

## **ALI 416 – Theology and Worship in Nahjul Balagha**

### **Readings #4 – Concept of Ibadah in Islam**

*Ibadah*, or service, of the One God and negation of everything else as an object of service and worship, is one of the essential teachings of God-sent apostles-a feature never absent from the teachings of any prophet.

As we know, in the sacred religion of Islam, too, worship occupies a preeminent position, with the only difference that worship in Islam is not regarded as a series of devotional rituals separate from everyday life and as pertaining solely to another world. Worship in Islam is located in the context of life and is an unalienable part of the Islamic philosophy of life.

Aside from the fact that some of the Islamic acts of worship are performed collectively, Islam has structured them in such a fashion that their performance automatically ensures the performance of other duties of life. For instance, *salat* is a complete expression of man's servitude and surrender to God.

It has been specified in such a manner that even a man who desires to pray in a lonely corner is forced to observe certain things of moral and social relevance, such as cleanliness, respect for rights of others, observance of punctuality, possession of a sense of direction, control over one's emotions, and expression of good-will and benevolence towards other righteous servants of God.

From the point of view of Islam, every good and beneficial action if performed with a pure, God-seeking intention, is viewed as worship. Therefore, learning, acquisition of knowledge and livelihood and social service, if performed for God's sake, are acts of worship. Nevertheless, Islam also specifies a system of rituals and formal acts of worship such as *salat*, *sawm* (fasting) etc., which have a specific philosophy for performing them.

#### Levels of Worship

Men have varying attitudes towards worship. Not all of them view it in the same light. For some, worship is a kind of deal, a barter and an exchange of labour performed for wages. Like an ordinary worker who spends his time and labour for the benefit of an employer and expects a daily wage in return, the devotee also endeavours for the sake of Divine reward, which, however, he would receive in the next world. Like the labourer, for whom his labour bears fruit in the form of his wages and who would not work except for a wage, the benefit of the devotee's worship, according to the outlook of this particular group of devotees, lies in the wages and reward which shall be granted to the devotees in the shape of the goods and comforts in the other world.

Another approach towards worship is that of the enlightened. Here the aforementioned problems of worker and employer, labour and wage, have no relevance. How can they be relevant when worship is viewed by them as the ladder to attain nearness to God, as the means of human sublimity, edification and upliftment of the soul and its flight to the invisible sphere of spiritual greatness, as an invigorating exercise of his spiritual faculties, and as a triumph of the spirit over the corporeal?

It is the highest expression of the gratitude and love of the human being towards his Creator and his declaration of love for the Most Perfect and the Absolutely Beautiful, and finally, his wayfaring towards Allah!

According to this approach, worship has a form and a soul, an appearance and an inner meaning. That which is expressed by the tongue and the movements of other members of the body, is the form, the outer mould, and the appearance of worship. Its soul and meaning is something else. The soul of worship is inextricably connected with the significance attached to worship by the devotee, his attitude towards it, his inner motive that drives him to it, the ultimate satisfaction and benefit he derives from it, and the extent to which he covers the Divine path in his journey towards God.

### The Approach of Nahjul Balagha

What approach and attitude is adopted by the *Nahj al-balaghah* towards worship? The *Nahj al-balaghah* takes an enlightened view of worship, or rather, it is, after the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet ('s), the main source of inspiration towards the enlightened approach to worship in the Islamic tradition.

#### 1) Worship of Freeman

A group of people worshipped God out of desire for reward; this is the worship of traders. Another group worshipped God out of fear; this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worshipped God out of gratitude; this is the worship of freemen. (Hadith #237)

Even if Allah had not warned of chastisement on those disobedient to Him, it would be obligatory by way of gratefulness for His favours that He should not be disobeyed. (Hadith #290)

#### 2) God's remembrance

The roots of all spiritual, moral, and social aspects of worship lie in one thing: the remembrance of God and obliviousness towards everything else. In one of its verses, the Holy Qur'an refers to the educative and invigorating effect of worship, and says: ***The salat protects from unseemly acts. (29:45) Adhere to salat in order that you remain in My remembrance. (20:14)*** This is a reminder of the fact that the person who prays remembers God and lives by the knowledge that He is always observing and watching him, and does not forget that he himself is His servant.

'The remembrance of God, which is the aim of worship, is burnishing of the heart and an agency of its purification. It prepares the heart for the reflection of Divine Light in it. Speaking of the remembrance of God and the meaning of worship, 'Ali ('a) says: 'Certainly God, the glorified, has made His remembrance burnishing of the hearts, which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness, and makes them submissive after unruliness. In all periods and times when there were no prophets, there were individuals to whom He spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellects.' (Khutba #221)

### 3) Nights of the worshippers

From the point of view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, the world of worship is another world altogether. Its delights are not comparable with any pleasures of the three-dimensional corporeal world. The world of worship effuses movement, progress, and journey, but a journey which is quite unlike physical travel to new lands.

It is spiritual journey to the 'nameless city'. It does not know night from the day, because it is always drenched in light. In it there is no trace of darkness and pain, for it is throughout purity, sincerity, and delight. Happy is the man, in the view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, who sets his foot into this world and is refreshed by its invigorating breeze. Such a man then no longer cares whether he lays his head on silken pillow or on a stone:

‘Blessed is he who discharges his duties towards his Lord, and endures the hardships they entail. He allows himself no sleep at nights until it over whelms him. Then lies down with the palm of his hand under head as his pillow. He is among those whom the thought of the Day of Judgement keeps wakeful at nights, whose beds remain vacant, whose lips hum in God's remembrance and whose sins have been erased by their prolonged earnest supplication for forgiveness They are the 'Party of God'; “surely God's Party-they are the prosperers!’ (Khutba # Letter no.45)

### 4) Purging of sins

From the point of view of Islamic teachings, every sin leaves a black stain and the effects of distortion in the human heart which in turn weakens a person's aptitude for good and righteous actions, and consequently further deviates him towards other sins and foul deeds. On the other hand, worship, prayer and remembrance of God, develop a human being's religious consciousness, strengthen his aptitude for virtuous deeds and diminish his proneness to sin. This means that worship and remembrance of God efface the mal-effects of sins and replace these with fondness for virtue and goodness.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* there is a sermon which deals with *salat*, *zakat* and delivering of trust; after emphasizing the importance of *salat*, 'Ali ('a) further says:

‘Certainly, prayer removes sins like autumn strips leaves off from trees, and it liberates you from the rope (of sins) tied around your neck. The Prophet ('s) likened it to a refreshing stream at one's door in which one takes a purifying bath five times in a day and night. Will after so much cleansing any dirt remain on him?’ (Hadith #199)

### 5) Intimacy with Allah

‘My God, You, of all beloved ones, are the most attached to those who love You and most ready to trust those who trust in You. You see, You look into their secrets and know that which lies in their conscience and are aware of the extent of their inner vision. Consequently their secrets are open to You and their hearts look up to You in eager apprehension. In loneliness, Your remembrance is their friend and consolation. In distress Your help is their protection.’ (Khutba #226)