

God and Nature Relationship in Iqbal's Metaphysics

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According to Iqbal "the universe does not confront the Absolute Self in the same way as it confronts the human self." (S. A. Vahid, Editor, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, Lahore, 1964, p.112). It is a fleeting moment in the life of God. "It is a structure of events, a systematic mode of behavior, and as such organic to the Ultimate Self. Nature is to the Divine Self as character is to the human self. In the picturesque phrase of the Qur'an it is the habit of Allah." (Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, 1962, p. 56)

Nature is ego as event and act. "Reality," says Iqbal, "is ... essentially spirit. But, of course there are degrees of spirit ... I have conceived the Ultimate Ego; and I must add now that from the Ultimate Ego only egos proceed. The creative energy of the Ultimate Ego, in whom deed and thought are identical, functions as ego-functions. The world, in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the 'Great I am'." (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 71)

The Universe

The relation of the Ultimate Ego to the finite ego may be conceived in several ways. For instance, the Ultimate Ego may be regarded as the sole reality absorbing all the finite egos, or as holding the finite egos within His own self without obliterating their individuality, or as existing apart from finite egos. The first of the afore-mentioned positions is rooted in pantheism even though it attributes personality to Ultimate Reality. It is an advance on those pantheistic modes of thought which regard the ultimate nature of Reality as being impersonal in character, e.g., light, or force.

Professor Sharif points out that in the first period of his thought, extending from 1901 to about 1908, Iqbal's writing had a pantheistic tinge. "God is universal and all-inclusive like the ocean, and the individual is like a candle, and the candle ceases to burn in the individual like a drop. Again God is like the sun and the individual is like a candle, and the candle ceases to burn in the presence of the sun. Like a bubble or a spark, life is transitory - nay the whole of life is transitory." (M. M. Sharif, *About Iqbal and His Thought*, Lahore, 1964, p. 110)

The first part of *Bang-e-Dara* contains several poems referring to the doctrine of the immanence of God (*wahdat-al-wujud*). Nature from being the Word of God becomes God. God's immanence is described thus: "Beauty is one though it is seen in all things." (*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 71) At this stage, Iqbal's God is Beauty rather than Love and the same Beauty manifests itself in all

things:

Visible in everything is Beauty everlasting,
it's speech in humans and a sparkle in the bud.
The secret of the One has become hidden in the Many
- the fire-fly's glow is the flower's scent.

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 82)

This idea is delicately expressed at one place when the poet refers to the “promise” of God to reveal Himself on the Day of Judgment. Since God is visible in everything, the poet asks:

Those who have sight can see you even here,
How then is the Promise of the Last Day a test of patience?

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 101)

In *Shama* (The Candle) Iqbal states the doctrine of *wahdat-al-wujud* in much the same way as Ibn ‘Arabi might have done, i.e., he makes the beloved identical with the lover, since he considers the relation between the world and God as one of identity: “The hunter and the object of the hunt are the same.” (*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 32) Iqbal’s position here resembles that of Ghalib:

The object, witness and witnessing is all the same thing, I’m wonderstruck
what, then, can “vision” mean?

(*Diwan-e-Ghalib*, Taj Co. Edition, p. 90)

Iqbal’s pantheistic ideas derive from Plato’s conception of God as Eternal Beauty which is manifested in all things. “This Platonic conception, as interpreted by Plotinus, adopted by the early Muslim scholastics and adapted to pantheism by the pantheistic mystics, came down to Iqbal as a long tradition in Persian and Urdu poetry, and was supplemented by his study of the English romantic poets.” (*About Iqbal and His Thought*, p. 11). Iqbal, however, soon outgrew his pantheism. His old teacher at Cambridge, McTaggart wrote to him on reading Nicholson’s translation of *Asrar-e-Khudi*: “Have you not changed your position very much? Surely in the days when we used to talk philosophy together, you were much more of a pantheist and mystic.” (McTaggart quoted in *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, p.118). This remark is very illuminating. For Iqbal in his later thought, the relation of the finite to infinite Ego is one in which “true infinite does not exclude the finite,” but rather “embraces the finite without effacing its finitude and explains and justifies its being.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 29)

