

Iqbāl-Nāmāh

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Issues in the Critical Study of Religion

The following passage opens one of Muhammad Iqbal's major articles, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal," first published in 1909. It is taken from Latif Ahmed Sherwani, ed., Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal (Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1977; reprinted with corrections in 1995), 97-98. Iqbal wrote the article soon after his return from Europe, where he lived for three years (1905-1908) in connection with his higher studies. Iqbal's exposition of "the Islamic ideal in its ethical and political aspects" (99) in the article prefigures several of the issues he was to deal with at greater length in his later years. The passage quoted here shows Iqbal to be cognizant of the types of issues that arise in the critical study of religion—at a time when Muslim thinkers and writers in India, or even in the larger Muslim world, had little understanding or appreciation of the importance of such issues. In this respect, as in many others, Iqbal proved to be ahead of his times.

There are three points of view from which a religious system can be approached: the standpoint of the teacher, that of the expounder, and that of the critical student. I do not pretend to be a teacher whose thought and action are or ought to be in perfect harmony in so far as he endeavours to work out in his own life the ideals which he places before others and influences his audience more by example than by precept. Nor do I claim the high office of an expounder who brings to bear a subtle intellect upon his task, endeavours to explain all the various aspects of the principles, the truth of which he never questions. The attitude of the mind which characterises a critical student is fundamentally different from that of the teacher and the expounder. He approaches the subject of his inquiry free from all presuppositions, and tries to understand the organic structure of a religious system, just as a biologist would study a form of life or a geologist a piece of mineral. His object is to apply methods of scientific research to religion, with a view to discover how the various elements in a given structure fit in with one another, how each factor functions individually, and how their relation with one another determines the functional value of the whole. He looks at the subject from the standpoint of history and raises certain fundamental questions with regard to the origin, growth, and formation of the system he proposes to understand. What are the historical forces, the operation of which evoked, as a necessary consequence, the phenomenon of a particular system? Why should a particular religious system be produced by a particular people? What is the real significance of a religious system in the history of the people who produced it, and in the history of mankind as a whole? Are there any geographical causes which determine the original locality of a religion? How far does it reveal the inmost soul of a people, their social, moral and political aspirations? What transformations, if any, has it worked in them? How far has

it contributed towards the realisation of the ultimate purpose revealed in the history of man? These are some of the questions which the critical student of religion endeavours to answer, in order to comprehend its structure and to estimate its ultimate worth as a civilising agency among the forces of historical evolution.

Thief-Like You Enter the Garden

The following poem, one of the most exquisite in Zabūr-i ‘Ajām, touches upon several of the themes encountered in Iqbal’s poetry: Iqbal’s loving devotion to God, his concern for the Muslim community, and his sense of mission as a poet; the modern human being’s alienation from God; and the imperialism of nations.

ازشت غبار ما صد ناله بر آئینری نزدیک تر از جانی با خوی کم آئینری
در موج صبا سبھان دید باغ آئی در بوی گل آئینری ما بچھ در آئینری
مغرب ز تو بیکاز مشرق همه افاز وقت است که در عالم نقش و کز آئینری
آئینری که سبر دار و سودای سبھ آئینری تسکین جوش کن با شتر چکنری
من بنڈبی قیدم شاید که کریم با این طره سبھان ادرگر دغم آئینری
جز ناله منی دانم گویند غزل خنم
این صیت که چون شبنم بر سینه من ریزی

From my handful of dust You draw out a hundred laments;
You are nearer than the soul—for all Your shy reserve.¹

Hiding in the gentle breeze, thief-like You enter the garden;
You mix with the flower’s perfume, and blend with the bud.²

The West is indifferent to You, the East is all legends;
It is time you etched a new design in the world.³

He who is heady with the ambition of world-conquest—
Soothe his craze with the lancet of Genghis.⁴

An unreined bondsman, I might slip away again—
Suppose You hung these curly tresses around my neck!⁵

Lament is all I know, but they say I am a singer of *ghazals*;
What is this dew-like thing You are pouring on my heart?⁶

Notes

¹*From my . . . shy reserve:* “Shy reserve” (*kbū-i kam-āmezi*, literally, “the habit or practice of mixing with people only infrequently”) is, in philosophical language, Divine transcendence. Since God is unlike anything in the world (Qur’ān 42:11) and is, for that reason, distinct from nature, one might think of Him as having no connection with the world. Yet, as Qur’ān 50:16 puts it, He is closer to human beings than their jugular veins. In other words, His transcendence is not to be interpreted in such a way as to make Him irrelevant to human lives. God, therefore, is not only transcendent, but is also immanent. And, being close to them, He creates in human beings a deep longing for Himself, and they become so charged with love for Him that they pine for Him just as a lover pines for his beloved.

