

IQBAL'S GOD AND GITA'S LORD

PURUSOTTOMA BILIMORIA

Preamble: In this paper I attempt to make some comparisons between Iqbal's conception of the Ultimate, with reference to some idealist notions he was introduced to, and a conception that appears in the celebrated Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavadgita (Gita)*.

I show that in both conceptions there is tension between the immutable-absolute and the dynamic-personal, and that Iqbal and the Gitā resolve this in somewhat similar ways. Why I chose to compare Iqbal with the Gitā is because Iqbal said he had been “inspired” by the Gitā.

As though Muhammad Iqbal had borrowed the pan-idealist symbolism of the self (and not-self), he believed that the ultimate is best described in terms of the Ego (Khudī) which he used interchangeably with self. The supreme is conceived as the ultimate ego. The term “ego” is appropriate, he believed, because it refers to a centre of experience and all experience must have a centre if it is to be distinguished as experience.¹⁰⁹ The individual ego is distinguished from ultimate ego as the centre that marks the focus of experience at the cosmic level and is given the proper name Allah in the Qur'an. But “Allah as a distinct individual or person is conceived in terms of “pure duration” and it is in terms of pure duration that we can conceive of “thought, life and purpose”, and hence, to exist in pure duration gives us ultimate organic unity which can be called a self.”¹¹⁰

This dense ontology needs unpacking. Let us look at it another way. Personal identity is best explained in terms of “I am”. “I am” or ego as the centralizing focus of experience that is self-referentially identifiable *qua experience*.¹¹¹ All self is distinguished from not-self by virtue of this capacity for self-referentiality, but the Ultimate ego exists in pure duration with not-

¹⁰⁹ *Asrar-i-Khudi* See his Preface to: (1915) tr. Nicholson, R.A., *Secrets of the Self*, London, MacMillan, 1920; and especially, *Bang-e-dara (Song of the Craven-bell) Kullayati-i-Iqbāl* (Urdu) Lahore, 1963. P. 289, and *Iqbāl Namah, part 1, Lahore, 1945*. George Nordgulen, "Theistic Ontology in Radhakrishnan and Iqbāl", *Iqbāl Review*, journal of the Iqbāl Academy, Lahore, Oct. 1984 pp. 51-65, p. 54 See next few notes.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Iqbāl, *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Delhi, Kitab Publishing House, 1974. p. 56 (Hereafter Recons).

self in organic unity. Iqbal gives a phenomenological with not-self in organic unity. Iqbal gives a phenomenological elaboration: "To exist in pure duration is to be a self, and to be a self is to be able to say" "I am". Only that truly exists which can say "I am". It is the degree of the intuition of "I-amness" that determines the place of a thing in a scale of being."¹¹² The "I-amness" of the individual marks the limits of the particular experiences.

In the cosmic vastness there is the ultimate ego or self which is the centre of all experience since it is the ground for the possibility of any experience; this transcendent Self also expresses itself as "I am"; therein lies its personal identity. There is a fundamental distinction to be made between our inner sense of the ego and that of God's: "We too say" I am". But our I-amness is dependent and arises out of the -distinction between self and not-self. The individual self, though possessed also of volition, is limited in its freedom and is dependent on the world, while the ultimate self, in the words of the Qur'an "can afford to dispense with all the worlds".¹¹³ And unlike the individuated ego, the ultimate ego never changes into something else, and this accounts for the permanency and stability (*thubut or thabat*) of the universe. Allah is therefore best characterized as the cosmic personality, its source and sustainer and this is not an anthropocentric conception either.¹¹⁴

Nor for that matter is this a pantheistic outlook, because we cannot say that there is a straightforward identification of God and the world, or that God is the world, or alternatively that God as absolute alone is with the world merely as his mirrored illusion. Consequently, Iqbal resolves that Allah has both a permanent and a *relative* or dynamic nature. As permanent Allah is the ultimate ego; as *relative* Allah is the evolving and changing nature *qua* God's presence as the organic unity of the whole in pure duration, Reminiscent of Rumi's evolutionary spiral, and not unlike Alexander's conception of 'Emergent Evolution'. This is essentially a finite conception of deity because durational change is admitted in the absolute; if God is infinite, should we not look separately at the transcendent, the absolute beyond all change? To be sure, however, for Iqbal there is no *absolute* that goes over the ultimate ego: The absolute is the ultimate ego integrated through Personality and inclusive of the universe; thus there is no separation, of the absolute

