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Critique of Materialism: Berkeley, Whitehead, and Russell

The following passage is taken from the second lecture, "The Philosophical Test of the Revelations of Religious Experience," in Muhammad Iqbal's The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam.

It was the philosopher Berkeley who first undertook to refute the theory of matter as the unknown cause of our sensations. In our own times Professor Whitehead—an eminent mathematician and scientist—has conclusively shown that the traditional theory of materialism is wholly untenable. It is obvious that, on the theory, colours, sounds, etc., are subjective states only, and form no part of Nature. What enters the eye and the ear is not colour or sound, but invisible ether waves and inaudible air waves. Nature is not what we know her to be; our perceptions are illusions and cannot be regarded as genuine disclosures of Nature, which, according to the theory, is bifurcated into mental impressions, on the one hand, and the unverifiable, imperceptible entities producing these impressions, on the other. If physics constitutes a really coherent and genuine knowledge of perceptively known objects, the traditional theory of matter must be rejected for the obvious reason that it reduces the evidence of our senses, on which alone the physicist, as observer and experimenter, must rely, to the mere impressions of the observer's mind. Between Nature and the observer of Nature, the theory creates a gulf which he is compelled to bridge over by resorting to the doubtful hypothesis of an imperceptible something, occupying an absolute space like a thing in a receptacle and causing our sensation by some kind of impact. In the words of Professor Whitehead, the theory reduces one-half of Nature to a 'dream' and the other half to a 'conjecture'. Thus physics, finding it necessary to criticize its own foundations, has eventually found

reason to break its own idol, and the empirical attitude which appeared to necessitate scientific materialism has finally ended in a revolt against matter. Since objects, then, are not subjective states caused by something imperceptible called matter, they are genuine phenomena which constitute the very substance of Nature and which we know as they are in Nature. But the concept of matter has received the greatest blow from the hand of Einstein—another eminent physicist, whose discoveries have laid the foundation of a far-reaching revolution in the entire domain of human thought. ‘The theory of Relativity by merging time into spacetime’, says Mr. Russell,

has damaged the traditional notion of substance more than all the arguments of the philosophers. Matter, for common sense, is something which persists in time and moves in space. But for modern relativity-physics this view is no longer tenable. A piece of matter has become not a persistent thing with varying states, but a system of interrelated events. The old solidity is gone, and with it the characteristics that to the materialist made matter seem more real than fleeting thoughts.

According to Professor Whitehead, therefore, Nature is not a static fact situated in an a-dynamic void, but a structure of events possessing the character of a continuous creative flow which thought cuts up into isolated immobilities out of whose mutual relations arise the concepts of space and time. Thus we see how modern science utters its agreement with Berkeley’s criticism which it once regarded as an attack on its very foundation. The scientific view of Nature as pure materiality is associated with the Newtonian view of space as an absolute void in which things are situated. This attitude of science has, no doubt, ensured its speedy progress; but the bifurcation of a total experience into two opposite domains of mind and matter has to-day forced it, in view of its own domestic difficulties, to consider the problems which, in the beginning of its career, it completely ignored. The criticism of the foundations of the mathematical sciences has fully disclosed that the hypothesis of a pure materiality, an enduring stuff situated in an absolute space, is unworkable.

Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*,
ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and
Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 27–28

The Denier of Love Is an Infidel

The following poem is taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's *Zabūr-i 'Ajam* ("Psalms of Persia"). It contrasts simple and authentic feeling with cold and studied sophistication, the closeness of human relationship with the impersonality of system, and commitment to truth with attachment to false goals.

زرسم و راه شریعت نکرده ام تحقیق
جز اینکه مکر عشق است کافر و ذوق
مقام آدم خاکی نهاد در کبابند
مساقران حرم را خدا بد تو فین
من از طریق پرسم، رفیق می جویم
که گفته اند سخن رستق و باز طریق
کنده تلافی ذوق آنچنان حکیمت
فروغ مابده من تر کنده بجا محبت
هزار بار مکتور مستاع بی بصری
زدانشی که دل اورا نمی کند تصدیق
پسچ و تاب خورد که چه لذت دگر است
یقین سادۀ دلان ز نکته های فین
کلام و فلسفه از لوح دل فرو شستم
ضمیر خویش کشادم به شتر تحقیق
ز استاد سلطان کناره می گیرم
ز کافر م که پرستم خدای بی تو فین

