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WILLIAM JAMES AND ALLAMA IQBAL ON EMPIRICAL FAITH

Allama Iqbal is an underappreciated character in the history of philosophy. Although he is familiar to many scholars of Islamic philosophy, he is less well known to historians of Western philosophy, epistemologists, and philosophers of religion despite his significance in these areas. His own citations and influences include Kant, Nietzsche, and William James as well as Al-Ghazali, Averroes, and Rumi. One of these connections is particularly salient to religious epistemology. James and Iqbal both believe that religious experiences are an important class of those experiences with which empiricism is concerned. In their way of thinking, the idea that we should look to experience for knowledge is compatible with religious faith and practice, and is also a grounds for understanding, defending, and testing religious belief. James includes this as one important aspect of his pragmatism, intentionally a more thorough empiricism than the earlier British Empiricism of the Enlightenment era. Iqbal in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* presents his religious empiricism as part of his strategy for renovating Islamic thought in the modern world by recovering the empirical aspect of religion. This requires that we learn to see science and religion as distinct but complementary spheres of empirical enquiry.

In what follows I will compare and contrast James' and Iqbal's religious epistemologies in order to understand both of them better and, hopefully, enrich contemporary reflection on faith and reason through a better awareness of the past dialogue on the subject. I will show that James and Iqbal, despite the different cultures and traditions they represent, agree that religious as well as sensory experience counts as a source of empirical knowledge and that the results of religious belief are a legitimate means of testing them. This, moreover, is no accident, for James influenced Iqbal on this very point. However, they diverge in some matters. James defends the right to diverse religious belief and eventually articulates his own account based on religious

experience—an account which is intentionally philosophical and not reliant on any religious authority. Iqbal, however, is out to reconsider and defend Islam understood along largely traditional lines.

I shall first consider James first and then Iqbal, and then compare and contrast them.

I. JAMES' RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

James' religious epistemology is a massive field of study in itself. The central idea is what he calls *radical empiricism*. Others have analyzed radical empiricism,¹ and for our purposes it will suffice to overview its development in a few key texts.² First, I shall introduce James' empirical approach to religion in the Preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Then I shall review his famous talk "The Will to Believe" and explain its connection to radical empiricism. Then I shall consider James' constructive project in radical empiricism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*.

A. Religious Empiricism

The classical British Empiricists—Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume—believed that knowledge comes from sensory experience alone.³

¹ One early analysis and critique, from when James was still lecturing and writing, is George H. Sabine, "Radical Empiricism as a Logical Method;" *The Philosophical Review* 14.6 (November 1905), 696-705. A recent, useful, and thorough overview of radical empiricism, although not much focused on its religious aspect, is James Campbell, *Experiencing William James: Belief in a Pluralistic World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017), chapter 5; chapter 7, however, is a helpful study of James in religion. Similarly, David Lamberth nicely overviews radical empiricism but gives little attention to religion in *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 1; however, the following chapters look at religion as an application of radical empiricism. The interested reader might also consult John E. Smith, "Radical Empiricism;" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (1964-1965), 206-218.

² For another overview, the interested reader might consult Wayne Proudfoot, "William James on an Unseen Order;" *The Harvard Theological Review* 93.1 (January 2000), 58-61.

³ On the need to improve on traditional empiricism, see Sabine, "Radical Empiricism as a Logical Method," 697 and Smith, "Radical Empiricism," 206-207. Campbell is helpful on the inadequacies of traditional empiricism and on the contrasts between it, radical empiricism, and Hegelian rationalism; Campbell. *Experiencing William James*, chapter 5. See also Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, chapter 1. Indeed, as

James' philosophical project is, in part, an attempt to expand the scope of empirical thinking from sensory experience alone to a broader range of experience and to take experience as we find it, recognizing its pluriform nature but also also the interrelatedness of its parts.

The Preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, first published in 1897, presents the idea of what he calls radical empiricism:⁴

Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of *radical empiricism*, I say 'empiricism,' because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical,' because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.⁵

The idea is to take experience as we find it, not a single organized unity so much as a jumble of distinct facts. Initially James may seem to be talking about epistemology and metaphysics but not so much about philosophy of religion. He soon clarifies that this is also about religion:

There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact. Real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and a real moral life, just as common-sense

oversimplifications go, I think that would not be a bad one which defines radical empiricism as that philosophy which takes from classic British empiricism the insight that reality as we experience it is a plurality rather than a unity, and which takes from the Hegelians the insight that we do not experience reality as a set of disconnected atoms or monads.

