

THE  
RECONSTRUCTION OF  
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT  
IN ISLAM

BY  
SIR MOHAMMAD IQBAL

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## PREFACE

THE Quran is a book which emphasizes 'deed' rather than 'idea'. There are, however, men 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. Moreover, the modern man, by developing habits of concrete thought—habits which Islam itself fostered at least in the earlier stages of its cultural career—has rendered himself less capable of that experience which he further suspects because of its liability to illusion. The more genuine schools of Sufism have, no doubt, done good work in shaping and directing the evolution of religious experience in Islam; but their latter-day representatives, owing to their ignorance of the modern mind, have become absolutely incapable of receiving any fresh inspiration from modern thought and experience. They are perpetuating methods which were created for generations possessing a cultural outlook differing, in important respects, from our own. 'Your creation and resurrection,' says the Quran, 'are like the creation and resurrection of a single soul.' A living experience of the kind of biological unity, embodied in this verse, requires to-day a method physiologically less violent and psychologically more suitable to a concrete type of mind. In the absence of such a method the demand for a scientific form of religious knowledge is only natural. In these lectures, which were undertaken at the request of the Madras Muslim Association and delivered at Madras, Hyderabad, and Aligarh, I have tried to meet, even though partially, this urgent demand by attempting to reconstruct Muslim religious philosophy with due regard to the philosophical traditions of Islam and the more recent developments in the various domains of human knowledge. And the present moment is quite favourable for such an undertaking.

Classical Physics has learned to criticize its own foundations. As a result of this criticism the kind of materialism, which it originally necessitated, is rapidly disappearing; and the day is not far off when Religion and Science may discover hitherto unsuspected mutual harmonies. It must, however, be remembered that there is no such thing as finality in philosophical thinking. As knowledge advances and fresh avenues of thought are opened, other views, and probably sounder views than those set forth in these lectures, are possible. Our duty is carefully to watch the progress of human thought, and to maintain an independent critical attitude towards it.

M. I.



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# I

## KNOWLEDGE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

WHAT is the character and general structure of the universe in which we live? Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe? How are we related to it? What place do we occupy in it, and what is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy? These questions are common to religion, philosophy, and higher poetry. But the kind of knowledge that poetic inspiration brings is essentially individual in its character; it is figurative, vague, and indefinite. Religion, in its more advanced forms, rises higher than poetry. It moves from individual to society. In its attitude towards the ultimate reality it is opposed to the limitations of man; it enlarges his claims and holds out the prospect of nothing less than a direct vision of Reality. Is it then possible to apply the purely rational method of philosophy to religion? The spirit of philosophy is one of free inquiry. It suspects all authority. Its function is to trace the uncritical assumptions of human thought to their hiding places, and in this pursuit it may finally end in denial or a frank admission of the incapacity of pure reason to reach the ultimate reality. The essence of religion, on the other hand, is faith; and faith, like the bird, sees its 'trackless way' unattended by intellect which, in the words of the great mystic poet of Islam, 'only waylays the living heart of man and robs it of the invisible wealth of life that lies within'. Yet it cannot be denied that faith is more than mere feeling. It has something like a cognitive content, and the existence of rival parties—scholastics and mystics—in the history of religion shows that idea is a vital element in religion. Apart from this, religion on its doctrinal side, as defined by Professor Whitehead, is 'a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when

