

THE MESSAGE OF MUHAMMAD IQBAL

(1873-1938)

Muhammad Iqbal is one of the most remarkable figures in the line of thinkers, philosophers, poets and reformers who glorify modern Islam.

As national poet of the Muslims of India, Iqbal exercised a great influence upon his compatriots. In flowing and meaningful verse, written in Urdu and Persian, he sang the past splendours of Muslim India, called his fellow citizens to action and foretold a great and glorious future for Islam. He long dreamt of an independent state for his brothers in India and showed his ardent wish for it in his poems and his speeches ; this dream was at least fulfilled by the great statesman Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

In reality, the poet's dream was vaster : it was not confined to India alone : Iqbal was inspired by the vision of a universal Islamic city, disregarding all racial and territorial barriers, with only the "Kaaba" for centre, and united by love of God and the Prophet.

I. HUMANISM

Muhammad Iqbal had not only an oriental culture ; he was familiar with Western culture also. He proclaimed the necessity for a synthesis of science and religion, and showed that science without conscience and politics without morality could only lead humanity to its ruin.

Iqbal had an ardent faith in men as such. And his sympathy for all that is human was not limited by racial or national considerations ; he was the friend and ally of all forces that liberate the mind and the spirit. He considered man's respect for his fellows to be the essential principle of Islamic democracy and the sum of Koranic teaching.

On tolerance, the poet expressed himself thus : "Religion is a constant aspiration towards perfection ; it is a sin to judge one's fellow man severely ; the believer and the unbeliever are equally the children of God. What is the basis of humanity ? It is the respect of a human being. Learn to esteem the dignity of man. The heart is imprisoned in matter, but in reality its domain is the universe."

For Iqbal, Islam represented a source of unlimited confidence in the future of humanity, a hope of salvation for the suffering peoples of the earth. The thinker did not only believe in Islam because he was born a Muslim, but because, in this search for truth, he arrived at a conception which harmonized perfectly with the Islamic ideal .

But if Iqbal was the national poet of Pakistan, he was not dogmatic ; he was imbued with a deep sense of humanity which enabled him to distinguish pure patriotism from the narrow nationalism which is ultimately a factor of war and injustice. Founded on a religious and moral base, the humanist conception of Muhammad Iqbal contains no element of materialism, as is the case with certain Western thinkers. Here is what he said on the subject in one of his poems :

What is the purpose of nature—the fitra, and the symbol of Islam ?

It is to promote brotherhood and to spread love.

Smash the idols and mingle your soul with that of the community.

And he says elsewhere :

Greed has divided the human race into enemy peoples ;

Speak the language of love and teach men brotherhood.

You are chained to the shore ;

Free yourself and steer yourself towards the horizon of unlimited liberty.

And Iqbal shows how the cult of false gods, those of racialism, of capitalism and of imperialism have reduced Europe to slavery and hastened the decline

of civilisation : "Until today," he says, "man continues to be the victim of exploitation and colonization. It is a great calamity for man to remain the prey of man. The glitter of present civilisation blinds the eyes, but it is a glitter of false jewels.....The science for which the West glorifies itself is only a sword in the hands of a man greedy for blood.".....

Finally, for Iqbal, the only hope for humanity in the quest for peace is to work to reconcile the reason of the West with the heart of the East, and to endeavour to establish the foundations of a new world, a world which will be dominated by ideas of love, of brotherhood and of justice.

The message of Muhammad Iqbal does not only concern Muslims. It is the message of a philosopher, at the same time idealist and realist, who addresses himself to all humanity.

II. HIS PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Among the Muslim philosophers Muhammad Iqbal was one of the most erudite, and he had at the same time one of the most remarkable innovating minds. He had a vast knowledge of the diverse tendencies of Eastern and Western thought : this extensive knowledge furnished him with abundant material which enabled his genius to fashion a doctrine uniting science, religion and art. We may observe in him the influence of Muslim mysticism in general and of the ideas of Galal-Eldin Al-Rumi in particular.

In his philosophy we discover ideas borrowed from Western idealism on the one hand, and from the philosophy of the modern moralists on the other. We recognise traces of Kant, of Fichte, of Bergson and of William James. There are also calls to concerted action in which he gives priority to abstract speculation. The views of Muhammad Iqbal on the history of Islamic thought resemble, to some extent, those of Kant in relation to Western thought. The poet-philosopher expressed these ideas in a collection of poems in Persian and Urdu-poems strongly favoured by Indian Muslim youth. He later expounded them in a series of conferences which he gave in English, in 1928. They were published in 1934 under the title of *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.

Iqbal threw into relief the purpose he set himself in giving these conferences : to indicate the points of contact between Islam and Western philosophy, and the necessity of recapitulating the teachings of Islam without breaking with the past, in the light of the truths and the methods discovered by modern science.

