

IQBAL'S CONCEPT OF THE LIFE

HEREAFTER

Dr. Abdul Khaliq

In Islam it is recognized as one of the fundamental, indispensable articles of faith that man, after his physical death in this world, which is bound to occur sooner or later, will be reborn in a world that is yet to be --- a world 'much superior in respect of degrees and much superior in respect of excellence'.³⁶ No one can be truly faithful without subscribing to this article. This incident of resurrection, according to the Qur'anic scheme of things, must necessarily be in store for men so that they meet in the big, the final and the total way rewards or punishments for their various deeds, good or bad. The hereafter has been called 'the domain of recompense' (dar al jaza), the world here and now being 'the domain of action' (dar al-'amal)

So he who does an atom's weight of good will see it.

And he who does an atom's weight of evil will see it³⁷

However, the Qur'an has not furnished any premisses which could provide conclusive evidence for the rebirth of man as it does not, in general, do for any one of the eschatological realities or metaphysical truths including the existence of God Himself. Firstly, no 'proofs' ---- in a strictly logical sense of this term ---- appear to be possible in this area of speculation; and secondly, if at all proofs had been given that would have robbed man of the capacity to make existential choices between alternatives. Man's freedom to choose and freedom to believe are so immensely valuable in the estimation of God that He would not like at all to bind him down to irresistible conclusions. So, the Qur'anic appeal in such cases is primarily to an intuited assurance in man of, and emotive faith in, the all-powerfulness of God, His justice etc. For this it resorts at the most to various stances of analogical reasoning. For the phenomenon of resurrection, the Qur'an says:

³⁶ Qur'an, 17:21.

³⁷ Ibid, 99:7-8.

See they not that Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth, is able to create the like of them? And He has appointed for them a term, whereof there is no doubt. But the wrongdoers consent to naught but denying³⁸

And says man: When I am deed, shall I truly be brought forth alive?

Does not man remember that We created him before, when he was nothing?

So by thy Lord! We shall certainly gather them together...³⁹

From it We created you, and into it We shall return you, and from it raise you a second time .⁴⁰

See they not that Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth and was not tired by their creation, is able to give life to the dead? Aye, He is surely Possessor of power over all things.⁴¹

Were We then fatigued with the first creation? Yet they are in doubt about a new creation⁴²

And so on. That conviction in the hereafter is structured on emotion rather than logic is what Iqbal also subscribes to. In one of his letters he says.

The cast of my emotional life is such that I could not have lived a single moment without a strong faith in the immortality of human consciousness. The faith has come to

³⁸ Ibid, 17:99.

³⁹ Ibid, 19:66-68.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 20:55.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 50:15,

me form the Holy Prophet of Islam. Every atom of me is brimming with gratitude to him⁴³

On the same subject, he writes in another letter:

....In this regard there are many facts which are beyond the ken of human reason. An awareness about them grows from certain sources which have nothing to do with philosophical understanding.⁴⁴

The question arises why is there an emphasis on the prospect of resurrection or rebirth in the hereafter, the next world *al-akhirah*, in the terminology of the Qur'an. The answer is that it helps man towards a moral and spiritual uplift here and now. Clear and transparent descriptions of the externally fascinating paraphernalia of heavens and the most dreadful upheaval that characterizes hell are meant for persuading individuals to lead a good life in this world and deterring them from the evil ways. In the hereafter, it has been promised, the principle of personal accountability and equitable justice will reign supreme. No proxy will be permitted and no sharing of burdens will be allowed. Every individual will be treated strictly in accordance with his own deeds alone and with the deeds of no one else. The Qur'an says:

I will not suffer-the work of any worker among you to be lost.⁴⁵

Whoever goes aright, for his own soul does he go aright; and whoever goes astray, to its own detriment only does it go astray. And no bearer of a burden can bear the burden of another⁴⁶

Leave Me alone with him whom I created.⁴⁷

⁴³ Quoted in Zia Bar, Iqbal Number, p. 50.

⁴⁴ Sayyid Nazir Niazi, Makutbat e Iqbal, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Qur'an, 3:195.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 74:15.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 74:17.

