Iqbāl-Nāmah

Volume 2, Number 2, Spring 2002

Youngstown State University
Iqbal Academy Pakistan

The Possibility of Religion

The following passage is taken from the seventh and final chapter ("Is Religion Possible?") of Muhammad Iqbal's The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, *edited and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1989), 144–145. In it, Iqbal raises the epistemological question of whether the normal level of experience constitutes the only source of knowledge available to humans. Iqbal's view, stated in detail in that book, is that other types of knowledge-yielding experience are too well attested in human history to be rejected as false. The three thinkers referred to in this passage are the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the Andalusian Muslim mystic thinker Muhyī d-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), and the mystic poet Fakhruddīn ʿIrāqī (d. 1289).*

As we all know, it was Kant who first raised the question: 'Is metaphysics possible?' He answered this question in the negative; and his argument applies with equal force to the realities in which religion is especially interested. The manifold of sense, according to him, must fulfil certain formal conditions in order to constitute knowledge. The thing-in-itself is only a limiting idea. Its function is merely regulative. If there *is* some actuality corresponding to the idea, it falls outside the boundaries of experience, and consequently its existence cannot be rationally demonstrated. This verdict of Kant cannot be easily accepted. It may fairly be argued that in view of the more recent developments of science, such as the nature of matter as 'bottled-up light waves', the idea of the universe as an act of thought, finiteness of space and time and Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy in Nature, the case for a system of rational theology is not so bad as Kant was led to think. But for our present purposes it is unnecessary to consider this point in detail. As to the thing-in-itself, which is inaccessible to pure reason because of its falling beyond the boundaries of experience, Kant's verdict can be accepted only if we start with the assumption that all experience other than the normal level of experience is impossible. The only question, therefore, is whether the normal level is the only level of knowledge-yielding experience. Kant's view of the thing-in-itself and the thing as it appears to us very much determined the character of his question regarding the possibility of metaphysics. But what if the position, as understood by him, is reversed? The great Muslim Sufi philosopher, Muhyuddīn Ibn al-ʿArabī of Spain, has made the acute observation that God is a percept; the world is a concept. Another Muslim Sufi thinker and poet, ʿIrāqī, insists on the plurality of space-orders and time-orders and speaks of a Divine Time and a Divine Space. It may be that what we call the external world is only an intellectual construction, and that there are other levels of human experience capable of being systematized by other orders of space and time—levels in which concept and analysis do not play the same role as they do in the case of our normal experience.

You Cannot Suffer Looks!

دل و دیده ئی که دارم همه لذت نظاره
چه گنه اگر تراشم صنمی ز سنگ خاره

تو به جلوه در نقابی که نگاه بر نتابی
مه من اگر ننالم تو بگو دگر چه چاره

چه شود اگر خرامی به سرای کاروانی
که متاع نارسائش دلکی است پاره پاره

غزلی زدم که شاید به نوا قرار آید
تب شعله کم نگردد ز شکستن شراره

دل زنده ئی که دادی حجاب دی نشاید
نگهی بده که بینم شرری بسنگ خاره

همه پاره دلم را ز سرشک دو آتشه
غم خود چسان نهادی دل هزار پاره

نکند سفینه کس به یمی بلند موجے
خطری که عشق بیند بسلامت کناره

به سکوه بی نیازی ز خدایگان گذشتم
صفت مه تمامی که گذشت بر ستاره

Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 358-359.

Translation

The eyes and heart that I have take such delight in view—
What is my fault if I should carve idols out of rough stone?[1]

For all Your manifest glory You are veiled—You cannot suffer looks!
Tell me, my moon, what is my recourse other than lament?[2]

What harm would come if You strolled by the lodgings of a caravan,
Whose only unworthy possession is a little, broken heart?[3]

I sang out a *ghazal*, hoping that expression would bring relief—
The flame does not die down with one spark breaking off.[4]

The living heart that You gave me is ill at ease with veils—
Give me an eye that will see the fire in the rock.[5]

Every piece of my heart shares in the joy it gives—
How did You vest Your sorrow in a heart of a thousand pieces?[6]