⁴ For an interesting introduction to the Preface and a commentary on the social dimensions of James' epistemology, see Ermine L. Algaier IV, "Reconstructing James's Early Radical Empiricism: The 1896 Preface and the 'The Spirit of Inner Tolerance';" *William James Studies* 11 (2015), 46-63.

⁵ William James, Preface. In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.

conceives these things, may remain in empiricism as conceptions which that philosophy gives up the attempt either to 'overcome' or to reinterpret in monistic form.

The abstracting philosopher may try to force every fact into the box of one fact into which he presumes the world he experiences must fit. But not the empiricist. He must take the world as we find it. We experience what appear to be real possibilities, beginnings, endings, evil, redemption, and even God. We must take these into consideration. Religious belief, like all beliefs concerning the facts of human experience, must be handled empirically. Each religious belief is to be treated as *a hypothesis* to be tested in experience by our believing it:⁶

If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, 'works' best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses.

Radical empiricism is in no small part about finding the true home of responsible religious belief. An important remark in *A Pluralistic Universe*, written much later, gets right to the point: "Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as of philosophy will be ready to begin."⁷

In short, radical empiricism shows us the true home of responsible religious belief and the direction empiricism should go in the future. Religion ought to be empirical, and empiricism ought to consider the nature and importance of religious experience.

⁶ On this topic see Proudfoot, "William James on an Unseen Order," 55.

⁷ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, Lecture VIII.

B. “The Will to Believe”

Probably James’ most famous work is his talk in favor of our right to religious belief even in the absence of convincing evidence—“The Will to Believe,” delivered “to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities” and first published in 1896.⁸ James gives two practical arguments for the rationality of such belief. Although these arguments have been explained before⁹ and are simple enough on their own terms, we must consider how they contribute to a radical empiricism.

First a short summary of the arguments would be in order. The first argument draws attention to the practical necessity of choice, a practicality not removed by any putative absence of convincing evidence. Sometimes a decision is *live, forced, and momentous*. These are James’ technical terms introduced to describe a choice where we really could go either way, where we *must* go one way, and where the decision will have important and irreversible effects on our lives. In such cases, deciding is a practical necessity, with or without convincing evidence which way is right. The decision whether to be religious presents itself to many of us in just this way. We could go either way, we must be either religious or not, and this has important effects on our lives, including the alleged benefits of religious belief. Whichever way we decide, we take a risk. If we believe, we risk being in error. If we do not believe, we run the risk of not believing any

⁸ William James, “The Will to Believe” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.

⁹ The interested reader might consider the following as helpful commentaries on “Will to Believe” and paths into the scholarly discussion: Robert J. O’Connell, *William James on the Courage to Believe* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1997), chapter 1; David A. Hollinger, “James, Clifford, and the Scientific Conscience;” *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69-83; Michael R. Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapters 1-2; and [ADDITIONAL REFERENCE OMITTED FOR BLIND REVIEW.] One source is especially interesting for explaining the importance of evidence in James’ approach, and explaining why James is not recommending non-rational fideism or wishful thinking: Hunter Brown, *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

religious truths there may be, and missing out on their benefits. We have the right to make this decision not solely on the basis of the evidence.

The second argument draws an analogy from the characteristics of ordinary human relationships to the likely characteristics of a relationship with God. Relationships as we know them are built partly upon a willingness to trust others. It is indeed that very trust which builds the relationship which in time provides the evidence of another's goodwill. Suppose that, as we have long been told, God is a person (or, on the Christian reading James does not mention, three Persons). We should not expect God to provide, prior to our decision whether to believe, all possible evidence and proof. It is likely that some amount of evidence will only be made available after we show ourselves willing to believe. So the rule, touted by religion's rational critics, that we should only believe that for which we have seen convincing evidence is, in fact, "an irrational rule." It would prevent us from ever knowing a certain kind of truth—truth concerning a personal God whom we know through relationship—if that truth were there to know.

Now this is the religious aspect of radical empiricism. With these arguments James is applying a thoroughgoing empiricism to the question of religion. The whole point of figuring out religion is to gain truth by empirical means. He remarks that "as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude" yet ceaselessly pursue truth "by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think." With the goal of truth and the method of learning it from experience in mind, he offers his arguments for the rationality of faith. These arguments apply to circumstances in which we have not (yet) accumulated sufficient evidence from experience to demonstrate a conclusion concerning religion. The belief defended by these arguments is a belief whose truth we would then seek to test in future experience. The defense of faith's rationality is

not based on any *a priori* argument but on practicality—on the nature and significance of the experience of life. James' second argument envisions religious belief as an aspect of a relationship with God that is itself an experiment to test the religious hypothesis, leading (hopefully) to empirical religious knowledge.

C. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*

In order to understand religion's role in radical empiricism and Iqbal's relation to James, we need to take a look at the course religious empiricism takes in the rest of James' work.¹⁰ Let us consider two of his most important works, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*.

The *Varieties* was based on James' Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, delivered in 1901 and 1902.¹¹ The *Varieties* is a study of religious experience with particular attention to its value and to the provisional conclusions that may be inductively derived from it. The first lecture argues for an empirical criterion for determining the value of religious experience.¹² We know its value by its fruits, by the ways it has added to or detracted from life. It is not good to judge religion by the theory that it is rooted in neurological problems.

Most of the *Varieties* is a lengthy study of the different kinds of religious experience with attention to their fruits.¹³ In the final chapter,¹⁴ James attempts to draw things to a conclusion.

¹⁰ An aspect of James' writings nicely explained in Brown, *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion*.

¹¹ For an introduction to the *Varieties*, see Proudfoot, "William James on an Unseen Order," 56-58; Richard R. Niebuhr, "William James on Religious Experience;" in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam: 214-236 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 214-236; Campbell, *Experiencing William James*, chapter 7; or Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, chapter 3.

¹² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture I.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Lectures II-XIX.

After summarizing some major beliefs and “psychological characteristics” of religion, he considers some pertinent questions. Is it lamentable that there is so much religious diversity? No. Should we “espouse the science of religions as our own religion?” No.

There are still some preliminary jobs to do on the way to his conclusion.¹⁵ James explains that that which is conscious, mental, and subjective is a part of the world we experience, and that religion takes this aspect of reality as the most important. Our ultimate goal is to make a decision whether we should agree with religion on this point. Religion posits “that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand” and that “*we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers,” by getting our own souls into the right link with the higher mind or minds. Should we agree?

James thinks so.¹⁶ Philosophy, he explains, may posit a theory that takes religious belief as true in such a way as to be consistent with science.¹⁷ This theory would be a “hypothesis,” and James offers his own.¹⁸ He suggests that there is a (usually) subconscious region of our human minds with which religious experience puts us in contact:

Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the “more” with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.

¹⁴ Ibid., Lecture XX.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lamberth: “Presuming that his view is a form of radical empiricism, we should expect that such a position cannot ignore the empirical findings of the individual special sciences. Rather, it should seek to bring them into a higher unity, resolving their disputes with one another through adjusting their shared or conflicting presuppositions;” *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, 137.

¹⁸ On earlier passages in *Varieties* which anticipated this hypothesis, see Niebuhr, “William James on Religious Experience,” 227-229 and 233-234; also Lamberth, 131-134 and 136-138.

It is for the business of the particular religious perspectives to state whether our minds connect to the God of classical theism, the Hegelian Absolute, to Brahman, or whatever else. We may choose to follow a particular religion in this or philosophically to arrive at our own more detailed beliefs. James opts to develop his own philosophical account. When we choose, however, “we do so in the exercise of our individual freedom”¹⁹ This choice is logically subsequent to the choice whether to accept the religious hypothesis, a choice made, as “Will to Believe” had described, for the purposes of living: “the religious question is primarily a question of life, of living or not living in the higher union which opens itself to us as a gift”

This belief, although we are free to choose to accept it or not, we are justified in taking as “*literally and objectively true as far as it goes.*”²⁰ There is a good reason for that: The preceding empirical investigation (several hundred pages long) serves to establish “*the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*”²¹

A Pluralistic Universe comes from James’ Hibbert Lectures at Oxford’s Manchester College from 1908, thus representing a late development in his radical empiricism. It also presents James’ religious views in a highly developed form (building off of the provisional philosophical interpretation of religious belief from the end of *Varieties*²²), and I leave to others a

¹⁹ On this freedom, and its limitations, see Campbell, *Experiencing William James*, 275-276.

²⁰ Italics here and in the next quote are in the original.

²¹ See Campbell, *Experiencing William James*, 272 and Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, 142-143.

²² See *Ibid.*, 266-267.

careful and thorough analysis.²³ Here we need only make a few observations on James' method and his conclusions at this late stage.

First, James is still using the term "radical empiricism," an articulation and defense of which is largely the point of the lectures. James informs us that it is a fitting name for the philosophy he is developing in opposition to the followers of Hegel.²⁴

Second, the term continues to have pluralistic metaphysical connotations. We take the universe as we find it, and it appears to be a pluralistic thing, not the monism sought by the Hegelians. Empiricism at its most fundamental means "*the habit of explaining wholes by parts, and rationalism means the habit of explaining parts by wholes.*"²⁵ Radical empiricism begins its study of the universe by recognizing its apparent pluralistic aspect.

