

# WAS IQBAL A PANTHEIST?

Nazir Qaiser

## What is Pantheism

Pantheism (Pan-, 'all', & theos, 'God', & ism), is the doctrine according to which "God is everything and everything is God". It is termed as Hama Ust in Persian literature. Wandat-ul-Wujud, in sufism, carries the same meaning. Wahdat-ul-Wujud or Unity-ism also identifies man, universe and God. Man dissolves his ego or existence in the essence of God. He is just a drop of water which slips into the ocean and loses its individuality. Shaikh Mohi-ud-Din Ibn-ul-Arabi clearly says in 'Fasus' "Being is One and the being of creation is nothing but the being of Creator". Ibn-i-Arabi is the leading upholder of this concept.<sup>34</sup> Thus Pantheism, Hama Ust and Wahdat-ul-Wujud are synonymous. Dr. Khalifa Abdul Hakim rightly says that Pantheism "maintains that all things are God or 'All' is God, which is exactly how Persian terminology describes it—Hama Ust, All is He. The Arabic expression for it (Wahdat-ul-Wujud, "The Unity of Being") is tinged with metaphysics and is a philosophical way of putting the same simple idea".<sup>35</sup> This concept of Wandat-al-Wujud is understood still in a better way, if read along with the opposing philosophy of Wahdat-al-Shahood, which means everything is not God but from God.

## Iqbal was not Pantheism

---

<sup>34</sup> Tarikh-i-Tasawwuf-e-Islam, p. 307.

<sup>35</sup> The Metaphysics of Rumi, p. 139.

Iqbal was not a pantheist. His view of human self, his concept of fana, God's relationship to man and universe, his dynamic philosophy, and his writings against pantheism—all stand testimony to his anti-pantheistic position.

(1) Human Self: Iqbal believes in the reality of the human self. To him, the self is a fact. Iqbal says:

اگر گوئی کہ من وہم و  
گمان است  
نمودش چوں و نمود این  
و آن است  
بگو بامن کہ دارائے  
کیست؟  
یکے در خود نگرآن بے  
نشان کیست؟<sup>36</sup>

“If you say that ‘I’ is a mere imagination.

And its appearance is mere ‘appearance’;

Then tell me, who is it that entertains these imagination  
Then tell me,  
who is it that entertains these doubts

Just look within and think what this ‘appearance’ is.”

---

<sup>36</sup> Gulshan-i-Raz-i-Jadid, p. 1701562.

To him, the self or the ego as a fact becomes more visible when “we appreciate the ego itself in the act of perceiving, judging, and willing.”<sup>37</sup> And “The main purpose of the Quran is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe”.<sup>38</sup> Dr. R.A Nicholson rightly argues that the capacity for action which is vehemently advocated by Iqbal’ depends ultimately on the conviction that Khudi (selfhood, individuality, personality) is real and is not merely an illusion of the mind”.<sup>39</sup>

Again, Iqbal regards the self as actuality, which when developed, brings revolutionary changes and attains tremendous power. Man has not only to develop his own ego by adopting different measures but also to shape the destiny of the universe by establishing the kingdom of God on earth.

One of the most important characteristics of the self is its uniqueness, i.e. the personal individuality of man. Iqbal refers to ‘Rabbi’ (My Lord), used in the Quran as personal pronoun, To Iqbal it means to suggest the individuality and specificness of the soul.<sup>40</sup> While explaining this view Iqbal writes to Dr. R.A. Nicholson, “The moral and religious ideal of man is not self negation but self-affirmation, and he attains to this ideal by becoming more and more individual, more and more unique.”<sup>41</sup>

If man’s self is a fact and he possesses his own uniqueness and individuality according to Iqbal, then how it can be reconciled with pantheism which negates these -characteristics of the self?