But when the deafening cry comes, The day when a man flees from his brother, and his mother and his father, And his spouse and his sons. Every man of them, that day, will have enough concern to make him indifferent to others.⁴⁸

Iqbal, during his discussion of the problem of immortality, specially in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, has described and examined the views of a number of Eastern and Western thinkers so as to be in a position to formulate his own standpoint in the richest possible perspective. The frame of reference and the subjacent current of his entire critical examination of these views necessarily happens to be his firm commitment to the insistent standpoint of the Qur'an, delineated in the verses just quoted, that man's immortality is uniquely individual in character. He so beautifully says:

اگر یک ذره کم گردد ز انگیز وجود من
باین قیمت نمی گیرم حیات جاودانے را

This would immediately refute the doctrine of metempsychosis or, what has more commonly been known as, the 'transmigration of souls' as well as the view that the immortal life of an individual consists in his ultimately becoming a part and parcel of the totality of existence like a drop of water which eternalizes itself by getting submerged in the expanses of an ocean. The former for example, was the view of Buddhism in India and of the Hindus who accepted the Buddhist influence. The latter was, for one thing, accepted by a number of Muslim mystics who subscribed to a pantheistic metaphysics partly due to the inherent logic of mystic experience itself and partly due to certain alien influences.

The first thinker whom Iqbal critically examines in his *Reconstruction* and finds reasons to refute is Ibn Rushd who, according to him, had propounded the doctrine of collective immortality'. To being with, Ibn Rushd did not subscribe to the orthodox conviction in bodily resurrection which they had built upon the basis of a literalist understanding of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali, in his *Tahafah al-Falasifah*, defended this conviction and

⁴⁸ Ibid, 80:34-37.

declared it as one of the basic articles of faith in Islam. Ibn Rushd, in his powerful poser *Tahafat ul-Tahafah* refuted al-Ghazali on this point as he chose to allegorize ---- like Farabi and Ibn Sina before him ---- the relevant Qur'anic verses instead of understanding them in their plain, lexical meanings.

Ibn Rushd made a distinction between sense or mind, on the one hand, and intelligence, on the other ---- presumably corresponding to the two Qur'anic terms *nafs* and *ruh*. Mind, occurring to him, depends for its operation and in fact for its existence on the data received through the sense organs of the body. It is the principle of individuality in man. Being entirely dependent on the body, it dies with the physical death of man. *Ruh*, on the other hand, he believes, is independent of the body. It is the principle of universality and collectivity. Though residing in a particular body, it only temporarily resides there as a representative of the universal Soul or Universal Intellect or Active Intellect to which alone belongs immortal existence. Universal Intellect may be taken to symbolize the entire human race. So not man as a person but the human race, in general is bound to survive eternally.

Iqbal raises at least three objections to Ibn Rushd's point of view. Firstly, Ibn Rushd is wrong when he appears to hold that the Qur'anic words *nafs* and *ruh* are the sort of technical terms used for two distinct elements in the human organism which are opposed to each other in character. The former being privately and indissolubly attached to the body; the latter being universal and transcendent and so essentially independent of any physical substratum. Qur'anic concept of the human person, Iqbal, instead, rightly emphasizes is that of an indissoluble organic unity. Secondly, this point of view fails to prove immortality for the human person: it only proves continued existence for the human race even only for the human civilization and culture. Thirdly, it "looks like William James, suggestion of a transcendental mechanism of consciousness which operates on a physical medium for a while and then gives it up pure sport"⁴⁹ and thus it fails to give due importance to the primal, unique individuality of the human person as such.

⁴⁹ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 89

Kant has dealt with the problem of immortality in both of his Critiques. The general tenor of his argument is moral. The observation that can be quoted as the basic intuition of his entire reasoning is available towards the end of his Critique of Practical Reason.

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heaven above and the moral law within.... I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my experience.

In his Critique of Pure Reason he argues that in this world virtue and happiness are two mutually divergent notions. Our reason demands that, they should meet so that virtue is rewarded with happiness. Given the different natures of both, this meeting is not possible in the limited span of an individual's life in this world. It needs an additional other world to eventuate. Hence the inevitability of the life hereafter. In the Critique of Practical Reason he proceeds a little differently. Under the auspices of the Moral Law we are duty bound to be perfect. Now any duty, by virtue of its very content, has to be carried out. Perfection to be attained being to, and absolute. This would not be possible within the limited period of time available in this world. It necessarily needs an unlimited time and so immortal life.

