

Muhammad Iqbal: Is Religion Possible? (Pakistan, 1932)

Introduction

The Industrial Revolution ushered a new era of scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century. Some of these discoveries such as the age of earth, theory of evolution and natural selection were not only rejected by the religious institutions but also were ridiculed by the general public. These ideas reached India during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Europe, it had a mixed response: some intellectuals welcomed these discoveries while the others, with more religious convictions, attempted either to reject them as transient and hypothetical or explained religious doctrines in the light of scientific paradigms.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), who is considered the father of Islamic Modernism in South Asia, understood the importance and implications of the advancement in science and technology for religion as well as the religious people. In 1864, he founded the Scientific Society at Ghazipur, the first of its kind in the sub-continent. He invited Muslims from all over the country to become members of this society. It was open to other communities also. The inaugural session had 109 members, 47 Muslims, 34 Hindus, and 28 were British. The society held annual conferences, published translations of scientific works and a journal on scientific subjects in English and Urdu.

Sir Syed took the initiative in writing on some of the most controversial issues. As an educator, he founded the Aligarh University, he felt that Muslims must face these new challenges and learn science. In one of his essays, he wrote that just as human thoughts, lifestyle and civilisation experience change over a period of time, so do religions and beliefs. He argued, “There was a time of faith and people believed in anything however irrational it may seem. This was the period of faith (*yaqīn*). But the present time is the time to suspect (*shakk*). Truth needs proof.”¹ His most famous quotation about nature and religion (*qur’ān*) is: “Quran is the word of God and Nature is the work of God. Therefore, there could be no contradiction between the two.” If there was a

1 Muhammad Ismail Panipati, ed. *Maqalat-i-Sir Sayyid* [Articles of Sir Sayyid] (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1962), Part 5, 31.

contradiction, it was only in the mind or because of lack of understanding the Holy Scripture.²

Similarly, he justified the theories of geology and evolution. He endorsed the idea that the Earth has a much longer life than what is commonly believed. Since Charles Darwin's theory had generated more controversies, he wrote a detailed article on "Human evolution from lower condition to higher condition" (*adna halat se a'la halat par insan ki taraqqi*). He refuted the religious doctrine of creation and accepted the theory of evolution. This was based on his own interpretation of the Quran.³

The ulama, traditional Muslim scholars, ridiculed his interpretation of the Quran especially with regard to the theory of evolution. He was called a *nechari* (Naturalist). They believed that he had interpreted the Quran not to educate Muslims but to please the British. But nonetheless, his ideas and the continuing progress of science and technology had a profound effect on young minds. He had attempted to bring harmony between science and religion but it was generally believed that his educational institution at Aligarh had pushed religion, especially Islam, in the background. The reaction against his ideas and educational policies came in the shape of religious decrees (*fatāwā*, i.e. fatwas), anti-Aligarh literature and poetry. The impact of these controversies was felt by all. We will confine our comments to the verses of a contemporary poet, Akbar Allahabadi (1846–1921) who conveyed his thoughts on these issues in his satirical and humorous poetry.

Akbar Allahabadi was not a religious scholar. In fact, he was opposed to those aspects of religion which were subjected to ritual and tradition. He worked for the British in various capacities retiring as a Session Judge. He felt that under the spell of science, people have forsaken religion:

The heart is empty, therefore, no feelings in what I hear,
Religion, gone long ago, now, just history of religion.⁴

[...]

Akbar, it is useless to long for Paradise,
The road of Science is running through that⁵

[...]

They have left mosques for the taverns,

2 "Majid ki Tafsir," in *Maqalat-i-Sir Sayyid* Part 2, 56.

3 Ibid.

4 *Akbar Allahabadi* (Lahore: Feroze Sons, 1977), 15.

5 Ibid., 28.

Vow! What a zeal Muslims show for 'progress'⁶
 He feels that it was a crime even to utter the name of God in this age of science:
 My enemies went to the police station to complain
 Akbar, even in these times, remembers God.⁷

Charles Darwin occupies a special place in his satire. In one couplet, he points a finger towards the British and exclaims: "Oh, God, what kind of monkeys these are? Evolution, they went through, but still could not become humans!"⁸ Reflecting on the state of affairs of the Indians, he says that they were going through amazing times, they entrusted their wisdom to masters (school teachers), their wealth to Englishmen, their life to doctors, and their soul to Darwin. The result is that instead of talking about the Holy Book, they discuss Darwin, and on the seat of Adam, now monkeys are jumping. And finally, he had the last word to say:

Mansur declared: 'I am God'!⁹
 Darwin said; 'I am a monkey'
 Amused after hearing this, one of my friends, said:
 Our thoughts reflect our inner strength.¹⁰

It was in these circumstances that Muhammad Iqbal,¹¹ a strong believer in the development of science as well as religion, delivered this lecture. Iqbal was also disturbed by the attitude of Muslims in general and youth in particular towards religion. In 1931, when he was in Cambridge to participate in a conference, he expressed his concern over the fate of religion:

I would like to offer a few pieces of advice to the young men who are at present studying at Cambridge. I advise you to guard against atheism and materialism. The biggest blunder made by Europe was the separation of Church and State. This deprived their culture of moral soul and

6 Ibid., 52.

7 Ibid., 31.

8 Ibid., 28.

9 Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (857–922) was a Sufi famous for his saying "I am the Truth" (Arabic *anā al-ḥaqq*), with 'Truth' as a synonym for God.

10 *Akbar Alahbadi*, op. cit., 28.

11 The transliteration of his name in Urdu is 'Muḥammad Iqbal', for a brief biography, see the chapter on Iqbal's "Presidential Address" in this volume (2.06).

diverted it to the atheistic materialism. I had twenty-five years ago seen through the drawbacks of this civilization and therefore had made some prophecies. They had been delivered by my tongue although I did not quite understand them. This happened in 1907 . . . After six or seven years, my prophecies came true, word by word. The European war of 1914 was an outcome of the aforesaid mistakes made by the European nations in the separation of the Church and the State.¹²

This lecture was delivered in a meeting of the Aristotelian Society in London. While it clearly shows impact of Western philosophy, Iqbal has successfully retained the Muslim legacy in terms of looking at religion as a medium that regulates human behaviour in terms of discipline leading to a rational understanding and culminating in ascension of human soul/self (*khudi*). The original lecture did not contain references. I have added some wherever I thought it would be useful.

Aslam Syed

Further Reading

Ahmed, Aziz. *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan: 1857–1964*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Maruf, Mohammed. *Iqbal's Philosophy of Religion: A Study in the Cognitive Value of Religious Experience*. Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2003.

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Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *Islam in Modern History: The Tension Between Faith and History in the Islamic World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Vahid, S. A. *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*. Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1964.

12 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1958), also published in London in 1934 and many editions from Lahore. Iqbal Academy's website has all his works, including this one, at www.iap.gov.pk (last checked February 2014).

Source Text¹³

Broadly speaking religious life may be divided into three periods. These may be described as the periods of 'Faith,' 'Thought,' and 'Discovery.' In the first period religious life appears as a form of discipline which the individual or a whole people must accept as an unconditional command without any rational understanding of the ultimate meaning and purpose of that command. This attitude may be of great consequence in the social and political history of a people, but is not of much consequence in so far as the individual's inner growth and expansion are concerned. Perfect submission to discipline is followed by a rational understanding of the discipline and the ultimate source of its authority. In this period religious life seeks its foundation in a kind of metaphysics—a logically consistent view of the world with God as a part of that view. In the third period metaphysics is displaced by psychology, and religious life develops the ambition to come into direct contact with the Ultimate Reality. It is here that religion becomes a matter of personal assimilation of life and power; and the individual achieves a free personality, not by releasing himself from the fetters of the law, but by discovering the ultimate source of the law within the depths of his own consciousness. As in the words of a Muslim Sufi—"no understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it is actually revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet."¹⁴ It is, then, in the sense of this last phase in the development of religious life that I use the word religion in the question that I now propose to raise. Religion in this sense is known by the unfortunate name of Mysticism, which is supposed to be a life-denying, fact-avoiding attitude of mind directly opposed to the radically empirical outlook of our times. Yet higher religion, which is only a search for a larger life, is essentially experience and recognized the necessity of experience as its foundation long before science learnt to do so. It is a genuine effort to clarify human consciousness, and is, as such, as critical of its level of experience as Naturalism is of its own level. As we all know, it was Kant who first raised the question: "Is metaphysics possible?"¹⁵ He answered this question in the negative; and his argument applies with equal force to the realities in

13 This lecture was published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 47–64, as well as in *The Muslim Revival* (Lahore), 1/iv (Dec. 1932), 329–49.

14 Some scholars believe that this Sufi was Iqbal's father, see Muhammad Said Sheikh, "Philosophy of Man," *Iqbal Review* xix/1 (April–June 1988).

