THE

ISLAMIC CONCEPTION

OF WORSHIP

by

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THE ISLAMIC CONCEPTION OF WORSHIP

The attitude of a sceptic or an apologist towards worship

To a sceptic, worship and prayer is not a fact or a fundamental and eternal reality of life. He considers it as a lie or an auto-suggestion, a delusion, a pursuit of one’s own phantoms, or a cry in the wilderness, or a primitive mumbling of a savage which only originated in fear. To him it is an escape from life which only helps man in becoming indolent and lazy; when everything follows a natural law there is no use of worship and prayer.

There is the apologist for prayer. Basically, he accepts what the sceptic says but he pleads; whether it is a fundamental reality or not, it is, however, a necessary condition of life; if it is a lie, it is a healthy lie which gives and restores some sort of confidence in man; if it is an auto-suggestion, it has still its value to the suffering millions; if it is a delusion, a soliloquy or the result of one’s own phantoms, let it remain so for the good of humanity — it might relieve people of nervous tension and save many from becoming nervous wrecks. There is no harm, the apologist argues, if people keep on addressing their petitions and supplications to a being which does not exist or, if He exists in fact, cannot interfere in the affairs of men and nature.

1 Text of a lecture delivered at the Annual Conference of the World Congress of Faiths at Manchester College, Oxfbrd on Saturday 16th July 1960. Dr. E. G. Perrinder of the University of London, King’s College, presided over the meeting.
In Islam worship (‘ibádah) is the very object of man’s creation

If the concept of prayer and worship is an illusion and not a fact, the concept of religion itself is an illusion. Then whatever is left of proper religion is a mere philosophy and a cold rational outlook on life. To a Muslim such an attitude is unacceptable. In Islam, worship is the fundamental aspect not only of religious life but of life itself. This is the very object of man’s creation. The Qur’án says: *I have not created . . . the men except that they should worship (serve) Me* (51 : 56).

The Arabic word for worship is ‘ibádah, which literally means: the serving, worshipping, adoring or obeying of God with humility or submissiveness. This verse shows, on the one hand, that man’s existence in this world is not without any purpose and, on the other, that the highest object of his creation is ‘ibádah. He is a helpless creature when he is born, although he has immense potentialities of realizing his capabilities to the full and reaching the goal of perfection in this life by knowing, loving and serving God, in other words, by ‘ibádah. It is only by working in accord with God’s will that man can realize what is best in him. If he serves God, it is not in any way beneficial to God, Who is the source of all goodness and power and beyond all needs of human service. It is for man’s own benefit that he should place himself under Divine protection and live and die for His sake. The love of God should be the mainspring of his activities and not the love of oneself or one’s family, nation or country. All rights and obligations of creation should arise out of the love of the Divine Being, complete surrender to Whom is the goal of a Muslim. In the words of the Qur’án:


cالإِنَّ الْسَّلَائِمِ
وَنَسِيَّةٌ وَعَضْدَاءٌ وَسَكَانِيُّ للَّهِ الْمَلِكِ الْعَلِيمِينَ أَلَا تِشْرِيكُ لَهُ


2 The other expressions used in the Qur’án for worship are: saláh—prayer, or technically speaking ritual worship; du’á—supplication, e.g., “My Lord, make me keep up prayer (saláh) and from my offspring (too), Our Lord, and accept my prayer (du’á)” (The Qur’án, 14 : 40). Dhikr Allah remembrance of God and recitation of the Qur’án has also been called acts of worship because the object of worship is God’s remembrance or celebration of His praise and because parts of the Qur’án are always recited in Muslim worship.
“Say : My prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death are surely for God, the Lord of the worlds. No associate has He. And this am I commanded, and I am the first of those who submit” (6 : 163-164).

