

Iqbal's Concept of God as the Ultimate Ego

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ABSTRACT:

Iqbal contribution to the reconstruction of religious thought centers on the formulation of his concept of God as an Ego and as the perfect personality by drawing upon the Islamic tradition and the teachings of the Holy Quran. The problem he faces here concerns how to reconcile the human ego and the world as an ego with the all-inclusive Divine Ego. He tries to overcome the difficulty by conceiving God as 'Reality as a whole' – essentially spiritual but individual on the analogy of the human self and as an organizing principle. By making His infinity as intensive and not extensive, Iqbal talks about the infinite inner possibilities of His creative activity. The relation between God and universe raises the problem of finite and infinite deity. For Iqbal, the universe cannot be regarded as an independent reality standing in opposition to Him. Here, the pantheism-panentheism controversy engulfs Iqbal's stand-point and seems to vacillate between the two views. His thesis here appears to be that reality is essentially spiritual and God merely makes manifest His creative energy to create the world. This, however, fails to solve the problem of how can an ego defined in terms of individuality incorporate other egos in itself.

Key words: *Ego, Ultimate Ego, Absolute Ego, deity, pantheism, panentheism, creative activity, emanationism, panpsychism*

Iqbal claims to have gone behind rationalistic commentaries and mystical speculations to the original Quranic teaching in describing God first and last as an Ego. More than that, he has built

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his entire system upon the very idea that God is the most perfect personality which he intended to prove from the Holy Quran. The emphasis Iqbal laid on the personality of God is considered one of his greatest contributions to the reconstruction of Islamic thought, and is, to a large extent, in tune with the contemporary interest which concentrates on the Divine personality and can be remarked in the Western religious thought Dr. Annemarie Schimmel has quite appropriately pointed out that Iqbal built his whole system upon the idea that God is the most perfect ego, the most perfect personality which he desired to prove from the Qur'an.¹

Classical Islamic mysticism had also held that real personality belongs to God alone, that 'nobody can say I but God.' In Iqbal's philosophy and theology, however, there are other egos besides God, or rather inside the all-embracing Divine Ego, as he sometimes likes to put it. The world itself is conceived as an ego, and everything created is nothing but an ego; the unimaginable varieties of them are sustained by that comprehensive Divine Ego who holds them in His own Being – not in His imagination. The existence of those numberless egos in different stages of development – from atom to man – whose existence is not obliterated by the Greatest Ego, seems to be self-contradictory; for

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either the smaller egos have no existence of their own but are organic parts of the Greatest Ego, or they exist in a sphere outside that Ego and cannot come into life-giving contact with them.

Iqbal tries to overcome the difficulty by conceiving God as 'Reality as a whole' – essentially spiritual but individual. And here creeps in the analogy with the human self. He is to be regarded as an ego because, like the human self, He is an organizing principle of unity, a synthesis which holds together and focalizes the dispensing dispositions of His living organism for a constructive purpose. He is an ego also because He responds to our reflection and our prayer. For the "real test of a self is whether it responds to the call of another self."² Strictly speaking, He is not an ego but the Absolute Ego. He is absolute because he is all-inclusive and there is nothing outside of Him.³ In this way, Iqbal believes to have found a way out in describing His infinity as intensive and not extensive. It involves an infinite series, but is not that series.⁴ This infinity consists in the infinite inner possibilities of His creative activity. But, the question arises: Is he then extensively space-bound? Iqbal's reply is to be found in the paragraph where he claims:

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“Beyond Him and apart from His creative activity, there is neither time nor space to close Him off in reference to other egos. The Ultimate Ego is, therefore, neither infinite in the sense of spatial infinity nor finite in the sense of the space-bound human ego whose body closes him off in reference to other egos. The infinity of the Ultimate Ego consists in the infinite inner possibilities of His creative activity of which the universe, as known to us, is only a partial expression. In one word GOD’s infinity is intensive, not extensive. It involves an infinite series, but is not that series.”⁵

Obviously, the basic issue involved here is that of relation between God and the Universe which is not our immediate concern here. What is more important is His creative activity which finds a partial expression in the universe. The issue of His creation reflects His perfection implying the ‘infinite scope of His creative vision.’ His not-yet means the infinite creative possibilities of His being. But, can we take this creation to mean reproduction? No, because the Absolute Ego’s individuality requires that there is no reproduction in Him – for reproduction is building up a new organism – duplication out of a detached fragment of the old. But, even if God or the