15 Iqbal's personal copy of Carl Rahn's *Science and the Religious Life* (London, 1928), contains a note "Is religion Possible? Kant's Problem," see: Muhammad Siddique, *Descriptive Catalogue of Allama Iqbal's Personal Library* (Lahore), 21–22.

which religion is especially interested. The manifold of sense, according to him, must fulfill certain formal conditions in order to constitute knowledge. The thing-in-itself is only a limiting idea. Its function is merely regulative. If there is some actuality corresponding to the idea, it falls outside the boundaries of experience, and consequently its existence cannot be rationally demonstrated. This verdict of Kant cannot be easily accepted. It may fairly be argued that in view of the more recent developments of science, such as the nature of matter as 'bottled-up light waves,' the idea of the universe as an act of thought, finiteness of space and time and Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy in Nature, the case for a system of rational theology is not so bad as Kant was led to think. But for our present purposes it is unnecessary to consider this point in detail. As to the thing-in-itself, which is inaccessible to pure reason because of its falling beyond the boundaries of experience, Kant's verdict can be accepted only if we start with the assumption that all experience other than the normal level of experience is impossible. The only question, therefore, is whether the normal level is the only level of knowledge-yielding experience. Kant's view of the thing-in-itself and the thing as it appears to us very much determined the character of his question regarding the possibility of metaphysics. But what if the position, as understood by him, is reversed?

The great Muslim Sufi philosopher, Muhyaddin Ibn al-'Arabi of Spain, has made the acute observation that God is a percept; the world is a concept.¹⁶ Another Muslim Sufi thinker and poet, 'Iraqi, insists on the plurality of space-orders and time-orders and speaks of a Divine Time and a Divine Space.¹⁷ It may be that what we call the external world is only an intellectual construction, and that there are other levels of human experience capable of being systematised by other orders of space and time—levels in which concept and analysis do not play the same role as they do in the case of our normal experience. It may, however, be said that the level of experience to which concepts are inapplicable cannot yield any knowledge of a universal character, for concepts alone are capable of being socialized.

The standpoint of the man who relies on religious experience for capturing Reality must always remain individual and incommunicable. This objection has some force if it is meant to insinuate that the mystic is wholly ruled

16 Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī (1164–1240), the reference is probably from his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* [Wisdom of Prophets] ed. Abī l-'Alā 'Afīfī (Nīnawā: Manshūrāt maktabat Dār al-thaqāfa, 2001).

17 Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī (1213–1289), the reference is from his *Ghāyat al-īmkan fī dirāyat al-makān* [The Extent of Possibility in the Science of Space] (Karachi: Maktaba-yi Nadīm, 1984).

by his traditional ways, attitudes, and expectations. Conservatism is as bad in religion as in any other department of human activity. It destroys the ego's creative freedom and closes up the paths of fresh spiritual enterprise. This is the main reason why our medieval mystic techniques can no longer produce original discoveries of ancient Truth. The fact, however, that religious experience is incommunicable does not mean that the religious man's pursuit is futile. Indeed, the incommunicability of religious experience gives us a clue to the ultimate nature of the ego. In our daily social intercourse we live and move in seclusion, as it were. We do not care to reach the inmost individuality of men. We treat them as mere functions, and approach them from those aspects of their identity which are capable of conceptual treatment. The climax of religious life, however, is the discovery of the ego as an individual deeper than his conceptually describable habitual selfhood. It is in contact with the Most Real that the ego discovers its uniqueness, its metaphysical status, and the possibility of improvement in that status. Strictly speaking, the experience which leads to this discovery is not a conceptually manageable intellectual fact; it is a vital fact, an attitude consequent on an inner biological transformation which cannot be captured in the net of logical categories. It can embody itself only in a world-making or world-shaking act; and in this form alone the content of this timeless experience can diffuse itself in the time-movement, and make itself effectively visible to the eye of history. It seems that the method of dealing with Reality by means of concepts is not at all a serious way of dealing with it. Science does not care whether its electron is a real entity or not. It may be a mere symbol, a mere convention. Religion, which is essentially a mode of actual living, is the only serious way of handling Reality. As a form of higher experience it is corrective of our concepts of philosophical theology or at least makes us suspicious of the purely rational process which forms these concepts. Science can afford to ignore metaphysics altogether, and may even believe it to be "a justified form of poetry," as Lange defined it, or "a legitimate play of grown-ups," as Nietzsche described it. But the religious expert who seeks to discover his personal status in the constitution of things cannot, in view of the final aim of his struggle, be satisfied with what science may regard as a vital lie, a mere 'as-if' to regulate thought and conduct. In so far as the ultimate nature of Reality is concerned, nothing is at stake in the venture of science; in the religious venture the whole career of the ego as an assimilative personal centre of life and experience is at stake. Conduct, which involves a decision of the ultimate fate of the agent, cannot be based on illusions. A wrong concept misleads the understanding; a wrong deed degrades the whole man, and may eventually demolish the structure of the human ego. The mere concept affects life only partially; the deed is dynamically related to Reality and issues

from a generally constant attitude of the whole man towards reality. No doubt the deed, i.e. the control of psychological and physiological processes with a view to tune up the ego for an immediate contact with the Ultimate Reality is, and cannot but be, individual in form and content; yet the deed, too, is liable to be socialized when others begin to live through it with a view to discover for themselves its effectiveness as a method of approaching the Real. The evidence of religious experts in all ages and countries is that there are potential types of consciousness lying close to our normal consciousness. If these types of consciousness open up possibilities of life-giving and knowledge-yielding experience, the question of the possibility of religion as a form of higher experience is a perfectly legitimate one and demands our serious attention.

But, apart from the legitimacy of the question, there are important reasons why it should be raised at the present moment of the history of modern culture. In the first place, the scientific interest of the question. It seems that every culture has a form of Naturalism peculiar to its own world-feeling; and it further appears that every form of Naturalism ends in some sort of Atomism. We have Indian Atomism, Greek Atomism, Muslim Atomism, and Modern Atomism. Modern Atomism is, however, unique. Its amazing mathematics which sees the universe as an elaborate differential equation; and its physics which, following its own methods has been led to smash some of the old gods of its own temple, have already brought us to the point of asking the question whether the casualty-bound aspect of Nature is the whole truth about it? Is not the Ultimate Reality invading our consciousness from some other direction as well? Is the purely intellectual method of overcoming Nature the only method? "We have acknowledged," says Professor Eddington:

That the entities of physics can from their very nature form only a partial aspect of the reality. How are we to deal with the other part? It cannot be said that other part concerns us less than the physical entities. Feelings, purpose, values, made up our consciousness as much as sense-impressions. We follow up the sense-impressions and find that they lead into an external world discussed by science; we follow up the other elements of our being and find that they lead—not into a world of space and time, but surely somewhere.¹⁸

In the second place we have to look to the great practical importance of the question. The modern man with his philosophies of criticism and scientific

¹⁸ Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: Macmillan Co. and Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1928).

specialism finds himself in a strange predicament. His Naturalism has given him an unprecedented control over the forces of Nature, but has robbed him of faith in his own future. It is strange how the same idea affects different cultures differently. The formulation of the theory of evolution in the world of Islam brought into being Rumi's tremendous enthusiasm for the biological future of man. No cultured Muslim can read such passages as the following without a thrill of joy:

Low in the earth
 I lived in realms of ore and stone;
 And then I smiled in many-tinted flowers;
 Then roving with the wild and wandering hours,
 O'er earth and air and ocean's zone,
 In a new birth,
 I dived and flew,
 And crept and ran,
 And all the secret of my essence drew
 Within a form that brought them all to view—
 And lo, a Man!
 And then my goal,
 Beyond the clouds, beyond the sky,
 In realms where none may change or die—
 In angel form; and then away
 Beyond the bounds of night and day,
 And Life and Death, unseen or seen,
 Where all that is hath ever been,
 As One and Whole.
 (Rumi: Thadani's Translation)¹⁹

On the other hand, the formulation of the same view of evolution with far greater precision in Europe has led to the belief that "there now appears to be no scientific basis for the idea that the present rich complexity of human endowment will ever be materially exceeded." That is how the modern man's secret despair hides itself behind the screen of scientific terminology. Nietzsche, although he thought that the idea of evolution did not justify the belief that man was unsurpassable, cannot be regarded as an exception in this respect. His enthusiasm for the future of man ended in the doctrine of eternal

19 Nanakram Thadani, *The Garden of the East* (Kharachi: Bhara Publishing House, 1932), 63–64. Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī was a thirteenth-century mystic and poet.

recurrence—perhaps the most hopeless idea of immortality ever formed by man. This eternal repetition is not eternal ‘becoming’; it is the same old idea of ‘being’ masquerading as ‘becoming.’

