

REASON AND FAITH IN THE NATURAL THEOLOGY OF IQBAL

Part III

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The kind of ideal that a person will choose at any moment will be dependent upon his state of knowledge and experience at that particular time. This will mean therefore that as his knowledge and experience increases, he should come closer and closer to the criteria of true Beauty.¹⁰⁸

But true to the spirit of evolution, as Iqbal understood it, this process is a very long one, involving innumerable combinations of possible right or wrong, perfection as well as imperfection. As has been explained, it is also not an easy process as each choice carries with it inherent mistakes and new adjustments. According to Iqbal, therefore, the urge for Beauty in man takes the form of the urge for the ideals and is capable of being fully satisfied by an ideal of the highest beauty and perfection and that is the Divine Beauty itself. The question of where this ideal of Divine Beauty is to be found we shall look at in the next section. Iqbal's idea can therefore be seen as pertaining to stages in the development of the self. We are never absolutely wrong; we advance from the lower to the higher, from less perfect to more perfect ideals.¹⁰⁹

Iqbal even connected his ideas with the central Islamic doctrine or profession of faith *la illa ha ilia Allah* which means "there is no god(s) but

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. A question can be raised at this point; i.e. would religion still be necessary if man is going to evolve towards the Right Ideal anyway? We can see Iqbal addressing this question in the last lecture of *The Reconstruction* where he asks the question "Is religion possible?" himself. We will see this later in the chapter.

God."La" stands for the self's stages of wrong ideals, and "illa" stands for the only Right Ideal.¹¹⁰

The urge for Beauty and the urge for ideals" rules man's instinctual urges. Instincts are those psycho-physical dispositions or compelling tendencies of action. Man preserves his life for the sake of the urge of his self for Beauty. The instincts in him do not obstruct the urge of the self, which is free to have its way, but only helps it to satisfy itself, if called upon to do so. This is proven by the fact that man can oppose any of his instincts, even the most compelling of them, whenever he thinks his ideal needs this sacrifice. Animals do not possess this urge for ideals. In man it is the ideal for Beauty and not any one of his instincts that dominates his life.¹¹¹ Only his devotion and service to the Right Ideal will enable man to unfold the deepest possibilities of his nature and enable him to reach the zenith, the height of his perfection.

Is Religion Possible?

If evolution is teleological and if the Right Ideals would eventually be realised, would not the question arise as to whether religion is still necessary? Iqbal also asserted that the finality of prophethood was supposed to mean the increased use of reason. Would not this also imply that religion would be a redundant affair? It is arguable that Iqbal was well aware of these questions and that is why he devoted the last chapter of the Reconstruction exclusively to a defence of religion.

Religious life is divided by Iqbal into three phases which he calls the periods of Faith, Thought and Discovery respectively.¹¹² In the first period there is an unconditional acceptance of the religious commands; without any rational understanding of those commands. Secondly there is perfect submission to discipline but it is accompanied by a rational understanding of the discipline. In this period religious life seeks its foundation in' a kind of

¹¹⁰ M. Rafiuddin, op. cit. 1971, pp.80-90.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² See chapter 7. The Reconstruction, 1968 edition.

metaphysics - a logically consistent view of the world with God as a part of that view.¹¹³

In the third period, metaphysics is displaced by what Iqbal termed as psychology, where religious life develops a desire or ambition to come into direct contact with God. Here the individual achieves a free personality, not by releasing himself from the fetters of the law or the dogma, but by "discovering the ultimate source of the law within the depths of his own consciousness".¹¹⁴

It is clear that it is in the sense of this last phase in the development of religious life that Iqbal used the word religion in asking and attempting to answer the question "Is religion possible?"¹¹⁵ Does this mean that ordinary dogmatic religion is no longer important to Iqbal? In the first place I do not think the question should be phrased this way, because, Iqbal wanted to reach a certain level of universality and objectivity in his discussion of religion; and it is in the third phase that this can be achieved as it operates at the basic bio-psychological (and therefore universal) level. Secondly, Iqbal believed that it is only after the third phase has been achieved that the dogmatic can become a norm or accepted naturally without being questioned. So the third phase, although the last, is in actual fact the most important. It is what makes the dogmatic part understandable and practicable. It is arguable that it is in the context of the third phase also that Iqbal would answer the question of the possibility of religion in the affirmative.

