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Islam on Human Nature and the Universe: A Comparison with Buddhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism

The following selection is taken from Muhammad Iqbal's article "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal," which was first published in the periodical The Observer *of Lahore in April 1909. It was originally read as a paper at the anniversary celebrations of the Anjuman-i Ḥimāyat-i Islām (Society for the Support of Islam). In the article, Iqbal, intending "to look at Islam from the standpoint of the critical student," raises a number of theoretical issues that are germane to a critical study of religion. Iqbal's interest in making a comparative study of religions and his ability to offer a succinct summary of essential doctrines of several religions are evident here. Also significant in this selection is the remark that concludes the second-to-last paragraph: "The highest stage of man's ethical progress is reached when he becomes absolutely free from fear and grief." In more than ten verses of the Qur'ān, most explicitly in 7:49, freedom from fear and grief is described as a characteristic feature of life in paradise. Iqbal, thus, exploits a Qur'ānic concept to state and illustrate what he calls the high point of ethical life in Islam. The subtle, almost imperceptible, way in which he employs the concept shows how deeply his thought was influenced by the Qur'ān.*

To begin with we have to recognise that every great religious system starts with certain propositions concerning the nature of man and the universe. The psychological implication of Buddhism, for instance, is the central fact of pain as a dominating element in the constitution of the universe. Man, regarded as an individuality, is helpless against the forces of pain, according to the teachings of Buddhism. There is an indissoluble relation between pain and the individual consciousness which, as such, is nothing but a constant possibility of pain. Freedom from pain means freedom from individuality. Starting from the fact of pain, Buddhism is quite consistent in placing before man the ideal of self-destruction. Of the two terms of this relation, pain and the sense of personality, one (i.e. pain) is ultimate; the other is a delusion from which it is possible to emancipate ourselves by ceasing to act on those lines of activity which have a tendency to intensify the sense of personality. Salvation, then, according to Buddhism, is inaction, renunciation of self and unworldliness are the principal virtues. Similarly, Christianity, as a religious system, is based on the fact of sin. The world is regarded as evil and the taint of sin is regarded as hereditary to man, who, as an individuality, is insufficient and stands in need of some supernatural personality to intervene between him and his Creator. Christianity, unlike Buddhism, regards human personality as something real, but agrees with Buddhism in holding that man as a force against sin is insufficient. There is, however, a subtle difference in the agreement. We can, according to Christianity, get rid of sin by depending upon a Redeemer; we can free ourselves from pain, according to Buddhism, by letting this insufficient force dissipate or lose itself in the universal energy of nature. Both agree in the fact of insufficiency and both agree in holding that this insufficiency is an evil; but while the one makes up the deficiency by bringing in the force of a redeeming personality, the other prescribes its gradual reduction until it is annihilated altogether. Again, Zoroastrianism looks upon nature as a scene of endless struggle between the powers of

evil and the powers of good and recognises in man the power to choose any course of action he likes. The universe, according to Zoroastrianism, is partly evil, partly good; man is neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but a combination of the two principles—light and darkness continually fighting against each other for universal supremacy. We see then that the fundamental pre-suppositions, with regard to the nature of the universe and man, in Buddhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism respectively are the following:

(1) There is pain in nature and man regarded as an individual is evil (Buddhism).
(2) There is sin in nature and the taint of sin is fatal to man (Christianity).
(3) There is struggle in nature; man is a mixture of the struggling forces and is free to range himself on the side of the powers of good which will eventually prevail (Zoroastrianism).

The question now is, what is the Muslim view of the universe and man? What is the central ideal in Islam which determines the structure of the entire system? We know that sin, pain and sorrow are constantly mentioned in the Quran. The truth is that Islam looks upon the universe as a reality and consequently recognises as reality all that is in it. Sin, pain, sorrow, struggle are certainly real but Islam teaches that evil is not essential to the universe; the universe can be reformed; the elements of sin and evil can be gradually eliminated. All that is in the universe is God's, and the seemingly destructive forces of nature become sources of life, if properly controlled by man, who is endowed with the power to understand and to control them.