To the line of argument adopted by Kant Iqbal has some objections specially insofar as it tends to belittle the importance of the present world for the realization of the moral ideal. Further, if it is granted that virtue and happiness are mutually incongruent notions, how can even an unlimited period of time make them meet together. Iqbal is of the opinion that Islam's view of this worldly life is different from that of Christianity which Kant might have in mind. According to Christianity man has been thrown into this world as a package of punishment for the original sin committed by Adam. Being a pit of damnation, this world cannot be the proper place where he can possibly attain the ideal of moral and spiritual excellences. This attainment is to be entirely postponed to the next world. For Islam, on the other hand, the present world plays a positive and constructive role in this connection. It is man's actions here and now that serve to secure higher and higher perfection for the ego and this progression continues on to the life hereafter also. Iqbal's attitude to this world is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but rather melioristic so that the ideals of moral perfection are neither completely

realizable nor absolutely unrealizable here: a meaningful progress can ofcourse be made towards their realization.

Besides these points of criticism we can raise objection against the argument on another count also. Kant seeks to draw a factual judgement as a conclusion from an evaluative judgement: "Virtue ought to be rewarded with happiness; therefore life hereafter exists for this reward". Or, "it is our duty to be perfect; therefore there will be an immortal life in the hereafter in which it will be positively to carry out this duty". But it is just a matter of simple understanding that 'is' by no trick of logic or even imagination, can be deduced from 'ought', as 'ought' too would be incapable of being deduced from 'is'.

William James tried to build up a case for immortality by refuting the point of view of the Darwinians" and the materialists that mind or consciousness is only a productive function of the brain and so, according to them, when body dies, mind goes into non-existence alongwith it. This was, in general, the standpoint of the school of Psychology known as Behaviorism. William James observes that mind is rather the transmissive or permissive function of the brain so that it essentially transcends the brain. It only employs the brain temporarily for its neuro- contact with the body; so by virtue of its nature it is capable of surviving the cessation of bodily existence. Iqbal, however, objects to this view by saying that it appears to be similar to that of Ibn Rushd insofar as it easily boils down to the point of view that consciousness is a cosmic, universal element which uses the individual brain as an instrument for a limited period of time and then, after the extinction of the brain, lives on as ever before.

Another thinker whom Iqbal mentions and mentions in some detail is Nietzsche with his doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. Nietzsche believed that the world comprises centers of energy which are limited in number as the quantum of energy is fixed once for all. It is the combinations and recombinations of energy centers which make up the entire furniture of the universe. As time is infinite according to Nietzsche, all such combinations have been exhausted in the past: have in fact been repeated a number of times. There is no happening in the universe which can be declared as totally novel. Whatever happens has already happened repeatedly in the past and will continue to happen an infinite number of times in the future. This

incidentally provides a guarantee for the continuing, periodic emergence of the ideal human person whom he calls the superman'.

Iqbal rejects this doctrine as a sort of sheer mechanism based not on any established fact but on just a working hypothesis of science. Movement of time as circular---- instead of being linear ---- in which various events simply continue repeating themselves infinitely makes immortality intolerable. Nietzsche seems to have had some realization of this implication as he himself described his doctrine not as of immortality but rather as a view of life which would make immortality endurable. This endurability is, according to him, due to the expectation that the energy centers will one day enter into the ideal combination known as the 'Superman' as they have been doing so in the past. This expectation, says Iqbal, is only a passive expectation of the irresistible and does not involve any active progression towards a stage of existence really new. It is only the latter that would be the essential spirit of the concept of personal immortality. Nietzsche's view, he says, is a kind of fatalism worse than that implied in the word *qismat* which, according to the orthodox interpretation, means that the entire life schedule, to the minutest details, of every individual was pre-determined and in fact written down on the *lawh-e-mahfiz*, the 'guarded tablet' before he was actually born. "Such a doctrine, far from keeping up the human organism for the fight of life, tends to destroy its action tendencies and relaxes the tension of the ego".⁵⁰

After criticizing various Eastern and Western doctrines of immortality from his own characteristic standpoint let us see now how does he put forth his own point of view. There are three basic facts which, he says, are emphasized by the Qur'an in this regard. These are as follows:

1. Human ego has a beginning in time and did not pre-exist its emergence in the present spatio-temporal order. Iqbal quotes in favour of this the following verses:

And certainly We create man of an extract of clay,

Then We make him a small life-germ in a firm resting place,

Then We make the life-germ a clot, then We make the clot a

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 92.

lump of flesh, then We make (in) the lump of flesh bones,
then

We clothe the bones with flesh, then We cause it to grow into
another creation. So blessed be Allah, the Best of creators.⁵¹