¹¹² *Ibid* p. 56

¹¹³ *Ibid*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 59: Quotes Nâsr All Sirhindi: 'Thou hast made me after thine own image! After all what hast thou seen beyond thyself!'

from the personal God. The ultimate is *transcendence-cum-immanence* in such a way that the world or rather the creative order of nature is within God's being. Yet it is not quite clear whether the identity of the world and God established through His presence is one of essentiality or of substantiality. It seems he might mean both.

In any case, it is strictly a *panentheistic* view. As Wahid puts it: "By regarding the Universe as the ego, Iqbal parts company with the pantheists; and the fact that he holds the Ultimate Ego to be a personality with the attributes of creativeness, omniscience and eternity make him a theists. But Iqbal's God comprehends the whole universe and in Him alone the finite egos find their being...in short God is personalistic, theistic and pluralistic"¹¹⁵.

There are analogues to this in the notion of the essential inseparability of *paramâtman* and the world as *Isvara's sarira* in the Hindu-Vedanta philosopher, Ramanuja¹¹⁶, but more significantly in Hegel's doctrine of the dialectical evolution of the Spirit. One can trace a fair deal of Hegelian influence on Iqbal, as well as the Hegelian impact on Whiteheadian 'process philosophy' which has its religious Counterpart in 'process theology' (more recently popularised by Charles Harthshorne in the West and Keiji Nishitani in the East (Japan)). Whitehead portrayed God as having a "primordial" and a "consequent" nature, that is, He is integral to the universe and vice versa; *He* develops, to some extent at least, in the development of the universe. *He* might be said to be transcendently immanent in it.¹¹⁷

Iqbal claims his source to be orthodox and refers to a verse in the Qur'an: "And it is He Who hath ordained the night and day to succeed one

¹¹⁵ Syed Abdul Wahid, *Iqbal His Art and Thought*, London, John Murray, 1953, p. 55. Iqbal confirms this further: 'The universe does not confront God as an 'other' existing per se... From the standpoint of all-inclusive Ego there is no 'other'. In him thought and deed, the act of knowing and the act of creating, are identical. (p. 77).

¹¹⁶ See Klaus Klostermaier *Body of God*, colloquium, Charles Strong Memorial Trust Lecture, Queensland, 1983. J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Ramanuja on the Bhagavadgita; Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass*, 1974. Cf. J.J. Lipner 'The World as God's Body: In Pursuit of Dialogue with Ramanuja', *Religious Studies*, 20,5,Nov. 1984 p. 145-161.

¹¹⁷Winston King, Foreword to Keiji Nishitani, Religion and *Nothingness* Berkeley, Uni. of California, 1983, pxxi. Also, A.N. whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Cambridge; and his, *The Concept of Nature*, Cambridge, 1971. Cf. Hegel *The Phenomenology of Mind* in W. Kauffman Hegel London, 1966. Whitehead is invoked in Iqbal, Recons. P. 34

