

Goethe and Iqbal: A Civilizational Dialogue Between East and West



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Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak

In the West, among the many who foresaw the decline of Western civilisation was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). As a man well-read in Eastern mysticism, Goethe appreciated the spiritual awakening and poetic wisdom shared by the East. Getting inspired by the works of Hafez Shirazi (1315–1390), Goethe came up with his own work, *West-östlicher Divan* (“West-Eastern Divan”). This masterpiece by Goethe was first published in 1819, and later, in 1827, the world saw the extended version of the book.

In this book, Goethe, the German poet-philosopher, tried to convey to the world that the West and East could meet and initiate a civilizational dialogue through the intermediary of the great works of their intelligentsia in the areas of philosophy, literature, poetry, and spirituality. Goethe’s proposal did not come out of nowhere,

but rather as a response to what he saw as the decline of Western civilization. Very precisely, during his time, he saw that much of the enthusiasm and momentum of the Renaissance and Enlightenment movements of Europe were slowly diminishing. Besides that, he also felt empathetic towards the East. Goethe resented the subjugation of the East and the colonial policy of usurping its wealth by the West. In lamenting the moral decline of the West, through *West-östlicher Divan*, Goethe called upon the East to inspire and enlighten the West.

For a very long time, Goethe's call went unanswered. Roughly one century later, the poet-philosopher of the Muslim world, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, came to answer Goethe's call for inspiration. Iqbal, as a thinker and philosopher, was a man well-read in Western philosophy. Not only that, as a man who understood the mindset of the people of both the West and the East, as well as the problems faced by these two blocs, he came up with his poetic work, *Payam-e-Mashriq*, as a panacea through which these problems could be addressed.

Though Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe lived at different times, both shared many commonalities as poets and thinkers. As poets, they were deeply interested in the major issues confronting humanity. Besides being barristers at law, they were also statesmen, moralists, humanists, and religious personalities. Instead of merely presenting abstract philosophical ideas through their poems, they suggested practical ways through which humanity could solve its existential problems.

As poets, Iqbal and Goethe were critical of the future direction of human civilization, particularly as people became more inclined towards materialist, utilitarian, and rational philosophies. Both were also interested in relating past historical happenings to the unfolding events of their respective times. In the realm of mysticism, Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) was a common figure admired by both thinkers.

Moreover, both were celebrated as the "spiritual father" by their respective peoples, Goethe in Germany and Iqbal in Pakistan. Against the pessimistic view of the concept of man, both viewed man as a dynamic personality endowed with great potential. Being opposed to the slavery and subjugation of mankind, Iqbal and Goethe were also ardent critics of Western colonization.

The final commonality found between Iqbal and Goethe is that both emerged as poets during periods when their nations were undergoing difficult times. Goethe appeared during the period when Germany came under the attack of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), while Iqbal appeared at a time when India was facing

unresolved issues in the areas of national education, economy, culture, arts, law, and many others.

Iqbal, in his *Payam-e-Mashriq*, which was first published in 1923, admitted that his inspiration for producing the work largely came as a response to *West-östlicher Divan*.

In analyzing the condition of Europe in his time, Iqbal admired many positive aspects of the West, particularly its achievements in the areas of science, technology, arts, creativity, research, and political freedom; nevertheless, he also had a fair deal of criticism against it. Among others, Iqbal criticized the West and its people for their overindulgence in materialism at the expense of spirituality and moral depth, their oversimplification of the concept of human nature, and their obsession with power and dominance over others, especially the East and Africa.

In taking a critical stand against the West, he felt that the people and nations there were living in a manner that did not conform to the true purpose for which man was created. He believed that, although people in the West had attained superiority in science and technology, they lacked inner peace and harmony within their souls.

Concerning the people of the West, in his magnum opus *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1996), this is what Iqbal candidly said:

Thus, wholly overshadowed by the results of his intellectual activity, the modern man has ceased to live soulfully, i.e. from within. In the domain of thought, he is living in open conflict with himself, and in the domain of economic and political life, he is living in open conflict with others. He finds himself unable to control his ruthless egoism and his infinite gold-hunger, which is gradually killing all higher striving in him and trying him nothing but life-weariness (p.148).

In *Javid Nama* (The Book of Javid or The Message to Javid), an anthology of poems dedicated to his son, Iqbal speaks of the differing mindsets of people in the East and the West:

“The East perceived God and failed to perceive the world;
The West lost itself in the world and fled from God!
To open one’s eyes to God is worship;
To see oneself unveiled is life.”

(The views expressed are those of Dr. Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak from the Department of Fundamental and Interdisciplinary Studies, AHAS KIRKHS, IIUM, and do not necessarily reflect the views of IslamiCity).