

RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF MUHAMMAD IQBAL

Dr. Javid Iqbal

Iqbal had no philosophic system to offer; therefore, strictly speaking, he was not a philosopher. He was also not a trained theologian in the traditional sense of the term; hence he could not be considered as an expert on religion. Had he been alive, he would have certainly been surprised to hear his thoughts or ideas being described as 'religious philosophy'. Even otherwise he would have rejected the term 'religious philosophy' as contradictory, for, philosophy, according to him, is merely a groping inquiry whereas religion is founded on faith in Reality. He likewise disapproved of being called a poet, for according to him he had only used poetry as a vehicle for conveying his ideas to the others.

Nevertheless Iqbal was essentially a religious poet, who expressed the religious aspirations of his age in such a way that is difficult to enter into the spirit of his great poems without some acquaintance with the religious-cultural history of Islam. He was a poet gifted with the necessity of utterance and thus carried a prophet's burden. The message he was to deliver had been pressed like lead upon his soul and although the process of telling was an agony, he was compelled to tell it. Each word of the message was like a flame which struggled to break forth into speech and would accept no suppression or denial.

There is no denying the fact that poetry can be vigorous while being quite indifferent to religion. But poetry cannot long remain separated from religious consciousness if it is to achieve a higher level of expression. Therefore, the bond between religion and poetry is not superficial. Religion is a power as ancient as the world and if philosophy the parent of the sciences, has been universally acknowledged as the child of religion, there is no reason why poetry, which in its higher forms is more philosophical than philosophy itself, should not be considered as the child of religion.

There has always existed a mysterious link between great problems and great poems. The conflict between the experience of men and the religious aspirations of the age has laid the foundations of the greatest poems of the

ancient Greeks, Jews, Christians and Muslims. In world literature examples of numerous poets could be cited, who, were most effective when their poetic expression resulted directly from religious emotion.

In chronological order Iqbal comes after Hali and before a group of Indo-Pakistan writers in modern Urdu literature known as the Progressive Writers. But in terms of the accuracy of his insights into the problems of contemporary Muslims, Iqbal ought to be placed much later. Similarly, his message must not be interpreted in isolation from the socio-political conditions under which he lived and against which he felt obliged to react.

He hailed from a Muslim middle-class family that was known for its piety and abstinence. He received his early education in Sialkot and thereafter came to study in Lahore. As a sensitive young Muslim he realised that the glory of Islam had become a matter of past history. The Ottoman Empire was in the process of breaking up. The struggle for independence of the Chinese and Central Asian Muslims was brought to an end and they had already been absorbed in the Chinese nationalist Empire and Tsarist Russia. The Muslims were gradually being driven out from Eastern Europe. Iran was collapsing. Egypt was controlled by the British. France had seized Morocco. The Muslims of the Indian sub-continent had given up all hope of regaining their lost freedom after suppression of the so-called 1857 Mutiny. Under the British rule, they had been reduced to a minority of 100 million people. Initiative had been snatched away from the hands of Islam which, like an old man, lived in the past and was perpetually on the defensive.

In this condition of utter despair the Muslims of the sub-continent turned their eyes towards the movement of Islamic solidarity. This movement (also called the Pan-Islamic movement) had been founded by Jamal al-din Afghani. Throughout his life Afghani preached that the unity of purpose among the Muslims was the only weapon with which they could defeat the forces of imperialism. Accordingly, he endeavoured for the establishment of a federation of Muslim states under the constitutional leadership of the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph. Iqbal was profoundly influenced by Afghani's vision of Islamic solidarity and it is in this context that he is regarded as a poet-prophet of Islamic revival or resurgence. He started his career as a poet in the traditional sense and wrote on whatever moved him. He was fascinated by nature, expressed himself on topics like love, solitude,

loneliness etc. or composed *Ghazals* in the conventional style. He also wrote some poems in support of Indian nationalism. Sometimes the subject matter of his poems was universal and at other times it exclusively concerned the Muslim community. He experimented in writing satirical verse or wrote poems for children. But the most moving poems of his formative phase are those in which he bewailed the miserable plight of the Indian Muslims or lamented the sorrows of the Muslim world involved in a bitter struggle for independence.

