RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE LIGHT OF DISCURSIVE LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the possibility of discursive language as media for explaining religious as well as mystical experience and how discursive language has position in the experience. This paper is based on Iqbal’s thought of religious experience as the main study as found in his masterpiece, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. Qualitative-descriptive method and philosophical perspective on language were used to elaborate problems of religious and mystical experience in order to find the solution. The result of study shows that there are two aspects that must be considered to understand religious and mystical experience. The first is language of religious or mystical experience which discusses the religious or mystical experience as something uncommunicable, untransformable, and unconceptualized. The second is language about religious or mystical experience which discusses the religious or mystical experience as something communicable and conceptualized through discursive language.

Keywords: religious and mystical experience, language of, language about, discursive language, Iqbal’s thought

BACKGROUND

The ultimate aim of human life is to know reality and to act in accordance with that knowledge. Sharp philosophical discussions center on human knowledge, and these discussions occupy a central position in philosophy, especially in modern philosophy. Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr (2000:39) argues that knowledge is the starting point of philosophical advance to establish a solid philosophy through investigations, studies and attempts to discover the primary principles of the powerful intellectual structure. This is very important as it throws light on the basic theory of knowledge as expounded by Iqbal, mainly the role of reason and intuition in understanding knowledge of God.

It appears from this that there is a religious “data”, when it is interpreted properly, which gives us the knowledge of God. While discussing about ‘heart’ or intuition Iqbal says it is something “sees”, and its reports, if properly interpreted, are never false. It implies that religious experience is also a kind of datum which is not sensory or physiological, and which requires interpretation, like the ordinary experience, in order to become a valid knowledge.

Actually Iqbal accepts the relative autonomy of reason while taking revelation of religious knowledge as the rock upon which the structure of religion is built. When discussing ‘Knowledge and Religious Experience’ of Reconstruction, he writes:” But to rationalize faith is not to admit the superiority of philosophy over religion. Philosophy, no doubt, has jurisdiction to judge religion, but what is to be judged is of such a nature that it will not submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy except on its own terms ……Thus, in the evaluation of religion, philosophy must recognize the central position of religion and has no other alternative but to admit it as something focal in the process of reflective synthesis” (Iqbal, 1960: 16).

Iqbal also warns us from the danger of other one-sided view of intuition. Its great emphasis on intuition, as manifested in some mysticisms, contributes the gap between reason and intuition as happened to al-Ghazali. “The technique of mediaval mys-
ticism by which religious life, in its higher manifestations, developed itself both in the East and in the West has now practically failed. And in the Muslim East it has, perhaps, done far greater havoc than anywhere else” (Iqbal, 1960:188). What is important in Iqbal’s thought is that he rejects exclusive separation between reason and intuition, between philosophy and religion. Rather they spring up from the same root and complement each other.

Iqbal makes some interesting observations on the nature of mystical experience and also accepts its cognitive validity. It is in religious or mystical experience that man apprehends the complex aspect of this dynamic reality. This experience has an outward or rational character as well as an inward or mystical one. The test of its genuineness is not exclusively pragmatic; but philosophical or speculative as well, since such an experience is not without cognitive content. Intuition has been conceived for instance by al-Ghazali and many other mystics as a faculty of knowledge which is unique and is of a different kind from thought and perception. This has led many to doubt the validity of intuition. But Iqbal differs here. He holds intuition to be a faculty of knowledge the same like other faculties of knowledge. It is indeed a higher form of knowledge, but it is qualitatively of the same nature as ordinary faculties. It is true that it is problem of feeling but it does not mean a descent into subjectivism. It is also objective as sense-perception. “The feeling ends in the consciousness of an object. No feeling is so blind as to have no idea of its own object” (Enver, 1944:19).

According to Iqbal religious experience is an intuitive experience which is different from perception and different from thought. In fact, religious experience is a unique experience different to every other kind of experience. It is feeling, but it does not mean descent into subjectivism. Feeling is essentially cognitive in its character, and it is objective as sense-perception.

