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Two papers by Munir el-Kassem

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Papers by Dr. Munir El Kassem

Jihad and Just War Theology: The Islamic Perspective

by Dr. Munir El-Kassem

Many people believe that Jihad is synonymous with "Holy War", or fighting in general. Not only it is wrong to equate Jihad with fighting, it constitutes a gross misunderstanding of historical facts to use "Jihad" and "Holy War" exchangeably. In order to clarify the principle of Jihad one needs to engage in a linguistic investigation, bearing in mind that a major portion of one's understanding of the Qur'an and the life example of Muhammad (pbuh) (Sunnah) requires an in-depth knowledge of Arabic as understood during the time of revelation.

The word "Jihad" is derived from the root "Juhd" which means "effort". The first usage of Jihad in the Qur'anic text was during the Prophet's stay in Mecca before migrating to Madinah. It is historically established that during that period Muslims did not have a state to defend by means of fighting in a battle field. Thus the usage of Jihad at that early stage in Islamic history illustrates the generic meaning of this noble practice. Jihad was mainly used to indicate "exerting an effort to improve something." That thing could be one's inner self, the surrounding environment, the community, relationship with God, etc...

One reads in Surat Al-Furqan/Chapter 25 of the Qur'an which was revealed in its entirety in Mecca: "Do not obey the disbelievers and put a great effort to teach them (the Qur'an) [Jaahidhum Bihi Jihadan Kabeera]" 25:52. Also in Surat An-Nahl/Chapter 16 of the Qur'an which according to Ibn 'Abbas was also revealed in Mecca except for three verses 95, 96 and 97: "Your Lord recognizes those who migrated following their sedition and followed that with great efforts [to establish their religion] [Jaahadu] and with perseverance. For such, your Lord is Oft-forgiving, Compassionate." 16:110. The migration mentioned in this verse is what is historically referred to as the first migration to Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

It is clear that Jihad in its "fighting" domain was used after migration to Medina to denote "the effort required to defend the nascent Islamic community." The early Muslims continued to understand the "fighting Jihad" as only one manifestation of a broader concept of "struggle to improve something" as mentioned earlier. Actually, it was not until late in the eleventh century that Jihad started to be solely interpreted as "fighting" due to a historical aberration that was forced on the Muslims.

In 1095, when Pope Urban II launched the first of his crusade campaigns against the "infidel Muslims", the defendants gathered under a banner of "Jihad" to defend themselves and their lands. By so doing they were literally exerting the effort to stop the aggression of the crusaders. Since the crusades raised the slogan of "Holy War" while the Muslims upheld the slogan of "Jihad", these two terms became synonymous with the passage of time. Nowadays, "Jihad" and "Holy War" are used exchangeably as though Muslims were the ones who coined the term "Holy War". One can clearly see how this terminology was imposed on Muslims by those who believed in it. From an Islamic perspective, there is absolutely nothing holy about war. It is only to be fought for necessity of defence and not for promoting aggression.

Islam is very specific as to the things a Muslim is obligated to defend. These include safety to practice one's religious beliefs, honour associated with blood relationships and marriage, possessions of wealth irrespective of value, integrity of the state/one's country, and one's own life and the lives of other citizens. There are restrictions as to the methodology of defence which will be discussed later.

With the passage of time, people slowly forgot the most important components of Jihad and narrowed their understanding to the fighting aspect. It is unfortunate that such a noble concept be turned into a title of violence and aggression. It is also regrettable and even outrageous that certain Muslim groups contributed to this deviation from a true understanding of Jihad. By themselves being ignorant of the unadulterated meaning of Jihad, they engaged with their enemies assumingly under a pretext of Jihad. Quite often, such misguided operations ended up giving Jihad a bad name.

On many occasions the Prophet Muhammad made it clear that Jihad is a broad concept of noble doings aimed at affecting changes that please God. Many compilers of Hadiths (sayings or discourses of Muhammad pbuh) including Abu Dawood, At-Tirmithi and Ibn Maaja reported on the authority of Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri that the Prophet said: "The best form of Jihad is to utter a word of truth [reproach for injustice] in the presence of an oppressive ruler." In another Hadith reported by Ad-Daylami, At-Tirmithi and Ibn Habbaan on the authority of Abu Thar, the Prophet said: "The true Mujahid [the one who undertakes Jihad] is he who struggles to improve himself in order to please God." These prophetic statements which were made in Mecca clearly demonstrate the true meaning of Jihad.