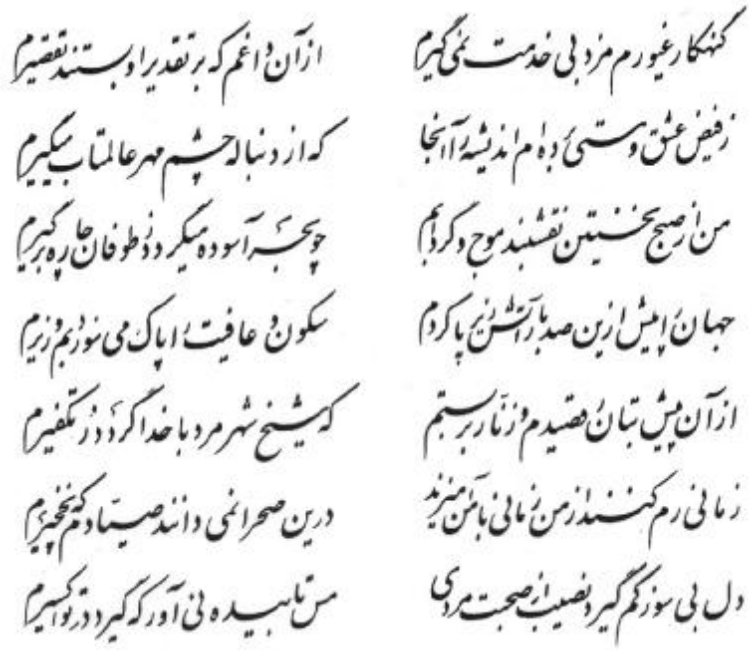
These and other similar teachings of the Quran, combined with the Quranic recognition of the reality of sin and sorrow, indicate that the Islamic view of the universe is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Modern psychometry has given the final answer to the psychological implications of Buddhism. Pain is not an essential factor in the constitution of the universe, and pessimism is only a product of a hostile social environment. Islam believes in the efficacy of well-directed action; hence the standpoint of Islam must be described as melioristic—the ultimate presupposition and justification of all human effort at scientific discovery and social progress. Although Islam recognises the fact of pain, sin and struggle in nature, yet the principal fact which stands in the way of man's ethical progress is, according to Islam, neither pain, nor sin, nor struggle. It is fear to which man is a victim owing to his ignorance of the nature of his environment and want of absolute faith in God. The highest stage of man's ethical progress is reached when he becomes absolutely free from fear and grief.

The central proposition which regulates the structure of Islam then is that there is fear in nature, and the object of Islam is to free man from fear. This view of the universe indicates also the Islamic view of the metaphysical nature of man. If fear is the force which dominates man and counteracts his ethical progress, man must be regarded as a unit of force, an energy, a will, a germ of infinite power, the gradual unfoldment of which must be the object of all human activity. The essential nature of man, then, consists in will, not intellect or understanding.

Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal,"
in Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, revised and enlarged edition,*
ed. Latif Amed Sherwani (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1977), 100–102

A Sinner with Self-Respect

The following poem is taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's Zabūr-i ʿAjam. *Each of the seven verses of the poem talks about some aspect of Iqbal's personality or sums up an aspect of his thought.*



Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 405

Translation

I am a sinner with self-respect, I will take no wages without labor;
I am scarred because my fault has been put down to His decree.[1]

Through the bounty of love and ecstasy, I have taken thought to such heights,
That, reaching behind, I can pluck the eyes of the world-brightening sun.[2]

Since the First Morning, I have been a drawer of wave and vortex;
When the sea becomes calm, I invoke the storm for help.[3]

A hundred times before now, too, I have lit a fire under the world's feet;
My high and low notes burn the world clean of peace and tranquility.[4]