Muhammad Iqbal, *Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl – Fārsī*
(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 410–411

Translation

I have not checked the validity of the ways and wonts of Islamic Law—
Except this, that the denier of love is an infidel and a heathen.¹

May they reach the station of Adam, the one of earthly constitution—
May God enable the pilgrims of the Sanctuary to do so.²

I do not inquire about the path; I look for a companion—
For they say, “First, companion, then, path.”³

The Western sage makes up for the taste thus:
He adds greatly to the wine’s luster by means of a carnelian cup.⁴

The asset of sightlessness is a thousand times better
Than the wisdom that is not attested to by the heart.⁵

Although the tossings and turnings of reason give pleasure of a special kind,
The conviction of the simple-hearted is better than subtle points.⁶

I have wiped theology and philosophy off the tablet of my heart;
I have opened up my inside with the lancet of the search for truth.⁷

I keep clear of the threshold of the sultan:
I am no infidel to worship an ineffectual god.⁸

Notes

¹**I have . . . heathen.** “Islamic Law” is a translation of *Sharī‘at* (Arabic: *Sharī‘ah*), which, more accurately, is the code of conduct laid down by Islam to regulate human life in all spheres. In its more restricted understanding—the understanding taken in this verse—the term *Sharī‘ah* has come to mean the body of rules and regulations produced in light of the fundamental Islamic sources, scriptural and others, by the jurists of Islam. Typically, then, the jurists, who enjoy a position of preeminence in Islamic culture, are the scholars and interpreters of the *Sharī‘ah*. Iqbal is saying that, not being a scholar of jurisprudence, he has not investigated the validity of this or that law or regulation of Islam, but he does know this much—and this is all that one needs to know—that one who denies love stands outside the fold of Islam.

What does Iqbal mean by “love” in this verse? By, first, referring to the *Sharī‘ah* and, second, passing judgment on the faith of the denier of love, the verse establishes a religious context for interpreting the word “love.” As such, “love” has to mean love of God and, by inference or extension, love of noble religious and ethical ideals. By contrast, “the ways and wonts of Islamic Law” here stand for the mechanically understood and applied rules and regulations of the *Sharī‘ah*. Understandably, the law has to be interpreted and enforced objectively and dispassionately—hence the saying that the law is blind and the artistic representation of the goddess of justice as blindfolded. But a rigorously objective or dispassionate approach runs the risk of becoming loveless, and this is the point Iqbal wishes to make. The jurist’s approach to religion, he is suggesting, is uninformed by love. As a doctor of the law, the jurist bases his judgment on a person’s faith by taking into account that person’s observable conduct, the interior quality of a person’s faith being irrelevant to his legalistic analysis. But, according to Iqbal, it is precisely the

possession or lack of this quality that determines a person's standing with God, who judges people on the basis of whether they have cultivated love for Him in their hearts. Iqbal, of course, does not mean to divide people into two neat categories—that of believers who hold to the doctrine of love of God and that of unbelievers who insist that law is the essence of religion. The seeming opposition set up in the verse between law and love serves a functional purpose only, Iqbal's main point being that the spirit of religion takes precedence over the form of religion and that exclusive preoccupation with the formal aspects of religion kills the spirit of religion.

The words "infidel" and "heathen" call for a comment. "Infidel" is a translation of *kāfir*, which, technically, is the antonym of *mu'min*, "believer." "Heathen" is a translation of *zindīq*. Muḥammad A'ālā b. 'Alī at-Tahānawī (d. 1777) in his *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn* ("Dictionary of the Technical Terms Used in the Sciences of the Muslims" [2 vols.; Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1993]), defines *zindīq* as follows (my translation from the Persian):

A dualist who says that there are two creators, calling one of them light or Yazdān and the other darkness or Ahriman; the creator of good he calls Yazdān and the creator of evil, Ahriman, that is, Satan; and one who does not believe in God, may He be exalted, and the hereafter; and one who professes belief outwardly but is an unbeliever inwardly. (Vol. 1, p. 617)

Explaining the etymology of *zindīq*, at-Tahānawī observes that the word comes from *Zind* (English *Zend*), the scripture of Zoroaster (*ibid.*). The word "heathen," though it does not have a comparable etymology—especially since it is often applied to someone who stands outside the major faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—appears, moreover, to have connotations similar to those of *zindīq*. Occurring as they do in sequence, *zindīq* represents an intensification of the meaning conveyed by *kāfir*: one who denies love is a *kāfir*—even a *zindīq*.