There is an interesting admission by Iqbal about himself in his notebook entitled *Stray Reflections*. This notebook was compiled in 1910. In one of the notes, while reflecting on the poets who had influenced him during this formative period, he remarks that Wordsworth saved him from atheism in his student days. An analysis of this remark is important for two reasons: First, it reveals the questioning and searching nature of Iqbal's mind; and second, it indicates that he was not confined to the generally accepted narrowness of his own tradition. From this remark it can be safely assumed that he drifted from a state of doubt to a pantheistic state and during this phase he founded his political ideas on a pantheistic philosophy. Accordingly he wrote poems in support of Indian nationalism and patriotism; but side by side with this trend proceeded the love for his own religio-cultural tradition which found expression in numerous exquisite poems written in the same period.

He went to Europe in 1905 as an ardent supporter of pantheism, nationalism, patriotism and at the same time Islamic solidarity. He stayed there upto 1908 studying philosophy and law at different universities. At that time Europe was in a state of intellectual turmoil. The spell of Hegelianism was holding every intellectual. The emphasis on rationalism and automatic progress through science had resulted in the development of materialistic and atheistic trends. It is a tribute to the quality of Iqbal's mind that it remained unaffected by the materialistic and -an atheistic trends in the Europe/thought of the early 20th century. Actually it was during his stay in Europe that he, passed through an intellectual as well as emotional revolution and became disgusted with pantheism, secular nationalism as well as territorial patriotism. He had seen the forges of secular nationalism and territorial patriotism active in Europe and arrived at the conclusion that the construction of human

groups on the foundations of race, language, colour and territory or fighting as well as dying for it was not only inhuman and barbaric but contrary to the universally accepted spiritual values of equality and brotherhood of man. A critical study of European culture had revealed to him that the development of materialistic and atheistic trends in Europe had trodden over the moral and religious convictions of Christianity; whereas the forces it had engendered e.g. nationalism, patriotism, imperialism etc. resulted in the formation of mutually ill-adjusted states, dominated by interests, not human but national. These mutually ill-adjusted states had been frequently dragged into internecine wars and were involved in a dangerous competition which would eventually lead to their destruction. He felt that secular nationalism and territorial patriotism were idols with which European Christianity had made a compromise at the cost of itself receding into the background of private opinion. But Islam, he reflected, never compromised with idolatry of any form and had destroyed this adversary altogether. Since Islam was complete in itself, it could not tolerate nationalism, patriotism or any *ism* sundered from it.

This disillusionment from European culture made Iqbal feel the necessity of seeking inspiration exclusively from his own religio-cultural tradition. A deeper study of the history of Muslims led him to the conclusion that it was pantheism among other destructive forces which had killed the will to act in the Muslim peoples and resulted in the decline of Islamic civilisation. Pantheism developed in Islam when decadence had already set in through the establishment of autocratic Sultanate and sterile Mullaism. It was a product of slavish mentality which extolled passive virtues like humility, submission and obedience. Accordingly this pantheistic God, manufactured by such mentality, according to him, was very different from the vigorous personality of the original Qur'anic God.

A deeper study of Islamic culture also revealed to Iqbal that the scientific and technological progress achieved in Europe had in fact been stimulated by and was an advancement on what had been handed-over by Islamic culture to Europe through Spain and Italy before the Renaissance. Therefore, adopting the same in the world of Islam amounted to taking back what Islam had originally given to Europe. Of the rest of the European culture he became an adverse critic and remained so all his life. The European

civilisation appeared to him as ‘an empty scabbard chased with flowery gilt’ and he genuinely believed that it would eventually ‘commit suicide with its own dagger’.