'Ibádah is thus not a self-imposed necessity of life, it is in fact the very soul and essence of life without which no progress in human affairs is possible. Prayer is a part of 'ibádah. Search for a solution or remedy by means of thinking, reflection or concentration puts us in a state of prayer. Whenever we try to find out the reality of hidden truths, whenever we stretch out our hands in distress for help, whenever we yearn for comfort and solace, whenever we look for a ray of hope and light in darkness, we are in the very act of praying, whether we realize it or not. And when the light shines the seeker who is under the veil of ignorance does not recognize the source — the source of Light, Grace and Compassion. The seeker may not be aware of it but his very condition of helplessness (which I have called the state of prayer) has drawn the Divine Grace towards him. Only the spiritually awakened sees the hand of God working in the affairs of men. Thus, worship in its rudimentary form is a fact of human existence, a fundamental truth and reality of life, and, in its developed form, it has a higher and specific meaning to the spiritually awakened. To him, it is a communion with God Who is Transcendent, but not utterly transcendent that friendship with or service (‘ibádah) to Him is not possible. Worship proper is thus not only an act of devotion to the Unseen Beyond but it is also an intimate discourse with Him, which brings to man God’s guidance, His company and friendship. The relation between man and this “Wholly Other” (das ganz Andere) is active and mutual. Something must be, and is, transacted in prayer. Otherwise, the saying of Abraham to his sire as mentioned in the Qur’án has no value at all. “When he (i.e., Abraham) said to his sire, O my sire, Why worshippst thou that which hears not, nor sees, nor can it avail thee aught?” (The Qur’án, 19 : 42).

Abraham has denounced the worship of idols, which in fact is worship misplaced, on the ground that they do not hear, nor see, nor can they come to the rescue of their worshippers. Is it really worth having faith in such a God, Who neither hears, sees nor answers?

God hears and answers prayers

The Qur’án has, however, repeatedly stressed the point :

“And your Lord say : Pray to Me, I will answer you” (40 : 60).
And when My servants ask thee concerning Me, surely I am nigh. I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls on Me, so they should hear My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way” (2:186).

"Or, Who answers the distressed one when he calls upon Him?” (27:62).

This empirical approach towards worship is an antithesis of the belief of those who look upon God as an Unapproachable Beyond or a mere Cosmic Force. The theory that prayer is not a genuine experience and is an auto-suggestion, a delusion, a mere soliloquy or mumbling to oneself, has not only been rejected by the Qur'an but also by the previous sacred scriptures. A few references will suffice:

"But verily God hath heard me; He hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me” (Psalms 66:19-20).

"The Lord is far from the wicked: but He heareth the prayer of the righteous” (The Proverbs, 15:293).

"Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but, if any man be a worshipper of God and doeth His will, him He heareth” (John, 9:31).

If the entreaties and supplications of the worshipper are not answered by God, if no intimate commerce and transaction takes place between them, if the sweet, majestic voice of the Infinite is not heard by the finite, if the Grace and Mercy of the Gracious and the Compassionate does not fall to the lot of the righteous and the needy, the Divinely raised and the favoured ones of God, there is no hope for the spiritual progress of man or for the future of religion.

Auguste Sebatier, a liberal French theologian, says:

"Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion. It is prayer that distinguishes the religious phenomenon from such similar or neighbouring phenomenon as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment. Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life. This act is
prayer by which I understand no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence — it may be before it has a name by which to call it. Wherever this interior hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or doctrines, we have living religion. One sees from this why ‘natural religion’, so-called, is not properly a religion. It cuts man off from prayer. It leaves him and God in mutual remoteness, with no intimate commerce, no interior dialogue, no interchange, no action of God in Man, no return of man to God. At bottom, this pretended religion is only a philosophy. Born at epochs of rationalism, of critical investigation, it never was anything but an abstraction. An artificial and dead creation, it reveals to its examiner hardly one of the characters proper to religion” (August Sabatier: 


Remembrance of God or worship keeps one away from indecency and evil

The object of man’s creation, as has been explained before, is ’ibádah, and the purpose of ’ibádah is the remembrance of God. “Surely I am God,” says the Qur’án, “there is no God but I, so serve me, and keep up prayer for My remembrance” (20 : 14). The significance of the remembrance of God or celebrating His praise has been made clear at another place in the Qur’án:

أَنْتَ مَا أُرْسِلْتُ لِأَنْبِيَّ عِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ ذَاتِ الصَّرْفِ إِلَّا الصَّرْفَ وَالْبَصْرَةَ وَلِيَكُنُّ اللَّهُ عِينَ الْكُنْدُلْجِ وَاللَّهُ يَغْلِبُ مَا يَقْدِرُونَ

“Recite that which has been revealed to thee of the Book and keep up prayer (saláh). Surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil; and certainly the remembrance of God (dhíkr Allah) is the greatest (force). And God knows what you do” (29 : 45).

