

Iqbal on Religious Experience—A Philosophical Appraisal

A. Nature of Religious Experience

The phenomenon of religious experience has both psychological and epistemological dimensions. It not only gives us a clue to unknown levels of consciousness but also gives rise to a peculiar type of knowledge. It can rightly be regarded as the cornerstone on which the whole body of religious dogmas, values, rituals etc. ultimately rests. Unfortunately, proper inquiry into the nature and value of religious experience has never been undertaken in the past. It has been because of two main reasons :

(i) Being supra-normal, religious experience is highly elusive.

(ii) It is not common to all men ; it is rather the privilege of a few.

It is only recently that thinkers, especially psychologists, have felt the need for such an inquiry.¹ Iqbal, in his first lecture draws attention to the following verse of the Quran :

“God hath made every thing which he hath created most good, and began the creation of man with clay ; then ordained his progeny from germs of life, from sorry water ; then shaped him, and breathed of His spirit unto him, and gave you hearing and seeing and *heart* ; what little thanks do ye return ?”. (32 : 7-9)

The above verse of the Quran clearly states that sense-perception (hearing and seeing) is a source of knowledge ; but along with it another faculty is given which is denominated ‘heart’ i.e. ; *Fuad* or

Qalb. Iqbal says, "the 'heart' is a kind of inner intuition or insight which, in the beautiful words of Rumi, feeds on the rays of the sun and brings us into contact with aspects of Reality other than those open to sense-perceptions".²

Iqbal has referred to the incident of the psychic Jewish youth Ibn Sayyad, whom the Holy Prophet, before his *bithat*, questioned and examined in various moods. Once the Holy Prophet hid himself behind a tree and tried to listen to the incantations of Ibn Sayyad. The mother of the boy, however, informed him that he was being watched by the Prophet. The boy, immediately came out of the ecstatic mood and the Prophet remarked, "If she had let him alone, the thing would have been cleared up."³ So, according to Iqbal, "The Prophet of Islam was the first critical observer of psychic phenomena."⁴ Later, the Prophet himself experienced psychological changes when he became recipient of Divine Revelation in the cave *Hira*. The great experience that the Prophet had in *Hira* was not only a sort of psychological overhauling, but his consciousness was also raised to unknown levels of knowledge. The fact is known to every student of comparative religion that the Prophet of Islam was unlettered. His mind was a '*tabula rasa*' on which nothing was written or inscribed. Whatsoever was written on it, was written by God Himself, i.e., the Quran was revealed to him. The fact of the Prophet's being unlettered made it possible to receive and preserve the Divine Revelation in its purest possible form. Now the entire network of values, concepts and rites that emanate from the unique experience of the Prophet, bears it out that religious experience involves not only radical psychological changes, but it also serves as a fountain-head of knowledge. It is a direct mode of knowledge, something which 'sees' and, if properly interpreted, yields certain knowledge of the Real. It is not a mysterious faculty, but is that mode of dealing with Reality in which sense-perception plays no part and yet in which our experience is as real and concrete as any other kind of experience. This religious (or mystic) experience

is not an illusion. It is a fact among other facts of human experience and one fact is as good as another in the matter of yielding knowledge by interpretation.

Since religious experience is a fact, there is no harm in critically examining this fact (as the Prophet had critically examined the mystical moods of *Ibn Sayyad*). Later on, Ibn Khaldun followed this very tradition of the Prophet's and approached the content of mystic consciousness in a more critical spirit and very nearly reached the modern hypothesis of subliminal levels.⁵ As it is already said, modern psychology has only recently begun to realize the importance of a careful study of the contents of religious experience. But as yet we are not able to evolve an effective scientific method by means of which the contents of supra-rational consciousness could be analysed and interpreted.

Here one important distinction should be borne in mind. Although all individuals are not capable of attaining mystic experience, yet most of the people, by adopting peculiar practices and by following the mystic path (*tariqah*), can have unitary experience with God. But the prophetic consciousness can't be achieved that way. It always remains dependent on the will and grace of God. Mystic experience differs from the experience of a prophet only in degree. Qualitatively, both are alike. But it should be remembered that no amount of mystic practice can raise a person to the level of a prophet.⁶

B. Main Characteristics of Religious Experience

For Iqbal mystic experience is not a mysterious experience. It is as cogent and indubitable as any other type of experience. He enumerates its main characteristics :

1. *Immediacy* :—Just as we can interpret some of our experiences and gain the knowledge of the external world, so we can interpret mystic experience and attain to the knowledge of God. Immediacy of mystic experience means only this that

we know God just as we know other objects in sense experience. This implies that God is not a mathematical notion or a system of concepts mutually related having no reference to experience.

