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Iqbal on the Concept of Prayer

The Prophet of Islam is reported to have once observed that prayer is *Mi'raj* for the believers. This saying is profound and very significant also. Broadly speaking it points to the immeasurable heights to which man can rise through the instrumentality of prayer and worship.[1] The prayee is here declared to be able to elevate himself to such a level that he communicates with no less a person than God Himself and has a living experiential knowledge of His presence. This experiential knowledge is eventualized through a special sensation—spiritual sensation we may call it—which is more or less what Otto calls "the faculty of divination" or what Father Poulain calls the 'Interior touch'. William James calls it an "intercoursewith an Ideal Companion." Man 'came down to the earth' as the best of creation, the image of God and as the bearer of Divine attributes to whom everything in heavens and earth has been made subservient.[2] In daily prayers he 'returns' to the source of his own being to receive an occasional reminder of his "worth and justification as a dynamic factor in the life of the universe"[3] and his supreme station to which he must prove himself to be equal. It is this reminder which eventually keeps the individual away from prohibited actions and abominable crimes.[4]

The Prophetic saying incidentally also refutes the literalist commonsense belief that prayer is essentially petitionary in nature so that it is a request to God to interpose Himself into the usual course of events and change it to the convenience of the petitioner. Genuine prayer, it is implied here, is rather a matter of 'being more'

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rather than 'having more'. At this authentic level of man-God relationship even if I ask God for favours, I in fact say to Him : 'O God grant me this', and also 'O God I submit to your will and am ready to carry it out'. So, what is important is the attunement of my own attitude to God which results in my moral and spiritual escalation.

Iqbal, in his Lectures, has prefaced his views on prayer with a detailed philosophical discussion of the nature of God, 'the ultimate ground of all existence'[5]. The Quran, he points out, has emphasized the individuality and personality of God, the ultimate Ego, whose "I-amness is independent, elemental absolute"[6] He goes on to offer a rationale of this point of view by giving his own interpretation of eertain attributes of God and of those Quranic verses which apparently have a pantheistic import. Now this entire prefatory account was necessary to provide a suitable context for a discussion of the nature of prayer in two ways. Firstly, a philosophical understanding of God brings into clear focus the nature of religion's' ambition' which according to Iqbal, 'soars higher than the ambition of philosophy. Religion is not satisfied with mere conception ; it seeks a more intimate knowledge of, and association with, the object of its pursuit. The agency through which this association is achieved is', he points out, 'the act of worship or prayer"[7]. Secondly, by convincing his readers of the personal character of God, it becomes easier for Iqbal to make them understand the nature of prayer which is an instrument of cognitive association with the 'Great Companion' that God is : Prayer, he holds is essentially a personal encounter with the Ultimate Reality.

Religious life, Iqbal points out, can be divided into three periods, namely, 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—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".[8] It is this direct contact with the Ultimate Rality that is the essence of prayer according to Iqbal. Prayer is the instrument through which the individual has vision of what was earlier the object of his faith and thought and so discovers the situation of his personality "in a larger whole of life'. This is the maximum to which a common man can go. Prophets, the chosen vehicles of the highest truth, however, have over and above to play the role of social reformers. In their case "unitary experince tends to overflow its boundaries and seeks opportunities of redirecting or re-fashioning the forces of collective life".[9] Thus with them prayer, besides being congnitive, as is the case with an ordinary mystic consciousness, is also creative.[10]

Ibn Rushd, we are reminded here, had categorized seekers after truth into three classes : The philosophers, the theologians and the laymen, The philosophers are the people of demonstration who, starting from a scratch use their reason to arrive at the Ultimate Reality. The theologians, the people of dialectics, on the other hand, start from certain preconceived notions and then try to reason out the truth. The masses who are the people of rhetorics understand through examples, poetic persuasions and emotional appeals. The philosophers, according to Ibn Rushd, are the best of all. It is they alone who have the right to interpret the esoteric verses of the Quran. And then they must withhold their interpretations from the

two other categories of truth-seekers who being men ef superficialities are liable to be led astray if exposed to the profundities of knowledge. Thus pure demostrative reason unalloyed by faith and emotions is, according to Ibn Rushd, the most excellent instrument of knowledge. With all his infatuation with, and a strong bias for, Greek rationalism and humanism he could not go farther than this. He could not visualize that there might be still higher ways possible in which reality can be known and known better.

