

Abdul Khaliq

‘Allāma Iqbāl on ‘DEAD’ AND ‘IDEA’

It is my proud privilege to thank the Chairman of the Department of Philosophy, Dr. Naeem Ahmad, who invited me, on behalf of the honourable Vice-Chancellor, to deliver the Iqbāl Memorial Lecture for the current year as a guest speaker. As a predecessor of Dr. Naeem Ahmad I had been hosting this prestigious lecture series for more than 20 years. For me, to be formally invited and received as a guest where I have been the host for such a long time is a singular honour and a beautiful, fascinating experience whose memory I shall cherish for a long time.

In the letter of invitation written to me I was asked to speak on any subject in which ‘Allāma Muḥammad Iqbāl evinced direct or indirect interest. Being a student of Philosophy myself, I am naturally interested primarily in the philosophical views of Iqbāl, especially those expressed in his maturest prose writing *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islām*. It is a difficult book indeed and profound also because it presupposes a lot of understanding of the traditions of religious, scientific and philosophical thinking, both Eastern and Western. Every time a reader goes through the text, he discovers new layers of meaning and gets a fresh inspiration from it.

As I just started perusing *The Reconstruction* in search of the theme on which I must prepare my write-up for the Lecture, I was captivated by the very first sentence of the Preface. The sentence specially attracted me due to its paradoxical nature. It reads: “The Qur’ān is a book which emphasizes ‘deed’ rather than ‘idea’.”¹ In simple paraphrasing it means that the Qur’ān

lays stress on 'deed' **and not** on 'idea'. This observation is paradoxical because, for one thing, the burden of the account that immediately follows in the Preface is an indicator of the emphasis on 'idea' rather than on 'deed'. Anyway, the fact that both these words have been placed within commas shows that they are proposed to refer to some specific connotations. What exactly are these connotations? The answer to this question, I hope, will be available as we proceed.

Deed or action, of course, is most evidently of basic importance from the Qur'ānic point of view. The Qur'ān does not have as its subject-matter philosophical theorization. It proclaims to be the Book of Guidance and so primarily seeks to prescribe a line of action, a code of behaviour that could safely and surely lead its readers towards the ideals of moral and spiritual excellence laid down in it. There are a very large number of verses in which 'good actions' (*a'māl e sālih*) — absolutely speaking — have been mentioned either appreciatively or directly or as a mark of identification of the men of faith. This is besides the frequent and insistent glorification of specific moral values like life, Justice, unity, love, truth, forgiveness, power, beauty etc. Correspondingly, evil actions and attitudes like greed, malice, pride, cruelty, hatred, hypocrisy etc. have been positively discouraged and condemned in no less eloquent words. It is action alone, Iqbāl rightly and repeatedly emphasizes throughout his poetic and prose works, that determines a man's role in this life, opens upon the so-called closed doors of his destiny and adequately qualifies him to enter paradise or hell in the life hereafter. "Personal immortality," he says, "... is not ours as of right; it is to be achieved by personal effort."² Whatever is received without action amounts, according to him, to begging, one of the worst moral disvalues which would degrade man in the eyes of others as well as in his own eyes. He defines human personality as a 'state of perpetual tension'. "The life of the Ego," he writes, "is a kind of tension caused by the Ego invading the environments and the environments invading the Ego."³

The word 'idea', unlike 'deed', is obviously ambiguous. It has generally been translated by the Urdu translators of *The Reconstruction* as *fikr*, i.e. thinking. Thus understood, it, according to the Qur'ānic scheme of things, is of course as much important as, if not more than, 'deed'. The Qur'ān, we know, strongly recommends speculating over various phenomena of the universe, both within and without man which are time and again described as signs (*āyāt*), i.e. as significant pointers to the Ultimate Reality. It has in a number of verses laid stress on the importance of *ta'aqqul*, *tadabbur*, *tafakkur*, and so on. Those who fail to inculcate in themselves the virtues of sense experience and reason are declared to be of the category of beasts — even of a category lower than that.⁴ They will, in fact, be held answerable to God for this failure on their part.⁵ Iqbāl too recognizes and highlights this fact of the Qur'ānic teachings. He even identifies the birth of Islām with the birth of inductive intellect⁶ in man and criticizes Greek Philosophy, in general, because of its distaste for observation and experience.

