious beliefs in ways that can be inclusive to your co-religionists, since there is apparently no limit to the totalitarian stance one can assume about one’s beliefs and so if you are dogmatic, someone else can always be more so. Finally, I would urge that the investigation of the history of science in Islamic societies be redirected toward more profitable ends. We may assert categorically that past communities of Muslims and non-Muslims constructed environments in which scientific investigation flourished. The historical reasons for that happy state of affairs are multiple and they might very well include, in some places and at some times, the fact that believers of all kinds undertook scientific studies as part of an interpretation of their religious beliefs. However, the experiment undertaken by Iqbal does eliminate one explanation: what Iqbal wants us to understand as “Islam”, essentialized by him to the point of banal irrelevance but imbued nonetheless with historical agency, did not produce, inevitably and ahistorically, whatever he wishes us to term “Science”.