

JAMES AND IQBAL

(A NEW APPROACH TO PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION)

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William James (1842-1910) is one of the outstanding figures in the philosophical movement known as pragmatism. He is equally notable for his contributions in the field 'of psychology of religion'¹¹⁰ His interest in religion was mainly centred on its personal aspect rather than on institutional religion.¹¹¹ What attracted him were 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'. Thus, he undertook generally a descriptive analysis of religious phenomena.

Dr. Muhammad Iqbal ' (1877-1938), a contemporary of James, is basically a religious thinker who employed both verse and prose to express his ideas.¹¹² He is considered to be-the greatest Muslim scholar of his time, at least in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent. His main contributions, however, can be narrowed down to his attempt to reconstruct the Muslim religious thought in the light of the more recent developments in the domain of knowledge. Both James and Iqbal have tried to interpret religious phenomena by employing psychological instruments of explanation and understanding.

The propensity towards a psychological study of religion is of a relatively recent origin and manifests itself prominently in American psychology. The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James appeared in 1902 and

¹¹¹ His major works include The Varieties of Religious Experience; Pragmatism and Principles of Psychology.

¹¹² His main religio-philosophical works are: The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (Prose-English), Secrets of the Self (Asrar.i. Khudi), Mysteries of Selflessness (Rumuz-i-Bekhudi) and The Book of Eternity (Javid Nameh) are in Persian verse. There are numerous essays as well (both English and Urdu) of religio-philosophical import.

made him 'the Father of the Psychology of Religion'. It was, till then, the most exhaustive single contribution to the psychology of religion and set the pattern for many subsequent studies on the topic. Even today, scholars make generous use both of the text and the ideas available in this epoch-making work. Iqbal--- a contemporary of James, was, of course, influenced by this trend.

In a short span of time, this discipline has made a phenomenal progress and attempts are in the offing to make it a truly scientific study. Psychology of religion is supposed to be a further development of general psychology 'reaching in the direction of religious behaviour to comprehend its meaning.'¹¹³ In this perspective it looks within human experience to understand what religion means to persons. It is different from philosophy of religion, which aims to view all religions impartially and evaluate each from a universal point of view. It is, thus, more akin to history of religion and sociology of religion in so far as both, like a psychology of religion 'gather, classify and arrange facts in a systematic order.' From these facts general principles are inferred. Hence, there is a tendency to formulate a scientific definition of psychology of religion. 'This stress on the behavioural and the practical is amply evidenced in the urge to make it branch of general psychology, "which attempts to understand, control predict human behaviour -- both appropriate and peripheral --- which 'perceived as being religious by the individual, and which is susceptible to one or more of the methods of psychological science.'¹¹⁴

Although William James is recognized as one of the most important figures in the American psychology of religion, his influence in the

¹¹³ The matter, in our view, is more complex. The phenomenon referred to by the author may as well indicate a reaching out, on the part of modern psychology, for gaining a fresh vision of Reality which is denied to it within the confines of the Freudian and Jungian paradigms. Frontier thinking in psychology such as Hillman's Revisioning Psychology testifies to it which borrows its underpinnings and occasional insights from Ibn 'Arabi via Henry Corbin (Editor).

¹¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, 1929, p. 73.

contemporary era remains far from dominating. Thus, one finds little affinity between James' "ether mysticism" or "anaesthetic revelation" and Freud's religion as "projective process" or Marx's "alienation" or even with Jung's work. Interestingly, many among the practitioners in the field are interested in the forms and potentials of human consciousness and thus share James' concern with both the religious consciousness and psychic phenomena. Without, of course, making substantive use of James' thought they refer to him as a thinker who exemplifies many of their own concerns and intentions. But, for them, he remains only worth a referential use.

With Iqbal, however, the situation is quite different. For him, the Varieties of Religious Experience was an inspiration as well as a work which he used substantially in working out his own view of religion.¹¹⁵ The core of the work is James' extended descriptions of various personal religious experiences. He takes up two major areas for detailed treatment:

1) The main features of mystical states of consciousness, viz. ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.

"2) The possibility of other avenues to truth or sources of knowledge than traditional philosophy and science; and a serious but critical treatment of mystic experience in this regard.

Now, Iqbal had vital interest in both these areas of mystical' consciousness. The discerning reader can' easily detect a clear reflection of the impact The Varieties had on Iqbal's view of religious experience.

In the first two Chapters of The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Iqbal's identification of the main features of mystic experience as well as the terminology and tone and tenor of his discussion, in general, betray a clear influence of the American philosopher. Obviously, the similarities have deeper implications for the whole of Iqbal's religious thought. But, there are other reasons for Iqbal's attraction to James also.