Iqbal adopted an interiorist tendency in the conception he formed of religious knowledge and practice. He said there is a difference between the types of knowledge resting on different sources. The Koran attaches equal importance to all the domains of human experience, considered as means of acquiring knowledge of absolute truth. With the purpose of assuring ourselves of a complete vision of truth, it is therefore necessary that perception be completed by intimate, intuitive perception that the Koran calls "Qalb", or heart. It follows that intelligence and intuition, in other words reason and inspiration, do not contradict each other, as some people are inclined to believe.

In taking up his views of intuitive knowledge, Iqbal effectively says : "Religion is not satisfied with pure and simple concepts ; it seeks a more intimate association with the objects of its researches. The means of realizing this association is adoration or prayer. Prayer is a normal, vital set by which our personality discovers its position in the greater whole of life. In fact, prayer must be considered as a necessary complement of the intellectual activity of every observer of nature. The scientist who observes nature is, in a way, a mystic at prayer. Nevertheless, the purpose of prayer is achieved better when it becomes collective. The spirit of every true prayer is social. Whether individual or collective, it is the expression of the intimate desire of man to be heard by God, amid the imposing silence of the universe."

Iqbal gives particular attention to the problem of individual liberty, demonstrating that the teachings of Islam confirm it. Still, the predominance of political aims and personal interests has spread among the Muslims a fatalism which has caused the greatest harm to Muslim society.

The philosopher-poet then declares that Islam conceives the spiritual basis of every life as an eternal being revealed by variety and change.

“The principle of movement in the structure of Islam is *Ijtihad*, which means sustained effort. It is regrettable that this principle which aims at giving life to a nation has had no effect on the Muslims. One of the deepest causes of the weakness of the Muslims is neglect of this principle, I mean the misappreciation of *Ijtihad*.”

Iqbal then speaks of *Ijma* (the unanimous consent of the community) as being one of the sources of Muslim law, in these terms : “The third source of the law is *Ijma*. In my opinion, it is probably the most important legal notion in Islam. It is surprising, nevertheless, that while having been the subject of many discussions at the outset of Islam, it remained simply an idea and rarely took the form of a permanent institution in any Muslim country. It is possible that the transformation of *Ijma* into a permanent legislative institution was contrary to the political interests of the type of absolute monarchy that developed in Islam immediately after the Rashidite khalifs. It was, I think, in the interest of the Umayyads and the Abbassid khalifs to leave to the *mujtabidites* the prerogative of practising *ijtihad* individually, rather than to encourage the formation of a permanent assembly which could have become too powerful for them. It is, all the same, comforting to note that the pressure of new world forces and the political experience of European nations has recalled to modern Islamic thinkers the value and the possibilities of *Ijma*. The development of the republican spirit and the gradual formation of legislative assemblies in the Muslim countries constitute a great step forward towards the application of *Ijma*.”

It is clear that the philosophy of Iqbal, in its essence, is deeply imprinted with religion. Basically, it constitutes a glorification of Islam, it revives and reinforces the Muslim and lets them glimpse a future of which they may be proud, if they follow the life and teaching of their religion. In his well-known Islamic hymn, the poet-philosopher delights in singing :

"In the shadow of the sword we were brought up,
 And we made the greatness of our nation.
 The banner of Islam in the course of time
 Is the glorious emblem of our profession of fatih.
 Muhammad was at the head of our caravan,
 Leading us to victory.
 The name of Muhammad lights and guides us,
 It is a pledge of hope for our rebirth.
 The hymn of Iqbal resounds
 And its echo accompanies the march of time,
 To bring home our first victorious caravans
 And let our people be born again."

Iqbal does not cease to extol the exploits of Islam. In his poetry there is an invitation to effort and action, an exhortation to resume the march with the caravan. Let us listen, rather to the philosopher :

"The most elevated aim of human activity is a glorious, vigorous, radiant life. Every human art should tend towards this aim. The value of each thing must be measured according to its power of giving us a resplendent life. The highest art is that which is able to awaken the will-power asleep in us, and which stimulates us to see life valiantly. All that makes us indolent, all that leads us to close our eyes to avoid seeing the real state of what is around us is disintegration and death."

And imbued with this idea of will, Iqbal sings the determination of the Muslim in well known verses :

The Muslim smiles when he is in peace,
 With a smile tender and sweet.

But when the clarion sound calls to war,
Noting is firmer than his resolution."

And elsewhere, he describes the Muslim thus :

Marching on thorns, facing fire and arms,
He goes forward despising pain.
Attached to the earth, he is not its slave.

Iqbal next expresses to the power of faith in a poem entitled :
"The badge of the believer," where he says : "I only bow to him who holds
the power of life and death." And he says again :

Poor before my Creator, I feel myself rich before His creatures ;
That is why I am rich in my very poverty.

