

## THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ASCENSION OF THE HOLY PROPHET

BY

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‘And certainly he saw him in another descent, by the lote-tree of the utmost boundary, nigh unto which is the Garden of Abode. When that which covers covered the lote-tree. *The eye turned not aside nor did it exceed the limit. Certainly he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord.* 53 : 13—19.

### I

Ethically considered, I believe, the Ascension symbolises the ideal of self-integration to which one has to seek an increasing approximation in life. The integration of an individual into a unity is a matter of degree. Man to begin with is a creature of impulses, drives and passions. His behaviour is partly controlled by various stimuli that happen to excite his receptors and nerve centres. But as he grows, he learns to combine and co-ordinate different movements into complex patterns of behaviour. Human personality is a many sided affair. Different desires pull the individual in different directions in different moods and situations. The individual vacillates and is internally torn. It is only at a higher level of development that one attains to a certain measure of unity.

### II

The Quran describes three stages in the spiritual growth of an individual. These are (i) Nafs-e-Ammarah, the animal soul, (ii) Nafs-e-Lawwamah, the self-accusing soul and (iii) Nafs-e-Mutmainnah, the contented soul. In the first stage man is primarily a creature of animal passions and low desires. It is the lowest stage of human existence. But considered ethically this can lead to a situation where man becomes the lowest of the low. “Already have we urged unto hell many of the Jinn and human-kind, having hearts wherewith they understand not, and having eyes wherewith they see not, and having

ears wherewith they hear not. These are as the cattle—nay, but they are worse. These are the neglectful”. 7 : 179. At this level of development an individual is wont to command evil. “And I (Joseph) call not myself sinless; surely man’s self is wont to command evil, except those on whom my Lord has mercy. Surely my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful”. 12 : 53. At the second stage a little deviation from the path of rectitude causes pangs of conscience. One is now past the animal stage. The individual is sensitive to the pricks of his conscience and is guided and moulded by the dictates of the self-accusing soul ‘Nay, I swear by the self-accusing soul (that this Scripture is true). 75 : 2. The third stage is the growth of the Divine in man and is the highest level of spiritual development. ‘O Soul that art at rest, return to thy Lord, well-pleased with Him, well-pleasing Him. So enter among my servants and enter into my Garden”. 89 : 27—30. This is a stage where an individual attains to perfect harmony. His various passions and desires are subordinated to an all embracing interest, which is in tune with the Divine Will. Iqbal describes this all absorbing interest by the phrase love and holds that love strengthens ego. These stages of development are interwoven in an integrated individual. The lower stage is “sublated” in the higher, is carried forward in the organic synthesis of life process. A slipping back into a lower stage is possible even at a sufficiently advanced stage of spiritual growth. “And certainly she desired him (Joseph) and he (Joseph) would have desired her, were it not that he had seen the manifest evidence of his Lord. Thus (it was) that we might turn away from him evil and lewdness. Surely he was one of our chosen servants. 12 : 24.

This unity of the self is not attained in a vacuum. It requires social participation as also reflective withdrawal for assessing the true import of various ends which constitute the standards of conduct for the people in general. A prophet seeks a reorientation or a transvaluation of the operative values of his people. The sources of his knowledge are the external physical environment as well as the inner world of the soul. In his person, in the words of Iqbal, “the word-life intuitively sees its own needs and . . . . defines its own direction”. Operative values are reflected in the customs, traditions, dos’ and dont’s of the group. The climate of opinion, the ethos

of a people form the basis of the group code. Now custom is to a group what habit is to an individual. Habit is easy but puts a cramp on the creative activity of an individual. Customs exemplify the approved and recognised modes of group behaviour. Thus when a prophet or a reformer revolts against some of the approved practices of his society, the opposition that he meets is quite natural. The force of custom acquires an authority which has both an emotive and a cognitive significance for the group. The Quran mentions repeatedly how the opponents of the prophets took refuge in the authority of their elders as a justification for their practices.

1. "And when they do some lewdness they say: we found our fathers doing it and God has commanded us thus". 7:28.
2. "They said: O Salih, thou wast among us a centre of (our) hopes before this. Dost thou ask us not to worship what our fathers worshipped". 11:62
3. "They said: Hast thou come to us to turn us away from that which we found our fathers following, and that greatness in the land may be for you two (Moses and his brother Aaron)? And we are not going to believe in you". 10:78.

To guard against this deadening influence of "virtue without imagination" on the character of a person, Iqbal preached creativeness as a distinct goal for an individual to strive for. In Javed Nama he says:

Life is mortality:  
 And everlastingness as well; it is  
 Compact of both creativeness and zeal.  
 Dost live? then learn to love and to create  
 And hold the heavens in grasp like Us.  
*And shatter all that suits thee not, and make  
 A fresher world grow from thy mind. The man  
 Who is liberated finds it burdensome  
 To live in other's world. The one who lack  
 Creative power is infidle*

*A heathen Vile; he doth not from Our grace  
 Obtain his share, nor from the tree of life  
 He plucks his fruit. Art thou the man of God?  
 Then let thy brilliance be that of a sword,  
 And thyself be thy own world's destiny". V. 3799-3813. [Trans-  
 lation by Mahmud Ahmad].*

