

PHILOSOPHY OF IQBAL

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Iqbal falls in the category of those religious thinkers who believe that man is still in the process of evolution and is yet to attain higher stages of life. In support of his philosophic reasoning, he advances the Qur'anic version of the creation of Adam.¹ When God disclosed to the angels his intention to create man, they were apprehensive that such a creature would create mischief. But God snubbed them by declaring that they do not know what He knows. Thereupon the angels submitted before God's will, conceding that they only knew what He had taught them. Further, according to the Qur'anic version, after the creation of man, God equipped him with knowledge and then challenged the angels to compete with him, but they could not. Adam and Eve were made capable of choosing between right and wrong, and in order to test their competence in exercising this freedom, God ordered them not to taste the fruit of a specific tree. But they both disobeyed and then sought forgiveness. They were forgiven, but as they had been through the test, they were directed to proceed from the "higher" place to the "lower" place and to lead their lives as they desired, for God had distinguished for them the right path from the wrong.

Iqbal infers from this Qur'anic version that man's first act of disobedience was also his first exercise of the freedom of choice. Therefore, according to Iqbal, his earthly life is neither a punishment to atone the "original sin" nor is this world "profane". On the contrary, man, equipped with knowledge and bestowed with the freedom to choose between right and wrong, is absolutely free to strive for higher stages of life.

Iqbal then quotes another passage of the Qur'an in which God talks about the great "responsibility" (*amanah*) which he wanted to bestow upon his creatures, but they were all reluctant to receive it except man.² According to Iqbal, this great "responsibility" that man voluntarily accepted is the "self", "ego" or "personality". Thus, Iqbal's main contribution to the cultural rejuvenation of Islam is his philosophy

of the "self". This is not only reflected in all his poetic works, but also in his principal work of prose titled *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.

In brief, his philosophic ideas are these: his God is the Ultimate Ego, a personality vigorously alive and constantly creative, whose infinity is intensive and not extensive, who continuously adds to His creation and is fully capable of changing His mind.

From the Ultimate Ego only egos proceed. The universe, from the mechanical movement of the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in human ego, is a self-revelation of the "Great I am". Therefore the universe is one continuous act of God and there is no distinction between mind and matter except for their degrees of ego-hood. Man is distinguishable from the universe because in the process of creation, he, as an act of God, has become self-conscious.

Man as a finite ego and as a personality is unique and distinct from God. He is free. His desires and aspirations, pains and pleasures, loves and hates, judgments and resolutions are exclusively his. Even God cannot feel, judge, or choose for him when more than one course of action is available. He is potentially creative and, if he takes the initiative, is capable of becoming a co-worker with God in the process of progressive change. His ego is capable of attaining such high power that while changing any destiny God Himself may have to ask for the approval of man:

Khudi ko kar buland Itna, Ke her taqdeer say pehlay.

Khuda banday say khud poochay, bata teri raza kiya hai.

In this context, man has to earn life after death by fortifying his ego through constant creativity. According to Iqbal, hell is not a pit of everlasting torture but only a corrective experience. Similarly, heaven is not a permanent holiday. They are not locations but states (of mind). In fact, man's activity knows no destination or end. He is always to march forward to illumination and refresh himself from the Ultimate Ego.

Iqbal's God and man are highly dynamic personalities - distinct from each other, yet together. Each and every act of man leads to a new situation and this provides a

greater scope of creative activity. According to Iqbal, the mystical or Sufi example of the submergence of drops of water into the ocean applies only to weaker egos who fail to fortify themselves. But persons who can fortify themselves supremely are akin to pearls in the perpetual flow of the Divine Sea. Their existence is not obliterated - they are held in the all-embracing Ultimate Ego within itself just as the flame of a candle retains its separate existence in the over-powering light of the sun.

Life, therefore, is like a candle's constant struggle to keep its flame continuously burning, or like a drop of water's tension spearing struggle to attain pearl-hood. Accordingly, the destination of man in Iqbalian terms is not liberation from the limitations of "self" but the affirmation of "self" until man becomes a co-worker with God towards the establishment of a perfect universe.

