

Is it Easy to Forget Allama Iqbal? A Search for Progressive Religion and Recrudescence of Reason

MONICA CHAUDHARY

*Ye Hikmat-e-Malkooti, Ye Ilm-e-Lahooti Haram Ke Dard Ka Darman Nahin To Kuch Bhi Nahin.*¹

— Allama Iqbal (1877-1938)

In different contexts confronted with challenges posed by traditional minds, men with broader vision have tried to overcome it through inventory means of various kinds. Longing to move towards a better age has been at the heart of all human ages starting from the Greek civilization and cutting across through all other civilizations that followed. In Europe, this craving to become progressive took off during the reformation and produced an impressionable effect over all disciplines that got nurtured as well as improvised. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, science and religion gave rise to a tumultuous debate as to what sort of reality is more plausible to the man. This debate carried itself right into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which philosophers as well as poets attempted to penetrate through the veil which they thought was necessary to do.

Within these philosophical branches the age of enlightenment is one of the most influential periods. In this age, one name which became a central attraction is that of Immanuel Kant who ventured to polish the very idea of enlightenment in order to get away from the fundamental attributions that had governed the scene prior to his arrival. He establishes the supremacy of reason in order to get his generations going on the path of progress; in doing so he compressed concepts like courage and freedom which to his mind are essential components of every being. Kant urged to move out of the “tutelage” that discourages one from using our rationale.² He advocated freedom of each and every individual that comprises not only of physical but also intellectual freedom which could be achieved only by channelizing the courage. In a similar vein, Iqbal advocated the reconstruction of religion but unlike Kant, religion is of crucial import to his theory and philosophy. At the same time, he prescribes a course of action to attain the objectives and it is not merely at the level of abstraction that his theory exists. He envisions a brand new empowered and intellectually aware community of Muslims by aiming at a holistic development of the human kind. Iqbal transcends Pakistan and his poetry reaches beyond the realm of aesthetic pleasure. But this process turns out not as simple as he probably might have thought, since all that he had envisioned could not fall into place even in a gradual manner. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to highlight the very complications which got ignored in Kant’s approach mainly towards freedom from orthodox doctrines and are subsequently addressed by Iqbal. It also investigates the role of Iqbal in instrumentalizing the relevance of reason within the realm of religion. For analysis, I

shall be taking into consideration Iqbal's poetry and Kant's 1784 seminal essay, "What is Enlightenment?", wherein he has explicitly dealt with the mechanism of assigning the reason complete autonomy.

The purpose is to hint at the limitation that this project faces when it thinks of reason as being the true representative of the human nature. To my mind, there is a fundamental miscalculation here because historically as well as philosophically speaking, one cannot create a model of enlightenment by excluding morals which belong to the sphere of emotion as well as religion. The project of Enlightenment which required and which should have aimed at the development of entire human race, remains incomplete without the inclusion of religion in its entirety. History shows that most of the crisis that mankind has got into has largely been through the distorted view of religion and in the absence of an intellectual who could reinterpret this distorted version to the people.³ As a result, the situation has always become even worse. In such a scenario, arrival of an enlightened age will be almost next to impossible since the majority of the population would continue to live in the world of deception and without knowing about any of the deceitful forces. By assuming a neglectful attitude towards realms of emotions and religious patterns, Kant ends up somewhere along the path which is a dimly lit one.

As a representational framework, Kant's idea of enlightenment presupposes equal moral worth of each and every individual without much of a real justification. He epitomizes this moral worth for the liberation of the human consciousness. Scholars have argued that this kind of mechanism gets very close to the pragmatic predicament, as it encourages a logical pushing up to a certain degree. I speculate, there is a paradox here because this could be said after all that by departing from the religion and labeling it as a private affair, one cannot encapsulate fully the sensibilities associated with the very idea of enlightenment or development. If boundaries of the reason are pushed to the edges, it might lead one to take a glimpse into the morality as a phenomenon but it cannot bring down the falsities which have been damaging the human progress nearly forever. Iqbal opines in "Bal-e-Jibril"-030-(Gabriels Wing), "Kya Sufi-O-Mullah Ko Khabar Mere Junoon Ki, Un Ka Sar-e-Daman Bhi Abhi Chaak Nahin Hai" (What do these priests know about my passion and craze, even the corner of their cloth is not yet torn) ("Allama Iqbal Poetry"). Iqbal here expresses anguish over the priests, as they have hijacked the real Islam and reproduced a distorted and mutated version of the Islam before the world.

For instance, in the subcontinent political matters are thought of as principles which lay a great deal outside from the common man's grasp. This view is made even firmer by the politicians, as they did not want to break out of the box to solve the political tensions but rather choosing to keep to themselves and creating a political hierarchy of some sort. It was only after 1935, when Progressive Writers Movement knocked at the locked political door of the subcontinent, that issues which were political in nature became somewhat comprehensible to the common man. Writers like Sadat Hasan Manto took it upon themselves to blend the existential with the personal so much so that all other discursive theories which had kept the political sensibilities out of the ordinary realm seemed inferior. The idea here is to hint at the approach that has in view all the principal spheres of life in order to create a developed society in the long run. It follows, that if humans technologically move ahead or stumble upon the discoveries in the scientific realm and at the same time get intimidated by the structures of religion which is to say that they do not add anything to this sphere but leave it where it was three thousand years ago and only replace the previous labels with some new ones, nothing is likely to happen.