another for those who desire to think on God or desire to be thankful”.¹¹⁸ From this Iqbal argues for the notion of ultimate reality as pure duration “in which thought, life, and purpose interpenetrate to form an organic unity.” (*Ibid*) This is anything but the ‘Unity of Being’ doctrine that the Sufis since Ibn-al Arabi had made popular. The Sufis considered the world of phenomena to be as waves of an ocean that emerged from the Infinite Being only to sink back into God, thereby erasing the distinction between being and non-being, time and timelessness. Far from a pure Oneness of Being, with its implications of illusionariness of the world in time, this unity in Iqbal is conceived as a “Unity of a self - an all-embracing self the ultimate source of all individual life and thought”.¹¹⁹ The “Unity of Appearance” that Sirhindi upheld in re-interpreting al-Hallaj’s controversial and unorthodox proclamation of *aria al-haqq*¹²⁰, (“I am Truth/God”) is here integrated with the “Unity of Being”, (*wandat al-wujud, al-tawhid*) to form as it were two sides of the self-same concrete reality, thereby giving ontic status to the ‘Unity of Appearance’. Iqbal takes over from Bergson the distinction between (finite) time and pure duration, which helps to refute the absoluteness of- time and space postulated by Ash’ari (d. 953). But Iqbal criticizes Bergson for conceiving pure duration as prior to self, to which self is predicated (i.e. a priori condition for the ground of existence); Iqbal locates the self in a pure space-time continuum but not separate from it. This may be comparable to Spinoza’s notion of Extension as one of the two attributes of God that makes causality a real possibility (*Ethica 11 passim*). Unlike Bergson, Iqbal would argue that: “It is the appreciative act of an enduring self only which can seize the multiplicity of duration - broken up into an infinity of constants-and transforms it to the organic wholeness of a synthesis”.¹²¹

Thus, unlike McTaggart’s time, which is essentially unreal, Time for Iqbal is ‘an element of the ultimate reality’ itself, and it is the *a priori* condition for the unity of the organic whole as it is for the unity of apperception of the ultimate ego. Iqbal looks to Einstein, and Haldane amongst others to evolve this view: “Time conceived as Pure duration ‘is a

¹¹⁸ Qur’ân 25.26: *Recons.* p. 55, P. 73

¹¹⁹ *Recons.* p. 56

¹²⁰ Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the eyes of Posterity*, Montreal/London. McGill University Press, 1971. See chapter 3 ('The Self-Image of Ahmad Sirhindi') p. 23 ff.

¹²¹ *Recons.* P. 57

kind of device by which Reality exposes as ceaseless creative activity to quantitative measurement.¹²² This reveals, to Iqbal, as M.S. Rascid acutely observes, the meaning of the Qur'anic verse, "And of Him is the change of the night and of the day" (Qur'an 15:161).¹²³ Indeed Krsna also speaks of the 'Night and Day of Brahman' (BG VIII 17-19). Rascid has criticized Iqbal for reading pure duration as coextensive with self, and argues that Iqbal is operating here with a limited and to some extent mistaken notion of time—this is a problem indeed. But Rascid's criticism rests basically on his observation that (a.) Iqbal has taken Bergson further than Bergson would go, and (b) the verse that Iqbal invokes from the Qur'an to support the view does not really lend itself to such a metaphysical interpretation¹²⁴. Rascid may be right; but what to me is significant is the affinity there is between this view and some things said in -the *Gitā* as Krsna attempts to convey a sense of *his* ontic magnitude to an inquisitive Arjuna.

The Bhagavad Gita

The divine Personhood in a non-absolutists sense is a notion that is also asserted in the *Gitā*. Arjuna suggests to Krsna that He is- the supreme *Brahman*, the supreme abode, the divine and eternal Person, the primordial god, unborn and "yet", observes Arjuna, "You permeate the world by your divine ubiquities."¹²⁵ Thus Krsna can say that "All the world is strung on me in the form of the Unmanifest (*avyakta*); all creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them". That is, god is immanent in nature by inclusiveness (BG XIII. 27) and, paradoxically, "the creatures do not exist in me... while sustaining the creation and giving them being, my self does not exist in them" (BG IX.4-6) That is, God transcends nature by exclusiveness: this imperishable is transcendent because of its beginningless and its being beyond the *gunas*. (qualities) (BGXIII.31). Iqbal's world of created nature, as we saw, is not so different: "What we call Nature or not-self is only a fleeting moment in the

¹²² *Ibid* p.

