

IQBĀL-NĀMAH

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Iqbāl-Nāmah, a quarterly publication, aims to introduce the works of the South Asian poet-thinker Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) to general readers in the English-speaking world. It will contain brief extracts from Iqbal's writings, short studies on his works, notices of critical and interpretive works about him, and other pertinent information in the field of Iqbal studies. For a life-sketch of Iqbal and a study of his thought, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1989). Scholarly contributions to *Iqbāl-Nāmah* are welcome.

Religion and Rationalism

[The following is the introductory passage of "Knowledge and Religious Experience," the first of a series of lectures that make up Iqbal's important philosophical work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (edited and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh and published in Lahore by the Iqbal Academy Pakistan and the Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989; published earlier, in 1934, by Oxford University Press). In this passage (*ibid.*, pp. 1–2) Iqbal, comparing religion with philosophy (and, secondarily, with poetry), explains why religion needs a rational foundation. The 'great mystic poet of Islam' cited about the middle of the passage is Farid ad-Dīn 'Attār (d. 1220), author of the Persian allegorical poem *Manṭiq at-Ṭayr* ("Conference of the Birds"); see *ibid.*, p. 158, n. 1.]

What is the character and general structure of the universe in which we live? Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe? How are we related to it? What place do we occupy in it, and what is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy? These questions are common to religion, philosophy, and higher poetry. But the kind of knowledge that poetic inspiration brings is essentially individual in its character; it is figurative, vague, and indefinite. Religion, in its more advanced forms, rises higher than poetry. It moves from individual to society. In its attitude towards the Ultimate Reality it is opposed to the limitations of man; it enlarges his claims and holds out the prospect of nothing less than a direct vision of Reality. Is it then possible to apply the purely rational method of philosophy to religion? The spirit of philosophy is one of free inquiry. It suspects all authority. Its function is to trace the uncritical assumptions of human thought to their hiding places, and in this pursuit it may finally end in denial or a frank admission of the incapacity of pure reason to reach the Ultimate Reality. The essence of religion, on the other hand, is faith; and faith, like the bird, sees its 'trackless way' unattended by intellect which, in the words of the great mystic poet of Islam, 'only waylays the living heart of man and robs it of the invisible wealth of life that lies within'. Yet it cannot be denied that faith is more than mere feeling. It has something like a cognitive content, and the existence of rival parties—scholastics and mystics—in the history of religion shows that idea is a vital element in religion. Apart from this, religion on its doctrinal side, as defined by Professor Whitehead, is 'a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended'. Now, since

the transformation and guidance of man's inner and outer life is the essential aim of religion, it is obvious that the general truths which it embodies must not remain unsettled. No one would hazard action on the basis of a doubtful principle of conduct. Indeed, in view of its function, religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science. Science may ignore a rational metaphysics; indeed, it has ignored it so far. Religion can hardly afford to ignore the search for a reconciliation of the oppositions of experience and a justification of the environment in which humanity finds itself. That is why Professor Whitehead has acutely remarked that 'the ages of faith are the ages of rationalism'.

A Poem

[This poem, entitled "Du'ā" ("Prayer"), formally inaugurates Iqbal's Zabūr-i 'Ajam ("Psalms of Persia"), a collection of poems in Persian. It has the format of a ghazal, which, by definition, is composed of couplets that do not have to treat a single theme, each couplet being self-contained and presenting a separate idea or thought. But the couplets of a ghazal have an identical rhyme, and this imparts at least a formal unity to the poem. In the hands of a competent poet, of course, a ghazal comes to have a unity of thought and mood as well, and this is true of this poem. In its seven couplets, Iqbal prays to God for insight into life (1), for authentic existence (2), for freedom of action (3), for composure in the face of difficulties (4), for resoluteness of will (5), for the power to influence the Muslim community, his primary audience (6), and for dynamism of action (7). The ghazal speaks of hopes, desires, and concerns that are expressed in much of Iqbal's poetry.]