At the outset, such a critical issue which has manifested itself in the very practice of the people cannot be left untouched and if it is left so then dreams about the complete development cannot be realized. The alertness and awareness of the reinterpretation of the religion need to be predominant as far as the ambition to bring about change is concerned. The repressive tools of the belief system which are settled in the shared imagining of the people ought to be pointed out. In other words, the falsities present in the religious framework might be termed as a structural weakness which ought to be cured in as daring a manner as possible. As in the context of the progressive writers who remained masterful at their craft and did not give it up before they appealed and moved the understanding of the middle class of the subcontinent.

One of the useful ways in which this consistent attitude towards religion can be resolved would be through establishing a kind of milieu where logic and emotion, physics and metaphysics exist in an exemplary harmony. The idea is to explore the human consciousness with a wholeness which is unavailable otherwise. This exercise can lead humans and mainly the intellectual who undertakes it to absorb what Nietzsche terms as "perspectivism". That is, to look at human nature from all angles to come to a critically formed judgment. In such a scenario, imagination and reason would complement each other and mysterious things like religion would start taking coherent forms and shapes. Such modified shapes would then open a true passage of joy.

To illustrate this point further, two examples one from the west and other from the east should be able to suffice. Martin Luther's negation of some of the dubious and ill-formed laws in the catholic set of principles made it possible for him to inject ingenuity into the realm which for a long time is perceived as permanent and not subject to change. It is indeed a democratizing project as he made the rigid principles of the Catholic Church congenial to the common man. His venture to translate Bible into regional languages made it impossible for the mediators to control and sustain their power who had been willfully doing so for many centuries. Scriptures became accessible to people and gave rise to possibilities of multiple interpretations.

Something of the similar nature happened in the early twentieth century South Asian Philosophy, when "poet of the east" (Shair-e-Maschrik), Allama Iqbal (1877-1938) quite openly in his work advocated the principles which to his mind are necessary for the religion of Islam in order to become compatible with the modern man. He rejected the notion of injustice which is perpetrated by the mediators of Islamic belief system. His modern interpretations suggest that concepts like secularism and democracy are an integral part of the Islamic and Quranic teachings. Not only such practices install fear in the minds of people, it offers a skewed understanding of religion, especially Islam. Islam as a religion is fundamentally based on the concepts of *Jadidiyat* (modernity) and *Ishtehaadi soch* (progressive thinking). There are many verses in Quran advocating the use of one's rationale, cognition and decisive thinking. He criticizes the ideas which are made popular by one of the sects of the fundamentalists which is to focus on the life hereafter and not to be affected by the worldly affairs. The note below is a reflection of Iqbal's understanding of the fundamentalists in Islam:

I know the *Ulama* of Islam claim finality for the popular school of Muslim Law. For fear of ... disintegration the conservative thinkers of Islam focused all their efforts on the one point of preserving a uniform social life for the people by a jealous exclusion of all innovations in the law of Shariat as expounded by the early doctors of Islam ... Since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human thought in all directions, I see

no reason why this attitude (of the *Ulama*) should be maintained any longer...*The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles, in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modern life, is in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Quran that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems*". (qtd. in Hillier and Koshul 8)

His efforts had shocking effects over the fundamentalists of his time who were absolutely not prepared for such a reconfiguration of the system which they had been pronouncing as perfect and unchangeable. Like Luther, he had to face the cruelest criticisms one of which is to call his philosophy, non-religious. In fact, to this day many of his poems cannot be put on air on radio or TV in Pakistan as the authorities feel less confident for the reception that those poems might initiate.

The Iqbalian model, had a revolutionizing effect in some of the countries of the Middle East and also within Europe. By penetrating into the religious veil, both Iqbal and Luther succeeded in compelling the fundamental religious doctrines to go through a major transformation which is appropriately captured in one of Iqbal's own couplets in "Bal-e Jibril"-046: "Na Tu Zameen Ke Liye Hai Na Asman Ke Liye, Jahan Hai Tere Liye, Tu Nahin Jahan Ke Liye" (you live neither for the earth nor for the skies, universe is made for you, you are not made for it) ("Allama Iqbal Poetry").

So, by not talking in terms of "categorical imperatives" as Kant would have it but linking reality of solid things with that of the feeling and emotion, we could be hopeful of hitting upon at least two fundamental benefits. The first positive outcome could come as a stabilizing force which would prevent our beliefs from becoming unreasonably vulnerable to the external retaliations. It is to suggest that our beliefs in such an arrangement could have a conviction and basis of their own. New doubts and questions would not have a confounding impact since we would be fully aware of the fact that our developed conviction is fully equipped to absorb or embrace any necessary change. This is important because things which are bigger in nature and which last relatively for longer periods of time can be redesigned only through a strong conventional framework. If this is not the case, reconstructions in any domain of human life would seem like a far-fetched and too ambitious a risk.

