

Concept of Worship in Islam

The concept of worship in Islam is misunderstood by many people, including some Muslims. Worship is commonly taken to mean performing ritualistic acts such as prayers, fasting, charity, etc. This limited understanding of worship is only one part of the meaning of worship in Islam. That is why the traditional definition of worship in Islam is a comprehensive definition that includes almost everything in any individual's activities. The definition goes something like this: "Worship is an all inclusive term for all that God loves of external and internal sayings and actions of a person." In other words, worship is everything one says or does for the pleasure of Allah. This, of course, includes rituals as well as beliefs, social activities, and personal contributions to the welfare of one's fellow human beings.

Islam looks at the individual as a whole. He is required to submit himself 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 (Muslims). (6:162-163)

The natural result of this submission is that all of one's activities should conform to the instructions of the one to whom the person is submitting. Islam, being a way of life, requires that its followers model their life according to its teachings in every aspect, religious or otherwise. This might sound strange to some people who think of religion as a personal relationship between the individual and God, having no impact on one's activities and outside rituals.

As a matter of fact Islam does not think much of mere rituals when they are performed mechanically and have no influence on one's inner life. The Qur'an addresses the believers and their neighbors from among the People of the Book who were arguing with them about the change of the direction of the Qibla (the direction in which Muslims pray) in the following verse:

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 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. (2:177)

The deeds in the above verse are the deeds of righteousness and they are only a part of worship. The Prophet (PBUH) told us about faith, which is the basis of worship, that it “is made up of sixty and some branches: the highest of which is the belief in the Oneness of Allah (that is, there is no god but Allah) and the lowest in the scale of worship is removing obstacles and dirt from people’s way.”

Decent work is considered in Islam a type of worship. The Prophet (PBUH) 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 (PBUH) told his companions that “seeking knowledge is a (religious) duty on every Muslim.” In another saying he said: “Seeking knowledge for one hour is better than praying for seventy years.” Social courtesy and cooperation are part of worship when done for the sake of Allah as the Prophet told us: “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.”

It is worth noting that even performing one’s duties is considered a sort of worship. The Prophet (PBUH) told us that whatever one spends for his family is a type of charity; he will be rewarded for it if he acquires it through legal means. Kindness to the members of one’s family is an act of worship as when one puts a piece of food in his spouse’s mouth. Not only this, but even the acts we enjoy doing very much are considered worship when they are performed according to the instructions of the Prophet (PBUH). He told his companions that they will be rewarded even for having sexual intercourse with their wives. The companions were astonished and asked, “How are we going to be rewarded for doing something we enjoy very much?” The Prophet (PBUH) asked them, “Suppose you satisfy your desires illegally; don’t you think you will be punished for that?” They replied, “Yes.” “So,” he said, “by satisfying it legally with your wives, you are rewarded for it.” This means they are acts of worship.

Thus, Islam does not consider sex a dirty thing that one should avoid. It is dirty and a sin only when it is satisfied outside marital life.

It is clear, from the previous discussion that the concept of worship in Islam is a comprehensive concept that includes all the positive activities of the individual. This, of course, is in agreement with the all-inclusive nature of Islam as a way of life. It regulates human life on all levels: individual, social, economic, political and spiritual. That is why Islam provides guidance in the smallest details of one's life on all these levels. Thus, following these details is following Islamic instructions in that specific area. It is a very encouraging element when one realizes that all his activities are considered by God as acts of worship. This should lead the individual to seek Allah's pleasure in his actions and always try to do them in the best possible manner, whether he is observed by his superiors or is alone. There is always the permanent supervisor, who knows everything: Allah.

