

CHAPTER TWELVE

Muhammad Iqbal As an Islamic Reformer

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ACCEPTANCE of religion as the most perfect form of social consciousness constitutes Iqbal's philosophical world outlook. "Philosophy," he wrote, "must recognise the central position of religion and has no other alternative but to admit it as something focal in the process of reflective synthesis."¹ Iqbal did not deny the importance of science and philosophy in the process of cognition, but he held that ultimately only religion can save unfortunate mankind from all calamities. Among all religions he gave preference to Islam as being the most perfect.

Recognising that "conservatism is as bad in religion as in any other department of human activity," Iqbal admitted the need to "reconstruct" the religious teaching of Islam.² Although he took into full account the "philosophical tradition of Islam," he tried very hard to reform Islam in the light of more "recent developments in the various domains of human knowledge."³ Of the philosophical heritage of Muslim thinkers Iqbal was most of all attracted by the philosophy of the medieval mystics.

The influence of Sūfism had a great influence on Iqbal's theory of knowledge and concept of personality. To a large extent Iqbal assimilated the Sūfī interpretation of intuition and its role in the process of cognition. His understanding

of the relationship between man and God, his concept of the “perfect man” and ways of achieving this perfection largely derived from the ideas of Ibn al-Arabi, Rumi and al-Jili.

However, it is noteworthy that Iqbal never accepted the Sūfī world outlook as a whole. He adopted a critical attitude toward Muslim mysticism, and as the years passed the criticism became increasingly sharper. For example, he did not subscribe to the view of those who regarded intuition in isolation from reason. For Iqbal, intuition and thinking were two inter-connected and necessary processes of cognition.⁴

Struggle: The Essence of Man

Iqbal vehemently criticised Sūfism for its advocacy of shunning everything that links man with the mundane world and thereby achieving, through the release of the particle of the divine essence contained in man, his merger with God. Iqbal perceived in Sūfism the danger of reducing all human activity to passive mystical contemplation. Criticising Sūfism, he wrote:

The ultimate aim of the ego is not to *see* something, but to *be* something. . . . The end of the ego’s quest is not emancipation from the limitations of individuality; it is, on the other hand, a more precise definition of it. The final act is not an intellectual act, but a vital act which deepens the whole being of the ego, and sharpens his will.⁵

Muhammad Iqbal, expressing the spirit of the new times, championed creative activity and struggle as the true expression of man’s essence, being convinced that the “world is not something to be merely seen or known through concepts, but something to be made and re-made by continuous action.”⁶ He maintained that mysticism

“destroyed the ego’s creative freedom” and therefore “medieval mystic technique” could no longer serve as a method for cognising truth.

In order to arrive at a new method Iqbal turned to the experience of the West. “With the reawakening of Islam,” he wrote, “it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and, if necessary, reconstruction of theological thought in Islam.”⁷ Iqbal borrowed from the West the intellectual tools most appropriate for his philosophical concepts.

His main aim was to construct a philosophic system that would be based on a “modernised” religious philosophy of Islam. He sought to demonstrate that Islam had not become obsolete and that its precepts had only to be expressed in the terms and concepts of the new age. Hence Iqbal strove to find points of contact between Muslim philosophy and contemporary Western philosophy. For example, he was especially drawn by the epistemological concepts of Kant and Bergson because, as he believed, they could be enlisted as proof of the “correctness” and “modernity” of the philosophy of Islamic Sūfism. (The Sūfis claimed that the possibilities of reason were limited and that “ultimate problems” could be cognised only with the help of mystic experience.)

It was no accident either that Iqbal turned to Fichte’s philosophy. In the latter’s interpretation of the concept of ego he found definite points of contact with the philosophy of Muslim medieval mystics who claimed the inseverable connection of the human “I” with divine substance. Moreover, in the pluralism of Leibniz, Iqbal saw a similarity with the pluralistic concept of the philosophy of *kalām*.