“It must, however, be noted that mystic feeling, like all feeling, has a cognitive element also; and it is, I believe, because of this cognitive element that it lends itself to the form of idea. In fact, it is the nature of feeling to seek expression in thought. It would seem that the two – feeling and idea – are the non-temporal and temporal aspects of the same unit of inner experience” (Iqbal, 1960:21). Iqbal gives a further explanation: “For the purpose of knowledge, then, the region of mystic experience is as real as any other region of human experience and cannot be ignored merely because it cannot be traced back to sense-perception.” (Iqbal, 1960: 23).

The mystical experience cannot be so subjective and personal that it is impossible to explain to someone else what it is like, or how to acquire it. This sort of problem led to the creation of the concept of ‘ilm al-hudhuri (knowledge by presence), a key notion in illuminationist thought. The idea is that there is a form of knowledge which is so obvious and so simple that we cannot doubt it; so the skeptic who would try deny it is unable to insert his wedge. Iqbal realizes that there is a problem by accepting this account of knowledge. The trouble with using the nature of personal experience to establish understanding of the self is that the only sort of self which emerges is rather weak one. That is, all one can prove is that there is some notion of a subject which accompanies experience, but no real information about that subject is given by that sort of experience. On the other hand, what an emphasis on the subject reveals is that, to a degree, the nature of personal and private experience is significant. We should not reject mystical experience merely because it has no connection with what we tend to regard as the ‘real’ world.

RESEARCH METHOD

The paper using qualitative research methods originated in the social and behavioral sciences such as sociology, anthropology and psychology. Today, qualitative methods in the field of marketing research include in-depth interviews with individuals, group discussions (from two to ten participants is typical); diary and journal exercises; and in-context observations. Qualitative-descriptive method and philosophical perspective on language were used to elaborate problems of religious and mystical experience in order to find the solution.
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In his Reconstruction, Iqbal actually tries to give a solution of explaining religious experience. He states that we have to make distinction experience as a natural fact, signifi-
cant of the normally observable behaviour of reality, and experience as significant of the
inner nature of reality. As a natural fact it is explained in the light of its antecedents,
psychological and physiological; as signifi-
cant of the inner nature of reality we shall
have to apply criteria of a different kind to
clarify its meaning. (1960:26).

Religious experience as well as
mystical experience, however unusual must
be regarded as a perfectly natural experience.
Therefore, according to Iqbal, it is the func-
tion of Sufism has been to systematize
mystical experience. Iqbal, 1960: 127). Here,
Iqbal actually offers a kind of theoretical
science which is useful to explain mystical
experience. For that purpose, mysticism can
be reconciled with a whole range of
philosophical views. The task of philosophy
is to explain and to avoid misinterpretation by
using discursive language. In this contact,
philosophy can be used as a tool to
rationalize mystical experience. Which Iqbal
calls as an intellectual test. “By the intel-
lectual test I mean critical interpretation,
without any presuppositions of human
experience, generally with a view to discover
whether our interpretation leads us ultimately
to a reality of the same character as is
revealed by religious experience.” (Iqbal,
1960:27).

What Iqbal means with intellectual
test resembles with theological philosophy or
‘irfan. As Mutahhari says ‘irfan bases its
deductions on principles discovered through
mystic experience (kashf) and then reverts to
the language of reason to explain them. To be
more precise, the ‘arif wishes to explain
those things that he claims to have witnessed
with his heart and his entire being by using
the language of reason. (Mutahhari, 2002:
92). To bridge this dualistic view of reason
and intuition, Iqbal offers an epistemic
relation by integrating both of them. Presentational knowledge is more based on
intuition, meanwhile acquired or representa-
tional knowledge is based in reason. But
they are related each other. In other words,
there is concomitance between presentential
knowledge and acquired knowledge. The
explanation of Taqi Misbah Yazdi can gives a
clarification to understand Iqbal’s
epistemology: “…the mind always takes a
picture of what is present to it like an
automatic machine. From these it gets
specific forms and concepts and then
analyzes and interprets them. For example,
when one becomes afraid his mind takes a
photo of the state of fear which it can
remember after the state has left.
Furthermore, it apprehends its universal
concept and by apprehending ‘I am afraid,’
or ‘I have fear,’ or ‘Fear exists in me.’ It
interprets the appearance of this
psychological state with a marvelous alacrity
in the basis of its previous knowledge and
identifies its cause.” (Yazdi, 1999: 106).