Remembrance (dhíkr) is to bring to or recall to mind something which is absent from mind or something which
one should know by heart. Remembrance of God in the
above verse means that our consciousness should be filled
with the thought of God. He is Omnipresent and knows our
intentions and actions, but what He expects from us is that
we should also realize His presence in our lives, which is
the only way to free ourselves from the snares of evil and
attain to spiritual tranquility. By tranquility, I do not mean
a state of inactivity but that feeling of thankfulness which
comes out of one's complete surrender to God in treading
the path of righteousness, however winding and difficult it
may be. Remembrance of God, on the one hand, is the
most powerful and effective restraint on sin and, on the
other, it raises a person to spiritual eminence. While com-
menting upon this verse, Muhammad 'Ali says:

"It is a living belief in the Divine power, know-
ledge and goodness that restrains man from walking in
the ways of His displeasure. A sure and certain know-
ledge that every evil action leads to an evil consequence,
that there is a Supreme Being, Who knows what is hid
from human eyes and Whose moral law is effective
where the moral force of society fails, that He is the
source of all goodness and it is through goodness that
man can have communion with Him, are the only
effective restraints upon evil.

"It should also be noted that recitation of the Book,
the keeping up of prayer, and the remembrance of God,
are really identical; for the Qur'án is recited in prayers,
and the Qur'án is the best means of the remembrance of
God. Every line of it brings before the mind of the
reader the goodness, power and knowledge of the Divine
Being, while there is no other Book which fulfils this
requirement. The Qur'án is neither a book of law,
though it contains the principles of the laws necessary
for the guidance of man, nor a book of sacred history,
though it contains the necessary sacred history, but it
is pre-eminently a book that manifests the glory, great-
ness, grandeur, goodness, love, purity, power and know-
ledge of the Supreme Being.

"While, as is generally understood, by the remem-
brance of God is meant His glorification and praise in
prayer, Ibn 'Abbas is reported to have said that by the
dhikr (remembrance) of God is here meant God's
remembrance of man or His raising him to a place of
eminence (Jámi' al-Bayán fi Tafsir al-Qur'án by al-
Imam Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari). Thus
the significance would be that through prayer to God,
not only is man freed from the bondage of sin, but
(which is greater than this) he is raised to a place of higher eminence” (Muhammad ‘Ali, *The Holy Qur’ān*, Arabic text, translation and commentary, 4th edition. Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha’at Islam, Lahore, Pakistan. 1951, pp. 768-9).

**Patience and steadfastness in worship**

Worship is thus the first step towards the spiritual perfection of man. It does not only keep him away from evil but also purifies his inner self (*nafs*) or the soul, and raises him to a place of eminence (91 : 9). Purification of the heart or emotion is a necessary condition of the purification of the self (*nafs*). The task is by no means easy, therefore the Qur’ān reminds us:

\[
\text{وَاسْتَعِنِّي بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ أَنْ لَآ إِلَيْهِ مَنْ تُنَادُونَ بِكَرْمَتِهِ}
\]

“And seek assistance through patience and prayer, and surely it is a hard thing except for the humble ones” (2 : 45).

Steadfastness is the most important point in all spheres of life and so it is in spiritual matters:

\[
\text{وَكَيْفَٰ يُصِيبُونَكُمُ الْكُوفَةَ وَمَا يَعْمَلُونَ أَبْلَاءً}
\]

“And be steadfast in worship (or keep up prayer) and pay the poor rate. And whatever good you send before for yourselves, you will find it with God. Surely God is seer of what you do” (2 : 110).

