

Iqbal and “*Tauhid*”

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“Iqbal begins and ends with the belief in ‘*Tauhid*.’”¹ This statement, at first sight, may look like an oversimplification but, in fact, it is not. For Iqbal the implications of the “*Kalima*”: “*La ilaha illa Allah*” (There is no god but God) are very profound and far-reaching, and provide a basis both for his theology and his philosophy. As Professor Schimmel observes, “Iqbal has built his system upon the principle of ‘*Tauhid*,’ the acknowledgement of the absolute uniqueness of God which is reflected in the unity of the individual life, and the unity of religio-political groups.”²

“*La*” and “*Illa*”

The “*Kalima*” has two parts – “*la*” signifying negation, and “*illa*” signifying assertion or affirmation. The contrast between the first part “There is no god” and the second part “but God,” has, from early times, been a subject of interest to many “speculative minds who discovered not only a strictly dogmatic meaning, but also a deeper mystical truth in the confrontation of the “*la*” and the “*illa*.”³ Human life advances by means of the dialectical tension between negation and affirmation. It is by saying “No” to the factors which weaken the Self, and by saying “Yes” to the factors which strengthen it, that the “*Mo'min*” reaches the highest stage of his spiritual development. Iqbal says:

خودی کا سر نہاں لا الہ الا اللہ خودی ہے تیغِ فسان لا الہ الا اللہ

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 7)⁴

Iqbal’s viewpoint:

پیش غیر اللہ لا گفتن حیات تازہ از ہنگامہ او کائنات

(*Pas Che Bayad Kard Ai Aqwam-e-Sharq?*, p. 10)⁵

finds support in Soderblom: “But No is also needed. Without No there will be no proper Yes. For then all that denies and destroys, degrades and delays what is right and good

1. McCarthy, E., “Iqbal as a Poet and Philosopher,” p. 18.
2. Schimmel, A. M., *Gabriel’s Wing*, p. 86.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
4. The hidden Secret of Selfhood is “There is no God but God,” Selfhood is the sword, “There is no God but God” is the whetstone.
5. To say “No” to Not-God is life - from this strife, creation is made fresh.

would be allowed to remain unattacked and unabolished. That is why a No is necessary in the moral warfare of the individual, in the evolution of religion and in the history of the race.”¹

By using the sword of “la” the “Mo’min” can resist the worship of the idols of modern civilization. Negation is the first stage in spiritual evolution:

در جهان آغاز کار از حرف لا است این نخستین منزل مرد خداست

(*Pas Che Bayad Kard Ai Aqwam-e-Sharq?*, p. 19)²

But “la” must be succeeded by “illa” or else having broken all the idols one would be left in a world with no God. Iqbal says:

نهاد زندگی میں ابتدا لا انتہا الا پیام موت ہے جب لا ہوا الا سے بیگانہ

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 60)³

According to Iqbal, Russia and Nietzsche have passed the stage of “la” but not reached “illa.” Russia has said “No” to despotism and exploitation in religion and politics but has not yet found a positive foundation to build upon. In his message to the Russian people, Jamaluddin Afghani says in *Javid Nama*:

کرده کار خداوندان تمام بگذر از لا جانب الا خرام
در گذر از لا اگر جوینده تا ره اثبات گیری زنده

(*Javid Nama*, p. 88)⁴

Nietzsche too did not pass beyond the “la” and did not know the deep joy of being the Servant of God. That, as Iqbal sees it, was Nietzsche’s tragedy.

زندگی شرح اشارات خودی است لا و الا از مقامات خودی است
او به لا در ماند و تا الا نرفت از مقام عبده بیگانہ رفت ا

(*Javid Nama*, pp 177-178)⁵

1. Soderblom, N., quoted by Schimmel, A.M., *Gabriel’s Wing*, p. 90.
2. In the world, the beginning is with the word “No” - this is the first station of the Person of God.
3. Life in its essence, begin; with “la” ends with “illa.” It is a message of death when “la” is separated from “illa.”
4. You have finished now with lords; pass on from “no”, march onwards to “but” - pass on from “no”, if you are a true seeker, that you may take the road of living affirmation. (Translation by Arberry, A.J., *Javid Nama*, pp 67-68).
5. Life is a commentary on the limits of the Self, “no” and “but” are of the stations of the Self; he remained fast in “no” and did not reach “but”. (Translation by Arberry, A. J., *Javid Nama*, pp. 112-113).