Third, there is a strong sense of the interconnectedness of things. Reality may be pluralistic, but it is not a collection of monads or severed atoms.²⁶ Traditional empiricism suggests that our ideas derive from "mental atoms," separated units of experience which are to be interpreted as referring to discrete units of reality. By contrast, radical empiricism recognizes that the things we experience are connected and effect one another.

Fourth, the term continues to have religious significance. Radical empiricism recognizes the importance (and indeed the unity) of the human and divine aspect of reality, but does not

²³ The interested reader might consider Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, chapter 5 as well as Campbell, *Experiencing William James*, 180-197.

²⁴ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lecture I. Campbell: ". . . it is clear from everything that he says that the central issue for him in contemporary philosophy was advancing the challenge to Idealism;" Campbell, *Experiencing William James*, 181.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Lecture VII.

insist that only that which is an absolute oneness can be divine.²⁷ Our own individual human minds may connect with one another and with a higher mind.²⁸ James suggests “the continuity of our consciousness with a wider spiritual environment,” proposing a conception of the divine as “a wider self” and asking, “may not we ourselves form the margin of some more really central self in things . . .?”

Fifth, religious hypotheses continue to have validity. As said long before in the Preface to *Will to Believe and Other Essays*, they are legitimate hypotheses to be tested. Moreover, as suggested in “The Will to Believe,” our belief may be a part of what helps to make them come true. He closes his final lecture in this series with a reference to “The Will to Believe” and a proposal that the same theology he has been describing in these lectures be taken as a religious hypothesis.²⁹ He overviews what he calls the “faith-ladder,” a series of steps in the testing of a religious hypothesis. The first step is merely to have the idea; the second and third steps are to confirm its logical consistency and the possibility that it is true in this world; the fourth step is to recognize that it *should* be true; fifthly, “something persuasive in you” (presumably the “passional nature” of “Will to Believe”) insists on its truth; sixthly, one decides to take it as true. Finally, “your acting thus may in certain special cases be a means of making it securely true in the end.”

II. IQBAL’S RECONSTRUCTION

²⁷ Ibid., Lecture I.

²⁸ Ibid., Lecture VII.

²⁹ Ibid., Lecture VIII.

We now turn to Iqbal's *Reconstruction*.³⁰ Like so many writings of James, it was originally a series of lectures—"undertaken at the request of the Madras Muslim Association and delivered at Madras, Hyderabad, and Aligarh."³¹ In this book Iqbal aims to reconstruct Islamic philosophical thinking along empirical lines. He does so by integrating the empirical aspects of two traditions. One of these is modern science with its emphasis on knowledge via sensory experience. The other is religious mysticism—especially of the Islamic Sufi variety—with its emphasis on religious experience. Iqbal argues that knowledge derives from experience plus interpretation, and that religious experience is no less a legitimate place to start than sensory experience. Indeed, the ultimate interpretation of sensory experience itself would require the insight into the ultimate non-physical nature of reality which religion teaches.

We will consider these matters with, first, a brief look at the Preface to the *Reconstruction* and, second, a study of Iqbal's account of knowledge.

A. The Preface

A brief look at the book's short Preface helps to clarify Iqbal's sources, methodology, and plans. Iqbal is drawing from two traditions, modern science and religious mysticism, particularly its sub-tradition of Islamic Sufism. On the science side of things, Iqbal claims that "religious faith ultimately rests" on a certain "type of inner experience," experiences psychological and spiritual and physical.³² However, "the modern man" has learned "habits of

³⁰ Who is Iqbal? A philosopher, a poet, a visionary—simultaneously an Indian, a British Knight, and the founder of the idea of Pakistan. For a more detailed introduction one might consult Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Open to Reason: Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition*, trans. Jonathan Adjemian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 86-88. Also Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Islam and Open Society: Fidelity and Movement in the Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal*; trans. Melissa McMahon (Dakar: Codesria, 2010), 1-3.

³¹ Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1974; 11th ed. 2011), v.

³² *Ibid.*

concrete thought” ill-suited to replicating such experiences, and modern man is moreover skeptical of non-public experience as a source of knowledge. These modern mental habits are not bad, however, and “Islam itself fostered” them long ago. These days such mental habits are promoted by modern science, while Islamic patterns of thought nowadays follow different patterns.

On the mystical side of things, “The more genuine schools of Sufism have, no doubt, done good work in shaping and directing the evolution of religious experience in Islam;” but their patterns of thought are ill-suited to the modern world.³³ The Sufi methods for knowing God are useless for this day and age.