As we keep a close track of the general tenor of argument built up in *The Reconstruction* as well as in the poetic work of Iqbāl, the word 'idea', used in the Preface and discredited and condemned by him, cannot be considered as equivalent simply to thinking or speculation etc. It would be the height of injustice to do so. It must rather be considered to stand for abstract, ideational thinking, purely drawing-room type of concept-analysis and hair-splitting, particularly about spiritual, *a*-natural and eschatological facts mentioned in the Qur'ān. Obviously such speculation, when once allowed to be initiated, proceeds unchecked — in the absence of any in-built mechanism to stop it — and ordinarily generates more and more of speculation itself and nothing else. It practically leads nowhere. Consequently, man's contact with the concrete realm of everyday experience, which is evidently the realm of activity, gets more and more weakened. It is on this very count that Iqbāl rejects the idealistic philosophies of Plato and Hegel and others of that kind which, he says, are devoid of all sense-content. The Qur'ān too appears to

discourage this kind of speculation, especially in regard to the *mutashābihāt* among its verses. It says:

He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book. In it are verses basic or fundamental (*the Muḥkamāt*). They are the foundation of the Book; others are allegorical (*the mutashābihāt*). But those in whose heart is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings. But no one knows its hidden meanings except God.⁷

How to differentiate between *the Muḥkamāt* and *the Mutashābihāt*?

Commentators of the Qur'ān have provided detailed discussions on the subject. The Qur'ān itself does not give a categorical classification of its verses into these two kinds, but there is almost a consensus of opinion among the scholars that the former ones are those verses which relate to the practical life of man, *i.e.* to doctrines, rituals, commandments etc., whereas the latter relate to the metaphysical realities, the realities which are ordinarily beyond human observation and understanding, like God, angels, paradise, hell etc. According to the words of the Qur'ān, as quoted above, those who try to understand the ontological, exact nature of its metaphysics, which can be called *the-idea-in-its-own-right*, are perverse and erratic in their attitude.

The above, however, does not mean at all that different metaphysical, supernatural truths mentioned by the Qur'ān technically called the *ghaib*, the unseen — are in any way unimportant, or even less important. They are rather of basic and foundational significance for the Qur'ānic scheme of things entire. Acceptance of the Unseen, by the verdict of the Qur'ān itself, is in fact the condition that alone would ensure and guarantee for its reader the release of guidance from the verbal understanding of the Qur'ānic text;⁸ otherwise this understanding, however perfect it may be from the lexical point of view, would simply lead him away from the right path.⁹ The

Qur'ān, by virtue of its own claim, is a book, clear and evident, and perfectly self-consistent¹⁰ also. These characteristics would further require that mutual relevance and fittingness of some kind be established between the *seen* and the *unseen*, the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt*, the *deed* and the *idea*. This relevance can, in principle, be established at two levels. One is the level that would permit a relationship of mutual externality between them; the other is totalitarian and organismic in character. Translated into religious language, one is that of belief; the other that of faith. Belief and faith both can be recognized as intimately related to 'knowledge', in a very broad sense of this term. I propose to explain in what follows how this comes to be.

