

## Allama Iqbal's Epistemological Approach Towards Religious Ontology

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### Abstract

Ontology is a branch of knowledge which is related to the types of existences which are two types the *Phenomena* and the *Noumena*. Epistemology is a branch of knowledge which explains the nature and existence of the physical objects which have surrounded us thus the is called the phenomena world. But there are some non-physical '*phenomeno*' which Kant had described as the *Noumena* world. For the former, the human rationality and observation are the types of epistemology which provide answer to some extent. But for the later, these epistemological sources are not sufficient. Thus religion proclaims that it has answer to all these '*noumenal world*' and metaphysical existences.

Here is Allama Iqbal's understanding and views that what epistemological approach Islam adopts and how it interprets and explains the *noumenal existence* such as, the concept Of God, the human beings, the nature of human beings, their relation to the world, the God and the relationship between the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* worlds and the roll of theses explanation in the status of the human beings.

**Key Words:** Atheism, Ego hood, Empiricism, Hikmah, Humanism, Rationalism, Revelation.

**I. Introduction.** Human beings living on the earth are surrounded by physical facts which had been source of benefit or threat or source of inspiration for human beings. Human beings, for thousand years are bothering and thinking about these '*phenomena*' and their sources in the '*noumena*' explanation. This intellectual endeavor had been done on the basis of rationality. But there is other domain which explains these two fold existences on the basis of revelation. Here is the focus of Iqbal's deliberations regarding the religious epistemology for the nature of theistic based concepts such as: explanation of the Universe, the nature of God, the nature and relationship between the *phenomenal* world and the *noumenal* existences etc.

**I.1. Rationality as the salient character of Human Beings** Rationality is the most distinctive feature of a human being. Reason by nature is inquisitive. Due to this basic instinct, a rational being thinks about his origin, beginning, life, death, attitude, conduct, behavior, relations with other fellow beings, freedom, determination, objectives and good and evil. These are basic questions for the man of every age. The man of every age tried to search the answer of these questions within his limits, level, understanding and consciousness. Theologians, mystics and philosophers of every age tried to address these questions. Among the entire questions the inquiry about the origin of this universe is of basic importance. In pre- modern era this question was entertained by mythology, philosophy and theology within their limits and scope.

**I.2. The Effects of Humanism** But from 14<sup>th</sup> century a new approach emerged in philosophy under the name humanism which entirely changed the parameters of discussion about all above questions and specifically about the question of Absolute Reality or the existence of God. Humanism was a philosophical movement began in 14<sup>th</sup> century and extended in entire Europe till 16<sup>th</sup> century. The basic thesis of humanism was that the human being is the centre of all activities rather than a supernatural reality. This journey of Western thought which started from humanism gradually led the West to atheism. Different phases of Western philosophy from humanism to atheism are deism, pantheism, secularism and absolute materialism etc. Bare

materialism has snatched the peace of mind from human being and threw him in the hell of lust and unending desires. The concept of a superior and supernatural reality is in the very nature of a human being. We are well aware that by nature a human being is not self-guided but others guided. In this scenario belief in God is inevitable. Renowned Muslim philosophers tried to address this question. Allama Dr. Muhammad Iqbal is a well-known, reverent and celebrated figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**1.3. Types of Religions** The population of this planet is approximately Eight billion. According to a survey the inhabitants of this planet are following 4200 religions.<sup>1</sup> According to an estimate 75% of the entire population is the follower of the Abrahamic, Indic and Sinic religions.<sup>2</sup> Similarly there are number of philosophical systems exist in the world i.e. idealism, theism, dualism, pluralism, non-theism, materialism and antitheism or atheism.

There are number of commons and differences in religion and philosophy. Both put up the questions about the existence and nature of God/Absolute Reality, human being and their mutual relationship. But the 'Existence of God/Absolute Reality' is the most important discussion among all. Even it is an important issue in mythological traditions also. There are various philosophical schools and systems existing in the world. We can divide all in two main categories i.e. revelation based and reason centered. No doubt that some issues and questions are common in all philosophical systems but they have grave differences in respect of the understandings of those issues. The Muslim thought is revelation centered. Due to this specific nature it has its own vision and scope in respect of all above mentioned issues. So before starting our discussion under our topic, we should have a brief look on the specific nature of Muslim Philosophy. It will help us to understand Allama Muhammad Iqbal's point of view in respect of the concept of God in a better way.