I have danced before idols and worn the holy thread, so that
The *shaykh* of the city may become a man of God by calling me a heretic.[5]

Now they run away from me, now they associate with me;
In this desert, they do not know whether I am hunter or prey.[6]

A heart that lacks warmth can ill profit from the company of a man;
Come with red-hot copper, so that my elixir may work on you.[7]

Notes

[1]*I am . . . His decree.* A critique of moral determinism. According to a certain school of Muslim theology, God can put people in heaven or hell regardless of the nature and quality of their actions and regardless of whether they have performed those actions of their own free volition—in brief, regardless of whether they deserve to be placed in heaven or hell. The justification offered in defense of this view is that an omnipotent God is not subject to any external law or constraint and, therefore, can do what He likes and can treat His creation as He wishes. The preoccupation with vindicating Divine omnipotence led members of this school to deny human freedom because, it was thought, Divine omnipotence would be abridged to the extent human beings were taken to be free. The conclusion drawn was that God alone is the true actor—originator of action—and that attribution of action to any other creature is false. Such a predestinarian view, as Iqbal takes pains to argue in his prose works, had a devastating effect on the individual Muslim's psyche and on Muslim society's moral fabric. Rejecting it, Iqbal says in this verse that he would like to enter paradise only if his actions merited it. The verse states Iqbal's position in a dramatic context. The scene is the afterlife, where Iqbal has been informed that, although he was sinful in earthly life, God has chosen to send him to paradise. Iqbal responds that, a sinner that he is, he is not without his dignity and, like a laborer whose sense of self-respect keeps him from accepting wages for work that he has not performed, he would not take paradise in charity. To the question as to who caused Iqbal to be sinful in terrestrial life, the predestinarian answer, of course, would be: God. To this, too, Iqbal takes exception: he would boldy accept responsibility for his sins and would suffer any punishment that he deserves on account of his misdeeds—for this would, at least, prove that he is free. He feels hurt, even insulted ("scarred," as he puts it), that his sins have been imputed to Divine foreordination. In brief, Iqbal rejects the thought that Divine omnipotence must be preserved at all costs—at the cost, even, of human freedom. At one level, then, the verse urges one to accept responsibility for one's actions; at another, more important level, it criticizes the fatalistic interpretation of *taqdīr*—or predestination—and, by clear implication, represents an assertion of human freedom.

[2]*Through the bounty . . . world-brightening sun.* In his poetry, Iqbal frequently contrasts *ʿishq* (love, intuition) and *ʿaql* (reason, intellect), and, while he acknowledges the merit of both, he accords preference to the former. Maintaining that *ʿaql* and *ʿishq* complement each other, Iqbal believes that *ʿaql* can reach its full potential only when it is informed and guided by *ʿishq*; this is the import of the second hemistich, for only through the catapulting effect of *ʿishq*, Iqbal means to say, can *ʿaql*-based thought be raised to celestial heights. (On the relationship, in Iqbal, between *ʿishq* and *ʿaql*, see Mustansir Mir, *Tulip in the Desert: A Selection of the Poetry of Muhammad Iqbal* [London: Hurst & Co. and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000], chapter 5.) Keeping Iqbal's understanding of the relationship of *ʿaql* and *ʿishq* in mind, we can explain the meaning of the verse as follows: Iqbal's thought, thanks to his *ʿishq* ("through the bounty of love and ecstasy") has attained to such heights that he has left behind even the world-illuminating sun, whose eyes, if he so wished, he could take out by reaching behind.