For the Faithful, then, both negation and affirmation are necessary:

لا و الا احتساب كائنات لا و الا فتح باب كائنات
هر دو تقدیر جهان كاف و نون حرکت از لا زاید از الا سکون

(*Pas Che Bayad Kard Ai Aqwam-e-Sharq?*, p. 19)¹

“*Tauhid*” the basis of the Islamic polity

The internationalism which Iqbal finds implicit in Islam and to which he refers untiringly in his writings, derives from the idea of Divine Unity. As Iqbal points out in his Lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Islamic culture “finds the foundation of world unity in the principle of ‘*Tauhid*’. Islam, as a polity, is only a practical means of making this principle a living factor in the intellectual and emotional life of mankind. It demands loyalty to God, not to thrones. And since God is the ultimate spiritual basis of all life, loyalty to God virtually amounts to man’s loyalty to his own ideal nature.”²

The implications of the principle of “*Tauhid*” when applied to the collective life of Muslims, are worked out in considerable detail in *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*. Iqbal points out that the unity of Muslims is not dependent on ties of country or kinship, but on the principle of Divine Unity, which is “a formative factor for the unity of mankind.”³ He says:

ملت بیضا تن و جان لا اله ما ز ما را پرده گردان لا اله
لا اله سرمایه اسرار ما رشته اش شیرازه افکار ما

(*Rumuz-e- Bekhudi*, p. 106)⁴

Thus the brotherhood of Islam transcending all barriers of race, colour or nationality, is directly derived from the idea of “*Tauhid*”. “From the unity of the all-inclusive Ego who creates and sustains all egos,” says Iqbal, “follows the essential unity of all mankind.”⁵

1. “*la*” and “*illa*” are the criterion for evaluating everything in the universe. “*la*” and “*illa*” open the door of the universe. Both of them are the destiny of the created world - motion is born of “*la*”, rest from “*illa*”.
2. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 147.
3. Schimmel, A.M., *Gabriel's Wing*, p. 87.
4. “There is no god but God:” this is the soul
And body of our pure Community,
The pitch that keeps our instrument in tune,
The very substance of our mysteries,
The knotted thread that binds our scattered thoughts.”
(Translation by Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 122).
5. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 93-94-.

تیر خوش پیکان یک کیشیم ما
مدعائے ما مال ما یکسیت
یک نما یک ہیں یک اندیشیم ما
طرز و انداز خیال ما یکسیت
یک زبان و یکدل و یکجاں شدیم
ما ز نعمتہائے او اخوان شدیم

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 107)¹

“The essence of ‘*Tauhid*’ as a working idea,” says Iqbal, “is equality, solidarity and freedom.”² Islam does not recognize the “tyrant overlordship” of either “the sceptered monarch” or “the surpliced priest.”³ The Prophet of Islam translated the principles deriving from God’s Unity and Sovereignty into terms of actual living:

قوت او ہو گہن پیکر شکست
تازہ جاں اندر تن آدم دسید
نوع انسان را حصار تازہ بست
بنده را باز از خداوندان خرید

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 120)⁴

Iqbal also applies the idea of the Unity of God to the Unity of the mind and body - an ideal realized in the Sphere of Mars in *Javid Nama*:⁵

خاکیاں را جان و تن مرغ و قفس
فکر مریخی یک اندیش است و بس !

(*Javid Nama*, p. 116)⁶

If body and spirit could be regarded as one then there would be no need to separate Religion from State. The ideal “*millat*”, in Iqbal’s view, beginning from the principle of “*Tauhid*”, recognizes the organic Unity of man’s life and does not seek to bifurcate it into mutually exclusive compartments either in individual life or in collective life.

1. Well-pointed arrows of one quiver are we;
One showing, one beholding, one in thought;
One is our goal and purpose, one the form.
The fashion and the measure of our dream
Thanks to His blessings, we are brothers all.
Sharing one speech, one spirit and one heart.
(Translation by Arberry, A. J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 13).
2. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 154.
3. Arberry, A. J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, pp. 21-22.
4. He shattered every ancient privilege.
And built new walls to fortify mankind.
He breathed fresh life in Adam’s weary bones,
Redeemed the slave from bondage set him free.
(Translation by Arberry, A. J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 22).
5. Schimmel, A. M., *Gabriel’s Wing*, p. 93.
6. For terrestrials, soul and body are bird and cage,
Whereas the thought of Martians is unitive.
(Translation by Arberry, A. J., *Javid Nama*, p. 82).

Because it preserves the wholeness of life, creative “*Tauhid*” produces both outstanding individuals and nations:

فرد از توحید لاهوتی شود ! ملت از توحید جبروتی شود !
بایزید و شبلی و بوذر ازوست امتان را طغرل و سنجر ازوست !

(*Javid Nama*, p. 226)¹

Iqbal’s Interpretation of Surah “*At-Tauhid*”

In *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, Iqbal gives as a “Summary of the purpose of the poem,”² a commentary on Surah CXII entitled “*At-Tauhid*” which has been called “the essence of the Qur’an.”³ The Surah reads: “Say, God is one God; the eternal God: He begetteth not, neither is He begotten; and there is not any one like unto Him.”⁴ Iqbal takes the various parts of this Surah and delineates the philosophical implications of each part in practical terms.