## **2. Epistemological Approach towards The Understanding of *Phenomenon* and *Noumenon***

Generally speaking, philosophy means love of wisdom or search for wisdom. Wisdom means use of reason, rational activity, rational inquiry or rational understanding. According to philosophers there are two main sources of knowledge i.e. reason and sense perception. Therefore, in history of

philosophy generally and in modern Western philosophy specifically we can see that all philosophical movements and schools of thought are revolving around reason and sense perception. So there are two leading approaches exist in the world of philosophy as 'rationalism' and 'empiricism' in different ways.

### **3. Nature of Islamic Epistemology toward Metaphysics**

But Muslim thought has a different perspective, origin, connotation and definition of wisdom and philosophy. In Muslim thought there are three main sources of knowledge i.e. revelation, reason and sense perception. According to Islam all these three sources have their own importance and role in the acquisition of knowledge in respect of their limits and scope. In Islam the fundamental, ultimate, infallible and authentic source of knowledge is revelation (divine guidance) only. No doubt human reason and sense perception play valuable role in the acquisition of knowledge but both have no claim of infallibility. Muslim Philosophy rests upon the notion of perfectness and infallibility of revelation in the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

### **4. The Term '*Hikmah*' As the True Exposition of Muslim Philosophy.**

In Quran we find a word '*Hikmah*' which is comprehensive than philosophy and encompasses all kinds of wisdom. So for Muslim philosophy the suitable and appropriate word is '*Hikmah*' rather than 'philosophy'.<sup>4</sup> Faith in Oneness of Almighty Allah, Revelation, Angels, Prophet-hood, Finality of the Prophecy of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon Him) and life hereafter is inevitable to be a Muslim.<sup>5</sup> According to Quran everything of this universe is mortal. Our life and stay in this world is for a limited time. Faith in mortality of this life and eternity of life hereafter revolutionizes the whole thought structure and way of action of a being. Both philosophy and religion discuss about the following issues; Absolute Reality, human being, universe, creation, beginning, end, free will, determination, good and evil, mind and body, soul, existence, sources of knowledge, aesthetics and ethics etc. The Muslim Philosophy has different understandings, perspectives and narratives in respect of above all basic notions.

### **5. God as Centrifugal Theme of Abrahamic Religions**

Every rational being thinks about his creation and other things within his capacity at his own level. This question is above and beyond religion, race and time. It is the question of all the times for all rational beings. The

question about the Beginning, end and origin of this universe has been addressed under the name of 'gods and goddesses' in myth, under the title of 'Absolute Reality' in philosophy and as 'Allah' or 'God' in Abrahamic religions.<sup>6</sup>

#### **6. Origin of the concept of Deities (gods / goddesses)**

For the creation, development of all mythological traditions had the concept of deities about everything. All the objects and their function like Earth, Sky, Sea, War, peace, Love, Hate, Women, Harvest, Fertility, Strategy, Sun, Music, Poetry, Justice, Motherhood, Drunkenness, Balance, Creation, Death and Goodness etc. had their explanations due to deities. It means the question of a creator is innate in a rational being and the rationality necessitates searching out its answer. In fact, human being by nature is not self-guided but other's guided. This nature inspires him to search out the reality and power who is the source of power and guidance out of him. The search for reality on the basis of pseudo information led him towards the concept of gods and goddesses made by human beings. This understanding about the origin of human being led them to relate all human evils to their deities. Because human being supposed the deities at their levels so they established an inhuman society.

