

God and the Universe in Iqbal's Philosophy

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Concept of God

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 Him the proper name of Allah.¹ As Bergson has stated in *Creative Evolution*, individuality is a matter of degrees and is not fully realized even in the case of a human being.² "In particular, it may be said of individuality," says Bergson, "that, while the tendency to individuate in 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 harbours its enemy at home."³ According to Iqbal, the Perfect Individual, God, cannot be conceived as harbouring its own enemy at home, and must therefore be regarded as a superior to the antagonistic tendency of reproduction.⁴ "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."⁵

Iqbal refers to the Qur'anic verse which identifies God with light: "God is the light of heaven and 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." (24:35)⁶ While he denies the pantheistic interpretation of this verse, Iqbal uses it to support his own personalistic conception of God as the Absolute. "No doubt," says Iqbal, "the opening

sentences 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 into a well-defined star.”⁷ In “*Gulshan-e-Raz-e-Jadid*” Iqbal writes:

مجرى مطلق دریں دیرِ مکانات
مطلق نیست جز نور السموات

Do not seek the Absolute in the monastery of the world,
for nothing is Absolute but the light of the Heavens.⁸

Professor 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.⁹

For Iqbal, then, God is a Person. God is an Ego also because God responds to our reflection and our prayer, for the real test of a self is whether it responds to the call of another self.¹⁰ 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 humanity. 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.”¹¹

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.”¹² 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.”¹³ In contrast to the classical conception of God, Iqbal emphasizes the idea of a changing God.¹⁴ 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 infinity is intensive, not extensive. It involves an infinite series, but is not that series.”¹⁵ Iqbal writes:

درونش خالی از بالا و زیر است
وے بیرون او وسعت پذیر است

His inside is void of Up and Down,
But His outside is accepting Space.
(Translation by Schimmel, A. M. *Gabriel’s Wing*, p.99.)¹⁶

Iqbal’s universe is dynamic. The Ultimate Ego is essential creative. By means of His Creativeness, He affirms His Reality. God is not a more 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*.¹⁷ Professor Whittemore 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.”¹⁸

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’.”¹⁹ Creation is a continuous and continuing process in time.

ٹھہرتا نہیں کاروانِ وجود
کہ ہر لحظہ ہے تازہ شانِ وجود

The caravan of Being does not stop,
for every instant there is a new phase of God’s Being.²⁰

Professor 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.²¹ The Ash'arites, in order to abolish the Aristotelien *causae secundae* which could compromise the freedom of the creative act of God, elaborated the theory of atomism.²² 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.²³ Iqbal also 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 God adds to Creation as God pleases (Surah 35: *Fatir*: 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."²⁴ In a well-known couplet, Iqbal says

یہ کائنات ابھی نامتام ہے شاید
 کرا رہی ہے دما دم صدائے کن فیکون!

Perhaps this universe is still incomplete,
 for each instant there can be heard the cry of "Be, and it came into being."²⁵

and in a letter to Professor Nicholson, states that "the universe is not a completed act: it is still in the course of formation."²⁶

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."²⁷

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.²⁸ Discursive knowledge cannot be predicated of an Ego who knows and who also forms the ground of the object known.

However, for Iqbal omniscience does not mean a single indivisible act of perception which makes God immediately aware of the entire sweep of history, regarded as an order of specific events, 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.”³⁰ Divine knowledge is not “passive omniscience” but a living creative activity to which the objects that appear to exist in their own right are organically related.³¹ If God’s knowledge is conceived as a kind of a mirror reflecting preordained 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.”³²

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 God’s Hands.³³ “If the rationally-directed Divine Will is good,” Iqbal says, then “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.”³⁴ Iqbal wonders, with Browning, if one is to regard God as All-Good, or, with Schopenhauer, as All-Evil.³⁵ 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.³⁶ (as indeed he intends that it should since he adapts James’s language to his purposes).³⁷ He says, “The teaching of the Qur’an, which believes in the possibility of improvement in the behaviour of man and his control over natural 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.”³⁸ Professor 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.” As the Qur’an says: “Go through the earth, and see how He originally produces creatures, afterwards will God reproduce another production.”(29:19)⁴⁰

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 God.⁴¹ 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’ (23:82).”⁴²

God and the Universe

According to Iqbal, “the universe does not confront the Absolute Self in the same way as it confronts the human self.”⁴³ 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 phase of the Qur’an it is the Habit of Allah.”⁴⁴

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 Reality as an 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 great revelation of the ‘Great I am’.”⁴⁵