Legitimate fighting in defense of one of the five entities mentioned earlier is only a branch of the massive tree of Jihad. One may speak of a Meccan Jihad, which is like nourishment to the body, without which health will suffer. Medinite Jihad, on the other hand, that which allowed defensive fighting, is a form of medicinal treatment which is sought to treat an illness.

One needs to examine the causes that legitimized fighting as a form of Jihad. In other words, why did Islam institute fighting to begin with? Is it true that Islam spread by the sword? To answer these questions, one has to appreciate that God had endowed all His messengers with divine intervention whenever human means would fail to provide protection to both the message or the messenger. Noah was divinely rescued from the cruelty of his people by the flood, Abraham did not suffer the consequences of being placed in the blaze, Moses was able to split the sea with his staff and escape the inevitable attack by Pharaoh and his army and Jesus was lifted up to heaven when the Romans decided to crucify him. With the advent of the final message of Muhammad, God withdrew such divine intervention allowing humans to interact through human means. The final message of Islam came at a time when civilizations became well established to warrant dissemination of human knowledge in an applied format. The aggressor has to be stopped through human means, otherwise humans will continue to be dependent on divine intervention. This does not mean that humans are independent of God's mercy and grace, but rather indicates a human preparedness to accept the responsibility of "Imarat- Al-Ard" or establishing vicegerency on Earth.

When Muslims migrated to Medina, the concept of Jihad did not change. However, its manifestations assumed new dimensions due to the new realities that defined the Medinite period. These realities arose as a result of the inception of the first ever cohesive Muslim community that satisfied the definition of statehood. The state in Medina was made of the migrant Muslims, their supporters (the original inhabitants of Medina, formerly known as Yathrib) and the Jewish tribes of Medina. Muhammad (pbuh) produced a constitution that governed the affairs of the newly established state. It was, moreover, necessary to defend the Islamic state of Medina against the aggression of the Arab tribes of Hijaz as well as the super powers to the north, namely the Roman and Persian empires.

The Arab tribes which considered the Islamic state a major threat to their powers and their cultural norms did not lose any time in plotting with each other and forging alliances to shake the foundations of the nascent state. Had the Muslims failed to uphold the newly defined form of Jihad to defend themselves and their state, they would have been over-run by the disproportionately superior powers of their enemies. The first injunction that allowed Muslims to defend themselves is found in Surat Al-Hajj: "Sanction is given to those who fight because they have been wronged, and God is indeed able to give them victory; those who have been driven from their homes unjustly, only because they said: Our Lord is God—For had it not been for God's repelling some men by means of others, cloisters and churches and oratories and mosques, wherein the name of God is oft mentioned, would assuredly have been destroyed. Verily God helps him who is obedient to [God]. God is All-Powerful, Almighty. Those who, if We strengthen them in the land, would establish prayers, and give charity and enjoin the right and forbid the evil. Unto God is the return of all things." 22: 39-41.

The above verse clearly defines the objectives of fighting as a form of Jihad. It is not meant to propagate aggression, but rather to defend the tripod of statehood: the land, the people and the authority within the state.

Some argue that Islamic Jihad is a form of spreading Islam by the sword. They insist that Muslims are instructed to fight anyone who rejects faith (Kaafer). As such, they look at the world as two camps: one for the Muslims and the other for everyone else. There is nothing further from the truth as indicated by many verses in the Qur'an. What is being propagated is a sensational campaign to discredit Islam from its very foundation.

It is a historical, legalistic fact that three out of the five Islamic jurisprudence schools of thought: Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali insist that fighting can only be in self defense. Offensive fighting, according to them, is not allowed. They base their verdict on many Qur'anic verses and prophetic statements. Some of the verses quoted by these schools are:

"Fight in the way of God against those who fight you, but never be the ones to initiate hostilities. God loves not aggressors. You may kill them wherever you find them and you may drive them out from whence they drove you out, for their persecution to you is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Inviolable Place of Worship (Mecca) unless they first attack you; if they do attack you then it is permissible to kill them. Such is the fate of disbelievers. But if they desist, then God is oft-Forgiving, Merciful. And fight them until persecution stops, and religion is established for God (alone). If they desist, then let there be no hostility except against wrong doers." 2:190-193.