In fact if we regard demonstration and discursive reason as the highest form of knowledge available to man, we can never know God and for that matter, the Ultimate Reality - whatever the name we give to this reality. The entire history of human thought bears witness to this fact. The function of discursive reason, we know, is to conceptualize and to conceptualize is to divide and relate. But God being the one unique Ultimate Reality is *ex-hypothesi* not subject to division, analysis or composition and also He does not derive His is-ness from being a member of a relational order. So there can be no conceptual awareness of God's nature. "Not even a concept in the mind of God could understand that Oneness[11] Mentioning Kant in this respect as a typical example of rationalism, Iqbal justifies his inability to affirm the possibility of a knowledge of God. This was perfectly consistent with his rationalistic principles. This logical intellect confines its operation to the natural order only : The Divine order is consequently unknowable to it. It follows from all this that there can be no strictly logical proof for the existence of God in which nature is accepted as the major premise. Nature is temporal and finite whereas God is eternal and infinite. How can the conclusion belong to the order of e ernity whereas the premises have been derived from the order of time. The gulf between the empirical and the trans-empirical cannot be bridged over by logical reasoning. Stoics have been known to be among the earliest to uphold a natural theology but then their God was fundamentally an

existing entity of the same kind as the world. Hence the inadequacy and the inapplicability of a Stoic approach to the religion of Islam in particular which conceives of God as somehow or other essentially different from nature. "The best that can be said of the arguments for the existence of God', A. C. Ewing observed, 'is that they give some support to the belief not that they are really conclusive''.[12]

Does all this mean that that the door to the understanding of God is entirely barred against human initiatives. Is God to remain a mysterious being simply entitled to a blind faith. Kierkegaard said 'Yes' and so for him God is the most absurd of beings. Iqbal's answer is however a positive 'no'. In this connection Iqbal compares the viewpoints of Kant and Ghazali. Kant held on to the 'forms of perception' and the 'categories of understanding' as the only available requipment with which we approach the objects of our knowledge and thus consistently with his premises held that the ultimate Reality is unknowable. Ghazali before Kant had also observed that it is impossible to build theology onra tional grounds, that discursive reason is incapable to grasp the Real. But, according to him, there is still another mode of knowledge possible and this is what he calls mystic cxperience. It is through the operativeness of this mode of knowledge that Ghazali, according to Iqbal, vouchsafed independence of religion and secured for it the right to exist independently of science and metaphysics.[13]

Islam is basically a way of knowledge because in fact all higher religion is essentially experience and recognizes then ecessity of experience as its foundation.[14] The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) registered the culmination of the deductive modes of understanding of the earliest prophets to whom certain truths were revealed as ready-made principles of behaviour for a blind unquestioned observance by ether people. This culmination came when metaphysics was replaced by psychology[15] and the source of revelation, the major

premise hitherto accepted on authority became the possible fact of human experience. Having become capable of such a supreme achievement man was thrown back henceforth to tap his own resources so as to have the joy of reaching the Ultimate through his own initiatives and efforts. Being too mature now to be led by the nose man has been called upon to go the natural way and thus investigate into an alternative dimension of the being of God. This is what he means when he says : "The Prophet of Islam seems to stand between the ancient and the modern world. In so far as the source of his revelation is concerned, he belongs to the ancient world ; in so far as the spirit of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the modern world". In him, he goes on to say, "life discovers other sources of knowledge suitable to its new direction".[16] Thus in either way Islam remains a way of knowing. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a contemporary scholar on Islam, points out that in fact "herein lies one of the major distinctions between the Islamic and the Christian points of view – Christianity is essentially a mystery which veils the Divine from man. The beauty of Christianitylies in the acceptance of God as a mystery and in bowing before this mystery. In Islam, however, it is man who is veild from God. The Divine Being is not veiled from us ; we are veiled from Him and it is for us to try to rent this veil asunder, to try to know God. Islam is thus essentially a way of knowledge ; it is a way of gnosis. Islam leads to that essential knowledge which integrates our being, which makes us know what we are and be what we know or, in other words, integrates knowledge and being in the ultimate vision of Reality".[17]

The strategic and borderline position occupied by the Prophet as referred to above also sufficiently explains the significant remark made by Iqbal " ..all search for knowlege is essentially a form of prayer. The scientific observer of nature is a kind of mystic seeker in the act of prayer[18]". Prayer in the sense of canonical prayers is to be understood with reference to the position of the Prophet as

belonging to the 'ancient world' whereas prayer in the form of a study of nature is to be understood with reference to his position as belonging to the 'modern world'. The one is deductive ; the other inductive. Prayers, of course, both of them are because both of them aim at the 'ultimate, unitive vision of Reality.' Only the approaches are different. The former realizes its objective through the recitation and contemplation of certain verses of Quran, the Word of God ; the latter through the contemplation of nature, 'the habit of God'[19] "knowledge of nature', says Iqbal, "is the knowledge of God's behaviour. In our observation of nature we are virtually seeking a kind of intimacy with the Absolute Ego".[20]

