

Iqbal's Conception of God

Riffat Hassan

For Iqbal, the ultimate ground of all experience is a rationally-directed will or an ego. He points out that in order to emphasize the individuality of the Ultimate Ego, the Qur'an gives God the proper name of Allah. As Bergson has stated in *Created Evolution*, individuality is a matter of degrees and is not fully realized even in the case of a human being. "In particular, it may be said of Individuality," says Bergson, "that the tendency to individuate is everywhere opposed by the tendency towards reproduction. For the individuality to be perfect it would be necessary that no detached part of the organism could live separately. But then reproduction would be impossible. For what is reproduction, but the building up of a new organism with a detached fragment of the old? Individuality therefore harbors its enemy at home."

According to Iqbal, the perfect individual - God - cannot be conceived as harboring His own enemy at home, and must therefore be regarded as a superior to the antagonistic tendency of reproduction. "This characteristic of the perfect ego is one of the most essential elements in the Qur'anic conception of God; and the Qur'an mentions it over and over again, not so much with a view to attack the current Christian conception as to accentuate its own view of a perfect individual." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*)

God is Light

Iqbal refers to the Qur'anic verse which identifies God with light: "God is the light of heaven of earth: the similitude of His light is as a niche in a wall, wherein a lamp is placed, and the lamp enclosed in a case of glass, the glass appears as it were a shining star." (Surah 24:35) He denies the pantheistic interpretation of this verse to support his own personalistic conception of God as the Absolute. "No doubt," says Iqbal, "the opening sentence of the verse gives the impression of an escape from an individualistic conception of God. But when we follow the metaphor of light in the rest of the verse, it gives just the opposite impression. The development of the metaphor is meant rather to exclude the suggestion of a formless cosmic element by centralizing the light in a flame which is further individualized by its encasement in a glass likened unto a well-defined star (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*).

In Gulshan-e-Raz-e-Jadid, Iqbal writes:

Do not seek the Absolute in the monastery of the world.
for nothing is absolute but the Light of the Heavens

(*Zabur-e-'Ajam*, p. 215)

A. M. Schimmel refers to the Naqshbandi mystic Khwaja Mir Dard of Delhi (1720-1784), who reached the conclusion that the metaphor of light for God suggests both Absolutism and Omnipresence which covers both transcendentalism and all immanency of the Supreme Being. (*Gabriel's Wing*).

Infinity

For Iqbal, then, God is a Person. He is an ego also because He responds to our reflection and our prayer; for the real test of a self is whether it responds to the call of another self. Iqbal, however, refutes the charge of anthropomorphism: "Ultimate Reality," he says, is a rationally directed creative life. To interpret this life as a personality is not to fashion God after the image of man. It is only to accept the simple fact of experience that life is not a formless fluid but an organizing principle of unity, a synthetic activity which holds together and focalizes the dispersing dispositions of the living organism for a creative purpose." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*)

Iqbal, thus, conceives of God as a Person. The question then arises: does not individuality imply finitude? According to Iqbal, "God cannot be conceived as infinite in the sense of spatial infinity. In matters of spiritual valuation mere immensity counts for nothing." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). True infinity does not mean infinite extension which cannot be conceived without embracing all available finite extensions. Its nature consists in intensity and not extensity. "The ultimate limit," says Iqbal, "is to be sought not in the directions of stars, but in an infinite cosmic life and spirituality." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*)

In contrast to the classical conception of God, Iqbal emphasizes the idea of a changing God. For him, "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 infinite is intensive, not extensive. It involves an infinite series, but is not that series." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). Iqbal writes:

His inside is void of Up and Down,
But His outside is accepting Space

(*Zabur-e-Ajam*, p. 216; translation by A. M. Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing*)

Creativeness

Iqbal's universe is dynamic. The Ultimate Ego is essentially creative. By means of His Creativeness He affirms His Reality. God is not a mere contriver working on something given. Iqbal believes that God created the world out of Himself. In orthodox Islamic theology, however, creation always means creation ex-nihilo. R. Whitemore observes: "On this point it may well be that Iqbal has reconstructed Islamic religious thought somewhat more extensively than the original architects would care to acknowledge." ("Iqbal's Panentheism," in *Iqbal Review*)

Iqbal points out that we are apt "to regard the act of creation as a specific past event, and the universe appears to us as a manufactured article ... Thus regarded the universe is a mere accident in the life of God and might not have been created ... from the Divine point of view, there is no creation in the sense of a specific event having a 'before' and an 'after'" (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). Creation is a continuous and continuing process in time:

The caravan of being does not stop
For every instant there is a new phase of God's Being.