Thus there is an “urgent demand” to reconsider Islamic religious philosophy. We need to learn—or, rather, rediscover or *reconstruct*—a better way of thinking. It would draw from Sufism’s insight into religious experience, draw from modern scientific patterns of concrete thought, and integrate both to the detriment of neither.³⁴ In both respects it would ultimately return to the conception of knowledge taught in the Quran.³⁵ Iqbal aims to begin this work here, and he notes that the moment is timely insofar as science itself has learned “to criticize its own foundations,” leading to the decline of materialism and the promise of “hitherto unsuspected mutual harmonies” between science and religion.³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Not that religious thought is *not* concrete. The term “concrete” does not refer to physicality so much as to the reality and immediacy of an experience. See his reference to concrete religious experience in, e.g., *Reconstruction*, 5.

³⁵ On this aspect of the *Reconstruction* see Basit Bilal Koshul, “Seeing, Knowing, Believing: Iqbal on Faith in the Modern World;” *Iqbal Review* 47.4 (October 2006); available at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct06/2-Seeing,%20Knowing,%20Believing.htm>; accessed 3 May, 2019.

³⁶ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, v-vi.

B. Experience Religious and Otherwise

Iqbal argues that religious experience is a form of human experience and, accordingly, a possible source of knowledge. This analysis relies on a way of thinking about what knowledge actually is. Let us first consider two definitions of knowledge suggested by Iqbal and link both of them to religious experience. Then we must consider how Iqbal expands his religious empiricism to account for the testing of a religious doctrine in future experience.

Chapter I of the *Reconstruction* considers “the character of knowledge and religious experience.”³⁷ One definition of knowledge suggested by the text is a fairly simple formula: Experience plus interpretation equals knowledge. Iqbal suggests that there are two branches of knowledge and two varieties of experience on which they are based. Scientific knowledge results from interpreting sensory experience. Religious knowledge results from interpreting religious experience. In one succinct remark Iqbal captures this notion: “The facts of religious experience are facts among other facts of human experience and, in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation, one fact is as good as another.”³⁸

The central idea here is the central idea of religious empiricism: There is such a thing as religious experience, and it is a potential source of knowledge. Implicit is an argument from science for the possibility of religious knowledge. Roughly, the argument goes something like this: Scientific knowledge derives from experience plus interpretation, and since there is such a thing as religious experience which can be interpreted, it is possible that religion can be knowledge no less than science.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸ Ibid., 16.

³⁹ I consider this argument in [REFERENCE OMITTED FOR BLIND REVIEW].

Another account of knowledge appears even earlier in the text and brings us closer to Iqbal's goal: "knowledge is sense-perception elaborated by understanding."⁴⁰ This may appear to be experience-plus-interpretation formula applied merely to the sensory side of experience, but this is not quite right. This is, rather, a description of a *higher* form of knowledge than what we get when we interpret either religious or sensory experience by themselves. The ultimate goal of knowledge is to understand that which we experience with our five senses in the light of religious insight—to understand the physical world as a creation and revelation of God. Quoting from the Quran, Iqbal explains how it gives evidence that this is just what God created humans to do!⁴¹

And this, of course, connects to the traditions the integration of which is the whole point of the *Reconstruction*. Modern science focuses on sensory experience, and religious mysticism on religious experience. Not only are both justifiable on empirical grounds, but both can indeed be reconciled and integrated. And, what's more, they need each other. God has taught us to look where science looks for knowledge of him: to our sensory experience of the physical world. Moreover, the completion of the knowledge of the physical world which science begins can only be found in religious insight. Science only gives us "sectional views of reality," but religion aims to understand the whole.⁴²

Completing his religious empiricism requires a look at the testing of a religious doctrine. Science subjects its theories to future testing. So also religion, its empirical counterpart. "Religious experience . . . is essentially a state of feeling with a cognitive aspect, the content of

⁴⁰ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41-42.

which cannot be communicated to others, except in the form of a judgment.”⁴³ Religious experience is an entirely personal matter in its *origin*, but public in its *product*: a proposition, a statement, a theory. What should someone make of such a proposition who has not herself *had* that experience? An important question with an important answer: “Happily we are in possession of tests which do not differ from those applicable to other forms of knowledge. These I call the intellectual test and the pragmatic test.”⁴⁴ The intellectual test is work for a philosopher. It is a consideration of human experience generally to consider whether it is consistent with the conclusions of religious experience. Iqbal applies this test in chapter II of the *Reconstruction*, arguing that modern science and the philosophical interpretations of its discoveries point towards a universe which is in fact consistent with that taught by religion: It is not a universe of mere matter; “the ultimate nature of Reality is spiritual, and must be conceived as an ego.”⁴⁵ The pragmatic test is not the work for a philosopher as such to perform, although he may analyze it. It is rather the work of a prophet and his followers. The pragmatic test is to see whether a prophet’s work has led to good results in the world; “The pragmatic test judges it by its fruits.”⁴⁶ Iqbal considers the results of Islam in chapter V,⁴⁷ considering “the cultural world that has sprung out of the spirit of” a prophet’s message; this, in the case of the history of Islam, is a good one. This, it seems to Iqbal, is a solid justification of Islamic religious experience by its fruits.