"If anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection, then grant his wish to allow him the chance to hear the Words of God; and afterward convey him to his place of safety. Remember that they have no knowledge [of the truth] 9:6

"Will you not fight a folk who broke their solemn pledges, and were determined to drive the Messenger (out of Mecca) and attacked you first? Do you fear them? Nay, God is more worthy to be feared if you are true believers." 9:13.

"Wage war against all the disbelievers as they have waged war against all of you." 9:36.

"God forbids you not those who did not fight you on account of your religion nor did they drive you out of your homes that you should show them kindness and deal justly with them. God loves those who are just. God, on the other hand, forbids you only those who fought against you on account of your religion and drove you out of your homes and supported the efforts to drive you out, that you befriend them or take them as advocates. Those who take them as advocates are the wrongdoers." 60-8-9.

The above verses were revealed over a long period of the Madinan period and some were revealed a few months before the death of Muhammad (pbuh) which further supports the view that such injunctions affect the permanent position of Islam in regard to fighting as a form of Jihad. As for the prophetic statements in this regard, the following are indicators of how Islam viewed Jihad.

- 1) Ibn Maaja, Abu Dawood and Ahmad reported on the authority of Hanzala that during the battle of Hunayn, the Prophet passed by a dead woman. He immediately sent his instructions to the leader of the Centre of the army, Khalid Ibn Al-Walid, who was a new Muslim at that time and told him never to kill women or covenanted people, such as Jews and Christians .
- 2) Abu Dawood reported through the authority of Anas Ibn Malik that the Messenger of God said: "March in the name of God. Never kill an old man, nor a child nor a woman. Never loot and make sure to justly collect any spoils of war."
- 3) Abu Bakr, the first Caliph instructed Usama Ibn Zayd before marching to Mu'ta: "Do not commit treason, nor deceive people, nor loot, nor disfigure a corpse. Do not kill a child, an old man, or a woman...and if you pass by monks isolating themselves in their monastic cells for the purpose of worship, do not disturb them."
- 4) Soon after migrating to Medina, the Prophet sent scouting missions to counteract any sudden attacks by the disbelievers. He was very clear concerning those missions that the objective was only scouting and not aggression even if the opportunity to overcome certain people would present itself. During one such mission, the Messenger of God sent a group headed by Abdullah Ibn Jahsh to Nakhla, a suburb of At-Ta'if. The group, not having enough experience in handling emergencies, got startled by a group from the enemy. To that they reacted swiftly by capturing one person and killing another. When they returned to Medina, the Prophet got quite angry with their response and ordered them to return the captured man and pay the blood money to the tribe of the killed man.
- 5) During the time of Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz, the Muslims reached Azarbaijan. Despite familiar etiquettes of entering a new country requiring permission of the head of state, the Muslims entered without such permission having the intention of presenting Islam to the people of Azarbaijan. The elders felt offended and as a result sent an envoy to Umar who sent his strict orders to the Muslims to leave promptly and thereafter seek permission to re-enter. From the time the envoy left till he came back, close to a month had passed which allowed the inhabitants of that country to familiarize themselves with the Muslims. As the Muslims prepared themselves to leave, upon receiving the Caliph's orders, the people of Azarbaijan refused to let them leave and mass acceptance of Islam ensued.

It is noteworthy that Muhammad (pbuh) was not the only Messenger of God who was commanded to resort to fighting. Before him Solomon, David, Moses and Joshua were also commanded to resort to fighting to subdue oppressors who rejected faith and refused to deal justly with people.

One has to examine what major Muslim jurists wrote concerning the declaration of Jihad to conclude that Jihad can never be initiated by individuals but rather is restricted to the head of the Islamic state. Thus, due to the establishment of nation states that divided the Muslims throughout the world, a declaration of Jihad remains suspended and can never take place under present circumstances. Therefore, any talk about Jihad by Muslims against any of their enemies remains a form of rhetoric and is not supported by Islamic teachings. In order to deal with the alarming increase in violence and terrorism, one has to confront modern realities that are deeply rooted in politics rather than religious principles. If the international community insists on aiming its extinguishers at the flames and not at the source of the fire, we will fail to bring the fire under control. As long as the inhabitants of the earth are identified as "haves" and "have nots", violence will continue to escalate and its perpetrators will always find ways to justify their strife, even by attempting to hide behind misguided religious interpretations. Modern violence will be dealt with only through political good will and not through demonizing certain religions.

