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Prophecy and Psycopathy

[*The following passage is taken from the 7th and final lecture, "Is Religion Possible?," of Muhammad Iqbal's* The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. A principal theme of the* Reconstruction *is that the so-called ordinary or normal human experiences are not the only genuine experiences that human beings have, and that certain so-called extraordinary or non-normal experiences, whose existence is widely and abundantly attested in human history and literature, are no less authentic. One such experience is mystical experience. In Iqbal's thought, mystical experience is distinct from prophetic experience (see Mustansir Mir,* Iqbal*, I.B.Tauris, London, 2006, 7), but Iqbal cites the former in order to make room for the latter: once, through reference to mystical experience, the validity of nonordinary or non-normal experiences has been established, it would become easy to validate prophetic experience. George Fox, to whom Iqbal refers, was a seventeenth-century English religious reformer who founded what is commonly called the Quaker Movement.*]

As I have indicated before, religion as a deliberate enterprise to seize the ultimate principle of value and thereby to reintegrate the forces of one's own personality, is a fact which cannot be denied. The whole religious literature of the world, including the records of specialists' personal experiences, though perhaps expressed in the thought-forms of an out-of-date psychology, is a standing testimony to it. These experiences are perfectly natural, like our normal experiences. The evidence is that they possess a cognitive value for the recipient, and, what is much more important, a capacity to centralize the forces of the ego and thereby to endow him with a new personality. The view that such experiences are neurotic or mystical will not finally settle the question of their meaning or value. If an outlook beyond physics is possible, we must courageously face the possibility, even though it may disturb or tend to modify our normal ways of life and thought. The interests of truth require that we must abandon our present attitude. It does not matter in the least if the religious attitude is originally determined by some kind of physiological disorder. George Fox may be a neurotic; but who can deny his purifying power in England's religious life of his day? Muhammad, we are told, was a psychopath. Well, if a psychopath has the power to give a fresh direction to the course of human history, it is a point of the highest psychological interest to search his original

experience which has turned slaves into leaders of men, and has inspired the conduct and shaped the career of whole races of mankind. Judging from the various types of activity that emanated from the movement initiated by the Prophet of Islam, his spiritual tension and the kind of behaviour which issued from it, cannot be regarded as a response to a mere fantasy inside his brain. It is impossible to understand it except as a response to an objective situation generative of new enthusiasms, new organizations, new starting-points. If we look at the matter from the standpoint of anthropology it appears that a psychopath is an important factor in the economy of humanity's social organization. His way is not to classify facts and discover causes: he thinks in terms of life and movement with a view to create new patterns of behaviour for mankind. No doubt he has his pitfalls and illusions just as the scientist who relies on sense-experience has his pitfalls and illusions. A careful study of his method, however, shows that he is not less alert than the scientist in the matter of eliminating the alloy of illusion from his experience.

Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*,
ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and
Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 149–150

[*Note. The late Fazlur Rahman of the University of Chicago, in his book* Islam *(2nd ed; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979, 13), deals with the once popular charge of epilepsy brought against the Prophet of Islam. One of the points made by Rahman shows the influence of the above-noted Iqbal's line of argument. Rahman writes: "This is, indeed, a strange form of epilepsy which is invariably associated with the deliverance of guiding principles for such a powerful and creative movement as the Prophet's and never occurs by itself. We are not, of course, denying the possibility of someone suffering from epilepsy and also being endowed with spiritual experiences, but the point is that at least sometimes the former should be capable of occurring independently of the latter even if the latter may not occur without the former."*]

Rediscovering the Heritage for Muslim Youth

[Iqbal had a clear and impassioned understanding of his role as a Muslim man of letters: his role was to examine, interpret, evaluate, and transmit those elements of the Islamic tradition that are of perennial worth, interest, and relevance, with a view to galvanizing the indolent, spiritless, and fatalistically minded Muslim generation of his time into action that would leave an enduring imprint on the tablet of history. All the seven couplets of the poem speak of Iqbal's efforts to rediscover, and reconnect Muslims with, some of the finest and most fundamental aspects of an Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition that had, through neglect and lack of appreciation, ceased to orientate, inspire, and guide Muslims. As such, the poem comes to have a noticeable thematic unity.