However, elsewhere, word of the Qur'an does describe the phenomenon of the pre-existence of human souls----maybe in their disembodied form. The Qur'an says:

And when thy Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them bear witness about themselves: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes; we bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: We were unaware of this.⁵²

In view of the lexical meaning of this verse, Iqbal's point of view may appear to be incorrect. However, it can be justified in either of the two ways: either Iqbal would accept only a symbolic interpretation of this verse and understand by it that faith in god is embedded in the primordial nature of man and now needs to be simply revived by observing His signs spread throughout the universe; or, he proposed to emphasize only that aspect of the Qur'anic idea according to which---- despite the pre-existence of souls that may be granted --- a personality that possesses the quality of being fortified or weakened by various sets of behavior patterns did not exist prior to its emergence in this world. The Qur'an, I hold, has a provision for both these ways of justification

2. There is no possibility of a return to this earth after one is deed and removed from the scene. The Qur'an has many verses emphasizing this point:

⁵¹ Qur'an, 23:12-14.

⁵² Ibid, 7:172.

Until when death overtakes one of them he says: My Lord send me back,

That I may do good in that which I have left. By no means! It is but a word that he speaks. And before them is a barrier, until the day they are raised.⁵³

And by the moon when it grows full. -

That you shall certainly ascend to one state after another.⁵⁴

3. Finitude is the essential character of the destiny of man. Every person shall meet God in the hereafter strictly in his capacity as an individual person with a unique sense of accountability for his and his own deeds alone. Finitude is not a misfortune either. It is rather a matter of respect, dignity and honor for the human individual. The higher is the stage of his moral and spiritual evolution, the more well-knit and disciplined his personality becomes. It is only such an ego who will be able to stand the catastrophic upheaval that the Day of Judgement will be and only he will be able to face God with composure and confidence. The Holy Prophet (peace be on him) is the embodiment of this ideal of perfect manhood in Islam. On the occasion of Mt' raj (the Supreme Ascension), when he was face to face with god, 'his eye turned not aside, nor did it wander'.⁵⁵ This would be an impossibility in the case of pantheistic metaphysics according to which the individual egos get obliterated in the Supreme Ego just as the rivers flow into, and get indistinguishably mixed up with, the sea waters or just as the light of a candle gets immersed in the daylight when the sun rises. Mansur Hallaj's ejaculation "aria '1 Haq (I am the Truth) which is generally understood pantheistically was, according to Iqbal, the affirmation by Mansur of a strictly theistic state of affairs. He only meant to declare that his ego had acquired a veritable truth and a robust authenticity by the assimilation of

⁵³ Ibid, 23:99-100.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 84:18-19.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 53:17.

Divine attributes or that in the words of the Qur'an --- it had been soaked in the Divine colours, better than which no colours are available.⁵⁶

Connected with the last point alone is Iqbal's primary thesis that immortality is closely relevant to the moral endeavors of the individual self or ego, "there are no pleasure-giving and pain-giving acts; there are only ego-sustaining and ego-dissolving acts. It is the deed that prepare, the ego for dissolution or disciplines him for a future career ... personal immortality, then, is not ours as a right; it is to be achieved by personal effort. Man is only a candidate for it".⁵⁷ That is to say, he has to work and work seriously for its attainment. Referring to *barzakh*, a term available in the Islamic literature for the stage between death and resurrection, Iqbal says, it would not be a merely passive state of expectation but rather a state of consciousness characterized by a change in the ego's attitude to the new spatio-temporal order that he is going to encounter in the next world. "It must be a state of great psychic unhingement, specially in the case of full-grown egos who have naturally developed fixed modes of operation on a specific spatio-temporal order, and may mean dissolution to less fortunate ones. However, the ego must continue to struggle until he is able to gather himself up and win his resurrection. The resurrection therefore is not an external event. It is the consummation of a life-process within the ego"⁵⁸ This activity process in the career of the ego never stops, not even after k resurrection, according to Iqbal. Neither hell is a pit of eternal damnation nor heaven a perpetual holiday. Both are only stages ---- one earlier; the other latter ---- in the he eternal, unending continuation comprising the development of the ego.⁵⁹ The former is a creative, purifying mechanism; the latter too is characterized by a gradual, on-going journey towards the realization of higher and higher levels of excellence. The orthodox have always held that the life hereafter will be a life of almost passive inactivity, the one involving only different levels of recompense in terms of rewards and punishments. Those in hell will be subjected to the severest pangs and tortures as if these were ends in themselves whereas the residents of heaven will have all kinds of pleasures readily available to them without the involvement of any effort on there part.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 2:38.