Three stages of knowledge of the world of existence have been marked out by the Qur'ān. These are the stages of '*ilm al-yaqīn*',¹¹ '*ain al-yaqīn*'¹² and '*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*'.¹³ The first one would roughly correspond to what Bertrand Russell has termed in his *Problems of Philosophy* as 'knowledge by description'¹⁴ or what 'Ali Hujveri and 'Allāma Iqbāl also have described as *khābar* (information) as opposed to *nazar* (vision). It is the knowledge as it is provided or made available to a person by inference, not directly acquired by him. For example, I know on the authority of someone else that man has landed on the moon, that there are big mountains growing on the bottom of the oceans, that the earth is elliptical in shape, and so on. '*Ain al-yaqīn*' is the knowledge attained by a person directly on the basis of his own sense-experience. I know that students who work hard get through the examination, that fire has burnt the finger of my friend, that a particular medicine cures headache, and so on. Both these levels of knowledge ordinarily involve a relationship of 'I-it' between the knower and the known. The latter is practically considered to be a thing, an objectivity, pure and simple, a passivity which the former may exploit for the realization of his own goals, epistemic or practical. Unfortunately, the orthodox concept of God Himself is generally of this nature. From a layman's point of view, He sits on the throne beyond heavens; He is kind, just, loving, forgiving and so on. And whenever a

person is in trouble he, in humble prayers, invokes the corresponding Divine attribute for the redressal of his ailment. We love and obey Him because his pleasure thus earned will get our seat reserved in the heavens, we fear Him so that he may not get angry with us and throw us into the hell. How eloquent is the Qur'ān on this subject when it says:

When We bestow favours on man, he turns away and gets himself remote on his side (instead of coming to Us); and when evil seizes him, he comes full of prolonged prayer.¹⁵

It is to show his disapproval for such a selfish and opportunistic attitude of man that Ḥaḍrat 'Alī is reported to have said that if a person is sincere in his love of God he should deny away His attributes, meaning to say that he must keep his love disinterested, selfless and unconditional. Based on the laymen's beyond-heavens view of God is the entire concept of Islām as a formal discipline only comprising some formulas that we utter, some doctrines that we hold on to, some practices that we go through and some rituals that we perform with meticulous regularity. All this is regarded as sufficient to make us good Muslims for overt purposes. We are said to *have* the religion of Islām but may absolutely fall short of *living* it. The third level of knowledge, i.e. *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, is the level where the mutual externality of subject and object of knowledge is transcended and the knower enters into a personal, reciprocal, subject-to-subject, I-thou encounter with the known. In religious context, this is what Iqbāl calls the period of 'discovery' in the evolution of religious consciousness. In this period, "metaphysics is displaced by psychology and religious life develops the ambition to come into direct contact with the Ultimate Reality. 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 law, but by discovering the ultimate source of the law within the depths of his own consciousness."¹⁶ This is exactly how we are said to bring home, assimilate and live the metaphysics of religion rather than to

have its intellectual understanding only as is done by the naïveté among the orthodox religionists. This is, of course, a rare phenomenon of which very few persons can prove themselves to be capable. "There are men," says Iqbāl, "to whom it is not possible organically to assimilate an alien universe by re-living, as a vital process, that special type of inner experience on which religious faith ultimately rests."¹⁷ The instrument through which this assimilation is achieved is, according to Iqbāl, worship or prayer, a 'vital act by which the little island of our personality suddenly discovers its situation in a larger whole of life'.¹⁸

The first two modes of knowledge amount to what has been known as 'belief' while the third one is equivalent to faith which is the religious category *par excellence*.

Modern philosophers of religion in their books and articles are specially bringing out the nature and significance of 'faith' with its religious connotation as different from 'belief' which is a conventional and a primarily intellectual concept. Earlier, these two words had been used interchangeably. Even the Qur'ānic term *'īmān* has almost invariably been translated into English by Muslim scholars as 'belief' (the *mo'minoon*, as the 'believers' etc.) which, I hold, is a mistranslation; *'īmān* is rather equivalent to 'faith' as I hope to show in the sequel.

