IQBAL: HIS METAPHYSICAL IDEAS

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The first page of *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is an excellent example of Iqbal's provocative style. The question is, he says, what kind of a universe do we live in, what are the unimagined potentialities of human beings and what help can we find from the history of human religiousness as a whole to help shed light on these questions? He also says in his Introduction that no answer to these questions should be considered final.

Iqbal's perspective is better appropriated if people keep on struggling with these questions. It is not faithful to Iqbal to assume that his answers were final, or to suppose that people should cease to think for themselves. He thought that human religiousness in general was threatened by the positivism of modern thought, and that the defence of any one religion needed to be a defence of the possibility of being religious in the context of a sceptical age. But defence in this respect does not mean a blind kind of defensiveness; it rather means an on-going critical approach to whatever new information comes forth. Therefore, although, sixty years after his death, new insights from astronomy, linguistics, anthropology, physics, biology, religious sciences, economics, computer science and so on have occurred and raised many new questions. These developments do not undermine his approach.

He urged the continual asking of new questions. He emphasised the need to continue to seek for a better understanding of the physical universe and of human history, which includes human religious history. He struggled to understand Einstein and Whitehead as well, of course, as Ibn Khaldën. There is a passion in Iqbal for the kind of knowledge of the external world and history, which will commend itself to the human mind collectively, that is information which can be verified. For this reason, he thought, Muslims should be involved in the on-going human enterprise to understand the external universe through disciplined reason. One cannot overstate his passionate conviction that the actual world must be studied and not just imagined or dreamed about.

Yet he also affirmed that all such rational study left human minds gaping and groping with unanswerable questions. He recognised that human languages were inadequate to deal with what a recent writer has called *The*

Edges of Language.[1] We can talk about much of what we experience; we can verify and reach consensus about much of what we observe and discover, but beyond a certain point, we reach areas of experience and awareness for which the language of reason cannot help us. On the edges of language, we cannot find words to convey in any systematic way information and insights that can be verified.

Iqbal, as a metaphysician, insists that the external universe is a continual source of newness. It is therefore impossible for human beings to have final ideas about the nature and structure of the cosmos. New information will always be forthcoming. He proclaims a strong *no* to any fixed ideas about the external universe. On the edges of language, where we cannot find words to talk about something like a black hole, we break into metaphor. Astronomers may not think of themselves as poets, but, of course, with images like the black hole, they are on the edges of language, pushing to think what we are not yet able to think.

Whitehead, one of the greatest mathematicians of this century and one of Iqbal's sources, wrote: [2]

> The history of human thought in the past is a pitiful tale of self-satisfaction with a supposed adequacy of knowledge in respect to factors of human existence. We now know that in the past such self-satisfaction was a delusion. Accordingly, when we survey ourselves and our colleagues, we have every reason to doubt the adequacy of our knowledge in any particular.

Iqbal agrees with Whitehead that knowledge of the physical universe is always tentative because the new breaks in and breaks up fixed ideas. Further, the problem of knowing ourselves is even more complex, because the problem is how can we know what we might become? Here, too, metaphor is the only tool we have in language to point to our sense of what is to happen next. Iqbal was concerned to transform the Indian Muslims' sense of themselves and what they might be. He saw this question also as a matter of what the human species might become. We are always pushing to know more about the external universe and we need to push just as hard to

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[1] Paul Van Buren, *The Edges of Language,* New York: MacMillan, 1972

[2] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and Philosophy* [Paterson, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co, reprinted, 1964, p. 86.

discover what is potential in ourselves. "What we might become" is as mysterious a question as "what is a black hole"?

Iqbal's metaphors about the self refer often to the 'world of sense' as opposed to the 'world of soul'. I do not know if anyone has spoken of the soul as a black hole, but to do so might help us grasp Iqbal's awareness of how strange, and unknown to ourselves, we actually are. Another of his metaphors is that we should seek the 'nature of the salamander which feeds on flame'.[3] This image suggests that the human soul is that which continually changes colour and is eaten up by fire.