Iqbal returned from Europe in 1908 with an awareness that for the Muslims the realisation of Islam was the only destiny. He had ceased to bewail the miserable condition or lament the sorrows of the Muslim world. Instead he either erupted into violent protest to God or broke into moving prayers urging God to guide him in finding solution of the problems of the Muslim community. The prayed for guidance was immediately available and the answer came spontaneously. There was a miraculous touch in the turning point, for, as he proceeded along, his poetry became more and more vigorous and strong.

Since Iqbal felt called upon to deliver a message, his poetry attained a prophetic character. As the message was to be delivered to the Muslims of the world, he changed the mode of communication from Urdu to Persian, the language of Islamic culture. Although the forms of imagery employed by him were taken from the Islamic literary tradition, he used them as vehicles for the expression of absolutely new insights. Since he aimed at bringing home his religio-philosophical ideas directly to the hearts of Muslims, the poetic language of Iqbal became lucid, simple and profound to the emotions, but remained complex, difficult, and unintelligible to the mind.

As for the religio-philosophical ideas on which the message of Iqbal’ is founded, an outline can be attempted. In order to appreciate his ideas properly, a comprehensive knowledge of the development of modern philosophy in Europe is required in addition to an understanding of the Islamic religio-cultural tradition. He had his own concepts of God, man and universe. He was deeply interested in the contribution of Muslim philosophers to the problem of time and space. He dealt with the problem of death and had his own concept of life-after-death.

According to him, the existence of God cannot be established by reason alone, but it can be established by a totality of experience consisting of sense perception, reason as well as intuition. God is a personality, vigorously alive and constantly willing. He is the Ultimate Ego whose infinity is intensive and

not extensive. He is continuously creative, goes on adding to His creation and is capable of changing His mind. From God conceived as the Ultimate Ego only egos proceed. Therefore, the universe from the mechanical movement of the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in human ego, is the self-revelation of “the Great I am”. It is one continuous act of God. There is no distinction between mind and matter except that of the degree of ego-hood.

Man is distinguishable from the universe, because in the process of creation, he, as an act of God, has become self-conscious. He, as a finite ego, is the representative of God on earth. He is essentially a creative activity and has the potential as well as capability of becoming a co-worker with God in the process of progressive change if he takes the initiative. Man, as a personality, is unique, distinct from God and free. His desires and aspirations, pains and pleasures, hates and loves, judgements and resolutions are exclusively his, and even God cannot feel, judge, or choose for him when more than one courses of action are open to him.

Death is a temporary shock, but man’s personality can survive it provided that it is fortified by such attributes as Love, Freedom, Courage and Disinterestedness. Life-after-death or immortality cannot be claimed by man as of right. It is to be earned by him through the fortification of his ego or personality. Hell is not a pit of ever-lasting torture, nor is Heaven a holiday. Man marches always onwards to receive ever-fresh illumination from the Ultimate Ego. Each and every act of man creates a new situation and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding.

Man and God, according to Iqbal, are highly dynamic personalities, distinct from each other and yet together. The example of submergence of the drops into the Ocean only applies to those egos which fail to fortify themselves and cannot stand the shock of death. Consequently, their submergence implies destruction or complete annihilation. But those personalities which can fortify themselves, live, move and have their being like pearls in the perpetual flow of the Divine Sea. Their existence is not obliterated, but they are held by the All-Embracing Ultimate Ego within Himself just as flames of candles retain their separate and distinct existence in the presence of the over-powering light of sun. Life, therefore, is a constant struggle for the candle to keep its flame continuously burning, or

for the drop to attain pearlhood, because the eventual destination of man is not emancipation from the limitation of individuality but to achieve a more precise definition of it. Thus, man is essentially a spiritual being realising himself in space and time. He can be properly apprehended as a living force possessing rights and duties only in the social organism to which he belongs. Unique individuals must constitute a unique society - a society which possesses a Well-defined creed and has a capability to enlarge its limits by example and persuasion. Such a society, according to Iqbal, is Islam. Hence his ideas on the Individual and Collective Ego are based on the Qur'anic conceptions of a perfect Muslim individual and the Islamic society.

