

Ritual must arise from the spirit

All religions, through rituals and ceremonies, give a definite form to the act of worship. Islam, too, has specific rites but emphasises the spirit in which these are carried out. It does not conceive of divine worship as a dichotomous proposition divided into two equal parts, of form and spirit. Form is an external manifestation of the spirit — the vital and indispensable element of every sincere religious act, of which the former is a mere ancillary.

A hadith on fasting shows how this act must be illumined by spirit: "One who did not forsake telling lies while on a fast, God has no need of such a person forsaking food and water." Numerous statements in the Qur'an and Hadith make it clear that in Islam ritual practices and spirit are not equal constituents of worship. In relation to one another, one is the crucial and the other subordinate element. Each act of worship may or may not — depending upon its nature and circumstances — have an external form but, ritualised or formless, what is truly important is the zeal which inspires it.

While rituals serve partly as palpable identifiers of religious acts or of worship and partly as physical reinforcements of or prompters to religious ardour, the essence of Islam is the inner spirit, eternal and unsailable unlike its outer forms. Whenever this reality is lodged in the recesses of the individual psyche, its effects are outwardly reflected. Sincerely performed ceremonial acts are but material expressions of the incontrovertible inner truth. When, near the end of his life, Prophet Muhammad went on his pilgrimage, he laid down specific ways of performing Hajj. More than 100,000 of his companions went with him. Then the Prophet seated himself in the courtyard of the Kabah and his companions queried him on the procedures of this important part of worship, especially concerning rites and their proper forms. (Hajj involves the performance

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of a series of rites, and since this was the first proper Hajj, there was uncertainty about their correct order.) The Prophet allayed their fears, saying: "There is no harm. There is no harm. Real harm lies in the dishonouring of a person." This saying throws light on how form relates to spirit in Islam: the spirit is the essential factor, while the form or ritual is a matter of externals. If the believer is not lacking in spirit, any deficiency in the form of his worship is tolerable.

The converse of this is illustrated by a tradition set down in the books of Hadith. Once the Prophet was seated in the mosque in Medina when a worshipper came to meet him after performing his ablutions and saying his prayers with full observance of their ritual. The Prophet sent him back to say his prayers again as, he said, *he had not said*

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his prayers. Here, a distinction was made between form and spirit. The Prophet sensed that this worshipper's performance of the rituals of prayer had been mechanical, not imbued with religious fervour. Indeed, the true spirit of namaz is modesty. But this individual's behaviour showed that while he was praying, modesty was far from his mind. The Prophet told him to go back and say his prayers so that he should concern himself with the kernel of prayer, not its outer shell.

However punctilious the worship in form, without the true spirit, the performance of the ritual is invalid. The mere observance of form does not make worship acceptable in the eyes of God.

The word "ritual", in fact, has the same connotation as "form". The only difference is that "form" is a term of general application, and "ritual" has become a religious term.

One hadith tells us that the value of an act depends upon the doer's intention. That is, a practice must be evaluated on the basis of motivation, for example, the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina, known as the Hijrah. This emigration for the sake of Islam when people abandoned hearth and home for the sake of God was an act of great religious significance.

However, one of the emigrants was not pure in intent. He left Mecca for Medina with the ulterior motive of marrying a Medina girl who had agreed to marry him only if he came to Medina as she could not go to Mecca. The Prophet told his companions since that individual had migrated not for the sake of God but for his own private benefit, he would not be rewarded.

This makes it clear that rituals are of relative value in Islam. The true value of an act in Islam depends entirely upon the spirit in which it is carried out, and not upon the trappings of outward form.