According to the Quranic point of view both these forms of prayer are in the final analysis equally authentic and are ultimately reducible to the same state of affairs. This is because of the fact that there is no essential disharmony between the word of God and the work of God. It is illuminative to note here that the Quranic word *'Ayat'* has been used for a verse in the Quran as well as for a phenomenon of nature. This shows their mutual affinity. "Nature's Laws, says Khalifa Abdul Hakim, 'are God's thoughts thinking themselves in orbits and tides. As there are signs of God's power and wisdom and beauty in all nature outside man, so are these signs inscribed in the hearts of all men—The verses of God's revelation are inscribed in the letters of light in the starry heavens, in the prophetic consciousness and in the minds and hearts of those who reflect rightly on nature within and nature without".[21]

Furthermore, just as the Quranic text being the word of God meant for understanding by human beings is necessarily symbolic in its description, nature, the 'cosmic text' is too a fabric of symbols. Through the language of symbols, they both speak forth the presence of God. Incidentally this explains why to Muslim physical scientists mathematics made such a strong appeal. "Its abstract nature

furnished the bridge that Muslims were seeking between multiplicity (of nature) and unity (of God). It provided a fitting texture of symbols for the universe—symbols that were like keys to open the cosmic text."

That physical nature is replete with significant pointers to the existence of God is verv evident a fact to the Quranic readers. When Prophet Moses, for instance, expressed his wish to see God he was directed to look towards the mountain which is just a phenomenon of nature. Thus the way prescribed by God for His cognition was the way of nature. Similarly the mile-stones in Abraham's way to God were the natural phenomena like stars, moon and so on. The Quran says :

> Surely, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth and in the alternation of night and day ; and in ships which pass through the sea with what is useful to man ; and in the rain which God sends down from heaven, giving life to the earth after its death and in scattering over it all kinds of cattle ; and in the change of the winds and in the clouds that are made to do service between the heavens and the eath—are signs (of God) for those who understand.[22]

> And it is He Who sends down rain from heaven, and we bring forth by it the buds of all the plants and from them we bring forth the green foliage and in the close growing green and palm trees with sheaths of clustering dates and gardens of grapes and the olives and the pomegranates like and unlike. Look at the fruits when they ripen. Therein are signs for people who believe.[24]

An so on.

But exactly how and in what specific sense can a study of nature lead to God. As explained above there can be nothing of the deductive demonstration involved here. The argument is not at all

of a strictly 'this-therefore-this' variety. Nature, as already pointed out, is a cosmos of symbols. These symbols spread all over in nature have to be interpreted before they can be understood. For this interpetative function we are required to have a 'cosmological insight' or what Iqbal has termed 'the vital way of looking at the universe'. Thus it is not through logical reason but by a trans-empirical mode of perception, through 'the reason of the heart that the reason knows not of', that we can bridge up the gulf between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal and can have the experience of God the natural way. Thus, in the last analysis, the appeal of a profound observer of nature is not to facts or matters of fact as such but rather to the basic religious intuitions. It is at the recalling of these intuitions into conscious awareness of man and bringing them into active operation In him that the Quranic teachings diretly aim. The word *zikr*[25] (rememberance) used for the Quran itself is significant. When man becomes oblivious of these intuitions, God wonders as to why his heart has been 'locked up'[26]. The Quranic phrase corresponding to this is 'expanding of the breast' (*inshirah-e-sadr*) ; Whomsoever God wishes to show the right path He expands his breast for Islam.[27] This is what Iqbal means when he points out that the observation of nature sharpens our inner perception so that we can have a deeper vision of it (nature)[28]. However, we may hasten to point out here that this 'sharpening' of inner perception' is not entirely due to men's own effort. It requires, as Iqbal correctly points out, the grace of God to eventualize[21] On this subject voluminous literature has been provided by the mystics of Islam who have invariably conceived Divine knowledge as direct and immediate and due to the initiative of God Himself. Al Ghazali, for instance, says in his autobiographical account '*Al-munqidh-min-al-dalal*' ; Attainment of it (the truth) did not come by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument but by a light which God Most High cast into my breast. This light has the greater part of knowledge. Whoever thinks that the understanding

of things Divine rests upon strict proof has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.[30] It is by virtue of this concept of Divine grace or *tawfiq* as it is known in characteristic sufi terminology that God remains the logically prior objective of the revealed characterizations of His person in spite of the temporal priority of nature and natural observation.