It means that one who experiences
religions experience or mystical experience is
also enriched by his/her previous experience
of internal and external reality. That is why
that the interpretation of the mystics to their
experience would be different between one
mystics to others. Some uncommon expres-
sions uttered by al-Hallaj and al-Bistami
show the different capacity of knowledge
they have to acquisition the same Reality.
From a philosophical point of view,
knowledge is generally identified with
grasping the immaterial form or essence of
things, as opposed to their material
embodiment. A very important distinction is
that between conception (tasawwur) and
assent (tasdiq). The former is the grasp of an
object without a judgement being made about
it, whereas the latter involves a judgement,
and in fact represents a relationship between
the mental representation and the object
which it represents. Concepts are the matter
of knowledge, and assent is its form, in a
sense. Different to Iqbal’s thought, al-
Ghazali’s thought, according to Oliver
Leaman fits far better with the approach to
religion of the ordinary member of community,
who tends to interpret religious
experience into ordinary language. (Leaman,
1999:45). The emphasis on intuitive-dog-
matic knowledge is more understandable than
intuitive-rational knowledge.
In grasping ultimate reality in religious experience the role of intuition is active and dominant but the role of sense-perception and reason, in the most intensive level, are passive. Iqbal always relate intuition with metaphysical problems, for example ultimate reality or God, as expressed in the following: “As region of normal experience are subject to interpretation of sense-data for our knowledge of external world, so the region of mystic experience is subject to interpretation for our knowledge of God.” (Iqbal, 1960: 18). Iqbal states that mystical experience cannot be communicated to other, except by seeing its pragmatic result; that is the birth of happiness of the mystics. Iqbal uses philosophy and shows that philosophy as a pure rational speculations becomes one of his tools in solving religious problems. In this context Iqbal is in line with Mulla Sadra as analyzed by Fazlur Rahman, who criticized pure mysticism which does not use philosophical analysis. (Rahman, 2000: 7). The truth of religion must be shown and supported by the truths found philosophically. That is why that religion has not to be dichotomized or contradictory with philosophy. Philosophy would be very useful to answer some religious problems in the age of rationalism. Philosophy an sich is not able to create any beliefs that religion has because its function is to rationalize and analyze critically. As Iqbal says that philosophy has right to judge on religion but philosophy cannot give inferior place to religion among its data. (Iqbal, 1960: 2). In short, even though philosophy is needed for religious interpretation but it cannot change the fundamental position of religion in our life. The experience itself is a personal aspect. Finally, Iqbal’s formulation with its identification can be characterized as the following:

His explanation points to the formulation of fundamental ideas toward the object studied. The main point of Iqbal’s thought is religious experience (Rahman, 1989: 39). In one aspect, Iqbal analysis of religious experience still in the frame of metaphysics-ontology but in another aspect Iqbal tries to bring religious experience to epistemological framework as shown by Fazlur Rahman. Basically, Iqbal’s deep interest on religious experience is his manifestation to defend religious experience and interpret it objectively in modern terms in order to understand by modern people. Even though Rahman and al-A’Attas reject the term “reconstruction”, which is implied by their rejection of some of Iqbal’s evaluations of Islamic intellectual traditions and modern science and philosophy, there is one important point on which all of them agree. Namely, that there is today a need for stating Islamic metaphysics in the “modern” language, that is to say, the language familiar to Muslims living in the modern world; a language which is very much coloured by modern scientific-philosophical theories. In other world, this is a problem of communication (Bagir, 1996: 29).