The third phase he identified not unexpectedly with mysticism. This he said was an unfortunate term because it has always been supposed to be a "life-denying, fact-avoiding attitude of mind directly opposed to the radically empirical outlook of our time".¹¹⁶ Iqbal was well aware of the difficulties

¹¹³ The Reconstruction, 1968. p. 141

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 184.

involved when talking about mysticism or religious experience - it is an experience difficult to describe. But this could not be the end of the matter. In fact the mystical experience can give a clue to the nature of the ego which to Iqbal is the heart of the religious experience. Here Iqbal harks back to his idea that our consciousness can be divided into the superficial and profound self [or what to William James was the transitive and substantive state of the mind]. In the Sufistic literature, Sufis describe experiencing different 'level's or the 'worlds'.

Iqbal wanted to emphasise that it is precisely the discovery of the consciousness as an individual, at a deeper level than his conceptually describable habitual selfhood that constitutes the very climax of religious life. It is through this way that possible 'contact' with the most Real can be achieved, and the effect is that the ego realises in its uniqueness its metaphysical status, and the possibility of improving this status.

The proof that this contact has been made can be seen in the acts that emerge out of the individual after the encounter, because, to Iqbal, religion is essentially a mode of actual living.¹¹⁷ What faith does is to change his actions. The content of this timeless experience can diffuse itself in the time-movement and make itself visible to the eye of history. Strictly speaking, however, the experience which leads to this discovery is not a conceptually manageable intellectual fact; it is a vital fact, "an attitude consequent on an inner bilogical transformation which cannot be captured in the net of logical categories."¹¹⁸

Iqbal also referred to the evidence provided by religious people in all ages and countries to show that "there are potential types of consciousness lying close to our normal consciousness." If these types of consciousness open up possibilities of life-giving and knowledge-yielding experience, the question of the possibility of religion as a form of higher experience is a perfectly legitimate one.¹¹⁹ To him higher religion is really only an attempt to

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 184.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 185.

understand life or what he calls 'larger 'life' and is essentially, still only a type of experience which religion recognises as necessary for its foundation, long before science learnt to do so.¹²⁰ But Iqbal insisted that higher religion is no less than a genuine effort to classify human consciousness and is as critical of its level of experience as Naturalism is of its own.¹²¹

Iqbal's categorisation of the different stages of higher religion seems comparable with Bergson's idea of the dynamic religion of the open society as opposed to the static religion of the closed society.¹²² In his *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* Bergson contrasted the "purely social and socially explicable forms of both religious and moral life (closed society, static religion) and the higher, qualitatively different manifestations (open society, dynamic religion) in which we perceive the collaboration of the human mind and imagination with the creative source of being."¹²³ Bergson had also been interested in mystical phenomena; in 1909 for example he reviewed a book by Henri Delacroix on the history of the psychology of mysticism.¹²⁴

Even more interesting is that by dynamic religion Bergson also meant mysticism which to him is the "main organ through which life assures progress for individuals and for the human race as a whole."¹²⁵ This is what Iqbal also wanted to say.

Iqbal's next argument was to show that science could only tell us about a part of the Reality. He referred for example to the idea of the plurality of

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 182.

¹²² H. Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. (1932) in L. Kolakowski. op. cit. pp. 72-87.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 81

space - orders which make the idea of Divine Time and Divine Space more rationally imaginable.

Therefore it may be that what we call the external world, is only an intellectual construction, and that there are other levels of human experience capable of being systematised by other orders of space and time - levels in which content and analysis do not play the same role as they do in the case of normal experience.¹²⁶ He quoted Eddington who seemed to support his view and said:-

We acknowledge that the entities of physics can from their very nature form only a partial aspect of reality. How are we to deal with the other part? It cannot be said that the other concerns us less than the physical entities. Feelings, purposes, values, make up our consciousness as much as sense-impression. We follow up the sense-impressions do and find that they lead to an external world discussed by science; we follow up other elements of our being and find that they lead not to a world of space and time, but surely somewhere.¹²⁷

From this, Iqbal asserted that religion is necessary because it is essentially a mode of actual living, the only serious way of handling Reality. Science which is the method of dealing with this Reality by means of concepts is not a serious enough way of dealing with it. Science is not too much concerned for example whether the electron is a real entity or not. He felt that "nothing is at stake in the ventures of science". In the religious venture however, "the whole career of the ego or individual's personal centre of life' is at stake."¹²⁸ This is because the individual cannot base his conduct just on mere illusions, a wrong concept may mislead the understanding, but a wrong deed not only degrades the man, and may eventually demolish the ego, but because it is also a sociable deed, can affect others.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ The Reconstruction. 1968, p 183.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 186.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 185.