(2) Concept of ‘fans’ Iqbal’s philosophy of Fana removes all doubts regarding his position as a non-pantheism. To Iqbal, ego is not to be

---

<sup>37</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp, 8, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Iqbal’, *Asrar-i-Khudi*, (Trn) p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 103,

<sup>41</sup> The Secrets of the Self, (Trans) by Nicholson, p. xviii.

dissolved. It is to be fortified. “In higher sufism of Islam unitive experience is not the finite -ego effecting 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.”<sup>42</sup> Thus to Iqbal the ego is no soluble when fully developed. It is not a drop of water which slips into the ocean and gets lost. He says:

به بحر ش گم شدن انجام ما نیست  
اگر او را تو در گیری فنا نیست  
خودی اندر خودی گنجد محال است  
خودی را عین خود بودن کمال است<sup>43</sup>

“It is not the goal of our journey to merge ourselves in His ocean. If you catch hold of Him, it is not fana (extinction)

It is impossible for an ego to be absorbed in another ego. For the ego to be itself is its perfection.”

He further says;

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.”<sup>44</sup>

To Iqbal the test of self-realization and the development of ego is the retention of individuality. “And the climax of this development 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”.<sup>45</sup> Iqbal here gives the example of the

---

<sup>42</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> Gulshan-i-Raz-i-Jadid, p. 159/551.

<sup>44</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 198.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p, 118.

Holy Prophet's ascension (mi'raj) when he viewed the very essence of God and his own self was retained.<sup>46</sup> Again, in the Javid Nama he says:

‘That man alone is real who dares

Dares to see God face to face

No one can stand unshaken in His presence; and he who can, verily, he is pure god.’

To Iqbal, fana means the annihilation of those experiences which bar the revealing of the real self’. He said in 1936. When ‘the Divine orders have penetrated the Ego so much that private tendencies and inclinations are no more left, and only Divine satisfaction is its goal, then, some great men of the Sufis of Islam have called this state of life fana...’<sup>47</sup> Dr. A. Schimmel explains it thus: “Essentially it is the annihilation of human qualities and their substitution by more sublimated even Divine qualities, according to the prophetic tradition ‘Create in your-selves the attributes of God.’”

Iqbal belongs to that group of Sufis who interpreted the conception of fana metaphorically. Ali Hujwiri (known as Data Gunj Baksh), Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, and Mujaddid Alf Sani among many others, are the glaring examples of this group. To Hujwari, in the words of Khalifa Abdul Hakim, fana is the “moral transformation caused by the substitution of the lower by the higher self.”<sup>48</sup> It is to live in the attributes of the beloved. Rumi gives a subtle and beautiful example of iron and fire in connection with the relationship of God to man. The iron when put in fire, assumes the colour of the latter, but still it is not fire, it is different. Though looks like fire, it possesses its own individuality.<sup>49</sup> This means that man possesses-his own individuality and is not dissolved in the essence of God. Mujaddid's views are well known. “The

---

<sup>46</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 198.

<sup>47</sup> Gabriel's Wing, pp. 366-7.

<sup>48</sup> The Metaphysics of Rumi, p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> Matheawi, ii, 1348.55.

relation between man and God is according to the Mujaddid that of ‘Abd and Ma’bud or the worshipper and the worshipped. ‘Abdiyyat or servitude means that man should change his whole life according to the divine will and should obey His commandments of commission and commission simply because they are his commands.’<sup>50</sup>

Iqbal’s views are diametrically different from Hindu mystic-ism according to which fana is the goal of man’s life and that is Nirvana according to which man, by dissolving himself, gets salvation. “Hindu outlook is that of an all-inclusive world-soul, a pantheistic substance or supreme being which is the sum of all that exists. Such a monotheistic conception implies that the ideal of life is found through unity of one’s self with this one ultimate reality and the consequent transcendence of all finite existence, including karma and transmigration.”<sup>51</sup>

(3) God’s Relationship: God’s relationship to man is both of immanence and transcendence though He is neither immanent nor transcendent in the absolute sense. Iqbal has beautifully discussed the transcendence and immanence of God in Gulshan-i-Raz-i-Jadid. Iqbal answers to a question:

خودی را زندگی ایجاد غیر است  
فراق عارف و معروف خیر است

از و خود را بریدن فطرت ماست  
تپیدن نا رسیدن فطرت ماست

---

<sup>50</sup> Dr. Burhan Ahmad Faruqi. The Mujaddid’s Conception of Tauhid p. 93.