they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended'. Now, since the transformation and guidance of man's inner and outer life is the essential aim of religion, it is obvious that the general truths which it embodies must not remain unsettled. No one would hazard action on the basis of a doubtful principle of conduct. Indeed, in view of its function, religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science. Science may ignore a rational metaphysics; indeed, it has ignored it so far. Religion can hardly afford to ignore the search for a reconciliation of the oppositions of experience and a justification of the environment in which humanity finds itself. That is why Professor Whitehead has acutely remarked that 'the ages of faith are the ages of rationalism'. But to rationalize faith is not to admit the superiority of philosophy over religion. Philosophy, no doubt, has jurisdiction to judge religion, but what is to be judged is of such a nature that it will not submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy except on its own terms. While sitting in judgement on religion, philosophy cannot give religion an inferior place among its data. Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man. Thus, in the evaluation of religion, philosophy must recognize the central position of religion and has no other alternative but to admit it as something focal in the process of reflective synthesis. Nor is there any reason to suppose that thought and intuition are essentially opposed to each other. They spring up from the same root and complement each other. The one grasps Reality piecemeal, the other grasps it in its wholeness. The one fixes its gaze on the eternal, the other on the temporal aspect of Reality. The one is present enjoyment of the whole of Reality; the other aims at traversing the whole by slowly specifying and closing up the various regions of the whole for exclusive observation. Both are in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation. Both

seek visions of the same Reality which reveals itself to them in accordance with their function in life. In fact, intuition, as Bergson rightly says, is only a higher kind of intellect.

The search for rational foundations in Islam may be regarded to have begun with the Prophet himself. His constant prayer was: 'God! grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things!' The work of later mystics and non-mystic rationalists forms an exceedingly instructive chapter in the history of our culture, inasmuch as it reveals a longing for a coherent system of ideas, a spirit of whole-hearted devotion to truth, as well as the limitations of the age, which rendered the various theological movements in Islam less fruitful than they might have been in a different age. As we all know, Greek philosophy has been a great cultural force in the history of Islam. Yet a careful study of the Quran and the various schools of scholastic theology that arose under the inspiration of Greek thought disclose the remarkable fact that while Greek philosophy very much broadened the outlook of Muslim thinkers, it, on the whole, obscured their vision of the Quran. Socrates concentrated his attention on the human world alone. To him the proper study of man was man and not the world of plants, insects, and stars. How unlike the spirit of the Quran, which sees in the humble bee a recipient of Divine inspiration and constantly calls upon the reader to observe the perpetual change of the winds, the alternation of day and night, the clouds, the starry heavens, and the planets swimming through infinite space! As a true disciple of Socrates, Plato despised sense-perception which, in his view, yielded mere opinion and no real knowledge. How unlike the Quran, which regards 'hearing' and 'sight' as the most valuable Divine gifts and declares them to be accountable to God for their activity in this world. This is what the earlier Muslim students of the Quran completely missed under the spell of classical speculation. They read the Quran in the light of Greek thought. It took them over 200 years to perceive

—though not quite clearly—that the spirit of the Quran was essentially anti-classical, and the result of this perception was a kind of intellectual revolt, the full significance of which has not been realized even up to the present day. It was partly owing to this revolt and partly to his personal history that Ghazali based religion on philosophical scepticism—a rather unsafe basis for religion and not wholly justified by the spirit of the Quran. Ghazali's chief opponent, Ibn-i-Rushd, who defended Greek philosophy against the rebels, was led, through Aristotle, to what is known as the doctrine of Immortality of Active Intellect, a doctrine which once wielded enormous influence on the intellectual life of France and Italy, but which, to my mind, is entirely opposed to the view that the Quran takes of the value and destiny of the human ego. Thus Ibn-i-Rushd lost sight of a great and fruitful idea in Islam and unwittingly helped the growth of that enervating philosophy of life which obscures man's vision of himself, his God, and his world. The more constructive among the Ash'arite thinkers were no doubt on the right path and anticipated some of the more modern forms of Idealism; yet, on the whole, the object of the Ash'arite movement was simply to defend orthodox opinion with the weapons of Greek Dialectic. The Mutazila, conceiving religion merely as a body of doctrine and ignoring it as a vital fact, took no notice of non-conceptual modes of approaching Reality and reduced religion to a mere system of logical concepts ending in a purely negative attitude. They failed to see that in the domain of knowledge—scientific or religious—complete independence of thought from concrete experience is not possible.

It cannot, however, be denied that Ghazali's mission was almost apostolic like that of Kant in Germany of the eighteenth century. In Germany rationalism appeared as an ally of religion, but she soon realized that the dogmatic side of religion was incapable of demonstration. The only course open to her was to eliminate dogma from the sacred record.