⁵⁷ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, op. cit., p. 95.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 96.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 98.

Iqbal, for whom Islam invariably emphasizes deed more than idea, regards life as a continuum, a perpetual moral struggle without a holiday either here or there. Hell, he says, is a transitional phase. Being 'the painful realization of one's failure as a man' it provides an occasion to 'make a hardened ego once more sensitive to the living breeze of Divine grace will be involved in a constant effort to "march always onward to receive ever fresh illuminations from an Infinite Reality which 'every moment appears in a new glory'.⁶⁰ Every act of a free ego creates a new situation and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding".⁶¹ Iqbal concludes that heaven and hell are ever-evolving states and positions rather than geographical localities. The Qur'an says:

No soul knows what is hidden for it of that which will refresh
the eyes: a reward for what they did.⁶²

An explanation of this verse by the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) is recorded in Bukhari as: Allah says, "I have prepared for my righteous servants what no eye has seen and no ear has heard and what the mind of man has not conceived".⁶³ Similarly Ibn 'Abbas is reported to have said that "nothing that is in paradise resembles anything that is in the his world except in name".⁶⁴

In view of the above Iqbal appears to be right when he says that the eschatological descriptions by the Qur'an involving references to the so-called physical objects and situations are all of them symbolic in nature. In this he was not alone. It were the Mu'tazilites we know who for the first time regularly resorted to this mode of interpretation. However, if such an interpretation seeks to completely transform the character of existence from physical to mental, that would be going too far. Comparatively less resistant hypothesis would be to say that it may possibly be 'physical' but in the sense that suits the requirements of its incumbents. Iqbal accepts this latter

⁶⁰ Qur'an, 55:29.

⁶¹ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, op. cit., p. 98.

⁶² Qur'an, 55:29.

⁶³ Sahib Bukhari, 58:8.

⁶⁴ Quoted by Mawlana Muhammad Ali on the Holy Qur'an, (Translation), Preface, p. xxviii.

hypothesis because "ego as an individual", he says, "is inconceivable without some kind of local reference or empirical background".⁶⁵

Anyhow, irrespective of the Qur'anic standpoint and its various interpretations, it may be remarked just in the passing that modern researches in parapsychology have indicated the possibility of disembodied existence. In the phenomenon of thought-transference, for example, there is mind-to-mind traffic and consciousness is found to operate independently i.e. without any material reference. The incidents of visitations by the souls of the dead also tends to establish the existence of individual without physical garbs ---- the so-called astral bodies.

The view that the concept of hell specifically be demythologized as to mean a corrective process, as Iqbal holds, rather than a purely punitive measure, has not been maintained by very many thinkers: only a few have done this. These few thinkers, one tends to feel, do so primarily on the basis of considerations over and above those of the strictly Qur'anic text ---certain hopes and aspirations, an overall optimism about human destiny and even some sayings said to be reported from the Holy Prophet (peace be on him). According to the plain Qur'anic text itself immortality is not an honorific term -- as Iqbal would have it — because the inmates of both hell and heaven will equally have, according to it an immortal lease of existence.

For Iqbal the term immortality, as said alone, stands reserved for the ever-evolving life of the human ego in the heaven where, with the passage of time, he will have a closer and closer approximation to God, the Ultimate Real. Here, incidentally a question arises: if the human ego is immortal in heaven will it not contravene and violate the Muslims' firm faith in the singular eternity of God? The Qur'an is very clear on this point when it says that everything 1 everyone is bound to perish except God.⁶⁶ The truth of this verse, however, stands vindicated and vouchsafed in three ways. Firstly, in this world all living creatures and everything else will of course be annihilated till the human beings are raised once again on the Day of Judgement for purposes of recompense. Secondly, in the heaven it will be the divinity itself which will be involved in the process of self-realization. Temptation towards

⁶⁵ Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁶⁶ Qur'an.

evil, the element of non-divinity (referred to in the Qur'anic phrase 'except God') will simply be non-existent there. It is in this sense that God has singular eternity which He does not share with anything or anyone else . Thirdly --- and that is very important ---God's eternity is simply incomparable with man's immortality: they are mutually different categories. Eternity means timelessness whereas immortality involves a linear, non-ending sequence of temporality.