<sup>51</sup> Harold H. Tetus, Ethics for Today, pp. 506-7.

نہ او بیے ماء، نہ ما بیے او، چہ حال  
است

فراق ما فراق اندر وصال است<sup>52</sup>

“The life of the ego is to bring non-ego into existence, The separation of the knower and known is good.

To sever ourselves from Him is our nature,

And also to be restless and not to reach the goal.

‘Neither He without us, nor we without Him’. How strange; our separation is separation-in-union.”

Again, in *Asrar-i-Khudi*, he says:

اے چوں جاں اندر وجود عالمی  
جان ما باشی و از ما می رمی<sup>53</sup>

“O Thou that art as the soul in the body of the universe, Thou art our soul, and thou art ever fleeing from us.”

To elaborate, Iqbal believes that God is Immanent, in the sense that He himself is the ideal of human ego and is present in it as a possibility. He is Immanent because man and the universe are not ‘other to Him’. “He is Creator from within”. God is transcendent also because man develops his self by assimilating the attributes of God. Iqbal refers to the saying of the Prophet: ‘Takhallaqu-bi-Akhlaq qillah?’—‘create in yourself the attributes of

---

<sup>52</sup> *Gulshan-i-Raz-i-Jadid*, p. 157/549.

<sup>53</sup> *Asrar-i-Khudi*, p. 75/75.

God'. The question of assimilation would not have arisen if God were not transcendent and man's self were not separate from the essence of God.

But still he is neither immanent nor transcendent in the absolute sense of the word. God is not totally transcendent, according to Iqbal, because it will mean that God is sitting at some throne in the Heavens far away from man. Iqbal ironically tells the believers of such God;

بٹھا کے عرش پہ رکھا ہے تو  
نے او واعظ  
خدا وہ کیا ہے جو بندوں سے  
احتراز کرے<sup>54</sup>

O pious man; you have made God sit on 'Arsh' but what is that God who shuns the company of men.

He is not immanent as believed by the traditional pantheism. Iqbal does not believe that man becomes God at any stage, Rather man retains his personality even in the presence of God. As regards God's relationship to the universe, to Iqbal the not-self does not present itself as a confronting 'other' to God: the universe is character to the ultimate ego. He says, "nature, as we have seen is not a mass of pure materiality occupying a void. It is structure of events, a systematic mode of behaviour, and as such organic to the ultimate Self. Nature is to the Divine Self as character is to the human self. In the picture squee phrase of the Quran it is the habit of Allah."<sup>55</sup>

To Iqbal "nature or not-self is only a fleeting moment in the life of God." (Ibid) It reminds us of the Prophet's saying, 'the world is but a

---

<sup>54</sup> Bang-i-Dara, p. 106/106.

<sup>55</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 56.



moment” which means ‘a flash of Divine illumination (tajalli) revealing the one as the many and the many as the one’<sup>56</sup>

This view of Iqbal far from the pantheistic view of Upanisads, according to which God and universe are not two separate entities and God “who pervades and controls the whole universe, is the whole universe.”<sup>57</sup> Further, it is opposed to Samakara’s view according to whom “Brahman has no genus, possesses no qualities does not act, and is related to nothing else.”<sup>58</sup>

This relationship of God to man and to the universe clearly reveals that according to Iqbal, God, man, and universe are not identical.