High waves never wrecked anyone's boat in the sea;
The danger that love sees lies in the safety of the shore.[7]

With a stately disregard I passed by the lords of the world—
Like a full moon passing by the stars.[8]

Notes

[1]*The eyes . . . rough stone.* A tongue-in-cheek defense of idol-worship. Religious dogma enjoins that one believe in and worship an invisible God. Human beings are, however, so constituted that they desire to see the object of their devotion with their eyes and are, consequently, driven to carve visible statues out of rock and pay homage to them. Are human beings, then, to blame for their idol-making? Obviously, Iqbal is not offering a serious justification of idolatry. The couplet is a plea for a more direct contact with the Divinity. As such, it is a mild criticism of the inability of ordinary human beings to get beyond the physical realm and "see" God with the mind's eye. Certain kinds of eyes and hearts—"the eyes and heart that I have"—do keep one from recognizing the true, invisible God, rendering one vulnerable to the allure of image-making. Given different eyes and a different heart, one may be able to break free of the constraints of outlook that a physical world generates and, thus, to rise above the need to "carve idols out of rough stone." Couplet 5, below, reinforces this point.

[2]*For all . . . suffer looks.* In line 1, God is probably being compared to the bright sun, which, though manifest, cannot be looked at because it dazzles the eye; the observer's looks slip off the sun's face, as if it were. Similarly, God is manifest—the creation everywhere bears His imprint and gives evidence of His glorious presence—and, yet, He cannot be seen by physical eyes. Thus, the poet's lament is justified: he can only weep at his inability to see a deity who is ubiquitous but invisible.

In poetry, the beloved is often likened to the moon, so the vocative phrase *māh-i man* ("my moon!") in line 2 simply means "my love!" But, if it is granted that, in line 1, God is compared to the sun, then the use of the word "moon" in line 2 will become significant. The change of metaphors—from the sun in line 1 to the moon in line 2—would, of course, mean that God is being compared both to the sun and to the moon. But the cause of the poet's inability to see the object of his love would be different in each case. The sun, though manifest, is veiled because of its dazzling countenance; the moon, though manifest, is veiled because of the shadows that conceal part of its face. And so, whether God is compared to the sun or to the moon, the observer's looks get "bumped" off the Divine visage.

I suspect that the phrase "You cannot suffer looks!" in line 1 represents a sort of inversion of the Qur'ānic *Lan tarānī* ("You will never be able to see Me!"), said by God to Moses when the latter expressed a wish to see God with his eyes (Qur'ān 7:143). If human eyes are unable to see God, then could it be that God Himself cannot suffer to be seen by human eyes—for why, otherwise, would He hide behind a veil? This kind of questioning or comment is quite common to Iqbal's poetry and need not ruffle any theological feathers.

[3]*What harm . . . broken heart.* Today's Muslim community, beset with difficulties, is like a weary caravan that, having despaired of reaching its destination, has pitched camp. But for all its failings, it has a redeeming trait: It is still possessed of a heart that is devoted to God, Who should, therefore, "visit" its lodgings—that is, turn to it in mercy and bless it. In line 2, the word "broken" (the Persian *pārah-pārah* literally means "that which has been shattered to pieces"), as a qualifier of "heart," signifies both suffering and loyalty: it is a heart that has experienced much suffering in its devotion to God, but it has, nevertheless, remained steadfastly loyal to God. In light of this explanation, the appeal made in line 1 becomes especially poignant.

[4]*I sang . . . breaking off.* Iqbal is consumed by the fire of love—of God or of the Muslim community. Thinking that giving vent to his passion would bring him relief, he composed a love-poem. Scarce did he realize that the heat of a fire does not diminish if a single spark breaks off from the fire.

[5]*The living . . . the rock.* Possessed as he is of a living heart, Iqbal longs to know the reality of things. The world, however, affords only a partial view of reality. For example, flint, struck by steel, will produce sparks. Rocks, therefore, can be said to have fire in them, but this fire is not visible to the ordinary eye. Iqbal wishes to have keen vision, which would penetrate the rock, enabling him to see the fire hidden in the rock.