With the elimination of dogma came the utilitarian view of morality, and thus rationalism completed the reign of unbelief. Such was the state of theological thought in Germany when Kant appeared. His *Critique of Pure Reason* revealed the limitations of human reason and reduced the whole work of the rationalists to a heap of ruins. And justly has he been described as God's greatest gift to his country. Ghazali's philosophical scepticism which, however, went a little too far, virtually did the same kind of work in the world of Islam in breaking the back of that proud but shallow rationalism which moved in the same direction as pre-Kantian rationalism in Germany. There is, however, one important difference between Ghazali and Kant. Kant, consistently with his principles, could not affirm the possibility of a knowledge of God. Ghazali, finding no hope in analytic thought, moved to mystic experience, and there found an independent content for religion. In this way he succeeded in securing for religion the right to exist independently of science and metaphysics. But the revelation of the total Infinite in mystic experience convinced him of the finitude and inconclusiveness of thought and drove him to draw a line of cleavage between thought and intuition. He failed to see that thought and intuition are organically related and that thought must necessarily simulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time. The idea that thought is essentially finite, and for this reason unable to capture the Infinite, is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge. It is the inadequacy of the logical understanding which finds a multiplicity of mutually repellent individualities with no prospect of their ultimate reduction to a unity that makes us sceptical about the conclusiveness of thought. In fact, the logical understanding is incapable of seeing this multiplicity as a coherent universe. Its only method is generalization based on resemblances, but its generalizations are only fictitious unities which do not affect the reality of concrete



things. In its deeper movement, however, thought is capable of reaching an immanent Infinite in whose self-unfolding movement the various finite concepts are merely moments. In its essential nature, then, thought is not static; it is dynamic and unfolds its internal infinitude in time like the seed which, from the very beginning, carries within itself the organic unity of the tree as a present fact. Thought is, therefore, the whole in its dynamic self-expression, appearing to the temporal vision as a series of definite specifications which cannot be understood except by a reciprocal reference. Their meaning lies not in their self-identity, but in the larger whole of which they are the specific aspects. This larger whole is, to use a Quranic metaphor, a kind of 'Preserved Tablet', which holds up the entire undetermined possibilities of knowledge as a present reality, revealing itself in serial time as a succession of finite concepts appearing to reach a unity which is already present in them. It is in fact the presence of the total Infinite in the movement of knowledge that makes finite thinking possible. Both Kant and Ghazali failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its own finitude. The finitudes of Nature are reciprocally exclusive. Not so the finitudes of thought which is, in its essential nature, incapable of limitation and cannot remain imprisoned in the narrow circuit of its own individuality. In the wide world beyond itself nothing is alien to it. It is in its progressive participation in the life of the apparently alien that thought demolishes the walls of its finitude and enjoys its potential infinitude. Its movement becomes possible only because of the implicit presence in its finite individuality of the infinite, which keeps alive within it the flame of aspiration and sustains it in its endless pursuit. It is a mistake to regard thought as inconclusive, for it too, in its own way, is a greeting of the finite with the infinite.

During the last five hundred years religious thought in Islam has been practically stationary. There was a time

when European thought received inspiration from the world of Islam. The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history, however, is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam. Our only fear is that the dazzling exterior of European culture may arrest our movement and we may fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture. During all the centuries of our intellectual stupor Europe has been seriously thinking on the great problems in which the philosophers and scientists of Islam were so keenly interested. Since the Middle Ages, when the schools of Muslim theology were completed, infinite advance has taken place in the domain of human thought and experience. The extension of man's power over nature has given him a new faith and a fresh sense of superiority over the forces that constitute his environment. New points of view have been suggested, old problems have been re-stated in the light of fresh experience, and new problems have arisen. It seems as if the intellect of man is outgrowing its own most fundamental categories—time, space, and causality. With the advance of scientific thought even our concept of intelligibility is undergoing a change. The theory of Einstein has brought a new vision of the universe and suggests new ways of looking at the problems common to both religion and philosophy. No wonder then that the younger generation of Islam in Asia and Africa demand a fresh orientation of their faith. With the reawakening of Islam, therefore, it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and, if necessary, reconstruction, of theological thought in Islam. Besides this it is not possible to ignore the generally anti-religious and especially anti-Islamic propaganda in Central Asia which