Thus, wholly overshadowed by the results of his intellectual activity, the modern man has ceased to live soulfully, i.e. from within. In the domain of thought he is living in open conflict with himself; and in the domain of economic and political life he is living in open conflict with others. He finds himself unable to control his ruthless egoism and his infinite gold-hunger which is gradually killing all higher striving in him and bringing him nothing but life-weariness. Absorbed in the ‘fact,’ that is to say, the optically present source of sensation, he is entirely cut off from the unplumbed depths of his own being. In the wake of his systematic materialism has at last come that paralysis of energy which Huxley apprehended and deplored. The condition of things in the East is no better. The technique of medieval mysticism by which religious life, in its higher manifestations, developed itself both in the East and in the West has now practically failed. And in the Muslim East it has, perhaps, done far greater havoc than anywhere else. Far from reintegrating the forces of the average man’s inner life, and thus preparing him for participation in the march of history, it has taught him a false renunciation and made him perfectly contented with his ignorance and spiritual thralldom. No wonder then that the modern Muslim in Turkey, Egypt, and Persia is led to seek fresh sources of energy in the creation of new loyalties, such as patriotism and nationalism which Nietzsche described as “sickness and unreason,” and “the strongest force against culture.” Disappointed of a purely religious method of spiritual renewal which alone brings us into touch with the everlasting fountain of life and power by expanding our thought and emotion, the modern Muslim fondly hopes to unlock fresh sources of energy by narrowing down his thought and emotion. Modern atheistic socialism, which possesses all the fervour of a new religion, has a broader outlook; but having received its philosophical basis from the Hegelians of the left wing, it rises in revolt against the very source which could have given it strength and purpose. Both nationalism and atheistic socialism, at least in the present state of human adjustments, must draw upon the psychological forces of hate, suspicion, and resentment which tend to impoverish the soul of man and close up his hidden sources of spiritual energy. Neither the technique of medieval mysticism, nor nationalism, nor atheistic socialism can cure the ills of a despairing humanity. Surely the present moment is one of great crisis in the history of modern culture. The modern world stands in need of biological renewal. And religion, which in its higher manifestations is neither dogma, nor priesthood, nor ritual, can alone ethically prepare the modern man for the burden of the great responsibility which the advancement of modern science

necessarily involves, and restore to him that attitude of faith which makes him capable of winning a personality here and retaining it in hereafter. It is only by rising to a fresh vision of his origin and future, his whence and whither, that man will eventually triumph over a society motivated by an inhuman competition, and a civilization which has lost its spiritual unity by its inner conflict of religious and political values.

As I have indicated before, religion as a deliberate enterprise to seize the ultimate principle of value and thereby to reintegrate the forces of one's own personality, is a fact which cannot be denied. The whole religious literature of the world, including the records of specialists' personal experiences, though perhaps expressed in the thought-forms of an out-of-date psychology, is a standing testimony to it. These experiences are perfectly natural, like our normal experiences. The evidence is that they possess a cognitive value for the recipient, and, what is much more important, a capacity to centralize the forces of the ego and thereby to endow him with a new personality. The view that such experiences are neurotic or mystical will not finally settle the question of their meaning or value. If an outlook beyond physics is possible, we must courageously face the possibility, even though it may disturb or tend to modify our normal ways of life and thought. The interests of truth require that we must abandon our present attitude. It does not matter in the least if the religious attitude is originally determined by some kind of physiological disorder. George Fox may be a neurotic; but who can deny his purifying power in England's religious life of his day? Muhammad, we are told, was a psychopath.²⁰ Well, if a psychopath has the power to give a fresh direction to the course of human history, it is a point of the highest psychological interest to search his original experience which has turned slaves into leaders of men, and has inspired the conduct and shaped the career of whole races of mankind. Judging from the various types of activity that emanated from the movement initiated by the Prophet of Islam, his spiritual tension and the kind of behaviour which issued from it, cannot be regarded as a response to a mere fantasy inside his brain. It is impossible to understand it except as a response to an objective situation generative of new enthusiasms, new organizations, new starting-points. If we look at the matter from the standpoint of anthropology it appears that a psychopath is an important factor in the economy of humanity's social organization. His way is not to classify facts and discover causes: he thinks in terms of life and movement with a view to create new patterns of behaviour for mankind. No doubt he has his pitfalls and illusions just as the scientist who relies on sense-experience has

20 The reference is to Aloys Sprenger's, *The Life of Mohammad* (Allahabad: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851).

his pitfalls and illusions. A careful study of his method, however, shows that he is not less alert than the scientist in the matter of eliminating the alloy of illusion from his experience.

