

# Iqbal's View of Prayer

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According to a well-known *hadith*, prayer is the essence of worship.<sup>1</sup> It is the living ground and basis of religion. In Iqbal's conception of prayer we find the keystone of all his religious ideas.<sup>2</sup> Prayer in the contact of God and humanity. As Iqbal says, "religious ambition soars higher than the ambition of philosophy. 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." For Iqbal, each act of prayer is a kind of "mer'aj" or Ascension to Heaven. He says:

در بدن داری اگر سوزِ حیات

ہست معراجِ مسلمان در صلوات

(*Pas Cheh Bayed Kard Ai Aqwam-e-Sharq?* p. 50)<sup>3</sup>

Prayer is a principle of integration because it coordinates all the elements that make up a human being's personality - thought, will and emotion - through their relation to a dominant purpose.<sup>4</sup> Prayer is the activity of the whole person - an activity through which human beings apprehend their high destiny and stretch towards it.<sup>5</sup> It is the way to the fulness of life.

Like William James, Iqbal regards prayer as being instinctive in its origin.<sup>6</sup> William James set forth in his *Principles of Psychology* what he believes to be the fundamental spring of prayer: "We hear in these days of scientific enlightenment a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given why we should not pray. But in all this very little is said of the reason why we do pray, which is simply that we cannot help

praying. It seems probable that, in spite of all that 'science' may do to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of time, unless their mental nature changes in a manner which nothing we know should lead us to expect. The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the social sort, it yet can find its only adequate Socius in an ideal world. Most men, either continually or occasionally, carry a reference to it in their breasts. The humblest outcast on this earth can feel himself to be real and valid by means of this higher recognition. And, on the other hand, for most of us, a world with no such inner refuge when the outer social self failed and dropped from us would be the abyss of horror."<sup>[7]</sup>

Prayer, then, is the instinctive outreaching of the human spirit for some reality which satisfies its deepest longings and embodies its highest ideals.<sup>8</sup> The native yearning of the soul for intercourse and companionship takes it to God "as naturally as the homing instinct of the pigeon takes it to the place of its birth."<sup>9</sup>

The very fact that human beings have the instinct to pray involves "the latent recognition of a metaphysical reality, standing over against physical reality, which men are driven to adore, and long to apprehend."<sup>10</sup> In Iqbal's picturesque language, "prayer ... is an expression of man's inner yearning for response in the awful silence of the universe."<sup>11</sup> And response there is, for if there were no response human beings could not long continue to pray. The instinct to pray would then shrivel like the functionless organ.<sup>12</sup>

Iqbal denies that prayer is auto-suggestion since auto-suggestion has nothing to do with the opening of the sources of life that lie at the depths of the human ego.<sup>13</sup> He points out that spiritual illumination confers new power by moulding the human personality, but auto-suggestion leaves no permanent life-effects behind.<sup>14</sup> Iqbal finds support in William Brown who observes that rather than prayer being auto-suggestion, "I am disposed to say that auto-suggestion is prayer ... Just as the mere fact of seeking for the causes of a particular phenomenon involves as its intellectual basis the assumption of the principle of the uniformity of nature, so I would urge the emotional basis of a particular auto-suggestion is some measure of confidence, implicitly felt if not explicitly

confessed, in the general beneficence of things. In religious natures this confidence expresses itself definitely as faith in God, and, with this explicitly assumed, auto-suggestion is quite clearly a form of prayer.”<sup>15</sup>

Iqbal believes that the spirit of all true prayer is congregational and that “the real object of prayer...is...achieved when the act of prayer becomes congregational.”<sup>16</sup> When a group of persons all animated by the same passion and concentrating on the same object join in prayer, such an association “multiplies the normal man’s power of perception, deepens his emotion and dynamizes his will to a degree unknown to him the privacy of his individuality.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, associative prayer enhances human sensibility.

Referring to Surah 2:Al-Baqarah:109, Iqbal says that the direction towards which one turns one’s face while praying “is certainly not essential to the spirit of prayer.”<sup>18</sup> But the choice of one particular direction in Islamic worship does serve a useful purpose. All Muslims pray with their faces turned in the direction of the Ka’ba. The Ka’ba thus becomes a symbol of Muslim unity, and figures very significantly both in the act of pilgrimage and in the act of prayer (which Iqbal calls “a lesser pilgrimage”<sup>19</sup>) Iqbal says:

مرکزیتِ اسلامیتِ الحرام است

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 154)<sup>20</sup>

Prayer performs another important social function. It “creates and fosters the sense of social equality as much as it tends to destroy the feeling of rank or race-superiority in the worshippers.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, it equalizes all. In classic lines, Iqbal states that at the time of prayer

ایک ہی صف میں کھڑے ہو گئے محمود و ایاز  
 نہ کوئی بندہ رہا اور نہ کوئی بند نواز  
 بندہ و صاحب محتاج و غنی ایک ہوئے!  
 تیری سرکار میں پہنچے تو بسبھی ایک ہوئے!