If worship does not keep a person away from indecency and evil, if worship is not a restraint on sin, if it does not purify one’s heart, emotion or *nafs*, if it does not teach him the lesson of steadfastness and patience, and if it does not help him to realize the Divine in him, there is something wrong with the mode of his worship and with the mode of his remembrance of God. Instead of becoming a discourse with God it has, in fact, turned into a mere soliloquy, a mere talking to oneself.

**Worship and fear**

To the sceptic, not only worship and prayer but the whole concept of religion is based on fear and ignorance.
To him, the fear of the unknown brought to the primitive mind the need of belief in something supernatural. To a Muslim, the concept of God is a revelation and not a product of psycho-social evolution or a discovery of the human mind under the stress of fearful conditions. The Qur'án does use the expression “fear God”, but, as has been rightly said, “The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom” (*The Proverbs*, 15:33), and “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction (*Ibid.*, 1:7).

Fear is of several kinds. One of the fears is very close to reverence and love when one fears him whom one most loves. The fear of an intelligent person who wants to protect himself and what is dear and near to him is entirely different from the fear of a coward and ignorant person. To the spiritually matured, the fear to displease his object of love is the source of guidance and light. It instructs him in the ways of the Lord and teaches him the lesson of complete submission to God in all suffering and joy and a stage is reached in his life when he can say from the core of his heart:

“Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds” (*The Qur'án*, 1:1).

The Arabic word *hamd* signifies that feeling of thankfulness that arises spontaneously out of one's heart. Surely this feeling of spontaneous thankfulness which has been acquired by constant emotional and spiritual struggle cannot be the result of abject fear, which is devoid of all intellectual element. The Rev. T. A. Burkill has made a valuable remark in this connection:

“Nature in its strange and daunting aspects may induce strained attention and paralyzing fear in an animal, but this is not worship, even in a minimum sense, for, in worship, there is always a metaphysical presumption that the *Mysterium Tremendum* is somehow corresponsive with man's solicitude concerning his destiny, and such a presumption presupposes a mode of intellectual activity however rudimentary” (*The Hibbert Journal*, published by Allen & Unwin, London, July 1960, p. 344).

Unless this intellectual activity is present one can neither truly fear God nor truly love Him. For this reason, reflection (*fikr*) has been mentioned together in the Qur'án at several places with remembrance of God, for instance, “Those who remember God,” says the Qur'án, “standing and sitting and (lying) on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the
heavens and the earth: Our Lord, Thou hast not created it in vain” (3:190).

This verse also shows that remembrance of God, which is the main object of worship, is not confined to stated times but it has been described as an attitude of mind and a way of living and it has also been associated with reflections and deliberation on the creation of God. The signs of God in human life and other creation are clear to those who have “knowledge,” “understanding” and “faith” (6:98, 99, 100). Remembrance of God and His hamd (thankfulness) is thus not (or should be not) the result of fear. It must become the spontaneous activity of the soul and the mind of a believer. At this stage it helps to free him from fear and grief.

The Qur’án says:

اللَّهُمَّ أَنْتَ أُمِّيٌّ وَأَنتَ نُورُ عَالَمِينَ هُمُّ الْمُطْهَرُونَ

“Now surely the friends of God, they have no-fear nor do they grieve. Those who believe and keep their duty (or constantly guard against evil). For them is good news in this world’s life and in the Hereafter” (10:62-64).

At another place it has been stated that “God guides to Himself those who turn to Him”

اللَّهُمَّ أَنتَ أُمِّيٌّ وَأَنتَ نُورُ عَالَمِينَ هُمُّ الْمُطْهَرُونَ

“Those who believe and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of God. Now surely in God’s remembrance do hearts find rest (or peace)” (13:27-28).

Is prayer an escape from life?

It has been explained before that, to a Muslim, prayer is the very core and essence of life. To seek assistance through prayer and patience is a hard thing. To fill our consciousness with the thought of God requires constancy, faith and sincerity. To achieve the highest degree of moral
and spiritual excellence through remembrance of God needs a lifelong struggle and God’s grace. It needs surrendering to the will of God, it needs **obedience coupled with the utmost submissiveness**, which is the true significance of ‘ibādah, as has been explained by me before; it is, in fact, selling oneself to God.

