

# IQBAL'S THEOLOGY OF LIFE

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Among modern Muslim thinkers, perhaps, Iqbal is the most distinctive one, who profoundly engaged himself with understanding the experience of life. He had a very broad intellectual universe, which stored a rich knowledge of world intellectual traditions. Therefore, Iqbal does not only understand life experience in his particular environment, but he reflects on life in its universal context. As a fruit of his global perspective, he is not only one of the thinkers of Muslim culture, but also he is one of the universal thinkers of humankind. Nasser writes:<sup>21</sup>

The need of the hour is to rediscover Iqbal in his true perspective and not to keep him confined to a narrow limit. In fact, Iqbal is a common heritage of whole humanity and his message should be allowed to reach uninterrupted and unhindered to all to all the citizens of the world.

His approach toward the problem of the nature of religious experience is conceptual as well as practical. It is conceptual, because Iqbal searches for a possibility of a meaningful expression of religious experience; it is practical, because Iqbal seeks to understand the meaning of religious experience within total life experience. Iqbal writes that "To yearn for something and to try to achieve it is itself and ideal, otherwise life will change into death."<sup>22</sup> Practical dimension of Qur'anic vision is the subject of the first sentence of his magnum opus, *The Reconstruction*: "The Qur'an is a book which emphasizes 'deed' rather than 'idea.'<sup>23</sup> 'I do' is superior to 'I think' in Iqbalian thought. 'What I did' is not a main question but 'what I am doing' and 'what I am going to do' is the centre of individual experience. To Iqbal, man is not a prisoner of the past, but he/she is the creative player *now* and in the *future*. Through the activity of human experience, Iqbalian type man says 'I or nothing.'

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<sup>21</sup> H. Nasser, 'Dr. Iqbal, The Poet of Humanity,' in S.G. Abbas, *Dr. Iqbal: The Humanist*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1988, p.

The duality between theory and practice does not remain as it is. This duality disappears in religious experience. Through religion, duality<sup>24</sup> becomes unity, which is the essence of Iqbal's definition of religion: "Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is expression of the whole man."<sup>25</sup> Unity is not an accidental in human life, but it is natural state, which is concretised in the form of religion. In other words, religion is the ontological status of man in Iqbalian thought. Stace expresses unity not only as the natural dimension of man but also universe: "The whole multiplicity of things which comprise the universe identical with one another and therefore constitute only one thing, a pure unity."<sup>26</sup>

The realisation of unity is equal to the realisation of life, since a divided life is not worth living to Iqbal. He writes: "The coherence of this world by unity alone, life herein means unity in this subterranean world."<sup>27</sup> In this connection, the question rises: 'How can we make life worthy?' How can we unite our life?' According to Iqbal, the answer of these questions is hidden in the concept of 'desire (*epithymia*),' which is the motivational power of life. In the words of Iqbal, "Life is the hunter and desire the snare."<sup>28</sup> Desire is the key individual and social dynamic in the Iqbalian thought. For Marx, desire for wealth is essential; for Freud, desire for sex; for Russell, desire for power. Unlike these thinkers, Iqbal does not divide desire into compartments, but, it is the total dynamic of life. Desire is identified with the desire to fulfilment of life, because a man without desire would cease to be a man. Iqbal prefers to be a man of full desires, rather than hypothetically claims to be a deity: "Priceless treasure is the agony and burning of desire. I would not exchange

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<sup>24</sup> Renee Descartes, a French Philosopher, is the father of the idea of duality, which is supposed to be inevitable necessity of human existence. He asserts that "I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that 'I', that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am. is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter." R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, pt. iv.

<sup>25</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Macmillan, 1961, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Traveller: Versified translation of the Persian Poem 'Musafir' Living Account of Living People*, (translated by J. Naqvi), Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1991, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1983, p. 60.

my manhood for the glory of Godhead.”<sup>29</sup> The idea of being a man of desires distinguishes Iqbal from Christian fiction of Jesus as man-God and atheist humanist imagination of man as God. In Christianity, man is deified through Jesus; God is humanised through Jesus. In atheist humanism, man is recognised as the only God. The essence of Christianity and atheist humanism is the same, because in both approaches, the question essentially is the same: How can man achieve to be a god? The radical difference between these approaches and Iqbalian vision lies in the nature of the question. In the thought of Iqbal, question is not how to make man *God*, but how to make man as *man*. Iqbal rejects a deified man, but he wants to be a real man of desires. Life is the dynamic actualisation of desire. Iqbal writes:<sup>30</sup>