The poem, as the opening couplet indicates, is addressed to the Muslim youth of ʿAjam—"ʿAjam" being a collective term used both for the non-Arab lands and for the non-Arab peoples (the common Persian and Urdu phrase "ʿArab-o-ʿAjam"—literally, "Arab and non-Arab lands" or "Arab and non-Arab peoples"—is an inclusive term, meaning "all the Muslims of the world"). Iqbal, since he wrote poetry in Persian and Urdu, took as his main audience the non-Arab, or ʿAjamī, populations in the Muslim world.

While Urdu would be understood by Muslims practically throughout the Indian subcontinent—representing a large part of the Islamic world—Persian would be understood not only in Iran, but, in various degrees, in many other Islamic lands as well. To address the people of ʿAjam, therefore, is to address, potentially, vast segments of the Muslim population in the Eastern hemisphere (the reference to the East in couplet 5, too, is made with this understanding of the range of Iqbal's address); and the address, specifically, to the youth of ʿAjam represents Iqbal's conviction that youth can preeminently serve as vehicles of the change that Iqbal had envisaged for the Muslim world. Just as he draws the major themes of his poetry from the Qurʾān—of this indebtedness to the Qurʾān we will see more than one example in the commentary below—so in his emphasis on the idea of youth as an effective instrument of social change—Iqbal follows a Qurʾānic motif.

Notably, in addressing Muslim youth and telling them that he has endeavored to revivify for them aspects of the Islamic cultural heritage, Iqbal repeatedly says that the heritage in question belongs to the youth themselves and that he is only *re*-presenting it to them, so that they may lovingly embrace it as they would a long-absent relative or friend.]

چون چراغ لاله سوزم در خیابان شما   ای جوانان عجم جان من و جان شما

غوطه‌ها زد در ضمیر زندگی اندیشه‌ام   تا بدست آورده‌ام افکار پنهان شما

مهر و مه دیدم نگاهم برتر از پروین گذشت   ریختم طرح حرم در کافرستان شما

تا سنانش تیزتر گردد فرو پیچیدمش   شعله‌ئی آشفته بود اندر بیابان شما

فکر رنگینم کند نذر تهی دستان شرق   پارهٔ لعلی که دارم از بدخشان شما

می‌رسد مردی که زنجیر غلامان بشکند   دیده‌ام از روزن دیوار زندان شما

حلقه گرد من زنید ای پیکران آب و گل

آتشی در سینه دارم از نیاکان شما

Muhammad Iqbal, *Kulliyyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī*
(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 415–416

Translation

In the avenues of your garden, I burn like the lamp of a tulip—
By your life, O youth of ʿAjam, and by mine![1]

Time and again, my thought dove into the depths of life,
Until I seized hold of the hidden thoughts of yours.[2]

I saw the sun and the moon, my vision soared higher than the Pleiades:
In your infidel land, I laid the foundations of the Sanctuary.[3]

That its point may become sharper still, I twisted it down—
A listless flame it was in your wilderness.[4]

My colorful thought presents to the empty-handed of the East
A piece of a ruby that I have from your Badakhshan.[5]

There is about to arrive a man who will break the chains of the slaves—
I have looked through the window in the wall of your prison.[6]

Make a circle round me, O creatures of water and clay:
In my breast, I have a fire that I carry from your ancestors.[7]

Notes

[1]**In the avenues . . . mine.** The basic meaning of the couplet is obvious enough. An earnest Iqbal, swearing by his life and by the life of his audience, says that he is, like a lamp, a source of guidance to his addressees—namely, the Muslim youth. Since the addressees' place of residence is described as a garden (*khiyābān*), the lamp is the lamp of a flower—of the tulip, to be specific. Incidentally, the tulip, which resembles a cup or a small vase in shape, is an apt image for a lamp (tulip lampshades are common). But there is a more important reason for Iqbal's use of the expression "the lamp of a tulip": the tulip in question is of an intense bright color, so that it actually appears to "burn," as Iqbal puts it. The "burning tulip" (the kinesthetic and synesthetic effects created by the phrase will not be missed) represents both the clarity and the force of the guidance or message that Iqbal has for his audience.