has already crossed the Indian frontier. Some of the apostles of this movement are born Muslims, and one of them, Tawfik Fitrat, the Turkish poet, who died only a short time ago, has gone to the extent of using our great poet-thinker, Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil of Akbarabad, for the purposes of this movement. Surely, it is high time to look to the essentials of Islam. In these lectures I propose to undertake a philosophical discussion of some of the basic ideas of Islam, in the hope that this may, at least, be helpful towards a proper understanding of the meaning of Islam as a message to humanity. Also with a view to give a kind of ground-outline for further discussion, I propose, in this preliminary lecture, to consider the character of knowledge and religious experience.

The main purpose of the Quran is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe. It is in view of this essential aspect of the Quranic teaching that Goethe, while making a general review of Islam as an educational force, said to Eckermann: 'You see this teaching never fails; with all our systems, we cannot go, and generally speaking no man can go, farther than that.' The problem of Islam was really suggested by the mutual conflict, and at the same time mutual attraction, presented by the two forces of religion and civilization. The same problem confronted early Christianity. The great point in Christianity is the search for an independent content for spiritual life which, according to the insight of its founder, could be elevated, not by the forces of a world external to the soul of man, but by the revelation of a new world within his soul. Islam fully agrees with this insight and supplements it by the further insight that the illumination of the new world thus revealed is not something foreign to the world of matter but permeates it through and through.

Thus the affirmation of spirit sought by Christianity would come not by the renunciation of external forces

which are already permeated by the illumination of spirit, but by a proper adjustment of man's relation to these forces in view of the light received from the world within. It is the mysterious touch of the ideal that animates and sustains the real, and through it alone we can discover and affirm the ideal. With Islam the ideal and the real are not two opposing forces which cannot be reconciled. The life of the ideal consists, not in a total breach with the real which would tend to shatter the organic wholeness of life into painful oppositions, but in the perpetual endeavour of the ideal to appropriate the real with a view eventually to absorb it, to convert it into itself and to illuminate its whole being. It is the sharp opposition between the subject and the object, the mathematical without and the biological within, that impressed Christianity. Islam, however, faces the opposition with a view to overcome it. This essential difference in looking at a fundamental relation determines the respective attitudes of these great religions towards the problem of human life in its present surroundings. Both demand the affirmation of the spiritual self in man, with this difference only that Islam, recognizing the contact of the ideal with the real, says 'yes' to the world of matter and points the way to master it with a view to discover a basis for a realistic regulation of life.

What, then, according to the Quran, is the character of the universe which we inhabit? In the first place, it is not the result of a mere creative sport:

'We have not created the Heavens and the earth and whatever is between them in sport: We have not created them but for a serious end: but the greater part of them understand it not.' (44: 38.)

It is a reality to be reckoned with:

'Verily in the creation of the Heavens and of the earth, and in the succession of the night and of the day, are signs for men of understanding; who, standing and sitting and reclining, bear God in mind and reflect on the creation of the Heavens and of the earth, and say: "Oh, our Lord! Thou hast not created this in vain."' (3: 188.)

Again the universe is so constituted that it is capable of extension:

'He (God) adds to His creation what He wills.' (35: 1.)

It is not a block universe, a finished product, immobile and incapable of change. Deep in its inner being lies, perhaps, the dream of a new birth:

'Say—go through the earth and see how God hath brought forth all creation: hereafter will He give it another birth.' (29: 19.)

In fact, this mysterious swing and impulse of the universe, this noiseless swim of time which appears to us, human beings, as the movement of day and night, is regarded by the Quran as one of the greatest signs of God:

'God causeth the day and the night to take their turn. Verily in this is teaching for men of insight.' (24: 44.)