Iqbal noticed how the modern European had been subjugated by his pure intellectual activity, to the point that he has no longer any spiritual life, that he hardly feels any more the intimate call of his interior life, and that he denies the invisible world, considering it illusory, to such an extent that in the domain of thought he always finds himself in conflict with others, so that in most cases he is incapable of overcoming his egoism and of curbing his passions. He is seduced by the material side of life and plunges himself blindly into it without getting back anything but disappointment and bitterness.

"The great war," he says, "spread over Europe and destroyed the organization of the old world in every aspect. Of the debris of civilization and culture, nature gave rise to a new being. She created a world suitable for humans, a world which glimpsed its confused structure through the works of Einstein and Bergson.

"Europe saw with her own eyes the fearful consequences of her ideology in the economic, moral and scientific domains. But alas : The admirers of past, attached to their principles, were unable to estimate the astonishing upheaval that roared in the human conscience,"

If we observe the Muslim East, we shall see that it is awakening after a secular sleep. And the poet-philosopher gives this warnings :

“The Esatern peoples must become aware that they will not be able to modify their environment unless a modification is made in their inward lives. A new world cannot exist before its meaning is present in the conscience of men.”

It is a stable law of nature that the Koran has exposed in terms both simple and eloquent, “God does not improve the conditions of mens’ life unless they improve the condition of their soul.” It is a law as valid for the individual life as for the social. Iqbal wrote : “Every effort in the world is worthy of admiration, and, particularly in East, where they strive to raise the eyes of people and societies above geographical frontiers, thus creating a true human life”.

Iqbal had an unshakable faith in the primoridial importance of religion and in its efficacious action, as much as on the conduct of the individual as on that of society. He expresses his conviction in these terms :

“Religion, in highest form, is not composed of rigid precepts or of monastic rules, or of liturgical ceremonies. Without religion, it is not easy for modern man to bear the heavy burden that modern scientific progress has laid upon him. Only religion can give him the faith and confidence that will enable him to acquire a personality in this world and keep it in the next. Man must attain a new conception of his past and of his future to be able to dominate an aggressive society and to raise himself above a civilization which has lost its spiritual unity because of the interior conflict between religious needs and political aims. The truth is that the way of religion and that of science, in spite of their apparent opposition, lead to the same end. Religion gives even more attention to the acquisition of the Supreme Truth.”

If we may borrow here the expression of Bergson in his book, *The Two Sources of Morals and Religion*. Muhammad Iqbal considers the Muslim religion as being an “Open Religion.” This means that its universal human mission is unlimited in time and place, and that it possesses a latent

force capable of liberating human souls from prejudices of race, colour and parentage. Iqbal gives back to the new generations of Muslims the confidence that they had lost in Islamic culture. In the same way, breathes into them the determination to present to the world the glorious civilization that was at a given moment an unlimited benefit for humanity.

The poet elsewhere dedicated a hymn of hope and faith to a people when adversity had oppressed for long years. He addresses Muslim youth, assuring them that the ruins of Western culture can give rise to a superior and more lasting culture, provided that we keep to the teachings of the Koran :

“Hundreds of new worlds are incorporated in verses ;
 All the worlds are included in its texts ;
 And from these will surge a unique world
 Abundantly sufficing men of the modern era.
 Penetrate therefore its meaning
 If you have a vibrant heart.
 If one of these worlds is annihilated,
 The Koran will give you another.”

The essence of the mission of Islam, according to Iqbal, is the establishment of liberty, of justice and of love among human beings. In this sense, the Muslim philosopher says :

“The aim of Islam is not limited to subjective inspirations that means the individual live on the margin of those who surround him, but it lays the foundations of an education that makes the individual apt to make of himself and his fellows a sound society resting upon traditional institutions. The party spirit that incites to hatred and discord is vile and humiliating ; it has no place in Islam.”

III. THE THEORY OF THE SELF :

Muhammad Iqbal had familiarized himself with the masterpieces of European thought. If his philosophy carries traces of the ideas of Fichte

and Bergson, in particular, there is no doubt that the philosopher poet of Pakistan had the heart and mind of a Muslim.

He considers that the Indian contemplative mysticism as well as the indolent Muslim mysticism disseminated among the Muslims despair, abdication, evasion and inaction. It is for this reason that he made every effort to stigmatise the philosophy that gave free play to feebleness and prostration in opposing to it a new philosophy, of energy, optimism and progress.

Such is his philosophy of the Self. It is based on the conviction that the Self or the personality is a thing which has a real existence and is not a product of the imagination. For this reason Iqbal sets himself against the opinion of Bradley and others among the partisans of the philosophy of Hegel that denies the existence of the individual and only admits the Absolute. He is also opposed to the extravagances of the sufi-poets—such as Hafez Al-Shirazi, for he considers that their opinions are to a great extent responsible for the decadence that spread in the Islamic countries.