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

¹¹⁵ See Chapters I & II of The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam.

With Abraham Maslow as its main exponent, the contemporary transpersonal psychology attempts to offer an alternative account against the traditional Western view of human consciousness. Going beyond the behaviourists, the psycho-analysts and even the humanists in psychology, it shows interest in such extraordinary issues as "meta-needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak-experiences, ecstasy, mystical experience, B Values, essence, bliss, awe, wonder, self-actualization, ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit, sacralization of everyday life, oneness, cosmic awareness, cosmic play, individual and species-wide synergy, maximal interpersonal encounter, transcendental phenomena, maximal sensory awareness, responsiveness and expression, and related concepts, experiences and activities."¹¹⁶ This kaleidoscopic vision of human consciousness implies inadequacy of the Western science paradigm, the precedence of the Eastern model of "spiritual psychologies" and the possibility of there being "higher" or "altered" states of consciousness. This is indicative of an awareness rather than a rejection of the narrow rationalistic and scientific-technological bias of the Western understanding of human consciousness. Therefore, the need to extend the scope of the model outside of its paradigmatic confines to include in its purview consciousness found at the fringe of our normal consciousness. The logical corollary is, thus, the bringing together of religion and psychology for fostering new insights in both these fields of human inquiry. The new psychology of religion so formulated, then, seeks to bring together the theoretical-analytical modern psychology and the traditional Eastern one with its practical techniques of meditation and inner experience. It is but natural for this holistic and monistic treatment of consciousness to criticise Western psychology for failing to take into account the "whole person". It, thus, hopes to lead to a more inclusive, integrated picture of the person and life as a whole.

James, however, advises care and caution in this transition from the domain of psychology to the more philosophical, normative concerns. Yet, his treatment of consciousness and religious experience is highly relevant to the contemporary transpersonal psychology: He, thus, indicates the scope and the range of the new psychology when he argues:

¹¹⁶ The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 1969, "Statement of Purpose", 16,i.

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lies potential forms of consciousness entirely different¹¹⁷

By extending the sphere of psychology to include various levels of consciousness and by looking at life in its total perspective, James naturally places himself in the anti-behaviourist camp. However, he interprets consciousness chiefly as a function, and unlike transpersonal psychologists, assigns to beliefs and belief systems a crucial status for understanding human beings. It is, therefore, fitting for James to claim that "beliefs contribute to an awareness of the limitations of psychology as a natural science and of the importance of distinguishing between a study of belief and the act of believing itself."¹¹⁸

In a strain similar to James, Iqbal reacts against an entirely behavioural account of human phenomena. He also agrees with James that man does not live for ever at the same level of consciousness. Consciousness, as James points out, is "a stream of thought", a continuous flow of changes with a felt continuity. But Iqbal does not agree with the view that ascribes to consciousness a fleeting element in experience: For Iqbal, its function to enlighten the forward movement of life.

It is a case of tension, a state of self-concentration, by means of which life manages to shut out all memories and associations which have no bearing on a present action. It has no well defined fringes: it shrinks and expands as the occasion demands: To describe it as an epiphenomenon of the processes of matter is to deny it as an independent activity, and to deny it as an independent activity is to deny the validity of all knowledge which is only a systematized

¹¹⁷ Robert Orenstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, New York, 1972, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ G.T. Alexander, "William James, the Sick Soul and the Negative Dimensions of Consciousness", *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, XLVIII/2, p. 202.

expression of consciousness. Thus, consciousness is a variety of the purely spiritual principle of life which is not a substance but an organizing principle, a specific mode of behaviour essentially different from the behaviour of an externally worked machine.¹¹⁹

It is in this context that Iqbal has criticised modern trends psychology. Since an exclusively objective method of psychology unable to explain adequately the religious experience as a form knowledge, it must fail "in the case of our newer psychologists as did fail in the case of Locke and Hume."¹²⁰ It does not imply the Iqbal was at all against psychological analysis in the domain religion. On the contrary, he approvingly mentions Prophet Muhammad'-s (peace be upon him) observation of the psychic Jew and eulogises Ibn Khaldun for having, for the first time, approach the content of religious consciousness in a critical spirit and f anticipating the modern hypothesis of subliminal selves. For Iqbal; psychology of religion means higher Sufism. and not merely scientific study of the religious phenomenon. He, therefore, hop that modern psychology will realize. the importance of a careful study of the contents of mystic consciousness, which, for him, is real and concrete as any. form of experience.