The above-noted Persian word, *khiyābān*, used in the original text by Iqbal in conjunction with the word for "tulip," *lālah*, raises a problem of interpretation. In more than one place in his poetry, Iqbal speaks of the incompatibility between the *khiyābān* and the *lālah* (*Bāl-Jibrīl*, in *Kulliyyat-i Iqbāl—Urdu* [Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2000], 399, poem 55, couplet 4; *Zabūr-i ʿAjam*, 399, couplet 4). There is, of course, no intrinsic incompatibility between the two, and the *lālah* may freely grow in any *khiyābān*. So why does Iqbal think that the *khiyābān* and the *lālah* are incompatible? Obviously, Iqbal is not speaking as a horticulturist would about the suitability or unsuitability of the soil of a *khiyābān* for the growth of the *lālah*. The incompatibility in question, then, is that which exists between the *khiyābān* and the *lālah* used as symbols by Iqbal himself. The tulip is Iqbal's favorite flower because it provides a fine illustration of certain ideas that Iqbal wishes to put across. For one thing, unlike most flowers, the tulip would grow even in an inhospitable environment—for example, in the desert (Iqbal frequently uses the phrase *lālah-i ṣahrā*, "desert tulip")—and reference to the hardy *lālah* is found very serviceable by Iqbal,

who wants Muslims to establish their identity in life against all odds and assert their presence on the world scene in the face of all opposition (for more details about Iqbal's use of the word *lālah* in his poetry, see Mustansir Mir, *Tulip in the Desert* [London: C. Hurst, 2000], 7). In speaking of the incomptability between the *khiyābān* and the *lālah*, Iqbal, we have to assume, presents the *khiyābān* as a symbol of enervating comfort and the *lālah* as a symbol of hardihood. In fine, Iqbal is telling the Muslim youth that, standing as he is as a lamp of a tulip in their *khiyābān*, he is both warning them that life in the *khiyābān* can turn them into weaklings and inviting them to learn the ways of the *lālah*.

[2]**Time and again . . . yours.** The couplet means that the insights that Iqbal presents in his works for the benefit of Muslim youth have been garnered by him as a result of long and deep thinking and reflection on his part. But, again, those insights had belonged to the addressees, only they had forgotten them, and Iqbal had to rediscover the insights for them.

[3]**I saw . . . Sanctuary.** This couplet makes a powerful allusion to two incidents of Abraham's life as narrated in the Qurʾān. The first is described in Qurʾān 6:74–83, according to which, Abraham, on one occasion, a shining star, on another occasion, the shining moon, and on yet another occasion, the bright sun, calling each his Lord but soon repudiating them on noticing that they not only rose and shone but also set and faded away. The incident has been variously interpreted in Qurʾānic exegesis, but the relevant point for us is that the Qurʾān presents Abraham's repudiation of the celestial bodies as a "definitive argument" (*ḥujjah*) against the idolatry practiced by his opponents. The second incident, described in Qurʾān 2:127–129, presents Abraham as "raising the foundations of the House [the Kaʿbah, the House of God in Makkah]." With these incidents forming the background to the couplet, Iqbal will appear to be casting himself in the role of Abraham: like Abraham, he finds himself in a state of confrontation with Muslims who, though "believers" in the conventional sense of the word, are, in thought and practice, so far removed from authentic Islam that they may deservedly be called, like the nation of Abraham, "idolatrous." Addressing such a nation, Iqbal says that he has looked at the heavenly bodies, but that, whereas the eyes of the idolators of Abraham's time got stuck at those heavenly bodies and could not see beyond them, Iqbal's eyes, like Abraham's, have seen the reality that lies beyond the stars, the moon, and the sun, that reality being God. Furthermore, having realized that God is the master reality of all existence, Iqbal has, like Abraham, understood the implications of that realization, the most important implication being that human beings must acknowledge God as Lord in their lives. It was in accordance with this understanding—and, of course, in obedience to the Divine command—that Abraham laid the foundations of the sanctuary of the Kaʿbah in the wilderness of Makkah. In alluding to that incident from Abraham's life, Iqbal uses the phrase "infidel land," conflating two places—the idolatrous land of Ur in Mesopotamia from which Abraham originally came and the "untilled valley" (Qurʿān 14:37) of Makkah. To this "infidel land" belong Iqbal's addressees, who are only nominally Muslims.