“**And of men is he who sells himself to seek the pleasure of God. And God is compassionate to the servants**” (The Qur'ān, 2 : 207).

A righteous servant of God is he whom trials and sufferings do not turn from his Lord. In fact, the internal and external faculties of the believers can only be fully displayed in adverse conditions. The friendship is immature and incomplete which has not been tested. We become the recipients of the mercy and blessings of God only when we have done His will and shown steadfastness, patience and faithfulness in suffering.

“**O you who believe, seek assistance through patience and prayer; surely God is with the patient. And speak not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay (they are) alive, but you perceive not. And We shall certainly try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of property and lives and fruits. And give good news to the patient, who when a misfortune befalls them say: 'Surely we are God's, and to Him we shall return.' Those are they on whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord; and those are the followers of the right course**” (2 : 153-7).
Mere knowledge of spiritual matter, however great it may be, is of no avail unless one has passed through the thick and thin of the battle of life. Can we say that such a person seeks an escape from life? The charge is wrong on the very face of it.

Work and worship

It has also been said that prayer helps man in becoming indolent and lazy. Nothing is farther from the truth. Asking God for a favour without making any effort on our part is against the spirit of worship and prayer. A Muslim utters several times during his ritual prayers:

“Guide us on the right path” or “Lead us on the right path”

The effort to reach the destination by treading the path of righteousness is ours. We are asking God’s guidance and help to keep us and lead us on the right path. On this path we have to walk the distance ourselves and face all the difficulties which we might come across in taking such a course in accordance with the will and commandment of God. In fact, it is sharing the greatest responsibility by asking Divine help to lead us on the ways of His pleasure. In view of the heavy task, it is not surprising that the soul’s yearning becomes bigger and bigger for the knowledge of the right path from the right source. For, if prayers be not addressed to the right source, our efforts will be wasted. “To Him is due the true prayer,” says the Qur’an, “and those to whom they pray besides Him give them no answer, but they are like one who stretches forth his two hands towards water that it may reach his mouth, but it will not reach it. And the prayer of the disbelievers is only wasted” (13:14).

That is why Abraham said to his sire: “Why worshippest thou that which heareth not, nor seest, nor can it avail thee aught?” (19:42).

As the right path is always beset with difficulties, therefore we constantly need the kind help of God so that we may reach our destination. There is a beauty of expression in ihdāna al-sirāt al-mustaqim (Guide us on the right path). For guidance the Arabic word is hidāyah, the meaning of which is:

“Guiding and leading on the right way with kindness until one reaches the goal” (Tāj al-‘Arus).

Moreover, acceptance of prayer in the Qur’an is itself associated with the reward of the hard work. “So their
Lord accepted their prayer (saying): I will not suffer the work of any worker to be lost, whether male or female, the one of you being from the other” (The Qur’an, 3:194). At another place it has been mentioned:

"Surely with difficulty is ease, 
"With difficulty is surely ease” (94:6-7).

Again:

“We have certainly created man to face difficulties” (90:4).

“And that man can have nothing but what he strives for: and that his striving will soon be seen. Then he will be rewarded for it with the fullest reward; and that to thy Lord is the goal” (53:39-42).

The life of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions is a living example of how they understood the relation between prayer and effort. They spent a greater part of the night in worship and the day in struggle for the cause of the glory of their faith. Prayer in them awakened the “latent energies of the human soul”, which helped them to progress in mundane as well as spiritual spheres of life.

As to the adoption of means for the success of our cause, we must remember that prayer is also a part of the effort. To a man of spirituality it rather precedes effort. The dormant energy in man is awakened by the process of prayer. “It often happens,” says Muhammad ‘Ali, “that notwithstanding the hardest struggle, a man is unable to gain an end, and finds himself quite helpless. In such a case prayer is a help, a source of strength, to the worker. He does not lose heart nor does he despair, because he believes that, though the means at his disposal have failed, though all around there are difficulties and darkness, though his own strength is failing, yet there is a higher power with whom
nothing is impossible, Who can still bring a ray of light to dispel the darkness and Who remains a perpetual source of strength for him in his helplessness, and that by praying to Him he can still achieve what seems otherwise quite unattainable. That is the function of the prayer, and thus one of the means to gain an end when all other means have failed, and a source of strength to a man in moments of utter weakness and despair” (Muhammad ‘Ali, The Religion of Islam, 1950 edition, p. 379).

