

Iqbāl-Nāmāh

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Is Islamic Law Capable of Evolution?

[The following selection is taken from "The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam," the sixth lecture in Muhammad Iqbal's The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 130–131. In this lecture, generally considered the most important part of the book, Iqbal undertakes to show, by analyzing the history of legal development in Islam and by examining parts of the Muslim world in the early twentieth century, that Islamic law is inherently dynamic, the notion of ijtihad (informed independent reasoning) representing the principle of movement in Islam. In the passage reproduced below, Iqbal offers the testimony of two distinguished European scholars of Islam in the early decades of the twentieth century, Max Horten (1874–1945) of Germany and Christian Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936) of Holland.]

I now proceed to see whether the history and structure of the Law of Islam indicate the possibility of any fresh interpretation of its principles. In other words, the question that I want to raise is—Is the Law of Islam capable of evolution? Horten, Professor of Semitic Philology at the University of Bonn, raises the same question in connexion with the Philosophy and Theology of Islam. Reviewing the work of Muslim thinkers in the sphere of purely religious thought he points out that the history of Islam may aptly be described as a gradual interaction, harmony, and mutual deepening of two distinct forces, i.e. the element of Aryan culture and knowledge on the one hand, and a Semitic religion on the other. The Muslim has always adjusted his religious outlook to the elements of culture which he assimilated from the peoples that surrounded him. From 800 to 1100, says Horten, not less than one hundred systems of theology appeared in Islam, a fact which bears ample testimony to the elasticity of Islamic thought as well as to the ceaseless activity of our early thinkers. Thus, in view of the revelations of a deeper study of Muslim literature and thought, this living European Orientalist has been driven to the following conclusion:

‘The spirit of Islam is so broad that it is practically boundless. With the exception of atheistic ideas alone it has assimilated all the attainable ideas of surrounding peoples, and given them its own peculiar direction of development.’

The assimilative spirit of Islam is even more manifest in the sphere of law. Says Professor Hurgronje—the Dutch critic of Islam:

‘When we read the history of the development of Mohammedan Law we find that, on the one hand, the doctors of every age, on the slightest stimulus, condemn one another to the point of mutual accusations of heresy; and, on the other hand, the very same people, with greater and greater unity of purpose, try to reconcile the similar quarrels of their predecessors.’

These views of modern European critics of Islam make it perfectly clear that, with the return of new life, the inner catholicity of the spirit of Islam is bound to work itself out in spite of the rigorous conservatism of our doctors. And I have no doubt that a deeper study of the enormous legal literature of Islam is sure to rid the modern critic of the superficial opinion that the Law of Islam is stationary and incapable of development.

God in Search of Man

[In Persian and Urdu mystic poetry, man is usually presented as a lover pursuing God. In the following poem, taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's Zabūr-i 'Ajam, those roles are reversed, God having become the pursuer, and man, the pursued. At times, the Muslim mystical tradition seems to suggest that God created human beings so that He may be known and praised—an implication being that a full appreciation of God's Being and attributes requires the existence of man, that, in a sense, not only God's but also man's existence is necessary. Since such a view can lead to a pantheistic understanding of ontos, Muslim theologians have endeavored to guard the integrity of Divine transcendence, though without trying to erect an impassable barrier between God and man. Iqbal's concern is not so much to guard Divine transcendence, but to argue for man's special place in the scheme of creation. Man's distinctive identity must always remain uncompromised, the highest point reachable by man being that of collegiality with God rather than that of union or merger with God in a mystical sense. It would probably be too much to say that, in this poem, God has been cast in the image of man, but the reader cannot but be struck by the poem's anthropomorphic vocabulary: like man, God, too, feels desire and experiences want, sings and draws sighs, and is eager to meet and converse with man. The real point of the poem, however, lies in an affirmation of the worth of man: man is worthy enough to be the object of God's loving pursuit. But, perhaps, Iqbal is speaking not of the human species in general, but specifically of the ideal man, that is, of the man who has actualized his full potential and, thus, has deservedly become the focus of Divine attention. If so, then the poem will be understood as an exhortation to man to rise to the highest level of achievement of which he is capable so that he may rightly deserve his status of what Muslim writers call ashraf al-makhlūqāt (the noblest of all creation).]