*Life is preserved by purpose:*

*Because of the goal its caravan-bell tinkles.*

*Life is latent in seeking,*

*Its origin is hidden in desire.*

*Keep desire alive in thy heart,*

*Lest thy little dust become a tomb.*

*Desire is the soul of this world of hue and scent,*

*The nature of everything is a store-house of desire.*

*Desire sets the heart dancing in the breast.*

*And by its glow the breast is made bright as mirror.*

*It gives to earth the power of soaring. It is a Khizr to Moses of perception.*

*From the flame of desire the heart takes life,*

*And when it takes life, all dies that is not true.*

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in R.J.D. Burki, ‘Iqbal’s Legacy to the World,’ in T.H. Raja, *Iqbal: A Cosmopolitan Poet*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1996, p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, pp. 23-24.

*When refrains from forming desires,  
Its opinion breaks and it cannot open soar.  
Desire keeps the self in perpetual uproar.  
It is a restless wave of the Self's sea.  
Desire is a noose for hunting ideals,  
A binder of the book of deeds.  
Negation of desire is death to the living,  
Even as absence of the heat extinguishes the flame.*

In the light of these lines, desire makes the unity of life possible, because wherever there is a *desire*, there is a *hope*, which is the key state in the Iqbalian psychology of desire. What we should hope for when we desire? The answer is *hope for love, hope for power*. Love and power are the essence of human life; they are ontological dimensions of human life. It is the primary task of every human individual to inquire the meaning of love and power from the perspective of Iqbal. This is a necessary condition of being authentic individual. The desire for the unity of love and power makes Iqbal distinctive from Nietzsche's theory of 'the Will to power' and naive Christian fiction of love. Iqbal writes that:<sup>31</sup>

*This brand of desire makes the blood of man run warm,  
By the lamp of desire this dust is enkindled.  
By desire Life's cup is brimmed with wine,  
So that Life leaps to its feet and marches briskly on.  
Life is occupied with conquest alone,  
And the one charm for conquest is desire.*

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60.

*Life is the hunter and desire the snare,*

*Desire is Love's message to Beauty.*

To Iqbal, there is a lack of desire in the contemporary Muslim world, which is the main reason behind the decay of Muslims,<sup>32</sup> because the absence of desire is equal, the absence of life. Iqbal's poems represent a cry for life to the ear of Muslims. Man can feel life through love, which originates from desire. In other words, desire is a result of life, and life is the fruit of love. This is the main condition of becoming human: "Love chiselled me: I become a man. And gained knowledge of nature of the universe." Muslims must study in searching for causes of their decline through looking the place and function of these ontological categories-desire-love-life- in their lives. Love is the governing desire for the potential perfection, which includes every province of life. Iqbal writes, "When the Self is made strong by Love, Its power rules the whole world."<sup>33</sup> Desire for love and life is the Iqbalian message of hope. Life is bearable only through hope: "Hope is like a lamp that lights the path of life."<sup>34</sup> There is always hope as long as man lives. To Iqbal, life is not a tragedy, but an experience of hope. Tragedy is a Western construction, which foreign to the spirit of Islamic way of life. Hope is the necessary part of living as a Muslim in the thought of Iqbal: "A Muslim art thou, keep thy heart filled with desire, and always remember that God does

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<sup>32</sup> In our opinion, the following lines of Iqbal is a good description of present situation of Muslims:

*They lost the power of ruling and the resolution to be independent,  
They lost reputation, prestige, and fortune.  
Their paws that were as iron became strengthless;  
Their souls died and their bodies became tombs.  
Bodily strength diminished while spiritual fear increased:  
Spiritual fear robbed them of courage.  
Lack of courage produced a hundred diseases-  
Poverty, pusillanimity, low-mindedness.  
The wakeful tiger was lulled to slumber by the sheep's charm:  
He called his decline Moral Culture."*

*Ibid.* pp. 54-55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in M. Maruf, 'Iqbal as a Poet,' in T.H. Raja, (Ed.), *Iqbal: A Cosmopolitan Poet*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1996, p. 88.

not break His promise.”<sup>35</sup> Love expresses the readiness for life. In the state of love, man firstly encounters himself, then whole life. In other words, it is the dynamic process of recognition of self and life. Iqbal, as an ontologist of love, writes:<sup>36</sup>

*The luminous point whose name is the Self*

*Is the life-spark beneath our dust.*

*By Love it is made more I sting,*

*More living, more burning, more glowing.*

*From Love proceeds the radiance of its being.*

*And the development of its unknown possibilities.*

*Its nature gathers fire from Love.*

*Love instructs it to illumine the world.*

*Love fears neither sword nor dagger,*

*Love is not born of water and air and earth.*

*Love makes peace and war in the world,*

*Love is the Fountain of Life,*

*Love is the flashing sword of Death.*

Love is the source of human independence. Free man is the production of love, since love does not recognise any boundary, or fixed condition; love always looks forward, not backward. Man has to be free if he wants to be a creative individual; man has to love in order to have creative freedom.

