

MUHAMMAD IQBAL: A REAPPRAISAL

by

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Neither Iqbal's philosophy nor his poetry can be easily understood in isolation from his historical context, that interval in India's history

between the failure of the Mutiny in 1857 with all it entailed for the Muslims and their gradual recovery, culminating in the establishment of Pakistan. Unlike most philosophers Iqbāl did not philosophise in a vacuum; his philosophy was purposive. Precisely in the nexus between his historical background and his reaction to it lies the clue to his writing, whether poetry and prose, and even the explanation of why at times the content of both verges on, what for want of a better word we may call, heresy. A glance at the contemporary situation may not account for his genius as a poet but it does explain his attitude as a philosopher. Whereas to-day there are some thirty independent Muslim states, when Iqbāl was living there were only three or four and of these, two — Turkey and Persia — were being rapidly secularised ; meanwhile in Palestine the rape of that country by international Zionism was proceeding apace with the connivance both of Russia and America. As for Iqbāl's own country there the crown of Shah Jahān rested on the head of Queen Victoria's descendant.

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Muhammad Iqbal was born into a Punjabi bourgeois family in 1877 and died in 1938. His emergence therefore coincides with one of the most complicated and critical periods in Indian history and the intricacy, not to say the confusion, of his background is reflected in the polyglot character of his work : the language he commonly spoke was Punjabi ; the language of his shorter poems was Urdu, that of his long poems Persian ; whilst his philosophical works were written in English and his religious language was Arabic. And toward the end of his life he was even contemplating turning to English as a medium for his poetic inspiration.

In his youth Iqbal had gone to Europe and studied at Cambridge and Munich, taking a doctorate in philosophy at the Latter university. This was the crisis, the turning point in his life. He saw in European society an attitude towards life which if applied in the East might resurrect its ancient glories. Back in India he found his co-religionists bewildered, as in the words of the Qur'an "Have you not seen them wandering mazed in every valley ?" (xxvi. 225) and their fatalism filled him with despair, In the long poem *Rumūz-i-Bekbūdi* he describes his anguish in graphic terms:

در سکوت نیم شب فالدن بدن

عالم اندر خواب و من گریان بدم

جانم از صبر و سکون محروم بود

درد من یا حی یا قیوم بود

آرزوے داشتتم خون کردش

تاز راه دیدہ بیرون کردش

سوختن چون لاله پیہم تا کجا

از سحر درویزہ شبنم تا کجا

اشک خود بر خویش میریزم چو شمع

با شب یلدا در آویزم چو شمع

In the mid-watch of night, when all the world

Was hushed in slumber, I made loud lament.

Unto the Living and Omnipotent God

I made my litany ; my longing heart

Surged, till its blood streamed from my eyes:

How long, O Lord, will the tulip glow,

Begging cool dewdrops nom the dawn?

Lo, like a candle wrestling with the night

Over myself I pour my flooding tears.⁷⁰

The only solution he could envisage was to transplant the activist philosophy of Europe to Eastern soil where it could be acclimated by a process of Islamisation. Iqbal therefore like most of us was not a pure philosopher : he did not start from a basis of reason and arrive at objective conclusions; rather he started with the conclusions and ingeniously constructed metaphysical arguments to give the impression that he had arrived at them by a rational process. He had asked himself the question : What philosophy can save Islām from disintegration? The answer, as he saw it, was a combination of the individualism of Nietzsche and the vitalism of Bergson. Nietzsche's theory of the superman he recast as the theory of ego.⁷¹ There is nothing inherently wrong in this borrowing from a foreign culture *provided that the elements borrowed be assimilable within their new context.*⁷² The answer to the

⁷⁰ *Asrar u Rumuz*, 95.96. Translation is from Prof. Arberry.

⁷¹ The writer seems to be unaware of Iqbal's true position in this respect. In a "Note on Nietzsche" dictated by Iqbal himself (preserved in the Iqbal Academy), he says, "The conception of the Superman in Nietzsche is purely materialistic. This conception may be new in European literature . . . It is probable that Nietzsche borrowed it from the literature of Islam or of the East and degraded it by his materialism." (Ed.)

