

PRAYER AND THE PERSONALITY OF GOD

Prayer, I believe, entails a reciprocal relationship between man and God, It is based on the presupposition, that the addressee is a sympathetic participator, and not an indifferent, immovable, impersonal Being—Thus the static absolute of Idealists has no room for prayer. In order to justify my thesis I would present some of the representative views about the personality of the divine being to see how far God described therein could be called a personal God.

To start with God as described by Spinoza is not a personal one—why ? The answer is to be found in Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy, for if God or the Divine person is conceived to be a plurality of beings within the Divine Nature, then neither a wholesome personality nor the possibility of human intercourse could be attributed to God, for He is merely the all inclusive Absolute Reality. No doubt, Spinoza admits distinctions in the Divine Nature, namely, the "attributes" of God, each of which expresses the whole of Divine nature, in its own way but only two of them are known to us, namely "thought" and "extension"—May be there are infinite other Divine attributes, yet their relation can, in no sense, be called personal—in fact Spinoza's notion of God could have been that of a personal one, only if the plurality within the Divine unity, had implied personal relations, such as prayer, trust, love etc., between oneself and God—On the other hand, for Spinoza the supreme happiness of man is the love of God through knowledge, But Spinoza made it clear that there is no question of reciprocation—According to him, God neither first loves us nor does He return our love.

Obviously from the above account of Spinoza's description of God we can easily infer that He is immanent alone and since we can have no personal relations with a purely immanent God, He cannot be called personal. It may be observed that it is equally difficult to derive a personal God from the philosophy of those who conceive God not to be immanent at all. This is

the case in Aristotle's theology, wherein we could have a personal God, only if he was taken to be no more than a self-conscious individual—But where would then be any room for intelligible intercourse between man and God ?

Thus we see that both Aristotle and Spinoza exclude the possibility of personal communion between God and the prayee, as the term "personal God" would in fact suggest. Still, it is interesting that both Spinoza and Aristotle speak of the love of God. But Aristotle meant, thereby, not so much a conscious emotion, but rather an instinctive movement of everything in the universe which is not the supreme good towards something which is—The former is drawn towards the latter as the lover is towards the beloved—While for Spinoza love is the personal activity of thought. But in both. Spinoza and Aristotle there is no possibility of reciprocation on the part of God.

The fact is that Aristotle could not speak of the love of God for us because he thought that God can know and love nothing less than himself since the only activity attributive to a perfect being, independent of all beyond itself, such as God, was knowledge—and the only object according to Aristotle not unworthy of God's knowledge is His own eternally perfect nature—Thus God, for Aristotle was not immanent as was for Spinoza.

According to Spinoza, our understanding or knowledge of God is a part of God's infinite understanding of knowledge of Himself and our intellectual love for Him, is a part of the infinite love, wherein God loves Himself. Therefore the love of God for us is but our love of God which is a part of God's love for Himself, which includes what can be called in a sense a love for us, because our mind and thoughts (clear and thorough) are parts of that one eternal system of thought which in Spinoza's language, God views under the attribute of thought—Just as our bodies are part of the eternal system of matter in motion which God views under the attribute of extension. Thus love of God is not the reciprocation of our love of Him, and therefore our relations with Him cannot be called personal.

For Aristotle, God loves us in no sense, since He is utterly transcendent—simply beyond reach of our personal communion with Him—This

difficulty was also felt by Saint Thomas Aquinas, a follower of Aristotle, who thereby introduced changes into his master's notion of God to make room for the providence of God for man and communion between God and man.

The faith in a personal God is not as sometimes believed, merely another name for anthropomorphism in theology because a thoroughgoing anthropomorphism may abstract from the concept of God, the possibility of exhibition of personal sympathy and devotion which is the criterion of man's demand to worship a personal God—In this connection we may consider the case of Epicurian gods, wherein, the only worship not directable to them was prayer, because they were believed to have no control over our destinies and were only attributive of mens willing tribute of admiration by virtue of their superiority.

