

Iqbal's Concept of God

The Birth of Theism in the Philosophy of Iqbal

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Muhammad (SAW) said the following about an Arab poet, Ummayya ibn al-Salat: "His tongue believed while his heart disbelieved." Iqbal, thirteen hundred years later, delivered a similar verdict about a German philosopher, Nietzsche: "His heart is a believer, though his brain denies." And so Iqbal, in a mood of nostalgia, feeling the pain of the thirst of Nietzsche's intellectual quest and lack of someone to quench that thirst, wished that if Nietzsche were to live in his time Iqbal himself would have enlightened him about the reality of God:

If that Western sage were present in this age,
Iqbal would have taught him the truth about God.¹

Iqbal's concept of God passes through three periods of intellectual development. As Professor Sharif has pointed out, it is almost impossible to draw a clear demarcation between these periods; however, there are certain distinguishing features which help us understand the development of Iqbal's idea of God.² The three periods thus defined are: (1) 1901-1908, (2) 1908-1920, and (3) 1920-1938 (Iqbal died on April 21, 1938). In the first period, Iqbal's idea of God is fundamentally Platonic. God is conceived as Eternal Beauty, the universal *Idos* (Idea or Ideal) of Beauty. This universal is in turn manifested into particulars in various forms, some of which have been revealed and some are yet to be revealed. So, for example, the sun, the moon, the stars are all expressions of this Eternal Beauty, which is the source and the essence of these multifarious expressions. These expressions are like a drop in the ocean, a candle in front of the sun, transient and perishable. Just like a candle ceases to burn in the presence of the sun, life of this world of matter ceases to exist in the presence of Eternal Life. The world of matter, which is not co-eternal, is therefore transitory; in fact, the whole of existence becomes transitory. The reply of the famous saint Bayazid Bistami is very suggestive of this attitude:

The question of creation once arose among the disciples of the well-known saint Ba Yazid of Bistam. One of the disciples very pointedly put the common-sense view saying: 'There was a moment of time when God existed and nothing else existed beside Him.' The saint's reply was equally pointed: 'It is just the same now, as it was then.'³

Iqbal's Platonic stance, though philosophically unoriginal, finds beautiful genuine expression in various early poems of *Bang-e-Dara* (*The Call of the Caravan*) reminiscent of Wordsworth and Tennyson.

In the second period (1908-1920), while maintaining its poetic beauty, Iqbal's concept of God grows philosophically owing partly to the influence of a few Western thinkers, and provides the foundations for *khudi* - his philosophy of the 'self'. From 1905-1908 Iqbal comes under the tutelage of the famous neo-Hegelian John McTaggart and James Ward at Cambridge University, during which time, he also studies Jalaluddin Rumi.⁴ Under McTaggart, Ward and Rumi initially Iqbal is a thorough-going pantheistic mystic, a claim supported by Iqbal himself. In a letter of 1920 to Iqbal, which McTaggart appears to have written after he had read R. A. Nicholson's English translation of Iqbal's *Asrar-e-Khudi* (*The Secrets of the Self*), McTaggart remarks: "Have you not changed your position very much? Surely, in the days when we used to talk philosophy together, you were much more of a pantheist and a mystic."⁵ The fact that Iqbal himself has quoted this letter in his essay on McTaggart's philosophy lends support to his pantheistic mystic position. However, around 1908, Iqbal's position begins to change as the idea of personal immortality of McTaggart, the theistic pluralism of Ward and the metaphysical orientation of Rumi impress deeply upon Iqbal turning him into a theistic pluralist himself.⁶ This impression prepares him for Nietzsche and his will-to-power, Bergson and his *elan vital*, and Macdougall's social psychology. With Rumi as his spiritual guide, the groundwork for Iqbal's deep study of the secrets of the self (initially in the later poems of *Bang-e-Dara* and then in his *Asrar-e-Khudi*) and later of the mysteries of selflessness (in *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*) is laid. The seed of *khudi* is sown and a most inspiring and comprehensive philosophy of the 'self' is born!⁷ As Professor Sharif points out: "It is in light of this philosophy that one must understand Iqbal's ever-increasing emphasis on the efficiency and eternity of will and his ever-decreasing belief in the eternity of beauty - a change in his attitude which takes him far away from Platonism and pantheistic mysticism."⁸

