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IQBAL'S VIEW OF GOD'S INFINITY

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As it is clearly stated by Iqbal himself, one of the main purposes of **The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam**, is to provide a philosophical justification for the Islamic conception of God.¹ Iqbal is fully aware of the fact that philosophy is mainly a theory which is not in a position to satisfy religious ambition, since the latter seeks «more intimate knowledge of, and association with, the object of its pursuit».² Thus, it can easily be said that any human attempt to talk of God is bound to remain inadequate. Our God-talk is not really about our **experience** of God, but rather about our **interpretation** of that experience. That is why our talk lacks clarity and fulness. According to Iqbal, «God's being is independent, elemental and absolute. Of such a self it is impossible for us to form an adequate conception.»³ Here I wish to underline the word «adequate». Iqbal is not a fideist: Not to be able to have an adequate conception does not mean that we can form **no** conception of Him whatsoever. As we all know in our own experiences, there are different degrees of conceiving something.

Having the logico-linguistic limitations in mind, now I wish to have a glance at Iqbal's talk of God which constitutes the most important part of his philosophy. I can but choose only some points which, to my mind, are mostly misunderstood and misinterpreted. I will also wish to make some references to the views of some contemporary process philosophers

(1) **Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam** (= R) Lahore, 1958, p. 88-9.

(2) R., p. 89.

(3) R., p. 56.

whose approaches to theology are, to a certain extent, similar to that of Iqbal.

We know that Iqbal uses many different, though related, expressions when he talks of God's nature and His attributes. We are told that God is an Ego, an Ultimate Ego, the Absolute Ego, an All-Inclusive Self, the Creative Self, the Ultimate Reality and so forth.⁴ The expressions concerning God's relation with the universe are perhaps more revealing and even striking. We are told that this Ego or Self is «organically related» to an ever-growing universe which is described as «the creation», «the behaviour», «the habit», «the effects», and something like the «character» of the Ultimate Self. Or, the universe is «a fleeting moment in His life». Iqbal's sympathy to what is called the Philosophy of Organism, his «eventism» and his sincere endeavour to hold permanence and flux, One and Many together is quite obvious. In a revealing passage it is said that «the passing show of the apparently permanent world of physics... is rooted in something more permanent, conceivable only as a self which alone combines the opposite attributes of change and permanence, and thus can be regarded as both constant and variable.»⁵ There is no external limit for the enrichment of the universe. «Its only limit is internal, i.e. the immanent self which animates and sustains the whole... As the Qur'an says, 'Verily unto thy Lord is the limit'.»⁶ The foregoing statement and Iqbal's interpretation of the verse remind us of Whitehead's wellknown doctrine of God as a «Principle of Limitation», putforward in **Science and the Modern World**, and defended also in **Process and Reality** under the name of «the Principle of Concretion».⁷

Difficulties arise when we start thinking about the relation between the infinite and the finite. Iqbal tries very hard to overcome these difficulties by dealing with them in a most comprehensive and critical manner. He rejects both deism and pantheism, though the latter seems to have occupied his mind throughout his life. But has his analysis of the God-World relationship brought him to a conception of a «limited God»? C.A. Kadir, the former Iqbal professor of philosophy, says that «so keen was Iqbal to preserve the creativity and freedom of the ego, that he accepted

(4) R., pp. 56 and 60.

(5) R., pp. 66-7.

(6) R., pp. 56-7.

(7) **Science and the Modern World**, Free Press, New York, 1967, p. 178. And **Process and Reality**, New York, 1929, p. 522.

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the idea of a limited God, though it ran counter to the orthodox view.»⁸ Again, in another place he says that «Iqbal has put forward the concept of a limited God, which was much in the air when the Lectures were written.»⁹ Dr. M.S. Raschid, in his recent and, to some extent, fairly provoking study says that «essentially and fundemantally Iqbal has developed a finite conception of diety.» According to the author, Iqbal arrived at this conclusion «largely by a superficial and uncritical reading of western science and philosophy.» «Iqbal tries to relate his metaphysical extrapolations from western sources - especially his finite concept of God - to the Qur'an and the tradition of Muslim thought. This enterprise is equally unsuccessful.»¹⁰

Now, what are the main characteristics of a finite diety? It is said that God becomes finite when we think that He partakes, in some fundamental respect, of the limited and imperfect character of nature.¹¹ Secondly, God becomes finite, if one thinks that He derives His being from any other source. Thirdly, He becomes finite, if there is something that stands beyond His reach and thus sets a limit to His creative activity.