Incidentally all this speaks eloquently for the importance that must necessarily be attached to a process of self-culture *i. e.* to the inculcation of correct orientation of mind and a keen receptivity for the grace of God. By virtue of contemplation and a clean living we in fact rent asunder the veils of our own superficiality and ignorance. To grasp the meaning of the word as the work of God we have to enter into the deeper dimensions of our own being and keep our eyes open. To those who are themselves superficial and uninitiated everything will appear to be superficial too—incapable of any esoteric import. It is such persons who are condemned by the Quran as spiritually diseased and involved in self-deception.[31] A person who is blind here, says the Quran, will be blind in the hereafter,[32] meaning thereby that one who does not see the facts of life and existence with the correctness of attitude here and now will never be able to have an encounter with the Ideal.

Thus the essence of prayer, according to Iqbal lies in going from the finite to the Infinite. It signifies a process of liberation—liberation from finite temporal existence and from all that it entails. This being a stupendous task, co-operation of God is needed all along, as already pointed out, which is readily granted to the deserving candidates. Incidentally this entire phenomenon of 'man realizing God through nature and God Himself co-operating with man in this endeavour' speaks well for the essential unity of all existence. Everything is 'more or less' the same. All are egos, as Iqbal puts it. "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', he declares, 'the self-revelation of the 'Great I am''.[33] ''Every atom of Divine energy', he goes on to say, 'however low in the scale of existence is an ego. But there are degrees in the expression of egohood. Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches its perfection in man.''[34]

However, even an ordinary human ego is not absolutely perfect because it is not absolutely free. What we have called above the superficial self of man, from which he has to achieve liberation, is, because of its attachment with serial time, determined by the mechanics of material existence. The real self which is eternal and lives in pure duration is purely free and can most genuinely say 'I am'. In fact ' it is the degree of the intuition of 'I-amness' that determines the place of a thing in the scale of being We too say 'I am' but our I - amness is dependent and arises out of the distinction between the self and the not-self. The ultimate self, in the words of the Quran, 'can afford to dispense with all the worlds', To Him the not-self does not present itself as a confronting other –His I - amness is independent, elemental, absolute''.[35] Now as prayer, according to Iqbal, is essentially man's translation from temporal association to a participation in eternal existence, from the drudgery of worldy business to a meeting with God, "the ultimate source of life and freedom''[36], it is to be understood as "essentially ego's escape from mechanism to freedom''[37]. The Quran clearly visualizes the possibility of such a translation when it says :

> "O Company of djin and men, if you can overpass the bounds of the heaven and the earth then overpass them. But by power alone shall ye overpass them.''[38]

In this act of freeing oneself from the spatio-temporal determiners of finite existence, man continues moving towards the ideal

of infinity. And the closer to the ideal he is, the more perfect he becomes in respect of his individuality, according to Iqbal, so that there remains no fear of the disintegration of his personality even in the face of heaviest odds and this makes it possible to have an encounter with God because, in the most authentic sense of the term encounter can take place only between two complete individuals. But, to begin with, how can infinity be reconciled with individuality. Iqbal is sometimes accused of having developed the 'self-contradictory' and 'illogical' concept of an infinite personality. However, Iqbal has taken pains to explain and justify this concept. It is interesting to compare his views in this regard with those of some modern European thinkers. Friedrich Von Hugel, for instance, writes : "Indeed we can safely hold with Lotze not only that Personality is compatible with infinitude but that the personality of all finite beings can be shown to be imperfect precisely because of their finitude and hence the perfect personality is compatible only with the conception of an infinite being .."[39]

Like a person engaged in ritual prayers whose approach is straight and direct, the observer of nature too has his own mode of travelling into the sphere of eternity and freedom. The natural system of causes and effects which is tne subject-matter of his studies seems to imply strict determinism. But this is not the final state of affairs as to the behaviour of things. Firstly, the causal chain is itself an artificial construction of the ego for its own purposes. The ego is called upon to live in a complex environment and he cannot maintain his life in it without reducing it to a system which would give him some kind of assurance as to the behaviour of things around him.[40] Further, "the view of his environment as a system of causes and effects is (in a way) an indispensable instrument of the ego, and not a final expression of the nature of Reality. Indeed in interpreting nature in this way the ego understands and masters its environment and thereby acquires and amplifies its freedom."[41]