2. *Unanalysability*.—In mystic experience, discursive thought is reduced to the minimum. Discursive thought presupposes the distinction between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge. Moreover, it is always piecemeal, i.e. it proceeds in step by step manner. Iqbal makes this point clear : “when I experience the table before me, innumerable data of experience merge into the single experience of the table. But out of this wealth of data I select those that fall into a certain order of space and time and round them off in reference to the table”⁷ The mere mass of sense data does not yield knowledge. Thought analyses and interprets these data and works them into a coherent scheme of knowledge. In mystic experience, however, this activity of thought is totally suspended. Hence no analysis is possible. Here Iqbal warns that the unanalysability of mystic experience should not be taken to mean discontinuance with the normal consciousness as Professor William James had erroneously thought. Reality for Iqbal is one : it is now known by thought and now grasped in mystic experience. Thought and mystic experience are only two ways of knowing the same reality. “Ordinarily rational consciousness, in view of our practical need of adaptation to our environment, takes that reality piecemeal, selecting successively isolated sets of stimuli for response. The mystic state brings us into contact with the total passage of Reality in which all the diverse stimuli merge into one another and form a single unanalysable unity in which the ordinary distinction of subject and object does not exist.”⁸
3. *Passivity*.—All mystics agree that mystic experience is passive through and through. No doubt, effort to concentrate attention and certain voluntary bodily movements and actions may be needed as a prelude to have a mystical state of mind. But once

this state is aroused, the mystic remains absolutely passive as long as it lasts. "The mystic state is a moment of intimate association with a Unique Other Self, transcending, encompassing and momentarily suppressing the private personality of the subject of experience".⁹ This is not a strange and mysterious state of consciousness. In our day to day life we say that Mr. X is completely lost in watching a game. Similarly somebody may forget himself and his environment while appreciating a beautiful scene or studying an interesting book. Mystic experience could be closely compared to these examples. Some sufis call it the state of *Fana*.

But it should not be understood by the fact of passivity that the individuality of the mystic gets annihilated in the mystic state. The mystic does not lose his identity in the sense in which a drop of water shades off into the unity of the ocean. Only his personality gets suppressed for the time being and his will suspended. Rumi explains that fact on the analogy of the sun and candle. When the sun rises and its light spreads everywhere, the light of the candle becomes insignificant and invisible. But this does not imply that it has lost its individuality. If you put a piece of cloth on it, it will burn it.

Iqbal thinks that in mystic experience, although the personality of the mystic is suppressed to the minimum, yet it is not annihilated. Mystic experience is rather a feeling of intimate association with a Unique Other Self. Now the question arises, "How is immediate experience of God as Other Self possible?" Iqbal's answer is as follows :

We know our fellows to be real because they respond to our signals. Response is the test of the presence to the consciousness of the other self and the Quran takes this view :

'And your Lord saith, call me and I respond to your call.'

(40 : 60)

'And when My servants ask thee concerning Me, then I am nigh

unto them, and answer the cry of him that crieth unto Me.'

(2 : 186)

This shows that mystic experience is objective and real ; it is not a figment of one's subjective imagination.

4. *Incommunicability*.—Being direct and immediate mystic experience is incommunicable. It is more like feeling than thought. It is very much personal and private like any of our immediate experiences e.g., our experience of toothache or headache. Therefore it cannot be made known to the person who has never been a recipient of it. The interpretation of the content of mystical or prophetic experience can be conveyed in propositions, but not the content itself. Although mystic experience belongs to an inarticulate feeling, it is not devoid of cognitive element and according to Iqbal, because of this element, it assumes the form of an idea. Iqbal quotes Prof. Hocking¹⁰ and concludes that although all feeling is inarticulate and undefined, yet it cannot be regarded as blind. It has a direction, which means that it has an objective or goal. Iqbal thinks that all feeling is directed towards ideas i.e., it seeks expression in thought. Feeling is outward pushing and idea is outward reporting. Thus feeling and thought are organically related. This is the reason why Iqbal does not condemn intellect and gives its proper place in his system of thought. Feeling and intuition find expression in idea and idea seeks ventilation in word. Word is the garb of idea, and both word and idea stem from feeling. Word, so to say, is also revealed.

5. *Connection with Common Experience*: - In mystic state of mind, the subject loses contact with everyday life and serial time becomes totally unreal for him. But "this does not mean a complete break with serial time. The mystic state in respect of its uniqueness, remains in some way related to common experience. "Moreover, it cannot last long ; it soon fades away but leaving a deep sense of authority and certainty on the mind of the rece-

piet. Both the mystic and the prophet return to the normal levels of experience but with a difference. The mystic's experience always remains his private affair but the Prophet's return to the normal level means much for mankind in general.

C. Mystic Experience and Psychoanalysis

Some thinkers have tried to minimize the importance of mystic experience by saying that it is the outcome of certain physiological conditions, but this is not true. Antecedent physiological conditions are necessary for every type of experience. But these have nothing to do with the criteria by which we judge the value of any experience aesthetic, moral or religious. Iqbal thinks that "scientific form of mind is as much organically determined as the religious".¹² In the history of Christian mysticism it was very difficult to disentangle the divine revelation from the satanic revelation ; because demon in his malice does counterfeit experiences which creep into the mystic state. So the mystic experience could be superior or inferior or worthless. To draw a distinction between the Divine and Satanic elements of revelation extraordinary wisdom is required. Finally it was decided that "it is by the fruit that we judge the value of mystic experience and not by its roots" (William James). William James' criterion of the value of a mystic experience is accepted by Iqbal. The Quran also subscribes to this view.