In short, Iqbal accepted from Western philosophy ideas which could be reconciled or in some way “combined” with

the Muslim philosophical traditions. However, his attitude towards the philosophy of Nietzsche has become controversial. Some students of Iqbal claim that his entire philosophy is a kind of repetition of the Nietzschean philosophy — E.G. Browne, for instance, defines Iqbal's philosophy as mainly an adaptation of the Nietzschean philosophy.⁸ A diametrically opposed view is held by others who deny the influence of Nietzsche on Iqbal, asserting that there is nothing in common between their philosophies.⁹

Both views seem to miss the point. Iqbal undoubtedly felt the influence of Nietzscheism but, far from becoming its follower, he sharply criticised it. To a certain extent the attraction of Nietzscheism was determined by another, no less important, premise (mentioned earlier), from which Iqbal proceeded to work out his philosophical system: the need, in pragmatic terms, to create a *philosophy of action* in a period of incipient national liberation movement in India. That is why Iqbal was drawn by the ideal of the Nietzschean superman, a personality of strong will capable of "heroic existence."

Nietzsche's criticism of Christian asceticism which dooms man to slavish passivity appealed to Iqbal because he himself was bitterly opposed to the asceticism preached by Muslim mystics. Iqbal borrowed some images from Nietzsche, including those of diamond and coal, as symbols of firmness and lack of will.

Although attracted by Nietzsche's philosophical writings and literary talent, Iqbal never did accept the very essence of Nietzscheism. He admitted that Nietzsche had the ability of "divine seeing," and in this sense the ability to become a prophet. But Nietzsche, maintained Iqbal, could not become one, because he relied solely on his own faculties and did not have in his spiritual life "guidance from without." Moreover, the principles of his philosophy could be carried

out only by the elite, by strong personalities, as opposed to the "herd."¹⁰ Nietzsche's atheism and cynical aristocratism made his doctrines unacceptable to Iqbal, who based his entire world outlook on faith and believed in the inseverable connection of man with God and society.

After examining the main spiritual sources of Iqbal's philosophical views, an analysis of some aspects of his world outlook is in order. In constructing his ontological conception, Iqbal tries critically to revise the philosophical doctrine of *kalām* "to turn the Asharite scheme of atomism into a spiritual pluralism."¹¹

He regarded in a positive light the *mutakallimūn* (dialectical theologians) idea of being as a whole, especially stressing its dialectical nature. Iqbal regarded as "dialectical" the postulate of *kalām* about the unlimited number of atoms constantly created by God, as also the proposition about accidents, the attributes of substances created each time anew by God. He saw in all these assertions an expression of the idea that everything in the world is in constant flux and subject to change.

However, Iqbal strongly objected to the *mutakallimūn* proposition that all atoms and all substances are similar, and that reason or the soul is nothing but one of the accidents of substance. His criticism of this proposition was evidently determined by two causes. In the first place, he acted here from a consistent position of monistic idealism. Second, he believed that the *mutakallimūn*, by recognising the soul (*nafs*) as only one of the attributes of substance, assumed a position of "pure materialism" and thereby "oppose[d] the real trend of their own theory."¹²

Indeed, the *mutakallimūn* interpretation makes it possible to draw a conclusion regarding the existence of two substances: one possessing the aperception of reason (that is, the spiritual), and the other devoid of it (that is, the

material). Iqbal opposed this dualism. "Reality is essentially spirit," he asserted. "The whole world is an expression of the Ultimate Reality — of God."¹³

God is the Ego which engenders a plurality of egos, each of which is His self-expression. "The world in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the 'Great I am.'" Egohood is most perfectly expressed in man. "That is why," Iqbal concluded, "the *Koran* declares the Ultimate Ego to be nearer to man than his own neck-vein."¹⁴

Assertion of various levels of substance enabled Iqbal to revise one more proposition of the *kalām*. According to the Asharite interpretation, all bodies are composed of identical atoms and differ from one another only by accident. Thus man consists of the same substance as a worm. Man, like everything else in the world, possesses no internal potential and does only what is pre-ordained by God. For Iqbal such an interpretation of man's place and role in the universe was unacceptable. He believed (as noted before) in the creative activity of the human ego and in man's definite freedom of choice and action. That is why Iqbal claimed that the ego's substances differ, depending on the degree to which they express the Divine Ego.