The question for us outsiders is to find out an effective method of inquiry into the nature and significance of this extraordinary experience. The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, who laid the foundations of modern scientific history, was the first to seriously approach this side of human psychology and reached what we now call the idea of the subliminal self. Later, Sir William Hamilton in England and Leibniz in Germany interested themselves in some of the more unknown phenomena of the mind. Jung, however, is probably right in thinking that the essential nature of religion is beyond the province of analytic psychology. In his discussion of the relation of analytic psychology to poetic art, he tells us that the process of artistic form alone can be the object of psychology. The essential nature of art, according to him, cannot be the object of a psychological method of approach. "A distinction," says Jung,

must also be made in the realm of religion; there also a psychological consideration is permissible only in respect of the emotional and symbolical phenomena of a religion, where the essential nature of religion is in no way involved, as indeed it cannot be. For were this possible, not religion alone, but art also could be treated as a mere sub-division of psychology.²¹

Yet Jung has violated his own principle more than once in his writings. The result of this procedure is that, instead of giving us a real insight into the essential nature of religion and its meaning for human personality, our modern psychology has given us quite a plethora of new theories which proceed on a complete misunderstanding of the nature of religion as revealed in its higher manifestations, and carry us in an entirely hopeless direction. The implication of these theories, on the whole, is that religion does not relate the human ego to any objective reality beyond himself; it is merely a kind of well-meaning biological device calculated to build barriers of an ethical nature round human society in order to protect the social fabric against the otherwise unrestrainable instincts of the ego. That is why, according to this newer psychology, Christianity has already fulfilled its biological mission, and it is impossible for the modern man to understand its original significance. Jung concludes:

Most certainly we should still understand it, had our customs even a breath of ancient brutality, for we can hardly realize in this day the

21 Carl Jung et al., *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (New York et al., 1928): 225.

whirlwinds of the unchained libido which roared through the ancient Rome of the Caesars. The civilized man of the present day seems very far removed from that. He has become merely neurotic. So for us the necessities which brought forth Christianity have actually been lost, since we no longer understand their meaning. We do not know against what it had to protect us. For enlightened people, the so-called religiousness has already approached very close to a neurosis. In the past two thousand years Christianity has done its work and has erected barriers of repression, which protect us from the sight of our own sinfulness.²²

This is missing the whole point of higher religious life. Sexual self-restraint is only a preliminary stage in the ego's evolution. The ultimate purpose of religious life is to make this evolution move in a direction far more important to the destiny of the ego than the moral health of the social fabric which forms his present environment. The basic perception from which religious life moves forward is the present slender unity of the ego, his liability to dissolution, his amenability to reformation and the capacity for an ampler freedom to create new situations in known and unknown environments. In view of this fundamental perception higher religious life fixes its gaze on experiences symbolic of those subtle movements of reality which seriously affect the destiny of the ego as a possibly permanent element in the constitution of Reality. If we look at the matter from this point of view modern psychology has not yet touched even the outer fringe of religious life, and is still far from the richness and variety of what is called religious experience. In order to give you an idea of its richness and variety I quote here the substance of a passage from a great religious genius of the seventeenth century—Shaikh Ahmad of Sirhind²³—whose fearless analytical criticism of contemporary Sufism resulted in the development of a new technique. All the various system of Sufi technique in India came from Central Asia and Arabia; his is the only technique which crossed the Indian border and is still a living force in the Punjab, Afghanistan, and Asiatic Russia. I am afraid it is not possible for me to expound the real meaning of this passage in the language of modern psychology; for such language does not yet exist. Since, however, my object is simply to give you an idea of the infinite wealth of experience which the ego in his divine quest has to sift and pass through, I do hope you will excuse me for the apparently outlandish terminology which possesses a real substance of meaning, but which was formed

22 Carl Jung and Beatrice Moses Hinkle, *Psychology of the Unconscious* (New York, 1916), 42–43.

23 Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī (1564–1624), a Sufi of the Naqshbandī order.

under the inspiration of a religious psychology developed in the atmosphere of a different culture. Coming now to the passage. The experience of one 'Abd al-Mumin was described to the Shaikh as follows:

Heavens and Earth and God's Throne and Hell and Paradise have all ceased to exist for me. When I look round I find them nowhere. When I stand in the presence of somebody I see nobody before me: nay even my own being is lost to me. God is infinite. Nobody can encompass Him; and this is the extreme limit of spiritual experience. No saint has been able to go beyond this.