Even Aristotle's conception of Godhead as the Perfect Intelligence however higher we may rank it to the Epicurian's notion of it, as a peculiarly, fortunate and enduring contribution of atoms, the only justification for the worship of Aristotle's God is the same as for the God of Epicurians—namely disinterested admiration of what is supremely beautiful and excellent. Although disinterested worship may not devaluate worshipping, yet it leaves unsatisfied those who believe that religious attitude, at its best demands a personal God—who necessarily reciprocates.

Divine Personality and Morality :

The history of the word "person" takes us back to its original association with the performance of functions in social intercourse. Therefore, the notion of personality cannot be disconnected from social conduct or the sphere of morality.

Let us consider whether a self-conscious individual altogether outside the sphere of morality could be naturally called a "person". We may take, for instance, God as described by Aristotle to whom ethical predicates are inapplicable. He has no reciprocal relations with others because He Himself by His very nature of perfection has no concern with or knowledge of anything

less perfect, and all things other than Him and that such a God could not be personal since He is outside the sphere of morality which is the sphere of personal relations.

The Absolute as described by Bosanquet and Bradley also transcends morality but in a different sense from that of Aristotle. For both these philosophers moral life is for beings who progress from more imperfect to more perfect state of existence, under the impulse of aspiration after an ideal not yet realized, and which is not altogether outside the absolute experience, but wholly comprehended within it, though transmuted beyond recognition. Now, while morality is unfulfilled aspiration, we have in the absolute, a satisfied fruition. Also whereas morality involves external relations to other beings to whom the moral person owes duties and from whom he claims rights, there is nothing beyond the absolute. Therefore, in this philosophy, where the absolute transcends the sphere of morality, He is not a person.

On the other hand, Lotze does not deny personality to the infinite because he believes that the highest conceptions like that of good, lose all reality and become empty abstractions except as referred to a person. Lotze describes the supreme reality as the "living love that wills the blessedness of others"—Since this is not inconsistent with the complete independence of the supreme reality, therefore, believes Lotze, it satisfies the deep-rooted demand of our nature to seek those values in the Supreme One which are lacking e.g. in the Absolute of Mr. Bosanquet.

Personality and Rationality :

Besides morality, rationality is another important factor in personality. Rationality seems to be that in which personal differences disappear and we are apt to explain as especially personal what is not rationally explicable in human conduct. This "irrationality of the personal" is the chief inspiration alike of the demand for a personal God and of reluctance of many to admit this demand as legitimate—Reason as it appears in the sphere of morality is very well-studied and emphasized in ethical systems of two great philosophers, Kant and Fichte.

Kant :

For the principles of the critical philosophy which debased the human mind from any knowledge of things as they are in themselves, combined with that stern aversion from the least compromise with sentiment in matters of conduct which was so characteristic of Kant's moral temperament to hinder him from admitting the legitimacy of that personal intercourse with God in the experience of which—or at least in the desire for it—the affirmation of personality in God is founded—Hence according to Kant public worship is an expression to one another, by the members of the congregation, of a common resolution to order their lives according to the moral law. Because private prayer is distinct from such a resolution, on the individual's part, to which when alone he would not need to give outward expression, he could find no room at all. Hence according to Kant a man properly instructed on the nature of morality, with autonomous freedom of individual will which, however takes no account of individual distinction—could not but be ashamed to be found by a stranger upon his knees alone.

Kant had this low opinion about prayer because he believed that it implied a neglect of the limits of human experience i.e. it assumed that God could be sensibly present, to listen to the prayee and fulfil his wishes—This, thought Kant, was an immoral attempt to claim to Divine aid in the performance of duty otherwise than by the right attitude of will which alone could deserve such aid.

