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Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom

The following passage is taken from the third lecture, "The Conception of God and the Meaning of Prayer," in Muhammad Iqbal's The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. After stating that God, whom he calls "the all-inclusive Ego," has granted a degree of freedom to human beings, whom he calls "finite egos," Iqbal asks whether, in giving such freedom to human beings, God imposes any limitations on his omnipotence and how Divine omnipotence can be reconciled with human freedom. Such reconciliation is, according to Iqbal, possible on the view that God has creative freedom.

If history is regarded merely as a gradually revealed photo of a predetermined order of events, then there is no room in it for novelty and initiation. Consequently, we can attach no meaning to the word 'creation', which has a meaning for us only in view of our own capacity for original action. The truth is that the whole theological controversy relating to predestination is due to pure speculation with no eye on the spontaneity of life, which is a fact of actual experience. No doubt, the emergence of egos endowed with the power of spontaneous and hence unforeseeable action is, in a sense, a limitation on the freedom of the all-inclusive Ego. But this limitation is not externally imposed. It is born out of His own creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators of His life, power, and freedom.

But how, it may be asked, is it possible to reconcile limitation with Omnipotence? The word 'limitation' need not frighten us. The Qur'ān has no liking for abstract universals. It always fixes its gaze on the concrete which the theory of Relativity has only recently taught modern philosophy to see. All activity, creational or otherwise, is a kind of limitation without which it is impossible to conceive God as a concrete operative Ego.

Omnipotence, abstractly conceived, is merely a blind, capricious power without limits. The Qurʾān has a clear and definite conception of Nature as a cosmos of mutually related forces. It, therefore, views Divine omnipotence as intimately related to Divine wisdom, and finds the infinite power of God revealed, not in the arbitrary and the capricious, but in the recurrent, the regular, and the orderly. At the same time, the Qurʾān conceives God as 'holding all goodness in His hands'. If, then, the rationally directed Divine will is good, a very serious problem arises. The course of evolution, as revealed by modern science, involves almost universal suffering and wrongdoing. No doubt, wrongdoing is confined to man only. But the fact of pain is almost universal, though it is equally true that men can suffer and have suffered the most excruciating pain for the sake of what they have believed to be good. Thus the two facts of moral and physical evil stand out prominent in the life of Nature. Nor can the relativity of evil and the presence of forces that tend to transmute it be a source of consolation to us; for, in spite of all this relativity and transmutation, there is something terribly positive about it. How is it, then, possible to reconcile the goodness and omnipotence of God with the immense volume of evil in His creation? This painful problem is really the crux of Theism. No modern writer has put it more accurately than Naumann in his *Briefe über Religion*. 'We possess', he says:

a knowledge of the world which teaches us a God of power and strength, who sends out life and death as simultaneously as shadow and light, and a revelation, a faith as to salvation which declares the same God to be father. The following of the world-God produces the morality of the struggle for existence, and the service of the Father of Jesus Christ produces the morality of compassion. And yet they are not two gods, but one God. Somehow or other, their arms intertwine. Only no mortal can say where and how this occurs.

To the optimist Browning all is well with the world; to the pessimist Schopenhauer the world is one perpetual winter wherein a blind will expresses itself in an infinite variety of living things which bemoan their emergence for a moment and then disappear for ever. The issue thus raised between optimism and pessimism cannot be finally decided at the present stage of our knowledge of the universe. Our intellectual constitution is such that we can take only a piecemeal view of things. We cannot understand the full import of the great cosmic forces which work havoc, and at the same time sustain and amplify life. The teaching of the Qurʾān, which believes in the possibility of improvement in the behaviour of man and his control over natural forces, is neither optimism nor pessimism. It is meliorism, which recognizes a growing universe and is animated by the hope of man's eventual victory over evil.

Muhammad Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 63–65

Earth is Better than Paradise

The following poem is taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's *Zabūr-i 'Ajam* ("Psalms of Persia"). Its main theme is the need to discover oneself through bold and self-confident action in the face of the odds presented by the seemingly intimidating but actually fascinating scheme of things.