Belief, as this word is commonly used, indicates only a degree of knowledge. 'Knowledge' is understood as inner conviction and certitude about an objective state of affairs and so can be declared true or false. 'Belief' is partial knowledge and partial ignorance. It simply indicates more or less of the certitude itself and is, in the last analysis, only an attitude of mind. So conceived, the criteria of its truth or falsehood, if there are any, are different from those that are applicable to knowledge as such. There is no contradiction between saying that 'he believes that Mr. X is a graduate' and that 'Mr. X is not a graduate'. So, belief, unlike knowledge, falls short of a correspondence between one's inner conviction and the grammatical object of that conviction. Consequently, there is always a possibility that, as greater and greater amount of evidence is available, beliefs are improved,

replaced, rejected altogether or sometimes confirmed. Another characteristic of 'belief' is that, unlike knowledge, it is invariably propositional in character. We always *believe that* such and such is the case. There are, no doubt, *belief in* declarations also but they can justifiably be translated into *belief that* statements. When I say, 'I believe in my friend,' that simply means 'I believe that he tells the truth' or 'I believe that he will help me in distress' or whatever. Knowledge, on the other hand, has both the propositional and the non-propositional uses. I know that the earth is round, I know that two and two make four etc., and also I know Mr. X, meaning to say that I have acquaintance with him or that I recognize him. There is another difference between 'belief' and 'knowledge'. Knowledge has as its basis some evidence which is either sense-experiential or rational or both. Sense-experiential knowledge is contingent whereas rational knowledge is necessary. The former is temporal; the latter, timeless and eternal. Beliefs, as they are a matter of degree, relate, on the other hand, only to contingent truths.

'Faith' is the superiormost mode of non-propositional knowledge, the most comprehensive, intimate awareness. In the Qur'ān the word *'īmān* and its various derivatives are almost invariably followed by the preposition بِ rather than اَنْ or اَنَّ indicating that it is a direct, faithful allegiance to a being rather than an intellectual consent of some truth. It is, as said above, *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*. It combines the characteristics of sense-experiential as well as rational knowledge. Like sense-experience, it is non-inferential, direct and immediate and like reason it is inviolable and sure. Definition of *'īmān*, as given by Iqbāl, brings this nature into clear focus. He says:

'Īmān is not merely a passive belief in one or more propositions of a certain kind, it is living assurance begotten of a rare experience.¹⁹

So *'īmān* is *sure* and *certain* despite the fact that it is *based on experience*. Besides *iqrār un bil-lisān*, it is *taṣdīq un bil-qalb*, meaning to say, it is self-authenticating and has not to search for its justification elsewhere. It is a matter of personal commitment

to that in which/whom it is reposed. Being thus the affair of the whole man, it is irrefutable and irreplaceable unless the man concerned goes through an entire metamorphosis of his personality and becomes a new man altogether. Thus a man of faith must of necessity prove himself equal, and remain firm, to his faith though he may have to go for that sake through the severest agonies and the most painful trials, amounting even to death in the battle field. Earliest history of Islām is replete with incidents of the most excruciating torments and afflictions to which the converts to Islām were subjected but they held on to their faith and remained firm to their new commitment. The Qur'ān says:

Do men think that on their (mere) saying "we have attained to faith" they will be left to themselves and will not be put to test. Yes indeed we did test those who lived before them (and so now too He will test the people now living.)²⁰

Referring to this same phenomenon Iqbāl says in *Armaghān e Hijāz*:

چومی گویم مسلمانم بلرزم کہ دانم مشکلات لا اله را

(When I say I am a Muslim I tremble because I understand the magnitude of hardships implied in the words 'no god but Allah'.)

In order to demonstrate how 'īmān, characteristically 'īmān *bil ghaib* (faith in the unseen) is grounded in personal experience we shall have to refer to the ordinarily known levels of existence in nature, viz. matter, life, bare consciousness and ought-consciousness. Every one of these levels has a different set of laws that regulate its behaviour — the laws discovered by the sciences of physics, biology, psychology and ethics, respectively. These levels obviously do not exist as distinct and separate realms of nature; they rather coalesce and so influence one another. In plants, life is together with matter; in animals consciousness, life and matter are together all of them, whereas