¹²³ 58M.S. Rascid, *Iqbal's Concept of God*, London/Boston, Kegan Paul Int. Books, 1981. Rascid, *Ibid*

¹²⁴ Rascid, *Ibid*

¹²⁵ Before we even get to the *Gitā*, there is an interesting treatment of time in Patanjali's *Yogasutras*, which as we know is based on Samkhya ontology, and there might be some reason to suggest that *Gitā* assumes the Samkhya position in question. See Klaus K. Klostermaier, 'Time in Patanjali', *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2 april 1984, pp. 205-210.

life of God. His “I-amness” is independent, elemental, absolute”. It is doubtful, though that by ‘absolute’ Iqbal would have us understand that God is an absolute being, impersonal and of single unity or Oneness, for, as we remarked, the duration of being allows the possibility of an organic growth of nature inseparable from the ultimate self. “Nature... is a 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,”¹²⁶ or in Gitā’s less personalised metaphor: Self is the hub of the wheel of samsāra set in endless motion. Iqbal ventures another oblique analogy: “In the picturesque phrase of the Qur’an it is the habit of Allah “¹²⁷. This does remind us, again, of Ramanuja’s suggestion of the world as though it were the sarira, organic body, of God which Ramanuja had read into these very verses of the Gitā. Although, we must point out, the special ontological status that individuated self or “soul” qua jivātman is accredited with in Ramanuja, in respect of its identity-cum-difference relation to Isvara, entails a much more sophisticated metaphysical doctrine of being than the ‘unity of organic nature’ doctrine could cope with. At least Ramanuja is clearer in this respect in that there is for him essential identity but substantial differentia. What makes communion possible in Iqbal is the fact of the ‘ego’ or personhood as the centralising focus of experience that both the human and God share. Man shares equally the creative activity of God, but beyond that man is intrically part of nature, albeit the organic unity of nature. The total oneness of God and man is conceivable at an expistemological level, but not at a metaphysical level, for Iqbal does admit appreciative intuition (of which ‘we have a first-hand knowledge...from within’), which “reveals life as a centralizing’ ego’. This knowledge constitutes ‘a direct revelation of the ultimate reality’¹²⁸.

Notwithstanding these ‘facts of experience’, Iqbal is aware of the limitations of the human mind in being able to fathom the complete mystery of being, and so “from the human point of view it is an interpretation which, in our present situation, we put on the creative activity of the Absolute

¹²⁶ BG X. 12; translation used in this work are predominantly from, or cross-checked with J.A.B.Van Buitenen (tr and edited), *The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata* (A Bilingual Edition), Chicago/London, The University of Chicago University press, 1981.(hereafter BG)

¹²⁷ *Recons.* p. 56

¹²⁸ *Recons.* p. 61

Ego”.¹²⁹ But at best it is an inference. He is almost suggesting that we end up with an anthropocentric view of the ultimate. Or is Iqbal alluding to what Krsna tells Arjuna: “The deluded disregard me in my human form, being ignorant of my higher nature as the great lord of the creatures.. [they do not understand that] I am the eternal source of the creatures (created nature, sarvab hutānam).¹³⁰ Clearly though, the self-affirmation in respect of the “I-anness” that only an higher transcendental being is capable of recurs several times over in Krsna’s sermon - thus for instance, Krsna makes it plain to Arjuna: “I am the eternal source of sacrifice, I am the libation too.. I am the fire... I am the father to this world, its mother...source, destruction and continuity, container (and) imperishable seed. I *am* immortality and death... the existent and non-existent¹³¹ (IX. 16-19). The apparently contradictory juxtapositioning of existence and non-existence is also not a difficulty for Iqbal, for he finds a verse in the Qur’an that says something like that: Naught is like *him*; yet *He* hears and sees. [Emphasis added to distinguish from individual subjectivity]¹³²