On the practical level. Iqbal felt that higher religion was especially necessary for modern man, who because he has been "wholly overshadowed by the result of his intellectual activity, has ceased to live soulfully i.e. from within."¹³⁰ Iqbal thought that in the domain of thought the modern man lives in conflict with himself, whereas in the domain of economic and political life he is living in open conflict with others.¹³¹ His suggestion for a remedy was religion which "in its higher manifestation is neither dogma nor priesthood, no ritual". Only religion can "ethically prepare the modern man for the burden of the great responsibility that the advancement of modern science necessarily involves". And in what sounds characteristically Iqbalian, religion can also restore to man "that attitude of faith "which will enable him to win a personality here and retain it "in the hereafter ".¹³²

When talking about the plight of modern man, Iqbal was not only referring to the west, He saw the situation as being no better in the East. Far from reintegrating the forces of the normal man's inner life, and thus preparing him for participation in the "march of history" he saw the techniques of¹³³ medieval mysticism as only teaching the Muslim "a false renunciation: and making him perfectly contented with his ignorance and spiritual thralldom."¹³⁴ Politically, he saw the Muslims trying to find answers through 'rationalism' and 'atheistic socialism'. But these he said must draw

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 185.

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. 188.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid. p. 189. Emphases is mine. In using the term 'biological' it shows how much Iqbal wanted religion to be treated in as natural a . way as possible. It is also in line with what he was saying about religion actually having concrete effects on man's behavior.

¹³³ By this I think he meant the 'interpretation' and use made of the mystical knowledge and experience of Sufism.

¹³⁴ Reconstruction, p. 189.

upon the psychological forces of hatred, suspicion and resentment which in the long run would close down his hidden sources of spiritual energy.¹³⁵

HOW CAN MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES BE

EXPLICATED?

This question was his fundamental preoccupation. He stressed that “we have to find out an effective method of inquiry into the nature and significance of this extraordinary experience.”¹³⁶ He turned to the field of psychology but found its present state unsatisfactory. This was because it did not give a real insight into the essential nature of religion and its meaning to human personality. It only held a plethora of new theories which proceed on a complete misunderstanding of the nature of religion as revealed in its higher manifestation and therefore was quite hopeless.¹³⁷

Refusing to be discouraged by the difficulty of the task he had set up for himself (i.e. no less than to 'empiricise' mysticism) Iqbal doggedly carried on drawing parallels between the scientific and religious enterprises. He believed, for example, that "the truth is that the religious and scientific processes, though invoking different methods are identical in their final aim. Both aim at reaching the most real". In fact, he felt that religion (for reasons which have been mentioned before) is far more anxious to reach the ultimately real than science is. And to both, the way to pure objectivity lies in what may be called the "purification of experience."¹³⁸

For him the scientific and the religious processes are in a sense parallel to each other. In science we try to understand the external behaviour of reality, while in religion we try to understand the inner nature of that reality. Both are really descriptions of the same world with the difference that in the

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid. p. 190.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 191.

¹³⁸ Ibid. pp. 198-196.

scientific, the ego is excluded, whereas in the religious the ego is integrated in the process.¹³⁹

He saw that just as Hume and Einstein,¹⁴⁰ for example, had helped to objectify science, so too the student of mystical or religious experience must try to rule out as many subjective elements as possible in religion until what is reached is absolutely objective.¹⁴¹

Like Bergson, Iqbal was certain that man's final religious experience "is the revelation of a new life process - original, spontaneous, and the moment he reaches this revelation he recognises it as the ultimate root of his being without hesitation."¹⁴² He is at pains to convince his audience that there is nothing mysterious about such an experience; it is a perfectly natural phenomenon; possesses cognitive value for the recipient as well as a biological significance for the ego.

As Bergson said, "even though the certitude of mystical experience cannot be simply converted into philosophical wisdom, the mystics have changed the philosophical perspective; that is, we cannot philosophise about God, love and creation without reference to their experience. And the most reliable method of philosophy is to look first at experience instead of concocting concepts by which reality is to be measured."¹⁴³

In view of what has been said about the role of mysticism in the thought of Iqbal, it is interesting to note that Bergson also thought that mysticism can form the basis for a 'universal religion'.¹⁴⁴ "Genuine mysticism" said Bergson,

¹³⁹ Hume showed that there is no foundation for causality through sense experience. Einstein. Says Iqbal, dispenses with the concept altogether. See the Reconstruction.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² L. Kolakowski, Bergson, Oxford, 1985, p. 83.