The essence of the doctrine of the Self, according to Muhammad Iqbal, is that our whole life is individual, and that what the philosophers of the Absolute call “the universal life” is non-existent. For Iqbal, God is Himself the “Self” of “Selves.”

Our philosopher admits the point of view of MacTaggart, affirming that the universe is no other than the link uniting the individuals. But he adds to this that the order that we find in this link is neither spontaneous nor established since an eternity. It is the resultant of a constant effort, of a conscious and sustained action. We follow a gradual path from a state of dispersion and chaos to a state of unity and order, and we are all associated in the realization of an order in the world. The universe is not an accomplished order, a thing finished with. It is in course of development, of formation; the creative operation continues all the time. The human being, too, collaborates in this as long as he participates in the establishment of order in one of the sections of this chaotic state. And Iqbal reiterates the words of the Koran: “Glory be to God, the most perfect of creatures.”

It is evident that this view of the universe and of man is opposed to that of the modern Neo-Hegelians, as it is opposed to all the forms of mysticism with pantheistic tendencies. These consider, in effect, that the destiny of the human being is its reabsorption in the universal life, in the same way that the salvation of the human soul is annihilation in the universal soul.

Quite on the contrary, the ideal of the human being, according to Iqbal, is not the negation of the Self, but its affirmation. The individual approaches this ideal in emphasizing his individuality, his unity. The Prophet said : "Imitate the qualities of God." It is for this reason that the human being is one, since he resembles the Unique One, who is God.

What is life, in fact ? It is personal, and its most perfect representation is the Self. The most complete being in existence is he whose individuality is the most pronounced ; the distance between him and God is, by this fact, shortened. It is thus with the believer, who is unique par excellence. He cannot reabsorb himself in the universe ; it is the universe that is reabsorbed in him :

The unbeliever is perplexed ; he is lost in the vast world.

While the believer is himself a universe where one loses the horizons.

Life is perpetual movement ; its essence resides in the continual appearance of desires and ideals. The greatest obstacles to life are matter and nature. Nevertheless, matter is not an evil, but a means of bringing out the latent forces of life. It is in destroying all the obstacles that bar the way that the Self realizes its liberation. On the one hand, the Self is free, and on the other, it is tied. It attains a more complete liberty when it approaches God, the Unique Supreme, who is Himself exempt from all ties. In sum, we may say that life is a continued effort towards liberty.

Liberty, according to Iqbal, is a unique state of dogged resistance and sustained efforts in face of difficulties and vicissitudes. Its opposite is found in laxity and abandonment. And the poet addresses each one :

Sharpen your soul every instant

And live more sharply than the sword.

And elsewhere he expresses his thought in these terms :

Dangers are a trial of the will.

They give the measure of what soul and body can do.

Given that the personality, taken in this sense, is, for man, the most precious acquisition, it is his duty to face events firmly. It is worth exposing oneself to danger, that one is careful not to resign oneself to one's fate in -relaxing one's efforts or in adopting evasions that will make one further from one's object. The mastery of the Self is the fight against the obstacles and the difficulties, facilitating for us the entry into eternal life. And the philosopher goes as far as to say :

If the strong personality were wakeful to conserve itself

It would defy every death.

And he adds :

"The words of the Koran affirm that the universe that we face is not vain, that it has many advantages. The greatest of these is that the efforts made to conquer the difficulties awake our discernment and prepare us to penetrate beyond apparent phenomena."

Thanks to these obstacles the Self can realize its perfection and its infinite possibilities.

Iqbal's idea of personality gives us a criterion of values in art, religion and ethics, as it gives us the measure of good and evil ; all that reinforces the personality is a good ; all that enfeebles it is an evil. On this point, Iqbal exalts the philosophy of Spinoza, placed under the heading of the joy of living. He criticizes that of Plato which considers death as the ultimate aim to which the human being can aspire, that ignores the most redoubtable obstacle of life : matter, and that leads us to escape it instead of to dominate it.

The power of the Self rests in what Iqbal calls *al'Ichke* (love). He means by this enthusiasm and zeal for creative work. The highest form of this love is for him the creation of values and ideals, and effort sustained to realize

them. While love fortifies the Self, *al-Sou'al* (beggary) enfeebls it. *Al-Sou'al* means lethargy, lack of energy, inaction.

The highest degree of the Self is that in which the personality realizes harmony between all its faculties. Sleep will then be forbidden, life will become for it an agreement between reason and the heart, science and religion, intellect and intuition, thought and action. It will be the level of the perfect man that humanity is waiting for.

In brief, the appearance of the Self in the philosophy of Iqbal is the very essence of the universe, the aim of life ; for a true life is a life of effort, of belief, of perseverance and courage. And Iqbal elegantly expresses the essential of this theory of the Self when he says :

Give full vent to the song of nature ;

Rid it of the songs of others.