In Kant's religion there is no place for love of God except cheerful performance of his commandments; any more than in his ethics he could ascribe moral value to any love of our neighbours other than the practical love shown in the cheerful performance of our duty towards him. Therefore Kant gives moral value only to the good will, which is the essence of our personality and yet abstracts the distinctive feature of person and which belongs in common to all rational beings.

Fichte :

He held almost the same views as Kant's rather to their full realization leading to paradoxical results. According to Fichte "The utter annihilation

of individual and submission thereof, in the absolute and pure form of reason, or in God is most certainly the final end of finite reason", though the end may not be attainable in finite time, Like Kant, he insisted that "love of our neighbour" is duty, and not yet love of the feelings.

The logical sequence of such statements is that God for Fichte is nothing but moral order of the universe besides which there is no good. But in moral order in which persons are sacrificed to what is itself impersonal is really robbed of that claim to reverence which only when envisaged as God, as a being with whom persons can stand in personal relations, it can in full measure possess.

Thus if it is the element of seeming irrationality in what is personal that makes it difficult to attribute personality to God, it is the absence of reason when divorced from personality, of what makes religion of a possible object of religious reverence which excites our discontent with the representation of God as an impersonal reason'

According to Wobb, If we ascribe personality to God, it could only be very different in essence from personality in ourselves, but for lack of better term, we use the same term for God also. It is upon the possibility of this reciprocal relation between man and a personal God, that the whole question turns. The child who offers sweets to an elder to please him, expects appreciation or disappreciation, or may be baffled by the elder's lack of attention due to preoccupation, but in any case the child has assurance that he is dealing with a real person, whose different pursuits the child may not understand, yet, who understands the child and cares for him. It would be very different if there was no real person at all. In that case the child would be in no communication other than himself, when talking to himself and consciously "making believe"—In the God intoxicated philosophy of Spinoza, where we could have only the intellectual love of God and God could love Himself in our love of Him and hence in no sense can God be said to love us—Condemned is the Spinozian religious man to the doom of Ixion who found in his embrace not a Goddess but a cloud.

It is sometimes suggested as by writers of different schools originating from Bradley's philosophy, that the concept of a finite God enables an escape from the difficulties which arise from an attempt of reconciling personality and the supernatural reality. Iqbal however strongly refuted the concept of a finite God. He, on the other hand, tried to reconcile the individuality and personality of God with His infinitude. Thus the ultimate Ego or God for Iqbal is a perfect and personal reality, yet He is boundless and suffers no limitations of finite beings. His infinity is not spatio-temporal, not quantitative and expansive, because for Iqbal space and time are not external or objective realities but mere interpretations of thought. On the other hand God's infinity is comprised of the infinite possibilities of Divine Creative activity, which, therefore, is intensive and qualitative in essence rather than quantitative and extensive.

Iqbal avoided extreme stress on immanence or transcendence. He attributed personality and individuality both, to God—the God who is unique and yet, with Whom finite beings can have personal relations. Thus in the introduction to the "Secrets of the Self" Iqbal writes:

"God Himself is an individual, He is the most unique individual."

It is astonishing that R.A. Nicholson has written in his studies on the "Idea of Personality in Sufism", which were published only shortly after he himself had translated Iqbal's "Secrets of the Self" into English, that:

"We must define, at least in general terms, what we mean when we ascribe personality to God—a question of prime importance for Christians, but on which Muslim theologians have never asked themselves, much less attempted to answer" (Nicholson: *The Idea of Personality*, P-1).

Iqbal, however, did more than merely accept the challenge—He built his whole system upon this very idea that God is the most perfect personality which he was to prove from the Quran. The problem before Iqbal is this: How can the Divine Ego, this "stupendously rich reality" (Von Hugel)

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which cannot be described adequately by human words—How can this infinite and overwhelming Being be compatible with personality? Iqbal has been accused of having developed an unlogical concept of an “infinite personality” since these two conceptions are contradictory and exclusive. It is interesting to compare his views in this respect with that of some modern European thinkers. Friedrich Von Hugel, the profound english thinker 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, finite beings can only achieve an approximation to it.”