Is this assertion of “*I-anness*”, however, of the same order as Iqbal would have his ultimate ego pronounce. I think so, if what we mean by this statement is that the “*I-anness*” reflects the profoundly subtle and self-conscious but at once detached organising principle in synthetic unity with the created or self-emanated collective, i.e. Nature, intending it towards a purposive in teleological goal. That God has a purpose for his creation is beyond a shred of doubt in the Qur’an: ‘God is equal to his purpose, but most men know it not’ (12:21). Krsna expands further on his identification with organic unity of the world by elaborating on the divine ubiquitousities by which he is permeated in the world, i.e. the extent of his spirit-immanence in the world of matter: “I am the self that dwells in all beings, I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of beings. Of the Vedas I am the Samaveda, of the gods I am Vasave, (Indra) of the senses the mind, of the creatures of the consciousness ... I am the wisdom of self among all wisdom, I am ‘A’ among syllables, I am everlasting Time, the Placer who looks everywhere, and the how of things to be. I am victory, the resolution (will), the courage of courages...not a being standing or moving can exist without

¹²⁹ *Ibid*

¹³⁰ BG IX.11

¹³¹ *Gītā* IX/16-19

¹³² *Recons.* p. 56 and p. 88 respectively.

me. There is no limit to my divine ubiquities...” (BG X. 20-42) Krsna speaks as though there were infinite time, and the spirit stretched out, as it were, throughout its boundless limits, in which his Will and Thought played sport, and when he gets tired then: “I am Time, grown old [resolved to] destroy the world”. (BG.XI. 32).

In the thirteenth chapter Krsna explains that this body is called the field and the one who knows calls this “field” the “guide” to this field. (‘I am the *ksetrājna* in the *Ksetra*’). This is *buddhi* in its *mabat* form in its role of directing “field” in reflective synthesis. To Iqbal, thought *qua* intuition has the function of moving into the infinitude of knowledge or organic unity.

Now I am not suggesting that what Iqbāl says on nature and the relation of nature to divinity is exactly what the *Gītā* postulates. One can’t, though, but be impressed at the distinctive resemblance in the two characterizations. Iqbāl’s idea that “nature is not a pure mass of materiality occupying a void, but is a structure of events and a systematic mode of behaviour”, albeit determined from within the absolute ego, is, as we saw, not alien to the *Gītā*’s view. Further, the unity of thought and will, intelligence and vitality, and the boundlessness of the creative extension of the ultimate ego in which nothing limits its finality, may be stretched into Krsna’s assertion that “Resting on my own nature I create, again and again, this entire aggregate of creatures involuntarily by the force of my own nature (BG IX.9).¹³³ Elsewhere Krsna attribute immeasurability, infinitude and monopoly to this power. (11.25; x. 39-42) Nature, then, must be understood as a living, ever growing organism whose growth has no final external limits. Its only limit is internal, i.e. the immanent self which immanent animates and sustains the whole. Or, as Iqbāl would put it, “The Ultimate Ego that makes the emergent emerge is immanent in nature, and is described by the Qur’ān as the First and last, the visible and the invisible”¹³⁴. Indeed, how much this sounds like the ‘manifest’ and the ‘unmanifest’ of the *Gītā*. But what are the limitations of the immanent and what causes them? Iqbāl is not so clear here,

¹³³ In this regard The Quran says: "Could we, then, be [thought of as being] worn out by the fiest creation? Nay-but some people are [still] lost in doubt about [the possibility of] a new creation!" Surah QAF (L),V.15 (Asad translation). See also "every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way". Surah *The Most Gracious* (LV) V. 29 (Asad Translation) *Editor's Note*.

25-a. Recons. P. 56 and P. 88 respectively

¹³⁴ *Ibid* p. 107

though he agrees that “all activity is a limitation without which it is impossible to conceive God as a concrete operative Ego”¹³⁵ Gitā is more specific about the internal constraints, which have largely to do with the wheel of *Karma*, set rather early in motion, a bit like the divine clockwork of Spinoza’s God. There is further constraint as a result of people not adhering to *dharmā* and therefore bringing about disequilibrium in the universal retributive system. To Iqbāl, ‘the twin fact of moral and physical evil stand out prominent in the life of Nature.’¹³⁶ The increase in *adharma*, according to Gitā, it seems, upsets the efficiency of the ultimate ego and impels it as it were to gather its expansive unmanifest force, like the tentacles of an octopus, into its centre only to burst upon nature in some manifest form: this is the avatara-thesis of the *Gitā*. (BG IV 4-8) Indeed, this is not unlike Iqbāl’s near admission to the plausibility of the buruz of Muhammad, (suggested by the Qadiyanias), - or lahut-nasut of Hallaj- as though he were a re-incarnation in the Aryan sense, for the purposes of bringing prophethood to its finality. But Iqbāl rejected this claim on some other grounds.¹³⁷