The creative activity of God may appear outwardly as a process of change in serial time. But in reality the change is a continuous act of God in durational or pure time. Here Iqbal introduces his concept of what he terms 'permanence-in-change. The relativity or objectivity of atomic time has been created deliberately by God as a device to test or measure the' creative activity of man. Human acts, if performed by a fortified personality, are creative and live as permanent forces across serial time. All other human efforts ultimately perish by the remorseless rolling on of time.

These ideas have been beautifully expressed in one of his famous poems, namely, "The Mosque of Cordoba." The poem opens with a description of the destructive power of serial time in the face of which all human efforts ultimately perish. But this ambiguity, cynical indifference or remorselessness of time is a touch-stone by which man's works are measured. If the activity of man is inspired by the courageous power of Love, it cannot be destroyed by time, but lives for ever across time. Experience of visiting this great mosque in Spain affected Iqbal so profoundly that he saw manifest in its stones the inmost self of the ideal Muslim. The vision convinced him that if the Muslim peoples were to realise their ego individually and collectively, they could reach the heights of perfect creativity again. There is, of course, no returning to the past, but the new challenges must be faced with courage and vigour. The countries of Europe have seen many a revolution in modern history and now the world of Islam— and here the poem assumes a prophetic character— is also on the verge of a revolution. Life, which is untouched by revolution, is death, for, living nations must breathe the air of revolution. Such nations are like a sharp sword in the Hand, of God, cutting,

changing, moulding, shaping and casting history in accordance with their ideals.

The ethical values which can be derived from his religio-philosophical ideas are such attributes as Love, Freedom, Courage and Disinterestedness (or supreme indifference towards the acquisition of material comforts). The cultivation of these attributes results in the fortification of man's personality. The acts of such a man are creative and ever lasting, for, he is a co-worker with God. It may be noted that these attributes are, by themselves, strong, dynamic and individualistic forces. Even Love, the main key to the worldview of Iqbal, is a power of genuine individuality. He defines it as "the desire to assimilate and to absorb. Its highest form is the creation of values and ideals and the endeavour to realise them. Love individualises the lover as well as the beloved. The effort to realise the most unique individuality, individualises the seeker and implies the individuality of the sought, for, nothing else would satisfy the nature of the seeker." Hence the agony of separation from God is transformed into man's affirmation of distinctness from God in Iqbal's concept of love.

The factors which destroy man's personality arise from stagnation, the opposite of creative activity. Stagnation gives birth to fear, corruption, cowardice, begging or asking (not only for the means of livelihood but also for thoughts, ideas, habits etc. from the others), imitating, and finally servitude. Servitude annihilates individuals, societies as well as nations and the blind and cynically indifferent rolling on of time obliterates even their trace in history.

From this brief survey of Iqbal's religio-philosophical ideas, it can be gathered that he spoke for the ideal Muslim individual and the Islamic society of tomorrow. Since the reconstruction of Islamic society was not possible without a struggle for the political, cultural, social, economical and technological emancipation of the Muslim peoples, he felt obliged also to present his views on these issues.

According to Iqbal, Islam constructs nationality out of a purely abstract idea, i.e. religion. The conception of nationality in Islam has no material basis because a sense of belonging to each other amongst the Muslim peoples really depends on a, sort of mental agreement in a certain view of the world

and a desire to lay down their lives in defence of it. Hence for a Muslim Islam is itself nationalism as well as patriotism. So Iqbal became the exponent of Muslim nationalism in the Indian sub-continent from 1909 onwards, and in 1930 as the-President of the Muslim League, suggested that the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent should demand territorial specification in the form of a separate state on the basis of a distinct cultural unit. He did not only dream of carving out a separate state for Muslims of the Indian sub-continent, for, the realisation of this goal was merely a means for achieving the unification of the entire Muslim world. This unification, according to him, was possible either through the establishment of a single federated Muslim state or through a commonwealth of Muslim nations or through a combination of several independent Muslim states tied to each other for purely economic and political considerations. He even suggested Teheran as the capital of the future Commonwealth of Muslim Nations.

