

IQBAL ON OBSERVATION OF NATURE AND GOD-KNOWLEDGE*

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Iqbal, in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, has consistently built up a case for God-Knowledge or, what he calls, "direct contact with the Ultimate Reality". He, however, takes care to distinguish his position from mysticism "which is supposed to be a life-denying, fact-avoiding attitude of mind directly opposed to the radically empirical outlook of our times."¹ Accordingly, he adopts a positive empirical approach instead. Anyhow, exactly in what sense is the experience of Nature relevant to the knowledge of God is a question which needs to be carefully explained and examined.

Iqbal, to begin with, rejects the celebrated cosmological and teleological arguments as a proof apparatus for the existence of God. The former, he holds, is self-contradictory. It reduces God to just an item in the long chain of causes which is arbitrarily elevated "to the dignity of an uncaused first cause,"² thus setting at naught the very principle of causation. The latter, on the other hand, "gives us a skilful external contriver working on a pre-existing dead and intractable material the elements of which are[*ex-hypothesi*], by their own nature, incapable of orderly structures and combinations. The argument gives us a contriver only and not a creator."³ Both these arguments agree in being "cosmological" in a broader sense of the term as they equally well start from the cosmos or the universe and lead up to God. And it is specifically due to this essential character that, in spite

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due to this essential character that, in spite of being fallacious on strictly logical grounds, they "embody a real movement of thought in its quest after the Absolute".⁴ Nature is, after all, relevant to the existence of God. The

¹ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 182.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Qur'ān, i.e. the word of God, gives certain verbal characterisations of Him. Nature, on the other hand, is the work of 'God. So between them there should be complete accord. The thesis of the essential harmony between the work of God and the word of God was propounded most forcefully by Sayyid Aḥmad Khān⁵ (1817-1898) and later by 'Allāmah Ināyat Allah Khan Mashriqī⁶ (1888-1953). Iqbal also had the conviction that the two are in mutual agreement and somehow support each other. That is very much the reason why in one of his Lectures⁷ he sought the confirmation of the descriptions of the Ultimate Reality as contained in the Qur'ān by a reference to the findings of natural, empirical sciences. In Islam the instrument of encounter with God has been technically known as prayer. And Iqbal rightly observes that the scientific observer of Nature too is involved in the act of prayer.⁸ "The knowledge of Nature," he says, "is the knowledge of God's behaviour. In our observation of Nature we are virtually seeking a kind of intimacy with the Absolute Ego."⁹ It is instructive to point out here that the Qur'ānic word āyah (pl. āyāt) has been used for a verse in the Scripture as well as for a phenomenon of Nature. This adequately shows the affinity between the Divine and the natural orders.

However, what is particularly wrong with the traditional Nature-based cosmological arguments is, for one thing, that they abstract particular single aspects of the natural happenings—causality or movement or harmony and order, and so forth—at the total exclusion of our experience as such. Talking of these arguments, H.J. Paton, for instance, writes: "They appeal . . . not to a rich and full and diversified experience but to its bare bones. The

inference, so to speak, is not from the living body of experience but only from its skeleton. Hence the cosmological argument is arid."¹⁰ Happily, the Qur'ān, while building up its metaphysics, does not abstract in this way. It accepts the whole of Nature that is revealed to sense-perception as a system of signs of the Ultimate Reality, which signs we are almost duty bound to

⁵ Cf. his favourite formula: "Islam is Nature and Nature is Islam." This is the title of one of his essays. See Maqālāt-i Sir-Sayyid, III, 16.

⁶ *Tadhkirah*, p. 84.

⁷ Iqbal, op. cit., Second Lecture: "*The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience*."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰ *The Modern Predicament*, pp. 193-94.

observe and peculate over. Those who are oblivious of the facts of experience here and now, it says, will remain blind to the beauties of the Ideal in the Hereafter.¹¹ The Qur'ān says:

"Surely, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth and in the alternation of night and day ; and in the ships which pass through the sea with what is useful to man and in the rain which God sends down from heaven, giving life to the earth after its death and in scattering over it all kinds of cattle ; and in the change of the winds and in the clouds that are made to do service between the heavens and the earth are signs (of God) for those who understand."¹²

Further:

"And it is He Who sends down rain from heaven, and We bring forth by it the buds of all the plants and from them we bring forth the green foliage and in the close growing grain and palm trees with sheaths of clustering dates and gardens of grapes and the olives and the pomegranates like and unlike. Look at the fruits when they ripen, Therein are signs for people who believe. "¹³

And so on.

The Qur'ān records a number of instances where Prophets themselves had a recourse to the observation of Nature while seeking to know God. When Prophet Moses expressed his wish to see God, he was directed to look towards the mountain,¹⁴ which is a natural object. Prophet Abraham, the "Upright Muslim" and the unitarian *par excellence*, found his way to God through a strong realisation, based on observation and experience, of the ephemeral character of the stars, the moon and the sun.¹⁵ Even when he had acquired a belief in God in this way he had to refer back to the world of experience in order to confirm his belief and be at peace with that belief.¹⁶

However, all these Qur'ānic references do not imply that even the

¹¹ The Qur'ān, xvii. 72.

