

Worship in Islam

God has stated in the Qur'an: "I only created mankind and the Jinn that they might worship Me." (51:56) According to Islam, the principal goal of life on this earth, from day one, is for human beings to show profound reverence for their Creator. The individual who lives for worship has fulfilled the purpose of his life. Conversely, one who does not lead a life of self-dedication to God has become derailed.

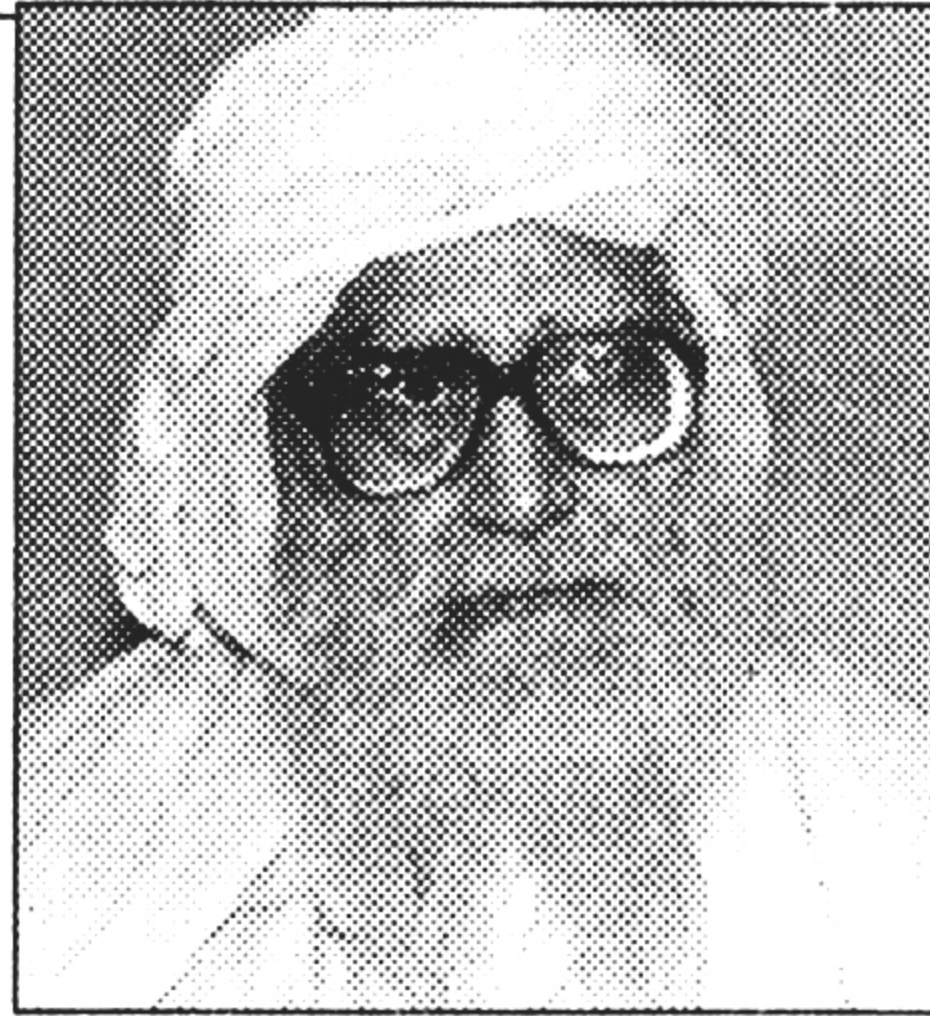
What is worship? Worship, the equivalent to devotion, means giving oneself wholly to God: it means surrendering oneself in both the physical and the intellectual sense.

In Islam, there are four practices which are important and complementary aspects of *ibadat* (worship): *namaz* (prayer), *sawm* (fasting), *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and *zakat* (alms-giving). These four forms of worship symbolise the nature of the extended worship required of human beings throughout their entire lives.

Namaz, for instance, conditions human beings in modesty — a quality which gives a proper religious hue to all spheres of human existence. Similarly, fasting inculcates patience, a virtue without which there can be no peace on earth. No less important is *zakat*, which is a gesture of well-wishing for humanity at large. *Hajj*, as well as affording spiritual benefit to the individual, aims at the uniting of all of God's servants under the banner of His religion. Each of these categories of obligatory worship has a form as well as a spirit; just as the human being has a body as well as a soul — the one being inseparable from the other.

The essence of each of these separate rites of Islamic worship is their spirit rather than their form. On *namaz* the Qur'an is explicit: "Successful indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers." (23:1-2) On the subject of fasting, we learn from a *hadith* that one who fasts, but who does not at the same time

Horizons



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give up telling lies or practising other forms of deceit, is not truly fasting in the religious sense of the term, but is merely experiencing hunger and thirst. Similarly, with regard to animal sacrifice, the Qur'an says: "Their flesh and blood do not reach God; it is your piety which reaches Him." (22: 37)

The Qur'an, moreover, makes it plain that when a servant of God turns to his Creator in worship, contact with Him is immediately established and without the intercession of any kind of intermediary. The act of worship, therefore, is a direct link between God and His servants. This has been variously expressed in the Qur'an and Hadith. For instance, the Qur'an says: "Prostrate yourself and come nearer." (96: 19) In the same vein, a Hadith tells us that when the worshipper is at his prayers, his contact with

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God may be established by the merest whisper.

Islamic worship is, in fact, an acknowledgement at the spiritual level of man's servitude to God Almighty. When the individual finds himself engrossed in true worship, he feels as if he is seeing God, as if divine light has descended upon his inner being; as if he has come very close to God. The achievement; of such spiritual states is the real goal of worship.

Any experience which has such a profound effect upon a man's inner personality must manifest itself in his external behaviour. Therefore, when an individual incorporates worship in his life on a regular basis, its effect becomes apparent in his moral conduct. Ultimately, his entire behaviour takes on the hue of his devotions.

As the Qur'an puts it: "Prayer fends off indecency and evil." (29: 45) But it is only sincere, heartfelt worship which renders the believer worthy of receiving God's blessings: in prayer one's whole being should be involved. Worship devoid of this spirit and performed purely for show is fit only to be rejected by God as an empty ritual. The Qur'an is specific on this point: it is only those who say their prayers in right earnest who will be ushered into Paradise. (74: 43) and it admonishes those who are only posturing when they pray: "Woe to those who pray, but are heedless in their prayers; who make a show of prayer and give no alms to the destitute." (107: 4).

For the true believer, worship is not something extraneous, in the nature of an appendage. It is rather the mainspring of the truly religious life. In essence, Islam is a holistic spiritual system, and worship, the key factor therein, builds and ensures the continuance of a relationship between the Almighty and His creatures in which His servants give expression to their love, humility, reverence, obedience and devotion, in return for which they may expect their Maker to look upon them with His divine mercy and magnanimity.