Does Iqbal's God have these or similar characteristics? Iqbal discusses God's infinity in many places of his Lectures, especially when he deals with the nature and attributes of God and Man's freedom. He talks, for instance, about «the revelation of the **infinite**»¹² and «**infinity** of the Ultimate Ego consisting in **infinite** inner possibilities of His creative activity..»¹³. And again, about «the **Infinite** passing into the loving embrace of the finite.»¹⁴ We are also told that «the true **Infinite** does not exclude the finite; it embraces the finite without effacing its finitude.»¹⁵ We can easily increase the number of this type of quotations, but the ones we have here are sufficient to show that the claims concerning Iqbal's defence of finite conception of God are made, to say the least, in hastiness and without taking Iqbal's whole talk of God into account.

Iqbal sees an organic relation between God and the Universe; God.

(8) See his «Deeds or Ideas», Al-Hikma, Vol. 5. n.d. p. 24.

(9) Op. cit., p. 22

(10) Iqbal's Concept of God, London, 1981, p. 59

(11) Op. cit., p. XIII.

(12) R., p. 6.

(13) R., p. 64.

(14) R., p. 110.

(15) R., p. 29.

as a creative power, is **in** the universe. Even the word «partaking» may not be appropriate in Iqbal's case, because the universe does not have an independent being standing in opposition to God. The Universe is, as we have pointed out a little earlier, «the behaviour of God.» Let us suppose that God in fact partakes of the order of universe. Would this make God finite? As Charles Hartshorne says, we do not call a building small if it has many many small rooms.

Iqbal's God is not finite in the second sense mentioned above, since Iqbal says very clearly that God's being is independent, elemental and absolute. That means He does not derive His being from something else. The Ultimate Ego «involves an infinite series, but it is not that series». God's absoluteness makes no sense when we consider Him as a finite being. Iqbal's rejection of the classical Cosmological Argument is, at least partly, due to his rejection of a finite conception of God. This argument, as it stands, tries to reach the Infinite by merely negating the finite.» But such a move can only take us to a false infinite not a true one. Again, teleological argument is rejected on the same bases. The Designer that this argument reaches is external to his material and hence limited and finite.¹⁶ Had Iqbal defended a finite conception of God, his whole argument about the superficiality of these arguments would itself be superficial.

Here one is tempted to ask a question which has been asked many times in some recent philosophical circles. Is it possible to attribute to God both finitude and infinity? Whitehead and Hartshorne, the well-known contemporary representatives of process philosophy, think that this is not only possible but also necessary. Both philosophers, as we all know, see two distinguishable aspects in the nature of God. Whitehead names them as Primordial and Consequent natures, and Hartshorne calls them as Absolute and Relative aspects. God, as a Primordial Being is, according to Whitehead, «infinite... free, complete and eternal,»¹⁷ whereas as a Consequent being He is in the flux. As a Primordial Being, God «is not directly related to the given course of history, but the given course of history presupposes (it).» As for Hartshorne, God in His essence is infinite and absolute. We can, however, call God a Relative being, because of His relatedness to every thing exists. According to Hartshorne, we can easily say that «S is P» and «S is not P», if S is applied to two different aspects of the same being, and if they are used as complementary to each

(16) R., pp. 28-9.

(17) *Process and Reality*, p. 524.

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other. Does this di-polarity make God finite? According to Hartshorne, the God of classical theism is «absolutely infinite». It might seem that the only alternative to this conception of God «must be now fashionable conception of a 'finite' God. Fortunately, this is not the case. I say 'fortunately', because the notion of a purely finite or imperfect diety seems to have all the weaknesses that overwhelmed primitive polytheism, plus a lamentable lack of verity.»¹⁸

Here I mention these two philosophers because Iqbal's view of nature is similar to that of Whitehead; and Hartshorne includes our philosopher among his «modern pantheists».¹⁹ In other words, he sees some similarities between his own views of God and those of Iqbal. Perhaps it is due to this connection, that Dr. Raschid says that «a finite God is something clearly intelligible and comprehensible - for instance, the God of Whitehead (and Hartshorne) and Iqbal.»²⁰ I think it is a mistake to say that Whitehead and Hartshorne defended a finite conception of God. Their God is infinite at least in one fundamental aspect. And it is another mistake to put Iqbal on the same line as these Western philosophers. To begin with, Iqbal, as far as I know, does not make a distinction in the nature of God, although such a distinction does not seem to be altogether foreign to Islamic thought. Criticizing one of the conclusions of S. Alexandre's *Space, Time and Diety*, Iqbal says that «we cannot apply atomic time to God and conceive Him as life in the making.»²¹ Whereas Whitehead's God (and Hartshorne's 'relative' diety) can be considered as a life in the making in one respect. Secondly some western philosophers, including Hartshorne, try to bring about a new interpretation of the concept of trinity. Whereas Iqbal's monotheism is so strong in the *Lectures* that it requires no elucidation. That is why Hartshorne sees only «the motifs of dipolarity» and not dipolarity itself in Iqbal's philosophy.²²

Now, I would like to come to another point which seems to strengthen the position of those who assert that Iqbal's conception of God is finite. The point is about Man's freedom and God's foreknowledge. According to Iqbal, «the emergence of egos endowed with the power spontaneous

(18) *Man's Vision of God*, Hamden, 1964, p. 5.