My Lord,

Let my breast have a heart that is aware;¹

Give me an eye that will see, in the wine,

The intoxicating power of the wine.²

This bondsman, who never lived by others' breath,³

Give him a sigh that is native to him,⁴

A sigh that is like dawn.⁵

I am a flood, do not make me writhe in a shallow stream;

Give me, for playground, mountains and valleys.⁶

If You would pit me against the boundless sea,

Give me, along with the restlessness of the wave,

The calm of the pearl.⁷

You have set my eagle to hunt leopards;

Give him high resolve, and claws that are sharper.⁸

I have set out to hunt the birds of the Sanctuary;

Give me an arrow that will hit the mark unshot.⁹

I am but dust, set me afire with the light of David's song;

Give, to every particle of my being, wings of sparks.¹⁰

دُعا

یارب درون سینم دل باخبرید
در بادہ نشسته اکرم آن نظرید
این بندہ اگر با نفس دیگران است
یکت آنہ خازن آدمشال سحرید
سلیم، مرا سجوی تکشاید فی بیج
جولا سنجے بوادی وکوه دکمرید
سازی اگر حریف یم بکیران برا
با اضطراب موج ہسکون کجید
شہین من بصید پلکان کدشتی
ہمت بلند و چنگل ازین تیزترید
دختم کہ طایران جسمم انکم شکار
تیری کہ ناکلفندہ قدکار کردید
خاکم بر نور معنہ داؤد بر فرو
بر ذرہ مرا پروبال شہ رید

Kulliyāt-i Iqbal—Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), p. 354.

Original text of poem © Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990.

Notes

¹a heart that is aware: A heart that is alive and sensitive to the realities of life. The phrase *dil-i bā-khabar*, as used in this couplet, stands for a heart that not only possesses intellectual knowledge, but is also caring and solicitous.

²*the eye . . . of the wine:* the ability to infer the effect from the cause, the wisdom to foresee the outcome of events and the consequences of actions, the ability to penetrate through appearance to reality—in brief, the gift of insight. *Nashshah*, here translated “The intoxicating power of the wine,” literally means “inebriety.”

³*This bondsman . . . breath:* In the phrase “who never lived by others’ breath,” the word “others” can mean either people other than the poet or beings other than God (both meanings may be simultaneously intended by Iqbal). On the first meaning, the phrase would be explained as: He who has lived drawing his own breath—that is, he who has lived authentically, guarding his identity and his self-respect (or what Iqbal calls *khudi*, “selfhood”), practicing self-reliance, and without being beholden to other people for his distinction or achievement. On the second meaning, the phrase would be explained as: He who has lived his life only by the breath of God—that is, he who has lived a life of single-minded devotion to God, refusing to bow before any other being or power. An allusion, on this second meaning of “others,” to the Sūfī term of *nafas ar-Rahmān*, the “Breath of the Compassionate One,” would almost definitely be intended by Iqbal.

On the second interpretation of “others,” the word “bondsman” (*bandab*) in the line would acquire especial significance. This word here appears to give rise to a paradox: a bondsman, by definition, has no identity of his own, and so cannot be said to have lived “by his own breath.” But Iqbal means to say that only the person who serves God achieves true liberation, since, as Iqbal says elsewhere, one who bows before the One True God does not then have to bow before a thousand false gods.

⁴*Give him a sigh that is native to him:* That is, fill him with the yearning for authentic existence, and make him pursue goals that are both compatible with his God-given nature and worthy of his true calling as a human being in this life.

⁵*A sigh that is like dawn:* A longing that is true and genuine, being like the fresh dawn. *Sahar*, the word for “dawn” in the couplet, often connotes in Iqbal’s poetry the dawn prayer, one of the five daily prayers in Islam. The word, moreover, may be taken as standing for *āb-i sahar*, “the sigh of dawn,” which, in Iqbal’s poetry, represents, at one level, words of devotion uttered in the dawn prayer, and, at another, a fervent hope for the amelioration of the condition of the Muslim community in the world. Getting up at dawn to offer the prayer is not easy, and so is a mark of sincerity and commitment on the part of one who does—the act, understandably, bringing one closer to God and making it more likely, according to the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, that the supplication made at that time will be granted by God. Thus, Iqbal, who hopes to awaken the Muslim community from its slumber, can here be understood as praying that God would make his appeal to his fellow Muslims effective.

⁶*I am . . . valleys:* This couplet expresses an idea frequently encountered in Iqbal’s poetry: God has given human beings limitless potential (“flood”), but, ironically, a very narrow avenue for the expression of that potential (“shallow stream”). Iqbal pleads with God to enlarge the scope and arena of human action.