A deviation from the conventional patterns of behaviour gives a rude shock to the group and when a reformer brings home to his people the cognitive hollowness of a certain custom he is naturally taken as a rebel in the first instance. But since a prophet has his contact with the very roots of his being (this is what Iqbal understands by *wahy*) he realizes the worthlessness of the operative values of his age and undertakes to reshape the contours of life. The culture and civilization of a people is like a mirror which holds up to them, in a condensed form, the past choices, the modes of behaviour and the way of thinking of the race handed down to them through a long line of ancestors from times immemorial. An ordinary non-reflecting member of a community is crushed under the load of the customs of his group. He has no authentic existence. He never seeks a contemporarity with people who belong to the remote and archaic past, *i.e.*, with people who lived long before the beginning and development of the culture and civilization which he unconsciously inherits. If he could only shake off the shackles of his racial heritage, he could breathe in an atmosphere which is not polluted with the smell of the operative values. May he chooses after a Kierkegaard, to be a religionist and may have constantly *to renew his choice*, to rise to the level of, what the existentialists call, the authentic existence. Or he may like a Nietzsche deny all traditional values and preach the gospel of being courageous but godless. This tearing off oneself from the historical roots is no easy process. Spinoza was right when he said: "If salvation lay ready to hand and could be discovered without great labour, how is it possible that it should be neglected by almost everybody? All noble things are as difficult as they are rare". This process of seeking contemporarity with Adam or the first pre-historic race of man is a highly

intense experience and taxes the entire being of the individual. Only a person who has rediscovered himself thus can claim to have attained to unity in the superlative. He enjoys freedom in the highest degree.

### III

The Quran regards God as the locus of all ultimate values. "And to thy Lord is the Goal". 53 : 42 Religious experience brings a person in direct contact with the ultimate source of all life and creation. The mystic, because of the marked, singular saint-like bliss aspect of the experience, is so overwhelmed with feeling that he does not like to come out of the repose of his unitary experience. But for a prophet religious experience is creative of new values. He actively seeks to reconstruct the social fabric of his environment in the light of his *ever sharpening vision*. This direct contact dispels the existentialistic despair and anguish. The feeling that life is absurd is replaced by a faith in life's intrinsic worth as an *ever developing and never ending process*. The Ascension of the Holy Prophet is his direct vision of God and *his maintenance of complete self-possession in* that moment of personal contact with the Infinite Ego. 'The eye turned not nor did it exceed the limit' 53 : 17. In that moment of intimate association with the Infinite he discovered that he had *fully assimilated the Divine Attributes*. (The Holy Prophet, as the tradition goes, has enjoined on Muslims to assimilate the Divine Attributes). The Ascension is seeking a confirmation of the fact of assimilation of the Divine Attributes. And in the maintenance of perfect calm and self-possession at that moment of intimate association with the Infinite lies the true ideal of individual unity. This also represents the acme, the zenith of spiritual growth that an individual can possibly achieve. It is the privilege of Nafs-e-Mutmainnah to attain to such a degree of perfection. It may be here noted that it is not simply a striving for a direct vision of God, a direct contact with the very roots of one's being, (for many persons are capable of doing that), but to maintain complete self-possession when one is in direct contact with his Creator that constitutes the ideal form of self-integration. Iqbal describes beautifully this idea in the following verses in Javid Nama :

The flight to heaven means a longing for  
 A witness who may testify thyself.  
 Unless it, be confirmrd by Him, our life  
 Is nothing but a play of tint and smell.  
 No one can stand against His beauty bright  
 Except the one who has perfection reached

V. 245-50

An individual with such a degree of unity can withstand calmly "the blast on the trumpet" preceding the Day of Judgement. "And there shall be a blast on the trump, and all who are in the Heavens and all who are in the Earth shall faint away, *save those in whose case God wills otherwise*". 39:68. 'Save those' are the souls who have attained to complete self-integration.

Bayazid Bistami, a persian mystic of the 9th century was the first sufi to describe in detail his mystic experience, which he termed as *ascension*. It is true that a sufi's ascension has no comparison with the Ascension of the Holy Prophet. But it gives some idea of how a great sufi felt his imperfections when he was in contact with God. The following account of Bayazid Bistami's mystic experience is taken from *Tadhkirah* of Attar :—

"I looked from God towards myself and found that my light was utter darkness in comparison with God's light, my loftiness was utter lowliness, it was all purity there and all darkness here. But when again I looked, I found my light in His light, my loftiness in His loftiness, and that whatever I did I did through His power. His light shone in my heart and I discovered that in truth all worship was from God and not from me, though all the time I had thought that it was I who worshipped. I felt perplexed and received the explanation : All that is, is I and not not—I. . . I looked from God towards God and saw Him as the only reality. I remained in this stage for long, left all efforts and all acquired knowledge. Grace from God began to flow and I got eternal (azli) knowledge. I saw that all things abide in God." p. 112-13

The sufi emphasis on the fear of God has its basis in the consciousness of his failure in assimilating the Divine Attributes. The essence of man

according to Rumi lies in the Vision of the Friend. "Man is vision, the rest in him is dross. True vision is the vision of the Friend." Ascension is a rediscovery of man resultant upon a contact with the roots of one's own being. It transforms the individual and leads to the creation of new values. It bestows upon him freedom, freedom to break and replace operative values.

## IV

Assimilation of the Divine Attributes is a creative process and needs ever renewed contacts with the Infinite. The commandment regarding obligatory prayers associated with the Prophet's journey to the Highest Heaven is a great pointer to the need of constant vigilance and of keeping renewed contacts with the Infinite for spiritual growth of the individual. The human mind is sensitive to all sorts of social and physical influences. It is likely to be corrupted if it is not jealously guarded "Say : I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, From the evil of the sneaking whisperer, who whispereth in the hearts of mankind." 114 1, 4,-5. The prayers and dhirk tend to intensify the self and help it maintain its unity. One has to exercise constant vigilance for his spiritual transformation through a sustained adherence to repeated dhirk and prayers. He is indeed successful who causeth it (soul) to grow, And he is indeed a failure who stunteth it (soul)." 91 : 9, 10.