One might in fact say that in such a position, humans would be guided towards a mature analysis. There would be a possibility to welcome any contrary remarks, knowing that capacity to think and feel in a balanced manner is going to unfold in sensible and impartial answers. It is referred to as a mature analysis because the stability that would follow, would be operating from a holistic viewpoint. In other words, it would be creating an inclusive enterprise to channelize our fluctuating principles. Historically, in the patterns of conventional wisdom, this sort of outcome is usually associated with technical and scientific domain. But interestingly, this understanding could be furthered by bringing impartial behavioral pattern into the field of religious philosophy.

The second of the fundamental advantages would manifest itself in the moderate tendency that would stop perceiving reason as an enemy of religious structures which has been hitherto the case. Such change in these tendencies would be an equivalent of embracing humanitarian values and attributes. A concept like secularism would become more meaningful and plausible to the fundamental psyche in its pragmatic sense. It might even furnish a process via which fundamental tendencies can be stopped from getting converted into extremist actions. For instance, the burning of the fifty thousand books in

the library of Baghdad is one of the darkest events in the Islamic history and it has been justified on the basis of distorted and unreasonable manifestations of feelings. Abdulsalem Abdulkareem (librarian) expresses grief as he says, "When the Mogols came here in 1258, they burned the libraries and threw so many books into the River Tigris that the water ran black from the ink" (Westcott). Books are indeed one of the radical ways of storing information and they do hold power to change the world. They are symbolic of intellect and reason; and reason has always been at the core of Islam and this could be testified from numerous verses in Quran. For instance, Surah Fatir: 35:1 state, "He adds to his creation as He pleases". Surah-ar-Rahman: 55:29 states, "Everyday some new work employs Him". These verses invoke creativity and newness. Apart from these, a slightly deep linguistic venture would show many passages asking us to think, reflect and then act. The problem is in Muslims who do read Quran but barely understand it in its true essence. This might appear as astonishingly naïve interpretation of the problem, it is no later when such simple issues take dangerous forms and violent shapes.

It is essential to assign vitality to the mechanism which would not let the fundamental intentions to be transformed into the extremist ones since it is the only source that could hinder the criminal and brutal destabilizing forces in their initial formation. In the absence of such a rectifying tool, it is much less likely that the intellectual progression would manage to defeat the unjust threats posed by the traditional blocks. This sort of moderate solution holds a great relevance even in the contemporary universal bent where major chunks of the population readily and willfully desire to engage each other in unjust and violent actions in the name of some ideology or the other. In simple words, if extreme views are left to run their course and to define what the universe should look like, the complexity is only going to get multiplied. This implies that distortions and misinterpretations which are socially and politically organized and even furthered, got to be intellectually recognized and modified. If it is done, maturity in its complete sense would be embraced and exercised. The event would be a life changing one. Iqbal, especially makes even more sense today when a provocative, militaristic, chauvinistic and belligerent nationalist narrative is at work. He becomes even more prominent in contemporary scenario where ones understanding is inevitably colored by repressive and monolithic political forces. The irony, however, is that importance of Iqbal is do acknowledged in every influential debate on religion; but he is less read and understood in terms of the core principles of his philosophical theology, in Islamic world. The truth is that his poetry creatively incorporates ideas of resistance, protest and dissent. The theoretical rooting of his ideas is so strong that centuries after his demise, his ideas continue to usher change and inspire intellectuals only to create society which could be perceived as more open and tolerant.

Notes

- ¹ If all the wisdom, philosophy and celestial lore together cannot cure the ills of Muslims, it is sure that they are worthless.
- ² Kant uses the word 'tutelage' in his 1784 essay on enlightenment. He primarily blames man's "laziness and cowardice [as] the reasons why such a large proportion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance, nevertheless gladly remain immature for life. For the same reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all" (1). Kant basically implies that it is self-imposed tutelage that we are mostly in hold of and overtly dependent on. It is primarily because that we consciously choose to keep our rationale aside and let others choose and decide for ourselves. In such a case, it is very easy for others to manipulate us.
- ³ The brouhaha over Rushdie's infamous text, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) can be seen as a result of the same distorted understanding of reality. The text gets banned in India even before it is released here. It is said, that the controversy began when one of the compatriots of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian leader, informs him that the text allegedly contains blasphemous verses against Islam and that it repudiates the religion almost to the extent of triviality. Rushdie himself confesses in one of the interviews years later, that Khomeini on his death bed wouldn't have cared to read a 500-page book and that in all probabilities it is somebody else's miscalculated understanding of the book that led up to the chaos. He further adds, that if at all he wanted to criticize Islam he would have done it in a line, he doesn't have to write a five-hundred-page book in order to do so. This incident sufficiently explains the dangers of blindly following certain self-installed moral guardians of society and culture. Also, not a single person bothered to read the book on its own to decide if it genuinely contains, anything, if at all, blasphemous. Again, the same Kantian notion of "convenient immaturity" is reiterated here. (see works cited for interview details).
(The couplets of Iqbal have been translated by the researcher for the article.)

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