In the words of Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi the topics discussed by Iqbal as interpretations, disclosures and findings of conscience are called “scientific gnosis”. Sometimes by adding reasoning and inferences they take the form of philosophical discussions (Yazdi, 1999: p. 72). The link between them focuses on rationality; a philosophical approach to religious experience as a rational process. By this, Rob Fisher gives two argumentations: “First, we are pointing to the fact that reason has a fundamental part to play in a religious tradition’s reflection on its experiences and beliefs. Part of the process of reflection involves looking closely at the language, doctrine, symbols, models, and myths the tradition has and uses. Second, we are pointing to the fact that in expounding its faith, a religious tradition must be able to use reason in producing logical arguments and making justifiable claims.” (Fisher in Connoly, 1999: 110).

He turned to the field of psychology but found its present state unsatisfactory. After elaborating James’ Varieties of Religious Experience Iqbal criticizes: “Modern psychology has only recently begun to realize the importance of a careful study of the contents of mystic consciousness, and we are not yet in possession of a really effective scientific method to analyze the contents of non-rational modes of consciousness.” (Iqbal, 1960: 17). To answer the tendency of modern psychology Iqbal gives a respon: “A purely psychological method, therefore, cannot explain religious passion as a form of knowledge, it is bound to fail in the case of
our psychologists as it did fail in the case of our newer psychologists as it did fail in the case of Locke and Hume.” (Iqbal, 1960: 26).

In one aspect Iqbal is in line with William James that the difference of the mystic states from the ordinary rational consciousness does not mean discontinuance with the normal consciousness. It is because James acknowledges that mystical experience has notice quality, therefore it has states of knowledge; states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by discursive intellect (James, 1958: 293). Iqbal’s epistemological analysis, in some aspects, resembles with William James’.

Because of its notice quality, mystical experience is concomitant with empirical experience, as William James states: “This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mysticism truth exists for the individual who has transport, but for no one else. In this, as I have said, it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought. Thought, with its remoteness and abstractness, has often enough in the history of philosophy been contrasted unfavorably with sensation. It is a commonplace of metaphysics that God’s knowledge cannot be discursive but must be intuitive, that is, must be constructed more after the pattern of what in us is called immediate feeling, than after that of preposition and judgment. But our immediate feelings have no content but what the five senses supply; and we have seen and shall see again that mystics may emphatically deny that the senses play any part in the very highest type of knowledge which their transports yield.” (James, 1958: 311). But, James’ analysis of religious experience only focuses on the psychological aspects of religion, precisely on pragmatic aspect, as shown by Walter H. Capps:

“James’s analysis focused on the functions religion performs within the lives of sensitive human beings. He understood that religion is formed within that set of reactions to what human beings regard as a (or perhaps the) primal reality. He recognized that varieties of responses are in order, depending on significant part on the attitudinal orientation of the individual.” (Capps, 1995:.45).

The characteristics of mystical experience as enumerated by Iqbal also run almost parallel to those presented by William James. From the two procedures that Iqbal chooses, it seems that both of them require the involvement of reason. Readers are invited by Iqbal to think. Some implications that rise from Iqbal’s formulation of religious experience are: Iqbal has tried to meet this challenge of communicating Islamic metaphysics, as he understood, to the young modern Muslims who had been “influenced by modern philosophy”. However, it seems that there are still some problems here, especially regarding the terminology he used. Both Rahman and al-’Attas disapprove Iqbal’s couching the Islamic metaphysical concepts in a particular scientific and philosophical theory – despite their views above regarding the necessity of modern expression of Islamic metaphysics. Surely there is fine line between these two things; and Iqbal, according to them, has fallen into the former. For example, as observed by al-’Attas, Iqbal used terminology which is derived from modern, Western evolutionist philosophy and science as represented by Bergson, Nietzsche and Whitehead, and thus obscuring the ideas itself. To do justice to Iqbal, we should also remember that his Reconstruction was one of the first attempts at expressing Islamic metaphysics in a modern language; even today merely translating an Islamic metaphysics into a modern European language remains problematic. The difficulties faced by Iqbal, therefore, have been greater (Bagir, 1996:30). We may say that Reconstruction was among the first serious works devoted to this problem – the one that is genuine and, in many way, still fares much better than many of the works of today’s Muslims scholars.