Iqbal supports Einstein’s view that the universe is finite but boundless.⁴⁶ It is finite because it is a passing phase of God’s extensively infinite consciousness, and boundless because the creative power of God is intensively infinite.⁴⁷ Nature has no external limits, its only limit is the immanent self which creates and sustains the whole.⁴⁸ According to Iqbal the universe is liable to increase.⁴⁹ He

translates the Qur'anic words "Inna ila rabbika al-muntaha" (53:43) as "And verily towards God is thy limit." Professor Bausani comments: "This is a good instance of a characteristic of Iqbal, that of interpreting in modern terms some Qur'anic passages which no doubt mean something else if literally translated. So here it seems that a literal translation would amount simply to say that every being's end is in God, a return to God. However, the metaphysical implications Iqbal wants to find in the verse are in no wise, in my opinion, contrary to the spirit of Qur'an."⁵⁰ Since Nature is organically related to the Creative Self, it can grow, and is consequently infinite in the sense that none of its limits is final - nature is organically finite only towards the innermost essence of God."⁵¹ Iqbal expresses this thought thus in: "*Gulshan-e-Raz-e-Jadid*."

حقیقت لازوال و لامکان است
مگودیکر که عالم بے کران است
کران او درون است و بردن نیست
درونش پست بالا کم فردن نیست

Reality is beyond time and space,
Don't say any more that the universe is without a limit.
Its limit is internal, not external,
There are no distinctions of low and high, more or less, in its
internal aspect.
(Translation by Dar, B. A. *Iqbal's Gulshan-e-Raz-i-Jadid and
Bandagi Namah*, p. 23)⁵²

The relation of the Ultimate Ego to the finite ego may be conceived in several ways. For instant the Ultimate Ego or God may be regarded as the sole reality absorbing all the finite egos, or as holding the finite egos within God's own Self without obliterating their individuality, or as existing apart from finite egos.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ However, it negates the individuality of the finite egos. 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 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.”⁵⁵

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:

وہی اک حُسن ہے، لیکن نظر آتا ہے ہر شے میں

Beauty is One though it is seen in all things.⁵⁶

At this stage, Iqbal’s God is Beauty rather than Love and the same Beauty manifests itself in all things:

حُسنِ ازل کی پیدا ہر چیز میں بھلک ہے
انساں میں وہ سخن ہے، غنچے میں وہ چٹک ہے
کثرت میں ہو گیا ہے وحدت کا راز مخفی
جگنو میں جو چمک ہے، وہ پھول میں مہک ہے

Visible in everything is Beauty everlasting,
it is speech in humans and a sparkle in the bud.
The secret of One has become hidden in the Many,
the fire-fly’s glow is the flower’s scent.⁵⁷

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, he asks:

دیکھنے والے یہاں بھی دیکھ لیتے ہیں تجھے
پھر یہ وعدہ حشر کا صبر آزما کیونکر ہوا؟

Those who have sight can see you even here,
how then is the promise of the Last Day a test of patience?⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹

صیاد آب، حلقہ دامِ ستم بھی آپ!

Oneself the hunter and the object of the hunt!⁶⁰

Iqbal’s position here resembles that of Ghalib:

اصلِ شہود و شہاد و مشہود ایک ہے
حیراں ہوں، پھر مشاہدہ ہے کس حباب میں!

The object, witness, and witnessing is all the same thing -
I’m wonderstruck what then, can “vision” mean?⁶¹

Iqbal’s pantheistic ideas derive from Plato’s conception of God as Eternal Beauty which is manifest 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.”⁶²

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.”⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴ “It is clear,” says Professor Whitemore, “That Iqbal does not intend that the Infinite be regarded merely as an abstract

totality of finites.”⁶⁵ Iqbal’s doctrine is not pantheism (i.e., 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.⁶⁶ 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 individualistic 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 in his Gifford Lectures on the Attributes of God. 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 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.”⁶⁷ Iqbal always refers to God in terms such “Ultimate Ego,” “Creative Self,” “Omnipsyche,” 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.”⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹

Iqbal rejects deism, the view that the world is separate from God. Outside of God there is nothing, so deism is meaningless.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ Iqbal attacked Monism on practical ground also. For him “all life is individual; there is no such thing as universal life.”⁷²

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 God’s 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.”⁷³

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 lie apart from the universe, as if separated by a 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."⁷⁴

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, "I have very great respect in my heart for Mujaddid Sirhind."⁷⁵ Like Iqbal, the Mujaddid passed through "*wujudiyyat*" or unityism and reached "*abdiyyat*" or servitude.⁷⁶ The Mujaddid stressed the transcendence of God. "He is beyond all "*shuyun-o-i'tibarat*" or modes and relations, all "*zuhur-o-butun*" externalization and internalization, beyond all "*buruz-o-kumun*" or projection and introjection, beyond all "*mawsul-o-mafsul*" or realizable and explicable, beyond all "*kashf-o-shuhud*" or mystic intuition and experience; nay even beyond all "*mahsus-o-ma'qul*" empirical and rational, and beyond all "*mawhum-o-mutakhayal*" or conceivable and imaginable ... He the Holy One is beyond the Beyond, again beyond the Beyond, again beyond the Beyond."⁷⁷

ENDNOTES

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