

Iqbāl-Nāmāh

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Islam and Political Freedom

In his article "Political Thought in Islam," published in 1908 in London's Sociological Review, Muhammad Iqbal discusses the subject of Islam and politics from theoretical and historical viewpoints. In the following passage, which concludes the article, Iqbal explains why the elective principle, which is an essential part of Islamic political theory, could not strike root in Islamic history. The complete article can be found in Latif Ahmed Sherwani, comp. and ed., Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal (Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1977; reprinted with corrections in 1995); the passage reproduced here occurs on pages 153–154.

It is clear that the fundamental principle laid down in the Quran is the principle of election; the details or rather the translation of this principle into a workable scheme of Government is left to be determined by other considerations. Unfortunately, however, the idea of election did not develop on strictly democratic lines, and the Muslim conquerors consequently failed to do anything for the political improvement of Asia. The form of election was certainly maintained in Baghdad and Spain, but no regular political institutions could grow to vitalise the people at large. It seems to me that there were principally two reasons for this want of political activity in Muslim countries.

(1) In the first place the idea of election was not at all suited to the genius of the Persians and the Mongols—the two principal races which accepted Islam as their religion. Dozy tells us that the Persians were even determined to worship the Caliph as a divinity, and on being told that worship belonged to God alone, they attempted to rebel against the Caliph who would not be the centre of religious emotion.

(2) The life of early Muslims was a life of conquest. Their whole energy was devoted to political expansion which tends to concentrate political power in fewer hands, and thus serves as an unconscious handmaid of despotism. Democracy does not seem to be quite willing to get on with Empire—a lesson which the modern English Imperialist might well take to heart.

In modern times—thanks to the influence of Western political ideas—Muslim countries have exhibited signs of political life. England has vitalised Egypt; Persia has received a constitution from the Shah, and the Young Turkish Party too have been struggling, scheming, and plotting to achieve their object. But it is absolutely necessary for these political reformers to make a thorough study of Islamic constitutional principles, and not to shock the naturally suspicious conservatism of their people by appearing as prophets

of a new culture. They would certainly impress them more if they could show that their seemingly borrowed ideal of political freedom is really the ideal of Islam, and is, as such, the rightful demand of free Muslim conscience.

Deny God's Existence? Do Not Deny Your Own!

In the following couplet, which introduces Part II of Zabūr-i 'Ajam and is addressed to the typical Muslim, Iqbal emphasizes the importance of human self-affirmation. One exists only insofar as one affirms one's self—by becoming aware of one's potential and developing it fully, by putting the stamp of one's personality on nature, and by effecting meaningful change in the world. The affirmation of the human self is so important, says Iqbal, that it takes precedence over the affirmation of God—and for good reason. One can affirm God's existence only after affirming one's own (cf. Descartes's affirmation of his own existence before his affirmation of anything else's existence, even God's). Iqbal seems to be taking the argument one step further: To deny God's existence but affirm one's own is more honorable than to do the opposite since, in the latter case, the affirmation of God's existence is made by a spiritless nobody, an act that neither glorifies God nor does credit to humanity. A further suggestion seems to be that, to affirm one's existence will necessarily lead one to affirm God's existence, a denial of God's existence amounting to a denial of one's own existence. In the poem "Taṣwīr-o-Muṣaṣwir" ("Picture and Painter") in Armaghān-i Hijāz (Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū, Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1990, 715–716), the picture, which represents humanity, complains that, unlike the people of ancient times, who could repose faith in an unseen God, the modern human being, who makes belief contingent upon supply of tangible evidence, would like to see God before believing in Him. To this demand for concrete proof, the painter—that is, God—replies:

*Mire dīdār kī hai ik yihī shart
Kī tū pinhañ na ho apnī naẓār se*

[The only condition for seeing me is,
That you should not be hidden from your own sight.]

In other words: If you can "see" yourself in the true sense of the word, you will have no difficulty in "seeing" God—and, consequently, in believing in Him. In Żarb-i Kalīm (Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū, Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1990, 413), Iqbal writes:

*Khudī kī marwt se masbriq kī sar-zamīnoñ men
Hu'ā na ko'ī khudā'ī kā rāzdān paydā*

[On account of the death of *khudī*, in the lands of the East,
None privy to the secrets of Godship was ever born.]