It is true that Iqbal's metaphors, like this of the salamander, refer on one level to the specific historical situation of the Indian Muslims at the time the poems were written. In the case of the salamander image, the situation was the domination by the European powers of Muslim countries in the period after 1914. Iqbal's poetry on this level was an imperative to throw off this domination and to get rid of the psychology of self-contempt that had developed in the midst of a colonised people. Muslims were asked to imagine themselves free people.

From this perspective, one might argue that since the political situation has changed and Muslims are no longer dominated by imperialist powers that occupy their territory, the metaphors are irrelevant. I want to maintain, however, that on another level, the metaphors refer to the human condition in a way that goes beyond one particular historical context. Other metaphors of Iqbal about the self are as follows: [4]

Hear my complaint and feel, or do not feel, with me:
He does not come to beg redress, whose soul walks free!
Vast skies and frozen winds and man's one pinch of dust;
What urged you to create-kindness or cruelty?
Is this your bounteous spring, your fair wind's ministry?
I sinned and I went solitary from Paradise,
But angels could not people Your world's vacancy;
On my all-venturing nature the naked wilderness
Pours blessings out, that realm You left to anarchy.
A spirit that craves danger is not lured by parks
Where no close ambush holds a lurking enemy.

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[3] Victor Kiernan, trans. *Poems from Iqbal,* London: John Murray, 1955, p. 17.
[4] Kiernan, pp. 24, 25.

The abode of Love lies far beyond Your seraphs' wing:
None find, but who desire and dare infinitely.

This poem serves to demonstrate some of the metaphors that typically express the metaphysics of Iqbal. The external universe, as we perceive it, is 'vast skies and frozen winds'—empty, cold, uncaring—vaster than we are capable of imagining or conceiving. We have to use metaphors about this because the more our science is telling us about the cosmos, with recent devices like the Hubble telescope, the more the size escapes our capacity to think about it. Also, because of the speed of light, the Hubble telescope can show us events which happened long ago, longer than we can imagine, but cannot show us what is happening now at these great distances. This is the kind of paradox about our capacity to know which would, I think, have appealed to Iqbal.

Yet, the 'pinch of dust' possessed of an 'all-venturing nature' fights back, argues, sins, craves danger, dares infinitely. Of course, we do not all consciously dare infinitely, but the point is that we might, or that we have hidden potentialities that we might never have imagined. Such possibilities and challenges are there in any context and any historical period. Why should we venture all and why should it be love that craves danger?

All the images of those people whom Iqbal objects to—mullahs, religious experts, Brahmins, capitalists, communists, parliamentarians, pharaohs, Frankish glassblowers, slaves, servile people, Europe, Asia, the vultures of the West—all represent to him alternatives other than those of the hawk in the desert, the image of love seeking danger. Or perhaps it is that the danger follows inexorably from love, because love stirs up the soul to demand response from the seemingly cold and empty vastness of the universe.

The characteristics of those in the list condemned by Iqbal include first of all servility. In terms of what we might call the metaphysics of microcosm of the self, the servile are rejected because they lack the courage to discover the creative depths of their individual selves.

Man let himself, dull thing, be wooed
By his own kind to servitude.
And cast the dearest pearl he had
Before Jamshed and Kaikobad;
Till so ingrained his cringings were,
He grew more abject than a cur-
Who ever saw at one dog's frown

Another dog's meek head bow down? [5]

Mullahs, Brahmins and religious experts also are generally condemned for *taqlâd*, endless repetition of ideas and practices characterised by blindness to the new. The servile are dull and the religious experts are too. Capitalists, Communists Frankish glass blowers and so forth represent forms of human awareness focused on material well being as the goal of existence. This also makes for dullness, because minds focused narrowly in this way avoid questions of ultimate meaning. In so doing, they fail to discover their essential humanity.