"We have not any Apostle or Prophet before thee among whose desires Satan injected not some wrong desire ; but God shall affirm His revelation, for God is knowing and Wise".

(22 : 51)

In modern Psychology, Freud has done a great service. His theories could be used in making a discrimination between Divine and Satanic revelations. But Freud has erroneously interpreted all spiritual states with reference to sexual impulses. In Freud, all religious dogmas become the figments of unconscious forces. He thinks that religion is a pure fiction created by the repudiated forces

of mankind to find an escape, or it is a primitive effort to understand Nature in accordance with "heart's desires" rather than "the facts of life". Iqbal agrees with Freud that there are some forms of art which provide a kind of cowardly escape from the facts of life. But this is not true of all religions.

Religion interprets mystic experience which is for it, a concrete fact. Sciences also study and seek concrete experience; but their data are different. Religion is not Physics or Chemistry seeking Nature in terms of cause and effect. The conflict between Science and Religion is due to the misapprehension that both interpret the same data of experience. Therefore, to say that religion is an escape created by thwarted instincts is wrong. Sciences relate to the temporal aspects of the real and so they have nothing to do with religious experience.

Content of religious experience is not created by sex impulses. Both forms of consciousness i.e., religious experience and sex impulses are totally different in character, aim and consequent conduct. It was the intensity of passion accompanied by mystic state of mind that led Freud to suppose that it was the work of the sub-conscious. This is not true "In all knowledge there is an element of passion, and the object of knowledge gains or loses in objectivity with the rise and fall in the intensity of passion"¹³ In religious experience, one transcends the circuit of his finite personality and encounters a unique Other Self. Science, therefore, is always at a loss to understand the nature of religious experience as a source of certain knowledge. Iqbal remarks :

"A purely psychological method, therefore, cannot explain religious passion as a source of knowledge. It is found to fail in the case of our newer psychologists as it did fail in the case of Locke and Hume"¹⁴

Iqbal finally points out an important difficulty. We accept that religious experience is a fine feeling having a cognitive element; and

that it could not be communicated to others, Only an interpretation of it could be communicated to others in the form of propositions.

One can object to this theory and ask, "Why should the one, who has not personally had this experience, believe in the reality and validity of such an experience?"

Had religion been, strictly speaking, dependent upon individual's personal experience, it would have been the prerogative of a few people only. Iqbal says that we are lucky enough to have two criteria of testing the validity of religious experience.

1. *Intellectual Test*.—In this test we have to see if the discoveries of Reason support and substantiate the facts revealed in religious experience. Iqbal explains :

"By intellectual test I mean critical interpretation, without any presuppositions of human experience, generally with a view to discover whether our interpretation leads us ultimately to a reality of the same character as is revealed by the religious experience."¹⁶

2. *Pragmatic Test*.—It is already stated that William James has devised a test to judge the validity of religious experience on the basis of the "fruits" not "roots" of this experience. For the psychologist, religious experience is a kind of abnormality. But the personality of mystic or of a prophet is by no means comparable to that of a psychopath. The results of the deeds that emanate from religious experience bear testimony to its validity.

Intellectual test is applied by the Philosopher and the prophet uses pragmatic test.

This however may be added that these tests should be applied with certain precautions. While applying the intellectual test, for instance, religion is not to be relegated to a secondary position, as Ibal has himself observed :

“But to rationalize faith is not to admit the superiority of Philosophy over religion. Philosophy, no doubt, has jurisdiction to judge Religion, but what is to be judged is of such a nature that it will not submit to the jurisdiction of Philosophy except on its own terms”.¹⁷

Similarly pragmatic test should not be considered in a strict and immediate sense of the term. A true religion, in the beginning, may not appear to be yielding positive results but in the long run it does have healthy impact on both the individual and the society at large.

NOTES

1. For example see William James, “*Varieties of Religious Experience*.”
2. Iqbal, *the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, Sh. Ashraf, 1965, Reference here is to *Mathnawi Maulana Rum*, ii.52 (trans. Nicholson).
“The bodily sense is eating the food of darkness. The spiritual sense is feeding from a sun”.
3. This incident is mentioned by D.B. Macdonald in his ‘Religious Attitudes and Life in Islam’ on the authority of Bokhari and several other *ahadith*. This book consists of Macdonald’s Haskell Lectures in the Chicago University 1906.
4. Iqbal *op. cit.* p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
6. This distinction has been referred to by Iqbal in his fifth lecture *Ibid.* p. 99 for a detailed comparison between mystic and prophetic consciousness see Dr. M. Maruf, *Iqbal’s Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 114-116.
7. Iqbal, *op. cit.* p. 15.
8. *Ibid.*, p, 15.

9. *Ibid.*
10. W. E. Hocking, *The meaning of God in Human Experience*,
p. 66.
11. Iqbal, *op. cit.* p. 22.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 2S.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