human beings have, over and above, an awareness of ideals which they ought to realize. The higher in every one of these existents is obviously supernatural, alien and in fact miraculous from the point of view of the lower because the former, although it assimilates the latter, has peculiar causal principles of its own. However, the lower, *if it has to exist peacefully with the higher*, must in some sense recognize the higher level/levels of existence. It must not simply recognize but also have a living assurance of the veritability of the supernatural, practically, a faith in the unseen. Man, like every one of the beings lower than him, must prove himself true to the total meaning of his existence. Rising above the causalities that he is already bound by as an incumbent of material, living, conscious and moral characteristics, he is bound to recognize a higher causality whose effects he continues to observe in his daily life. Against the perspective of theism, we can say a *mo'min* is one who has faith in God, the Unseen as an Active Agent who has his own purposes and plans, which are being constantly carried out in the universe. These characteristically Divine plans are a part and parcel of man's *episteme* at its subjacent level. They have to be brought out to the broad-day light of full consciousness and made a matter of his ordinary, everyday awareness. Iqbāl approvingly quotes a Muslim Šūfī who said: 'no understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it is actually revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet.'²² A *mo'min* must, in the last analysis, discover the ultimate source of the law within the depths of his own consciousness.²³ This reminds me of a saying of Immanuel Kant, the moralist, to the effect that a principle of moral conduct is morally binding on me if and only if I can regard it as a law that I impose on myself. Such an existential awareness of co-existence with the Divine, of *riḡāqat* or companionship with God, is that 'living assurance', that self-authenticating certitude which, according to Iqbāl, is institutionalized in the act of canonical prayer which is a sort of dialogue between man and God; a popular Šūfī saying even describes it as analogous to the *Mi'rāj* (heavenwards ascension) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Iqbāl also describes it

as 'higher fatalism'²⁴ as distinct from 'lower fatalism'. Lower fatalism amounts to the belief that the destiny, to the minutest details, of each and every individual who is yet to be born, is already recorded in the *Lawḥ e Maḥfūz* (the Preserved Tablet) and he cannot budge even an inch from that. This is the laymen's concept of *qismat* which is sustained by their literalist view regarding the Divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience. In order to understand what higher fatalism is, we must make a distinction, after Kant, between 'good will' and 'holy will'. Bearer of a good will is one who, despite the possibility of performing either the good or the evil action exercises his free will, *as a matter of fact*, in favour of the former. A soldier of the moral ideal, who consistently continues to exercise his choice in favour of the good, develops in due course a holy will which means that to all intents and purposes he does exercise a free choice but always *must* perform the good action. This is the way of the man of faith who, according to the terminology of the Qur'ān, becomes saturated in Divinity.

Experience as such is characteristically subjective and private. The 'unique experience', which has been shown above to make for religious faith, is naturally also highly subjective and so has the liability to illusion. It is specially suspect, says Iqbāl, in the eyes of the modern man who has developed habits of concrete thought, "habits which Islām itself fostered at least in the earliest stages of its cultural career."²⁵ It must, however, be pointed out that the subjectivity which religious faith is is not ordinary subjectivity, it is rather one which has already gone through an amount of self-culture. Iqbāl made a distinction between the efficient and the appreciative aspects of the self of man.²⁶ Efficient ego is the I-anness that operates in this spatio-temporal world. It is man-in-the-world comprising all the characteristics and qualifications which are determiners all of them – that are the result of my contact with the world and that I have 'learnt', in a very broad sense of this term. In moments of 'profound meditation', as Iqbāl would have it, or by practically eliminating 'love of the world' along with all the attendant disvalues, as the Ṣūfis recommend, we can transcend the

efficient self, dispense with all the determiners and rise above space and time. This is the level of trans-subjectivity, the level of the appreciative self of man. This is how one realizes the divine within himself by virtue of which he becomes a fit candidate for God-awareness. For this realization of the Divine within, Iqbāl in his *Jāved Nāma* used the phrase دیدن خود را بنور ذات حق, i.e., looking at oneself with the light of God, the Truth. Alternatively, it is like bringing in the consciousness of God to bear witness to the supreme perfection of the human ego. Besides this there are two more witnesses that are to be invoked, viz. the consciousness of one's own self and the consciousness of not-self or 'the other'. The verses in this connection that Iqbāl put in the mouth of Rūmi are beautiful and worth-quoting in full:

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| از سه شاهد کن شهادت را طلب | زنده‌ئی یا مرده‌ئی یا جاں بلب |
| خویش را دیدن بنور خویشتن | شاهد اول شعور خویشتن |
| خویش را دیدن بنور دیگرے | شاهد ثانی شعور دیگرے |
| خویش را دیدن بنور ذات حق | شاهد ثالث شعور ذات حق |
| حی و قائم چون خدا را خود شمار | پیش این نور اربمانی استوار |

(Whether you are living or dead or suspended between life and death seek a confirmation of your state from three witnesses. First witness is your own consciousness. It is looking at yourself in the light of your own consciousness. Second witness is the consciousness of other. It is looking at yourself in the light of the consciousness of the other. Third witness is the consciousness of God. It is looking at yourself with the consciousness of God. If you remain steadfast before this light consider yourself eternal and firm like God.)

Islāmic faith, in fact, is *shahādah* or testimony or 'bearing witness to'. A Muslim does not simply say: 'I believe that there is no god but Allah and that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is His Prophet'. He rather says: 'I bear witness to the fact that ...' This witness formula is proclaimed by a *mu'adhdhin* at the pitch

of his voice twice in every call to prayer five times a day. This is a public declaration to the effect that the basic articles of faith are, in principle, a matter of intimately personal, direct experience. Of course, one cannot bear witness to a state of affairs unless that state of affairs has been 'experienced' by him in some valid sense of this term. Can I offer *shahādah* to the effect that the Eid moon has appeared if I have not myself seen the moon? Certainly, not.

Faith, being a person's commitment and unconditional surrender to the reality in which it is reposed and being thus organismic and comprehensive, is, as said above, an affair of the whole man; it affects the man of faith in all aspects of his personality — cognitive, affective as well as conative. The Prophet of Islām (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: Beware of the wisdom of a *mo'min* because he sees with the light of God. Enlightened vision of the *mo'min* helps him see, and argue about, the problems of life and existence in true perspective. On the affective side, his pleasures and pains, his joys and sorrows, his likes and dislikes, his friendships and enmities are all entirely metamorphosed. Similarly, on the conative side, actions of a particular kind and quality do necessarily emanate from him. The Qur'ān, on most of the occasions, mentions the 'inculcation of faith' immediately before the 'performance of good actions', indicating between them a relationship of entailment, of reason to its consequents, of a dictum to its corollaries. Qur'ānic God is the bearer of all the Beautiful Names²⁸ which, from the human point of view, are the supreme ideals of moral and spiritual excellence. So from faith in Him emanates a morally good human life; nothing can stop this emanation. When the poet Ghālīb said

جانتا ہوں ثواب طاعت و زہد پر طبیعت ادھر نہیں آتی

(I understand that obedience and piety are prized activities but I don't feel inclined towards them),

his understanding of the value of the acts of obedience and piety was either of the nature of belief only or it was at the most a

piece of discursive knowledge. Had it been of the level of faith, he must have been positively inclined towards them. However, when Socrates says that 'knowledge is virtue', meaning to say, knowledge of virtue necessarily leads to the performance of the virtuous action, his concept of knowledge comes very close to the connotation of 'faith' as we have spelled out above. Conversely he was also right when he said that a virtuous action must invariably be grounded in knowledge and never in ignorance.

Going back from where we started we can conclude by saying that the 'idea' without being faithfully assimilated into our persons is fruitless and the 'deed' without necessarily following from faith is rootless. *The Qur'ān requires that its metaphysics should be lived so that it may compulsively generate moral actions.*

(1998)

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