جهان رنگ بویید تو میگوئی که ازت این یکی خود را تبارش زین که تو مضروب سازت این
نگاه جلوه بدست از صفای جلوه می لغز تو میگوئی حجابت این نقابت این مجازت این
بیادش طناب پرده های نیلگونش را که مثل سله عربیان بنگاه پاکبازت این
مرا این جا کدان من فردوس بنی خستر تمام وقت این حرم زود سازت این

زمانی کم کنم خود را زانی کم کنم او را
زمانی هر دو را با هم زانت این چه زانت این

Kulliyāt-i Iqbal – Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 418–419

Translation

The world of color and scent is manifest; you say that it is a mystery.
Just strike its string with yourself, for you are the pick and it, the instrument.¹

The look befuddled by view stumbles over the purity of view.
You say that it is a barrier, it is a veil, it is a metaphor!²

Come, draw in the ropes of its blue curtains,
For, like a flame, it is exposed to the chaste look.³

To me, this dust bowl is better than the lofty paradise:
It is a place of desire and longing, a sanctum of fire and passion.⁴

At one time, I lose myself; at another, I lose Him;
At yet another, I find both. What mystery is this? What mystery is this?⁵

Notes

¹**The world . . . instrument.** The physical world, with its phenomenal diversity, is a manifest reality that speaks its meaning eloquently. Yet, there are those who think that the nature, purpose, and destiny of the observable world constitute a mystery, that the world may even lack reality. Addressing such a person, Iqbal says: The solution of the apparent mystery attaching to the world rests with you. A stringed instrument is quiet until played upon. Strike the string of this instrument-like world with the pick of your personality or self and it will produce a melody, revealing its secrets. In a word, human beings impart to the world any meaning or value it has, and human beings should, therefore, recognize both their privilege and their responsibility of engaging actively with the world. Only such engagement will bring out the potentialities of the world, making human beings masters of the world, and, as a result, rendering irrelevant what must be seen as irrelevant—namely, the question whether the world has reality or is a mystery.

²**The look . . . metaphor.** Those who are accustomed to seeing only the material aspect of reality are unable to see through it to the spiritual aspect of reality that lies beyond. Such people become so absorbed in, or intoxicated by, the material phenomena surrounding them that, ironically, “the purity of view” characterizing the spiritual dimension of reality gives them a blurred vision, much like the one—Iqbal might have added—who, having been brought up on unwholesome food, falls sick on eating healthful food. To compound the irony, such people, instead of recognizing the ultimacy of the spiritual, go into the contrary mode of regarding the spiritual as a barrier to what they think is reality, as a veil on the face of what they consider to be the truth, and as a metaphorical or allegorical representation of something other than itself.

The word “stumbles” (Persian: *mī-laghzad*) is strongly suggestive, contrastively, of Qurʾān 53:17. Referring to the Prophet Muḥammad’s observing a spiritual phenomenon on the horizon on a certain occasion, the Qurʾānic verse says that Muḥammad was able to see the phenomenon in question in a state of complete composure: “The look did not get deflected and it did not overreach.” The two Arabic verbs in the Qurʾānic text, *mā zāgha* (“it did not get deflected”) and *mā ṭaghā* (“it did not overreach”), especially the first one, are very close in meaning and spirit to the Persian infinitive, *laghzīdan* (“to stumble”), of which a derivative is used in Iqbal’s verse. In fact, in a poem in *Ẓarb-i Kalīm*, Iqbal explicitly cites the Qurʾānic expression *mā zāgh* (*zāgh* being *zāgha* in its full form), calling Muḥammad “the lord of *mā zāgh*”:

Eurōgh-i maghribiyān khīrah kar rahā hai tujhe
Tirī nazar kā nigahbān hō s̄ahīb-i mā zāgh

[The splendor of the Western people dazzles you;
May the lord of *mā zāgh* guard your look]

Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdu (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 598