(4) Iqbal’s dynamic philosophy: In the context of Iqbal’s whole philosophy, one cannot consider him a pantheist. To Iqbal self is not a datum. It is not given in complete form. Its capacities are to be developed harmoniously into a full grown personality with a definite purpose. And it is the result of this development that it earns freedom and immortality, the great assets of human life. Iqbal’s philosophy is dynamic. Action is his pivotal point. He clearly maintains “In great action alone the self of man becomes united with God without any loss of his own identity, and transcends the limits of space and time. Action is the highest form of contemplation.”<sup>59</sup>

(5) Iqbal’s own criticism: Wahdat-al-Wujud is a philosophical concept, and this is precisely the place where Iqbal says, “My spirit revolts against it.”<sup>60</sup> Further, he says, “Indeed the sufis committed a great mistake in understanding Tauheed and Wandat-ul-Wujud. These terms are not synonymous. The former is purely religious and latter philosophical.”<sup>61</sup> Besides these remarks, there are many writings, passages and verses which

---

<sup>56</sup> Dr. Nicholson’s Commentary on Rumi’s Mathuawi, i, ii, p. 92.

<sup>57</sup> R. C. Zaehrer, *Mysticism*, pp. 135 - 36.

<sup>58</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 535.

<sup>59</sup> *Self in the Light of Relativity*, p. 401.

<sup>60</sup> *Iqbal Name*, part I, p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> *Marha-i-Asrar-i-Khudi*, *Majallah Iqbal*, Oct. 53).

establish Iqbal's anti-pantheistic position. Above all, his whole book, *Asrar-i-Khudi*, was especially written against pantheism. Dr. Schimmel rightly says, "The *Asrar* had been written as a protest of \*Arabi' Islam as a challenge against the Monism which permeates Persian poetry".<sup>62</sup>

#### Accusation Refuted:

Some critics quote Iqbal's verses which prove him as a pantheist. But they deplorably ignore the chronological development of Iqbal's thought. The fact is that while he was in England from 1905 to 1908 he was a pantheistic mystic. But afterwards he changed his position. The letter which his teacher, Dr. McTaggart, wrote to him proves him to be anti-pantheistic. Dr. McTaggart wrote to Iqbal after seeing his changed position

"Have you not changed your position very much? Surely in the days when we used to talk philosophy together you were much more a pantheist and mystic."<sup>63</sup> To my mind this change in Iqbal was due to the influence of Rumi, whose *Mathnawi* he read thoroughly after 1908. It is why his respect and tribute to Rumi are paid in his books written after 1908.

Again, some casual observers hold that Iqbal reverted to Pantheism from 1926 till his death. But this too is not a fact. It is clear from his writings appearing after 1926 e.g. in *Zabur-i-Ajam* (1927) Iqbal said: "it is not the goal of our journey to merge ourselves in His ocean. If you catch hold of Him it is not *fana* (extinction). It is impossible for an ego to be absorbed in another ego. For the ego to be itself is its perfection. In his Lectures, delivered in December, 1928 Iqbal clearly repudiated the concept of Pantheism. He asserted "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."

---

<sup>62</sup> *The Reconstruction*, p. 198. (Iqbal's own trans)

<sup>63</sup> Prof. M.M. Sharif, *About Iqbal and His Thought*, p. 13.

That man does not become God at any stage and can retain his personality even in the presence of God, is enunciated by Iqbal in Javid Alma (1932) thus:

“That man alone is real who dares—Dares to see God face to face

No one can stand unshaken in His presence and he who can, verily, he is pure gold”.<sup>64</sup>

To believe in such reversions is to negate his philosophy of the self with all its implications to distort his real thought and diminish his position as a dynamic thinker.

Further, some hold that Iqbal’s theory of time proves Iqbal as a Wujudi. Undoubtedly Iqbal identified ‘Dahr’ with God. But as the quotation says, time (serial) and space (universe) are “reflections of Dahr” Then how is the reflection of God Himself? To Iqbal “universe is a reality to be reckoned with”<sup>65</sup>

Whereas to Wandat-ul-Wujud the universe is identical with God.

To conclude, a casual study of some of the verses of Iqbal may give the impression that he was a pantheist; but this impression is dispelled after one studies his total system of thought which includes his views on man, God, and the Universe.

---

<sup>64</sup> Jabriel’s Wing, pp. 339—40.

<sup>65</sup> The Reconstruction, p. 10.