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 171)

A. Bausani states that in Muslim thought, utmost importance has always been given to creation, even going so far as to consider human acts as created in order to save the idea of the absolute creativeness of God. The Ash'arites in order to abolish the Aristotelian "*causae secundae*" which could compromise the freedom of the creative act of God, elaborated the theory of atomism. According to the Ash'arites, the world is composed of "*jawahir*" - infinitely small parts or atoms which are indivisible. The essence of the atom is independent of its existence i.e., existence is a quality imposed on the atom by God. Before receiving this

quality, the atom lies dormant. Since the creative activity of God is ceaseless, fresh atoms come to being every moment and therefore the universe is constantly growing. Iqbal, too, believes in a growing universe, but unlike the Ash'arites, he thinks that the universe changes not "in an atomistic development moving from point to point but in a never ceasing organic movement in the Divine Ego itself. This is proved, for the philosopher poet, by the Qur'anic attestation that "the universe increases"(Surah 35:1), which hints at the ever-fresh possibilities that may emerge from the fathomless depths of the intensive Divine life and be manifested in the created serial time." (*Gabriel's Wing*). In a well-known couplet, Iqbal says:

Perhaps this universe is still incomplete
for each instant there can be heard the cry of "Be, and it came into being."

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 44)

and in a letter to Professor Nicholson, he said, "The universe is not a completed act: it is still in the course of formation."

Opposing the Ash'arites ideas on substance and creation, Iqbal points out "that they used the word substance or atom with a vague implication of externality; but their criticism, actuated by a pious desire to defend the idea of divine creation, reduced the Universe to a mere show of ordered subjectivities which, as they maintained like Berkeley found their ultimate explanation in the Will of God." (*The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*).

Knowledge

The Ultimate Ego is omniscient. In the case of finite beings, knowledge even if extended to the point of omniscience, must always remain relative to the confronting "other" and cannot, therefore, be predicated of the Ultimate Ego Who, being all-inclusive, cannot be conceived as having a perspective like the finite ego. Discursive knowledge cannot be predicted of an ego who knows and who also forms the ground of the object known.

For Iqbal omniscience does not, however, mean a single indivisible act of perception which makes God immediately aware of the entire sweep of history, regarded as an order of specific wants, in an eternal "now." Dawani, 'Iraqi and

Royce conceive of God's knowledge in this way. Iqbal observes, "there is an element of truth in this conception. But it suggests a closed universe, a fixed futurity, a pre-determined, unalterable order of specific events which, like a superior fate, has once-for-all determined the directions of God's creative activity." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). Divine knowledge is not "passive omniscience" but "a living creative activity to which the objects that appear to exist in their own right as organically related." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*) If God's knowledge is conceived as a kind of a mirror reflecting pre-ordained events, there is no room left for initiative and free creativeness. "We must, therefore, conceive of His knowledge as a perfectly self-conscious, living, creative activity - an activity in which knowing and creating are one." (M. M. Sharif: *About Iqbal and His Thought*)

Omnipotence

Iqbal points out that omnipotence, abstractly conceived, is merely a blind, capricious power without limits. The Qur'an finds Divine omnipotence closely related to Divine Wisdom, and finds God's power revealed, not in the arbitrary and the capricious, but in the recurrent, the regular and the orderly. Simultaneously, the Qur'an conceives of God as holding all goodness in His Hands. "If, then, the rationally directed Divine will is good," then, asks Iqbal, "how is it possible to reconcile the goodness and omnipotence of God with the immense volume of evil in His creation. The painful problem is really the crux of Theism." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*) Iqbal wonders if, with Browning, one is to regard God as All-Good, or, with Schopenhauer as All-Evil. According to Iqbal, sin or evil is not something which hangs over humankind as a curse. It is looked upon as a challenge. It is the presence of evil which makes us recognize good, and acts as a whetstone for the development of personality. Iqbal's point resembles that of William James (as indeed he intends that it should since he adapts James's language to his purposes).

"The teaching of the Qur'an, which believes in the possibility of improvement in the behavior of man and his control over nature forces, is neither optimism nor pessimism. It is meliorism, which recognizes a growing universe and is animated by the hope of man's eventual victory over evil." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). Bausani points out that in Iqbal's conception of a continuously creative God there "lies also hidden a new solution of the old problem, the crux of theism, i.e. the problem of Evil. Nature is neither bad nor good in itself, it is one of the first exercises of God." ("Iqbal's Philosophy of Religion and the West")

in *The Pakistan Quarterly*). As the Qur'an says: "Say, Go through the earth, and see how He originally produceth creatures, afterwards will God reproduce another production." (Surah: 29:19)

Eternity

God is eternal but not so in the sense in which a thing is supposed to last for all time. This implies a wrong view of time making it external to Him. (*About Iqbal and His Thought*). Iqbal's God is a changing God but change does not mean serial change. God lives both in eternity and in serial time. To Iqbal the former means non-successional change, while the latter is organically related to eternity in so far as it is a measure of non-successional change. "In this sense alone it is possible," says Iqbal, "to understand the Qur'anic verse: 'To God belongs the alternation of day and night' (23:32)."

"Iqbal's Conception of God," in *The Pakistan Times*, Lahore, Pakistan, January 17, 1969