The verse makes punning use of the word *dunbālah* (literally, "tail"). The phrase *az dunbālah* in the verse means "from behind" (here: "reaching behind"), but the word *dunbālah* also means "the outer corner of the eye" (the phrase *chashm-i dunbālah-dār* means "an eye that is made to appear longer on account of eye salve"). The second line of the verse reads in Persian: *Ki az dunbālah chashm-i mihr-i ʿālam-tāb mī-gīram*. Since the sun is called *chashm-i mihr-i ʿālam-tāb*, "the eye of the world-brightening sun," the deliberate but unpretentious use of the immediately preceding word *dunbālah* is artistically appropriate and significant. Incidentally, the construction *chashm-i mihr*, literally "the eye of the sun," means, simply, "the sun"—the *iḍāfah* or annexation being of the type of *iḍāfat ash-shay' ilā nafsihī* ("the annexation of something to itself"; we are not concerned here with the particular *ta'wīl* or construction that grammarians usually place on this type of *iḍāfah*), as in "the land of Spain," which signifies no real possession of one entity (land) by another (Spain) but, simply, Spain. In common Persian usage, then, *chashm-i mihr* would mean not an eye that is possessed by the sun but the eye-shaped sun—or, simply, the sun. In using the phrase *chashm giriftan*, however, Iqbal conceptually disjoins *chashm* ("eye") from *mihr* ("sun"), almost personifying the sun, which is described as possessing an eye. The personification of the sun and the juxtaposition of *chashm* with *dunbālah* add to the verse's artistic merit.

[3]*Since the First . . . for help.* In this verse, the sea is used as a metaphor for life. The rough sea's ominous waves and frightful vortexes are the scenes that, as a "painter," Iqbal has always liked to draw. Iqbal is saying that

he likes to live a dynamic, adventure-filled life—a life in which one has to contend with storms and vortexes—rather than one that is drab and uneventful. From the beginning—"Since the First Morning" means, since the first day of creation (see below)—Iqbal has loved to draw scenes that involve the terrifying wave and the dreadful vortex. So, when the sea of life becomes tranquil, he is dismayed: rather than being thankful for the calmness of the sea, he wishes and prays for a storm to rise—in fact, he calls upon the storm itself to come and stir up action so that he can portray its savage majesty on his canvas. The phrase "Since the First Morning" alludes to the time of the creation of the first human being, Adam, who, instead of being content with the pleasurable but static life of paradise, set a fateful series of events in motion by disobeying the Divine command not to eat of a certain fruit. In identifying himself with the First Man, Iqbal is implying (without, of course, justifying Adam's act of disobedience) that it is in the very nature of human beings to love movement and action, and that a static and uneventful existence, whether lived by individuals or societies, is inauthentic. "Painting" in the verse stands for poetry: Iqbal's poetry, it is implied, is a celebration of movement and dynamism.

[4]*A hundred . . . and traquility*. Iqbal's thought has challenged the status quo and caused turmoil in the world. This, however, is not the first time he has done so (the comment made about Adam in the preceding note is relevant here as well). The words "peace and tranquility" (*sukūn-u-ʿāfiyat*), here used ironically, mean inertia and stagnation. The fiery notes of Iqbal's poetry are, thus, meant to cleanse the world of inertia and stagnation and to infuse vitality and dynamism into the world's veins.

[5]*I have danced . . . a heretic.* A bitter critique of religious obscurantism. There are people of religion (the word *shaykh* signifies an authoritative religious figure) who have no better way of winning credentials in society than that of hereticating people; they establish their own religiosity by declaring others irreligious and their own authority by discrediting others. Declaring someone an infidel (*takfīr*, the word used in the second hemistich, is an Islamic technical term) is a serious matter, and Islam does not allow just anybody to pronounce people infidels. Iqbal implies that the *shaykh* of the city indiscriminately calls people unbelievers, as if *takfīr* were a matter of no consequence and as if one could indulge in it at will and with impunity. Iqbal implies, of course, that the *shaykh* has no real standing in Islam and is no better than a religious charlatan. Like Hindu worshipers, Iqbal dances before idols and wears the sacred thread called *zunnār* (this word occurs in the first hemistich) just so that the narrow-minded *shaykh* has an opportunity to declare Iqbal an infidel and to establish himself as a great believer. Somewhat playfully, the verse presents Iqbal in a redemptive role: Iqbal, though not a heretic, acts like one, "sacrificing" himself at the altar of the *shaykh's* sanctimoniousness. But, the real force of the verse derives from a certain non sequitur: Declaring Iqbal—or anyone else, for that matter—an infidel by no means proves that the *shaykh* himself is a man of God, or even a good ordinary believer, though such *takfīr* is the sole, and utterly flimsy, basis on which his authority as a religious personage rests.