*In several other places, Iqbal appears to be making the same point when he says that the goal of human beings ought to be not to become God, but to become truly human. For example, in a verse in Bāl-i Jibrīl (Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Urdū, Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1990, 413), he says that servanthood to God (*bandagī*), which characterizes the creaturely status of human beings, is too precious a thing to be exchanged for Godship (*khudā'ī*). But, since, in Islamic theology, Godship and servanthood are correlatives—God being the *ma'būd*, "one who is worshiped," and the servant being the *'ābid*, "one who worships"—an affirmation of the existence of the human being would necessarily imply an affirmation of the existence of God.*

Iqbal was severely critical of the Ṣūfī philosophy known as waḥdat al-wujūd (ontological monism). It would probably be too much to say that, in the verse under study, Iqbal was offering a conscious criticism of that philosophy. It is, however, tempting to think that the verse lends at least indirect support to his stance on the subject. According to several reports about the Prophet's ascension, Gabriel, who accompanied Muḥammad during his journey to the heavens, told him, upon reaching the Sidrat al-Muntahā, that he, Gabriel, was not allowed to go beyond the tree, that Muḥammad alone had the privilege of crossing the "Farthest Boundary" and proceeding to meet his Lord. It is easy to see how Muḥammad's subsequent meeting with God should be

*interpreted as the union of the Divine and the human. To a wujūdī Ṣūfī—that is, one who subscribes to the doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd—the Prophet’s ascension and his meeting with God would represent the union of God and man, with the Prophet “losing” his identity and “merging” into God. Bearing these details in mind, one can read Iqbal’s verse to mean that, even in a state of proximity to God, one must not lose one’s individuality, that proximity to God must not lead to what mystics call the annihilation of the human self. Nobility of status is obtained through association with the Sidrah tree, but it is not obtained at the expense of self-loss. In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (ed. and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh, Iqbal Academy, Lahore, 1989, 99), Iqbal quotes ‘Abd al-Quddūs of Gangoh, one of India’s saints, who said: “Muḥammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned.” This remark, Iqbal says, sharply brings out*

the psychological difference between the prophetic and the mystic types of consciousness. The mystic does not wish to return from the repose of ‘unitary experience’; and even when he does return, as he must, his return does not mean much for mankind at large. The prophet’s return is creative. . . . The desire to see his religious experience transformed into a living world-force is supreme in the prophet. (Ibid.)

The real thrust of ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s statement, it should be noted, is that the Prophet stood on a much higher footing than mystics, that, even during the intense experience of ascension to the heavens, the Prophet was able to maintain his calm and composure and his sense of personal identity and was not swept off his feet in ecstasy as a mystic might have been.

« شاخ مهال سده فی خار خوش من شو »
« منکر او اگر شدی منکر خوشین شو »

Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 383.

Translation

You are a branch of the Sidrah tree,¹
Do not become the thorns and thistles of the garden.²
If you have denied His existence,
Do not deny your own.³

Notes

¹*You are . . . Sidrah tree.* Qur’ān 53:13–17 says that the Prophet Muhammad saw the angel Gabriel at *Sidrat al-Muntahā*, “The Lote-Tree at the Farthest Boundary,” in whose proximity paradise is located. According to the exegetes, the incident took place during Muḥammad’s ascension to the heavens. Because of its association with the celestial realm, Gabriel, and Muḥammad, the Sidrah tree becomes holy and is commemorated as such in the Islamic religious and literary tradition. Iqbal makes a creative use of that tradition. Whereas most scholars and writers speak of the Sidrah tree in reference to Muḥammad, Iqbal speaks of it in reference to Muslims in general, for, through Muḥammad, the followers of Muḥammad, too, come to be associated with the Sidrah tree, partaking of its holiness. The association justifies Iqbal’s address to a typical member of the Muslim community in the words, “You are a branch of the Sidrah tree.”

²*Do not . . . the garden.* Speaking to his Muslim addressee, Iqbal says: You must always be mindful of your holy origin; being a branch of the Sidrah tree, you must not compromise your “lineage” by acting like a low-born creature, for, then, you will lose your noble status and be reduced to a worthless object. The Persian *khār-o-khas* literally means “thorn and dried grass” and signifies rubbish, waste, or worthless matter.

³*If you . . . your own.* One who lacks faith in oneself and has no self-esteem falls to the lowest level to which a human being can fall. Denial of one's self—which amounts to a denial of one's existence—is such an abominable thing that even the denial of God's existence pales in comparison with it. Stand on your dignity, Iqbal says, and prove, through both word and deed, that you exist.

Mustansir Mir

Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan, Iqbal's Teacher

Iqbal-Nāmah will carry, beginning with this issue, translations of extracts from Dr. Javid Iqbal's monumental biography of his father, Muhammad Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd (The Living Stream [Sheikh Ghulam Ali, Lahore, 1979]). The author's permission to translate selections from the book is gratefully acknowledged. The passages given below occur in Chapter 4, pages 103–105, 106 of the Urdu work; the page numbers are indicated at the end of the translated passages. Footnotes are not translated.

Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan was Iqbal's teacher in Sialkot (now in Pakistan), Iqbal's birthplace.