(19) *Philosophers Speak of God*, eds., Hartshorne and Reese, Univ. Press, Chicago, 1953, p. 294.

(20) Raschid, op. cit., p. 97.

(21) *R.*, p. 75.

(22) *Philosophers Speak of God*, p. 297.

and unforeseeable action is, in a sense, a limitation on the freedom of the all inclusive Ego. But this limitation is not externally imposed. It is born out of His own creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators of His life, power and freedom.»²³ Iqbal tells us not to be afraid of the word 'limitation', since all activity, creational or otherwise, is a kind of limitation without which it is impossible to conceive God. Now this well-known oft-quoted statement try to show that to accept the right of self-decision or self-determination to other egos is a metaphysical (and in Man's case, moral as well) necessity. Secondly, it tries to show that God's power and freedom should be considered in the light of divine wisdom.

I do not deny that the idea stated in the above quotation is tied up with many problems philosophical in nature. Without the power of spontaneous and thus unforeseeable action Iqbal could not talk of novelty, growth, even creation and so on. And without these concepts he could not reject the idea of a block universe, and defend a universe whose future is open. The word «unforeseeable» in the above quotation needs a comment. Foreseeable by whom? Can God foresee a free and spontaneous action, and if He does, does foreseeing - or foreknowledge - predetermines the action in question? Can we say, as E. Hocking is reported to have said, that God does not know what we are going to do to-morrow? If the answer is 'yes', then we have to ask another question: Is not there a region that remains outside the divine reach? As soon as we remember Iqbal's identification of divine knowledge with divine creation, these questions will turn out to be more crucial, since any limitation in the sphere of knowledge becomes a limitation in the sphere of creation.²⁴ I believe that Iqbal's solution of this problem is fairly different from those of, say, Whitehead and Hartshorne. For example, according to Whitehead, «God is not before creation but with creation.»²⁵ In other words, God does not create - at least not in the classical sense of the term - the actual entities; He saves them by receiving the reach and concrete experience of every actual entity which is, by the way, not the result but the instance of creation. Thus, creativity is not a cause and it does not have an actuality apart from, and independent of its instances. The upshot of such a view is that not all decisions are God's decisions - a result which is fully supported

(23) R., pp. 79-80.

(24) R., p. 78.

(25) Process and Reality, p. 521.

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by Hartshorne.

I do not think that we can derive this type of conclusion from Iqbal's philosophy. If we examine the above mentioned quotation concerning the freedom of egos, we will see that this freedom is considered within God's creative activity. It is in God's life, power and freedom that other free egos participate. This is only natural, because according to Iqbal, «the world in all its details... is the self revelation of the Great I-am. Iqbal believes that this view does not prevent us from holding the view that «the ego is a free personal causality.»²⁶

Well, this is a problem which Iqbal does not seem to pretend to solve. As a matter of fact, he says that the subject needs a special treatment.²⁷ All we can say is that Iqbal does not think that self-limitation is a limitation in its usual sense. This kind of limitation, since it is born out of God's own creative freedom, and not externally imposed, does no harm to God's absoluteness and perfection. As for God's foreknowledge, it is related to His continuous creation. The future is, according to Iqbal, an open possibility and not an order of events determined once and for all. So, as a realm of possibility awaiting God's free creative decision, the future pre-exists in His life.²⁸ It is interesting to note that Hartshorne is in full agreement with Iqbal when he says that «there is nothing in the future... to be ignorant of, except those... outlines of possibility or probability. God knows this entire outline.»²⁹ It seems to me that when we understand the future in this way, no question of ignorance and thus limitation will be involved.

My final upshot is this : A careful study of all the relevant passages in the **Lectures** makes it very difficult indeed to assert that Iqbal defended a finite conception of God. The problem of the relation between the Infinite and the finite egos is a difficult one. To say that «either God or Man» and try to solve the problem in a reductionist manner cannot be a final step. A theistic solution ought to take both sides into account. Iqbal's approach to the solution of the problem is sound, though this does

(26) R., pp. 71 and 108.

(27) R., p. 111.

(28) R., p. 79.

(29) Hartshorne, «Whitehead's Idea of God.» **The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead**, ed. P.A. Schilpp, The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., Second edition, 1951, p. 529.

not mean that he releived the whole tension and brought about a final solution, since in such matters perhaps no final solutions are possible for the finite egos.