The verse from *Ẓarb-i Kalīm* leaves no doubt that Qurʾān 53:17 had supplied Iqbal with a suitable image for expressing a key criticism of the West. In fact, it would not be too far-fetched to suggest

that, in the verse under study from *Zabūr-i ‘Ajam*, too, “the look befuddled by view” is the look that belongs to a materialistically-oriented Muslim who is so deeply influenced by the splendor of Western culture that he finds it difficult to see “the purity of view”—that is, the beauty—of his own Muslim culture. Nor is it too far-fetched to suggest that, just as the *Ẓarb-i Kalīm* verse refers to Muḥammad as possessing the ability to see without being dazzled, the *Zabūr-i ‘Ajam* makes an allusion to Muḥammad since it implies that, contrary to the one whose look is “befuddled by view,” Muḥammad is the one whose look was *not* befuddled when he gazed at the heavens. The implied meaning in Iqbal’s verse can be brought out and stated in more explicit terms as follows: In contrast to those whose deep involvement in worldly affairs renders them incapable of negotiating the spiritual realm with ease, Muḥammad, because of his highly advanced spiritual state, was able to have the experience mentioned in Qur’ān 53:17 unruffled, his look not stumbling at the “purity” of the heavenly sight. Thus, the experience described formulaically in the first hemistich of the *Zabūr-i ‘Ajam* verse can be taken as the obverse of the aforementioned experience of Muḥammad, this latter experience being in the background of the *Zabūr-i ‘Ajam* verse.

³**Come, draw . . . look.** The blue curtains of the sky are hiding reality; draw in those ropes and you will see reality exposed to your view like a burning flame. That is, after having explored and exploited the universe, go on to conquer the world beyond the heavens. “The chaste look” is the totally committed look, one that is unpolluted by any mean thought or intention.

It is tempting to think that the second hemistich alludes to Qur’ān 20:10 (also 27:7 and 28:29), in which Moses, traveling in the desert along with his family, spots a fire in the desert and, saying, “I have glimpsed a fire,” asks his family to stop and wait for him while he approaches the fire in order that he may bring back a brand of fire to provide heat in the cold night or, at least, get directions from someone present at the fire. Even though Iqbal may not have intended the allusion, the similarity or correspondence between the Qur’ānic verse and Iqbal’s verse is notable. Incidentally, the Arabic for “glimpsed” in the Qur’ānic verse is *ānastu*, which, according to one interpretation, implies that the flame of the fire was possibly seen only by Moses, who, to borrow Iqbal’s words, could be said to have a “chaste look” since the flame was “exposed” to his eyes.

⁴**To me . . . passion.** The verse states a familiar theme in Iqbal’s poetry: The earth is a much better place than paradise because, unlike paradise, which represents perfection and, hence, presents no further opportunities for progress or improvement, the earth, precisely because of its many imperfections, holds limitless prospects of change and improvement and, accordingly, is a place where one longs to reach goals and ideals that appear to be unattainable and are, for that very reason, so much more attractive. One of the poems in which Iqbal makes this point with great force is “The Hourī and the Poet,” in *Payām-i Mashriq (Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī* [Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990], 279–280). The hourī complains that the poet, now in paradise, shows no interest in the pleasures of paradise. The poet responds that paradise, being a perfect place, cannot be improved upon and is, therefore, very dull and unexciting (for a translation, with commentary, of the poem, see Mustansir Mir, *Tulip in the Desert: A Selection of the Poetry of Muhammad Iqbal* [London: Hurst & Co., and Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000, 63–64, 66–67].

⁵**At one . . . this.** There have been times when, negating their own identity or personality, human beings have lost themselves completely in God. At other times, however, they have done the exact opposite: they have exalted themselves so much as to forget or deny God. But there also have been times when human beings have affirmed their own as well as God's existence, and Iqbal seems to approve of this balanced approach to the matter. But, then, the cycle resumes, human beings going through the same phases of affirmation and denial of God or of the human self—prompting Iqbal to wonder about the whole mystery.

Mustansir Mir

Iqbal's Meetings with Massignon and Bergson

Iqbal met, had conversations with, and corresponded with many distinguished personalities in the religious, political, and other fields in various parts of the world, and the details of his interaction with them forms a very interesting chapter both in the biography of Iqbal and in the history of the times. Two of the European figures he met were the Orientalist Louis Massignon, one of the greatest Western scholars of Sūfism known especially for his epoch-making research on Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, a Sūfī of the ninth and tenth centuries, and Henri Bergson, the French philosopher known for his theory of vitalism.