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Absolute Ego or the whole of Reality is accepted as freely, infinitely and perfectly creative, all-powerful movement, are we to say with Browning that He is all good, or with Schopenhauer that He is all evil, or a finite deity of William James or to suspend the judgment at the present stage of our knowledge of the universe. The facts of moral and physical evil stand out prominently in the life of nature. Evil arises from the conflict of opposite individuals and is therefore relative to the finite beings: Both good and evil though opposites fall under the same whole. But here, we are told that we pass the boundaries of pure thought and can see our way only by faith in the eventual triumph of goodness.⁶

The finite-infinite controversy also relates to Iqbal's concept of deity. Now, a finite deity may be defined as one which partakes in some fundamental respect of the limited and imperfect character of the order of nature. His argument runs like this:

“To Him the non-self does not present itself as a confronting ‘other.’ What we call Nature or the ‘not- self’ is only a fleeting moment in the life of God. Now a self is unthinkable without a character, i.e. a uniform mode of behavior. Nature. is not a mass of

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pure materiality occupying a void. It is a structure of events, a systematic mode of behavior, and as such organic to the Ultimate self. Nature is to divine self as character is to the human self,”⁷

It highlights the importance assigned by Iqbal to his standpoint on God-world relationship. An equally important issue concerns his question: If God is an individual, how is He related to the universe? He explains the issue further: “Does the universe confront God as His “other”, with “Does the universe confront God as His “other”, with space intervening between Him and it? The answer is that, from the Divine point of view, there is no creation in the sense of a specific event having a “before” and an “after”. The universe cannot be regarded as an independent reality standing in opposition to Him. space, time, and matter are interpretations which thought puts on the free creative energy of God. They are not independent realities existing per se, but only intellectual modes of apprehending the life of God. The world of matter, therefore, is not a stuff co-eternal with God, operated upon by Him from a distance as it were. It is, in its real nature, one continuous act which thought breaks up into a plurality of mutually exclusive things”⁸

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This brings Iqbal right in the middle of the muddled area of pan theism, the idea of a straightforward identity of God with the world, though in his formulation of the Ultimate Ego he shifts his position towards panentheism.⁷ Thus, he argues that the famous light-verse in the Holy Quran (24:35) must be taken as a metaphor to suggest the absoluteness of God and not His omnipresence. God being the basis of all phenomena, as Iqbal seems to hold; it can be described panentheistically as the view that all that exists is a manifestation of God. Or it may be termed 'emanationism' in the sense that everything is an emanation from God. On the other hand, his treatment of God's creativity in the sense of 'nature as God's behavior' makes him patently pantheistic. Still another dimension appears when Iqbal's critical appraisal of Ash 'rite atomism leads him to conclude that reality is essentially spiritual and God merely makes manifest His creative energy to create the world. He is simply revealing himself through the world of matter with a space-time pattern. As pointed out above, Iqbal regards God as an ego – the Ultimate Ego, the source of all other egos. His use of the adjectives 'spiritual' and 'substantive' as applied to the ego is almost

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equivalent. This means that to him the spiritual is psychical. For Iqbal, God is individual and spiritual and the universe is His objectification only. But, this would lead only to panpsychism. Iqbal himself says: “The world, in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the ‘Great I am. Every atom of Divine energy, however low in in the scale of existence, is an ego. there are degrees in the expression of ego-hood... Throughout the entire, gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of ego- hood until it reaches the perfection in man.”⁸

Iqbal’s position here can, indeed, be termed as panpsychism. As per his own admission, Iqbal was led to “spiritual pluralism” on the basis of his critical examination of Ash’arite atomism. But, the criterion of reality to which Iqbal is led is the feeling of ego-hood. Significantly, he defines ego-hood in terms of individuality when he says: The nature of the ego is such that, in spite of its “capacity to respond to other egos, it is self-centered and possesses a private circuit of individuality excluding all egos other than itself.”⁹ Here in lies the privacy of the ego which is another important characteristic

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of reality. It also determines its uniqueness as an individual. But, it leads to the difficulty that if God is an ego then He cannot embrace other egos in Himself

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2. M. Iqbal, "Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal", A collection of various articles and addresses by Iqbal, (Ed.) S.A Vahid, S.M. Ashraf, (Lahore: 1964), P. 126.
3. Iqbal does not take cognizance of the fact that this view is inconsistent with the separate identity of the finite self as conceived by him.
4. M. Iqbal, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam", S.M. Ashraf, (Lahore: 1968), p. 64.
5. Ibid. p. 52.
6. Ibid. p. 81.
7. Ibid. p. 56.
8. Ibid. pp. 65-66.
9. Panentheism is the notion of God as including but also transcending the world.
10. M. Iqbal, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam", S.M. Ashraf, (Lahore, 1968), pp. 71-72.
11. Ibid. p. 72.