Among the proofs of God’s egohood, Iqbal includes the Quranic assertion “Call upon me, and I will answer”—that means the experience of prayer becomes the proofs for God’s personality. Iqbal shares here the view of one of the leading philosopher of modern Germany Beinrich Scholz who writes:

“It belongs to the character of the Divine that it is given as a thou. Thus the content of the religious consciousness of God can never be the same entity that metaphysics calls “the Absolute”. For it is clearly an absurdity to contact the Absolute in the form of a thou, indeed even to come into touch at all.

(H. Scholz, Religious Philosophies, P-138)

Contact with the Absolute, as sought by many of the most influential mystics, is only possible on quite other levels of consciousness and ultimately involves a passing away from all qualities of thought and from life in the normal sense of the word. That is also the conviction of C.C.J. Webb whom R.A. Nicholson quotes in his above mentioned book.

“Only so far as personal relations are allowed to exist between the worshipper and his God, can that God be properly described as

personal." Paul Tillich, too, has stated the importance of :
 "A God with whom I have a person to person encounter. He
 is the subject of all the symbolic statements in which I express my
 ultimate concern".

(Love, Power and Justice, P.109)

The emphasis Iqbal laid on the personality of God—which of course transcends every imaginable personality—is one of his greatest contributions to the reconstruction of Islamic thought, and is completely in tune with the contemporary interest which concentrates again on the Divine personality and can be remarked in Christian theology and other religions.

Classic Islamic mysticism had held that real personality belongs to God alone, that nobody can say I but God (Sarraj, Kitab-I-Luma). In Iqbal's philosophy and theology, however, there are other egos besides God, or rather inside the all-embracing Divine Ego. The world itself is conceived as an Ego, and everything created in it 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. (H. Enver, the metaphysics of Iqbal, p. 72). The existence of those numberless egos on different stages of development—from atom to man—whose ego is not obliterated by the greatest Ego, seems to be self contradictory, for 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 living and life-giving contact with Him. We may guess that Iqbal's idea of the relation between the Ultimate Ego and the created egos is something similar to Rudolf Eucken's notion that :

"The singular existence must as a matter of course belong to a universal personal life in order to be or to be able to become that what the striving of their nature aims at ; the particular beings will get a character of personality only from a universal personality life."

Iqbal protested against the Hellenistic interpretation of God which had converted the living God of prophetic religions into an immovable

“Prima Causa”, and his early sympathy with Nietzsche can be attributed to a certain extent to the fact that the German philosopher attacked the Hellenized God of Christianity. Iqbal, on this part, wanted to rid the Islamic idea of God from these immobilizing influences ; God has revealed Himself to him as power. Thus he noted down :

“Christianity describes God as love, Islam as power. God reveals Himself in history more as power than love. I do not deny the love of God, I mean that on the basis of historical experience, God is better described as power.”

Thus God’s Divine personality is an absolute power, capable of creating spontaneously—The proposition that God is conceived as an ego whose Egohood is realized in full in man’s contact with Him in prayer, leads to the logical conclusion of man’s egohood, Also Tillich has pointed out :

“Man becomes man in personal encounters. Only by meeting a Thou does man realize that he is an ego”.

Man draws his being, his content, rational and spiritual from God. Hence he is not self-existent and independent—not a solitary unit, the “Lucretian Atom”. Thus Iqbal was against all those pantheistic and monistic systems of thought which do not accommodate any room for the Divine - Human relations.

In short, prayer like Abraham’s sword breaks down the static and lifeless “idols” —Why do you worship gods, Abraham had said, “who cannot help you in distress, or alter your lives in any way—?” and this is exactly what prayer assumes, a God who is a friend in agony, a saviour in odds—and not an Absolute, indifferent to all that goes on in the world of finite beings.