Iqbal's answer to all these human failures is the image of the hawk in the desert. The hawk is a very old symbol in human religious history. One finds it on the flag of Mexico—representing the pre—Columbian peoples whose great and lost civilizations conceived of the hawk from the sky and the snake from the earth as the mysterious symbols of forces coming from beyond and beneath to balance the human world. In ancient Egypt also the hawk, one symbol of the God Horus, is a link between levels of known and unknown reality, the link that sustains human reality. Iqbal typically wrote of the hawk as follows:

Close veils inflame the loiterer in Love's lane
Your long reluctance fans my passion's flare.
The hawk lives out his days in rock and desert,
Tame nest-twig-carrying his proud claws for swear.
Was it book-lesson, or father's glance, that taught
The son of Abraham what a son should bear?
Bold heart's firm souls, come pilgrim to my tomb;
I taught poor dust to tower hill-high in air.
Truth has no need of me for tiring-maid;
To stain the tulip red is Nature's care. [6]

In the earlier cultural systems, the hawk comes from above, and helps sustain the known world. In Iqbal's language, the hawk represents the spirit in humans which demands to transcend the known world—the nest-twig-carrying—and to discover more.

Why must the offspring of Abraham, those who wish to know, to love and to serve God, bear so much? The bloodstained tulip is a characteristic

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[5] Kiernan, p. 97.
[6] Kiernan, pp. 26,27.

image in Iqbal's verse of the devastated human heart. On one level, the devastation for the Indian Muslim was the loss of their power in the world and their creative energy.

On another level, however, the problem is a universal one for all humans; life itself—Nature's care—stains the tulip

Are we devastated because the speed of light means that we cannot see what is happening now in our universe? Yes, that is one reason why the tulip is stained red; we are finite. Many now on our planet are setting up listening devices to ask if there is more life in the universe which can speak to us. I remember taking my children to our local planetarium for a programme on the stars, which began with the question, is anyone out there? I think, many children on the planet now want to know if there is more life out there which we can hope to encounter. There is a great hope in our species that we can discover that we are not alone as a sentient, self-conscious life form in this vast universe. But, of course, even if we meet new life, we will still be finite.

If some listener on our planet were to pick up a broadcast from somewhere out in space, that event would change all of us. The salamander image of Iqbal is a potent reminder of how adaptable in fact we are and how we change and keep on changing. This is not to say there is no core of identity within each of us as individuals, as representatives of cultural and religious traditions and as members of a species. Identity is linked with memory. But we are much more than computers; when we change, our memories also change and are re-interpreted; the processes of growth, individually and corporately are processes of continual shifting of priorities and goals. In Iqbal's words:[7]

> The characteristic of the ego is spontaneity...No doubt man has a spatial aspect; but this is not the only aspect of man. There are other aspects of man, such as evaluation, the unitary character of purposive experience and the pursuit of truth... Every act of a free ego creates a new situation and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding... Nor is the activity of intelligence possible without the presence of ends... Life is only a series of acts of attention and an act of attention is inexplicable without reference to a purpose, conscious or unconscious... Thus ends and purposes, whether they exist as conscious or subconscious

[7] Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* Lahore: Ashraf reprinted, 1960, pp. 106, 114, 123, 52, 53.

> tendencies, form the warp and woof of conscious experience. And the notion of purpose cannot be understood except in reference to the future. The past, no doubt, abides and operates in the present; but this operation of the past in the present is not the whole of consciousness. The element of purpose discloses a kind of forward look in consciousness... To be determined by an end is to be determined by what ought to be... A state of attentive consciousness involves both memory and imagination as operating factors. On the analogy of our conscious experience, therefore, Reality is not a blind vital impulse wholly un-illuminated by idea. It's nature is through and through teleological.

The metaphysical position of Iqbal is thus that Reality is teleological, possessed of purpose and direction. Yet this is not one simple purpose, not a divine plan which automatically works itself out. Since individuals keep changing their purposes and since each change makes the whole situation different, nothing is automatic about the unfolding of the universe. Purpose is what directs consciousness and action, but purpose also changes. New purposes are discovered as the spirit matures. This also is paradoxical; our energy comes from our drive to make the world what we dream it ought to be, but our idea of what ought to be also changes and evolves. If we do not learn and change, the rigidity of our minds tends to smash us and others.