¹² Ibid., ii. 164.

¹³ Ibid.i vi. 99.

¹⁴ Ibid., vii. 143.

¹⁵ Ibid., vi. 76-80.

¹⁶ Ibid., ii. 260.

diverse phenomena of Nature mentioned do in any way provide sufficient proofs for the existence of God. There can, strictly speaking, be no logical argument worth the name for the existence of God in which Nature, even in its organic wholeness, is accepted as the major premise. Nature is finite and temporal; God is infinite and eternal. Neither a deductive nor an inductive reasoning is in principle applicable here because in both these types of argument the premises and the conclusion must mutually have at least a continuity of reference and belong to the same universe of discourse. We may extend finitude to whatever degree we desire: it would never be transformed into infinity. Nor can any number of moments joined together give us a glimpse of eternity. Eternity is simply timelessness and infinity is the very negation of all finitudes and determinations. God is Wholly Other. There is nothing and no one like Him.

Now, how to bridge up the gulf between Nature and God so that we may have God-Knowledge the natural way, as envisaged by the Qur'ān? In other words, how is natural theology possible? Nature, we have already observed, is a system of signs or symbols pointing towards God. So, knowledge of God should be a matter of interpreting these signs and giving them a meaning rather than of arriving at a conclusion on the basis of certain premises. In order so perform this interpretative function, it is necessary but not sufficient that we observe well and find out in the spirit of naturalism as to how things happen. What we are required to have, in addition, is a cosmic vision, or, in the beautiful phrase of Iqbal, "the vital way of looking at the universe". This cosmic vision which is duly presided over by an I-Thou encounter with God comprises faith in the Unseen. The Qur'ān says:

"This Book, there is no doubt in it, is a guide to those who keep their duty, who believe in the Unseen. . . ." ¹⁷

By belief (or, more appropriately, faith) in the Unseen is meant faith in God, the angels, the Day of Judgment and other realities mentioned in the Qur'ān which are not open to ordinary observation. I-I-However, more generally, it implies an overall non-natural attitude of mind. For a naturalist or an empiricist, the world of experience is the only reality and a talk of anything beyond it is a nonsense, pure and simple. Hume, for instance, says:

¹⁷ Ibid., ii 2-3.

"If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school meta-physics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence? No. Commit it then to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion,"¹⁸

In modern times this position was taken up by Logical Positivists. With their principle of verifiability in hand, they rejected the validity of everything that was outside the purview of positive sciences. "The theist may believe," says Ayer, one of the pioneers of the Logical Positivist movement, "that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but unless he can formulate his knowledge in propositions that are empirically verifiable. we may be sure that he is deceiving himself."¹⁹ As opposed to this positivism, the kind of attitude that the Qur'ān requires from its readers is that they should have a firm conviction that there are realities beyond the physical world. This is what may be meant by faith in the Unseen. In the verse quoted above, "The Book" has, in fact, sometimes been interpreted to mean not the Qur'ān, but the "Book of Nature". In that case the verse would mean that only those observers of Nature are capable of going beyond the appearances that are directly encountered and having a vision of reality, who are convinced that reality does exist and that the world of sensible experience is not the end-all and the be-all of everything. It is truly at this level of his attitude towards God that a scientific observer of Nature can be identified with the religious seeker after the Ultimate Reality. It is at this level alone that he realises that the spatio-temporal world is not simply a three-dimensional world: it has a fourth dimension as well. "Every thing we experience in the course of our lives," says Herbert Butterfield, "is not only what it is; it can be psychologically a symbol of something more. It is this something more that is the fourth dimension."²⁰ The Qur'ān condemns the strictly matter-of-fact type of people. It is about them that it says that their hearts are sealed:

"Allah has sealed their hearts and their hearing and there is covering on their eyes. "²¹

¹⁸ Quoted by C.A. Qadir, Logical Positivism, p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁰ Quoted by G.S. Spinks, Psychology and Religion, p. 187.

²¹ The Qur'ān, ii. 7.