¹⁴³ Ibid. pp. 87-85 (for a fuller discussion of this contention.)

is "the guiding force of dynamic religion appears very infrequently in the history of religion but is able to move a real, if hidden, layer in our minds and gradually transform or ennoble conservative religion."¹⁴⁵

He believed that "there is progress in religious life; the transition from worshipping spirits to worshipping personal Gods is already an important step forward. The power of mystical experience gives new color to the established mythologies."¹⁴⁶ He believed also that "mysticism culminates in a 'contact' and therefore partial coincidence with the creative effort that life reveals. This effort is of God, if not God Himself."¹⁴⁷ Bergson tried "to assimilate into his spiritualist outlook those tenets of modern science which had seemingly established the materialistic doctrine and had done away with the religious legacy of mankind". The same may be said of Iqbal.

Finally, Iqbal's thinking on religion and science can perhaps be summed up via an extract from a poem by the Turkish poet Zia whom he quoted in the Reconstruction.

Both religion and philosophy claim the soul of
man and draw it on either side.

When this struggle is going on, pregnant
experience delivers up positive science.

And this young leader of thought says,
tradition is history and Reason is the method
of history!

Both interpret and desire to reach the same

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 87-83.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Reconstruction. 1968, p. 160. Emphasis is mine.

indefinable something!

But what is this something? Is it a spiritualized heart? If so, take my last word.

Religion is positive science, the purpose of which is to spiritualize the heart of man.¹⁴⁸

LESSON FOR THE PRESENT

(i) What I find most encouraging is the fact that there were similarities or positive harmonies at least between Islam and rationalistic - humanistic perceptives of religion. Both Iqbal and Bergson talked of higher religion i.e. mysticism which is an element present in all religions. It can therefore be the basis of a unity between many diverse world communities. Perhaps it is about time also that religion in its 'higher' meaning combines efforts with philosophy and science. Philosophy and science could provide the language or form of expression for the meaning of that higher religion.

(ii) Iqbal's philosophy about the nature of reality also has relevance to the conflict generated by the mind-body problem that has been reflected in many schools of psychology, most notably in the conflict between the psychologies of Freud and Jung.¹⁴⁹ As he noted in his Reconstruction during his time, (and perhaps the situation is not very much different today) the prevailing psychology, because of its mechanistic bend was not able to contain the subject of the meaning of the self or the consciousness. Perhaps it is now time to have a fresh look at the basic tenets of psychology. In this context also the new holistic approach that is being argued for by F. Capra

¹⁴⁸ F. Capra. The Turning Point London, 1985, p. 169.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

against the duality of Cartesianism and mechanistic Newtonism seem to be echoing the thoughts of Iqbal.¹⁵⁰

(iii) Another inspiring feature of his theology is his idea of evolution -- man's development as an ego can be explained via the concept of beauty and man's quest for it. Translated into the realm of real actual life, this idea can provide the basis for the incentives that are badly needed in facing the present challenges and creating alternatives for the future. In explaining the idea of takdir or destiny Iqbal convinces us that we are actually involved in the process of creation, in real history. This surely is a momentous fact and if true means that there is no room for 'any feelings of despair in action and life for man.

(iv) Iqbal's natural theology is a reconciliation between religion and science. Many people are still under the impression that the conflict thesis between religion and science is a proven fact. Research in the history of science has however shown for several decades, now however, that this is but one interpretation. Serious scholars have found that what may look like conflicts are in actual "fact conflicts of interests (in power and politics for example) between various groups.¹⁵¹ Many Christian scientists have shown, for example, how a more integrated view of nature and reality - can be obtained through a wedding of understanding of the two spheres.

In this context, Iqbal was one of the earliest Asian Muslim contributors to the field and that his works should therefore

¹⁵⁰ See Martin J.S Rudwick, "The Shape and Meaning of Earth History" in D.C. Lindberg & R.L. Numbers, *God and Nature*, Berkeley 1986, p. 296-321.

¹⁵¹ Huston Smith, "Crisis in Philosophy", Paper Presented at the International Seminar on Islamic Philosophy and Science – Penang, 30 May – 2 June 1989.

be critically studied and expanded upon by present scholars and thinkers.

(v) Finally it can be argued that the natural theology of Iqbal can have an important place in the prevailing debates on the current 'crisis in philosophy'.¹⁵² As Prof. Huston Smith has pointed out recently, reason is not itself light. "It is more like a transformer that does useful things but on condition that it is (attached or) to a generator."¹⁵³ He explained that after revolting against a narrowly empiricist positivism, philosophy is now looking for a new generator. What strikes me as being very interesting is his argument that the much sought after new alternative could very well be found in our understanding of human nature itself. Perhaps this is why Iqbal stressed the importance of psychology. I believe that in his ideas regarding the consciousness and the nature of the self. Iqbal's theology may prove more than a useful source of inspiration, regarding our perceptions about human nature. In this regard I hope that the very lengthy explication of this theology has proven to be worthwhile.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.