Was Krsna a Prophet? Sirhindi did not deny that India had been sent prophets, but lamented that the messages of the prophets were either rejected at immense cost to the land, or they were misused by Brahmins in their selfish claim that the divine dwelled within them as a means to attracting favours and worship from the people¹³⁸. Iqbāl might have been happier and to settle for Krsna as a pre-Qur’anic prophet than as an avatara, whatever that might mean.

The picture that emerges, in Iqbāl at least, has the absolute ego as the whole of reality. But the imperishable, unchanging, and permanent reality also has another side to it, but no apart from it, which is dynamic, changing, located in space and time in a non- finite continuum. But change is not interpreted as a perishable series of appearances: the ultimate ego exists in pure duration wherein change ceases to be a succession of varying attitudes, and reveals the true character as continuous creations; untouched by weariness; not ‘unseizable’ by slumber or sleep.¹³⁹ Indeed, Krsna describes

¹³⁵ *Ibid* p. 80

¹³⁶ *Ibid* p. 80

¹³⁷ *Ibid* See also Annemarie Schimmel, 'The Place of the Prophet of Islam in Iqbāl's thought', *Islamic Studies* (Karachi),1.4, 1962.

¹³⁸Friedmann, op. cit p. 71.

¹³⁹ *Ibid* p.60

himself as though he were the first unmoved mover, ceaselessly engaged in action that, however, does not bind him since he remains disinterested in their fruits (IX. *ibid*) Like *Gitā*, *Iqbāl* could not conceive the ultimate ego as changeless for this would be “to conceive Him as utter inaction, a motiveless, stagnant neutrality, an absolute nothingness”. To us change might imply imperfection - as it certainly did also to Plato - but to the:”Creative Self change cannot mean imperfection. he remains untouched by it as the calm in the centre of a whirlpool”. God’s life is one of continuous self-manifestation. And when *Kṛṣṇa* utters that “I am the source of that which is not yet”, *Iqbāl* would say in the same vein that the “not-yet” of God means unending realisation of the infinite creative possibilities of his being, which retains its wholeness throughout the entire process.¹⁴⁰

Iqbāl concludes that “Ultimate Reality is a rationally directed life. To interpret life as ego is not to fashion God after the image of man. It is only to accept the simple fact of experience that life is not a formless fluid, but an organising principle of unity, a synthetic activity which holds together and focalizes the dispersing disposition of the living organism for a constructive purpose¹⁴¹. This sort of teleological basis for the existence of nature is something *Kṛṣṇa* tries hard to convey to *Arjuna* with all the optimism of an *Iqbāl* drunk not on an intellectual view of life - which he says is necessarily pantheistic - but on an intuitive-pragmatist vision. Though in points of analysis, I find it difficult sometimes to distinguish *Iqbāl*’s ontology from a pantheistic one; perhaps, as we suggested earlier, pantheistic is a better designation for his view. The symbolism that comes to mind here is that of the upside down *asvatthab* tree with its roots above and fruits below (BG XV.I). But *Iqbāl* would have the roots descend and entwine more and more into the world of the fruits; and yet God might be a mystery far beyond human comprehension. But it is the link between God’s personality and our own personality that makes the bridge less formidable, and thus in the “I-thou” relation there is a distinct possibility of union between man and divine. On this point at least, *Iqbāl* and the *Gitā* converge.

According to the Qur’ān, "and we have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six aeons, and [that] no weariness could ever touch us." Surah QAF. (L) v.38 (Asad Translation) Editor's Note.

¹⁴⁰ *Recons. p. 60*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*