[6]*Now they . . . prey.* Iqbal has the people of the world confused. The ferocity of his speech (of his poetry, that is) strikes terror in their hearts, and they fear him and shun him, as game fears and shuns a hunter. But the gentleness of his conduct endears him to them, and they befriend him, as if he were a kindred spirit. Tongue in cheek, perhaps, Iqbal affirms both perceptions of him.

[7]*A heart . . . on you.* Iqbal senses that his addressees lack the earnestness or enthusiasm that is needed before Iqbal's poetry can have effect on them. He advises them to come to him with red-hot copper—that is, with hearts filled with zeal and ardor—so that he may transform it into gold; only metal that has been heated to a very high degree can be molded or reshaped.

Mustansir Mir

Iqbal's Student Years in Europe (1905–1908)

The following selection from Dr. Javid Iqbal's biography of Muhammad Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd *(The Living Stream) deals with an interesting stage of Iqbal's intellectual development. It highlights the fact that, even as a college student, Iqbal pondered serious issues of life, and that, while he had not yet reached the stage of settled convictions, he was already in search of what one may call intellectual certitude. The full names of Iqbal's teachers, mentioned in this passage by their last names, are as follows: Thomas Walker Arnold (1864–1930), Edward Granville Browne (1862–1926), John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925), Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (1868–1945), James Ward (1843–1925), and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1941). The original wording of the quote from McTaggart given in the last paragraph is taken from* Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, edited with notes by Syed Abdul Vahid (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1992), 118.*

It is a little difficult to determine with precision the dates pertaining to Iqbal's educational activities during his stay in Europe. The stay lasted for a total of three years, and the sources on which one can depend for purposes of reconstructing the three-year period consist either of his own writings and statements or of the observations and impressions of such friends of his as Atiyah Faizi and Sir Abdul Qadir regarding his person and interests.

Iqbal arrived in Cambridge on 25 September 1905. His admission to Trinity College had, in accordance with the the rules and regulations of Cambridge University, probably already been arranged through Arnold's good offices. Since he belonged to the category of postgraduates or research scholars, it was not mandatory for Iqbal to stay in the hostel on the College premises, and so he took up residence at 17 Portugal Palace. The academic year of Cambridge University starts with the Michaelmas term, that is, on 1 October. Iqbal's year of residency at the university, therefore, started with that term.

The procedure of obtaining a doctoral degree at Western universities is as follows: The research scholar, after becoming attached to a college, becomes a resident of the university and gets his research topic, his name, and his supervisor's name registered. The research period extends to three years, during which the research scholar spends most of his time in various libraries, collecting material on his research topic. He meets with his supervisor once or twice a month to receive guidance from him and presents the chapters he has written to his supervisor to read or has discussion with him about them, this process continuing until the submission of the thesis in its final form to the university. At the time of the submission of the thesis to the university, usually two copies of the thesis are submitted for the examiners; one copy is eventually returned to the student while the other one is kept for the record. After a certain period of time, the research scholar presents himself before the examiners, on a date fixed by the university, for an oral examination on the research topic. The interview lasts for about one or two hours, after which, on the basis of the examiners' report, the university informs him whether he has been successful in obtaining the doctoral degree.

It seems that, immediately after starting his residency at Cambridge, Iqbal had arranged the necessary registration of his research topic at Munich University. He himself writes in this connection:

> I presented my thesis to Munich University, whose authorities exempted me from the residency requirement and also allowed me to write my thesis in English. German universities usually insist that one attend lectures for a period of three or one-and-a-half years. The period of attendance is

> determined on the basis of the candidate's ability, and, as a rule, the thesis is required to be written in German. On the recommendation of my Cambridge teachers, however, I was exempted from it. The oral examination of the doctorate was conducted in German, in which I had become somewhat conversant during my stay.

