

Worship in Islam

(part 1 of 3): The Meaning of Worship



The concept and purpose of worship in Islam is unparalleled to any other religion in existence. It combines the mundane with the spiritual, the individual with the society, and the internal soul with the external body. Worship has a unique role in Islam, and through worship, a person is regarded as a true Muslim who accords his entire life to the Will of God.

The importance of worship may be seen in the fact that it has been prescribed by God in all religions prior to Islam. God said in the Quran:

“And assuredly We have sent among every people a messenger (with the command): worship God...” (Quran 16:36)

Worship in Islam has so many facets that it is difficult to describe them all in words. The most general meaning of worship in Islam is inclusive of everything which is pleasing to God, whether they deal with issues of belief, or deeds of the body. It may include everything a person perceives, thinks, intends, feels, says and does. It also refers to everything that God requires, external, internal or interactive. This includes rituals as well as beliefs, work, social activities, and

personal behavior, as human being is a whole, such that every part affects every other.

Worship may be classified into two types:

- 1) Specific Beliefs, feelings and visible acts of devotion paid in homage to God which He has commanded.
- 2) All other acts of goodness generally encouraged in the life of a Muslim.

Devotion to God

This facet of worship entails that one fulfill certain deeds which God has commanded in His religion, whether they deal with the inner self or the outer body, and whether they be obligatory or voluntary. This facet of worship is not only limited to following His commandments, however, but it is also inclusive of leaving those things which He has forbidden. Worship in this sense, maybe defined as anything believed, felt, or done as an act of obedience to God.

In this respect, worship may also be called servitude, as it is in essence living one's life in complete servitude to God, doing what He commands, and avoiding what he forbids, as a slave lives within the will of his master. In essence all creations are slaves of God, whether they like it or not, for they are all subject to the laws He has placed within His creation:

“There is none in the heavens and the earth but comes unto the Most Beneficent (God) as an obedient slave.” (Quran 19:93)

“To Him submitted all creatures in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly.” (Quran 3:83)

But worship differs from servitude in that it must be coupled with love, awe and reverence. No act of obedience is regarded as worship unless it is coupled these feelings; one must love the action and love, hold in awe and have reverence for the One the action is being performed.

For this reason, in discussing this topic, it must be emphasized that worship is a right with is solely for God. Islam adheres to the strictest form of monotheism and does not tolerate that any act of worship be directed towards other than God. It is God alone who demands our obedience, and it is God alone who deserves our love. Any veneration of other deities besides God, whether they be demigods, prophets, angels, saints or martyrs, or their relics, statues or pictures, is considered as a breach in this monotheism, and a person is rendered out of the fold of Islam if committed. Even though one may justify that they venerate saints due to their service to God, or their relics as a remembrance of them, Islam does not differentiate between direct and indirect, or subordinate and superior worship. All

worship and acts of veneration, homage and obedience must be offered for God alone.

The Inner Forms of Worship

As mentioned earlier, acts of worship prescribed by God either deal with the inner self or the outer body. Those which deal with the inner self do so with belief and feelings. Humans are commanded to believe in certain ultimate truths, discussed in the articles of faith, and this is the most important aspect of worship. Belief is the basis for what a person feels and does – actions and feelings are a reflection of belief. If a person's belief is incorrect or weak, it will never produce the desired results in regards to their feelings or actions. For example, if a person incorrectly believes that God has forgiven them their sins due to their mere faith, their belief will not produce the desired feeling of fear which should be present in their heart, nor will this belief cause a person to cease sinning and perform deeds of righteousness.

God has also commanded us to maintain certain feelings in our hearts, both towards God as well as others of His creation. Muslims must love God, fear him, have awe in Him, place their trust in Him, and revere Him. Muslims have also been commanded to love their fellow Muslims, to have mercy and compassion towards them, to love righteousness and to hate sin. These are all considered acts of worship of the inner self because they are in essence a fulfillment of the commandments of God; Muslims will be rewarded for fulfilling them.

