Abdennour Bidar, *L’islam face à la mort de Dieu: actualité de Mohammed Iqbal*

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[1] It is rather unexpected for a historian of the cultures of northern India to be asked to write a review of a book of highly sophisticated Western theology and philosophy for a journal of South Asian social sciences. The task, at first glance, looks impossible as a social sciences approach to such a book would, for instance, require locating it in the complex landscapes of contemporary Islamic thinking and of European Islam, and confronting it, in the context of ‘French Islam’, with such recently published volumes as *Mon intime conviction* by Tariq Ramadan (Ramadan, 2009), and *Pari de civilisation* by Abdelwahhab Meddeb (Meddeb, 2009). It could also mean situating it in Abdennour Bidar’s existential and intellectual itinerary, for which he has given keys in his quite original and much acclaimed *Self Islam* (2006). Mobilizing the tools of psychoanalysis might also prove rewarding for shedding light on the author’s undertaking. The present reviewer does not have the qualifications nor the required intellectual interest to do any of those. However, the Mohammed Iqbal of the book’s title is not unknown to me, as I recently wrote a lengthy article on the relations between Iqbal’s religious ideas and his various commitments in the affairs of his time in the Punjab, in India, and in the world at large. Emerging from such an enquiry, I am quite bewildered to see how aspects of the thought of a historical Indian character of the early 20th century can still deeply matter to a young French philosopher searching for absolutes and I sincerely admire, though not without a good dose of sceptical perplexity, the way A. Bidar has built upon Iqbal’s religious thought to elaborate a complete system of humanist and universal wisdom. This review will hence only consist in trying to give a brief account of the path followed by the author in the unexpected company of Iqbal.
[2] Who was Iqbal? Born in 1877 in a pious Punjabi Muslim family descending from converted Kashmiri Brahmans, he was initially trained in Arabic and Persian in Lahore, and then studied law and philosophy in Cambridge and then in Heidelberg and Munich between 1905 and 1908. Established as an advocate in Lahore, he kept his practice to a minimum, devoting most of his time to reading and writing. He had practised the European philosophers, and particularly meditated Nietzsche and Bergson, but among his major sources of inspiration were the Koran and the writings of the great Persian Sufi master Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273 in Konya, in modern day Turkey). His philosophical and theological message is to be found in his magnificent, visionary poetry, written in Urdu and in Persian, and in a series of essays collected in The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. It is on the French translation of this latter work that A. Bidar mostly relies. In his first Urdu collection of poems, Iqbal presents himself as a caravan bell calling Muslims towards a new destiny. Believers are summoned to become God’s locum tenens (khalifa) on earth by unfolding all the possibilities of their egos (khwudî) and by ultimately identifying themselves with the entire umma (Muslim community), which cannot be fragmented into nations nor limited in time and space. For Iqbal, who delivered the presidential address to the All India Muslim League in Lahore in 1930, if the Muslims of India wanted to reach this ideal, they had to organize themselves according to their own principles in an Indo-Muslim state within an Indian federation or outside it. But when the idea of Pakistan was first floated in 1933, Iqbal declared that it had nothing to do with his vision. This did not prevent the Pakistani state from making him the spiritual father of the newly created country.

[3] This historical Iqbal is hardly present in A. Bidar’s book, which is basically devoted to the author’s philosophical ideas and spirituality. L’islam face à la mort de Dieu presents Iqbal’s Reconstruction as an open work, as a reservoir still rich with infinite potentialities for ‘a soul’ longing for the Absolute but suspended between a religious path seemingly ‘extinct’ and a profane one judged ‘empty’ (p. 10). To such a soul, the Reconstruction provides a representation of the nature and the future of what is called ‘modernity’, as well as a vision of humanity to come that could be shared between cultures (p. 22). Two conditions explain, according to A. Bidar, how Iqbal could reach such a vision. On the one hand, he blames Muslims for failing to perceive Western modernity as an extension of their own past wisdom. On the other hand, he rebukes the West for being unable to see the spiritual meaning of the new world it has created through science, technology, and Enlightenment (pp. 42-43). Thereby, Iqbal frees Islam from what holds it
back in its fossilized past, and projects it as new wisdom for the world (pp. 52-53). According to A. Bidar, Iqbal’s own spiritual modernity consists in looking at humanity ‘in history’, instead of conceiving its ‘posthumous Becoming’ in terms of hell and paradise (p. 57). Hope is not in the sky, but in the future of life in this world, because there is in a human being’s ‘ego’ a still unknown meaning, the infinite possibility of a ‘Creative Self’, of an ‘Ultimate Ego’. And Allah, which only referred to the Creator of the universe for generations of Muslims, is to be understood now as the name of the Reality towards which humanity is progressing (p. 76): the world of ‘Creative Selves’.