How beautifully has Iqbal put it while taking of the discovery level of religious life : "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".[42]

This reminders me of a brilliant paper and by Professor Osman Amin of U.A.R. at the department of Philosophy, Punjab University, Lahore some years ago. He talked at length of his Philosophy of inwardness which he termed as a philosophy of conscious vision. He also called it, interchangeably, a philosophy of freedom because essential freedom, as he put it, is "consciousness accompanied by comprehension, the faculty of judging according to clear and distinct reason". Elaborating a distinction between automatism and consciousness Prof. Amin made reference to the distinction clearly drawn by Bergson between two very different ways of knowledge, the one being the way of the inward vision, of intellectual sympathy, the other being the way of exterior vision, of applying the testimony of senses or applying the method of logical analysis alone. Consider, Bergson is reported to have said, the difference between the knowledge that one could have of a town from a multitude of photos taken from all possible positions and the knowledge one would have of the same town if one lived in it, loved it, and enjoyed roaming about it. It is only the latter knowledge that is profound and gives control and mastery to one over the object of one's knowledge. The former being fragmentary binds one down to superficialities. In terms of profundity/superficiality of knowledpe the distinction corresponds pretty closely to distinction made by Spinoza between passive and active emotions, between the state of human bondage and the state of human freedom.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a religio-philosophical thinker, once made

a distinction between the fundamental and protective injunctions of the Quran. The latter of these are secondary in importance. Their function is simply to protect the spirit of the former which are of primary concern from the Quranic point of view. Sayyid Ahmad specially mentioned the institution of canoncial prayers to illustrate his point of view. Prayer—and for that matter any religious duty—has an essence as well as a form. The essence of prayer as we have already seen, is to have an intimate association with the Great 'I am'. Now this essence has found expression in a variety of forms. The very fact that these forms have differed with different times and circumstances shows that they are not ends in themselves and should not become a matter of dispute. "To every people', says the Quran, 'have we appointed ways of worship which they observe. Therefore let them not dispute this matter with you''[43]. Which side we turn our face while praying, for example, is not essential to the spirit of prayer. Ipbal justifiably quotes Quranic reference in this regard :

> "The East and the West is God's : Therefore whichever way you turn there is the face of God"[44].
>
> "There is no piety in turning your faces towards the East or West".[45]

However, the Quranic declaration that there is no piety in turning your faces towards the East or the West and so on must be carefully understood and accepted only after making certain qualification. It, of course, should not at all be taken to imply that various formalities involved in our daily prayers like adhering to certain pre-conditions of cleanliness, choice of a particular direction, joining a congregation in perfect obedience to the Imam who leads the prayers, and such other observances are futile in any absolute sense of the term. If we accepted this interpretation that would lead to an esoteric attitude in religious matters. It would unfortunately encourage a sharp distinction between *shari'at* and *tariqat*, a doctrine very popular with the ungenuine class of sufis, giving an undue importance to the

essential at the entire expense of the formal. The verses rather simply mean that these formalities in their right i.e. when they are divested of their spiritual content, are useless. Those who fulfil the formalities of prayer but are oblivious of its essential character have been condemned by the Quran as the people of the hell.[46]

The point of view enunciated by Iqbal is that the importance of the form of prayer—when the essential character of prayer is also retained—lies in the fact that it sreves to fortify the spiritual content and enhances the desired effect. If every time a man goes to prayer he has to undertake a special course of preparation in terms of physical cleanliness, wearing clean garments, giving due recognition to the portion of the day (because to each specified portion of the day is assigned one particular prayer), selecting a clean spot of earth for the performance of the ceremony—that all serves to vouchsafe the attunement of attitude to a single objective and the centralization of attention in respect of it. When a seeker of God has relinquished all worldly business which would at the most be an indirect approach to God and is all set for an 'I-Thou' encounter, he faces towards the direction of the *quibla* and makes a verbal commitment also : "I have turned my face in all sincerity towards Him who has created the heavens and the earth and I am not of the polytheists'. Body and mind being closely related various postures of the body which the person adopts while offering his prayers are a real factor in determining the attitude of the mind. They symbolize humility and single-mindedness and thus accentuate the spiritual realization. Extremely helpful in this spiritual realization is the Prophet's directive that the prayee must be as sure of God as if he is seeing Him and that if it is not possible for him to feel, then he should have at least the conviction that God is seeing him When a person's entire attention is thus absorbed, naturally the operation of all his bodily sensations is held in abeyance. Many stories to confirm this psychological fact have been related of the mystics of all times.

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