The constitution of a Muslim state could not be secular but Islamic and its form could be no other than socio-democratic, because the ideal Muslim individual as well as the Islamic society can only be brought solidarity up in a spirit of equality and freedom. Iqbal believed that the past contained many treasures of wisdom and understanding of the human soul. But according to him a return to medievalism was neither possible nor desirable. Since the idea of progressive change had so much significance in his philosophical thinking, he took it as normal that an age should end, and that new challenges must be faced with vision and courage. Therefore, he was of the opinion that Islamic Law should be reinterpreted in the light of contemporary experience and the altered conditions of modern life. He insisted on, a reform in the system of Islamic legal instruction and was in favour of transferring the power of interpreting the law of Islam from individual representatives of Schools to a Muslim Legislative Assembly.

Iqbal was disgusted with the imperialism of the European secular capitalist-democratic powers. He was of the view that Asia was bound to rebel against the acquisitive economy which the West had developed and imposed on the nations of the East. In his opinion, Asia could never comprehend modern Western capitalism with its undisciplined individualism. However, since he believed in a re-birth of passionate and creative faith in God, he could never accept the communist utopia founded on atheistic

socialism. According to him, although Islam considered private ownership as a trust, it did not allow capital to accumulate so as to dominate the real producers of wealth. Islam recognised the worth of the individual but disciplined the 'haves' to surrender and give away as trustees to the service of the 'have-nots'. Islam could, he maintained: "still create a new world where the social rank of man is not determined by his caste or colour or the amount of dividend he earns, but by the kind of life he lives; where the poor tax the rich; where human society is founded, not on the equality of stomachs but on the equality of spirits".

From the above it follows that Iqbal had rejected both the secular capitalist-democratic order of the power elite developed in the west as well as the atheistic socialist-dictatorial order established in the communist countries. The revolution of which he was the prophet was to be realised only by establishing the Islamic socio-democratic order. The best expression of his ideas on this subject is found in another famous poem titled "Satan's Parliament" which pictures Satan and his counsellors discussing contemporary history. The poem was written two years before the commencement of the Second World War. It is the last of the series of Iqbal's great poems on Satan whose personality had attracted his attention as an active force that shatters the spell of paradisaal rest. Satan drew in Europe's mind the fantasy of imperialism based on a secular-capitalist-democratic order of the power elite and thus divided humanity into groups of the exploiters and the exploited. Thereof, as a natural consequence, atheistic socialism emerged and communism came to be established. In order to destroy communism Satan revealed the dream of fascist authoritarianism. Satan alone is capable of dragging the European nations into war, because he can seduce them into destroying each other. He is himself the creator and protector of the secular capitalist-democratic order. Therefore, he is not afraid of the threat of the communist revolution of tomorrow. The only revolution of which he is frightened is the possibility of the awakening of the Muslims and the establishment of the Islamic socio-democratic order. Hence he commands his counsellors to keep the prophet's path hidden from the sight and mind of the Muslim peoples and to keep their eyes well-banded from the theatre of life and activity.

In the light of what has been stated above, it is evident that the achievement of Pakistan is merely the realisation of a fraction of Iqbal's

dream. His ideas on the establishment of Islamic socio-democratic order in Muslim countries as well as the unification of the world of Islam are far from being realised. Consequently, the revolution he dreamed of is yet to come and thus he continues to remain the poet philosopher of Islam's tomorrow.