⁷*If You . . . pearl:* God has placed human beings in a world that poses many challenges to them. If He wants human beings to take on these challenges, then He should give them the powers needed to do so: They need the restlessness of a wave in motion, but also the aplomb of the pearl, which, deep in the waters and sustaining much pressure, resides in a state of complete calm. In other words, both dynamic action (the movement of the wave) and self-assured vision (the repose of the pearl) are required.

The word *harif* in the first hemistich means “match” in the two senses of “rival” (the sense taken here) and “peer” (or “companion”). If we take the second meaning, Iqbal would be saying to God: If You would like me to be like the boundless sea, then give me such-and-such qualities. Although, on this second meaning, the overall meaning of the couplet will not be materially affected, the nuance is worth noting.

The wording of the second hemistich can also be interpreted to mean that human beings, while they already possess the quality of the restlessness of the wave, lack the equally important quality of the calm of the pearl—that they need both qualities if they are to acquit themselves well in the world.

In the first hemistich, the word *marā* refers to the poet, but the poet can be taken to represent humanity in general or, perhaps more plausibly here, the Muslim community in particular. The second meaning will go well with the next couplet.

⁸*You have . . . sharper:* In light of other verses of Iqbal, “my eagle” can be interpreted to mean the Muslim community (the phrase is indicative of Iqbal’s affection for the community). Iqbal is saying that Muslims have been charged with a great and onerous mission in life—that of bringing order and justice to a turbulent world—but they need the strength and ability requisite for the task. He prays to God to endow Muslims with that ability. The couplet is a mild criticism of the Muslims’ present inability to meet the challenges of life.

The couplet can also be interpreted on a more personal level, with Iqbal seen as praying to God for the power to accomplish the lofty goals that God, by making him a creative thinker, expects him to achieve.

⁹*I have . . . unshot:* The “Sanctuary” (*ḥaram*) is the Ka’bah, the Sacred Mosque of Islam, which is the site of the annual pilgrimage. Islamic law forbids hunting during the pilgrimage, and the precincts of the Ka’bah are frequented by birds, which can be seen there roaming around freely, without fear of being caught or killed. But the phrase “the birds of the Sanctuary” (*ṭā’irān-i ḥaram*) here stands for Muslims, whom Iqbal intends to “hunt,” that is, whom he seeks to influence by means of his message, which is “aimed” at them. Moving between the literal and metaphorical meanings of hunting, Iqbal says that, since he wants to observe the law that forbids hunting at the Sanctuary, he wishes to be able to hunt his game without having to shoot an arrow. In other words, Iqbal hopes that he will be able to motivate Muslims through the use of the poetical medium, such that he will achieve his goal without having to use real weapons.

¹⁰*I am . . . sparks:* Iqbal, who wishes to give a rousing call to Muslims, is conscious of his limitations. He realizes that, as an ordinary human being, he is no more than a handful of dust, whose property is to lie still on the ground and not move. But he wishes his message to reach a wide audience in the Muslim world. To this end, he prays that God would irradiate the dust of his being with the light of David’s songs (note the synesthesia in “the light of David’s song”), such that all of his being will be transformed into a blazing fire that will send off sparks that will reach all around. In the phrase “wings of sparks,” the word “wings” (*par-obāl* literally means “feather and wing”) may allude to Qur’ān 21:79, which says that, when the prophet David sang the glories of God, mountains and birds sang along with him. If so, then Iqbal’s mission is holy—it is the mission of the great prophets of history (*Zabūr-i ‘Ajam*, the title of the book from which this poem is taken, literally means “Persia’s Pslams of David”). And so, in using poetry to raise the consciousness of his community, Iqbal is discharging the religious obligation that devolves upon him—namely, the obligation to use his talent in the service of his community. Iqbal, therefore—the couplet would imply—deserves to be blessed by God with a voice so powerful that it will be echoed by birds and mountains.

Mustansir Mir

Human intellect is nature’s attempt at self-criticism.

Muhammad Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, rev. ed.
(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), p. 26.

Center for Islamic Studies

421 DeBartolo Hall
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio 44555-3448, USA
(330) 742-1625 and (330) 742-3448
(330) 742-1600 (fax)
mmir@cc.ysu.edu
Iqbal Academy Pakistan website: www.allamaiqbal.com
iqbalacd@lhr.comsats.net.pk

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