

The Concept of Worship in Islam

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The concept of worship in Islam differs from that found in other religions, and is therefore subject to misunderstanding. In general, worship is understood to mean the observance of certain rituals: praying, fasting, giving charity, and other "good" works. In Islam, however, worship is much more-it is one's entire life. As many Muslim scholars have said: "Worship is an all-inclusive term for those internal and external sayings and actions of a person that are pleasing to Allah." In other words, worship is that which is done in obedience to Allah's will, which obviously includes rituals but goes far beyond to the realms of one's beliefs, social activities, and personal contributions to one's society and fellow human beings.

Islam looks at the individual as a whole. He is required to submit completely to Allah, as the Qur'an instructed the prophet Muhammad to do: Say (O Muhammad) my prayer, my sacrifice, my life and my death belong to Allah; He has no partner and I am ordered to be among those who submit, i.e.; Muslims. The natural result of this submission is that one's activities should conform to the instructions of the one to whom the person is submitting-Allah. Islam requires that its followers conduct every aspect of their lives according to its teachings. This might sound strange to those who view religion as a personal relation between the individual and God and as having no impact on those activities that are not connected specifically with any religious rituals.

The Prophet taught his followers that Islam is far more than a private personal matter. Islam attaches no value to rituals that are performed mechanically and have no influence on one's inner life. The Qur'an dealt with this issue when it addressed Muslims, as well as local Jews and Christians, during the dispute that arose when the prayer direction was changed from Jerusalem to the Ka'bah in Makkah:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward the East or the West, but righteous is he who believes in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Prophets, and gives his beloved money to the relatives and the orphans and the needy And over the ransoming of the captives, and who

observes prayer and pays the poor-due, and those who fulfill their promises when they have made one, and the patient in poverty and affliction and the steadfast in time of war; it is those who have proved truthful and it is those who are the God-fearing. (2:177)

The deeds mentioned in the above verse are indications that a person is righteous. But they are only a part of worship. Faith, according to the Prophet, is the basis of worship and "is made up of sixty and some branches: the highest of which is the belief in the Oneness of Allah, i.e., there is no God but Allah and the lowest in the scale of worship is removing obstacles and dirt from people's way"

Honest work is considered a type of worship. The Prophet said: "Whoever finds himself at the nightfall tired of his work, God will forgive his sins." Seeking knowledge is one of the highest types of worship. The Prophet told his Companions that "seeking knowledge is a (religious) duty on every Muslim." He also said: "Seeking knowledge for one hour is better than praying for seventy years. " Social courtesy and cooperation, when done for the sake of Allah, are also a part of worship: "Receiving your friend with a smile is a type of charity, helping a person to load his animal is a charity, and putting some water in your neighbor's bucket is a charity"

In Islam, the performing one's duties is also considered an act of worship. The Prophet told us that whatever one spends for his family will be counted as an acts of worship for which he will be rewarded, provided that he has acquired it through Islamically acceptable means. Kindness to family members, no matter how small, are also viewed as acts of worship. Even activities that we enjoy very much, such as sexual relations with one's spouse, are considered acts of worship as long as they are performed in accordance with the relevant Qur'anic and prophetic guidelines. For example, the Prophet once told his Companions that they would be rewarded even for engaging in sex with their wives. They were astonished and asked: "Are we to be rewarded for doing something that we enjoy very much?" The Prophet replied: "If you satisfy your desires illegally, will you be punished?" They replied, "Yes. " "So," he said, "by satisfying it legally with your wives you will be rewarded."

It is clear from the previous discussion that the concept of worship in Islam is a comprehensive concept that includes all of the positive activities engaged in by an individual. This is in agreement with the

all-inclusive nature of Islam, which regulates life on the individual, social, economic, political, spiritual, and all other levels of one's life. This minute attention to one's activities is the reason why the Qur'an and the example and sayings of the Prophet deal with all aspects of an individual's and a society's life. As following these guidelines is an act of obedience to Allah, He considers them as acts of worship. This very positive attitude encourages individuals to follow the relevant guidelines and thus to bring about personal and social transformation. It also causes an individual to internalize the guidelines, for even if no one is watching him, he knows that Allah is watching him.

