

VIII

LETTER TO DR. NICHOLSON

(Lahore: dated 24-1-1921)

My dear Dr. Nicholson,

I was very glad to learn from your letter to Shafi¹ that your translation of the *Asrar-i-Khudi* had been favourably received and excited much attention in England. Some of the English reviewers, however, have been misled by the superficial resemblance of some of my ideas to those of Nietzsche.

The view of the writer in the *Athenaeum* is largely affected by some mistakes of fact for which, however, the writer does not seem to be responsible. But I am sure if he had known some of the dates of the publication of my Urdu poems referred to in his review, he would have certainly taken a totally different view of the growth of my literary activity. Nor does he rightly understand my idea of the Perfect Man which he confounds with the German thinker's Superman. I wrote on the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man more than twenty years ago, long before I had read or heard anything of Nietzsche. This was then published in the *Indian Antiquary*, and later in 1908 formed part of my Persian Metaphysics. The English reader ought to approach this idea not through the German thinker, but through an English thinker of

1. Late Principal Muhammad Shafi of Oriental College, Lahore.

great merit—I mean Alexander—whose Gifford lectures, delivered at Glasgow, were published last year. His chapter on Deity and God (Chapter I, Book IV, p. 341, Vol. II) is worth reading. On page 347, he says: “Deity is thus the next higher empirical quality to mind, which the universe is engaged in bringing to birth. That the universe is pregnant with such a quality—we are speculatively assured. What that quality is we cannot know, for we can neither enjoy nor still less contemplate it. Our human altars still are raised to the Unknown God. If we could know what Deity is, how it feels to be Divine, we should first have to become as Gods.” Alexander’s thought is much bolder than mine.

I believe there is a Divine tendency in the universe, but this tendency will eventually find its complete expression in a higher man, not in a God subject to Time, as Alexander implies in his discussion of the subject. I do not agree with Alexander’s view of God, but it is clear that my idea of the Perfect Man will lose much of its outlandishness in the eyes of the English reader if he approaches it through the ideas of a thinker of his own country.

But it was Mr. Dickinson’s review which interested me most, and I want to make a few remarks on it. Kindly pass on this letter to him; I am sure he will be interested to know what I think of his review:—

(1) Mr. Dickinson thinks, as I understand from his private letter to me, that I have deified physical force in the poem. I am afraid he is mistaken in his view. I believe in the power of the spirit, not brute

force. When a people is called to a righteous war, it is, according to my belief, their duty to obey the call, but I condemn all wars of conquest (the story of Mianmir and the Emperor of India). Mr. Dickinson, however, is quite right when he says that war is destructive whether it is waged in the interests of Truth and Justice, or in the interests of conquest and exploitation. It must be put an end to in any case. We have seen, however, that Treaties, Leagues, Arbitrations and Conferences cannot put an end to it. Even if we secure these in a more effective manner than before, ambitious nations will substitute more peaceful forms of the exploitation of races supposed to be less favoured or less civilised. The truth is that we stand in need of a living personality to solve our social problems, to settle our disputes, and to place international morality on a surer basis. How very true are the last two paragraphs of Prof. Mackenzie's Introduction to *Social Philosophy* :

“There can be no ideal society without ideal man : and for the production of these we require not only insight but a motive power ; fire as well as light. Perhaps, a philosophic understanding of our social problems is not even the chief want of our time. We need prophets as well as teachers, men like Carlyle or Ruskin or Tolstoy, who are able to add for us a new severity to conscience or a new breadth to duty. Perhaps we want a new Christ . . . It has been well said that the prophet of our time must be a man of the world, and not merely a voice in the wilderness. For indeed the wilderness of the present

is in the streets of our crowded cities, and in the midst of the incessant war by which we are trying to make our way upwards. It is there that the prophet must be.

“Or perhaps our chief want is rather for the poet of the new age than for its prophet—or for one who should be poet and prophet in one. Our poets of recent generations have taught us the love of nature, and enabled us to see in it the revelation of the Divine. We still look for one who shall show us with the same clearness the presence of the Divine in the human . . . We still need one who shall be fully and in all seriousness what Heine playfully called himself a “Ritter von dem Heiligen Geish,” one who shall teach us to see the working out of our highest ideals in the everyday life of the world, and to find in devotion to the advancement of that life, not merely a sphere for an ascetic self-sacrifice, but a supreme object in the pursuit of which all thoughts, all passions, all delights may receive their highest development and satisfaction.”

It is in the light of the above thoughts that I want the British public to read my description of the ideal man. It is not our treaties and arbitrations which will put an end to the internecine wars of the human family.

(2) Mr. Dickinson further refers to my “Be hard”. This is based on the view of reality that I have taken in the poem. According to my belief, reality is a collection of individualities tending to

become a harmonious whole through conflict which must inevitably lead to mutual adjustment. This conflict is a necessity in the interests of the evolution of higher forms of life, and of personal immortality. Nietzsche did not believe in personal immortality. To those desiring it, he ruthlessly says, "Do you wish to be a perpetual burden on the shoulders of time?" He was led to say this because he had a wrong notion of time, and never tried to grapple with the ethical issue involved in the question of time. On the other hand, I took upon immortality as the highest aspiration of man on which he should focus all his energies, and consequently I recognise the need of all forms of activity, including conflict, which tend to make the human person more and more stable. And for the same consideration, I condemn speculative mysticism and inactive quietism. My interest in conflict is mainly ethical and not political whereas Nietzsche's was probably only political. Modern physical science has taught us that atom of material-energy has achieved its present form through thousands of years of evolution. Yet it is unstable and can be made to disappear. The same is the case with the atom of mind-energy, i.e., the human person. It has achieved its present form through ions of incessant effort and conflict; yet, in spite of all this, its instability is clear from the various phenomena of mental pathology. If it has to continue intact it cannot ignore the lessons learnt from its past career, and will require the same or similar forces to maintain its stability which it has availed of before. It is possible that in its onward march nature may modify or eliminate altogether

some of the forces (e.g., conflict in the way of mutual wars) that have so far determined and helped its evolution, and introduce new forces hitherto unknown to mankind to secure its stability. But, I confess I am not an idealist in this matter and believe this time to be very distant. I am afraid mankind will not, for a very long time to come, learn the lesson that the Great European War has taught them. Thus it is clear that my purpose in recognizing the need of conflict is mainly ethical. Mr. Dickinson has unfortunately altogether ignored this aspect of the "Be hard."