“It is clear,” says Professor Whittemore, “that Iqbal does not intend that the Infinite be

regarded as abstract totally of finites.” (R. Whittemore, “Iqbal’s Panentheism,” *Iqbal Review*, 1966, Volume VII, Number 1, p. 71) Iqbal’s doctrine is not pantheism (meaning by this term the doctrine that the world is identical with God). This is confirmed by the fact that nowhere in his philosophy does Iqbal refer to God in terms of featureless totality. Referring to Farnell’s view on the attributes of God, Iqbal remarks that “the history of religious thought discloses various ways of escape from an individualist conception of the ultimate Reality which is conceived as some vague, vast, and pervasive cosmic element, such as light. This is the view that Farnell has taken ... I agree that the history of religion reveals modes of thought that tend towards pantheism; but I venture to think that in so far as the Qur’anic identification of God with light is concerned Farnell’s view is incorrect ... Personally, I think that the description of God as light, in the revealed literature of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, must now be interpreted differently ... The metaphor of light as applied to God ... must in view of modern knowledge, be taken to suggest the Absoluteness of God and not His Omnipresence which easily lends itself to pantheistic interpretation.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 63-64)

Iqbal always refers to God in terms such “Ultimate Ego,” “Creative Self,” “Omni-psyche,” and to the finite in terms of egos or selves. “The reference is always plural. Even in his doctrine of transformation (transmutation), Iqbal is at pains to stress his conviction that the *individual* is neither in time nor eternity lost in God.” (“Iqbal’s Panentheism,” p. 72). In Iqbal’s words, “the end of the ego’s quest is not emancipation from the limitations of individuality; it is, on the other hand a more precise definition of it.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 198)

Iqbal rejects deism, the view that the world is separate from God. Outside of God there is nothing, so deism is meaningless. Neo-Platonic ideas resembling the Buddhist Vedantas culminated in the famous doctrine of Monism. This doctrine preached the belief in an immanent God and considered the world as a mere incarnation. It substituted pantheistic deism for the personal and transcendent God of the Qur’an, and led to the blossoming of pseudo-mysticism. Iqbal attacked Monism on a practical ground also. For him “all life is individual: there is no such thing as universal life.” (Iqbal quoted by R. A. Nicholson in Introduction to *The Secrets of the Self*, Lahore, 1964, p. XVII)

Panentheism

Iqbal’s view is panentheistic, panentheism being the doctrine that the world is not identical with God, nor separate from God, but in God, who in His divine nature transcends it. Iqbal’s view is panentheistic because “according to it God as individual, while not other than that universe which is His physical being, is more than the sum of egos and sub-egos of which this universe is composed.” (“Iqbal’s Panentheism,” p. 72)

The relation of the Ultimate Ego to the finite egos in Iqbal's philosophy has been summarized thus: "The Ultimate Ego holds the finite egos in His own Being without obliterating their existence. The Ultimate Reality must be regarded as of the nature of the self. But further this self does not exist apart from the universe, as if separated by the space lying between Him and ourselves. The Ultimate Self, therefore is not transcendent, as is conceived by the anthropomorphic theists. He is immanent for He comprehends and encompasses the whole universe. But He is not immanent in the sense of the pantheists of the traditional type, because He is a personal and not an impersonal reality...He is, in short, immanent and transcendent both, and yet neither the one nor the other. Both immanence and transcendence are true of the Ultimate Reality. But Iqbal emphasizes the transcendence of the Ultimate Ego rather than His immanence." (I. H. Enver, *Metaphysics of Iqbal*, pp. 85-86)

In his rejection of the doctrine of unityism or *wahdat-al-wujud*, Iqbal was deeply influenced by Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi also known as Mujaddid-e-Alf-e-Sani. In a letter written in 1917, Iqbal said that "I have very great respect in my heart for Mujaddid Sirhind." (Letter to S. S. Nadvi, quoted in M. M. Ahmad in "Allama Iqbal and Mujaddid-i-Alf-i-Sani," *Iqbal Review*, January 1964, pp. 112-113). Like Iqbal, the Mujaddid passed through *wujudiyyat* or unityism and reached 'abdiyyat or servitude. The Mujaddid stressed the transcendence of God. "He is beyond all *shuyun-o-i'tibarat* or modes and relations, all *zuhur-o-butun* or externalization and internalization, beyond all *buruz-o-kumun* or projection and introjection, beyond all *mawsul-o-mafsul* or mystic intuition and experience; nay even beyond all *mahsus-o-ma'qul* empirical and rational, and beyond all *mawhum-o-mutakhayall* or conceivable and imaginable ... He the Holy one is beyond the Beyond, again beyond the Beyond." (B. A. Faruqi, *The Mujaddid's Conception of Tawhid*, Lahore, 1940, p. 118)

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