Ibn Qudama wrote in his famous book *Al- Mughni*: "Jihad is the sole responsibility of the Imam (head of Islamic state) and those under his command have no choice but to obey his directive." Ad-Dardir, in his book *Al-sharh Al-Sagheer*, wrote: "Jihad is declared by the Imam..." Similarly, Al- Tahanawi, in his book *Kashaf Al- Qina'*, wrote: "Jihad is declared by the Imam who is most knowledgeable in regard to the circumstances of his people and their enemy." Finally, Al-Qaraafi wrote in his book *Al-Ihkam*: "The Imam is the person who is in charge of public relations and forging treaties and preventing harm from befalling his community. He is also the person who subdues offenders and punishes oppressors and maintains security and peace among his followers." These quotations are very clear in stressing the fact that any acts of violence which happen to be committed by Muslim individuals cannot shift the blame on the religion itself.

In conclusion, Jihad is not only fighting, and not all fighting falls under the category of Jihad. Upon returning from one of his defensive campaigns, Muhammad (pbuh) told his companions: "We have just returned from the minor form of Jihad to continue with the major form of Jihad." Violence, nowadays, is a global phenomenon, and no one religion or

group of people can assume full responsibility for its propagation. All members of the international community should be ready to assume responsibility in tackling this serious disease and come up with a lasting cure.

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Worship: The Islamic Perspective

by Dr. Munir El-Kassem

Worship is a fundamental feature of all religious traditions. However, every religion has its unique set of rules in performing worship which is usually guided by different objectives and assumes different forms. The late Ismail Al-Faruqi, one of the great Muslim scholars of modern times, states that "in all the religions of the world, worship means a ritual consisting of legomena (things thought or recited) and dromena (things done or acted) performed by people, more often regularly rather than at random, by which people adore,; thank or petition God, the Ultimate Reality."

The concept of worship is inherent in the fact that human beings are created by God, their Lord, and are also destined to return to Him. This is actually the basis of worship or "ibadah" in Islam. God says in surat Al-Baqarah, ayah 156 (chapter 2, verse 156): "We belong to God, and to Him we are returning." A person's turning towards God in devotion and reverence, is not only seeking to purify his soul, but is also submitting himself to his master. This is indeed a reflection of the literal meaning of the word "Islam" which is understood as "attainment of inner peace through total submission to the Will of God."

In the Qur'an, there is an ayah that emphatically states that worship is the very reason of our creation by God. In surat Adh-Dharyat, ayah 56 (51: 56), God says: "I did not create the Jinn nor the human kind save for the purpose of worshipping Me." This indeed is very significant because it shapes the definition of worship according to Islam. Worship, in its general sense, spans all actions which a believer undertakes for the sake of God, and for the fulfillment of the general imperative regarding human life on earth. The Islamic concept of worship is intimately related to the fundamental view that a good life is one which is firmly established on genuine faith, upright thinking, pure soul, and righteous actions.

A good life flows from the fundamental Islamic notion of the Oneness of God "tawhid" which is the first pillar of Islam. Briefly expressed, tawhid is the affirmation that "No deity is God but God, or La ilaha illa Allah." This implies that God is the sole determinant of a person's life and the ultimate cause of all events. Therefore, a believer who wants to live a good life, firmly believes that God is the eternal Creator, the Master and Judge and the ultimate end of all ends. This is translated into an absolute service of God and a fulfillment of His will. In this context, Al-Bukhari and Muslim report in their authenticated collections of Prophetic traditions "Hadiths" that: "Faith consists of seventy-some categories, extending from the testimony of faith (La ilaha illa Allah) all the way to removing danger from the pathways."