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 174)<sup>22</sup>

In Iqbal's poetry the various parts of the ritual prayer are transmuted into symbols having a spiritual significance<sup>23</sup>. The "azan" (call to prayer) is the symbol of the living religion, "perhaps the best single epitome of Muslim belief and action."<sup>24</sup> The words "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the Greatest) which form the beginning of the call to prayer, are the triumphant affirmation of God's greatness by a person who realizes his or her own station as God's deputy on earth.<sup>25</sup>

Prostration in prayer signifies "faqr" or spiritual poverty, and standing upright is emblematic of sovereignty.

The life of the "Mo'min" consists of both prostration and standing upright, both humility and dominion. Of the faithful, Iqbal says:

جلال کبیرائی در قیامش      جمال بندگی اندر سجودش

(*Armaghan-e-Hijaz*, p. 207)<sup>26</sup>

Humanity is more blessed than angels for to angels is granted only one of the movements of prayer - either "sujud" or "qiyam" or "ruku" - while human beings can perform them all.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the angels cannot partake of human agony:

پس کونوری کو ہے سجدہ میتر تو کیا  
اس کو میتر نہیں سوز و گداز سجود!

(Bal-e-Jibril, p. 129)<sup>28</sup>

The *hadith* “There is no prayer at all if not with the presence of the God,”<sup>29</sup> is very dear to mystics. Iqbal, too, protests against those who pray mechanically without the spirit of true devotion. Paying only tip-service to the Almighty makes God complain in “*Jawab-e-Shikwa*”:

رہ گئی رسمِ اداں، روحِ بلائی نہ رہی

(Bang-e-Dara, p. 219)<sup>30</sup>

Iqbal also protests against those who indulge in unnecessary ostentation in matters of worship. Neither God nor the “*Faqir*” care for outward show - it is the inner feeling which makes holy and beautiful the act of prayer. God says to the angels with touching simplicity:

میں ناخوش و بیزار ہوں مرم کی ریلوں سے  
میرے لیے مٹی کا حرم اور بنا دو!

(Bal-e-Jibril, p. 150)<sup>31</sup>

Beginning from *Asrar-e-Khudi*, Iqbal never tired of repeating that humanity must not lose itself in God as a drop loses itself in the ocean, but, on the contrary, strengthen its ego and enlarge its possibilities.<sup>32</sup> “Prayer,” says Iqbal, “is a unique process of discovery whereby the searching ego affirms itself in the very

moment of self-negation, and thus discovers its own worth and justification as a dynamic factor in the life of the universe.”<sup>33</sup>

Iqbal denies that there is anything mystical about prayer, which he regards as “a normal vital act by which the little island of our personality suddenly discovers its situation in a larger whole in life.”<sup>34</sup> Prayer, then, does not mean “loss or annihilation of personal selfhood but rather the heightening of everything which constitutes the inner citadel of personality.”<sup>35</sup> Moses, standing losing himself in the flames is Iqbal’s symbol of the faithful in communion with God.<sup>36</sup>

“Prayer in Islam,” says Iqbal, “is the ego’s escape from mechanism to freedom.”<sup>37</sup> The timing of the daily prayers saves the ego “from the mechanizing effect of sleep and business.”<sup>38</sup> The routine of mechanical living atrophies the freedom and freshness of the human soul and deadens its awareness of deeper Reality. Ritual prayer leads to liberty because it “restores ‘self-possession’ to the ego by bringing it into closer touch with the ultimate source of life and freedom.”<sup>39</sup> Iqbal says:

وقتِ عصر آمد صد رے الصلوات  
اں کہ مومن را کند پاک از بہات

(*Musafir*, p.15)<sup>40</sup>

Not only does prayer free human beings from the bondage of mechanism, but through it they also rise above the other obstacles which limit their freedom, for “prayer delivers us from two great enemies of freedom - doubt and fear.”<sup>41</sup> Fellowship and communion with God liberates humanity from all that is not-God. Iqbal says:

یہ ایک سجدہ جسے تو گراں سمجھتا ہے  
ہزار سجدے سے دیتا ہے آدمی کو نجات!

(Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 32)<sup>42</sup>

Through prayer humanity is freed from the mastery of all but God. But prayer, says Iqbal, is meaningful only if the one who prays worships God truly and has no other gods before him or her:

وہی سجدہ ہے لائقِ استہمام      کہ ہر جس سے ہر سجدہ تجھ پر حرام

(Bal-e-Jibril, p. 92)<sup>43</sup>

Prayer is not only ritual prayer. It is not just a certain act, rather it is a life-attitude.<sup>44</sup> “An act is temporal or profane,” says Iqbal, “if it is done in a spirit of detachment from the infinite complexity of life behind it, it is spiritual if it is inspired by that complexity.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, whatever tends to make explicit to humanity the consciousness of God and sharpens awareness of its relation to ultimate Reality, is prayer. As Victor Hugo said, there are moments when whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees.<sup>46</sup> The soul is on its knees whenever a person seeks for the Truth in utter earnestness. He or she may be engaged in offering his or her (ritual) prayer or in a scientific pursuit - it is the spirit inspiring the act which counts in determining whether or not the act is an act of prayer. In any case, says Iqbal, the loving ardour of the faithful is not confined to fixed forms of prayer:

رہِ دیرِ تختہ گلِ جڑِ حسینِ سجدِ ریزم  
کہ نیازِ من بگنجد بدو رکعتِ نمازے

(Payam-e-Mashriq, p. 177)<sup>47</sup>

“The truth is,” says Iqbal, “that all search for knowledge is

essentially a form of prayer. The scientific observer of Nature is a kind of mystic seeker in the act of prayer.”<sup>48</sup> Like the mystic, the scientist seeks to establish relations with Reality. Like the mystic, “he asks, he seeks, he knocks.”<sup>49</sup> Like the mystic he has on insatiable thirst for the Truth. Citing an illustration taken from Rumi, Iqbal points out that the Sufi like the hunter, is first led in the search by the footprints of the musk-deer, but once the total self becomes passionately involved in the quest, then he or she is guided by the musk-gland itself and has no need to watch the track.<sup>50</sup> The scientist, like the Sufi, first follows the footprints of the musk-deer, but then the “close contact with the behaviour of Reality,” sharpens the “inner perception for a deeper vision of it” and he or she can follow the muskgland.<sup>51</sup>

The act of prayer, in so far as it aims at knowledge, resembles reflection. “Like reflection it, too, is a process of assimilation, but the assimilative process in the case of prayer draws itself closely together and thereby acquires a power unknown to pure thought. In thought the mind observes and follows the working of Reality; in the act of prayer it gives up its career as a seeker of slow-footed universality and rises higher than thought to capture Reality itself.”<sup>52</sup> One attains to the “vision of that total-infinite which philosophy seeks but cannot find,”<sup>53</sup> when “*ilm*” (knowledge) becomes “*ishq*” (love).

Most human prayer takes the form of a petition to God - in other words, we pray for something. Some people would not regard the cry of anguish wrung from the heart of the mother of a dying child as prayer. Some people would also say that when we pray to God for something, we are only petitioning, not praying. Iqbal would agree that prayer is “no more a means to something else than love is,”<sup>54</sup> that it is an end in itself. But he would not have said that asking God for something makes one’s prayer insincere or a means to an end. The relationship between humanity and God is a deeply personal one. When we ask those whom we love for help or strength we are not using them as means to an end. Such dependence is a part of love. And Iqbal sees prayer not only as an act of obedience but also of love. His God is not an impersonal Deity but a Beloved who is also a Lover, who promised “Call Me and I respond to your call” (Surah 40: *Mo’min* : 62). Iqbal who spent a great portion of his own life in prayer - the “*faqir*” who



would not seek anyone's favour - also petitioned God - and believed that his prayer would bear fruit:

کیا عجب! مری نواہائے سحر گاہی سے  
زندہ ہو جائے وہ آتش کہ تری خاک میں ہے!

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 95)<sup>55</sup>

The belief that God responds to our prayers does not mean that our prayers are always granted. Kierkegaard said, "Prayer does not change God, but changes him who prays."<sup>56</sup> This deep truth is also embodied in the famous statement, "Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered."<sup>57</sup> In a striking poem in *Zarb-e-Kalim*, Iqbal says:

تری دعا سے قضا تو بدل نہیں سکتی  
مگر ہے اس سے یہ ممکن کہ تو بدل جائے!  
تری خودی میں اگر انفتاب ہو پیدا  
عجب نہیں ہے کہ یہ چار سو بدل جائے!