Iqbal's new philosophy of *khudi*, 'self' or 'egohood', is ultimately the foundation of his concept of God. Iqbal argues that *khudi* is the root of all existence, that the human ego has a central place in the universe while it

is at the same time linked with the Ultimate Ego (i.e., God). According to Iqbal:

Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches perfection in man. That is why the Qur'an declares the Ultimate Ego [i.e., God] to be nearer to man than his own neck-vein.⁹

Khudi posits a belief in evolution, freedom and possibilities of the self, in the will to power, in the value of super-egos, and in destruction of the old for the creation of the new. Life, in other words, is a forward assimilative movement and this movement, the gradually rising note of egohood passing through various stages to get closer to Reality, is the essence of Reality. This Reality is God - the Ultimate Reality, the Absolute Self, and the Supreme Ego. God is no longer Eternal Beauty but rather Eternal Will with an infinite sense of creativity, a sense of which man is a central component. Instead of Platonic emphasis on God's beauty, the emphasis is now laid on God's unity and the principle of *Tawbeed*, which gives unity of purpose and strength to individuals, nations and mankind as a whole. The principle of Divine Unity becomes a formative factor for the unity of mankind. Therefore, the approach to God and the progress of the individual human being becomes dependent on his/her relationship to the self, to the family, to the society and ultimately to God. God is to be sought not by begging but on the strength of will. Once found, one is not to annihilate oneself in God but rather to absorb God within oneself; that is, "create in yourselves the attributes of God" as much as one possibly can - a possibility to which there are no limits. If the human ego is able to do this successfully, it will then become worthy of the vicegerency of God - that is, *khudi* will have reached perfection in man. In the words of the Qur'an:

The one who causes this [self] to grow in purity has indeed attained success and the one who is negligent of this [self] has indeed utterly failed. (Al-Shams 91:9-10)

Iqbal's concept of God reaches its climax in the third period of intellectual development (1920 till his death), in which he consolidates all the elements of his synthesis and elaborates them into a comprehensive system - a system in which the concept of God, the Ultimate Ego, occupies the supreme position. Iqbal's final views on God are, in the main, Qur'anic. He passes beyond the rationalistic commentaries and the mystical speculations to the original Qur'anic teachings and describes God first and

last as an Ego: His name Allah, as He calls Himself in the Qur'an, manifests his personal character, and the 112th Surah (or Chapter) of the Qur'an is a proof of God being an Ego, albeit the Ultimate Ego:

In order to emphasize the individuality of the Ultimate Ego the Qur'an gives Him the proper name of Allah, and further defines Him as follows: 'Say: Allah is One; All things depend on Him; He begetteth not, and He is not begotten; And there is none like unto Him.'¹⁰

Iqbal, as Dr. Annemarie Schimmel has very rightly suggested, built his whole system upon this very idea that God is the most perfect ego, the most perfect personality which he was to prove from the Qur'an. In addition to the name Allah and the 112th *Surah*, Iqbal has found another proof of God's Personality, His Egohood in the Qur'anic assertion "Call upon me, and I will answer." (Al-Ghafir 40:60) This means that the experience of prayer becomes the proof of God's personality, a personality above and beyond any imaginable personality.¹¹ The identification of God as a personality, however, raises a question: If God is an ego, an individual, then isn't He finite? In other words, how can we think of Him as infinite if He is an individual since individuality implies finitude? According to Iqbal:

The answer to this question is that God cannot be conceived as infinite in the sense of spatial infinity. In matters of spiritual valuation mere immensity counts for nothing... Modern science regards Nature not as something static ... but a structure of inter-related events out of whose mutual relations arise the concepts of space and time ... [In other words] space and time are possibilities of the Ego, only partially realized in the shape of our mathematical space and time. Beyond Him and apart from His creative activity, there is neither time nor space to close Him off in reference to other egos. The Ultimate Ego is, therefore, neither infinite in the sense of spatial infinity nor finite in the sense of the space-bound human ego whose body closes him off in reference to other egos. The infinity of the Ultimate Ego consists in the infinite inner possibilities of His creative activity of which the universe, as known to us, is only a partial expression. In one word God's infinity is intensive, not extensive. It involves an infinite series, but is not that series.¹²

In addition, the personality of the Ultimate Ego, from an intellectual point of view, involves (i) Creativeness (ii) Knowledge (iii) Omnipotence and (iv) Eternity. For Iqbal, creation is the unfolding of the inner possibilities of the Ultimate Ego and His being a free-living energy with infinite creative possibilities implies His Omnipotence. To Him, the universe is not a reality confronting Him as His 'other', it is only a passing phase of His consciousness, a fleeting moment of His infinite life. As the

Qur'an says, "every day He has a new phase (*shan*) to bring forth" (Ar-Rahman 55:29). Iqbal finds enough support for his view in modern physics:

Einstein is quite right in saying that the Universe is finite, but boundless. It is finite because it is a passing phases (*shan* in the language of the Qur'an) of God's extensively infinite consciousness, and boundless because the creative power of God is intensively infinite. The Qur'anic way of expressing the same truth is that the Universe is liable to increase.¹³

Iqbal was strongly against the Hellenistic interpretation of God which had turned the living God of prophetic religions into an immovable *prima causa*, and his early sympathy with Nietzsche can be attributed to a certain extent to the fact that the German philosopher attacked this Hellenized God of Christianity.¹⁴ Iqbal wanted to emancipate the Islamic concept of God from such immobilizing and paralyzing influences; to Iqbal God was active, creative and dynamic. Since God is Eternal, therefore, His activity, creativity and dynamicism are also eternal.

This creation is perhaps still unfinished,
For every moment arises the cry 'Be', and it becomes! ¹⁵

Thus, the Ultimate Ego is essentially creative; however, the creativity of the Ultimate Ego is fully realized in its relationship to the human ego. According to Iqbal, this relationship is nowhere more profoundly manifested than in the act of prayer because prayer alone provides the possibility of coming into close contact with the Ultimate Ego. In this act of worship, Iqbal found the self-revelation of the "Great I am", and the proof that God is an Ego taken from the Qur'anic verse "Call upon Me and I shall answer you" (Al-Ghafir 40:60). The human ego which is not so much yearning for perfection but more importantly for direct contact with the Ultimate Ego prays to a being whom it can trust as a companion and to whom it can reveal the innermost mysteries of the heart, thus both affirming and negating itself in the personality of the Ultimate Being:

Prayer...is an expression of man's inner yearning for a response in the awful silence of the universe. It is a unique process of discovery whereby the searching ego affirms itself in the very moment of self-negation, and thus discovers its own worth and justification as a dynamic factor in the life of the universe. True to the psychology of mental attitude in prayer, the form of worship in Islam symbolizes both affirmation and negation.¹⁶

Psychologically speaking, then, prayer is instinctive in its origin and forms a necessary part of human consciousness. Iqbal quotes "the great American psychologist, Professor William James" on this matter:

It seems probable that in spite of all that 'science' may do to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of time, unless their mental nature changes in a manner which nothing we know should lead us to expect. The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the social sort, it yet can find its only adequate Socius [its great companion] in an ideal world ... Most men, either continually or occasionally, carry a reference to it in their breast ... For most of us, a world with no such inner refuge when the outer social self failed and dropped from us would be the abyss of horror. I say 'for most of us', because...it is a much more essential part of the consciousness of some men than of others. Those who have the most of it are possibly the most religious men. But I am sure that even those who say they are altogether without it deceive themselves, and really have it in some degree.¹⁷