**Prayer and pre-ordination**

There are people who think that prayer is of no avail when everything in life is pre-ordained and what is going to happen will happen irrespective of our appeals, petitions, interpellations or intercessions unto God for our own cause or for the cause of others.

Such an objection is the result of our wrong conception of the Divine Being. We think that God is like a watchmaker and, once the watch has left His hands, he has nothing any more to do with it. God thus becomes a mere spectator or rather a helpless onlooker of His poor, suffering creation. Such a God is only the God of the past Whose power and control have been left behind, i.e., He has lost His control on the destiny of things — things which were created and originated by Him. And thus He is not the God of the present or the future. But, if at all there is any control left in the hands of God over the destiny of things, there is a possibility of alteration in it as well. To a Muslim, God has perfect control over His creation in space and time. He is mālik-i yaum al-din, i.e., Master of the day of requital (1:3). The word yaum (day) in the Qur’ān is applied from a moment (55:29) to fifty thousand years (70:4). Thus He is the Master of every moment of our life on this world and the Hereafter. Master of the day of requital signifies that He is the master of the law of requital, which is working every moment of our existence. Even the law of creation has not ceased at some point in the past. It is a continuous process as is clearly indicated in the Qur’ān:

\[\text{Kulla yaum-in huwa fi shán} \]
\[(55 : 29).\]

1 Similar expressions have also been used in other scriptures: “The Night of Brahma is a thousand ages long” (Bhagavad-Gita 8:17); “With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day” (2 Peter 3:8).
It is not possible to fathom all the secrets of His creation and laws. Prayer is only a means to fall back upon the sources of His limitless knowledge and power about which we have so little understanding.

This reminds me of a prayer by the Prophet Muhammad which he taught for a special occasion and which runs as follows:

"O God! I desire Thy blessing by Thy knowledge, and I beg of Thee to give me power (to do it) by Thy power, and I ask of Thee Thy great grace, for Thou hast the power while I have not, and Thou knowest while I do not, and Thou art the Great Knower of the unseen things. O God! if Thou knowest that this affair is good for me in the matter of my religion and my living and the result of my affair, then ordain it for me and make it easy for me and bless (me) therein; and, if Thou knowest that this affair is evil for me in the matter of my religion and my living and the result of my affair, then turn it away from me and turn me away from it and ordain what is good for me wheresoever it is, and make me contended with it" (Al-Bukhári, 19:25).

In spite of the theory of natural laws and pre-ordination, we never cease to make efforts to help ourselves. If we fall ill, we go to the doctor, if a house catches fire we ask for the fire brigade. To take an extremely simple instance we drink water to quench our thirst because we know that in the so-called pre-ordained affairs of life God has appointed certain ways and means for the removal of certain human difficulties. In the same way, prayer is a means to draw of the grace of God in times of need. It is just like other means which we make use of for the attainment of our objectives.

After discussing some of the main objections raised against prayer I should like now to deal with some other aspects of worship in Islam.

**Worship in Islam is connected with the service of humanity**

Worship in Islam is not an empty ritualism. It is a part and parcel of our daily conduct, it determines our attitude towards life and it helps us to attain to moral and spiritual perfection. It should lead us to the disinterested service of humanity, it should urge us to come to the rescue of the indigent. If worship fails to urge man to safeguard the rights of the orphan and the needy, it is of no value to the worshipper. Even the religion he outwardly professes is utterly belied by his own conduct.
"Hast thou seen him who belies religion? That is the one who is rough to the orphan, and urges not the feeding of the poor. So woe to the worshipping (or praying) ones who are unmindful of their prayers! Who do (good) to be seen and refrain from acts of kindness" (The Qur'án, 107:1-7).