Discussing non-ritualistic types of worship first does not mean that the ritualistic ones have less importance. In fact, if the latter are performed correctly and sincerely, they elevate the individual both spiritually and morally and actually help him to live a righteous life according to the guidance of Allah.

Islam has several ritualistic activities that all Muslims are expected to perform. The most important one is the prayer (salah), which must be performed according to a specific style. Its importance derives from the fact that it serves as the distinctive trait of a Muslim and because it prevents a Muslim from engaging in sinful activities by putting him into direct contact with Allah five times a day. Thus, the ritual prayer is a chance for him to renew his covenant with Allah and to seek His guidance anew. As it says in the Qur'an: You alone do we worship and to You alone do we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path (1:4-5). Actually, the ritual prayer is the first practical manifestation of the Islamic faith and is the main condition for a Muslim's success: Successful indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers. (23:1-2)

This has also been emphasized by the Prophet, who said: "Those who offer their prayer with great care and punctuality will find it a light, a proof of their faith and a cause of their salvation on the Day of Judgment."

The second most important pillar of Islam is zakat, a term that signifies giving to the less fortunate a certain percentage of one's earnings and holdings. Giving the poor-due and performing the prayer are usually mentioned together in the Qur'an, for they are both visible manifestations of one's Islamic faith and belief that Allah is the sole owner of everything in the universe, which he

allows man to enjoy as His trustee for a specific period of time: Believe in Allah and His Messenger and spend of that over which He made you trustees (57:7). In this respect, giving one's poor-due is an act of devotion that, like prayer, brings the believer nearer to his Lord.

In addition, this act provides a means to redistribute a society's wealth in a way that reduces differences between classes and groups. It makes an important contribution to social stability, for by purging the soul of the rich person from selfishness and the soul of the poor from envy and resentment against society, it blocks the channels leading to class hatred and makes it possible for the springs of brotherhood and solidarity to gush forth. Such stability is not merely based on the personal feelings of the rich: it stands on a firmly established right that, if denied by the rich, would be exacted by force, if necessary.

The month-long fast of Ramadan (siyam) is the third pillar of Islam. Its main function is to make the Muslim pure from "within," just as the external legal code (the Shari'ah) makes his external actions pure. This process of purification makes it possible for him to respond to what is true and good and to shun what is false and evil. As stated in the Qur'an: O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may gain piety (2:183). In an authentic tradition, the Prophet reported Allah as saying: "He suspends eating, drinking, and gratification of his sexual passion for My sake. " Thus his reward is going to be according to God's great bounty.

Fasting, then, awakens an individual's conscience and gives it scope for exercise in a communal experience that is engaged in by the entire Muslim world at the same time. Such a ritual strengthens the individual's resolve to improve himself and to realize the purpose of the whole undertaking. Fasting offers a compulsory rest to the over-worked human body for the duration of one full month, and also reminds Muslims of those who are deprived of life's necessities throughout the year or throughout one's life. It makes him realize the suffering of his less fortunate Muslim brothers, a feeling that promotes in him a sense of sympathy and kindness towards Muslims and other people in general.

Lastly, we come to the annual pilgrimage to the House of Allah (the Ka'bah) in Makkah. This ritual, known as the hadj, is unique to Islam.

Muslims from all comers of the world and all attired in the same clothing respond in one voice and one language with the following phrase upon entering the sacred precincts: "*labbayk Allahuma Labbayk*" (Here I am at your service O Lord!). This is a time of strict self-discipline and control where not only sacred things are revered, but even the life of plants and birds is made inviolable: And he that venerates the sacred things of God, it shall be better for him with his Lord (22:30) as well as And he that venerates the way marks of God, it surely is from devotion of the heart (22:32).

Pilgrimage gives an opportunity for all Muslims, regardless of their affiliations with certain groups, classes, organizations, and governments, to meet annually in a great congress. The time and venue of this congress has been set by God. All Muslims are invited to attend, for no individual or government can deny any Muslim the right to do so. Every Muslim who attends is guaranteed full safety and freedom as long as he does not violate its sanctity.

Thus, worship in Islam, whether ritual or non-ritual, trains the individual in such a way that he loves his Creator even more, which causes him to gain an unyielding will and spins to wipe out all evil and oppression from his society and to make the word of God triumphant.