[6]*Every piece . . . thousand pieces.* The pronoun "it" in line 1 refers to "sorrow" in line 2. A lover often speaks of his broken heart: the beloved, through her indifference to him or through her rejection of his love, "shreds" his heart to pieces. Iqbal's devoted heart, too, has been torn to pieces in his love for God. (Iqbal is not necessarily implying that God has dealt badly by him; he is comparing God to a beloved, and himself to a lover, in a general way.) Iqbal pines for God, his heart being filled with the sweet sorrow generated by his separtion from God. In fact, every single piece of his heart—and it is a heart that is broken into a thousand pieces—partakes of this joyous sorrow, and Iqbal is led to wonder how God could imbue every single piece with such that feeling.

[7]*High waves . . . the shore.* My reading of the text of this couplet differs from that of several other translators and commentators. I read *na-kushad* ("does not kill/destroy"; from the verb *kushtan*) rather than *na-kashad* ("does not draw/take out"; from the verb *kashidan*), taking *buland-mawje* ("a high wave") as the subject of the verb *kushtan*, *safīnah-i kas* ("anyone's boat") as the object, and *ba-yame* ("in a sea") as an adverbial. In other words, I do not take *yame-buland mawje* as an *izāfah* construction, neither as an *izāfah* with a *kasrah* (surprisingly, some reproduce the couplet with the word *yam* followed by a *kasrah*, which is totally unwarranted by the received text) nor as an *izāfah* with a *ya* substituting for the *kasrah*. It may be possible to read the text in the Iqbal Academy edition as the latter type of *izāfah*, but in the

Sheikh Ghulam Ali edition—which represents the orthographical conventions used in the printing of Iqbal's works during Iqbal's lifetime and with Iqbal's approval—the *muẓāf* with a consonantal ending is regularly given with a *kasrah* and not with a *yā*. The word *yam* in this edition occurs with a *yā-i majhūl*, a clear indication that it is not a *muẓāf*—that *yame buland-mawje*, therefore, is not an *iẓāfah* construction—and that the *yā* in *yame* is that of *tankīr* (indefiniteness) or *waḥdat* (unity). Incidentally, in *Jāvīd-Nāmah*, Iqbal does use the phrase *yam-i buland-mawj*, given in both editions (Iqbal Academy, 500; Sheikh Ghulam Ali, 616) in the normal form of the Persian *iẓāfah* construction (*yam* followed by a *kasrah*)—further evidence that, in the couplet from *Zabūr-i 'Ajam*, the *yā* of *yame* is not that of *iẓāfah*. Iqbal is saying in this couplet, as he does in several other places, that the real threat to a worthwhile existence comes not from vigorous activity and bold adventure, but from passive outlook and dormant ambition; "love"—that is, noble ambition or commitment to lofty ideals— is not afraid to ply the stormy seas, though it is afraid of the safety of the terra firma. This safety is valueless because it represents inertia and stunts growth. The ocean, on the other hand, represents dynamic life, and any danger it may appear to pose is negligible in view of the promise of achievement it holds out to adventurous spirits. In other words, it is only by accepting life's challenges that one can make significant accomplishments. In a poem of *Payām-i Mashriq* (in *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī* [Iqbal Academy edition], 276), Iqbal says: *Agar khwāhī ḥayāt andar khaṭar zī*, "If you desire life, live in the thick of danger."

[8] *With a stately . . . the stars.* In his poetry, Iqbal often takes pride in maintaining his independence of the world's big shots and of his would-be patrons. These "lords of the world" are, on account of their worldly glory, like stars, but Iqbal cares little for them and, like the moon, which possesses greater glory, passes by them without even deigning to look at them.

Mustansir Mir

Shakespeare and Goethe

Both Shakespeare and Goethe rethink the Divine thought of creation. There is, however, one important difference between them. The realist Englishman rethinks the individual, the idealist German, the universal. His *Faust* is a seeming individual only. In reality, he is humanity individualised.

Muhammad Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, rev. ed. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 122.

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.ysu.edu/~islamst
mmir@cc.ysu.edu

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

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 264
Youngstown, Ohio