Indeed, this act of worship, this relationship of direct contact of the Ultimate Ego with the human ego actualizes itself differently according to the particular levels of consciousness or religious experience. Iqbal speaks of "prophetic" and "mystic" types of consciousness. In the case of prophetic consciousness, the act of prayer is mainly creative; in the case of mystic consciousness, it is mainly cognitive. Here Iqbal reveals the true color of mysticism through the act of prayer, rather than the quest for a nameless nothing as disclosed in Neo-Platonic mysticism. According to Iqbal, mystic experience, no matter how unusual or abnormal, is a perfectly natural experience, a real human experience. And the "unusualness" or "incommunicability" of such an experience is due to the fact that it is essentially a matter of "inarticulate feeling, untouched by discursive intellect."¹⁸ It is a matter of feeling seeking expression in thought. Unfortunately, though mysticism has revealed fresh horizons of the self lending further uniqueness and vitality to the process of spiritual illumination, "its set phraseology shaped by the thought-forms of a worn-out metaphysics has had a rather deadening effect on the modern mind."¹⁹ Therefore, Iqbal, in rediscovering the meaning of prayer from a cognitive point of view, has revitalized the essence of mystic experience. He distinguishes the cognitive from the creative in the following manner:

In thought the mind observes and follows the working of Reality; in the act of prayer it gives up its career as a seeker of slow-footed universality and rises higher than thought to capture

Reality itself with a view to become a conscious participator in its life.²⁰

Yet, the “mystic” experience remains subordinate to the “prophetic” experience; rather, “mystic” consciousness is a training ground for the more ultimate and complete “prophetic” consciousness. In the words of Dr. Schimmel, the goal of “mystic” experience, after ascetic preliminaries, is the preparation of the soul for full union with God, the meditation of God’s transcendent beauty and the contemplation of unchanging eternity. A myriad of religious experience may reveal themselves as truths in such an experience but it ends at the moment when union with God is attained,

...when there remains nothing but the ‘clear darkness’, and the inexhaustible Godhead, a Godhead which can be described either as a Neutrum, as spiritualized force, beyond the personal God, or as the essence of eternal beauty, the eternally Beloved whose are gladly and ungrudgingly accepted.²¹

Through the act of prayer, however, “mystic” consciousness rises to a level higher than that of just a “personal” union with God; it elevates to the level of “prophetic” consciousness in which God is active, creative and dynamic:

The last goal in the prayer of the prophetic type is not quietude, calmness and detachment from worldly affairs but the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. Man’s aim is not to be united with God but to unite his will with the Divine will, and work according to His laws.... And when man has reached the climax of prayer, staying eye to eye, brow to brow with the Greatest Ego, he experiences the infinite possibilities in God, and may choose one of them, even asking from God the altering of His will and the granting him a new life, a new destination.²²

Indeed, we find in a *hadith qudsi*, the mutual quest between God and the human being in the following words: “When my slave comes nearer to Me a span, I will approach him a yard, and when he approaches one yard, I will approach him one fathom, when he comes walking I come running.” And this is what Iqbal wants to emphasize: the mutual approach of the human being and God through the act of prayer.

In the “prophetic” experience, prayer leads to an active and vital relationship with the Ultimate Ego. Prayer leads to action, at the same time, action leads to prayer. The quest for the knowledge of the Ultimate Ego is a form of prayer and in fact all search for knowledge, philosophical or scientific, is essentially a form of prayer.

Prayer must be regarded as necessary complement to the intellectual activity of the observer of Nature. The scientific observation of Nature keeps us in close contact with the behavior of Reality, and thus sharpens our inner perception for a deeper vision of it.²³

The attitude embodied in prayer, as explained by Iqbal, empowers the human vision with power which philosophy and science seeks but cannot find. Vision without power is capable of inducing moral elevation but only temporarily; it cannot be an enriching experience permanently. At the same time, power without vision cannot be constructive and human; it tends to become destructive and inhuman. Therefore, both must combine for the spiritual expansion of humanity. This spiritual expansion or spiritual illumination is thus a vibrant and energetic act in which a personality discovers its position in the larger scheme of life and leaves a permanent impression on life. Thus, prayer is the highest form of action and action is the highest form of prayer, both resulting from the combination of vision and power, and both completing each other. Prayer without action, and action without prayer, is an incomplete phase of life. In other words, for life to be complete, the unity of prayer and action is indispensable.