For bar examinations, too, it was necessary to get admission to an Inn of Court in order to complete the terms, but it was not necessary to have a permanent residence in London or to attend the law lectures. According to the rules, it was possible for one to complete the terms by attaching oneself to some Inn of Court and attend a designated number of dinners there. One could take an examination in each of the six subjects of Part One, but it was mandatory to take the examinations in the six subjects of Part Two together. These examinations were given three or four times a year at the Inns of Court. Iqbal took admission to Lincoln's Inn on 6 November 1905 and commuted from Cambridge to London in order to complete the terms. Sir Abdul Qadir writes that when Iqbal came to London, he and Iqbal would go together to attend law lectures or dinners.

In any case, it is not possible to tell whether Iqbal took the examinations in all the subjects of Part One all at the same time or at different times or when he took the examinations. All we know is that he received the bar-at-law degree on 1 July 1908. One can speculate that he completed Part One of the examinations during his stay in Cambridge but prepared for and completed Part Two later, during his stay in London.

Iqbal also took the baccalaureate degree from Cambridge, but this degree was not obtained in the conventional way. At Cambridge, the bachelor of arts examination, called the tripos, is taken in three subjects three years after matriculation; undergraduates take this examination. Every postgraduate student, subsequent to his residency at the university for a designated period of time, is granted an honorary master of arts degree. As for Iqbal, he had taken admission to Trinity College as a research scholar, and so there was no question of his doing the tripos. Sometimes, however, research scholars can, on account of their interest in a given subject, attend the lectures on that subject and take the annual tripos examination in it and can, by passing the examination, satisfy their supervisor or their teachers as to their competence. Obtaining the university's permission to study European philosophy, Iqbal attended the lectures of McTaggart, Whitehead, Ward, and, perhaps, Browne or Nicholson. It is also possible that, keeping in mind the stipulations of Munich University, Iqbal, with a view to assuring the university authorities, passed special examinations in philosophy, Arabic, or Persian. On account of his personal interest in economics, Iqbal also attended lectures on this subject at Cambridge with great interest. In any event, on 7 March 1907, Iqbal submitted a research thesis to the Faculty of Philosophy and Ethics, and on 13 June 1907, he was granted a BA by Cambridge University. In those days, Arnold was professor of Arabic at London University and resided at Wimbledon, which is some distance from London. In my view, it was these teachers, including Arnold, who had recommended to Munich University that Iqbal be exempted from fulfilling certain requirements.

At that time, McTaggart lectured on Kant and Hegel; he was associated with Trinity College. Like McTaggart, Ward and Whitehead, too, were well-known British philosophers. Browne and Nicholson were experts of the Persian and Arabic languages and were reckoned among Orientalists. Later on, Nicholson translated Iqbal's *Asrār-i Khudī* into English.

Iqbal came to have friendly relations with all these figures. McTaggart was a mystically oriented individual of advanced age. Iqbal not only attended his lectures regularly, but also engaged in long discussions with him on issues of mysticism. After his return from England, he continued to correspond with MacTaggart and Nicholson. On reading the English translation of *Asrār-i Khudī*, McTaggart asked Iqbal in a letter: "Have you not changed your position very much? Surely, in the days when we used to talk philosophy together, you were much more of a Pantheist and mystic." Iqbal also wrote an essay on McTaggart's philosophy.

Javid Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd
(Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1979), 176–179
Translated by Mustansir Mir

Does Man Exist?

For centuries Eastern heart and intellect have been absorbed in the question, Does God exist? I propose to raise a new question, new, that is to say, for the East, Does man exist?

Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections*, revised edition,*
ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan,1992), 155

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