According to Iqbal, God's creativity only outwardly appears as a process of change in "serial" Time. In reality, the change is a continuous act in "durational" Time. God has deliberately created the relativity or objectivity of "atomic" Time as a first measure of the creativity of man. Human acts, if performed by a fortified personality, are creative and live as permanent forces unaffected by "serial" Time. All other human efforts ultimately perish by the remorseless passage of Time.

Interestingly, Iqbal felt that understanding the problem of Time was a question of life and death for the Muslims. This remark necessitates a brief survey of views on the nature of Time expressed by people other than Iqbal.

According to the Greeks, since the universe was stationary or motionless, the movement of Time was an illusion. The Ash'arite group of Muslim thinkers, who rebelled against this Greek philosophy, advanced the theory of "atomic" Time. Jalaluddin Dawani and 'Ayn al-Quzzat Hamadani divided Time into three categories: slowest flow of Time for heavier material bodies; faster flow of Time for lighter spiritual beings; and "God's Time" which is motionless, unchangeable and without any beginning or end.

As far as the European thinkers are concerned, Leibnitz advanced the concept of "monads" which was quite close to the Ash'arite concept of "atomic" Time. It is also somewhat similar to the modern "Quantum" Theory advanced by Plank and Bohr. Newton believed in "Ordinary Time" and the underlying "Absolute Time." Nietzsche conceived "Cyclical or Repetitive Time". Ouspenski believed that Time was the involuntary motion of a three dimensional body in space.

Iqbal could not refute the objectivity of Einstein's "Relativity" Theory, but his main objection against it was that it destroyed the original nature of Time by reducing it to a mere "fourth dimension" of space. Besides, it fixed "future" as pre-determined. In other words, events in future were not expected to happen, but were already laid out in space and that one could only come by them. This, according to Iqbal, was the worst kind of determinism.

Iqbal generally agreed with Bergson on the "Subjective" nature of Time. But he rejected Bergson's argument that "duration" only consisted of the past and present events and could not include future events. Iqbal thought that future events must also be considered as an essential feature of "pure Time" as future events at least existed in the realm of probability because they may or may not take place.

Iqbal attached equal importance to both the "objective" (serial) and the "subjective" (durational) aspects of Time because of Time's significance with reference to the creative activity of the human ego. He gave the example of God's constant creative activity in "serial" and "durational" time by interpreting the Qur'anic expressions of creating heavens in "seven days" (*Sitta Ayyam*)³ and in the "twinkling of an eye" (*Kalambil basr*).⁴ Likewise, he cited the Tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in which he described his personal experience in "pure Time", stating, "I had a Time with God"; and another Tradition in which he is reported to have said, "Do not abuse Time, for Time is God".

Iqbal reprimanded Muslims who, as a decadent community, measured time by the passage of day and night and considered life only as eating, drinking, sleeping and

waking. In the eyes of Iqbal, such life was the life of animals that did not know the real significance of Time. He expected them to discover the relationship of Time with creativity and to aspire to live creatively.

The ethical values that Iqbal deduced from his philosophy of the "Self" include attributes such as love, freedom, courage, high ambition, and supreme indifference towards the acquisition of material comforts. Cultivation of these attributes is likely to result in the fortification of man's personality. Thus a life of such cultivation would be creative and everlasting.

The factors that destroy man's personality emerge from stagnation, the opposite of creative activity. Stagnation gives birth to passive virtues like, humility, submission and obedience as well as fear, corruption, cowardice, beggary, plagiarism and imitation, eventually leading to servitude. Servitude annihilates individuals and societies, and the blind and cynical march of Time obliterates their very trace from history.

In his philosophy of the "Self", Iqbal sought the rebirth of the spirit of inquisitiveness and defiance among the Muslims, calling on them as individuals and as a society to rediscover their lost position in the fields of creativity and innovation. Through his historical analysis, he demonstrated that in the sphere of human knowledge Western civilisation was a prolongation of Islamic civilisation. Everything in Western thought that led to human progress was an elaboration of the very ideas and theories on which Muslim thinkers and scientists had commenced debate. Hence Iqbal, through his vision of new Muslim individuals and a new Muslim society, endeavoured to create a bridge between Islam and the West. But his dream of creating a "new world" (*Jahan-i-Nam*) could not be realised except through the advancement of a new concept of nationality and the establishment of a modern Islamic state.