⁴³ Ibid., 26-27.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 124-145.

With such an empirical foundation laid, Iqbal completes the groundwork for a reconstructed Islamic philosophy true to its religious heritage yet fit for a modern, scientific world. The analysis is rich and multifaceted. Although it is the subject for a study not focused on Iqbal's epistemology, it is important to understand that the epistemology suggested in the *Reconstruction* leads here—to new directions for Islamic thought including Iqbal's philosophy of time, understanding of free will, his social and political philosophy, and so on.⁴⁸

III. COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

Various scholars have noted the connections between James and Iqbal.⁴⁹ No wonder, since Iqbal himself cites James a number of times in the *Reconstruction*. What is less well understood is how Iqbal follows James in developing an empiricism which takes religious experience into account. They both look to experience as the source of knowledge, considering the parity of religious experience and the sensory experiences foundational to science. They both

⁴⁸ For example, for an overview of Iqbal's integrated philosophies of time, free will, and social reform, see Diagne, *Open to Reason*, 88-97. On the social and political philosophy of Iqbal, see Diagne, *Islam and Open Society*.

⁴⁹ In an interesting article on Iqbal and C. S. Pierce, another American Pragmatist, Peter Ochs observes that Iqbal draws from the *Varieties* on prayer and that James' "work introduced Iqbal himself to the psychology and epistemology of American pragmatism;" Peter Ochs, "Iqbal, Peirce and Modernity," *Iqbal Review* 49.4 (April 2008); available at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct08/7.htm>. Accessed 5 May, 2019. Similarly, Richard Gilmore considers Iqbal's relation to Pierce but also mentions his citation of James in Gilmore, "Pragmatism and Islam in Pierce and Iqbal: The Metaphysics of Emergent Mind;" in *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought*, ed. Chad Hillier and Basit Koshul (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 88-111. Nicholas Adams focuses on understanding Iqbal's approach to western philosophy, briefly mentioning James; Adams, "Iqbal and the Western Philosophers;" *Iqbal Review* 49.4 (April 2008); available at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct08/6.htm>; accessed 2 May, 2019. Asif Iqbal Khan notes that "Iqbal makes use of a kind of pragmatic method to justify the conclusions drawn by him;" in a footnote Khan elaborates:

Incidentally, James and Iqbal shared many convictions and beliefs. Both sport diversity of interest and are not much bothered by the need for method in their thought. It is possible to work out a significant area of influence under which Iqbal formulated some of his views strikingly in line with those of James. See Khan, "The Problem of Method in Iqbal's Thought;" *Iqbal Review* 35.1 (April 1994); available at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct96/7.htm>; accessed 2 May, 2019. Khan later gives a more detailed study of James and Iqbal on the psychology of religion, but with little emphasis on epistemology; Khan, "James and Iqbal (A New Approach to Psychology of Religion);" *Iqbal Review* 37.3 (October 1996); available at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct96/7.htm>; accessed 2 May, 2019.

look to further experience to test the conclusions drawn from religious experience, with a particular attention to the fruits of religious belief.

Although we cannot hope to be thorough in a short study, let us consider some of the major connections, looking first at the similarities and at Iqbal's citations of James, and then at the differences.

A. SIMILARITIES

We may note five major similarities between James' and Iqbal's religious epistemologies. After considering them it would do to look at some of the evidence that these connections involve a direct influence of the former on the latter.

First, each of them is committed to the idea that knowledge comes from experience.

Second, each of them extends his understanding of empiricism beyond the traditional understanding of its boundaries. Sensory experience is not the only kind that counts. Religious experience also counts.

Third, they both argue that religion is partly justified on empirical grounds by looking to its origins in experience. Religious experience testifies to the likelihood of a reality outside our ordinary experience of the physical world.