Human purposes develop, in Iqbal's opinion, in inter-action with the one God who is best understood by the metaphor of a self-conscious self—the Ultimate Ego. The English expression 'I-Thou' relationship best characterises this insight; the opposite is an 'I-it' relationship in which the human is a person but everything else has the status of object to be manipulated according to the needs and wishes of the human person. To conceive of God as most like a person is to insist that God cannot be the object of human manipulation. Another person is someone who can be heard and responded to, but not controlled. Any effort to dominate another person is a failure to comprehend that between persons only free responses are authentic. To try to control another person is to perceive that person as an 'it' and not a "Thou".

We have to think of God with the metaphor of a "Thou' because any other kind of metaphor would reduce God to less than ourselves. "Thou' has purposes, in somewhat the same way as "I' has purposes. Yet any metaphor for God does no more than point in a particular direction. When the basic

question arises as to how the human person could know the purposes of God, the answer is problematic. Iqbal mentions the speed of light. He says that as a metaphor for God, as used in surah of Light, light is better understood as an absolute that is that the speed never changes.[8] Light gives us a clue to the consistency of the Absolute. We can know that God has purposes, and we have dim perceptions of what these purposes are. But we delude ourselves if we ever think those purposes are identical with our own, or that we understand them with perfect clarity. Light shows us some things, but not everything.

Iqbal insists that the metaphor of an Ultimate Ego is the closest his language can come to explaining the Qur'anic teaching about God. In his words:[9]

> The infinity of the Ultimate Ego consists in infinite inner possibilities of his creative activity of which the universe, as known to us, is only a partial expression. In one word, God's infinity is intensive, not extensive.

Thus the salamander of the human self, capable of unfolding unimaginable possibilities, is a clue to the free possibilities in the Ultimate Ego whose creative possibilities go beyond anything we could conceive. The virtue of this metaphysical position is that it both opens up hitherto unimagined possibilities and closes the door on any ideas about the divine plan as something clear and readily intelligible. The implications for action are obvious; human purposes should be formulated in response to what are dimly perceived as divine purposes. But since purposes require decisions, the shape of the future cannot be known until it has been created. Striving to know and to do the will of God necessarily takes place in context of lack of clear sight. The reason is that the nature of the creative process requires commitment to what has not yet been fully accomplished. Thus the red stain on the tulip. Iqbal says:[10]

> This is the point where faith in the eventual triumph of goodness emerges as a religious doctrine. 'God is equal to His purpose, but most men know it not.'"[12:2]

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[8] *Ibid.,* pp. 63,64.
[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 63,64.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 88.

We act knowing only dimly where we are going; we have to trust in the goodness of God as the directive force. Our relation to this goodness is that we both know and do not know what it is like.[11] If we did not know at all, we could not even devise metaphors to express it; if we knew clearly, we would not need metaphors to point the direction for us. We move without maps, but with dimly perceived direction nevertheless.

Iqbal says that we have to reflect upon prayer at this point in the discussion. [12]

> Religion is not satisfied with mere conception; it seeks a more intimate knowledge of and association with the object of its pursuit. The agency through which this association is achieved is the act of worship or prayer ending in spiritual illumination.

He quotes William James on prayer to indicate that the greatest modern psychologist of religion thinks, as Iqbal does, that the impulse to pray is universal and that it springs from the human consciousness of finitude. Iqbal insists that prayer is a process that can lead to spiritual illumination and to the human persons discovering direction and purpose in response to the perceived goodness of God. His metaphor for this situation is from Rumi: 'the scent of the musk-gland is a better guide than the footprints of the deer'.[13] Since our origins of sight and observation are limited, we need to rely more on the depths of ourselves. The goodness of God is the only reality which can be trusted to direct the choices. We must make in shaping the future for ourselves and for our species. But we follow this direction in the half-blind state characteristic of our finite natures and therefore, we trip over our own feet all the time.