One may note that the Divine will is fulfilled through both immutable natural laws and commandments which are revealed for people to follow. Based on this, God's will is manifested in the affirmation of a believer's life by living it to the fullest: procreating, seeking knowledge, acquiring lawful possessions, earning money, and enjoying lawful worldly pleasures, all of that within the context of worship. If done out of loyalty to God, these acts are regarded as acts of worship. Indeed these acts are expected to cultivate in the worshipper, as well as in the family and society, the senses of justice, concern for others, responsibility, honesty, and morality in general, which is the motivating objective of all acts of worship. The Prophet, peace be upon him, is reported to have said: "I have been sent (by God) to promote moral behaviour."

It does not require outstanding scholarship to detect in the teachings of Muhammad (pbuh) "Sunnah", the strong correlation between acts of worship and morality, scattered throughout the books of prophetic traditions. Some of the examples include: "the pursuit of a livelihood for oneself and one's family is 'ibadah; spending of one's wealth and spending of one's life is 'ibadah; fulfilling the physical desires of one's spouse is 'ibadah; smiling to another person is an act of charity or 'ibadah, and so on and so forth." These examples clearly demonstrate that worship is the very substance of life, as well as the stabilizing force of societies and civilizations. This means that, unlike some religions, worship in Islam does not promote asceticism and isolation from life. One is in a state of worship as he is enjoying the wholesome pleasures of life.

Worship plays an important role in the development of the Islamic personality. Again, it is the oneness of God "tawhid" which provides that personality with its distinct features. Every movement becomes a reflection of the presence of God in the consciousness of the worshipper. God, who is invested with all the attributes of perfection, is the ultimate mover and shaker of everything that happens in his life. When he sees something impressive, he immediately says: "Subhana Allah." An act which requires praise, illicit the utterance of "Masha Allah", while the response to satisfaction is "Alhamdu Lillah." When things go wrong, a believer will not complain but instead will say: "La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah", and when someone dies, the usual utterance is "Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un." It is evident from these statements that God is the only determinant of every act undertaken by the believer, whether he is working, studying, travelling, judging, feeling and so on and so forth. This possession by God makes the believer a committed person who aspires for something much bigger than himself, all other people and indeed the entire world. In other words, he is an idealist in the best sense of the term. He is a person for whom no act is random and every action or inaction is precisely calculated.

Central to the concept of worship in Islam is the uncompromising opposition to polytheism. This may sound as a foregone conclusion since Islam is founded on a strong belief in the Oneness of God. However, one needs to stress

that Islam takes notice even of imperceptible forms of polytheism and considers it a major sin that may never be forgiven by God. In surat An-Nisa', ayah 116 (4: 116), one reads: "God does not forgive that partners should be ascribed to Him. He forgives all except that, to whom He wills. Whoever ascribes partners to God, has wandered far astray." One of the manifestations of this doctrine is that a Muslim may not swear in the name of anyone except God. When Caliph 'Umar Bin Al-Khattab observed that people had started to sanctify the tree beneath which the Companions of the Prophet gave the famous pledge of allegiance at Al-Hudaybiyah, he ordered the tree to be cut down for fear that its sanctification might corrupt their faith.

Having realized that Islam has considerably widened the scope of worship, one needs to understand that in as much as there is a very wide spectrum of voluntary un-structured worship, or as I like to call it "free style worship", there are also structured acts of worship that are obligatory and should be performed according to pre-defined strict rules. Famous among these acts are the five pillars of Islam: the testimony of faith "Shahadah", daily prayers "Salah", obligatory charity "Zakah", fasting during the month of Ramadan "Sawm", and pilgrimage to Makkah and its surroundings "Hajj".

The Shahadah is the very foundation of all acts of worship. It is a solemn testimony that God is the sole deity and that worship is due to Him alone. It is also an affirmation that Muhammad is the Prophet and Messenger of God, sent by Him to preach His oneness "tawhid". The Shahadah is so fundamental to the Islamic faith, to the extent that Muhammad (pbuh) spent the first thirteen years of his mission instilling the spirit of Shahadah in the consciousness of his companions who, by that time, numbered less than one hundred. Realizing that the entire prophetic mission of Muhammad (pbuh) lasted twenty three years, one can easily detect how fundamental Shahadah is to Islam. The Shahadah plays a pivotal role in the development of the Muslim's personality, as it provides a constant reminder of the Islamic commitment.

Like in most religions, prayer "Salat" may be regarded as the most recognized act of worship, wherein the believer demonstrates his submission to God. Islam considers Salat the supreme act of worship. There are many prophetic traditions that suggest that Salat may not be missed even under the most stringent of conditions. The first thing, according to one hadith, that a believer has to account for on the Day of Judgement is Salat; if performed satisfactorily, God may judge the rest of his actions as satisfactory as well. In another hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said: "The dividing line between faith and its rejection is the establishment of Salat."

By using "prayer" as the English translation for "Salat", one may confuse Salat, the structured form of Islamic prayer, with prayer in most other religions, which consists of invocations addressed to God in an unstructured manner. Islam does, however, encourage unstructured prayer called supplication or "Du'a" which, unlike Salat, can be invoked at any time, place, or in any position whether standing, sitting, walking, or lying down. The purpose of Du'a may be adorational, proclamational, or petitional. Salat, on the other hand, is an act of worship that should be done in a specific manner, at specific times and satisfying specific conditions. The Prophet told his companions to watch him doing his Salat and then do theirs exactly like him.

One distinguishing feature of Salat which it shares with all other structured acts of worship is the specific intention "Niyah" which immediately precedes the act of worship. Technically speaking, a believer should always be conscious of his Niyah, but this may be practically difficult to maintain. In the case of Salat or any other structured act of worship, the Niyah defines the framework of consciousness required for communication with God. In comparison, a free style prayer or Du'a is a subjective method of communicating with God, and does not need any special preparation similar to Salat which requires ablution or "Wudu". This pre-requisite to Salat does not only clean the exposed organs of the body, but it also refreshes the whole "self".

Salat provides the believer with a rich package of benefits. It inculcates an awareness of the importance of time, as it has to be performed at its prescribed time. The Qur'an teaches, "Salat, at fixed times, has been enjoined on the believers", surat An-Nisa', ayah 103 (4:103). This ends up teaching discipline and the proper utilisation of time. Salat also promotes solidarity and unity, as Muslims are encouraged to perform their Salat in congregation. Another outcome of congregational prayer is the cultivation of the spirit of equality since no one has any preference to occupy any particular spot. Having women pray behind the rows of men is not a matter of giving men preference over women, but is rather an organizational arrangement intended to provide women with the assurance that no man may run into them when they are in the state of prostration, which is quite uncomfortable. Furthermore, Salat teaches self-confidence as it allows the worshipper to directly communicate with God without the need for any intermediary. Closely related to self-confidence is the cultivation of one's ability to concentrate, as the believer is instructed to focus on all that he says or does during Salat, "Successful indeed are the believers who attain a state of deep concentration "Khushu" during their Salat", surat Al-Mu'minun, ayat 1-2 (23: 1-2). Salah also teaches responsibility, since the believer is constantly reminded of the reckoning he has with God. Surat Al-'Ankabut, ayah 45 (29: 45) outlines another important moral benefit of Salat: "Salah prohibits debauchery and evil "al-fahsha" wal-munkar." When established properly, Salah is indeed a preventive shield against corruption because it teaches the believer to follow God's commandments and to condemn His prohibitions. The Qur'an describes the believers as those who "supplicate their Lord out of fear and hope," surat As-Sajda, ayah 16 (32:16). Salat, the structured supplication, provides the believer with an exotic combination of fear and love of God. One can finally say that, in a nutshell, Salat draws the worship into a life of piety and virtue.

The third pillar of Islam, Zakah is sharing of one's wealth with defined categories of recipients according to very specific rules. It is an act of worship in as much as the person who gives it out is admitting that all wealth belongs to

God and that he is a mere trustee who willingly circulates God's wealth among His servants. "Say: God! The maintainer of all sovereignty! You give power to whom You want, and You withdraw power from whom You want. You exalt whom You want and You abase whom You want. In Your Hand is all the wealth. You have the absolute ability to do all things." Surat Al-'Imran, ayah 26 (3: 26).

According to the Qur'an, the most powerful potential detractors from leading a virtuous and upright life are wealth and children. Sharing this wealth with the rightful recipients ends up purifying the inner soul of its destructive tendencies to align itself with greed, fraud, cheating, and unlawfully amassing as much wealth as humanly possible. The Qur'an instructs the Prophet (pbuh) to enjoin upon the believers to "give out of their wealth a charity that will purify them and make them more virtuous." Surat At-Tawbah, ayah 103 (9:103)

Zakah, no doubt, helps in shaping the personality of the Muslim. Being an act of obedience to God, it requires the believer to give up for the sake of God the fruit of his labour which he cherishes most. This consolidates the bond of loyalty to God, and makes the believer an integral element of divine providence. Thus, through Zakah, the believer dissociates himself from the argument of those who say: "shall we feed those whom God; if He willed, would have fed?" surah Ya-Sin, ayah 46 (36: 46). Furthermore, Zakah strengthens communal bonds and adds a new dimension to the distinctiveness of the "Ummah" which is not a collection of individuals, not a society or a community in the classical sense, but a cohesive body which is beautifully portrayed by Muhammad (pbuh) when he says: "Muslims, to one another, are like a tightly stacked structure whose components strengthen each other," and "The example of believers in their display of love and mercy, is like a single body whereby if one organ suffers, the rest of the body will reciprocate in that suffering."

Unlike in some religious traditions, Sawm is not a renunciation of life and an act of self-denial. It is a significant act of worship intended to cultivate righteousness "Taqwa" which is a unique relationship between God, the Creator and Master, and His created worshipper and servant. Beside being an act of obedience to God, sawm is an exercise in self-control and discipline. No one can deny that food and sexual desires are the basic ingredients of life and the strongest urges a person possesses. Sawm does not deny these urges; it only addresses them through a cyclical process of abstinence and satisfaction. This explains why the Muslims rejoice and celebrate at every sunset in Ramadan, because sunset marks the victory over oneself during the day.

Sawm is, furthermore, an act of self assessment and evaluation. Through sawm, as an act of worship, the believer makes new resolutions and strives to advance closer to God. By controlling the carnal desires, the spirit is encouraged to flourish and regain its transparency that gets subdued throughout the year. Moreover, the communal dimension of sawm awakens the feeling of belonging to the Ummah of believers, a feeling which contributes to the enhancement of pleasure associated with worship. During Ramadan, worship turns into an enchantment of acts that make it the happiest month of the year.

Although a worshipper may be forced because of certain circumstances to perform the above acts of worship alone, Hajj cannot be performed without the participation of the Ummah. It is a communal act of worship which is strictly bound by time and space. Thus the worship of Hajj is a binding force that helps eliminate social differences among people who realize how equal they are before God. But despite its collective nature, Hajj remains an act by an individual worshipper who knows that while being merely a drop in the ocean of other pilgrims, can still cherish a direct personal relationship with God, the Absolute. That relationship that is so effectively manifested through the worship of Hajj raises a slogan with a far-reaching implication: "Labbayk Allahumma Labayk, Labbayka Lasharika Laka Labbayk, Innalhamda Wanni'mata Laka Walmulk, La Sharika Lak - Here I am, O God, here I am. You have no associates, here I am, glory, abundance and sovereignty are among Your attributes, You have no associates." This solemn chant uttered by each individual pilgrim resonates with benefits to the individuals as well as the entire Ummah.

It is clear then, how Hajj is the affirmative response of a human being to his Creator's call, a re-dedication and re-consecration of one's life to the Divine cause. After Abraham and his son Ishmael finished rebuilding the Ka'bah, Abraham was commanded by God to proclaim Hajj among all people. Despite the fact that no one was around to hear Abraham's call, God assured him that people would positively respond to his proclamation. The on-going convergence of worshipers towards Makkah is indeed the response that God assured Abraham with.

As an act of worship, Hajj is unique among all religions. Indeed no religious tradition or civilization has ever witnessed or sustained something similar. Yes, pilgrimage is known among other religions but nowhere close to the dimensions of Hajj. What Hajj does to the individual and the Ummah is so significant to the extent that, unlike other Islamic acts of worship, God prescribed it only once in a life-time. After an intimate experience with the Divine cause, the pilgrim returns home with a reconstructed personality which is oriented towards God. This personality enjoys equilibrium on all fronts of the human existence.

Having examined some examples of both structured and unstructured forms of worship, it is easier to draw conclusions concerning the characteristic features of worship according to Islam.