On this the Shaikh replied:

The experience which is described has its origin in the ever varying life of the Qalb (heart); and it appears to me that the recipient of its [sic, A. S.] has not yet passed even one-fourth of the innumerable 'Stations' of the Qalb. The remaining three-fourths must be passed through in order to finish the experiences of this first 'Station' of spiritual life. Beyond this 'Station' there are other 'Stations' know as Ruh (soul), Sirr-i-Khafi (the inner hidden), and Sirr-i-Akhfa [sic] (the inner veiled), each of these 'Stations' which together constitute what is technically called 'Alam-i Amr (the world of directive energy) has its own characteristic states and experiences. After having passed through these 'Stations' the seeker of truth gradually receives the illuminations of 'Divine Names' and 'Divine Attributes' and finally the illuminations of the 'Divine Essence.'

Whatever may be the psychological ground of the distinctions made in this passage it gives us at least some idea of a whole universe of inner experience as seen by a great reformer of Islamic Sufism. According to him this "world of directive energy" (*'alam-i amr*), must be passed through before one reaches that unique experience which symbolizes the purely objective. This is the reason why I say that modern psychology has not yet touched even the outer fringe of the subject. Personally, I do not at all feel hopeful of the present state of things in either biology or psychology. Mere analytical criticism with some understanding of the organic conditions of the imagery in which religious life has sometimes manifested itself is not likely to carry us to the living roots of human personality. Assuming that sex-imagery has played a role in the history of religion, or that religion has furnished imaginative means of escape from, or adjustment to, an unpleasant reality—these ways of looking at the matter cannot, in the least, affect the ultimate aim of religious life, that is to say, the

reconstruction of the finite ego by bringing him into contact with an eternal life-process, and thus giving him a metaphysical status of which we can have only a partial understanding in the half-choking atmosphere of our present environment. If, therefore, the science of psychology is ever likely to possess a real significance for the life of mankind, it must develop an independent method calculated to discover a new technique better suited to the temper of our times. Perhaps a psychopath endowed with a great intellect—the combination is not an impossibility—may give us a clue to such a technique. In modern Europe, Nietzsche, whose life and activity form, at least to us Easterns, an exceedingly interesting problem in religious psychology, was endowed with some sort of a constitutional equipment for such an undertaking. His mental history is not without a parallel in the history of Eastern Sufism. That a really ‘imperative’ vision of the Divine in man did come to him, cannot be denied. I call his vision ‘imperative’ because it appears to have given him a kind of prophetic mentality which, by some kind of technique, aims at turning its visions into permanent life-forces. Yet Nietzsche was a failure; and his failure was mainly due to his intellectual progenitors such as Schopenhauer, Darwin, and Lange whose influence completely blinded him to the real significance of his vision. Instead of looking for a spiritual rule which would develop the Divine even in a plebeian and thus open up before him an infinite future, Nietzsche was driven to seek the realization of his vision in such scheme as aristocratic radicalism. As I have said of him elsewhere:

The ‘I am’ which he seeketh,
 Lieth beyond philosophy, beyond knowledge.
 The plant that groweth only from the invisible soil of the heart of man,
 Groweth not from a mere heap of clay!

Thus failed a genius whose vision was solely determined by his internal forces, and remained unproductive for want of expert external guidance in his spiritual life, and the irony of fate is that this man, who appeared to his friends “as if he had come from a country where no man lived,” was fully conscious of his great spiritual need. “I confront alone,” he says, “an immense problem: it is as if I am lost in a forest, a primeval one. I need help. I need disciples: I need a master. It would be so sweet to obey.” And again:

“Why do I not find among the living men who see higher than I do and have to look down on me? Is it only that I have made a poor search? And I have so great a longing for such.”