This is why the Prophet said: 'Do not vilify time, for time is God.' And this immensity of time and space carries in it the promise of a complete subjugation by man whose duty is to reflect on the signs of God, and thus discover the means of realizing his conquest of nature as an actual fact:

'See ye not how God hath put under you all that is in the Heavens, and all that is on the earth, and hath been bounteous to you of His favours both in relation to the seen and the unseen?' (31: 19.)

'And He hath subjected to you the night and the day, the sun and the moon, and the stars too are subject to you by His behest; verily in this are signs for those who understand.' (16: 12.)

Such being the nature and promise of the universe, what is the nature of man whom it confronts on all sides? Endowed with a most suitable mutual adjustment of faculties he discovers himself down below in the scale of life, surrounded on all sides by the forces of obstruction:

'That of goodliest fabric We created man, then brought him down to the lowest of the low.' (95: 4.)

And how do we find him in this environment? A 'restless' being engrossed in his ideals to the point of forgetting everything else, capable of inflicting pain on himself in his

ceaseless quest after fresh scopes for self-expression. With all his failings he is superior to nature, inasmuch as he carries within him a great trust which, in the words of the Quran, the Heavens and the earth and the mountains refused to carry:

‘Verily We proposed to the Heavens and to the earth and to the mountains to receive the trust (of personality), but they refused the burden and they feared to receive it. Man alone undertook to bear it, but hath proved unjust, senseless!’ (33: 72.)

His career, no doubt, has a beginning, but he is destined, perhaps, to become a permanent element in the constitution of being:

‘Thinketh man that he shall be thrown away as an object of no use? Was he not a mere embryo? Then he became thick blood of which God formed him and fashioned him, and made him twain, male and female. Is not He powerful enough to quicken the dead?’ (75: 36-40.)

When attracted by the forces around him, man has the power to shape and direct them; when thwarted by them, he has the capacity to build a much vaster world in the depths of his own inner being, wherein he discovers sources of infinite joy and inspiration. Hard his lot and frail his being, like a rose-leaf, yet no form of reality is so powerful, so inspiring, and so beautiful as the spirit of man! Thus in his inmost being man, as conceived by the Quran, is a creative activity, an ascending spirit who, in his onward march, rises from one state of being to another:

‘It needs not that I swear by the sunset redness and by the night and its gatherings and by the moon when at her full, that from state to state shall ye be surely carried onward.’ (84: 17-20.)

It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes. And in this process

of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him, provided man takes the initiative:

'Verily God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves.' (13: 12.)

If he does not take the initiative, if he does not evolve the inner richness of his being, if he ceases to feel the inward push of advancing life, then the spirit within him hardens into stone and he is reduced to the level of dead matter. But his life and the onward march of his spirit depend on the establishment of connexions with the reality that confronts him. It is knowledge that establishes these connexions, and knowledge is sense-perception elaborated by understanding.

'When thy Lord said to the Angels, "Verily I am about to place one in my stead on earth", they said, "Wilt Thou place there one who will do ill and shed blood, when we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness?" God said, "Verily I know what ye know not!" And He taught Adam the names of all things, and then set them before the Angels, and said, "Tell me the names of these if ye are endowed with wisdom". They said, "Praise be to Thee! We have no knowledge but what Thou hast given us to know. Thou art the Knowing, the Wise". He said, "O Adam, inform them of the names". And when he had informed them of the names, God said, "Did I not say to you that I know the hidden things of the Heavens and of the earth, and that I know what ye bring to light and what ye hide?"' (2: 28-31.)

The point of these verses is that man is endowed with the faculty of naming things, that is to say, forming concepts of them, and forming concepts of them is capturing them. Thus the character of man's knowledge is conceptual, and it is with the weapon of this conceptual knowledge that man approaches the observable aspect of Reality. The one noteworthy feature of the Quran is the emphasis that it lays on this observable aspect of Reality. Let me quote here a few verses:

'Assuredly, in the creation of the Heavens and of the earth; and in the alternation of night and day; and in the ships which pass