"Man," Iqbal stated, "in whom egohood has reached its relative perfection, occupies a genuine place in the heart of Divine creative energy and thus possesses a much higher degree of reality than things around him. Of all the creations of God he alone is capable of consciously participating in the creative life of his Maker."¹⁵ Iqbal admitted that in his criticism of the Asharite philosophy he was guided by the traditions of Muslim thought. This statement undoubtedly contains a measure of truth, and apparently the pantheistic school of Sufism exerted here a great influence on Iqbal. But,

in the opinion of this author, Iqbal's main reasons for revising the *kalām* theory of being were the *new socio-political* conditions demanding fresh approaches to many philosophical problems, including the position of man and his role in society.

The form in which Iqbal's concept of being was expressed resembled in many respects Leibniz's monadology. This similarity is very clearly visible in Iqbal's followers, who include Pakistani philosophers, especially Khalifah Abdul Hakim, M.M. Sharif, and others. Iqbal's interpretation of the essence of being was the basis on which he and his followers developed their epistemological and ethical concepts.

In the philosophy of the Muslim mystics (especially in the thought of al-Ghazzali) Iqbal found the most suitable approach to the problem of knowledge. What attracted Iqbal to al-Ghazzali was that his philosophic aim in the medieval world of Islam was similar to Iqbal's own, namely securing for religion the right to exist independently of science and metaphysics.

In his lectures, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal compared al-Ghazzali with Kant, saying that the mission of both was "apostolic," in the sense that both proceeded from positions of scepticism in the period of the greatest advance of rationalism and eventually succeeded in restoring religion to its rightful position. From Iqbal's viewpoint there was, however, an important difference between al-Ghazzali and Kant. "Kant, consistent with his principles, could not affirm the possibility of a knowledge of God," whereas al-Ghazzali, "finding no hope in analytic thought, moved to mystic experience, and there found an independent content for religion."¹⁶

Although Iqbal had high regard for al-Ghazzali's philosophy he nevertheless pointed to an essential shortcoming in his philosophical world outlook — his failure

to understand that thought and intuition are organically related. Iqbal believed that thought and intuition were non-contradictory:

They spring up from the same root and complement each other. The one grasps Reality piecemeal, the other grasps it in its wholeness. The one fixes its gaze on the eternal, the other on the temporal aspect of Reality.¹⁷

In contrast to most religious philosophers, Iqbal considered it necessary to subject the "data" of mystic experience to an intellectual and pragmatic test. He asserted that "critical interpretation" or the "intellectual test" by philosophers "leads us ultimately to a reality of the same character as is revealed by religious experience."¹⁸ As for the "pragmatic test," it is a function of prophets.

Iqbal was primarily a religious thinker; simultaneously, his philosophy reflected the tendency of renouncing blind adherence to religious dogmas and developing the creative activity of man's reason. This tendency was further developed in Iqbal's ethical concepts.

Man, The Partner of God

Iqbal, poet and philosopher, advocated recognition of man's freedom of will. He regarded man as a creator, as a partner of God the Maker. In his poem, "Conversation of the Creator With Man," man speaks to his Maker as an equal:

God

I made this world, from one same earth and water
 You made Tartaria, Nubia, and Iran.
 I forged from dust the iron's unsullied ore,
 You fashioned sword and arrowhead and gun;
 You shaped the axe to hew the garden tree,
 You wove the cage to hold the singing-bird.