Iqbal's concept of nationality is also founded on his philosophy of "Individual ego" and "collective ego". He taught the Muslims of South Asia that Islam should form the basis of their nationalism as well as patriotism. Therefore their nationality was

founded on a common spiritual aspiration and not on common race, language or territory. He also taught them that in the regions of the Indian subcontinent where they were in a majority, they were justified to assert their right of self-determination and to strive for their independence.

Iqbal's dream was realised after his death by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah under whose leadership Muslims established Pakistan. Iqbal had rightly declared. "Nations are born in the hearts of poets. They prosper and die in the hands of politicians."

Iqbal did not define Islam as a theologian but as a philosopher. According to him, Islam was not a religion in the ancient sense of the word. It was an attitude of freedom and even of defiance of the universe. It was essentially a protest against the entire outlook of the ancient world. It was the discovery of man. Therefore in his perception, Islam as a religion and culture is humanistic and egalitarian. Any interpretation of Islam which approves feudalism and discriminates between man and man, is unacceptable to him.

As for the Qur'an, Iqbal believed that its different interpretations could resolve the problems of the past, present and future eras provided that Muslims were able to reconcile "reason" with "love", and realised that the new world lying buried in their hearts was anxiously waiting to unfold itself on hearing the word "be" from them.

In brief he subscribed to the view of flexible and progressive interpretation of Qur'anic laws in order to cope with the needs and requirements of changing times. It was in this background that he held that the claim of modern Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles of Islam, in the light of their own experience and the altered conditions of modern life, was perfectly justified. He suggested that each and every generation of Muslims, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve their own problems.

According to Iqbal, Islam's fundamental principle of "*Tawhid*" (God's Unity) in fact implied human equality, solidarity and freedom. He regarded the gradual formation of

popularly elected legislative assemblies in Muslim lands as a return to the original purity of Islam. It also constituted a great step forward to transfer the power of "*Ijtihad*" from individual representatives of schools of Law to Muslim legislative assembly. This was necessary towards the establishment of an evolutionary outlook towards the Islamic legal system in modern times. He also realised that due to the extraordinary development of human knowledge, the contribution to legal discussion of experts other than the Ulema, (religious Scholars) as well as laymen who happened to possess a keen insight into affairs, was required in order to stir into activity the dormant spirit of life in the Shari'ah laws.

As for the political or constitutional order of Islam, Iqbal felt that the history of Muslims established that it had always been in a state of "becoming" and was never considered a finished product.

For establishment of the caliphate, different modes were adapted e.g. election, nomination, election through an electoral college, referendum, usurpation of power and finally constitutional caliphate as contemplated by Syed Jamal-ud-Din Afghani. But laying stress on equality, solidarity and freedom, Iqbal went one step further and proposed for his Islamic state a "Spiritual" democracy, embodying the principles of supremacy of law, guarantee of human rights and realisation of social and economic justice for all citizens as laid down in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

In sum, Iqbalian idealism is an appropriate example of the fusion of modern ideas into Islam. Iqbal was declared a "*Kafir*" (infidel) by some Ulema for the views expressed in his poems and in his lecture on "*Ijtihad*" in 1924. He was ahead of his times and even today the conservative Muslim community of Pakistan is not ready to accept all his views. Iqbal's Western critics may consider his concept of a modern Islamic state as founded on its own kind of "secular humanism" or perhaps "liberal unitarian humanism", but to Iqbal the spirit of Islam was boundless and as established by its past history, was capable of assimilating all the attainable new ideas

of the surrounding civilisations, giving them its own peculiar direction of development.

¹ The account of the creation of Adam is to be found at several places in the Qur'an. Like most Qur'anic narrative, it is not told in one place. See the Qur'an, 2:30-34, 7:11 and elsewhere.

² Qur'an, 33:72.

³ Qur'an, 7:54, 10:3, 25:59 and elsewhere.

⁴ Qur'an, 54:50.