We enter to philosophical critique of twentieth century concerning metaphysical way of thinking towards religious experience; that is language philosophy. Language philosophers, like Bertrand Russel and Wittgenstein, criticize metaphysical as well as idealistic approach in understanding religious experience. Wittgenstein, for example, tries to approach religious experience not through metaphysical way but through language point of view. This is a new tradition which tries to explain “content”
metaphysics from language perspective. Through language analysis, blurred concepts and categories will be clarified (Munawar-Rachman, 1990: pp.84-91).

The critique actually rises because Iqbal did not finish his main project concerning the objectivity of religious experience into language analysis. Therefore, Iqbal faces difficulty to search the way out argumentatively, except only giving some explanation of five main characteristics of religious experience. Even though Iqbal had opened the way to explore this kind of subjective experience into objective and philosophical investigations, but in some aspects, he failed to explain religious experience discursively. Some aspects forgotten by Iqbal are the problems of language. He did not differentiate and verify, for example, the difference between religious experience as a realized knowledge and religious experience as expressed in human’s languages. This problems, in Islamic epistemology, is studied in ‘irfan; as understood by Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi, the linguistic science of mystical apprehension, and the expression of mystical ways of experience both in the introvertive journey of ascent and the extrovertive process of descent (Yazdi, 1992: p.22). The aspects discussed in ‘irfan are about problems of metamysticism and language of mysticism.

Classifications of Religious and Mystical Experience

According to Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi there are three classifications of mysticism, including religious experience. These classifications are in order to avoid any confusion of understanding mysticism (Yazdi, 1992: p.160).

First, ineffable mysticism: the experience of mysticism that is not conceptualized in terms of public understanding, and therefore has no normal public language at all. It has peculiar private language, which is not publicly understandable. This language is related to the genuine state of mysticism. It consists of apparently blasphemous, and sometimes meaningless and paradoxical. In these circumstances they speak of what they experience, not of what they are thinking of, or of what they willing to say. This is why we cannot categorize it as a conventional form of language. In this classification we can mention al-Hallaj as an example of Sufi who has paradoxical statement. Iqbal also tries to accept and interpret the well-known words of Hallaj –‘I am the creative truth.’ (Iqbal, 1960: p.96) by stating: “In the history of religious experience in Islam which, according to the Prophet, consists in the ‘creation of Divine attributes in man,’ this experience has found expression in such phrases as – ‘I am the creative truth’ (Hallaj), ‘I am Time’ (Muhammad), ‘I am the speaking Quran’ (Ali), ‘Glory to me’ (Ba Yazid).” (Iqbal, 1960: p.110). Second, introspective and reconstructive mystical thinking as the pure object language of mysticism. This is what we called the language ‘of’ mysticism. Third, philosophical or scientific metamysticism that talks “about” mysticism. The first classification can be categorized as ‘pure empirical mysticism’. The second is categorized as the object of language of mysticism proper. In third classification, actually, mysticism is designed metalinguistically to approach it from various angles: semantic, logical, scientific, metaphysical, epistemological, etc. Mysticism can be reflected upon and interpreted through the conceptualization and introspection of mystics, and can be taught and spoken of in our ordinary language. But W.T. Stace warns us that this interpretation and conceptualization should by no means be confused with the mystical unitary consciousness (Stace, 1960a: 31-38). Therefore, all interpretation and conceptual understanding of mystical and religious experiences fall within the domain of phenomenal knowledge, not noumenal knowledge or knowledge by presence. It is necessary to understand that mystical consciousness is quite different from the interpretation of it. For this, Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi gives an explanation: “No mystical consciousness can ever be identical with any mode of knowledge by correspondence, either in theory or in truth, “ and “No knowledge by correspondence can ever be identical with any degree of mystical consciousness either in truth or in theory.” (Yazdi, 1992: 109).

Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi (1992: pp.165-167) gives some approaches concerning this
problem: There is the descriptive empirical inquiry into the problem of mysticism which is of the category of language ‘about’ mysticism. This sort of inquiry is historical, scientific, anthropological, or sociological. William James, as Ha’iri Yazdi said, is one of those few famous thinkers who, using this scientific principles, tried to capture four essential but empirical characteristics of mysticism. These are ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. Here, James does not ask or try to answer any epistemic, semantic, analytic or metaphysical questions about mysticism. His language is therefore an empirically scientific kind of metamyntical language, but not a metaphysical one.

