

# IQBAL AND *TAUHID*

**Riffat Hassan**

E. McCarthy observes, "Iqbal begins and ends with the belief in *Tauhid*." ("Iqbal as a Poet and Philosopher," *Iqbal Review*, 1961, Volume II, Number 3, p. 18). This statement, at first sight, may look like an over-simplification, but in fact, it is not so. For Iqbal the implications of the *Kalima* (profession of faith) "*La ilaha illa Allah*" (There is no god but Allah) are very profound and far-reaching, and provide a basis both for his theology and his philosophy. As A. M. Schimmel observes, "Iqbal has built his system of the principle of '*Tauhid*,' the acknowledgment of the absolute uniqueness of God which is reflected in the unity of the individual life, and the unity of religio-political groups." (*Gabriel's Wing*, Leiden, 1963, p. 86)

## "*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 Allah" 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 '*illa*'." (*Gabriel's Wing*, p. 86).

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* (true believer) reaches the highest stage of his spiritual development. Iqbal says:

The hidden secret of Selfhood is "There is no god but Allah,"  
Selfhood is the sword, "There is no god but Allah" is the whetstone.

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 7).

His proclamation:

To say "No" to not-God is life,  
from this strife creation is made fresh.

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

finds support in Archbishop Nathan 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

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.” (*Gabriel’s Wing*, p. 90)

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:

In the world the beginning is with the word “No”  
- this is the first station of the Person of God.

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

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:

Life in its essence begins with “*la*” ends with “*illa*,”  
it is a message of death when “*la*” is separated from “*illa*.”

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 60)

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 on which to build. In his message to the Russian people, Jamaluddin Afghani says:

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.

(*Javid Nama*, p. 88, translation by A. J. Arberry,  
London, 1966, pp. 67-68)

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:

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,”  
being a stranger to the station of “His Servant.”

(*Javid Nama*, pp. 177-178, translation by A. J. Arberry, pp. 112-113)

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

“*La*” and “*illa*” are the criteria 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*,” and rest of “*illa*.”

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

### ***Tauhid - the Basis of 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, 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, and not to thrones. And since God is the ultimate spiritual principle of all life, loyalty to God virtually amounts to man’s loyalty to his own ideal nature.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, 1962, p. 147)

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.” (*Gabriel’s Wing*, p. 87). He says:

“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.

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 106, translation by A. J. Arberry,  
*The Mysteries of Selflessness*, London, 1953, p. 12).

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 mankind.”

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.

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 107, translation by A. J. Arberry,  
*The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 13).

“The essence of ‘*Tauhid*’ as a working idea,” says Iqbal “is equality, solidarity and freedom.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 154) Islam does not recognize the “tyrant overlordship” of either “the sceptred monarch” or “the surpliced priest” (*The Mysteries of Selflessness*, pp. 21-22). The Prophet of Islam translated the principles deriving from God’s Unity and Sovereignty into terms of actual living:

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.

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 120, translation by A. J.  
Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 22).

Iqbal also applies the idea of the unity of God to the unity of the mind and body. If body and spirit could be regarded as one then there would be no need to separate Religion from State. The ideal *millat* (community) in Iqbal’s view, beginning from the principle of *Tauhid*, recognizes the organic unity of human life and does not seek to bifurcate it into mutually exclusive compartments either in individual or in collective. Because it preserves the wholeness of life, creative *Tauhid* produces both outstanding individuals and nations:

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.

(*Javid Nama*, p. 226, translation by Arberry, *Javid  
Nama*, p. 139)

***Iqbal’s View of “At-Tauhid”***

In *Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, Iqbal gives as a “Summary of the Purpose of the Poem,” a commentary on Surah CXII entitled *At-Tauhid* which has been called the “essence of the Qur’an” (M. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York, 1960, p. 454). The Surah reads: “Say, He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All That Exists. He begets not, and neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with him.” (Translation by Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, Gibraltar, 1980). 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 translate their belief into action so that their faith becomes a living thing:

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.

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 183, translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 70).

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:

If though hast a heart  
Within thy breast, with thine own ardour burn!

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 187, translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 73).

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

No man to individuality  
Ever attained, save that he knew himself,  
No nation come to nationhood, except  
It spurned to suit the whim of other men.

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhuri*, p. 188, translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 74).

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

Love dwells within the spirit, lineage  
The flesh inhabits, stronger far than race  
And common ancestry is Love's firm cord.

(*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, p. 190, translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, p. 75).

### ***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.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 156). The fact that in his own career as a political thinker Iqbal rejected the 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 insightfully: “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. ‘There is no God but one God’ is always said with that gesture meaning God to be above all terrestrial ideas and symbols.” (*Inside India*, London, 1937, pp. 93-94)

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:

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.

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 39).

Iqbal often complains about the ritualists and theologians who have made the word *Tauhid* the subject of scholastic hairsplitting and diverted interest away from practical Islam. In his view,

Whoever has tied the knot of “*La illa*” in his mind,  
passes beyond the fetters of the School and the *Mulla* (preacher)!

(*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 Allah). Schimmel observes that it is difficult to decide whether this form of the creed - preferred by the monistic mystics - “is a purely literary play of words, which would be surprising in Iqbal, or comes from a deeper layer of religious feeling.”

“Iqbal and *Tauhid*,” in *The Pakistan Times*, July 9, 1968