Iqbal's early student life was dominated by Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan's (1844–1929) personality. An enlightened scholar, Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan taught and trained his students giving due consideration to their mundane good as well as their religious edification. He was not only well-versed in the religious and mystical sciences of Islam, but was also highly proficient in modern disciplines of knowledge, literature, linguistics, and mathematics. His pedagogical method cultivated in his students a genuine sense and appreciation of the Urdu, Persian, and Arabic languages. He knew thousands of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi verses by heart. While explaining a Persian verse, he would quote scores of Urdu and Punjabi verses on the same subject so as to fix its meaning firmly in the student's mind. In spite of his busy teaching schedule, he read regularly. He was firmly anchored in Islamic faith and was dedicated to worship. He had committed the complete Qur'ān to memory and was deeply attached to the Qur'ān. As a rule, he conversed in highly eloquent and refined Urdu.

Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan was a living embodiment of virtuous qualities. Simplicity, sedateness, contentment, indifference to worldly gain, humility, cheerfulness, and gratitude were the principal marks of his character. His students addressed him as "Shāh Sāhib." It was his custom to perform the postmidnight *tahajjud* prayer or the day's first, dawn prayer and then visit the cemetery, where he recited the *Fatihah* prayer over his deceased relatives and loved ones. His students joined him in the cemetery and took lessons from him throughout the walk back home. On reaching home, he resumed teaching. He ate a quick breakfast just before the start of school and then set out for school, again accompanied by his students. He taught at school all day long, returned home in the evening, and continued to teach until night. He bought his own groceries—and even during these trips to the marketplace, his students did not part company with him.

Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan lived a very simple life. He wore ordinary but neat and clean clothes. All his life, he was associated with the Scotch Mission School, where the highest monthly salary he ever drew was Rs. 120.

By instructing him in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu literature and in philosophy and mysticism, Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan cultivated in Iqbal a deep attachment for traditional and Islamic disciplines of knowledge. Iqbal's simplicity, contentment, indifference to worldly gain, and wit and humor were all a reflection of Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan's disposition. As long as Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan lived, Iqbal visited him to pay his respects and to seek his advice and guidance in scholarly matters. Iqbal would sometimes send him new books for study. On several occasions, Iqbal was heard saying that Shāh Ṣāhib's company brought peace of mind and dispelled worry. Iqbal treated him with the utmost deference, so much so that he never dared to recite his own poetry in his presence.^[103–105]

Iqbal learned about Sir Sayyid and the movement he started through Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan. Because of this association, when Iqbal became acquainted with Sir Sayyid's grandson, Sir Ross Masood, he became a close friend of the latter and loved him dearly.^[105]

In 1923, when he was offered a knighthood, Iqbal told the governor of the Punjab that he would not accept the title until the scholarly achievements of his teacher Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan were acknowledged. On being asked whether Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan had written any books, Iqbal replied, "I am the book he has authored." And so, when Iqbal was knighted, Sayyid Mīr Ḥasan, too, received the title of "Sun of Scholars."^[106]

*Javid Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd
Translated by Mustansir Mir*

Complaining to Iqbal: Dialogue with the Dead

The following verses are excerpted from a long poem, until now unpublished, that Professor Muhammad Kamal Hassan wrote to express his thoughts and feelings after his visit to the historic sites and cities of Andalusia in the spring of 2002. The poem, which is addressed to Muhammad Iqbal, reminds one of Iqbal's famous poem "Complaint" (in the Urdu collection Bang-i Darā [The Sound of the Caravan Bell]), in which Iqbal complains to God that He has let down Muslims, who believe in Him, have been faithful to His prophet, Muḥammad, and have, throughout history, offered so many sacrifices to promote His religion, but who have now lost status, power, and respect in the world. Iqbal's visit to Cordova, Granada, and other cities of Spain in 1933 occasioned what is generally regarded as his finest poem, "The Cordova Mosque" (in the Urdu collection Bāl-i Jibril [Gabriel's Wing]). Professor Hassan's poem resonates, both thematically and verbally, with a number of Iqbal's poems, including "The Cordova Mosque." The concluding passage (not reproduced here), like several of Iqbal's poems, sounds a note of hope, dispelling the gloomy mood of the rest of the poem.

Jannatu'l 'Arif (Spanish: Generalife), lines 14–15, is the name of Granadan royalty's palace and gardens, which are located to the east of the Alhambra (one of the several renditions of the Arabic name is "Architects' Paradise"). The Arabic phrase Lā Ghāliba illa' Llāh, lines 20–21, means "There is no prevailer except God." The phrase, which is inscribed all over the walls and arches of some of the Alhambra buildings, represents a Qur'ānic motif—the words themselves harking back to such Qur'ānic verses as 12:21. From an Islamic religious perspective, the phrase is a poignant summation of the history—that is to say, of the rise and fall—of Muslims in Spain, hence line 20, "They wrote all over al-Andalus. . .," which, in this particular context, is used with ironic effect.