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 167)<sup>58</sup>

Prayer, then, does not change the order of things, but it changes people and people change things. As Surah 13: *Ra'd* :12 states "Verily God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves."<sup>59</sup> Prayer purifies, enlightens and at last transforms those who submit themselves to it.<sup>60</sup> "Such prayer - prayer which changes both the man who prays and the world he lives in - is not achieved without concentrated effort."<sup>61</sup> But once human beings make this effort and attain spiritual perfection, then they are asked by the Almighty Himself what destiny they desire.

## Notes and References

1. Schimmel, A.M., "The Idea of Prayer in the Thought of Iqbal," *Mohammad Iqbal (Poet and Philosopher)*, The Pak-German Forum, Karachi, 1960, p. 68
2. *Ibid.*
3. If your body has the ardour of life,  
then for the Muslim "me'raj" lies in ritual prayer.
4. Brown, W. A., *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science*, London, 1927, p. 132.
5. Herman, E, *Creative Prayer*, London, 1921, p. 35.
6. Iqbal, M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, 1962 p. 90.
7. James, W., quoted by Jones, R. M., "Prayer and the Mystic Vision," in *Concerning Prayer* (by various authors), London, 1916, p. 119.
8. Brown, W. A., *The Life of Prayer in World of Science*, p. 9.
9. James W., "Prayer and the mystic Vision", p. 119.
10. Underhill, E., *Worship*, London, 1941, p. 4.
11. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 92.
12. "Prayer and the Mystic Vision," p. 118.
13. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 90.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Brown, W., *The Practice of Prayer in Religion and Life*, New York, 1923, pp. 81-96.
16. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 92.

17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid*, p. 93.
19. Nicholson, R. A, *The Secrets of the Self*, Lahore, 1964, p.7.
20. The Centre of the Islamic Community is Mecca's Sacred House.
21. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 93.
22. In the same row stand Mahmud (the king) and Ayaz (the slave),  
no servant now remains nor any master,  
servant and lord, the poor and rich are one,  
coming into Your Presence all are one.
23. Schimmel, A. M., *Gabriel's Wing*, Leiden, 1963, p. 177.
24. Cragg, K., Preface to *The Call of the Minaret*, New York, 1956,  
pp. vii-viii.
25. *Gabriel's Wing*, p. 178.
26. The tremendum of Divine Majesty is in his standing upright,  
the beauty of human worship is in his prostration.
27. *Gabriel's Wing*, p. 179.
28. What if the creatures of light have been granted the honour of  
prostration?  
They do not know the burning and ardour of prostration!
29. *Gabriel's Wing*, p. 176.
30. Only the convention of "azan" is left,  
the (ardent) spirit of Bilal is no more.
31. I am unhappy with, and weary of, marble slabs,  
make for me another temple of clay.
32. "The Idea of Prayer in the Thought of Iqbal," p. 70.

33. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp 92-93.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
35. Jones, R. M. "Prayer and the Mystic Vision," p. 122.
36. "The Idea of Prayer in the Thought of Iqbal," p. 89.
37. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 109.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. In the afternoon came the call for prayer  
which gives the "Mo'min" freedom from (the bondage) the world.
41. *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science*, p. 132.
42. This one prostration which you deem exacting  
liberates you from a thousand prostrations.
43. Only that prostration is worth solicitude  
which makes every other prostration forbidden for you.
44. Mueller, W. A. quoted in *The Encyclopaedia of Religious Quotations*, (Edited by Mead, F. S.) London. 1965, p. 344.
45. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 154.
46. Hugo, V., quoted in *The Encyclopaedia of Religious Quotations*,  
p. 341.
47. Wherever I bow my head into the dust, roses arise -  
my asking will not find room in two "rak'as" of prayer  
  
(Translation by Schimmel, A. M., *Gabriel's Wing*, p. 179)
48. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 91.

49. Anson, H. "Prayer as Understanding" in *Concerning Prayer* , p. 80
50. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 9.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.
54. Jones, R. M., "Prayer and the Mystic Vision," p. 118.
55. It could be that through my lamentations at dawn,  
the spark within your dust may come to life!
56. Kierkegaard, S., quoted in *The Encyclopaedia of Religious Quotations*, p. 342.
57. Meredith, G., quoted in *The Encyclopaedia of Religious Quotations*, p. 343.
58. Your prayer cannot change the Universal Order,  
but it is possible, that it will change you.  
If in your Self there is a revolution -  
it will not be strange if this world changes!
59. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 12.
60. Underhill, E, *Worship*, London, 1941. p. 18.
61. *Creative Prayer*, p. 38.

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