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The Religious Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal

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Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal is the most outstanding poet-philosopher of modern Muslim India. He was born on February 22, 1876, in the city of Sialkot, Punjab. He had his early education in India, first in a *maktab* (Muslim religious school), then in Murray College, in Sialkot, and finally at the Government College in Lahore, where he took his M.A. in philosophy. During his education in India, his main interests were poetry, philosophy and Muslim culture. For some time he taught history and philosophy at the Oriental College, Lahore. In 1905, he left for England to study philosophy at Cambridge and law in London. At Cambridge, he studied under J. E. McTaggart. From England he went to Germany to work for a doctor's degree in philosophy at the University of Munich. His doctoral dissertation was later published under the title of *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*.

To the average Muslim in North India, Iqbal is best known as a poet and, poet indeed he was, of the very first order. But poetry for Iqbal was a means to disseminate some germinal ideas to awaken the slumbering Muslim world. To this end, he employed every possible medium of expression that he possessed. He wrote his poetry in Urdu and in Persian to reach the widest possible audience in the Muslim world. His most important work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, was written in English.

The dominating motive in the religious writings of Iqbal is to reformulate the thought of Islam in terms of modern Western philosophy. It was his firm conviction that such a reformulation was imperative if Islam was to be meaningful to the new generation of Muslims. He also wanted to eliminate the misunderstanding by the non-Muslim peoples everywhere of the basic teachings of Islam. In this he especially addressed himself to Europe. Iqbal, therefore, can be regarded as the spokesman of the new emerging world of Islam.

Iqbal thought and acted in the context of Indian Islam. His writings evince a sensitive awareness of the decadence of Islam in general and the manifold failings of Indian Islam in particular. Educationally the Muslims of India clung to a theory of education which encouraged the uncritical acceptance of traditional lore, where memorization of facts was preferred to the spirit of inquiry and research. Injured pride deterred the Muslim youth from attending schools instituted by a government which had displaced the Mughal Empire. In the time of Iqbal, they were slowly overcoming this prejudice, thanks to the efforts of Sir Sayyid, who had founded the Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh.

In social ethics, Islam was being challenged by the invasion of a new culture that entered India in the wake of the British raj. The religious situation was even more complex. On the one hand, Indian Islam was 'tainted' by the subtle influence of Hinduism. There were movements directed to cleanse Islam of these 'impurities'. On the other hand, there was the problem of stating Islamic doctrine in such a way that it would answer to the needs of contemporary Muslims. There had been little progress in Islam, since the middle ages, in the discussion of theological and philosophical issues. With few exceptions authoritarianism was the method par excellence as a criterion for religious truth. The function of reason was not the critical evaluation but the defense of accepted doctrine. Muslim orthodoxy held tenaciously to the doctrine of a transcendent and omniscient God, who knew through an eternal decree every event irrespective of its position in the temporal sequence. The future was already determined. Consequently the Muslim world was in the grip of a determinism that destroyed initiative and produced an attitude of fatalistic resignation. It is in this context that the contributions of Iqbal must be discussed and evaluated.

The Problem of Method

Iqbal grappled with the problem of knowledge in religion. For him, the Quran is the norm and final authority in matters religious. He ignores the problem of the relation of Scriptural authority to the rest of his epistemological views. We are not told how the authority of the Quran is related to intuition and reason, the two most important sources of religious knowledge for Iqbal. Next to the Quran, he finds that intuition is the method par excellence for a direct knowledge of Reality. Reason's apprehension of Reality is distorted because it breaks up the continuum of Reality into fragments by imposing static concepts on something that is dynamic. Only through mystic-intuition can Reality be grasped in its dynamic immediacy. Intellect gives us only a cinematographic view of it. It is a device created by the necessities of life, which for practical purposes can deal with reality only through static concepts. In his emphasis on intuition as the true method of religious knowledge Iqbal acknowledges his affinities with *Sufism* (Muslim mysticism). At the same time he is critical of the negative pantheistic type of Sufism, which Islam inherited from Neo-Platonism.

The method of intuition raises three serious problems: (1) Can non-conceptual or pre-conceptual experience claim the title of knowledge? (2) How can intuitive experience be verified? (3) How can it be communicated except through concepts?