²**May they . . . so.** It is, relatively, easy to serve God but difficult to realize fully one's human potential. Put differently, commitment to God does not require one to negate one's humanity, but that, unfortunately, often happens. Those on the way to the sanctuary of the Ka'bah in Mecca intend to express, by means of their pilgrimage, their devotion to God. On reaching the Ka'bah, or the House of God, one reaches into the presence of God, but reaching into the Divine presence does not require one to give up the station of the earthborn Adam—the station peculiar to human beings, that is. Or, one might say, one can truly show one's devotion to God only by affirming one's humanity. Human beings enjoy a special position in the scheme of the universe, and they must affirm their humanness by realizing the immense, world-transforming potential they possess. In fact, Iqbal often suggests that the task of affirming one's humanity is meritorious independently of the obligation of offering homage to God. In one verse, Iqbal says that the prayer of those whose minds and spirits are free—and only such people are truly free—is qualitatively different from the prayer of those with servile minds. In another, he says that being human is so dear to him that he would not give it up for the privilege of becoming God. In the verse under discussion, then, Iqbal prays that those on the way to the Ka'bah may realize that reaching God is not the ultimate goal for human beings; the ultimate goal is to realize the mandate of being fully and truly human.

The phrase "the pilgrims of the Sanctuary" refers to Muslims. Iqbal is saying that, in the present age, Muslims, who are under the religious obligation of performing the pilgrimage to the

Ka'bah, have come to have a very narrow view of serving God: they are diligent in serving God—they would, for example, undertake long journeys to reach the Ka'bah—but they evince little interest in making a mark in the world. The verse, thus, has a certain satirical undertone. That undertone is reinforced by the use, in the original text, of the word *tawfiq* in the second hemistich. Arabic in origin, *tawfiq* is frequently used in contexts in which God's help is invoked, as in the following sentence: "May God give you *tawfiq* to overcome your difficulties." The use of the word in this verse implies, tongue in cheek, that Muslims, on their own, are almost incapable of rising to the occasion of translating the human mandate into reality and that it is only with special Divine help that they might succeed in the task.

³**I do not . . . path.** Many travelers, after fixing a destination for themselves, set out on the road but soon find themselves in the company of those who were not necessarily their first choice as traveling companions. A wise person would begin by choosing the right companion, for such a person will make worthwhile any and all travel, even travel that has no specific destination. Iqbal is not advocating the virtues of aimless travel. He means to point out that human relationships are more important than impersonal systems. Confucius said that a neighborhood becomes excellent not on account of the beauty of its physical structures but on account of the virtuous manners of its inhabitants, and, according to an Arabic saying, one must pick one's neighbors before one picks a house to live in (*al-jār qabla d-dār*). It is to the category of such sayings that Iqbal's verse belongs.

One more point: The right companion, besides making travel meaningful and enjoyable, can help in choosing the right destination, too. In spiritual matters, especially, an accomplished companion, or a master, can authoritatively and systematically guide one to the right goals.

⁴**The Western sage . . . cup.** Iqbal's main criticisms of Western thought is that, putting almost an exclusive premium on reason, it delegitimizes such extrarational resources as intuition for comprehending reality. But such resources are invaluable for the purpose of understanding certain crucial experiences of life, and Western thought's self-set limitation, therefore, renders it incapable of seeing reality in all its plenitude. As such, the taste of the wine of thought served by Western philosophers is compromised. Western thinkers compensate for this deficiency by serving the wine in a brightly shining carnelian cup, creating the impression that the luster belongs to the wine rather than to the cup. In other words, the dazzle of Western thought is due largely to the deft use of the instrument of logic (the carnelian cup) by Western thinkers rather than to the content or substance (wine) of that thought.

⁵**The asset . . . heart.** True wisdom is that which is acknowledged by both intellect and intuition, both head and heart. In themselves, the discoveries of the intellect, or the mind, are no good if not confirmed by intuition, or the heart. Compared with such futile insights, even blindness is a prized asset.