Line 24: matā' ad-dunyā is derived from the frequently occurring Qur'ānic phrase matā' al-ḥayāh ad-dunyā (goods of worldly life).

Line 46: Kāfirūn: disbelievers.

Line 50: Zam-Zam is the name of a well in Makkah; Muslim pilgrims to the Ka'bah drink from it and bring back its water as a blessed souvenir.

Line 53: The Malay phrase fitnah memfitnah means "libel and slander."

Line 70: bāl-i Jibrīl, "Gabriel's wing," an allusion to the title of one of the poetry collections of Iqbal.

Line 71: Khayru Ummatin, "The best of nations," a phrase taken from Qur'ān 3:110, in which the Muslim community is so designated.

In lines 57 to 68, 'ishq (love), nūr (light), maḥabbah (love), raḥmah (mercy), salām (peace, tranquility), hidāyah (guidance), 'ilm (knowledge), and taqwā (piety) are—barring the first—all Qur'ānic terms; most of them occur, with special meanings and nuances, in Iqbal's poetry.

O Iqbal!

The spring of 2002 beckoned my soul and body:

to witness the Muslim remains of Alhambra,

Cordova and Sevilla,

to retrace your noble steps and feel the

vibrations of your ecstasy,

to feast my aging vision on the haunting

grandeur of Alhambra and

relish the matchless beauty of

Moorish art. . . .

I glided through the cold ruins, searching for

the secrets of the humiliating

downfall of al-Andalus. . . .

The flowing fountains of Jannatu'l-'Arīf

(Generalife) continue to narrate the

melancholy of Muslim follies . . .

How they succumbed to the same diseases

which brought down the mighty

Roman Empire.

They wrote all over al-Andalus *Lā Ghāliba*

illa'LLāh (There is no vanquisher

except Allah).

But they began to worship the

matā' ad-dunyā (pleasures of

the world),

and traded their souls for gold, glory, women, and

wine,

only to end like stray donkeys, kicked around by

the boots of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Today, pigeons nestle and make love in the ruins,

their droppings strewn all over the walls,

Western tourists pour out of buses and planes,

frolicking in romance, obliterating all pain,

while Muslim architectural glory continues to boost the coffers

of Catholic Spain.

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I stood, O Iqbal,
on the hill of Alhambra, “a stranger, gazing at things gone
by, dreams of another age.”

O Iqbal!
Don't turn in your grave if I tell you 40
that the Muslim world is the champion
today in corruption and illiteracy.
Or, that our rulers are among the smartest in deceiving the masses,
Having mastered the art from Machiavelli's *Prince*.
Or, that some of our elites 45
are the greatest drinkers of the wine of the *Kāfirūn*,
Intoxicated, they try to sell cheap
versions of it in their stores,
Beguiling the local youth as they deconstruct
the blessed Zam-Zam to make it taste like beer and wine, 50
And succeeding in making the young worship celebrities as divine.
Or, that the Muslim Malay community
excels in *fitnah memfitnah*,
pouring the poison of hatred
where love once stood. 55

O Iqbal!
Where is the *‘ishq* that used
to drive you to divine ecstasy?
Where is the *nūr* that illumines
the heart and obliterates man's egoism? 60
Where is the *maḥabbah*, the *rahmah*
that forges the bonds
of love and *salām*?
Where is the *hidāyah* that destroys insincerity,
hypocrisy, and greed? 65
Where is the *‘ilm* that elevates
the soul to its True Master?
Where is the *taqwā* that
imbues thought and action with righteousness?
Where is the *bāl-i Jibrīl* 70
that will deliver us from this earthly misery?
Can the *Khayru Ummatin* ever emerge
from robots, rubbles, and bubbles?

Mazzini

The true sphere of Mazzini was literature, not politics. The gain of Italy is not much compared to the loss which the world has suffered by his devotion to politics.

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

Call for Contributions to *Iqbāl-Nāmāh*

Scholars and students of Iqbal are invited to write for *Iqbāl-Nāmāh*. Essays and studies on Iqbal, as well as translations of his Persian and Urdu writings and commentaries on any aspect of his work, are welcome. Please send your contributions to the Center for Islamic Studies at Youngstown State University.

Center for Islamic Studies
421 DeBartolo Hall
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio 44555-0001, USA
(330) 941-1625 & (330) 941-3448
(330) 941-1600 (fax)
www.as.yosu.edu/~islamst
mmir@cc.yosu.edu

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