⁷² Iqbal's own comment on the current tendency to copy the West could not be more apt: "There is nothing wrong in this movement," he says, "for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Oxford, 1934), 7). The issue confronting Muslim nations today is not the acceptance or rejection of Western civilisation *in toto* but the selection of valid criteria to distinguish between good and bad in that civilisation and in the case of the former to

question of Nietzsche's assimilability may be found in his own work *The Antichrist* :

"Christianity destroyed the harvest we might have reaped from the culture of antiquity, later it also destroyed our harvest of the culture of Islam. The wonderful Moorish world of Spanish culture which in its essence is more closely related to us, and which appeals more to our sense and taste than Rome and Greece, was *trampled to death* Later on the Crusaders waged war upon something before which it would have been more seemly in them to grovel in the dust, — a culture, beside which even our Nineteenth Century would seem very poor and 'senile' Christianity, alcohol — the two great means of corruption. As a matter of fact, choice ought to be just as much out of the question between Islam and Christianity as between an Arab and a Jew" (*Aphorism* 60).

These excerpts illustrate to perfection Nietzsche's splenetic style ; there is much more in the same vein, but we have quoted enough to show why Iqbāl could describe the German philosopher as a *mu'min*, a true believer.⁷³

Bergson, however, was a very different proposition. Iqbal with characteristic subtlety saw that the mindless dynamism of Bergson was insoluble as such in Islām and he ingeniously adapted the French philosopher's theories. And here we come to

assess the compatibility or otherwise of the feature whose adoption is proposed.

⁷³ An extensive study of this topic, which unfortunately cannot be recommended without caution, is Subhash Kashyap's "Sir Muhammad Iqbal and Friedrich Nietzsche" in *The Islamic Quarterly*, II (1955), 175-194

the heart of Iqbal's philosophy, but before analysing it there is one observation which deserves to be made. Since Iqbal is the only philosopher properly so-called to have emerged in Islam since Averroes's death in 1198 C.E., Most Muslim scholars have hesitated to criticise the only example there is of a modern Islamic metaphysic and Iqbal's writings in consequence have assumed an almost sacrosanct character. This attitude in inhibiting the emergence of a modern Islāmic philosophy is a tendency of which Iqbal himself would have been the first to disapprove.

Iqbal was above all anxious to discredit determinism which in terms of human behaviour meant a tendency for Muslims to be complaisant about their unenviable lot. This leads him to analyse the individual's inner experience as "pure duration" untouched by serial time which is time as the common man apprehends it, a series of "nows". Paralleling the dual nature of time there is a bifurcation in the ego's activity: it is divided into the efficient self and the appreciative self. The former is in direct relation with space, the external world of everyday experience, Time as the appreciative self knows it is pure duration which the same ego acting in its capacity of efficient self has broken down into sequence that it might apprehend its daily experience in a dimensional world. Real time is spatialised and therefore distorted through the ego's unavoidable commerce with the world. But in pure duration as it is experienced by the appreciative self there is change but no seriality or succession : the temporal order of events has ceased to obtain. This is the dimension of mystical experience. "Its unity," says Iqbal, "is like the unity of the germ in

which the experience of its individual ancestors exist, not as a plurality, but as a unity in which every experience pervades the whole."⁷⁴

From the individual self this pure duration is transferred to the universe and predicated of the Ultimate Ego. Thus an immanent God is established for nature and the divine purpose is seen as working out through the Muslim community whose behaviour is therefore purposive and rationally directed. The only flaw in this system would seem to be the impossibility of eliminating entirely the notion of seriality from pure duration. The unity of the latter, Iqbāl contends, is like a germ wherein the past (its parentage) and its future (the open possibilities of its growth) are co-existent with its present existence as a germ. But if the future tree be potentially present in the seed then the effect is already present in the cause, and as effect is posterior to cause pure duration is therefore not wholly untainted with seriality and determinism, we are forced to admit, still stands. To point out the partial failure of Iqbāl's metaphysic is not to belittle his stature. Free will, as someone observed, is something we all continue to believe in even though all the evidence is to the contrary. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of his metaphysic is its insistence on the plural nature of time. Heidegger emphasises that time, far from traversing a measurable course as along the edge of a ruler, is really a complex tissue of directions. And Dunne and Priestley have noted that the

⁷⁴ *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Oxford, 1934), 45.

secret of immortality may lie in the individual's life not being circumscribed within a single time.