Prayer serves to fortify the religious or theistic consciousness in Iqbal's system of thought. The fact that he holds the Ultimate Ego to be a personality, albeit the Ultimate Personality, which has the attributes of creativeness, knowledge, omnipotence and eternity, and which longs to come close to the finite egos as much as the finite egos long to be near to Him, makes him a philosophical theist *par excellence*. Thus, Iqbal is a theist who made God's Personality to be the cornerstone of his whole system, rather than Will-to-Power as proposed by Nietzsche. The Will-to-Power, like all other activities of the self, perfects our ego, but only partially. Further, an undue emphasis on the Will-to-Power, as Nietzsche had laid, is unhealthy for the development of the ego. According to Iqbal, it is not the Will-to-Power, but the idea of Personality, which should be the true standard of value.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that though Iqbal is a theist, his theism is not the theism of the old theists. Iqbal's God is not "the God in the Heavens". Neither is God's Personality an anthropomorphic being or architectonic intelligence acting upon the world externally. Rather, Iqbal's God encompasses the whole universe, a universe in which the finite egos are consciously and organically related to the Ultimate Ego. Indeed, in Islam, God and the universe, spirit and matter, Church and State, all are organic to each other. In fact, God's will functions through the will of the finite egos and His Will is not stationary or dependent upon a pre-determined destination, it is not moving toward a foreseen end. That would

be antithetical to the very notion of God and His creative, knowledgeable, omnipotent and eternal progress, a process, which progresses *in* perfection not *toward* perfection. In the words of Iqbal, Divine Will

... must be conceived as a living creative activity to which the objects that appear to coexist in their own right are organically related.... The future certainly pre-exists in the organic whole of God's creative life, but it pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines.²⁴

Nietzsche could not have realized this because of his materialism. He recognizes no spiritual purpose in the universe and as a result to him there is no ethical principle resident in the forces of history. As Iqbal points out, virtue, justice, duty, love, are all meaningless terms to him and the process of history is determined purely by economical forces, forces which are governed by the principle, "Might is Right". Nietzsche views the universe only from an intellectual point of view, which is why he cannot accept the human "I" as a reality. This position of Nietzsche echoes the Kantian argument in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that the notions of God, immortality and freedom cannot be proven on intellectual grounds - however useful such notions may be for practical purposes. But Iqbal goes beyond the intellectual barriers to note that the existence of "I" cannot be rejected just because it cannot be proven on intellectual grounds. This is because the human ego is not a purely intellectual entity; its existence is also rooted in "inner experiences" - experiences capable of reflecting "mystic" and "prophetic" consciousness. Bradley has also noted that when one moves beyond the constraints of purely intellectual thought and views the issue from the perspective of "inner experiences" the "I" is no longer a fiction but an indubitable fact. Iqbal notes that Leibnitz was closer to the truth than either Kant or Nietzsche in asserting that the "I" is an ultimate fact. But Leibnitz regarded the human ego as something closed or windowless. Iqbal, however, notes that this assertion is contradicted by our experience, may it be "mystic" or "prophetic" or both, in which the "I" can grow and evolve. In light of this, the most pressing question for Iqbal is not whether the human ego is a reality or not - it most certainly is a reality - but whether this weak, created and dependent ego or "I" can survive the shock of death and thus become a permanent element in the constitution of the universe. As Iqbal argues in *Asrar-e-Khudi*, the human ego can attain immortality if it adopts a certain way of life through which it can come into contact with the ultimate source of life, the Ultimate Ego.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, does not conceive of the immortality of the human ego and, as a result, nor does he envision any new happening in the universe. Whatever happens now has happened before an infinite number of times, and will continue to happen an infinite number of times

in the future. The very word "Recurrence" in his doctrine of "Eternal Recurrence" implies this constancy and rigidity. In the words of Iqbal, Nietzsche's view is,

... nothing more than a Fatalism.... Such a doctrine, far from keying up the human organism for the fight of life, tends to destroy its action-tendencies and relaxes the tension of the ego.²⁵