God: The Divine Self

It is in his doctrine of God, however, that Iqbal has really introduced a revolution in the world of Muslim theology. God, for him, is not an unchanging Absolute, but a dynamic Reality. The most frequent analogy for God, in the writings of Iqbal, is the analogy of the Self. Time is real for God. He knows the past as the past can be known in all its details, but he knows the future as potential and thus vaguely in terms of possibilities. There is freedom and adventure even for God. The

Divine Self, according to Iqbal, is a 'rationally directed life'. It has imminent 'ends' and 'purposes' which 'act from within, unlike the concept of cause which is external to the effect and acts from without'. In other words, Reality is teleological. Teleology, however, does not imply a fixed futurity. The future presents an 'uncertainty' even for God's purposes. Is there any broad and general purpose inherent in the nature of the Divine Self which he is constantly pursuing in the midst of the host of immediate purposes that must be actualized for the preservation of the universe? Iqbal hints at this purpose of the Divine Self as the pursuit of a new cosmic synthesis at each moment. He is immanent in the world in the sense that the world is organically related to him. God and the world imply each other. His omnipotence is limited by the choices of the society of organisms that constitute his being. The tremendous significance of this conception of God in the Muslim theology can be appreciated when we realize the grip of fatalism which an exaggerated emphasis on the omniscience of God has created in Islam. In a way Iqbal's whole theological effort may be summarized as a determined and effective attack on the doctrine of fate. Iqbal has tried to show that the future lies as an open possibility even for God. All this is due to the tremendous shift in the philosophical perspective that Iqbal attempted to introduce in Muslim theology and the shift is from a philosophy of substance to one of process.

The Human Self

The life of the self in time is not to be conceived in atomistic terms, for such a conception of the self does not account for the indisputable fact of memory.

Iqbal asserts emphatically over and over again the individual reality of the human selves in the all-encompassing reality of the Divine Self. He rejects all pantheistic philosophies wherein the distinct individuality of man is lost in the all-embracing reality of God.

Man is a real creator. His freedom is real because the future remains open even for God; also because God is not the only creator as most Muslim theology has traditionally maintained, but man is a fellow creator with him. Iqbal, therefore, emphasizes the need for creative action and he exhorts his fellow Muslims to strengthen the Self, through obedience to the Law of Islam, through self-control, and through the effort to bring into being the vicegerency of God on earth. The hope for the coming of a superior race of men Iqbal finds in the doctrine of evolution. He even builds a doctrine of immortality on the support of the evolutionary view of life. Immortality, however, is conditional. Only those selves survive the shock of death who have strengthened themselves through creative activity in this life. The life after death is also one of activity. The discussion of immortality in Iqbal is confusing because it seems to imply a world beyond and apart from history and time. It seems to be a vestigial remnant from an older metaphysics which divided reality into the world of time and the world of eternity.

Change and Social Order

In ethics Iqbal faces the problem of reconciling a metaphysics of change with an ethics of permanent norms especially such as are speci-

fically enjoined in the Holy Quran. Here he emphasizes what he calls 'the principle of movement in Islam' by which he means that modern Muslims have the right to re-interpret the law of Islam in terms of the needs of their present situation by invoking the principle of *ijtihad*. Modern Muslims are not bound by the verdict of the Tradition, although this is a valuable source of precedents in theological and legal matters. The principle of *ijma* (general agreement of opinion) can be best expressed in our times through a Legislative Assembly in which the voice of both the clergy as well as the trained laity can be heard in the reformulation of the Muslim law. Wherever necessary, analogical reason (*qiyas*) should be employed to determine the verdict of law on particular cases. The Quran is final in matters of theology as well as law. Iqbal attempted to reconcile change and permanence with regard to the Quranic norms by saying that the Quran should be reinterpreted in terms of the need of the age. To understand Iqbal's views on change and social order, we must recognize him as a man who stood on the boundary line of an old and a new world. We find him progressive in adumbrating general principles of change but conservative when it comes to specific instances such as change in the status of women in Islam. However, he advocates change in some concrete cases too. He attacked the caste system in Islam and was willing to admit the need for women to obtain divorce rather than be driven into apostasy to secure freedom from their husbands.

Influences on the Thought of Iqbal

The three men who were most influential in shaping Iqbal's philosophy and religious outlook were Bergson, Nietzsche and Jalalu'l-Din Rumi. Bergson influenced his view of Reality as dynamic. His definition of time in terms of duration and his preference of intuition to intellect are also to be attributed to Bergson. Nietzsche may have influenced his doctrine of the Ideal Man. However, there are significant differences between Iqbal and Nietzsche. Iqbal denounces Nietzsche's atheism and aristocratic bias. He also rejects Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence. Iqbal is greatly influenced by Rumi in his poetic style. Other resemblances between Iqbal and Rumi are to be noticed in their emphasis on intuition, the concept of the Perfect Man, and their use of evolution as an argument for immortality.