(part 2 of 3): The Outer Forms of Worship

The Outer Forms of Worship

Throughout history, certain religions, due to their tampering, have placed more emphasis on the inner format of worship, wholly or partially dismissing the importance of the outer, while others have placed more emphasis on apparent and visible acts of rituals, diminishing the value of belief. As mentioned earlier, in Islam, there is no absolute separation between the inner and outer - the inner state produces and ought to produce outer manifestations, and outer conditions and actions have inner consequences. There is certainly a correspondence between the inner and outer state, and each tends to modify the other. All inner intentions lead to equivalent postures and actions. One can often judge a person's inner state by his outer. A person in despair or fear, for instance, has a certain posture and expression on his face. Conversely, if certain activities or postures are adopted then the equivalent inner state will result.

Visible acts of worship offered to God are fruits of the Muslim's belief. For this reason, not only does Islam demand that a person believe in the ultimate truths

laid out in its doctrine, but it also demands that belief in God produce visible action. It is not enough for one to maintain certain beliefs for salvation, but rather deeds are essential in order for one to be successful in this life and the next.

God has commanded that Muslims fulfill certain commandments throughout the course of their lives, exemplified in the five pillars of Islam. These have been prescribed daily, such as the prayer, and annually, such as the compulsory charity and the fast of Ramadan, or as little as once in a person's life, such as the Hajj. There are many other acts of worship prescribed in Islam other than the five pillars, some of which are obligatory and others of which are voluntary, their performance left to a Muslim's discretion.

Though there is a ritual connected with these acts of worship, they should not be mistaken for ritualism or regimentation. Acts of worship must be done with full awareness of what one is doing and awareness of the presence of God. Actions performed mechanically or as habits produce only automatons and do not facilitate spiritual growth.

“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward the East or the West, but righteous is he who believes in God and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Prophets, and gives his beloved money to his relatives and the orphans and the needy and for the ransoming of 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.” (Quran 2:177)

The Purpose and Benefit of Worship

God is not in need of our worship. Worship has been legislated in Islam and all other previous religions for the benefit of humanity, both in the individual and societal sense. Worship is essential for the maintenance of spirituality in the life of Muslims and its growth. Formal worship trains the individual to love his Creator and to develop constant awareness of God. God says:

“O people! Worship your Lord Who has created you and those before you in order that you may be of the God-conscious.” (Quran 2:21)

God also said to Moses:

“...And establish the prayer in order to remember Me.” (Quran 20:14)

Acts of worship serve as a means through which one remembers God and maintains a relationship with Him. Muslims perform prayer a minimum of five times daily in order to maintain this relationship. When one supplicates, implores, praises God, recites verses from His revelation, which has been called “the Reminder”^[1], along with other forms of worship throughout the day, they will gain the sense that the Power and Knowledge of God is present with them at all times, leading them to this sense of God-consciousness.

Worship also creates a strong sense within a Muslim to remove the evil within himself and in the community and environment and to establish the word of God throughout the world. God says:

“...Indeed the prayer prevents one from committing licentious and evil deeds...” (Quran 29:45)

Again, when a person spends his day performing specific acts of worship, they are constantly reminded of the purpose of life and their final end, and this in turn helps them to accord their lives to the Will of God, doing what He is pleased with and avoiding what He dislikes.

One can clearly see the impact worship has on a collective level. Society is merely a conglomeration of individuals, and when individuals are spiritually and morally upright, the society itself will also be upright. Ideally, the society will be one which feels that God is ever-watching over them; one to which beneficent acts of kindness will be an inseparable adjective, and sin and vice will be confined and limited.

Although it may seem to some that worship and obedience to God is similar to imprisonment and slavery, the worship of God and servitude to Him actually liberates humans from all types of subjugation. A person break frees from the chains of society, peers, and family, and liberates him to please His One True Lord. This is true freedom that brings about security and contentment. Servitude to God is the ultimate source of freedom.

Footnotes:

^[1] This may be found in many verses, such as 15:9, 36:11, and others.