In our opinion the Islāmic metaphysic of the future must move within the conceptual framework of the 'Ashariya. It may be that Islām will one day, witness a neo-'Asharite movement, just as Catholicism has witnessed neo-Thomism. At all events — and the inadequacy of Iqbāl's metaphysic confirms this — a philosophy or cultural identity such as Islām evolves best when it evolves from within itself. Ultimately every people will have to work out their own destiny simply because no other course is open to them.

Whatever, nevertheless, the final verdict on Iqbāl's philosophy may be, that is no reason why we should not consider on their own merits the ethical values which arise from his premises and their significance for the Muslim community in the future. If in philosophy he was an innovator, in his social theories Iqbal was a conservative reformer, which is not really as paradoxical as it sounds. "Believe me," he said, "Europe to-day is the greatest hindrance in the way of man's ethical advancement. The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of those ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which speaking from the inmost depths of life, internalises its own apparent externality."⁷⁵ This sentence is central to Iqbāl's position. He envisaged the ideal society toward which Islām is or should be moving and this, apart from his unquestioned status as a poet, may be the most valuable aspect of his achievement. He saw that the class war had its basis in a false

⁷⁵ Ibid., 170.

attitude toward property which the Qur'ān proposed to abolish. The Qur'an's attitude is that *the whole earth is God's*⁷⁶ which means that the relation of the individual to his property is not ownership but trusteeship ; in other words, the world is held in trust by man for God. Further, Islamic society is unlike other societies in that it is God-given, established by divine charter in the Qur'an. Islam is not a religion in the sense in which Christianity and Buddhism are religions : these are extended metaphysical essays ; they purport to explain why things are not otherwise than thus. Islam, on the other hand, is a social system related to a metaphysical background which in turn confers dignity and transcendental validity on that system. For the Muslim religion seeks always to fuse the secular and spiritual into a new reality which is superior to either of original components taken separately. In this connection Iqbāl says, "In Islam it is the same reality which appears as the Church looked at from one point of view and the State from another. It is not true to say that the church and the state are two sides or facets of the same thing. Islam is a single unanalysable reality which is one or the other as your point of view varies."⁷⁷

It is not to be wondered at therefore that to Iqbal the names of certain modern seculariits in Islam were anathema as a glance at several bitter little epigrams in Urdu will show. Our modern

⁷⁶ Verily the earth is God's. He gives it as an inheritance to whom He will.

And the sequel is for those who keep their duty to Him" (VII. 128).

⁷⁷ Op. cit., 146.

secularists unable to refute his arguments prefer to pass them over in silence as they do with those of Napoleon who also found little to say in favour of laicism.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ "No society can exist without morality ; there is no good morality without religion. It is religion alone, therefore, that gives to the State a firm and durable support." From an address delivered in Milan, June 1800.

Not only does Iqbāl attack policies of westernisation but on the West itself he pours the vials of his scorn. Four trenchant lines describe what France referred to as her civilising mission in Syria:

فرنگیوں کو عطا کیا خاک سوریا نے کیا

نبی عفت و غم خواری و کم آزاری

صلہ فرنگ سے آیا ہے سوریا کے لیے

مے و قمار و ہجوم زنان بازاری

(ضرب کلیم)

This land of Syria gave the West a Prophet

Of purity and piety and innocence ;

And Syria from the West as recompense

Gets dice and drink and troops of prostitutes.

Another poem, *Syria and Palestine*, enlarges the same theme :

ہے خاک فلسطین پیہ یہودی کا اگر حق

ہسپانیہ پر حق نہیں کیوں اہل عرب کا؟

(ضرب کلیم، ۱۵۹)

If the Jew claims the soil of Palestine

Why not the Arab Spain?