Here, a question is raised by the author: will all the realized Creative Beings share a unique Ultimate Ego or not? With Iqbal, A. Bidar conceives a plurality of individual Ultimate Egos and foresees the possibility of a Republic of Creative Beings, what Iqbal termed ‘the spiritual democracy which is the ultimate goal of Islam’ (p. 264). What, then, are the means by which an ego can build its way towards the Creative Self? The answer is not easy, as a modern ego is caught between the rigidities of the religious past and the anxieties of a modernity where, on the one hand, ‘God is dead’, as stated by Nietzsche, and on the other hand, the post-human is about to emerge, with brains being connected to other brains and to machines, and with the perspective of an ‘individual-network’ (an individual who is also a network) (p. 277). For the Iqbalian A. Bidar, the means for progressing towards the Ultimate Ego and reaching a fully realized humanity are prayer, love and devoting one’s life to the creation and the protection of life in order to make one’s being sacred (p. 83). Acceding thus to the state of Creative Self means experiencing a regenerated, spiritual modernity where God is not dead, but replaced by humankind (p. 145).

Ultimate Egos have indeed reached such a stage that they can create a world which is of their own work, and where the idea of God appears to them as a ‘transitory concept’ (p. 189), the function of which is to provide human beings with the model of their perfect individuality. At this stage though of course, no religious law can be imposed any longer from the outside, no fixed modality for prayer, no taboo on food, no marriage prescriptions, and so on (p. 203), and realized individuals develop by themselves the spiritual rules of life best suited for each to reach his/her inner being and make it sacred. Once the goal is reached, not only do religious distinctions cease to matter, but religion itself loses its raison d’être and vanishes away: for the citizens of A. Bidar’s Republic of the Creative Selves, there is no sharia (Islamic law) any more (pp. 192-194). This is a major difference with Iqbal, as the latter could never envisage dispensing with sharia (p. 198 f.).

Clearly, A. Bidar’s approach to Islam as a way to get rid of religion is at the antipodes of Islamic reformism and hence, as he states, the exact opposite of Tariq Ramadan’s ‘radical reform’ which,
according to the author, does not question Islam as a religion of the Law, but only aims at modernizing it (p. 201).

[4] Many other philosophers, thinkers and scientists are met with in A. Bidar’s book, and more specifically those with whom Iqbal was in constant intellectual dialogue, using whatever he found useful for his Reconstruction in their works, and criticizing whatever he saw as limitations. One comes across two categories of characters. On the one hand, there are the great Sufis of the past who did not succumb to the facility of passive surrender to God, such as Ḥallāj (d. 922 in Bagdad) (p. 158-161) and Rūmī (p. 166-169), who was Iqbal’s distant spiritual master as Iqbal is A. Bidar’s. On the other hand, there are Nietzsche (passim), Einstein (pp. 232-234), Heidegger (p. 234-237), Bergson (p. 237-244), and Jung (p. 255-264). But basically, A. Bidar’s main source of inspiration in his progression with Iqbal is the Koran, quoted again and again throughout the book, and interpreted with the Indian master as the ‘autobiography of the ultimate Ego’ (p. 251-255). Through the questions he raises from his intimate frequentation of the sacred book of Islam, Iqbal is regularly characterized by A. Bidar as a Sphinx, and also, in a particularly striking metaphor, as an ‘ethnologist of the future’ (p. 247), able to foresee God appointing someone else in His place, namely the Creative Being who, with such an heritage, can only be a merciful being. At the source of this Iqbalian vision is a radically new cogito, which A. Bidar contrasts with that of Descartes summing it up in the formula: ago ergo mundus est (I act, hence the world is).

[5] Iqbal was already the one to whom A. Bidar had turned while concluding Self Islam (p. 234 f.), and there is definitely something touching in this spiritual companionship beyond time and space. Indeed, a quite remarkable feature of L’Islam face à la mort de Dieu is precisely to show page after page how an ‘intelligent heart’ of today can accede to the highest type of philosophical and theological imagination by closely reading and meditating upon the writings of a luminary of the recent past.

References


