Scripture, Science and Self in Islam

What is Scripture? For the Muslim thinker Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), founding poet of the nation of Pakistan, the answer concerns science as well as the Quran, reason as well as faith, poetry as well as prophecy. In his influential book of philosophy and faith, 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,' Iqbal called fellow Muslims to re-awaken both the rationality and the mysticism that is inherent in Quranic tradition. And that is the theme of this post: Iqbal's account of the central place of empirical study in the scriptural tradition of Islam.

Iqbal teaches that, as demonstrated in the great Muslim civilization of the medieval and early modern periods, Quranic tradition places high value on the empirical study of the natural world as well as in prayerful devotion to the will of Allah. The word and will of Allah, the one God, creator of heaven and earth, were dictated to the Prophet Muhammad and preserved in the Arabic text of the Quran. But the Quran is only one of the great signs (ayaat) of Allah's will and word. Other signs are the created world (nature), the self and history: "We will show them our proofs in the horizons, and within themselves, until they realize that this is the truth. Is your Lord not sufficient as a witness of all things?" (Quran 41:53), and "It is He Who sends down rain from the skies: with it We produce vegetation of all kinds: from some We produce green crops, out of which We produce grain, heaped up at harvest; out of the date-palm and its sheaths come clusters of dates hanging low and near: and gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates. ... Behold! In these things there are signs for people who believe..." (Quran 6:97-98)

What shall we learn from the fact that the Arabic word for "scriptural verse" (ayaat) is the same as the word for "sign"? I asked this question of Mian Muhammad Nauman Faizi (a Ph.D. student from Pakistan, currently studying Iqbal and philosophy at the University of Virginia). He answered:

For Iqbal, one lesson is that the meaning of Scripture cannot be seen directly, as if by simply" looking at a verse of the Quran, the reader would directly 'see' what it means. In order to understand the signs of the Quran, readers must engage in the patient work of reading and interpretation: analogous to the patient work through which scientists investigate the signs of nature. Iqbal's claim is that believers are brought closer to God both by reading the signs of the Quran and by gaining knowledge of the signs of nature."

Another lesson is that reading and interpreting signs is a multi-leveled affair. To read well is to have learned the language and grammar of the texts; to recognize when a given verse should be read alongside other verses in the Quran; to situate oneself within a reliable community of readers and within reliable traditions of reading and interpretation; to perceive and understand the social and natural world out of which one reads; and to read for the sake of hearing lessons about how to live and act in that world right now.

To read the Quran well is, in sum, to learn lessons of living from it, after having studied the history and literature of the Quran and after having examined the world out of which one reads Quran. To examine one's world is to study its features the way one reads verses (ayaat) of Scripture: "reading" each feature of the world as a "sign" (ayaat) of God's work. A generation's finest theories of science (in Iqbal's day this included Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's quantum theory) illustrate this kind of reading, which implies that natural science contributes to knowledge of the divine word and will. Natural Science thereby complements and enriches what one learns from Scripture. In Iqbal's words: "The religious and the scientific processes, though involving different methods, are identical in their aim. Both aim at reaching the most real" (p. 155).

Helpful reading: Muhammad Iqbal, A Contemporary, eds. Muhammad Suheyl Umar and Basit Bilal Koshul; and Scripture, Reason, and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter: Studying the "Other," Understanding the "Self", eds. Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul.