

WORSHIP AND PRAYER An Islamic Overview

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Man has been described as the religious animal for having always displayed a tendency to experience himself related to a higher level of reality. There is something in man which points to a suprasensible dimension of his being. From the Qur'anic viewpoint, this something is an innate and pure nature (*fitrah*), a kind of Edenic consciousness, which dispositionally leads man to experience the presence of God around him. To go through such an experience, man's pure nature, first of all, needs to be restored and renovated with the help of a proper attitude toward religion. Man's pure nature (*fitrah*) is a category of primordial consciousness which when revived banishes doubt and disbelief (*ghaflah*) and permeates souls of men with a spiritual radiance. Man starts perceiving things and events as signs and symbols of God's presence. This state of affair brings in its fold the call of God. The believer is required to respond to God's call in penitence and trust. He should come forward with distinction of good works, reverential attitude and prayerful behaviour.

The feeling of the divine Presence, according to Otto, brings in its wake 'creature-consciousness or creature-feeling'.¹ The concomitant feelings of the numinous experience are the feelings of submergence and prostration and of the diminution of the self into nothingness. The orderly reaction religion proposes in this state of numinous experience is absolute devotion to God in the shape of worship and prayer.

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However due to the widespread epistemic blindness among the majority of people, the faculty of numinous feeling remains limited to the selected few. Generally, people turn to God when they encounter some awful realities of life in the shape of horrible sufferings such as failure, condemnation, torture, disease and death. They find a kind of feeling of dependence in their psyche. The simple instinctive reaction shown in such a condition is to kneel down before God and pray in humble submission and obedience. Asking for divine assistance and support is the main aim of such a practice as prayer and worship. The believer express his gratitude, trust, love and dedication when he meets success, escapes harmful situations and comes to have good fortunes.

According to some religious psychologists, a strong prayer instinct is deeply rooted in human nature. William James supporting this view says: "The impulse to pray is necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical self in man is a Self of the social sort, it yet can find its only adequate *Socius* (its great companion) in an ideal world.² Iqbal, following this point of view, claims that prayer is instinctive in its origin.³ We have natural yearning to pray, to reconcile ourselves with the infinite companion. The essence of Prayer, according to Iqbal, lies in going from the finite to infinite. It signifies a process of liberation from temporal existence and from what it entails. Further broadening the scope and meaning of prayer Iqbal has observed, "Prayer as a means of spiritual illumination is a normal vital act by which the little island of our personality suddenly discovers its situation in a larger whole of life."⁴

There are some religious scholars who believe that like other faculties, which exist in human nature, such as the faculties of understanding, reasoning, memory, etc., prayer is also a natural faculty. This faculty is rooted deep in man's primal consciousness of his position in the world. This was a religious impulsion to which incitement from without and pressure from within the mind both contributed. The human reason brought this impulsion with it when human species entered the stage of history long ago.

However, with the passage of time the faculty of reason and intellect became stronger and stronger and natural faculty of prayer became weaker and weaker. The result is that we find many people having material attainments in abundance, but they miss happiness. What causes this unhappiness is the veil of our own ignorance of our spiritual nature. With the passage of time, man's intuitive faculties have been relegated to oblivion. He has lost his link with the spiritual self. According to the Qur'an, this has resulted from a spiritual disease and self-deception (II:9). If we are really interested in our spiritual rehabilitation, we need to acquire the right perspective of human life. We need to know wherein lays our true welfare. The material prosperity brings comforts in one's life but not true happiness for which human soul yearns so much. To promote true happiness in us we are required to revive the prayer instinct. When man-God relationship through prayer and worship is reestablished, man finds happiness not only in this world but also in the world hereafter.

Now the detractor has a typical objection to this natural faculty thesis. For him, this natural faculty thesis is nothing more than the extension of the primitive form of animism. The pagan mind used to find in every natural object a spirit dwells and that spirit is somehow connected with some kind of a universal spirit. And that universal spirit, in paganistic scenario, is considered a wonder-working force, which if one is determined to have an influence on its working, it needs to be propitiated through rituals, reverence and making requests. In this way, the detractor claims that the notion of prayer has emerged from the pagan religious practices. Thus the present form of religious prayer and worship is essentially a part of spiritual conscious of the dark ages. It is centered on the idea of 'Power' called *orenda or mana*. Different forms of this 'Power' worship are called fetishism, totemism, animal worship, demonism, and polydemonism. Magic is also a kind of a strategy to control the natural and suprasensible powers. The modern form of magic rituals is religious prayer. In this manner, prayer is still practiced as magic in the secret circles of most religions whether theistic or non-theistic.

This is vastly a mistaken view of religious prayer. It is based on a misleading analogy. Theistic prayer is not held as a magical formula, which may be used to manipulate God to cause something to happen. If some religious person endeavours to use prayer as a sort of magic, he is believed to be under the influence of demon. The theistic community will reject him forthwith as the follower of Satan. In the community of believers prayer is offered within the context of worship. It is a way of relating our self to God and feeling his presence around in the world. In prayer, a believer is required to praise God for his goodness and thank him for the gifts he has already given to him. The believer asks God to forgive him and help those who are in trouble, discomfort due to the vicious circle of ignorance and sin. As far as the petitionary prayers are concerned, they are treated simply as requests, which God may or may not grant. Muslims believe that God pay heed to their petitions when they make them in obedience. But his response ultimately depends on how God sees the request whether it fits within the greater plan of his purpose and will. There is no compulsion on God to grant our request. No one can coerce God to work according to his wishes. No one has the power to manipulate all powerful God. He as an omnipotent God always 'ensures that his own uniqueness and sovereign power remains unmistakable'.⁵

Further, it is wrong to conceive prayer as something like a tribute demanded by God. This notion has its roots in the cruder phase of numinous consciousness. The theistic religions shun portrayal of God in this way. According to a Muslim believer, God is beyond all egoistic needs and carnal desires. The Qur'an says: "Whosoever striveth, striveth for himself, for lo: Allah is altogether independent of (His) creatures" (29:6). Prayer is required of man for his own benefit. Professor Keith Ward has rightly observed that God "is not impressed by any human attempt at flattery".⁶ God does not receive any benefit from praise, adoration and prayer. "God wants us to grow by learning to appreciate the things that are truly worthwhile, to be happy in contemplation of excellence."⁷

The other critical view held by some religious thinkers is that religious leaders have employed the idea of prayer to keep the human society under awe to prevent it from committing excesses. God being kind will not punish his poor creature man for his neglect of prayer. The orthodox believer may retort that of course Allah is kind, but Allah is just too. Justice demands that all offences and sins must be punished. However this is an oversimplification of the matter. Philosophically speaking, though awe, punishment, kindness and justice are significant notions concerning doctrinal aspect of prayer, the most important aspect which need not be ignored is the spiritual fruits of prayer and worship is the experience of God's presence, which a true and committed believer goes through when he offers prayer with obedience, reverence and trust. In Rudolf Otto's words, this is based on numinous feelings, a kind of consciousness of being in the presence of the Holy. Here Iqbal's remarks about the experiential aspect of prayer in the life of a religious man need to be quoted. Iqbal says: "Prayer as a means of spiritual illumination is a normal vital act by which the little island of personality suddenly discovers its situation in a larger whole of life."⁸

Iqbal is well aware of the objections, which some religious psychologists have raised about prayer. One such objection is that prayer is nothing but a sort of auto-suggestion or soothing self-hypnosis. Iqbal has clearly rejected this view in the following words: "Do not think that I am talking of auto suggestion. Auto suggestion has nothing to do with the opening up of the source of life that lie in the depths of the human ego."⁹ Iqbal also rejects the idea that prayer is some sort of superstition having links with the occultist web no more relevant to the life of a modern man. For him it is a living and meaningful human experience. He states:

"All that I mean to fix your attention on a real human experience which has a history behind it and a future before it."¹⁰

Gnostic epistemology claims that prayer offered with sincerity of faith and trust brings within its fold a kind of

experience in which the temporal time intersects the eternal time. We start seeing the things with a new angle. We see the whole becoming a part of temporal life. It is a kind of seeing in which the believer feels himself submerged in the unlimited ocean of being on the surface of which all finite beings appear and then vanish away. This is a moment, which enriches our perception and brings us enjoyment and bliss. At this level of consciousness we catch a glimpse of what 'presence of God' means. As a religious believer one cannot underestimate the significance of such a blessed moment? It must be understood in the perspective of the saying of the Prophet Muhammad 'prayer is *Mi'araj* of the believer'.

Then we come across a view that spirituality and prayer is an escapist attitude. Though this view is very popular among some famous psychologists, it does not find acceptance in authentic religious circles. But paradoxically Iqbal is a supporter of the escapist theory. He supports it from a different angle. He adopts a positive attitude. In order to understand his point of view, we must ask what escape specifies. If escape is required, then we must escape from what to what? The religious standpoint is that this is not an escape from reality. It is rather an escape from the carnal self, from the world of desires and wishes and other dark aspects of this human life. It is an escape from the Satan who leaves no stone unturned in his endeavour to lead man astray. This is why when a believer start praying, first he seeks refuge with Allah from the Satan. The Satan has been condemned in the story of genesis because of his arrogance, insubordination, and mischief, evil plans and seductive activities. By implication we may say that when we seek refuge from Satan, we seek refuge from arrogance, mischief, evil part of our self and sinful acts. Dr. Abdul Khaliq adds a new dimension to this discussion when he employs the term liberation to explain the idea of escape in his article 'Iqbal on the Concept of Prayer'. The essence of prayer, according to Iqbal, lies in going from finite to the infinite. It signifies a process of liberation — liberation from finite, temporal existence and from all that it entails.

“However even an ordinary human ego is not absolutely perfect because it is not absolutely free. What we have called above the superficial self of man, from which he has to achieve liberation, is, because of its attachment with serial time, determined by the mechanics of material existence. The real self, which is eternal and lives in pure duration, is purely free and can most genuinely say ‘I am’. In fact it is the degree of the intuition of ‘I-anness’ that determines the place of a thing in the scale of being. We too say ‘I am’ but our I-anness is dependent and arises out of the distinction between the self and not self. The ultimate self in the words of the Qur’an ‘can afford to dispense with all the worlds’. To Him the not-self does not present itself as a confronting other — His I-anness is independent, elemental and absolute. Now as prayer according to Iqbal is essentially man’s translation from temporal association to participation in eternal existence, from the drudgery of worldly business to a meeting with God, “the ultimate source of life and freedom”. It is understood as “essentially ego’s escape from mechanism to freedom”.¹¹

The aim of religion is not to promote the mechanism of the material existence and the self-regard of human ego. Life centered on material gains is a curse in religion. It is considered a trap, a vicious circle having no exit – no liberation. Religion and society both disapprove rather condemn the self-centered attitude towards life. One may gain worldly benefits but one cannot develop a healthy rapport between man’s soul and the world around. When a man is fully involved in the vicious circle of material gains, he becomes the victim of demonic powers, which generate in him anxiety, anguish, alienation, and dread. These are the existentialist terms, which describe fruits of egocentric human situation. The materialist presumes that he is so clever that he can “wrest life from death, pleasure from pain, good from evil, and self from not-self.”¹² But his over cleverness ends up in the vicious circle of dukkhas, *e.g.*, internal conflict, nihilism and dread. In theistic religions the self-glorifying of pragmatism is

condemned as the working of evil. The superficial self of man emerges as the focal point of this evil. Only the release from the self-centeredness can save him from the hell. To gain release one is required to fully devote himself to worship and prayer. The heart of prayer is the value-centered attitude towards life. The believer is required "to respond to his (God's) claim on us to realize his purpose in our lives".¹³ Prayer in this context plays in our lives a morally dignified, spiritually fruitful and epistemically illuminative role. If it is so, then how could we call prayer a characteristic of a weak mind or how could prayer be relegated to such a hopeless condition as to be called a product of a weak moment. The theistic argument in support of this view is: A weak mind in weak moments cannot show spiritual strength to reach the highest degree of contemplative concentration, which is a must for the man of faith to acquire the knowledge of the ultimate Reality.

Next one may argue that even if prayer is accepted to be an act of emotional weakness, there is nothing wrong in prayer. All people experience such moments in their lives. In despair and helplessness, even very strong men are found crying for divine assistance. If a believer prays for help and guidance from his creator and sustainer in face of adversity, his response cannot be rejected on reasonable grounds. First, the believer's response is based on natural impulsion or propensity which manifests in such psychological phenomena as seeking, groping, yearning and longing, etc. Second, his response is founded on the religious form of life within which he operates and works out behaviour pattern in his life. Making request is spontaneous and rightful activity. Wittgenstein calls it a self-contained language game, which does not stand in need of any explanation or justification.

It must be emphasized here that petitionary prayer does not occupy the central position in the religious tradition of worship and prayer. No doubt petitions of the needy people have some power and effect as God has promised to respond to genuine petitions. But it is wrong to think that there is a causal connection between prayer and the Divine response. One should not think that prayer is a magical ritual, which carries the causal

efficacy. Prayer does not work as a kind of magical formula, which, if applied in particular condition, will certainly bring the desired results. The man of faith is not allowed to interpret and use prayer in a magical way.

What is specific to prayer in Islam like Judaism and Christianity is the expression of praise, adoration and gratefulness in such a way that one should surrender oneself to God's will. The first Surah of the Qur'an 'Al-Hamd' justifies this claim in its entirety. When one prays one should keep it in mind that one is in the presence of God. The Prophet Muhammad is quoted to have said that the prayee must be as sure of God's presence as if he is seeing Him and that if that is not possible for him to feel, then he should have at least the conviction that God is seeing him.¹⁴

The aim of the believer is to express his appreciation of God's glory. It is relating of oneself to God with purity of heart, mind and body. Prayer is essentially a means to come in contact with Him. Buber in his great work, 'I and Thou', has described the experience of prayer as a direct encounter with the greater 'Thou'. The practice of prayer and worship leads the faithful to a kind of personal relationship, which provides spiritual pleasure and moral strength. What is important in prayer is the proper attunement of one's own spiritual attitude towards God. In such state of mind the believer feels that he has been saved and protected from evil, and his life has been enriched. He feels himself in the state of peace and bliss.

Let us now bring into focus the Sufi way of praying and worshipping, which is labeled as '*dhikr*'. The word '*dhikr*' means remembrance or mentioning. It denotes making continuous mention of God. It is a spiritual method invoking the Divine Names and chanting litanies. In the Qur'an God says: "Remember Me; I (God) will remember you (*fa'dhkuruni adhkurukum*)" (2:152), "Invoke the name of your Lord, devote yourself to Him with utter devotion" (73:8), and remembrance of God the greatest (*wa ladhikru Llahi akbar*) (29:45). The prophet is quoted to have said. "For everything there is polish that takes away rust, and the polish of the heart is remembrance of God."

When asked who would be the highest in God's esteem on the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet answered: "Even though a man wielded his sword against unbelievers and idolaters until it was broken ... yet the rememberer of God would have more excellent degree."¹⁵

For the Sufis, '*dhikr*' is a spiritual method of concentration, the invocation of a Divine Name or a Sacred formula, for example, Allah or '*Subhan Allah*' or the words of '*fatihah*', under the guidance of a spiritual master belonging to an authentic chain of transmission (*silsilah*). The Sufi master gives the practitioner the necessary permission (*idhn*) and in this way mediates the pledge to God (*Bay'ay*) that makes the method operative. The '*idhn*' which generally follows '*bay'ay*' is an initiation in which there is transmission of blessing (*barakah*) whose origin, according to Sufi saints, goes back to the prophet, and from him to Angel Gabriel. The '*dhikr*', or invocation, should, of course, be accompanied by the observance of all other religious rituals and virtues.

The Sufi masters are of the view that the power of '*dhikr*' arises from the identity of the divine Name with whom who is invoked, the '*mudhkur*', God himself. According to them, the act of invocation '*dhikr*' is God's own act. It is God who invokes himself through the invoker, the '*dhakir*', as he also does through creation. If a man, while asleep and dreaming, calls out the divine Name or the '*shahadah*', he will wake without fail. The '*dhikr*' by analogy, does the same for a man caught in the dream called life, for the Prophet said: "When we live, we sleep, and when we die, we wake." The special form of '*dhikr*' practiced in the Sufi circles is that first the Divine Name Allah is chanted, then the Name is reduced to its last syllable *Hu* (of the nominative form of *Allahu*) which corresponds to the shortened form of '*Huwa*', "He", a Divine name of the essence. Finally this Name and the act of invocation are reduced simply to breathing, which is, as actualized by the sacred form of worship, both the divine Name in its purest form, which is that of breath or of life itself, and, because of the nature of creation and its opposite, the re-absorption of creation into God. This is called '*dhikr as-sadr*'

It symbolizes a return of essences escaping from the existential illusion of manifestation back to the Creator, The '*dhikr as-sadr*' is also called '*hadrah*' (presence). The remembrance of God not only removes the forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) but also at the same time leads to forgetting of self. Ghazali says that the person engaged in meditation —

“Forgets both himself and all that is, except God. He now enters on the beginning of the Sufi path. It is a condition called ‘annihilation’ or ‘not-Being’ by the Sufis. This is to say, all that is becomes non-existent as a result of his [one-pointed] meditation, and that too becomes non-existent because [the mystic] has forgotten himself as well. And just as God possesses universe of which we have no knowledge and which, as far as we are concerned, do not exist, so our existence is [simply] that of which we have consciousness and about which we have information. When someone forgets these worlds which constitute created being, these cease to exist so far as self is concerned: and since he is left with nothing but God, his existence is God, neither more nor less (*va bas*). And just as you survey heaven and earth and all that in them is and only see part of it, you will say that the universe extends just so far as this and that this is all. So too does this man (mystic) also see nothing but God, and he says, ‘All is He and apart from Him there is nothing at all.’”¹⁷

Keeping in view the phenomenology of consciousness, Ghazali has interpreted the method of '*dhikr*' with the emphasis on the point that you are what you are conscious of. Therefore if, by one pointed meditation on God you find yourself in a state in which you are aware of nothing but the object of your meditation that is God. The heart of '*dhakir*', in the state of one-pointed '*dhikr*', becomes united to Pure Being.¹⁸ In other words, the '*dhikr*' in the state of '*fana*' transcends the profane world of time and space. The world of becoming disappears except the name of God. The Qur'an says that everything will perish except the face of God. At this stage of phenomenological annihilation, the

'*dhakir*' loses his consciousness and comes to have the religious experience of illumination in which the '*dhakir*' enjoys the vision of God in the polished mirror of his heart. He sees God through God's eyes and thus does not have the metaphysical knowledge of God but the living experience of God. In this perfect prayerful state of surrender to God, the '*dhakir*' exclaims: 'All is he and apart from him there is nothing at all.' No one can pray in a better way than a person who surrenders his self to the Self of God.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Cf. Rudolf Otto (1958), *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 10.
- 2 Quoted by Iqbal in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, from W. James' *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 316.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 71.
- 4 *Ibid*, p.72.
- 5 Keith Ward (1990), *Divine Action*, p. 162.
- 6 Keith Ward (1984), *The Living God*, p. 80.
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 80.
- 8 Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, edited and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh (1996), p. 72.
- 9 *Ibid*, p. 72.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 72.
- 11 Abdul Khaliq (1973), Iqbal on the Concept of Prayer, *Al-Hikmat* (Research Journal of the Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore), Volume 5, pp. 51-65.
- 12 Allan W. Watts (1963), *Psychotherapy: East and West*, p. 80.
- 13 Keith Ward (1984), *The Living God*, p. 82.
- 14 Quoted by Abdul Khaliq in his article, 'Iqbal on the Concept of Prayer'.
- 15 Quoted from Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 98.
- 16 Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of Minaret*, p. 138.
- 17 Ghazali (1319), *Kimiya Sa'dat* (Solar), Tehran, p. 206, also see R. C. Zaehner (1960), *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, p. 167
- 18 Cf. Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 12-13.