[4]**That . . . wilderness.** A burning flame, pushed down, shoots back up with a flare as soon as the downward push ceases (similarly, a body of flowing water, dammed up, will gush forth with greater force when the barrier holding it is removed). Addressing Muslim youth, Iqbal says that the flame of their ambition and energy was uncharacteristically low and weak, and that he deliberately pushed it down, twisting it in the meantime, with the hope that, when the pressure on it is lifted, the flame would come back up, rise much higher, and burn the more brightly. Iqbal is referring to the criticism—the use of the word "twisted" makes that criticism quite severe—to which he often subjects Muslims in his works. The scathing criticism, one might think, is negative, but, actually, it is purposeful and meant to produce positive results. It may appear to "put down," but is, in fact, intended to "lift up," Muslims. Socrates called himself the gadfly of Athens. Iqbal, one thinks, would not mind being called the stinging bee of the Muslim Community.

In the second hemistich, the reference to the flame in the wilderness is significant. One of Iqbal's favorite images is that of the fire of the Sinai, which is mentioned in the Qurʾān in reference to Moses. As one learns from Qurʾān 7:141–145; 20:9–35; and other verses taken together, Moses, while returning from Madyan, to which he had exiled himself from Egypt after he had inadvertently killed an Egyptian there, noticed a fire burning at some distance in the wilderness of Sinai through he was passing along with his family. Asking his family to stop and wait for his return, Moses went up to the fire, where he had an encounter with God and received the Torah. This Qurʾānic narrative and its components come to have an exceptionally rich set of significations in Iqbal's poetry. In the present couplet, Iqbal draws on the image of the fire in the wilderness: Muslims—Muslim youth, especially—should have been passionate about setting and pursuing high goals in life, but they are not. Given this situation, Iqbal decided to apply pressure on them (by twisting their flame down, as he puts it), so that they might react and become "fired up" with noble ambition.

[5]**My colorful thought . . . Badakhshān.** A region in northeastern Afghanistan, Badakhshān was, for centuries, mined for rubies and other precious stones; even today, magnificent rubies of Badakhshān origin can be seen in museums across the world, one such stone being the Black Prince's Ruby, which, set in the Imperial State Crown, is on display in the Tower of London. In Persian—and also in Urdu—literature, accordingly, Badakhshān has come to be associated with rubies; as one can imagine, a distinguished scholar or man of letters connected to Badakhshān might be called "the ruby of Badakhshān"—the Persian poet and philosopher Nāsir-i Khusraw (1004–1088) was so called—and a charming beloved might be described by a poet as "a ruby of Badakhshān." Iqbal is saying that the Muslims of the East have been living an intellectually and spiritually barren existence for centuries, and that he is trying to rejunvenate them with new ideas and a new spirit. To the "empty-handed" Muslims (the word "empty-handed" here has connotation of impoverishment), Iqbal is presenting the gift of a set of ideas expressed in beautiful language that are like the ruby of Badakhshān (the gift, actually, consists of only a single "piece of a ruby," which implies that the Islamic tradition, in its entirety, is vast and rich like the region of Badakhshān, and that Iqbal is presenting his addressees with only a very small portion of that tradition, hoping that the addressees will become enamored of that tradition and undertake to discover more of it on their own). Iqbal's ideas have the potential of enriching the impoverished Muslims, who should, therefore, accord them the appreciation they deserve. But, as in other couplets of this poem, so in this couplet, Iqbal says that he is presenting Muslims with what always belonged to them, only they had consigned it to oblivion: the ruby he is offering them is from their own Badakhshān.

[6]**There is . . . prison.** Iqbal tells Muslims that the days of their misfortune will soon come to an end: Muslims are like slaves shut up in prison, but there is a window in the prison's wall that allows one to catch a glimpse of the outside world. While most of them are resigned to their servile fate and have no hope of redemption, Iqbal knows that their situation is about to change for the better. Looking through the window in the prison wall, he can make out that a man who will break their chains is about to arrive.