#### **7. Mythology Provisions as Explanation of the Creation of the Universe**

The mythological beliefs were based mostly on assumptions, superstitions and suppositions. Generally, those were derived from pseudo stories, tales and myth. Hindu mythologies to Etruscan, there were number of mythological traditions. For example in ancient Egyptian mythology there were more than hundred famous gods and goddesses.<sup>7</sup>

**7.1.** According to a Roman myth there were twelve major gods and goddesses<sup>8</sup> while in Hindu mythology there were more than 33 million gods and goddesses which still existed.<sup>9</sup> Greek mythology was major among all. Greek myth revolves around twelve major deities.<sup>10</sup> This tradition as existed in Greek before the 1<sup>st</sup> Greek philosopher Thales. They had the concept of gods and goddesses who had not only created everything but were governing the universe also.

#### **7.2. Greek explanation of the nature and Origin of the Universe**

The search for absolute or ultimate reality is the most basic problem of philosophy. In ancient Greek this problem was addressed by all Greek philosophers from Thales to Aristotle. Greek philosophers right from 'Thales' challenged the mythological beliefs and set the foundation of their thought on reason. In this respect almost every philosopher started his discussion from Absolute Reality/Ultimate Reality and presented their theories on the basis of reason. The 1<sup>st</sup> Greek philosopher or the father of Greek philosophy 'Thales' considered 'Water' as the basic and fundamental principle or reality of this universe. It was further nurtured by later Greek philosophers as 'Boundless', Air, Number, Being-not Being, Fire, Four Elements, Atoms and Nous. In Plato's philosophy we find it as a Supreme Idea and for Aristotle that is the Unmoved Mover or the 1<sup>st</sup> Cause or Uncaused Cause.<sup>11</sup> Despite all the rationality we find their conception of God on two extremes, on one side isolated from the material world and on the other dissolved in the world of matter.

**8. Concept of God in Modern West.** In the wave of progress there had been many views regarding the existence of God which finally lead to atheism. Here is one standpoint.

8.1 The Approach of Humanism: In modern Western philosophy the concept of God has been considered in a different way. From 14<sup>th</sup> century the movement of humanism emerged in Italy. In fact it was a paradigm shift in thousand year's human history. The foundation of humanism was on the negation of the authority of church and priesthood. Pre-modern philosophy was based on the authority and centrality of a supernatural and a transcendental reality. But humanism shifted it towards the centrality of a human being. Later on Western philosophy developed on the heels of this notion. In this way gradually the concept of God in modern Western philosophy turned from supernatural reality to a mere created substance, deism, agnosticism, non-theism, materialism and ultimately to anti theism or atheism. Due to the advancement in science and technology in modern Western era leading rule shifted from religion to philosophy and science.<sup>12</sup>

8.2 Modern Views about Religion: The concept of God and the proofs for His existence are out of the scope of science. Philosophy headed by scientific quest lead to the concept of atheism. It shocked the foundation of the society

and deprived of a being from all ethical and moral values. Richard Milhous Nixon 37<sup>th</sup> president of United States in his inaugural address on 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1969 said that as a nation we Americans have done a lot. We have achieved number of goals. We have a distinction in the nations of the world. We have a solid and sound economy. We are managing modern economy. We have enhanced our agriculture. We have gigantic development in industry. We are leading in science and technology. We are making the history. Nations of the world are looking towards us. We have overcome on all our challenges and crises. But despite all our enormous material development we are in the decisive moment of history. We will have to recognize our today crisis. And "...our crisis today is the reverse. We have found ourselves rich in goods, but ragged in spirit; reaching with magnificent precision for the moon, but falling into raucous discord on earth. We are caught in war, wanting peace. We are torn by division, wanting unity. We see around us empty lives, wanting fulfillment. We see tasks that need doing, waiting for hands to do them. To a crisis of the spirit, we need an answer of the spirit... let us go forward, firm in our faith, steadfast in our purpose, cautious of the dangers; but sustained by our confidence in the will of God and the promise of man."<sup>13</sup> This is a glimpse of the crises of the Godless Western society and of an individual.

### **9. Allama Muhammad Iqbal on the Religious Ontology**

He, being a staunch Muslim presented a combination of Islamic teaching and revelations with rational approach. He explained the religious issues regarding epistemological based on revelation for explanation the ontological existences.