(part 3 of 3): The Comprehensiveness of Worship

As mentioned earlier, the definition of worship in Islam is one which is comprehensive, including everything a person perceives, thinks, intends, feels, says and does. It refers to everything that God requires, external, internal or

interactive. This includes rituals as well as beliefs, work, social activities, and personal behavior.

There is a distinction between that which is good, that which is evil and that which is neutral. A good thing is that which is according to the purposes and nature made by God. It leads to harmony and is, therefore, a reward in itself because it removes conflict and suffering. It follows that anything that accords with this must be a form of worship.

This Islamic understanding of worship allows the whole of one's life to be an act of worship, as long as the objective of that life is the pleasure of God, which is achieved by doing good and refraining from evil. A person can turn everyday activities into acts of worship by purifying his or her intention and sincerely seeking God's pleasure through these activities. God's Messenger, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“Helping a person or his belongings onto his mount is an act of charity. A good word is charity. Every step taken on the way to performing prayers is charity. Removing an obstacle from the road is charity.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Earning a living can be a form of worship. The Companions saw a man and were astonished by his hard work and industry. They lamented: “If he were only doing this much work for the sake of God...”

God's Messenger said:

“If he is working to support his small children, then it is for the sake of God. If he is working to support his elderly parents, then it is for the sake of God. If he is working to occupy himself and keep his desires in check, then it is for the sake of God. If, on the other hand, he is doing so to show off and earn fame, then he is working for the sake of Satan.” (al-Mundhiri, as-Suyuti)

Even the most natural acts can become acts of worship if they are accompanied by the proper intention: God's Messenger said:

“When one of you approaches his wife, it is an act of charity.” (Saheeh Muslim)

The same can be said for eating, sleeping, working and traits of good character, such as truthfulness, honesty, generosity, courage, and humbleness, can become worship through sincere intention and deliberate obedience to God.

In order for these otherwise mundane actions to be counted as acts of worship deserving of divine reward, the following conditions must be met:

A. The action must be accompanied by the proper intention. God's Messenger said:

“Actions are but by intentions, and a person gets only what he intended.”
(*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

B. The action must be lawful in and of itself. If the action is something prohibited, its perpetrator deserves punishment. God’s Messenger said:

“God is pure and good, and He accepts only what is pure and good.” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

C. The dictates of Islamic Law must be completely observed. Deception, oppression, and iniquity must be avoided. God’s Messenger said:

“He who deceives us is not one of us.” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

D. The activity should not keep the person from performing his or her religious obligations. God says:

“O you who believe, do not let your wealth and children distract you from the remembrance of God...” (Quran 63:9)

As we see here, the concept of worship in Islam is not restricted to mere monasticism, meditation, or acknowledging the reality in which God has created us, nor is it one based upon mere ritualism and performance of certain actions with no apparent meanings. Rather Islam has combined the inner and the outer and has defined righteousness and placed for it a reward. It is this comprehensiveness of the concept of worship through which humans may fulfill the purpose for which they have been created. God says:

“And I have neither created jinn nor humans, except for My worship.” (Quran 51:56)

Humans are required to live not according to their subjective desires, automatisms, mental conditioning or according to the dictates of social, political or academic authorities, but in accordance with their cosmic purpose inherent in us: the worship of God.

“So direct your face towards the straight religion, the nature (framed by) God with which He has created humankind. No change let there be in the creation of God, that is the straight religion, but most people do not know.” (Quran 30:30)

When one lives their life fulfilling those aspects which God has commanded, leaving those things which God has forbidden, and according each of their actions to the Will of God, their life, from morning until evening, from the time of birth until death, is turned into worship for which they will be rewarded. This was the state of the Prophets, as God says:

“Indeed, my prayer, my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for God, the Lord of the all that exists.” (Quran 6:162)

When one achieves this state, they come into harmony with the rest of creation and return to their natural state of being, as all others of the creations of God are unconsciously in constant worship of God, as He has said:

“Do you not see that unto God bow down in worship (or submit in service and adoration) whosoever is in the heavens and whosoever is in the earth, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the mountains, and the trees, and the beasts, and many among mankind...” (Quran 22:18)