A NEW ROLE FOR PSYCHOLOGY

The main concern in modern psychology of religion has all along been to limit religious experience within the so-called scientific boundaries of an objective study. But religious experience itself is not so simple as to legate itself to the status of norm scientific data. The peculiar characteristics of religious experience make it extremely difficult to confine it within the bounds of laboratory discipline. For Iqbal, strangely, it follows more or k the same course as is followed by our normal experience. There the same awareness of stimuli and a search for meaning. The on difference here is that both the stimuli and the meaning assigned 1 it are religious in nature. As in

¹¹⁹ Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Sh. M. Ashraf, Lahore, 1968, pp. 40-41.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26

normal experience, judgment value and recognition are made, and ideals are visualised to I attained in the foreseeable future. He, thus, claims that the nature religious experience nowhere contradicts or violates the natural order of normal consciousness. 'Religious consciousness is not a world separate from secular consciousness'.

Iqbal very strongly stresses the experiential character of religious experience in his 'psychology of religion'. In this regard, he gives secondary importance to science.. He says:

Religion is not Physics or Chemistry seeking an explanation of nature in terms of causation; it really aims at interpreting a totally different region of human experience---religious experience--the data of which cannot be reduced to the data of any other science. In fact, it must be said in justice to religion that it insisted on the necessity of concrete experience in religious life long before science learnt to do so. The conflict between the two is due not to the fact that the one is, and other is not, based on concrete experience. Both seek concrete experience as a point of departure. Their conflict is due to the misapprehension that both interpret the same data of experience. We forget that religion aims at reaching the real significance of a special variety of human experience.¹²¹

But, how the data of the two disciplines differ? Iqbal has divided religious life into three periods and has named them as 'Faith', 'Thought', and 'Discovery'. In the third period, he claims that metaphysics is displaced by psychology and religious 'life develops the ambition to come into direct contact with the ultimate reality. This is possible only in the case of what Iqbal designates as the higher Sufism, which is possible only in higher religion, and is the real subject of such a psychology of religion. While equating higher religion with a search for a higher life he asserts that it is essentially experience (thought of a higher order), and recognises the necessity of experience as its basis. Higher religion, for him, is a genuine endeavour to clarify human consciousness.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 25-26

Iqbal, significantly, is against effecting the ultimate divide between science and religion --- the Western and Eastern traditions of treating religious phenomena. Without making psychology the basis of religious belief he, nevertheless, wanted to widen the horizons of the psychological treatment of religion. This is precisely the foundation on which James criticises the transpersonal psychologist's either-or option between Western analytical paradigm and the Eastern spiritual psychology. Like Iqbal, ' he refuses to limit the framework of psychology to the Western science alone. While appreciating the importance of religious experience and belief as vital to a complete and comprehensive understanding of man, still he avoids using psychology as the ground of a substantive theology. For him, it arises from the lived experience of individuals and groups and manifests itself in the form of personal beliefs and belief-systems

What actually makes religious experience distinct from normal human experience is the fact that it manifests itself as unanalysable whole, that to its recipient it is a moment of intimate association with a unique other self, that it is incommunicable and finally, that it is an immediate experience of the Real 'transcending', encompassing, and momentarily surpassing the private personality of the subject of experience'. Now, since the quality of religious experience is to be directly intuited, it is obvious that it can be communicated only in its wholeness. Moreover people claiming to have religious experience seldom feel like describing it. Those who try to do so are often vague due to the use of a peculiar symbolism. Iqbal finds nothing amiss here, since the standpoint of the man who relies on religious experience for capturing reality must always remain individual and incommunicable. Moreover, there can be no bar on looking for other avenues of experience than the normal one if it fails to yield desired results. So, the moot point is, whether the normal level is the only level of knowledge-yielding experience. Iqbal looks for historical support in the recorded evidence of religious divines.

The evidence of religious experts in all ages and countries is that there are potential types of consciousness lying close to our normal consciousness. If these types of consciousness open up possibility 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 and demands our serious attention.¹²²

The fact of there being more than one space-time orders induces Iqbal to question whether the causality-bound -aspect of nature is the only acceptable mode of experience. Is not the Ultimate Reality invading our consciousness from some other directions as well?

Iqbal considers religious experience as perfectly natural and normal. In this context he compares it with normal human feelings. He tries to establish the similarity by pointing out the common characteristics that the two possess as human activities. Like feeling, the meaning of its content is presumed to be transmitted to others in the form of propositions, but the content itself cannot be transmitted. The incommunicability of religious experience itself hinges on the claim that it is essentially a matter of inarticulate feeling, untouched by discursive intellect. The real difference lies the fact that religious experience (though essentially a state feeling) is not the ordinary feeling of pleasure and pain which organically based. It is rather a unique kind of feeling requiring special faculty to receive it.