The passage here translated from Zindah Rūd ("Living Stream"), Javid Iqbal's biography of his father, Iqbal, includes excerpts from two letters written by Iqbal, one to Sir William Rothenstein and the other to Lord Lothian. The original English texts of the excerpts are reproduced from Bashir Ahmad Dar, ed., Letters of Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1978), 182 (Rothenstein letter) and 211 (Lothian letter).

In Paris, in fact, the center of Iqbal's attention was only two personalities—first, Louis Massignon [1883–1962], and second, [Henri] Bergson [1859–1941]. Louis Massignon had done research on Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj [ca. 858–922] and had published the Arabic text of Ḥallāj's *Kitāb at-Ṭawāsīn* with a well-argued introduction and useful notes. It was this work that introduced him to Iqbal, and it was this work that changed Iqbal's view of Ḥallāj. They started corresponding with each other. According to Massignon, Iqbal had written to him, in a letter of 18 February 1932, that he would see him on visiting Paris, and had also mailed him a copy of his new book, *Javīd-Nāmāh*. Massignon writes that his meeting with Iqbal took place in Paris on 1 November 1932, and that the conversation revolved mostly around Ḥallāj, to whose personality Iqbal attached very great importance. Attending the meeting along with Iqbal were Sayyid Amjad Ali [1907–1997] and Sardar Umrao Singh Shergill [1870–1954]. The room in which they all sat was probably Massignon's library, for there were heaps of books all around. . . .

Iqbal's interest in Bergson was occasioned by the fact that the latter's concept of the reality of time was, to some extent, in accord with the argument that Iqbal, during his

student days at Cambridge, had presented in an essay on the same subject; Iqbal had later destroyed the essay on account of the logical criticism of his teacher [John McTaggart Ellis] McTaggart [1866–1925]. Perhaps Iqbal wished to meet Bergson in order to acquaint him with criticisms on that concept. It is not possible to determine the date of his meeting with Bergson in Paris. Probably, the meeting took place some time during the first week of 1933. Bergson, at that time, had become very old and, because of several illnesses, could not move around without using a wheelchair. He had also stopped seeing people but, as a special favor, met Iqbal in view of the latter's wish to see him. The meeting lasted for about two hours, and a lively discussion on Bergson's concept of the reality of time took place. During the conversation, Iqbal related to Bergson the following *ḥadīth* [saying] of the Prophet Muḥammad about God: *Lā tasubbū d-dahra inna d-dahra huwa llāhu* ["Do not revile time; time is God"]. Deeply impressed on hearing it, Bergson repeatedly asked Iqbal if it really was an authentic statement. The conversation in the meeting took place through the mediation of Sardar Umrao Singh Shergill, who also recorded the details of the conversation, but in such a sloppy manner that he later found it difficult to read his own handwriting. Unfortunately, therefore, the record of the conversation could not be preserved.

Iqbal has talked about his meeting with Bergson in his letters to various personalities. For instance, he writes to Sir William Rothenstein [1872–1972] in 1933:

When in Paris I met Bergson. We had extremely interesting conversation on philosophical subjects. The substance of [George] Berkeley's [1685–1753] philosophy is that in perception matter reveals the whole of itself without a remainder; not so the case with the mind. This is a way of putting Berkeley. Our conversation lasted for two hours. Bergson is old and very ill. He does not see people, but was good enough to make an exception in my case. Unfortunately, the friend who accompanied him and made a record of the conversation, could not afterwards decipher his own handwriting. . . .

In a letter written to Lord Lothian [1882–1940] on 17 March 1933, he says:

During my stay in Paris I met Bergson. Our conversation on Modern Philosophy and Civilization lasted for about two hours. Part of the time we talked on Berkeley on whose philosophy the French Philosopher made some very interesting observations.

Javid Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd
(Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1979), 795–797
Translated by Mustansir Mir

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Plato and Goethe

Nature was not quite decided what to make of Plato—poet or philosopher. The same indecision she appears to have felt in the case of Goethe.

*Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections, revised edition,
ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 113*

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