

Iqbāl-Nāmāh

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Christianity and Islam—How They are Similar and Different

The following passage is taken from the opening chapter ("Knowledge and Religious Experience") of Muhammad Iqbal's The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, edited and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1989), pp. 7–8. In it, Iqbal explains how the fundamental insights of Christianity and Islam are similar in one respect but different in another. The passage is one of the several discussions on comparative religion that are found scattered throughout Iqbal's works. The two German writers mentioned in the passage are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), famous author of Faust, a book which Iqbal admired very highly, and Johann Peter Eckermann (1792–1854), Goethe's friend and biographer.

The main purpose of the Qur'an is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe. It is in view of this essential aspect of the Quranic teaching that Goethe, while making a general review of Islam as an educational force, said to Eckermann: 'You see this teaching never fails; with all our systems, we cannot go, and generally speaking no man can go, farther than that'. The problem of Islam was really suggested by the mutual conflict, and at the same time mutual attraction, presented by the two forces of religion and civilization. The same problem confronted early Christianity. The great point in Christianity is the search for an independent content for spiritual life which, according to the insight of its founder, could be elevated, not by the forces of a world external to the soul of man, but by the revelation of a new world within his soul. Islam fully agrees with this insight and supplements it by the further insight that the illumination of the new world thus revealed is not something foreign to the world of matter but permeates it through and through.

Thus the affirmation of spirit sought by Christianity would come not by the renunciation of external forces which are already permeated by the illumination of spirit, but by a proper adjustment of man's relation to these forces in view of the light received from the world within. It is the mysterious touch of the ideal that animates and sustains the real, and through it alone we can discover and affirm the ideal. With Islam the ideal and the real are not two opposing forces which cannot be reconciled. The life of the ideal consists, not in a total breach with the real which would tend to shatter the organic wholeness of life into painful oppositions, but in the perpetual endeavour of the ideal to appropriate the real with a view eventually to absorb it, to convert it into itself and illuminate its whole being. It is the sharp opposition between the subject and the object, the mathematical without and

the biological within, that impressed Christianity. Islam, however, faces the opposition with a view to overcome it. This essential difference in looking at a fundamental relation determines the respective attitudes of these great religions towards the problem of human life in its present surroundings. Both demand the affirmation of the spiritual self in man, with this difference only that Islam, recognizing the contact of the ideal with the real, says 'yes' to the world of matter and points the way to master it with a view to discover a basis for a realistic regulation of life.

To the Reader of *Zabūr-i 'Ajam*

This short poem, which opens Zabūr-i 'Ajam, seems to speak of the possibility of sudden illumination: There are times when one gets, all of a sudden— and quite by accident, one feels— an insight into the nature of things. But the real emphasis in the poem falls on preparedness: One must make the necessary effort to receive such illumination, the effort involving not only focused reflection on what the Qur'an calls āyāt—"signs" of Reality—but also unwavering faith and trust placed in God as the source of all insight. Those who engage in such reflection with patient devotion will find that sometimes the seemingly most insignificant objects of nature fling open before them windows onto Reality.

بر خواننده کتاب زبُو

می شود پرده چشم پرکاهی کاهی
دیدم هر دو جهان بر کجایی کاهی
دادی عشق بی در و درازت ولی
طی شود جاده صد ساله بر بی کاهی
در طلب کوشش مده لمن امید ز دست
دولتی بست که مایی سزای کاهی

A straw, at times, becomes the screen of my eye;¹
And with one look, at times, I have seen both the worlds.²

The Valley of Love is a long way away,³ and yet, at times,
The journey of a hundred years is covered in a sigh.⁴

Persist in your search, and do not let go of the hem of hope—
There is a treasure that, at times, you will find by the way.⁵

Kulliyāt-i Iqbal—Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 352

Notes

¹A straw. . . eye: At times, an insignificant object of nature becomes a source of illumination to me. Thus, even the meanest of phenomena, such as a straw, at times becomes for me a screen on which aspects of reality are displayed.

Pardab-i chashm, the Persian original for "screen of the eye," ordinarily means "eyelid." But the word *pardab* in the phrase has been used here not in the sense of the "screen" that blocks one's vision, but in the

sense of the “screen” that receives images, enabling one to see. It seems necessary to explain why the first meaning of the word would be inappropriate here.