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<sup>35</sup> Cited in *Ibid.* p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, pp. 28-29.

According to Iqbal, love has two functions: 'invitation to freedom' and 'declaration of freedom.' He writes:<sup>37</sup>

*The world of love knows no leadership or lordship,*

*It is enough that it knows the rules of service.*

*Not everyone who perambulates an idol or carries the sacred thread,*

*Knows the regimen of idol worship and the rules of being an infidel.*

*Come to Iqbal's assembly and drink a cup or two,*

*Although he does not shave his head he knows all about being a Qalandar.*

'Unity,' 'life,' 'hope,' 'love,' and 'strive' are the essential elements of human identity. In other words, man becomes human through them: "Faith, constant struggle and intense love are the conqueror of the world; in the struggle of life for men of valour, these qualities are like swords."<sup>38</sup> These are definable dimensions of being human, because Iqbal defines himself in their light: "I have lighted the candle of love in the conclave of life, consuming in fire, my soul obliterated the deception of duality and difference."<sup>39</sup> The transformation of life into light should be a creative aim and continuous act of man in Iqbalian thought.

Iqbal's answers to life are 'a Yes' without any boundaries. Ontological state of 'being in love' is the best state of Iqbalian limitless Yes. However, this ontological state is not enough for Iqbal, because he wants to be in an ontological act, which is 'having power': "Life has only one law. Life is power made manifest, and its mainspring is the desire for victory."<sup>40</sup> It is clear that Iqbal's ontology of life runs 'from being in love' to 'having power,' 'from state to act.' This is Iqbalian road toward the destination of life. Searching for

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in S.A. Vahid, 'The Lyric Poet,' in T.H. Raja, (Ed.), *Iqbal: A Cosmopolitan Poet*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1996, p.52.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in M. Moizuddin, *The World of Iqbal; A Collection of Papers*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1982, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in S.M. Murshed, 'Iqbal, Some Anniversary Musings,' in T.H. Raja, (Ed.), *Iqbal: A Cosmopolitan Poet*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1996, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, p. 92.

truth and eliminating falsehood in the life-process is only actualised through power. Iqbal gives a teleological function to power: "Life is the seed, and power the crop: Power explains the mystery of truth and falsehood."<sup>41</sup> Love is the dynamic self-affirmation of life as power is the creative self-actualisation of life. In other words, love is the 'will' to life and power is the 'act' to life. When Iqbal speaks about power as self-actualisation of life he means overcoming every sort of internal and external resistance against life. Iqbal writes:

*Subject, object, means, and causes-*

*All these are forms which it assumes for the purpose of action.*

*The Self rises, kindles, falls, gloms, breathes,*

*Burns, shines, walks, and flies.*

...

*'Tis the nature of the Self to manifest itself:*

*In every atom slumbers the might of the Self.*

*Power that is expressed and inert*

*Chains the faculties which lead to action.*

*In as much as the life is in proportion to this power.<sup>42</sup>*

Self is itself the power of self in the thought of Iqbal. If human self has a power for his full realisation, what can resist against this power? What sort of power can deny the power of self? Iqbalian answer to this question is *the power of being no-self*, because "Self-affirmation brings Not-self to light."<sup>43</sup> In Iqbalian ontology, the actualisation of self is essential, but its denial is foreign and accidental power within the self itself. In other words, this is the resistance of the self against the self. Iqbal says 'Yes' the power of being self,

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.



but says ‘No’ the power of being non-self. Human ontology is the field of power struggles of these two selves.

Life is the production of the unity of power and love, because they are the sources of being; their disunity is the source of non-being: “By desire Life’s cup is brimmed with wine, So that Life leaps to its feet and marches briskly on.”<sup>44</sup> Iqbal prays for the unity of love and power in his life: “O Lord! give me strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love.”<sup>45</sup> Iqbal uses two metaphors of cup and wine, which corresponds to love and power. He demands wine within cup. In other words, he longs for love, which based on power: “Arise and pour wine into the cup, pour moon beams into the dark into the dark night of my thought.”<sup>46</sup> Man should be a creative fruit of the unity of wine and cup in the Iqbalian vision of man: “Be thou a surge of wine, and the crystal cup thy robe!”<sup>47</sup> For a creative man, power is not essential, it is only instrumental; the centaur is love. He should not waste time for the quantity of power, but he must focus for the quality of love. In other words, wine is superior to cup just as love is more essential than power, as Iqbal writes: “Do not find fault with the wine-cup. But consider attentively the taste of the wine.”<sup>48</sup> Although wine, as a metaphor of love, is essential than cup, as a symbol of power, no one of them cannot live without another. Wine is real within its cup just as love is concrete with power. Love and power together can give life to the Self. If love or power disappears from the Self, it means that there is a crisis at the centre of the Self, since the lack of power of love can turn being into non-being. As long as the Self has love and power, he/she can remain as a being. Iqbal writes:<sup>49</sup>