The couplet seems to suggest that Iqbal believes that heroic figures bring about historical change through quick and dramatic action. In fact, Iqbal holds that such change is due to the operation of larger social and other forces in the lives of nations over extended periods of time. In this connection, Iqbal does speak of the role and contribution of the "self-concentrated individuals," but he regards such individuals as important, first, not because of any charismatic or wonder-working powers they might possess but because they carry the weight of the tradition to which they belong and serve as focal points for the effective transmission of that tradition in a reworked and viable form; and, second, not because such individuals are always directly and practically involved in replacing the old order with the new but because, being visionaries, they determine the need and potential for change and set the direction of change. The following quote from Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (ed. M.

Saeed Sheikh [Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989], 120), aptly summarizes Iqbal's thought on the subject:

> The only effective power, therefore, that counteracts the forces of decay in a people is the rearing of self-concentrated individuals. Such individuals alone reveal the depth of life. They disclose new standards in the light of which we begin to see that our environment is not wholly inviolable and requires revision.

As a footnote to the quote from the *Reconstruction*, it may be added that Iqbal himself, doubtless, was a "self-concentrated" personality, and that it would be instructive to study the wide, if at times subtle, influence of his thought on the history of several Muslim nations during and after his life.

Iqbal was both an admirer and a critic of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Some of Iqbal's ideas, especially that of the Perfect Man, have been interpreted to mean that he approved of Nietzsche's idea of the Overman (*Übermensch*). If so, then the man whose advent is foretold by Iqbal in the present couplet is, one might think, Nietzsches' Overman. Such a view, however, would be grossly mistaken. Iqbal, a firm believer in Islamic egalitarianism and in a universal, nondiscriminatory application of the Islamic legal and moral code in a Muslim society, could hardly be imagined as warming up to the Nietzschean idea. For, as Walter Kaufmann remarks, Nietzsche's Overman "does not have instrumental value for the maintenance of society: he is valuable in himself because he embodies the state of being that has the only ultimate value there is; and society is censured insofar as it insists on conformity and impedes his development" (Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* [4th edition; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974], 313–314). Nor would Iqbal put any premium on Nietzsche's distinction between the master race and the slave race, or accept the concomitant distinction between aristocratic morality and herd morality (Frederick Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, 11 vols. [New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1994], 7:401). One suspects that neither Nietzsche's Overman nor any other member of Nietzsche's master race would be keenly interested in liberating the slaves of whom Iqbal speaks in this couplet.

The pronoun "your" in the phrase "your prison" in this couplet, as against the same pronoun in similar phrases in the other couplets, carries a special nuance: Muslim youth, or, for that matter, Muslims in general—are in prison, but Iqbal is not. True, if Iqbal has looked through the window in the prison wall and told of the impending arrival of a liberator of slaves, then he, too, must have been in prison. But Iqbal's point is that, unlike the other prisoners, he is only *physically*, but not *mentally*, in prison. In Iqbal's view, mental servitude precedes bodily servitude, and his main endeavor as a thinker and a poet, therefore, was to set the minds of Muslims free, because only with liberated minds could Muslims win true and complete freedom. The man whose advent is foretold in the couplet, thus, has to be a liberator of minds.

[7]**Make a circle . . . ancestors.** Iqbal says that the Muslim youth need to learn from him since he wishes to inspire them in the same way in which the earliest generations of Muslims were inspired. A wordplay is probably intended in the couplet. The addressees are called "creatures of clay and water" (*paykarān-i āb-o-gil*). Water and clay can be said to be the main constituents of a person's physical being, but those constituents are inert matter, and it is the element of fire that imbues creatures of water and dust with the dynamism they need to make their mark in life. The opening phrase of the couplet, "Make a circle round me," may be a borrowing from Samuel T. Coleridge (see *Iqbal Quarterly*, 7.1–2, 2007, 8).

Mustansir Mir

The Value of the Moment

I judge the worth of my days, months and years from the experience which they bring to me; and sometimes I am surprised to find that a single moment is more valuable to me than a whole year.

Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections,
ed. Javid Iqbal, revised and annotated by Khurram Ali Shafique
(Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2006), 131

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