Worship, therefore, loses all its meaning if it becomes a show of piety, a mere daily routine and just verbal repetitions of certain formulae. Worship that is divorced from life and its moral and spiritual demands and obligations is in fact belying the religion. At another place the Qur'án says:

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteous is the one who believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels,
and the Book and the prophets, and gives away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphan and the needy and the wayfarer and those who ask and to set captives free and keeps up prayer and pays the poor rate; and the performers of their promise when they make a promise, and the patient in distress and affliction and the time of conflict. These are they who are truthful; and these are they who keep their duty” (2:177).

The form of Islamic worship

When we have understood the spirit and significance of worship in Islam, it would not be difficult to appreciate the need of a particular mode and form which is prescribed in Muslim worship. In Islam, prayer in a particular form performed at stated times is an integral institution of its system. Besides its spiritual and moral benefits, it has a great social aspect. It helps to level down all differences of race, colour, rank and nationality from among its followers. While praying, a prince and a beggar stand shoulder to shoulder. It is through this regular training that the colour problem does not exist in the Islamic world, neither in theory nor in practice.

Again, in Muslim worship has been combined all the possible positions which are necessary for developing the right attitude of reverence. Standing, bowing, prostration and sitting postures are sufficient to inspire the heart of the worshipper with feelings of humility before the Divine Being. To an outsider, various postures of Muslim worship may appear strange, but they are the same postures which were adopted by previous prophets and their disciples when they prayed. To quote a few examples:

“O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our Maker” (Psalms, 95:6).

“They fell on their faces” (1 Kings, 18:39).

“And he (i.e., Jesus) went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed” (Matthew 26:39; Mark 144:35).

The last reference shows that Jesus prostrated on the ground and prayed and that is how he taught his disciples to pray and worship.

There also prevails some misconception about the repeated times of Muslim liturgical prayer. As we partake
A posture in prayers

The congregation is in the posture of prostration. The foreheads of the devotees are touching the ground. This posture is essentially the logical conclusion of the mental change that can and does take place in a Muslim who does not recite the words of his prayers mechanically. Even in cases where the real point of prayers is missed, this symbolic posture succeeds in impressing on the mind of a Muslim his real position in life as against his Creator. The words uttered in this posture are: "Glory to my Lord, the Most High"

of food five or six times a day, similarly we should partake of this spiritual food several times during our waking hours. Repetition is the secret of beauty. How many times a pattern is repeated in a carpet or a wall-paper to make it a beautiful whole!

Another requisite of Muslim worship, besides its form and stated times, is ablution and the keeping clean of one’s clothes. Outward cleanliness is thus the starting point of spiritual purification. God addresses the Prophet Muhammad in the following words:
“O thou that art clothed! arise and warn, and thy Lord do magnify, and thy garment do purify, and uncleanness do shun” (The Qur'an, 74:1-5).

“Surely God loves those who turn much to Him, and He loves those who purify themselves” (The Qur'an, 2:222).

“O you who believe, when you rise up for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads, and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. And if you are under an obligation then have a bath” (The Qur'an, 5:6).

The Prophet is reported to have said: “Purification is half the faith” (Mishkat al-Masabih 3). On another occasion he said: “The key to paradise is prayer and the key to prayer is purification” (Ibid.). Once he asked his companions:

“Tell me, if there is a stream at the door of one of you, in which he bathes five times every day, what dost thou say, will it leave anything of his dirt?”

“They said, ‘It would not leave anything of his dirt.’

“He said, ‘This is the likeness of the five prayers, with which God blots out (all) faults’.”

Worship, to a Muslim, is a moral and spiritual discipline where patience, steadfastness, submission, humility, regularity and cleanliness are most essential before he can enjoy the fruits and blessings of prayer. The worshipful attitude, above all, is the crying need of the day. It is only this that can draw the grace of God to men. Darkness cannot dispel darkness. We can only receive light from the source of light. Men today are groping in the dark and do not know what real use they can make of all the scientific discoveries, and this has brought them to the verge of annihilation. Let us all pray from the core of our hearts:

“O Lord!

“Guide us on the right path.” Amen.