According to Iqbal, Nietzsche fell into this error of the world repeating itself on account of his fatal error, namely that clock time is the real time. Nietzsche never seriously grappled with the issue of time and accepted without criticism the old Hindu and Greek idea of time. Nietzsche regarded time as circular and Iqbal concedes that time regarded as perpetual circular movement makes immortality absolutely intolerable. Nietzsche himself knows this and therefore describes his doctrine, not as one of immortality, but rather as a view of life which would make immortality endurable. Time, however, according to Iqbal, is not circular but linear, a straight line. If it were circular and not linear, creativity would be an oxymoron. By this account, even Nietzsche's *Übermensch* or Superman, which is not much different than Emerson's *Overman*, has been born a number of times before and will be born a number of times again and thus gives us no new inspiration. Therefore, whereas life in Nietzschean philosophy is repetition, in Iqbal's system of thought it is creation. The perfection of the perfect man, in other words, is not based on a view of time as a circular and repetitive. Rather, it thrives on realizing time as linear and creative.

Nietzschean flaw lies in the fact that by concentrating solely on his fight against the Christian conception of God which resulted in his ardent distaste for the "ascetic-moralistic" conception of God as purported by Christianity, he completely lost cognizance of the vitality inherent in moral and spiritual forces in the universe. His materialistic interpretation of the universe precluded him from recognizing an *Übermensch* who is both matter and spirit. Being a thoroughgoing materialist, he was unable to use the term spirit except in the sense of life in its metaphysical manifestations. This is why whereas Nietzschean (and atheistic) perfect man is a biological product, the Iqbalian (and theistic or, more appropriately, Islamic) perfect man is the product of both biological and ethical (moral and spiritual) forces. Nietzsche was able to see the truth but only partially. His Godless philosophy could see God but only in a limited scope - as man's horizon and nothing more. Indeed, if he was alive in Iqbal's time or Iqbal in his time, Iqbal could have taught him the reality about God.

Endnotes

1. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad. *Bal-i-Jibreel (Gabriel's Wing)* in *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal* (Urdu), Karachi, Pakistan: Sheikh Ghulam & Sons Ltd, 1986, Ghazal 33, Verse 5, p. 348.
2. Sharif, M. M. "Iqbal's Conception of God" in *Iqbal as a Thinker (Essays by Eminent Scholars)*, Lahore, Pakistan: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1973, pp. 97-118.
3. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Edited by M. S. Sheikh. (Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and the Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986) p. 53.
4. Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, the famous Persian philosopher-poet of the 13th Century, wrote the *Mathnawi* which was a great influence on Iqbal. In fact, Rumi acted as Iqbal's spiritual guide, a relationship similar to that of Virgil and Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.
5. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad. "McTaggart's Philosophy" in *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*. Edited by Syed Abdul Vahid. (Lahore, Pakistan: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1992) p. 118.
6. Sharif, Ibid, p. 103.
7. Iqbal, M. Irfan. "Iqbal's Philosophy of Khudi" in "The Qur'anic Horizons" Vol 3: No.2 (April-June 1998), pp. 47-56.
8. Sharif, Ibid, p. 104.
9. *Reconstruction*, Ibid., p. 57.
10. Ibid, p. 50.
11. Schimmel, Annemarie. *Gabriel's Wing*. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1989) p. 95-97.
12. *Reconstruction*, Ibid, p. 52.
13. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad. "Self in the Light of Relativity" in *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, Ibid, p. 112.
14. Schimmel, Ibid, p. 101.
15. *Bal-i-Jibreel*, Ibid., Ghazal 3, Verse 7, p. 320.
16. *Reconstruction*, Ibid, p. 74.
17. Ibid, p. 71.
18. Ibid, p. 17.
19. Ibid, p. 72
20. Ibid.
21. Schimmel, Ibid, p. 184
22. Ibid, p. 184.
23. *Reconstruction*, Ibid, p. 72.
24. Ibid, p. 63.
25. Ibid, p. 92.