First, the stated purpose of this inaugural poem of *Zabūr-i ‘Ajām* is to inspire the reader. Iqbal seeks to motivate his audience to undertake a journey into the spiritual realm, encouraging them to strive to find reality and be hopeful of receiving illumination; and he cites his own experience of receiving illumination in this way. It would have been inappropriate for Iqbal to say, in a context like this, that an insignificant thing like a straw sometime becomes the veil of his eyes, rendering him incapable of viewing reality. Such a meaning would militate against the meaning, intent, and mood of the whole poem.

Second, if Iqbal had intended to say that his vision is sometimes blocked by an object of nature, it would have made more sense for him to mention not something puny like a straw but something big or colossal. For then he could have effectively driven home the point that, while at times he can see both the worlds with a single look (second hemistich), at other times he fails to see even those objects of nature which are too evident or outstanding to miss (first hemistich).

Third, Iqbal himself has, elsewhere, used the phrase *pardah-i chashm* in the sense in which it has been interpreted here. In the Dedication of *Payam-i Mashriq (Kulliyat-i Iqbal—Farsi, 187)* he writes:

*Haq rumuz-i mulk-u-din bar man kushud
Naqsh-i ghayr az pardah-i chashmam rubud*

God has revealed to me the secrets of government [politics] and religion;
From the screen of my eyes he has deleted all imprints other than His own.

Here, too, quite obviously, *pardah-i chashm* signifies “instrument of vision” rather than “obstruction to vision.”

²*And with . . . worlds:* Certain moments in one’s life acquire revelatory significance, so that, in those moments, one gains precious insights both about this world and about the next, comprehending, for instance, the nature of ultimate reality, realizing what is of supreme value in life, and understanding the relationship between this world and the world to come.

³*The Valley . . . away:* The Valley of Love, conceived as a destination, can be interpreted either as true love of God, which mystics and others have sought to achieve, or as high ideals, which the best human minds and souls have passionately pursued. In either of the two senses, the Valley is difficult of access because it is far away and journeying toward it makes strenuous demands on the would-be traveler.

Quite possibly, this couplet alludes to the principal theme of one of Iqbal’s favorite Persian literary classics, *Mantiq at-Ṭayr*, by Farīd ad-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1220). In this mystical allegory, a large number of birds set out to find their king, wandering around unsuccessfully for a long time. In the end, they realize that the object of their search lay within them and not in the phenomenal world outside. This realization, when it comes, comes suddenly, so that the birds cover in an instant the journey of a thousand miles, as if it were (see next couplet).

⁴*The journey . . . sigh:* See the last paragraph of n. 3, above. A well-known couplet of Iqbal reads: “A single leap of love wrapped up the whole story; these heavens and earth I had taken to be boundless.”

The phrase “in a sigh” signifies both instrumentality and duration. The journey to the Valley of Love can be covered through employment of such simple means as drawing a sigh (which stands for deep devotion to, and genuine longing for, a noble cause), and it can be covered in no more time than it takes one to draw a sigh.

Mustansir Mir

Iqbal on Germany and German Writers

The following sayings of Iqbal are taken from his Stray Reflections, rev. ed. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992); page numbers are given in parentheses. While reading the first statement, especially, it should be kept in mind that it was made at least seventy years ago.

The Function of the German Nation

In the economy of nature each nation has a function allotted to it. The function of the German nation is the organisation of human knowledge. But they have recently started on a commercial enterprise which may give them empire, but they will have to suffer the displacement of a higher ideal by the all-absorbing spirit of trade. (46)

Kant's Categorical Imperative

No one can fully understand the significance of Kant's categorical imperative who does not study the political history of the German people. The rigour of Kant's conception of duty finds its full expression there. (93)

Goethe

Goethe picked up an ordinary legend and filled it with the whole experience of the nineteenth century—nay, the entire experience of the human race. This transformation of an ordinary legend into a systematic expression of man's ultimate ideal is nothing short of Divine workmanship. It is as good as the creation of a beautiful universe out of the chaos of formless matter. (74)

Goethe and Heine

No nation was so fortunate as the Germans. They gave birth to Heine at a time when Goethe was singing in full-throated ease. Two uninterrupted springs! (126)

Center for Islamic Studies

421 DeBartolo Hall
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio 44555-0001, USA
(330) 742-1625 & (330) 742-3448
(330) 742-1600 (fax)
www.as.yzu.edu/~islamst
mmir@cc.yzu.edu

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Youngstown, Ohio

Iqbal Academy Pakistan website: www.allamaiqbal.com
iqbalacd@lhr.comsats.net.pk