⁶**Although the tossings . . . points.** One may feel a peculiar pleasure when one's mind is exercised in an attempt to solve knotty intellectual problems and puzzles, but such an attempt, even when successful, cannot produce the unshakable conviction of the simple-hearted. The great theologian,

jurist, philosopher, and mystic of Islam, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), said toward the end of his life that he envied the staunchness of the faith of old women (*īmān al-‘ajā’iz*).

⁷**I have . . . truth.** Having made a detailed study of various disciplines of knowledge over a long period of time, Iqbal had reached a conclusion similar to that reached by Ghazālī (see note 6). On the tablet of his heart, says Iqbal, he had inscribed the findings of theology and philosophy, but, in the end, he decided to erase those findings, opening up his mind, heart, and soul (each and all of the three words could be used as translations of the word used in the original—*zamīr*, literally, “the inside”) by means of “the lancet of the search for truth”—that is, by means of a simple but genuine search for truth. The second hemistich implies that the complicated systems of theology and philosophy are *not* effective for the purposes of opening up one’s *zamīr*.

⁸**I keep . . . god.** I do not seek the protection or support of the supposedly powerful individuals, for they do not possess real power and control nothing; even a sultan is, at best, an ineffectual god, and if I were to pay homage to such a self-styled god, I would be no better than an idol-worshipper, an infidel. Instead, I worship God and submit to Him, for He is the true sovereign of the universe.

Mustansir Mir

Iqbal the Lawyer: An Interesting Anecdote

The poet and philosopher Iqbal was also a competent lawyer. The following passage, from his son Javid Iqbal’s biography of him, throws light on some aspects of Iqbal’s practice of law. Three cities are mentioned in the passage: Patna, capital of the state of Bihar, in northeastern India; Calcutta, capital of West Bengal, in India; and Lahore, capital of the province of the Punjab in present-day Pakistan. The passage also mentions three distinguished lawyers of the time—C. R. Das, Pandit Motilal Nehru (father of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister), and Abdullah Suhrawardi. The rupee (“Rs.”) is the currency of India and Pakistan.

Iqbal’s sources of income were limited. It went against his grain to amass wealth or to fill his life with comfort by means of amenities. In his practice of law, too, he took on only as much work as would bring him enough compensation to meet his expenses for one or two months. If he could get work that would yield at least five hundred rupees, he would refuse to take on more, and if some client came in, he would ask him to come back the following month. He was always mindful of the ethical aspect of legal practice. Once, probably in Patna, an important issue was under discussion in the High Court, with one side represented by C. R. Das [1870–1925] and the other, by Pandit Motilal Nehru [1861–1931], Abdullah Suhrawardi [1882–1935], and others. Some of the documents pertaining to the case were in Persian or Arabic, and the interpretation of a few words had become a controversial matter. C. R. Das was the counsel of the government. With the government’s permission, he had Iqbal come from Lahore to interpret the controversial words for

the court. Iqbal's fee was set at Rs. 1,000 per diem. The court informed Iqbal that he could stay in Bihar to make preparations for the case for as long as he wished, even for a period of one or two months, and that, moreover, if he needed to visit Lahore or Calcutta in search of books or references, his travel expenses would be borne by the government. C. R. Das went to the Patna railway station to receive Iqbal and lodged him in an expensive hotel. A day later, C. R. Das came in to see him. Iqbal told him that he had made the necessary preparations in regard to the controversial words and that he wished to return to Lahore the same day after presenting his viewpoint before the court. C. R. Das told him that it was a government case and he need not be in a rush to present his opinion, that he should work on his papers at leisure since he could stay there for a period of two months, for which he would continue to receive Rs. 1,000 per diem. But Iqbal insisted that his preparations were complete and that he wished to make his statement before the court as soon as possible. Accordingly, on the following day, he put his statement in final form and delivered it to the court. After presenting his statement before the court, he wanted to go back to Lahore, but the banks had closed, and the government officials did not have his fee in hand in cash form. If he had stayed for one more day, Iqbal could have added one thousand rupees to his income. But Iqbal insisted on going back because his work had been finished. The government officials paid Iqbal's fee by collecting cash from here and there, and Iqbal took the first train back to Lahore.

Javid Iqbal, *Zindah-Rūd*
(Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1979), 653–654
Translated by Mustansir Mir

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