**9.I. Subject of Quran is *Human Being*:** Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) a well-known theologian, philosopher, mystic, wisdom poet and a creative thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to develop a nexus between religion, philosophy and science. Although he produced a thoughtful poetry in Urdu and Persian on this topic but in this article we will concentrate on his philosophical thoughts only. His major philosophical thought is under the title *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. This book is consisted of a preface and seven lectures. In the preface of the book Iqbal tried to unfold the basic spirit of the Quran. He pointed out that the subject

of Quran is *Human Being* and his well-being. No doubt Quran is a theory but the basic spirit of this theory is its practical implementation.<sup>14</sup>

**9.2. Threats to Religion** The 1<sup>st</sup> lecture is about knowledge, possibility of knowledge, sources of knowledge verification of knowledge and the authenticity of knowledge. Actually it was a step to prove the existence of God. In 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and science were leading the world in all dimensions. Revolutionary advancements in science and technology faded the perception of human being towards religion and divine guidance in generally all over the world and specifically in the West. New theories were presented by philosophers and scientists about the beginning and origin of the universe. In the respect the 1<sup>st</sup> blow of philosophy and science was the negation of the supernatural authority in 14<sup>th</sup> century. No doubt the rigidity and narrow mindedness of the church compelled the philosophers to opt this stance. But it was as wrong as the stagnancy of the church. This limitless liberty paved the way for humanism which led to atheism. The second blow was of the Darwinian theory of evolution which was an effort to prove that human being is an animal only by his nature and instincts. And the third blow was the most horrible. It was the Freud's theory of psychoanalysis which tried to prove that human being is a sick animal. Although these theories and approaches were suppositions but these were so forcefully propagated that people adopted them as a fashion and a sign of modernity. This advancement, liberty, modernity and fashion ruined every sign of nobility, sanctity, sacredness and humanity from humankind. This approach eliminated the difference of a rational being from an animal. In fact, it was the elimination of ethical and moral values.

**9.3. God as the Source of Morality** There are two ways for the determination of moral values: religion and reason. In religion, Almighty Allah determines the values, standards and parameters of ethics, morality and good and evil. These are absolute, ultimate and universal. The second way is of philosophy. No doubt we can get some common standards by reason but different cultures challenges to its universality. Now we can observe that by the emergence of postmodernism cultural relativism has become a dominating philosophy in West. The only way to observe the values and protect the prestige of human being is the faith in God. So by questioning about



knowledge, Iqbal indirectly started his discussion about the existence of God.<sup>15</sup>

**9. 4. Revelation as Epistemological Basis.** He opened discussion about the sources of knowledge. He took the stance that revelation is a Divine source of knowledge. The origin of revelation is God, who is Ultimate and Absolute. In philosophy, we depend on reason while in science we rely on five senses. Both have their limitations due to their nature and scope. So the information provided by them would also be limited. If we accept only reason and sense perception as the ultimate sources of knowledge, then we will have to depend only on them for ethics and morality. For this purpose, in I<sup>st</sup> lecture he on one side differentiated revealed knowledge from the experience based knowledge and on the other he tried to develop a link between revelation, reason and sense perception. He strived to prove that religion, its subject matter, its scope and its sources are more authentic and comprehensive than philosophy and science. He argued that the approach of philosophy and science is not ultimate and final about the origin, human being, and universe.<sup>16</sup> According to philosophy only reason is ultimate and its information is authentic. Generally, for philosophy and science human being is a material product. It is a combination of four basic elements. But as for religion, human being is neither transformed from a single cellular organism nor a sick animal. He is the noblest among all creatures and the vicegerent of Almighty Allah.<sup>17</sup>

**9.5. Incompetency of the Traditional Theistic Arguments.** The discussion in I<sup>st</sup> chapter was under the title of 'knowledge by revelation' and the 'knowledge by reason and sense perception'. Under this discussion he strived to encounter the non-theistic and anti-theistic or atheistic philosophies. In 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter he moved towards the arguments presented by scholastic philosophers of the West and analyzed them. The major arguments presented by different philosophers to prove the existence of God are: Cosmological, Teleological, Ontological, Experiential and Pragmatic/Moral.