*Wine is formless because its self is weak;*

*It receives a form by favour of the cup.*

*Although the cup of wine assumes a form,*

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> F. Mahmood, ‘Iqbal’s Attitude Toward God,’ in M.R. Siddiqi, K.G. Saiyidain, and *et al.*, *Iqbal As A Thinker*; Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1991, p. 281.

<sup>46</sup> Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

*It is indebted to us for its motion.*

*When the mountain loses its self, it turns into sands*

*And complains that the sea surges over it;*

*The wave, so long as it remains a wave in the sea's bosom.*

The self can only be whole through love and power. Love is the foundation of the life of the Self while power affirms life and protects it. Not only is the task of power to eliminate any internal and external threats, which are against love and life, but also constructs anything, which affirms love and life. Iqbal encourages people to be in love and have power for life: "My philosophy is the philosophy of the Self. If you want to succeed in life, develop yourself. Learn to stand on your own legs. Have a proper sense of values, and keep evaluating yourself time to time. Do not run away from difficulties; face them like a man and overcome them. Be a man."<sup>50</sup> He also says that "When it is a question of fighting the battle of life be hard as steel. But when you are away from that battle you should be as soft as silk."<sup>51</sup> *Destruction* and *construction* are two relational aspects between love and power in the Iqbalian thought, since love commands power 'destroy for the sake of life' and 'construct for the sake of life.' The position of power is located in the service of love. The fruit of love-power unity is life in the Iqbalian ontology of life. The state of unity creates a complementary relationship between love and power rather than contradictory one.

Love and power create the Self and the Self creates an autonomous world itself. Iqbalian type of the Self *has* to live in his/her own world, so, he/she *has* to create his/her own world. If the Self is not able to create a world for him/herself, the inevitable result is the alienation and extinction of the Self. The worlds of other are places for suffering and death, but, the autonomous

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<sup>50</sup> Cited in M. Hasan, *Life of Iqbal ; General Account of His Life*, vol. 1, Lahore: Ferozsons Ltd., no date, p. 141.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in M. Hasan, 'The Educational Significance of Iqbal's Philosophy,' in M. Moizuddin, (Ed.), *Tribute to Iqbal*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1982, p. 12.

world of the Self is the homeland for creativity and life; therefore, Iqbal says, “Man must create his own world.”<sup>52</sup>

Creativity is *summum bonum* of Iqbalian ontology, because to Iqbal it is the goal of life. Iqbal’s ontology centres on teleology. Let ask a question: ‘Is life worth for living?’ Iqbal would answer that ‘Yes! It is worth for living if it is creative.’ *A life for the sake of creativity* is Iqbal’s longing, because creativity is the only action of a real self. According to him, Self has only one quality, which is creativity; Self is a noun, creativity is its adjective. This component is ‘the creative Ego.’ Iqbal asks the Self to recreate him/herself and a New World. The Self must be his/her architecture himself. Even a brick wants to be something; human self must be more than a brick. Iqbal writes:<sup>53</sup>

*Be a conqueror of earth; that alone is worthy of a man.*

*Thou art soft as a rose. Become hard as a stone,*

*That thou mayst be the foundation of the wall of the garden!*

*Build thy clay into a Man,*

*Build thy Man into a World!*

*Unless from thine own earth thou build thine own wall or door.*

*Someone else will make bricks of thine earth.*

*O thou who complaisant of the cruelty of Heaven,*

*Thou whose glass cries out against the injustice of the stone,*

*How long this wailing and crying and lamentation?*

*How long this perpetual beating of thy breast?*

*The pith of life is contained in action,*

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<sup>52</sup> F. Mahmood, ‘Iqbal’s Attitude Towards God,’ in M.R. Siddiqi, K.G. Saiyidain, and *et al.*, *Iqbal As A Thinker*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1991, p. 275.

<sup>53</sup> Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, pp. 89-90.

*The delight in creation is the law of Life.*

*Arise and create a new world!*