The truth is that the religious and the scientific processes, though involving different methods, are identical in their final aim. Both aim at reaching the

most real. In fact, religion, for reasons which I have mentioned before, is far more anxious to reach the ultimately real than science. And to both the way to pure objectivity lies through what may be called the purification of experience. In order to understand this we must make a distinction between experience as a natural fact, significant of the normally observable behaviour of Reality, and experience as significant of the inner nature of Reality. As a natural fact it is explained in the light of its antecedents, psychological and physiological; as significant of the inner nature of Reality we shall have to apply criteria of a different kind to clarify its meaning. In the domain of science we try to understand its meaning in reference to the external behaviour of Reality; in the domain of religion we take it as representative of some kind of Reality and try to discover its meanings in reference mainly to the inner nature of that Reality. The scientific and the religious processes are in a sense parallel to each other. Both are really descriptions of the same world with this difference only that in the scientific process the ego's standpoint is necessarily exclusive, whereas in the religious process the ego integrates its competing tendencies and develops a single inclusive attitude resulting in a kind of synthetic transfiguration of his experiences. A careful study of the nature and purpose of these really complementary processes shows that both of them are directed to the purification of experience in their respective spheres. An illustration will make my meaning clear. Hume's criticism of our notion of cause must be considered as a chapter in the history of science rather than that of philosophy. True to the spirit of scientific empiricism we are not entitled to work with any concepts of a subjective nature. The point of Hume's criticism is to emancipate empirical science from the concept of force which, as he urges, has no foundation in sense-experience. This was the first attempt of the modern mind to purify the scientific process.

Einstein's mathematical view of the universe completes the process of purification started by Hume, and, true to the spirit of Hume's criticism, dispenses with the concept of force altogether. The passage I have quoted from the great Indian saint shows that the practical student of religious psychology has a similar purification in view. His sense of objectivity is as keen as that of the scientists in his own sphere of objectivity. He passes from experience to experience, not as a mere spectator, but as a critical sifter of experience, who by the rules of a peculiar technique, suited to his sphere of inquiry, endeavours to eliminate all subjective elements, psychological or physiological, in the content of his experience with a view finally to reach what is absolutely objective. This final experience is the revelation of a new life-process—original, essential, spontaneous. The eternal secret of the ego is that the moment he reaches this final revelation he recognizes it as the ultimate root of his being without

the slightest hesitation. Yet in the experience itself there is no mystery. Nor is there anything emotional in it. Indeed with a view to secure a wholly non-emotional experience the technique of Islamic Sufism at least takes good care to forbid the use of music in worship, and to emphasize the necessity of daily congregational prayers in order to counteract the possible anti-social effects of solitary contemplation. Thus the experience reached is a perfectly natural experience and possesses a biological significance of the highest importance to the ego. It is the human ego rising higher than mere reflection, and mending its transiency by appropriating the eternal. The only danger to which the ego is exposed in this Divine quest is the possible relaxation of his activity caused by his enjoyment of and absorption in the experiences that precede the final experience. The history of Eastern Sufism shows that this is a real danger. This was the whole point of the reform movement initiated by the great Indian saint from whose writings I have already quoted a passage. And the reason is obvious. The ultimate aim of the ego is not to see something, but to be something. It is in the ego's effort to be something that he discovers his final opportunity to sharpen his objectivity and acquire a more fundamental 'I am' which finds evidence of its reality not in the Cartesian 'I think' but in the Kantian 'I can.' The end of the ego's quest is not emancipation from the limitations of individuality; it is, on the other hand, a more precise definition of it. The final act is not an intellectual act, but a vital act which deepens the whole being of the ego, and sharpens his will with the creative assurance that the world is not something to be merely seen or known through concepts, but something to be made and re-made by continuous action. It is a moment of supreme bliss and also a moment of the greatest trial for the ego:

Art thou in the stage of 'life,' 'death,' or 'death-in-life.' Invoke the aid of three witnesses to verify thy 'Station.'

The first witness is thine own consciousness—
 See thyself, then, with thine own light.
 The second witness is the consciousness of another ego—
 See thyself, then, with the light of an ego other than thee.
 The third witness is God's consciousness—
 See thyself, then, with God's light.
 If thou standest unshaken in front of this light,
 Consider thyself as living and eternal as He!
 That man alone is real who dares—
 Dares to see God face to face!
 What is 'Ascension'? Only a search for a witness
 Who may finally confirm thy reality—

A witness whose confirmation alone makes thee eternal.
No one can stand unshaken in His Presence;
And he who can, verily, he is pure gold.
Art thou a mere particle of dust?
Tighten the knot of thy ego;
And hold fast to thy tiny being!
How glorious to burnish one's ego.
And to test its lustre in the presence of the Sun!
Re-chisel, then, thine ancient frame; And build up a new being.
Such being is real being;
Or else thy ego is a mere ring of smoke!
Javid Namah

Selected and annotated by Aslam Syed

Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism

A Sourcebook

Edited by

Björn Bentlage
Marion Eggert
Hans Martin Krämer
and Stefan Reichmuth



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