Taking the first part of the Surah, Iqbal exhorts Muslims to believe in Unity and to translate their belief into action so that their faith becomes a living thing:

یک شو و توحید را مشهود کن هائیش را از عمل موجود کن
لذت ایمان فزاید در عمل مرده آن ایمان که ناید در عمل

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 183)⁵

The second part of the Surah deals with God’s Self-Subsistence. Like God, a Muslim must not depend on things or persons outside himself. Iqbal’s voice rings out loud and clear:

ز آتش خود سوز اگر داری دلی

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 187)⁶

1. The individual through the Unity becomes Divine.
The nation through the Unity becomes Omnipotent;
Unity produced Ba Yazid, Shibli, Bu Dharr,
Unity produced, for the nations, Tughril and Sanjar,
(Translation by Arberry, A.J., *Javid Nama*, p. 139).
2. Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 69.
3. Pickthall, M. M., *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York, 1960, p. 454.
4. Sale, G. (Translation) *The Koran*, p. 459.
5. Be one; make visible thy Unity;
Let action turn the unseen into seen;
Activity augments the joy of faith,
But faith is dead that issues not in deeds.
(Translation by Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 70).
6. If thou hast a heart
Within thy breast, with thine own ardour burn!
(Translation by Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 73),

Individuals and nations attain spiritual perfection only if they guard their selfhood jealously and resist assimilation:

فرد فرد آمد که خود را وا شناخت قوم قوم آمد که جز با خود نساخت

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 188)¹

The third part of the Surah tells a Muslim that he is not to set store by his lineage since God “begot not, nor was begotten.” What binds Muslims together is Love, not ties of blood:

عشق در جان و نسب در پیکر است رشته عشق از نسب محکم تر است

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 190)²

The last part of the Surah affirms that God has no equal: If Muslims possess the fortified Ego, then they too can become “an unequalled people,”³ able, like the Perfect Person to command all things.

Iqbal and “*Tauhid*”

Iqbal realizes, not without sorrow, that “the pure brow of the principle of ‘*Tauhid*’ has received more or less an impress of heathenism, and the universal and impersonal character of the ethical ideals of Islam has been lost through a process of localization.”⁴ The fact that in his own career as political thinker Iqbal rejected this “process of localization,” shows that for him the ideas, implicit in his creed, were a living force - a practical not just a theoretical necessity. Explaining Iqbal’s “hasty retreat from pure Nationalism,” Halide Edib observes with insight:

To whatever political creed the Muslim may belong, his ultimate loyalty must be to the One God who cannot be symbolized by material objects or by ideas. This point was best expressed by the Muslim members of the “Front Populaire” in the French colonies. They lifted their fists like the rest of their comrades, giving the sign of their political creed, but added to it the lifting of their index finger to the sky. The last is the sign common to all Muslims:

1. No man to Individuality
Ever attained, save that he knew himself,
No nation came to nationhood, except
It spurned to suit the whims of other men.
(Translation by Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 74).
2. Love dwells within the spirit, lineage
The flesh inhabits; stronger far than race
And common ancestry is Love’s firm cord.
(Translation by Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 75).
3. Arberry, A.J., *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 76.
4. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 156.

“There is no God but one God...” is always said with that gesture meaning God to be above and beyond all terrestrial ideas and symbols.¹

Modern civilization does not really understand the meaning of “*Tauhid*” says Iqbal. It knows how to destroy but not how to create. It cannot pass beyond its unbelief to positive faith:

لبالب شمشدہ تہذیب حاضر ہے مٹے لا سے
مگر ساتی کے ہاتھوں میں نہیں پیمانہ الا

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 39)²

Iqbal often complains about the ritualists and theologians who have made the word “*Tauhid*” the subject of scholastic hairsplitting³ and “turned away the interest from practical Islam.”⁴ In his view:

کسے کو لا الہ را در گرہ بست ز بند مکتب و ملا بروں جست⁵

(*Armaghan-e-Hijaz*, p. 143)

As a point of interest it may be mentioned that sometimes Iqbal uses a different formulation of the creed and says “*la maujuda illa Allah*” (There is no existent but God).⁶

1. Edib, H., *Inside India*, London, 1937, pp. 93-94.
2. The bottle of modern civilization is brimful of the wine of “*la*”, but the cup of “*illa*” is missing from the hands of the cup-bearer;
3. *Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 13.
4. Schimmel, A.M., *Gabriel's Wing*, p. 88.
5. Whoever has tied the knot of “*la illa*” in his mind, passes beyond the fetters of the School and the “*Mulla*”!
6. For example in *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 163, and *Musafir*, p. 7.