²*Hiding in . . . the bud:* While human beings cannot see God with their eyes, they can see His signs everywhere in nature. Natural phenomena like the breeze, the flower’s perfume, and the bud attest not only to His existence in an abstract, metaphysical sense, but also to His subtle, “thief-like”—but, to the discerning eye, unmistakable—presence in the world. Muslim mystics distinguish between two aspects of God, *jalāl* (“majesty”) and *jamāl* (“beauty”). Some phenomena of nature represent Divine *jalāl*, while others—like the ones mentioned in this couplet—represent Divine *jamāl*. The couplet says that nature is a repository of the signs of God and that one who is able to read these signs will be led to God. This couplet ties in nicely with the opening one, which speaks of the invisible God’s closeness to human beings. The Persian word *dar-awehtan* (the base form of *dar-awezi*, in the second hemistich), here translated as “to blend,” may also be rendered as “to intertwine” or “to tangle.”

³*The West . . . the world:* The world has become alienated from God: the West has rejected God on philosophical grounds; the East, though it still believes in God, is so given to legend-making that it is no longer able to form a correct conception of God. The second hemistich, thus, means: It is time You created a new East and a new West—that is to say, a new human race that will know You and serve You the way You deserve to be known and served. The Persian phrase *naqsh angekhtan* (the base form of *naqsh-i digar angezi*) in the second hemistich may also be translated as “to make an imprint, draw a sketch, create a pattern.”

⁴*He who . . . of Genghis:* In the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan and his successors worked havoc with a large part of the world. Such individuals have been called God’s scourge. But, in a certain sense, they may have been part of God’s plan to purge the world of certain forms of corruption and to discipline rebellious nations or deal the *coup de grâce* to decadent civilizations. The first hemistich, “He who is heady with the ambition of world-conquest,” alludes to the European imperialist powers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Iqbal wishes that God would raise a Genghis-like figure to soothe these powers’ craze of world domination. In the same vein, Iqbal says in *Bāl-i Jibril (Kulliyāt-i Iqbal—Urdū, Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1990)*, 363:

Karti hai mulūkiyyat āthār-i junūñ paydā
Allāh ke nishtar haiñ, Taymur ho yā Changez

Imperialism creates symptoms of madness;
Tamburlaine or Genghis—all are God’s lancets.

The word “lancet” (*nishtar*) in the two couplets alludes to the old medical practice of venesection to treat certain types of diseases.

⁵*An unreined . . . my neck:* Note, first, the use of the two main words in the phrase *bandah-i bi-qayd*. *Bandah* is the Persian equivalent of the Arabic ‘*abd*, “slave,” a key Qur’ānic term that defines the human beings’ status vis-à-vis God, their Master; *qayd* means “confinement, restraint, fetter,” either literally or figuratively. The apparently oxymoronic *bandah-i bi-qayd*—a slave who is not subject to *qayd*—means a slave who may be in fetters physically but who is unruly or unsubmitive and is likely to get away at the first opportunity he gets. In calling himself *bandah-i bi-qayd*, Iqbal means that, as a true slave of God, he is supposed to make complete submission to God but that he is too undisciplined to bear His yoke. In the second hemistich, Iqbal himself suggests how God (who is represented here as the female beloved of Persian and Urdu poetry) might break him in—by using His beautiful tresses to enchain him. The tresses, appropriately curly or ring-like, will form

a tight noose or collar around the lover's neck, making him a prisoner forever and cutting off all possibility of his escape. It should be kept in mind that, in Iqbal's view, human beings achieve true freedom not in revolting against God, but in surrendering completely to His will. Iqbal says in *Bang-i Dara (Kulliyāt-i Iqbal—Urdu)*, 130: *Qayd meñ āyā to ḥāṣil mujh ko āzādī hu'ī* ("I became free only when I was taken prisoner").

⁶*Lament is . . . my heart?* The word "lament" in the first hemistich can signify either the human being's pining love for God (this is the meaning it has in the opening couplet of the poem) or the poet's deep concern over the state of affairs in his community. On the first meaning, Iqbal would be saying that his poetry consists of nothing more than longing and lamenting for God; on the second, that it is but an expression of grief and sorrow over the abject state to which the Muslim community has been reduced. On either meaning, Iqbal regrets that people think of him only as a composer of *ghazals* or love poems, failing to realize that he has a serious message to convey. His poetry, in fact, has a kind of Divine sanction behind it, for the thoughts that he expresses in it descend on his heart (the Persian *sināb* literally means "chest") from a heavenly source, like the dew that drops from heaven. The implication, of course, is that God Himself has blessed Iqbal with certain insights and that Iqbal is meant to serve as a medium for their transmission. The second hemistich possibly alludes to Qur'ān 2:97 and 26:194, according to which the angel Gabriel conveyed the Qur'ān "to your [Prophet Muhammad's] heart."

Mustansir Mir

The Jewish Contribution to Civilization

In the development of universal civilisation the Jewish factor cannot be regarded as a negligible quantity. The Jews were probably the first framers of the principles of business morality summed up in the idea of righteousness.

Muhammad Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, rev. ed (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 64.

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