Discussing the non-ritual worship in Islam first does not mean under-evaluating the importance of the ritual worship. Actually, ritual worship, if performed in true spirit, elevates man morally and spiritually and enables him to carry on his activities in all walks of life according to the Guidance of God. Among ritual worships, *Salah* (ritual prayer) occupies the key position for two reasons. Firstly, it is the distinctive mark of a believer. Secondly, it prevents an individual from all sorts of abominations and vices by providing him chances of direct communion with his Creator five times a day, wherein he renews his covenant with God and seeks His guidance again and again: "*You alone we worship and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path.*" (1:5-6). Actually, *Salah* is the first practical manifestation of Faith and also the foremost of the basic conditions for the success of the believers:

Successful indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers. (23:1-2)

The same fact has been emphasized by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a different way. He says:

"Those who offer their Salah with great care and punctuality will find it a light, a proof of their Faith and cause of their salvation on the Day of Judgment."

After *Salah*, *Zakah* (poor-due) is an important pillar of Islam. In the Qur'an, *Salah* and *Zakah* have been mentioned together many times. Like *Salah*, *Zakah* is a manifestation of faith that affirms that God is the sole owner of everything in the

universe. What men possess is a trust in their hands to discharge as God has laid down:

trustees. (57:7) Believe in Allah and His messenger and spend of that over which He has made you

In this respect, *Zakah* is an act of devotion that, like prayer, brings the believer nearer to his Lord.

Apart from this, *Zakah* is a means of redistribution of wealth in a way that makes a contribution to social stability, providing a means of survival for those who have not, and reminding those who are wealthy that what they have is a trust from God. By purging the soul of the rich from selfishness, and the soul of the poor from resentment against society, *Zakah* 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 generous feelings of the rich: it stands on a firmly based right of the destitute which, if denied by those holding the wealth, would be exacted by force, if necessary.

Note: as there are two most fundamental rights a human being has in this life.

1. Right upon Allah (called Hoqooq Allah)
2. Right upon his fellow being (called hooqooq ul Ibad)

Salah (namaz) falls under the most important right towards Allah a human has to fulfill and Zakah fall as the most important right a man has to fulfill towards his/her fellow being

Siyam (fasting during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan) is another pillar of Islam. The main function of fasting is to make the Muslim pure from “within” as other aspects of Shariah (Islamic law) make him pure from “without.” By such purity he responds to what is true and good and shuns what is false and evil. This is what we can perceive in the Qur’anic verse:

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 (PBUH) 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 the conscience of the individual and gives it scope for exercise in a joint experience for all society at the same time, thus adding further strength to each individual. Moreover, fasting offers a compulsory rest to the overworked human machine for the duration of one month. Similarly, fasting reminds an individual of those who are deprived of life’s necessities throughout the year or throughout life. It makes him realize the suffering of others, the less fortunate brothers in Islam, and thus promotes in him a sense of sympathy and kindness to them.

Lastly, we come to *Al-Hajj* (pilgrimage to the House of God in Makkah). This very important pillar of Islam manifests a unique unity, dispelling all kinds of differences. Muslims from all corners of the world, wearing the same dress, respond to the call of Hajj in one voice and language: *LABBAIK ALLAHUMMA LABBAIK* (Here I am at your service, O Lord!). In Hajj there is an exercise of strict self-discipline and control where not only sacred things are revered, but even the life of plants and birds is made inviolable so that everything lives in safety:

And he that venerates the sacred things of God, it shall be better for him with his Lord. (22:30)

And he that venerates the way marks of God, it surely is from devotion of the heart. (22:32)

Pilgrimage gives an opportunity to all Muslims from all groups, classes, organizations, and governments from all over the Muslim world to meet annually in a great congress. The time and venue of this congress have been set by their One God. Invitation to attend is open to every Muslim. No one has the power to bar anyone. Every Muslim who attends is guaranteed full safety and freedom as long as he himself does not violate its safety.

Thus, worship in Islam, whether ritual or non-ritual, trains the individual in such a way that he loves his Creator most and thereby gains an unyielding will and spirit to wipe out all evil and oppression from human society and make the word of God dominant in the world.