Man

You made the night, and I the lamp,
 And You the clay and I the cup;
 You — desert, mountain-peak, and vale;
 I — flower-bed, park, and orchard; I
 Who grind and mirror out of stone,
 Who brew from poison honey-drink.¹⁹

The recognition that man is a creator who transforms the world left to God only the role of the prime impulse, which created the world and then gave man full freedom of action. Seeking to resolve this contradiction, Iqbal asserted that God in this way consciously limited His omnipotent will. "It (this limitation) is born out of His own creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators in His life, power and freedom."²⁰ For Iqbal recognition of the freedom of the will was a prerequisite for the awakening in people of faith in their powers and potentialities. Describing man as a co-worker of God the Maker, Iqbal sought to convince his compatriots of the need for action and energetic intervention in the reconstruction of social life.

Iqbal accepted in his own way the Sūfī interpretation of the relationship between good and evil. In contrast to the *Koran*, which states that whatever good falls to the lot of man comes from Allah and whatever evil befalls man comes from himself (*Sura*, IV.79), medieval Sūfis asserted that both good and evil in the world come from God. The Muslim mystics held that evil was objective and necessary for the realisation of good. Just as a bird can fly only by overcoming the resistance of the air, so man can become pious only by overcoming evil. That is why man has no right to complain about the existence of evil, but must accept it as necessary.

Borrowing this concept of evil from the Sūfis, Iqbal transformed it into a contingency for realising good. But the spirit of pessimism and passivity underlying the writings of the medieval mystics was abhorrent to him. Also, in order to solve the problems of relationship between good and evil, Iqbal was attracted by the romantic and dynamic European philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As a poet Iqbal perceived Western philosophical ideas chiefly through literature. That is why, for example, he borrowed the dialectical concept of good and evil from the poetry of Goethe and Milton. The problem of the relationship between good and evil is solved by reinterpreting the biblical legend (*Sura*, VIII.10-24) about the fall of man and his eviction from paradise. In contrast to the traditional religious interpretation of the legend, Iqbal welcomed the fall of man as a manifestation of the first act of his free will. "Man's first act of disobedience," he wrote, "was also his first act of free choice."²¹ Since good is a product of free choice, it may be said that evil creates good. Iqbal's Iblis-Satan, like Goethe's Mephisto, is a part of "the eternal force always striving for evil which created only good." Without it life would be devoid of dynamism, and dead passivity would prevail in this world. As in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan in Iqbal's *Javid-Namah (The Book of Eternity)* is more attractive than God because he symbolises a more dynamic and creative spirit. Addressing God, Iblis says:

You created the stars, but they owe their movement to me.

The world's hidden life comes from me, not from you. You breathed life into man's body, but it owes its dynamism to me.

You followed the road of passivity, while I urged all to act.

This Adam wrought of clay, devoid of vision and of narrow horizon
 Was begotten by you, but he will mature under my guidance.

The revolutionary spirit of Iqbal's concepts of good and evil corresponded to the sentiments of many Muslims. Recognition of the objective existence of evil was of interest to them. This made it possible to explain all social difficulties and hardships not in terms of subjective causes, but in terms of existing objective evil personified by colonialism. By advocating the close connection of good and evil and their transmutation it was possible to substantiate and justify action against the social and political order of the day. Disobedience, active protest, and even violence, regarded by the prevailing morality as evil, were pictured as forces creating good.

Notes and References

1. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, 1962, p. 2.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 196; Vahid, *Iqbal: His Art and Thought*, L. 1959, p. 76.
5. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 198.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, IV, Cambridge, 1924, IV, p. 41; Radhakrishnan, *History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, I, p. 512; P.T. Raju, *Idealistic Thought of India*, p. 393.
9. Vahid, *Iqbal, His Art and Thought*, p. 97.
10. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 195.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

12. Ibid., p. 70.
13. Ibid., p. 71.
14. Ibid., p. 72.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 5.
17. Ibid., pp. 2-3.
18. Ibid., p. 27.
19. Kiernan, *Poems from Iqbal*, L., 1955, pp. 93-94.
20. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 80.
21. Ibid., p. 85.