**9.6. Religion as Panacea for Human Solace.** Iqbal pointed out the weaknesses of these arguments and said that these are insufficient to prove the existence of God.<sup>18</sup> Men of this age cannot have faith in God on the basis of theoretical and metaphysical arguments only. Due to the negation of the concept of God,

His elimination from all spheres of life and reliance on man-made philosophies, the man of this age is facing severe spiritual, psychological, economic, political, social, cultural and moral crises as we have quoted above the views of the American president in this regard. He said, "Humanity needs three things today; a spiritual interpretation of the universe; Spiritual emancipation of the individual; and the basic principles of universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis."<sup>19</sup>

Iqbal was of opinion that according to modern knowledge there are three levels of experience i.e. physics, biology, and psychology. But we cannot restrain human being within these three levels. In fact, human being means a transcendence of a being from the levels of bare reason and sense perception. This transcendence is above and beyond the domain of philosophy and science. Due to this distinct nature of Muslim thought from others, we find that Greek philosophy is static, modern Western philosophy is material while Muslim thought is dynamic. Human being has a unique and specific feature, faculty or characteristic in him which is different from body.<sup>20</sup> That faculty is directly linked with God. By the elimination of the concept of God modern man has deprived of from the recognition of that specific, unique and distinctive faculty within himself on one side and developing the link with God on the other. Thus for Iqbal, human being has not only forgotten the God only but he lost his identity as human being. Iqbal was of opinion that without having faith in God, human being is neither capable to be human nor to resolve his issues.

**9.7. God as Sentient reality.** Here are some views explaining the God's relation towards the Human beings and the universe. Some are scientific or based on naturalism; some are rationalistic or atheistic ones, but others are theistic or mystic ones e.g. Pantheism, Pan-theism, Emanation-ism, Theory of intellects, Deism, Creationism, Wahdat Al- Inniyyah Ego-Hood<sup>21</sup>. Iqbal present the concept of God Who Himself is a sentient reality. He is not an abstract concept but He is living God, who has living relationship with the Universe. Everything is living and has an Ego. God is Himself Supreme Ego thus human beings as Vicegerent of God can contact Him and can make relation with Him with 'I-Thou' nature. Thus Due to this approach Iqbal

elaborated to concept of religion in which the man is in contact with the religious ontologies.

### **10. Conclusion**

Islam is a divine guidance, complete code of life descended through timeless words of Qur'an. It encircles all aspect of human life. It considers all sources of knowledge: revelation, reason and sense perception to get the knowledge of Absolute reality, human being and universe. Islam addresses all related issues in the light of above mentioned three sources of knowledge. All the problems related to Muslim theology, philosophy and Muslim mysticism are due to relying only on one source.

Islam is neither theology, nor philosophy nor mysticism but it is a divine wisdom named as *Hikmat* which encircles to all sources mediums and traditions. All branches are under the umbrella of *Hikmat*. Islam's God is not a concept but He is an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent and Omni benevolence Reality, who has a direct and live relation with his creation. Almighty Allah is neither a myth nor an abstract idea. He is an Absolute Creator, Provider, Sustainer, Producer, Designer, Architect, Developer, Director and Guide. Everything is in His observance. Human being due to his structure, design and nature is not absolutely self-guided but others guided. That *Absolute Other Guide* is Almighty Allah.

The human being of this age is facing sever spiritual and psychological problems. This is only due to the lack of faith in God and reliance only on reason and sense perception. God is not only a need of faith or a psychological need. He is a live reality, who observes, guides, encourages, inspires, optimizes and enlightens a being in every moment of life. God is the creator of good, absolute good and inspire a being to do as well. Human being is His best creature and He created him on the best made. For Iqbal this is the basic point to whom we should realize to man of this age that human being has been created as a human being and not as an insect, unicellular organism, or sick morality less animal. It can be realized when we have a firm and solid belief in a live, loving, kind and merciful God.<sup>22</sup> This is the only way to provide spiritual and moral salvation to the man of this age who has lost his splendor.

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