Fourth, they both argue that religious belief derived from past experience ought to be tested in future experience.⁵⁰

Fifth, they both argue that religion's ultimate empirical justification must come by looking at its fruits. James looks to the personal life-change associated with religious conversion, a fruit well known from already past experience. Iqbal looks to the past cultural contributions of

⁵⁰ Proudfoot on James is remarkably similar to Iqbal's two tests: "Any belief must be tested by examining its reasonableness in the light of other beliefs already held and its consequences for ordering experience;" Proudfoot, "William James on an Unseen Order," 58.

Islam as evidence, another look to the past. Both look hopefully to the future where religion may yield a much better world.⁵¹

There are other similarities in metaphysics. Both James and Iqbal resist materialism,⁵² and both understand reality to have an ultimate mental rather than physical aspect.⁵³ Both defend the idea that we have free will.⁵⁴ And so on. Here, however, our priority is the epistemological and methodological similarities.

Nor are these connections a coincidence. Although Iqbal draws on many sources, James is a significant tributary to his thought. Let us look over the references to James in the *Reconstruction*. The first mention of James is in chapter I where Iqbal notes the similarity of medieval Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun's thought to James' in the *Varieties*.⁵⁵ (Iqbal almost immediately notes a disagreement he has with James on the nature of "mystic experience."⁵⁶) Elsewhere he similarly notes a similarity of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) to James.⁵⁷ Iqbal also cites "the great American psychologist, Professor William James" on the meaning and function of

⁵¹ See, for example, Lecture VIII in James' *A Pluralistic Universe*, the conclusion to "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, and Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 179-180.

⁵² A memorable passage from James is found in the discussion of how Beethoven played on strings, when reduced to materialistic explanation, is "a scraping of horses' tails on cats' bowels;" see James, "The Sentiment of Rationality" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. For Iqbal's resistance to materialism, I suggest *Reconstruction*, chapter II.

⁵³ See James, *A Pluralistic Universe* and Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 61.

⁵⁴ See James, "The Dilemma of Determinism" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* and Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, Chapter IV.

⁵⁵ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

prayer.⁵⁸ Later he notes James' clever idea that our experience of the world is a continuous "stream" rather than a set of discrete units.⁵⁹ However, he objects, saying that consciousness as we experience it is not as James described, but rather shows the self as a constant presence directing consciousness. In another passage Iqbal mentions James' critique of an argument against life after death, but in turn critiques James' suggestion as an insufficient assurance of immortality.⁶⁰

These references show that Iqbal is a reader of James and in dialogue with James, who had some degree of influence on him. The most important reference to James in the *Reconstruction* is the third one, and is decisive. Paving the way for Iqbal's introduction of the pragmatic test of religious belief, Iqbal cites James.⁶¹ Giving a succinct summary of James' idea from the beginning of the *Varieties* that the physical causes of religious experience do not matter, he then quotes James on what *does* matter in evaluating religious experience: ". . . by their fruits ye shall know them and not by their roots."⁶²

Does this show that James' radical empiricism is the source of Iqbal's own version of religious empiricism? Certainly not; indeed, Iqbal would consider his own analysis a failure had

⁵⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁶¹ Ibid., 23-24.

⁶² Khan notes that the *Varieties* "was an inspiration as well as a work which he used substantially in working out his own view of religion;" Khan, "James and Iqbal."

he not drawn it from the Quran.⁶³ It does, however, show that at least one crucial aspect—the testing of a religious belief by its fruits—of his religious empiricism comes directly from James.

In short, James' religious empiricism is very similar to Iqbal's in many respects, and while the former is not the sole source of the latter, it is an important source.

B. DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS IN INTERPRETATION

Iqbal and James are still rather different philosophers. It seems to me that there is one major difference in their religious epistemologies. Perhaps the only one, but it's a big one: They go in rather different directions in the interpretation of religious experience.

Recall that James in Lecture XX of *Varieties* summarizes the religious position “that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand” and that “*we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers.” He then suggests as a philosophical hypothesis that religious experience is what happens when we access a region of consciousness continuous with our own conscious minds but ordinarily beyond them. Whether this region is continuous with the God described by one of the traditional religions, with something else, or with nothing at all is a separate question. We are free to answer it as we may. James is characteristically eloquent:

. . . here mysticism and the conversion-rapture and Vedantism and transcendental idealism bring in their monistic interpretations and tell us that the finite self rejoins the absolute self, for it was always one with God and identical with the soul of the world. Here the prophets of all the different religions come with their visions, voices, raptures, and other openings, supposed by each to authenticate his own peculiar faith.

⁶³ For that matter, as Adams reads him, Iqbal considers that the best of western philosophy was itself a development of Quranic ideas; see Adams, “Iqbal and the Western Philosophers.”