For Iqbal, religious experience is not merely a subjective state the individual. In his Lecture on "Knowledge and Religion Experience" he discusses the point at length: Religious -experience, I have tried to maintain, is essentially a state of feeling with a cognitive aspect, the content of which cannot be communicated to others, except in the form of a judgment. Now when a judgment which claims to be the Interpretation of a certain region of human experience, not accessible to me, is placed before -me for my assent, I am entitled to ask, what is the guarantee of its truth? Are we in possession of a test which would reveal its validity? If personal experience had been the only ground for the acceptance of a judgment of this kind, religion would have been the possession of few individuals only. Happily we are in possession of tests which do not differ from those applicable to other forms of knowledge. These I-call the intellectual test and the pragmatic test. By the intellectual test I mean critical interpretation, without any presuppositions of human experience, generally with a view to discover whether our

¹²² Ibid., p. 185

interpretation leads us ultimately to a reality of the same character as is revealed by religious experience. The Pragmatic test judges it by its fruits. The former is applied by the philosopher, the latter by the prophet.¹²³

The fact that religious experience 'possesses a cognitive import carries much weight with Iqbal. What is, however, more important is Its capacity to centralize the forces of the ego thereby endowing him with a new and a richer personality. For Iqbal, religious life is a step higher in life's struggle for evolution. From a fragile unity of the ego with ever present danger of dissolution, the religious life takes him to the domain of greeter freedom in the realms of new and unknown situations. It fixes its gaze on experiences symbolic of those subtle movements of reality, which profoundly affects the destiny of the ego as a possible permanent element in the constitution of reality. It is in this sense that Iqbal expresses his dissatisfaction with the latter development of psychology and counsels it to look for an independent method and a new technique. Presently, for him, psychology has yet to touch even the outer fringe of religious life and is far from the richness and variety of religious experience.

What makes religious experience of vital importance to psychology is its claim to express and represent the whole man.,William James has emphasized the point in the following passage:

If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faith, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows that the result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk. however clever, that may contradict it.¹²⁴

It is true that in some sense religious experience integrates the disparate and competing propensities of the ego and develops single synthetic

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 26-27

¹²⁴ The Varieties of Religious Experience, op. cit., p. 73

transfiguration of his experiences. In a semi religion is the expression of man's whole life. It is concerned, not with one aspect of life, but with whole of life or with life as whole. The point can be made clear if religion is likened to attitude. For an attitude involves the whole of the personality of person--conscious and unconscious:

Religion is the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities towards the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interests and destinies... This definition defines religion as an 'attitude'... The word 'attitude' shall hereby used to cover that responsive side of consciousness which is found in such things as attention, interest, expectancy, feeling, tendencies to action etc. The advantages of defining religion as an attitude are sufficiently manifest. It shows that religion is not a matter of any one 'department' of psychic life but involves the whole man. It includes what there was of truth in the historical attempts to identify religion with feeling, belief or will. And it draws attention to the fact that religion is immediately subjective, thus differing from science (which emphasises 'content' rather than 'attitude'); and yet it points to the other fact also that religion involves and presupposes the acceptance of the objective. Religion is the attitude of a self towards and object in which the self genuinely believes."¹²⁵

It is 'obvious from the above discussion that there are similarities between Iqbal and James in so far as they consider religion to be an expression of the whole personality of man. But, then there is also agreement between him and J.B. Pratt on this point, though Iqbal lays greater stress on the cognitive content of religious experience. Still, for him, religion is not a matter of any one 'department' of psychic life, but involves the whole man:

¹²⁵ J. Bissett Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness*, Macmillan, New York, 1959, pp.2-3

Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man.¹²⁶

Iqbal goes a step further and makes it incumbent upon the recipient, of religious experience to involve himself in a 'world. shaking' or a . 'world-making' act, diffusing itself in the time movement, and making itself effectively visible to the eye of history. Religious experience as the expression of a total ego, then, is expressed in a vital act which deepens the whole being of the ego, and sharpens his will with the creative assurance that the world is not something to be merely seen or known through concepts, but something to be made and remade by perpetual action and struggle.

It is this social aspect of religious experience which provides Iqbal the basis for this view that Prophetic experience is different from that of the mystic.