> If [a person] studies life as manifested in himself, i.e. his own mind freely choosing, rejecting, reflecting, surveying the past and the present and dynamically imagining the future, he is sure to be convinced of the inadequacy of his mechanical concepts. On the analogy of our conscious experience, then the universe is a free creative movement.[14]

Tripping over our own feet is a feature of spontaneity. The challenges and possibilities of today are different from yesterday and will be different again

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[11] Robert Lawson Slater, *Paradox and Nirvana A study of religious ultimates with special reference to Burmese Buddhism,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1951, pp. 88-102.

[12] *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 89.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[14] *Ibid.,* pp. 50, 51.

tomorrow. We trip partly because we are usually out of date in our ideas about the external world and ourselves: we fail to grasp the possibilities of the moment. Any kind of religious consciousness which is self-satisfied, which assumes that the divine plan is clear and which says that believers know exactly what they should do, is a deluded consciousness. It is better to trip, fall, and reflect than to move serenely forward convinced that the universe is clearly understood. We do not solve problems when we assume in advance that we have all the answers. Metaphors can be very dangerous when taken literally. Metaphors point; they do not provide maps or blueprints.

The Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye says that the education of the imagination is the most important duty we have towards the young of our species. Educated imaginations should be able to learn to digest and appropriate metaphors because Frye says, metaphors tell us more about the realities of life than anything else does. Metaphors are the essence of language; they represent the core of what we try to do for each other when we attempt to speak of the fundamental realities of existence.

> Metaphors are paradoxical and again we suspect that perhaps only in paradox are words doing the best they can for us.[15]

Frye speaks of the metaphors of the Bible as important because they convey a vision of spiritual life that continues to transform and expand our own. Iqbal says, the Qur'an is a catalyst directed to stirring up human consciousness to an awareness of the significance of sign and symbol.[16] These two experts on religious language recognized in very similar ways that scripture is valuable when it functions to liberate the mind from simple positivism to an awareness of what Frye calls the double vision. Time and space can be looked at two ways at once; minds can see what can be measured and they can also see beyond and through the measurable.[17]

For double the vision my eyes do see
And a double vision is always with me.

(William Blake)

Frye's thoughts on religious language have developed from a life-long study of Blake's poetry and of the impact of Biblical imagery on the western

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[15] Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision Language and Meaning in Religion,* Toronto: The United Church Publishing House 1991, pp. 22-28.
[16] *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 14.
[17] Frye, pp. 22-28.

literary and religious heritage. His conclusions move in directions very similar to those of Iqbal, namely that mental and spiritual health require a balanced kind of double vision.

The spiritual democracy which Iqbal says, is the ultimate aim of Islam,[18] requires leaving space for each individual to mature in his or her own way. The individual with the double vision is seeing for himself or herself; such insight cannot be forced, it can only be elicited by brilliant metaphors. One of the amazing realities of language is that the speech which truly reveals us to each other, can only happen when we are free and spontaneous. Iqbal valued spontaneity as essential fore growth in understanding of the self and the universe.[19] His vocation as a poet was to find the metaphors, which could realise the energy of his people and to direct them to the healing of the wounds of the world.

> Every day doth some new work employ Him,' says the Qur'an. To exist in real time is not to be bound by the fetters of serial time, but to create it from moment to moment and to be absolutely free and original in creation. In fact all creative activity is free activity.[20]

One implication of this perspective is that the past can serve as a source of ideas and inspiration, but it should not be allowed to dominate the present. Creativeness requires free and spontaneous use of the cultural goods of the past for the purpose of shaping a better future. Creativeness in the present arises out of a free relationship to the source of life, which is Thou—the Ultimate Ego—alive and good.

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[18] *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 180.
[19] *Ibid.,* p. 150.
[20] *Ibid.,* p. 40.