"They have hearts with which they understand not, and they have eyes with which they see not and they have ears with which they hear not ; . . . nay, they are more astray. "²²

The phrase roughly corresponding to the "sealing of the heart" is "expanding of the breast":

"Whomsoever Allah intends to guide, He expands his breast for Islam."²³

This "expansion of the breast" helps the individual to develop in himself a profound vision and understanding. He begins understanding the true, esoteric meaning of the word as well as the work of God and is thus transported from finite Nature to God, the Infinite. Iqbal has this level of experience in mind when he says that the observation of Nature sharpens our inner perception so that we can have a deeper vision of it (i.e. Nature).²⁴ Once we have that vision, our normal perception, our reason and understanding are in turn thoroughly metamorphosed against new perspectives. "Positive views of ultimate things," Iqbal rightly observes, "are the work rather of Inspiration than Metaphysics."²⁵ Elsewhere, indicating the inadequacy of natural-cum-rational approach to God, he quotes with approval the saying of Ibn 'Arabi that God is a percept as differentiated from the world which is a concept.²⁶

Observation of Nature as the basis for God-Knowledge has been emphasised by the Qur'ān, as shown above, due to the simple fact that Nature furnishes pointers to God and suggests the right direction in which a search for Him can be fruitfully under-taken. It is thus only an evocative technique and simply furnishes the occasion to have a knowledge of God Who thus, in spite of its relevance to Him, retains His singularity and autonomy. This can be made clear with the help of an illustration given by I.T. Ramsey in his *Religious Language*.²⁷ Suppose, he says, I have to bring home the existence of a circle to a person who has a peculiarly developed geometry

²² Ibid., vii. 179.

²³ Ibid., vi. 125.

²⁴ Iqbal, op. cit., p. 91.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 183.

²⁷ *Religious Language- An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases*, p. 69.

which is completely without curves. I will ask the person to draw a regular polygon with a certain number of sides. Then I shall ask him to make more polygons each time adding one side more to the last figure already drawn. If the process goes on, there generally comes sooner or later a point of disclosure. The man realises with a flash of insight that his activity of drawing polygons with more and more of sides is leading to an absolutely new kind of figure—the circle—which these figures are approaching more and more nearly but which he will never reach. The circle is then, according to Ramsey, the "infinite polygon". The word "infinite" is significant here. It implies that we may add as many sides as we like to our polygons, but still the difference between the circle and the polygon nearest to it will be as wide as between the infinite and the finite. Yet, the circle is definitely relevant to the growing polygons and presides over the whole series. On the same analogy, Nature is relevant to the existence of God, but still it cannot be equal to Him, nor can it furnish a sufficient proof for His existence.

The entire above account speaks eloquently for a need to under-go a process of self-culture on which the Muslim mystics in particular have invariably laid special emphasis. Iqbal, also, speaks of ego's gradual growth in self-possession, in uniqueness and intensity of his activity as an ego. "The climax of this development," he says, "is reached when the ego is able to retain full self-possession, even in the case of a direct contact with the all-embracing Ego."²⁸ So, it is only a full-grown, well-integrated ego who can afford to have personal knowledge—knowledge by acquaintance, roughly speaking—of the Divine Being. From the very beginning, the seeker of God must learn to discipline his attitudes and be most sincere in his efforts for the realisation of the ideal. Daily canonical prayers are generally begun with the declaration: "I have turned my face towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth and I am not one of the polytheists." So also the observer of Nature should always have in mind the attainment of the Ultimate Truth as the grand objective of his experimentations and should never divert his attention elsewhere, however strong the temptation. There is no holiday in the spiritual life of man.

God-Knowledge, which is pursued with such absorption and single-mindedness and with the discovery of the true I-amness in the background,

²⁸ Iqbal, op.cit., p.118.

is, of course, not knowledge in the discursive or analytical sense of the term. It is not the sort of knowledge in whose case it would be possible to make a watertight distinction between the knower and the known and also we could understandably talk about the known object in normal everyday language. It is rather of the nature of what the sufis call *ma'rifah* or gnosis where the gnostic develops a kind of unicity with God and, not very infrequently, comes out with the spontaneous eruptions like "I am the creative truth" or "I am holy; how great is my majesty" and so on. The distinction between discursive knowledge and gnosis can be well brought out by referring to a corresponding distinction made by Bergson between a man's knowledge of a city which he gathers from the hundreds and thousands of photo-graphs of that city taken from all possible angles and viewpoints and another man's knowledge who lives in that city and roams about its streets.

Anyway the unicity of the human ego with the Divine Ego and the spontaneous ejaculations of certain mystics in that regard can very easily be interpreted in terms of pantheism. Iqbal scrupulously guards against this interpretation. The finite ego, he holds, must remain distinct though not isolated from the Supreme Ego.²⁹ . . . unitive experience is not the finite ego effacing its own identity by some sort of absorption into the Infinite Ego ; it is rather the Infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite."³⁰ Talking specifically of the well-known words of Ḥallāj ("I am the creative truth"), Iqbal says: "The true interpretation of his experience . . . is not the drop slipping into the sea, but the realization and bold affirmation in an undying phrase of the reality and permanence of the human ego in a profounder personality."³¹

References

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Five offprints of articles published in Iqbal Review are supplied to their authors free. If more offprints are needed, the number needed may please be written prominently in red on the first page of the article. These will be

²⁹ Ibid,

³⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

³¹ Ibid., p. 96.

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