Islam recognizes no intermediaries in worship between a human being and his creator. All humans are equal before God, and as such each one of them may directly communicate with his creator without the need for another human being to act as a "middle man". Religious scholars, leaders or Imams are not to be regarded as intermediaries since they are not entitled to accept or reject acts of worship on behalf of God. Their role is to provide guidance and impart knowledge. Even Muhammad (pbuh) himself did not assume the role of an intermediary. God defined his role in the Qur'an in surat Al-Ghashiyah, ayat 21-22: "Remind them, for you are but one who reminds; you are not at all a warder

over them." (88: 21–22). On one occasion, Prophet Muhammad told his daughter Fatima: "O Fatima, daughter of Muhammad: I shall be of no help to you before God."

Another important feature of Islamic worship is that it is not confined to specific places. As long as it is clean and does not have unlawful images that may cut through the real purpose of worship, any place is good enough to worship God. Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have said: "The whole of the earth has been rendered a mosque "Masjid" for me (and my Ummah), pure and clean."

Islam has associated lots of importance with one's intentions. Thus any virtuous action which is performed with sincerity and with the intention to please God through fulfilling His commandments, is an act of worship for which a human being will be rewarded. This ends up widening the scope of worship in Islam, making it comprise everything a human being does, as long as the actions are associated with true religious motives.

It is an act of worship to take care of one's body and satisfy its needs in a lawful manner. Imagine that one is in a state of worship if he goes to sleep with the intention to recover some lost energy which will enable him to shoulder responsibilities placed on him by God. The Prophet (pbuh) reinforces the theme of the inclusivity of worship by saying: "A strong believer is better and dearer to God than a weak believer."

As an extension of the above, one concludes that spiritual growth and worldly pleasures may go hand in hand through a simple process of purification of one's motives. While enjoying worldly pleasures, the heart will be in communion with God by virtue of the purity of the intentions. Unlike other religions, Islam does not dismiss the need to satisfy instinctive bodily desires in a lawful manner. Even further than that, abstention from satisfying those desires is not any more righteous or virtuous than satisfying them. Islam simply demands of its adherents that as one is legitimately satisfying one's desires, he is not infringing on the rights of other people, nor is he transgressing against societal rights. This is significant in that it becomes easy to render obedience to God because such an obedience is not a foe of one's legitimate desires, but rather an ally.

Granted that intentions are paramount in defining the scope of human actions, one may not win the argument that external manifestations of worship are rendered less significant. It was mentioned earlier that Islam is founded on five pillars which are mostly visible in nature. Thus to deliberately disregard the structured act of worship and focus only on unstructured acts, arguing that only intentions do matter, is destructive of the very foundations of Islam. For, were this viewpoint to be adopted, everyone, even those who are not religious, could claim to be opportunistic devout worshippers. Worship, from this standpoint is not a lip service. Faith, which is the pre-requisite of authentic worship, is defined by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as "that which is felt by the heart, and translated into visible action."

No system of worship has ever lasted as long, and none has been as universally and consistently observed as the worship in Islam. Its intimate association with the life of the Muslim is next to none among other religions. A justification for this intimacy may be sought in the fact that Islamic worship is a perfect fit of the ideology of Islam and its very purpose. This is not a biased assessment of worship according to Islam, as many non-Muslim scholars have admired the deeply rooted commitment of Muslims towards worship in all its forms. Practicing Muslims are extremely careful not to do anything that will invoke God's anger. They are in constant communion with God through their daily activities and through the structured acts of worship that they strive to perform as close to perfection as possible. There are special rewards for those who are constantly conscious of their Lord. In short, a Muslim is constantly in a state of worship, although this worship is manifested in different forms. This is beautifully illustrated in a statement made by the famous Muslim scholar, Al-Hasan Al-Basri, in response to an inquiry concerning the cause of his permanent state of happiness: "I am aware that divine sustenance cannot be taken away from me, so as a result my heart is tranquil. I also know that no one is expected to do my share of the work, so I always get busy doing it. I am certain that God is constantly watching me, so I am embarrassed with the possibility that He may see me committing a sinful act, and I am expecting the Angel of Death at anytime, so I am as prepared as can be to meet my Lord."

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