He was anxious to score Islam against all forms of culture distortion, and if he did not spare the West neither did he neglect disruptive forces within Islam or the apathy which is perhaps more dangerous than either. The militant feminism of the West met with his distrust and he exhorted Muslim women to take the Prophet's daughter Fātima as their model and to copy her chastity, meekness and obedience.

In fact this notion of obedience, of submission, is central to Islam and to Iqbāl's understanding of it. — in the words of the Qur'ān, "I have surrendered up my face to Allah, likewise he who follows me" (III. 20). "My face" means "my purpose", the direction in which I look. The -verb used here, *aslama* (to surrender). gives as its active participle *muslim* which therefore means "one who has surrendered", surrendered, that is, his individual purpose to the will of God as revealed in the Qur'ān.⁷⁹ The Law embodies Allāh's will and signifies the integration of the community who have made this act of surrender. In *Rumūḡ-i-Bekhūdī* (p. 139) Iqbal says:

ملته را رفت چون آئین ز دست

⁷⁹ The verbal noun or *masdar* of a verb in the fourth measure contains the idea of the end of a process; and the end of a process of submission is unconditional surrender, which is the precise meaning of the word "Islam".

مثل خاک اجزائے او از ہم شکست

When a community forsakes its Law

Its parts are severed like the scattered dust.

In the Qur'ān the relation of the believer to God is beautifully described in terms of slavery. The recurrent phrase *wa Allāhu bashīrun bi'l-'ibād* (And God is Overseer of His slaves) emphasises this because enslavement to God means liberation from all other forms of bondage. But God, having accepted the individual's voluntary surrender, assumes the right to impose His own terms which are total obedience to His Law as contained in the Qur'ān. Thus in *Asrār-i-Khūdī* (p. 46) Iqbal, in a frankly didactic mood, exhorts:

باز ای آزاد ستور قدیم

زینت پاکن آن همان زنجیر سیم

شکون سنج سختی آئین مشو

از حدود مصطفیٰ بیرون مرد

O you who are emancipated from the old customs,

Adorn your feet once more with the same fine silver chains!

Complain not of the hardness of the Law

And transgress not the statutes of Muhammad!

Only a specialist can deliver a verdict on his Urdu and Persian poetry ; it seems however to be accepted now that in the genre of *nazm* his supremacy is as unchallenged as is that of Mirzā Ghālib in the *ghazal*, as far at least as the subcontinent is concerned. And though his philosophical system admits of more than one opinion its purpose does not. His orthodoxy in respect of Islāmic society and culture, his loyalty to Islam in distress whether in India or Palestine, his deep understanding of the Law and the singleness of his effort to create a modern Islāmic philosophy all combine to make him what he is generally admitted to be, the leading Muslim thinker of the present century. He dreamt of an Islamic resurrection, but unlike others he was not contest with dreaming. In the last analysis his is a gospel of action, a fresh *jihād*. The words he addressed to the Muslim woman in *Rumūz-i-Bekhūdī* (p. 180) have a wider application irrespective of gender:

فطرت تو جذبہ ہا دارد بلند

چشم ہوش از اسوۂ زہرا مہند

تا حسینے شاخ تو بار آورد

موسم پیشین بہ گلزار آورد

. . . be conscious still

And ever of your model Fātima,

So that your branch may bear a new Husain,

Our garden blossom with the Golden Age.

And if one asks how a garden so long sterile may be refertilised, the answer may be sought in a perfect little epigram which is Iqbāl in a nutshell:

ساحل افتاده گفت گرچه بسے زیستم

ہیچ نہ معلوم شد آہ کہ من چیستم

موج ز کود رفتہ خرامید و گفت

ہستم اگر میروم گر نروم نیستم

(پیام مشرق، ۱۵۰)

"Long years were mine," said the sea-shattered cliff,

"Yet never taught me what is this called I".

A headlong hurrying wave cried, "Only if

I move I live, for if I stop I die."