Those of us who are not personally favored with such specific revelations must stand outside of them altogether and, for the present at least, decide that, since they corroborate incompatible theological doctrines, they neutralize one another and leave no fixed result. If we follow any one of them, or if we follow philosophical theory and embrace monistic pantheism on non-mystical grounds, we do so in the exercise of our individual freedom, and build out our religion in the way most congruous with our personal susceptibilities.

We face a choice of what “over-belief,” in James’ terminology, to have concerning that higher region of consciousness. We may choose philosophically or choose to follow one of the traditional religious views on the subject. James nods to one particular philosophical approach, the strategy favored by the Hegelians which leads towards monistic pantheism. As we have seen, his own considered over-belief is more along the lines of a hybrid of polytheism and pantheism—a view of all reality as touched with divine mind, but in a pluralistic rather than a monistic universe.

That is *his* choice. Put simply, the difference from Iqbal is that he makes a *different* choice.

Iqbal’s analysis of religious experience is explicitly tied to one specific religious tradition. It is to Islam that he appeals, to its prophetic origins that he applies his pragmatic test, and its spiritual and social insights that he recommends for building a better world.

The conclusion to Iqbal’s chapter II vividly depicts Iqbal’s and James’ parting of ways.⁶⁴ Like James, he nods to the Hegelian-style philosophy. This approach, Iqbal explains, tends towards pantheism. This is because philosophy can’t help systematizing, and pantheism is the

⁶⁴ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 60-61.

natural result of any systematization of the insight that ultimate reality is mind. But Iqbal recommends we *not* take the philosopher's path; "the aspiration of religion soars higher than that of philosophy." We need not an intellectual account, but a relationship with the divine—"living experience, association, intimacy." So Iqbal points to prayer instead of to systematizing philosophy—and in context of an explanation and defense of Islam for the modern world.

Not that James' philosophy is systematizing in the manner of the Hegelians, or that he objects to prayer. (Indeed, he closes "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" with an eloquent exhortation to prayer.) James also thinks we need "living experience, association, intimacy." So it appears that James' and Iqbal's divergent approaches to religious empiricism are not in dramatic conflict. However, ultimately they do go in two separate directions.

And here I, personally, have one final point to offer. I, a Nicene Christian, go in a third direction. This too, so far as I can tell, is a permissible choice by James' lights. (James does air some concerns with traditional theism from time to time, for example in Lecture I of *A Pluralistic Universe* where he suggests that "philosophic theism makes us outsiders and keeps us foreigners in relation to God;" I think this difficulty is avoided in orthodox Christianity by the doctrine of the Incarnation.) James says of Pascal in "Will to Believe" that he unduly limits our choices. Perhaps the divergence of James and Iqbal is similar; we do have other options consistent with religious empiricism.⁶⁵ The prophets Moses and Jesus may also be subjected to Iqbal's pragmatic test, and many other philosophers of religion (for example, to name only one of the more famous ones, Richard Swinburne) have offered their own analyses of religious

⁶⁵ I would also note that the experiences on which the Christian faith rests, in particular the Resurrection event, are not that type of "inner experience on which religious faith ultimately rests" according to Iqbal (*Reconstruction*, v). They are outer and public experiences.

empiricism. In short, James and Iqbal have some interesting (and, it seems to me, insightful) things to say, but they are not the whole story.

IV. CONCLUSION

So what have we learned? Allama Iqbal, twentieth-century Islamic philosopher of the Subcontinent, shows some influence of William James, nineteenth- and twentieth-century American philosopher. They both develop empirical accounts and defenses of religious belief. They both argue that a thoroughgoing empiricism must consider religious experience as a legitimate form of experience and a possible source of knowledge. They both argue that a religious belief is tested by its fruits. James' analysis comes about in the course of his development of radical empiricism, which leads ultimately to his articulation of a philosophical interpretation of the data of experience. Iqbal's analysis is part of his attempt to reconstruct traditional Islamic thought in the modern world.

And why does this matter? For many reasons, perhaps not the least of which is that it is interesting. We might also take from his influence on Iqbal a lesson on William James—that he is a global and not a merely American philosopher. And perhaps we can better appreciate how creative is Iqbal's philosophical approach integrating not only elements of religious mysticism and modern science but also a range of modern western philosophers.

However, I think the primary benefit of understanding the commonalities of James and Iqbal is the enrichment of our understanding of the topic of faith and reason. The conversation concerning the relationship of faith and rationality features diverse characters and perspectives. These two interesting participants are well worth knowing, and their insights and arguments are worth keeping in mind as that perennial discussion continues.

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