There are also analytic, critical, metaphysical, and logical ways of approaching mystical thought. These consist entirely of non empirical analysis of the problem of mysticism. This approach to a philosophy of mysticism is based on posing questions such as the following: What is the meaning of mysticism? What makes it different from religion? Is there any rational justification for the essential and principal claims of mystical propositions? What is the definition or meaning of mystical expressions and concepts such as “Unity”, “the One”, “the oneness of existence”, “the notion of light”, etc.

These questions are logical, semantic, epistemological or metaphysical ones. Mystical thinking of this kind does not try to answer questions as to how, practically, we can obliterate our limited selves and unite with the One, although these are typical questions in the mystical language, referred to in ‘irfan. Many ancient, medieval, and contemporary philosophers have in one way or another viewed mystical thinking through this approach. Taqi Misbah Yazdi said that in discussing epistemology, it will be made clear that the value of intellectual understanding is not merely no less than that of sensory and experiential knowledge, but is even of an even higher level than these. Even the value of experiential knowledge itself will be found to be due to the value of intellectual understanding and philosophical propositions (Yazdi, 1999: 35).

Mystical experience, as a higher level of experience, was tried by Iqbal to be formulated philosophically by giving five concepts and characteristics of mystic experience. Here, Iqbal does not, however, think ‘of’ mysticism in a mystical manner; he rather thinks and talks “about” the objective truth of mysticism. It is the introspective knowledge of mysticism that is manipulated in concepts and expressed by the articulated object language of ‘irfan. Iqbal argues that mystic feeling also has a cognitive element that lends itself in the form of idea or in the seek of thought expression (Iqbal, 1960:.21). The importance of expressing this kind of intuitive experience in the form of discursive language is for the need of public verification rationally. Here, it is the role of philosophy (rational thought) to describe metaphysics (Wittgenstein in Thompson, 2005: p.41), including religious or mystical experience in the form of discursive language, but the primary form of mystical knowledge remains unconceptualized, ineffable, and unanalysable (Here, Iqbal tries to prove the validity of mystic experience in the context of justification, not in the context of discovery in logical-discursive language. Although Islamic philosophy, including Islamic mysticism, is greatly influenced by Islamic religion but it does not mean that it is not rational because of its context of discovery but must be judged from context of justification whether it is rational and scientific or not (Bagir, 2005: p.89). It is the only way out to see religious experience within the wider context of natural theology, that is within the context of an integral intellectual and even moral vision of the nature of ultimate reality, and of the meaning and purpose of human life, including a claimed religious experience, only within the conceptual apparatus that is brought to it and which must be justified on grounds other than experience which it interprets (Throner, 1999: p.72).

There is reflective and introspective, scientific but non-philosophical, thinking in which a mystic tries by the power of his intellect to reconstruct in a sophisticated way the features of whatever he has already seen or apprehended in the course of his mystical experiences. This is what is called as the genuine mystical language, or the science of mysticism, for the simple reason that it is talking ‘of’ mysticism not ‘about’ mysticism,
and it is designed to recapitulate the state in which a mystic was already involved. Within the scope of this kind of mysticism, any philosophical or scientific question ‘about’ mysticism is incoherent to the system, and is regarded as absolutely irrelevant and inadmissible.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In this paper, I have elaborated the problem of understanding religious or mystical experience and its relation to the possibility of discursive language. This is based on the fact that nowadays many people are still misunderstanding in classifying religious or mystical experience as pure experience and its expression. Therefore, rational explanation through discursive language may help people to understand this metaphysical problem. By this, Islamic mysticism specifically and mysticism in general are open to be criticized rationally as well as academically in order to clarify the right (divine) mysticism from pseudo mysticism. This effort can be addressed to Iqbal who tried to bring Islamic mysticism tradition in discursive language. The development of philosophical language from the West can be used as tool to explain the richness of religious and mystical writings and traditions of all religions.

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