(3) Mr. Dickinson further remarks that while my philosophy is universal my application of it is particular and exclusive. This is in a sense true. The humanitarian ideal is always universal in poetry and philosophy, but if you make it an effective ideal and work it out in actual life, you must start, not with poets and philosophers, but with a society exclusive in the sense of having a creed and well-defined outline, but ever enlarging its limits by example and persuasion. Such a society, according to my belief, is Islam. This society has so far proved itself a more successful opponent of the race-idea which is probably the hardest barrier in the way of the humanitarian ideal. Renan was wrong when he said that science was the greatest enemy of Islam. No, it is the race-idea which is the greatest enemy of Islam—in fact, of all humanity, and it is the duty of all lovers of mankind to stand in revolt against this dreadful invention of the Devil. Since I find that the idea of nationality based on race or territory is making headway in the world of Islam, and since I fear that the Muslims,

losing sight of their own ideal of a universal humanity, are being lured by the idea of a territorial nationality, I feel it is my duty as a Muslim and as a lover of all mankind, to remind them of their true function in the evolution of mankind. Tribal or national organizations on the lines of race or territory are only temporary phases in the unfoldment and upbringing of collective life, and as such I have no quarrel with them; but I condemn them in the strongest possible terms when they are regarded as the ultimate expression of the life of mankind. While I have the greatest love for Islam, it is in view of practical and not patriotic considerations, as Mr. Dickinson thinks, that I am compelled to start with a specific society (e.g., Islam) which, among the societies of the world, happens to be the only one suitable to my purpose. Nor is the spirit of Islam so exclusive as Mr. Dickinson thinks. In the interests of a universal unification of mankind the Quran ignores their minor differences and says, "Come let us unite on what is common to us all!"

I am afraid the old European idea of a blood-thirsty Islam is still lingering in the mind of Mr. Dickinson. All men and not Muslims alone are meant for the Kingdom of God on earth, provided they say good-bye to their idols of race and nationality, and treat one another as personalities. Leagues, mandates, treaties, like the one described by Mr. Keynes, and Imperialisms, however draped in democracy, can never bring salvation to mankind. The salvation of man lies in absolute equality and freedom of all. We stand in need of a thorough over-

hauling of the aims of science which has brought so much misery to mankind and of a total abandonment of what may be called esoteric politics which is ever planning the ruin of less clever or weaker races.

That Muslim peoples have fought and conquered like other peoples, and that some of their leaders have screened their personal ambition behind the veil of religion, I do not deny; but I am absolutely sure that territorial conquest was no part of the original programme of Islam. As a matter of fact, I consider it a great loss that the progress of Islam as a conquering faith stultified the growth of those germs of an economic and democratic organization of society which I find scattered up and down the pages of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. No doubt, the Muslims succeeded in building a great empire, but thereby they largely repaganized their political ideals, and lost sight of some of the most important potentialities of their faith. Islam certainly aims at absorption. This absorption, however, is to be achieved not by territorial conquest but by the simplicity of its teaching, its appeal to the common sense of mankind and its aversion to abstruse metaphysical dogma. That Islam can succeed by its inherent force is sufficiently clear from the Muslim missionary work in China, where it has won millions of adherents without the help of any political power. I hope more than twenty years' long study of the world's thought has given me sufficient training to judge things impartially.

The object of my Persian poems is not to make out a case for Islam; my aim is simply to discover a

universal social reconstruction, and in this endeavour, I find it philosophically impossible to ignore a social system which exists with the express object of doing away with all the distinctions of caste, rank and race; and which, while keeping a watchful eye on the affairs of this world, fosters a spirit of unworldliness so absolutely essential to man in his relations with his neighbours. This is what Europe lacks and this is what she can still learn from us.

One word more. In my notes which now form part of your introduction to *Asrar-i-Khudi*, I deliberately explained my position in reference to Western thinkers, as I thought this would facilitate the understanding of my views in England. I could have easily explained myself in the light of the Quran and Muslim Sufis and thinkers, e.g., Ibn Arabi and Iraqi (Pantheism), Wahid Mahmud (Reality as a Plurality), Al-Jili (the idea of the Perfect Man) and Mujaddid Sarhindi (the human person in relation to the Divine Person). As a matter of fact, I did so explain myself in my Hindustani introduction to the first edition of the *Asrar*.

I claim that the philosophy of the *Asrar* is a direct development out of the experience and speculation of old Muslim Sufis and thinkers. Even Bergson's idea of time is not quite foreign to our Sufis. The Quran is certainly not a book of metaphysics, but it takes a definite view of the life and destiny of man, which must eventually rest on propositions of a metaphysical import. A statement by a modern Muslim student of philosophy of such propositions, especially when it is done in the light of

religious experience and philosophy invoked by that great book, is not putting new wine in old bottles. It is only a restatement of the old in the light of the new. It is unfortunate that the history of Muslim thought is so little known in the West. I wish I had time to write an extensive book on the subject to show to the Western student of philosophy how philosophic thinking makes the whole world kin.

Yours sincerely,
Muhammad Iqbal