ما از خدای کم شده ایم او بجهت
چون ما نیازمند و گرفتار از دست
کاهی بر برگ لاله نوید پیام نبی
کاهی درون سینہ مرغان بایستی
در زکس آرمید که بنید جمال ما
خندان کرشمه دان که نکاهش گفتگوست
آهی سحر کھی که زند در مشاق ما
بسیرون اندرون بزریر چاروت
هنگامه سبت از پی دیدار کنی
پنهان بر ذره ذره و نا آشنا هنوز
پیدا چو ما بتاب و باغوش کاخ و گوت

در خاکدان ما کمر زندگے کم است

این کوهری که کم شده ما نیم یا که است

Translation

God has lost us—He is in search of us;¹
Like us, He feels need and is a captive of desire.²
At times, he inscribes his message on the petals of tulips;
At times, he makes ecstatic chant in the breasts of birds.³
He reposes in the narcissus, that He may view our beauty;
He is so adept at wooing that His looks make conversation.⁴
The sighs He draws at dawn in separation from us
Are inside and outside, above and below, all around.⁵
He has caused all this stir that He might observe the creature of dust;
The pageant of scent and color is but a pretext for watching.⁶
He is hidden in every particle and yet is a stranger;
He is conspicuous like the moon and is caressed by town and street.⁷
In this dust-bowl of ours is lost the pearl of life;
This lost pearl—is it we, or is it He?⁸

Notes

¹*God has . . . of us.* According to the Bible and the Qur'ān, Adam and Eve left their heavenly abode, losing their erstwhile proximity to God. Iqbal puts the matter differently: it was not man who lost God; rather, it was God who lost man. This was so because (as Iqbal says elsewhere) man, through his efforts, transformed his new, terrestrial abode into a wonderful place to live in and, thus, could “afford” to forget his former, heavenly dwelling. But now it was God who missed him and, feeling the pangs of separation, wished man to return. But man, too engrossed in refashioning the world to which he had been sent, was nowhere to be found, and so God earnestly began to search for him.

²*Like us . . . of desire.* Taking the preceding verse as background, this verse offers a general statement: God misses man because, like man, He, too, feels the pinch of need and has longings. The anthropomorphism of this verse and the previous one may be a little too bold for some readers—and a theologian might even term blasphemous the notion of God's dependency—but Iqbal is only trying to underscore the intimacy of the relationship between God and man: God loves man.

³*At times . . . of birds.* Borrowing the familiar garden imagery of Persian and Urdu love poetry, Iqbal, in this and the next two verses, speaks of nature as the liaison between God and man. At times, God uses the petals of the tulip as paper on which He writes His messages of love, to be read by man; at times, pining for man, God makes laments through songs sung by birds. In other words, the phenomena of nature constitute an invitation by God to man to draw close to God.

⁴*He reposes . . . make conversation.* Resting in the flower narcissus as if it were a seat or pavilion, God intently observes the beauty of man, or the beautiful work that man does in this world. In Persian and Urdu poetry, the narcissus is often compared to a beloved's eyes, hence the mention, in the second hemistich, of God's adeptness at wooing: the inviting looks of the narcissus engage man in conversation.

⁵*The sighs . . . all around.* Like a lover who stays awake all night, profitlessly waiting for his beloved's arrival, God, pining in His love for man and despairing of seeing him, heaves sighs of despair at dawn, and these sighs fill up all space. The expression “sighs of dawn” is often used in Iqbal's poetry for the sound of sighing made by a person in a state of prayer at dawn (the prayer of *fajr*, or dawn, is the first of the five obligatory daily prayers in

Islam) or in remembrance of God at that time, which, because of its quiet serenity, is highly conducive to establishing a close relationship with God. Again, Iqbal reverses the roles: it is God who sighs at dawn in remembrance of man.

⁶*He has . . . for watching.* The whole point of creating the universe—of bringing into existence this vast, bustling place that is full of exquisite colors and lovely smells—is to furnish man with a stage on which he may perform. The verse implies (1) that man is the acme of all creation, the world being only an instrument placed at his disposal so that he might use and exploit it to make his achievements, and (2) that God expects great things of man, so that He would like to watch eagerly as man performs on the stage of the world.

⁷*He is . . . and street.* God is both hidden and manifest. He is disguised in every particle of the physical world and so would be, one thinks, easy to discover, but He remains unknown. Iqbal might mean that God is unknown either because most people do not make the effort to discover Him, even though He is so close, or because human beings cannot fully comprehend God. But God is also disclosed to view like the moon, whose gentle, welcome light shines forth in all places.

⁸*In this . . . it He?* Inert, dead, and lacking intrinsic worth, the world is here called a “dust-bowl”—a translation of the Persian *khakdān*, which literally means a depository of dirt or refuse. In this world is lost the principle of life, and this principle is to be retrieved. But the question is, Who represents that principle—God or man? The poem began with the statement that God has lost or “misplaced” man, but that statement is now called into question. A sort of deconstruction thus takes place in the poem, raising another question: Who is searching for whom—God for man or man for God? If we reread the whole poem with this question in mind—and the question is definitely more than rhetorical—at least some of the verses would seem to suggest that man, too, has lost God—that is, has failed to recognize God and appreciate His handiwork, nature. As such, the correct answer to the question probably would be that man has lost God as much as God has lost man.

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