The mystic does not wish to return from the repose of 'unitary experience'; and even when he does return, as he must, his return does not mean much for mankind at large. The Prophet's return is creative. He returns to insert himself into the sweep of time with a view to control the forces of history, and thereby to create a fresh world of ideals. For the mystic the repose of 'unitary experience' is something final: for the Prophet it is the awakening, within him, of world-shaking psychological forces, calculated to completely transform the human world. So, the desire to see his religious experience transformed into a living world-force is supreme in the Prophet. Thus his return amounts to a kind of pragmatic test of the value of his religious experience.¹²⁷

It is true that both the Prophet and the mystic come back to the normal levels of experience. However, the difference lies in the fact that 'the return of the Prophet is fraught with infinite meaning for mankind.'

¹²⁶ The Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam, op. cit., p. 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 124

It has been claimed by some scholars of Iqbal that 'although the mystic experience differs from the experience of a prophet, it does not differ from it qualitatively. That is, the two forms of religious consciousness differ not in kind, but in degree only'. Indeed, Iqbal has defined a prophet as:

a type of mystic consciousness in which 'unitary experience' tends to overflow its boundaries and seek opportunities of redirecting or refashioning the forces of collective life. In his personality the finite centre of life sinks into his own infinite depths only to spring up again, with fresh vigour, to destroy the old, and to disclose the new directions of life."¹²⁸

No doubt, the above definition clearly indicates the fact that a prophet is a type of mystic consciousness. But this consciousness is different both 'in degree and kind'. And Iqbal is not at all vague on this point:

The nature of Prophet's religious experience, as disclosed in the Qur'an, however, is wholly different. It is not mere experience in the sense of a purely biological event, happening inside the experiment and necessitating no reactions on his social environment. It is individual experience creative of a social order.¹²⁹

He goes further and argues:

The point to be seized is that while it is psychologically possible for a saint to attain to a prophetic experience, his experience will have no socio-political significance making him the centre of a new organization and entitling him to declare this organization to be the criterion of the faith or disbelief of the followers of Muhammad.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 125

¹²⁹ Syed Abdul Wahid (ed.), *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, Lahore, 1964, pp. 166-167. (Presidential Address delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League at Allahabad on 1930.

What does this prove? (1) that quantitatively the mystic experience is limited; (2) that qualitatively, it does not have that in-built force which cannot but create a new socio-political order. so far as mystic experience. is a 'consciousness' similar to that o prophetic consciousness, Iqbal does not restrict it to man alone:

Indeed the way in which the world Wahy (inspiration) is used in the Qur'an shows that the Quran regards it as a universal property of life; though its nature and character are different at different stages of the evolution of life. The plant growing freely in space, the animal developing a new organ to suit a new environment, and a human being receiving light from the inner depths of life, are all cases of inspiration varying in character according to the needs of the recipient, or the needs of the species to which the recipient belongs.¹³¹

Despite these differences, a comprehensive study of mystic consciousness still remains the only possible way to an understanding of religious experience. More so, if in the realm of psychology, "all states, whether their content is religious or non religious, are organically determined."¹³² It is true that we are not in possession of a really effective scientific method to analyse and evaluate the contents of non-rational and other-than-intellectual modes of consciousness. Still, there is no justification for an escape from the fact of there being types of experience other than purely sensory. It is no use dubbing religious experience as illusion.

The view that such experiences are neurotic or mystical will not finally settle the question of their meaning or value. If an outlook beyond physics is possible, we must

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 268-269. (Reply to questions raised by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru).

¹³¹ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, op. cit., p. 125.

¹³² Ibid., p. 23.

courageously face the possibility, even though it may disturb or tend to modify our normal ways of life and thought.¹³³

Iqbal attempts to find an organic unity between various levels of consciousness and while trying to draw an analogy between cognitive faith and sense-perception seems to implicate an extended use of science, and by implication physics. Like the transpersonal psychologists, he appears to have a fascination for the scientific paradigm. Obviously such a stand involves an implicit and a priori interpretative element. Thus, one may ask if he was trying to study the religious states of consciousness or the experience of such states of awareness. This is the moot point for planning to contrive a genuine relation between psychology and religious consciousness. It may be alright wishing to base religion on an objective, scientific study. But, the problem of meaning involved here does not arise within a scientific frame work and is essentially in issue for the normative analysis of philosophy. Religion as a lived experience remains crucially a personal affair. A scientific, psychological study may illuminate the phenomenon only partially. But, in James' words, "the science of religion may not be equivalent for living religion."¹³⁴

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 189-190

¹³⁴ The Varieties of Religious Experience, op. cit., pp. 479-481