

The Interior Life in Islam

The function of religion is to bestow order upon human life and to establish an “outward” harmony upon whose basis man can return inwardly to his Origin. This universal function is especially true of Islam, this last religion of humanity, which is at once a Divine injunction to establish order in human society and within the human soul and at the same time to make possible the interior life, to prepare the soul to return unto its Lord and enter the Paradise

Although the whole of the Quranic revelation is called “*Islam*”, from the perspective in question here it can be said that not all those who follow the tradition on the level of *Islam* are *mu'mins*, namely those who possess *iman*, nor do all those who are *mu'mins* possess *ihسان*, which is at once virtue and beauty and by function of which man is able to penetrate into the inner meaning of religion.

The Islamic revelation is meant for all human beings destined to follow this tradition. But not all men are meant to follow the interior path. It is enough for a man to have lived according to the *Shariah* and in surrender (*Islam*) to the Divine Will to die in grace and to enter into Paradise. But there are those who yearn for the Divine here and now and whose love for God and propensity for the contemplation of the Divine Realities (*al-haqaiq*) compel them to seek the path of inwardness. The revelation also provides a path for such men, for men who through their *iman* and *ihسان* “return unto their Lord with gladness” while still walking upon the earth.

While the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will, which is the *Shariah*, is called the exoteric dimension in the sense of governing all of man's outward life as well as his body and psyche, the spiritual path, which leads beyond the usual understanding of the “soul” as a separated and forgetful substance is called the esoteric dimension. In Sunni Islam, this dimension is almost completely identified with Sufism (*tasawwuf*) while in Shi'ism, in addition to Sufism, the esoteric and the exoteric are intermingled within the general structure of the religious doctrines and practices themselves. In the Shi'ite world, the prayers almost all of which, such as the *al-Sab'iyah al-sajjadiyyah* of the fourth Imam Zayn al- Abidin, were written by esoteric authors, partake of both an esoteric and an exoteric character

To interiorize life itself and to become aware of the inward dimension, man must have recourse to rites whose very nature it is to cast a sacred form upon the waves of the ocean of multiplicity in order to save man and bring him back to the shores of Unity.

The major rites or pillars (*arkan*) of Islam, namely the daily prayers (*salat*), fasting (*sawm*), the pilgrimage (*hajj*), the religious tax (*zakat*) and holy war (*jihad*), are all means of sanctifying man's terrestrial life and enabling him to live and to die as a central being destined for supreme blessedness. But these rites themselves are not limited to their outer forms. Rather they possess inward dimensions and levels of meaning which man can reach in function of the degree of his faith (*iman*) and the intensity and quality of his virtue or inner beauty (*ihسان*).

The *salat* punctuates man's daily existence, determines its rhythm, provides a refuge in the storm of life and protects man from sin. Its performance is obligatory and its imprint upon Islamic society and the soul of the individual Muslim fundamental beyond description. Yet, the meaning of the prayers is not to be understood solely through the study of their external form or their impact upon Islamic society, as fundamental as those may be. By virtue of the degree of man's *ihسان*, and also by virtue of

the grace (*barakah*) contained within the sacred forms of the prayers, man is able to attain inwardness through the very external forms of the prayers.

He is able to return, thanks to the words and movements which are themselves the echoes of the inner states of the Holy Prophet, back to the state of perfect servitude (*ubudiyyah*) and nearness to the Divine (*qurb*) which characterize the inner journey of the Holy Prophet as the Universal Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) to the Divine Presence on that nocturnal ascent (*al-miraj*), which is at once the inner reality of the prayers and the prototype of spiritual realization in Islam. The interior life of Islam is based most of all upon the power of prayer and the grace issuing from the sacred language of Arabic in which various prayers are performed. Prayer itself is the holy ship which leads man from the world of outwardness and separation to that of union and interiority, becoming ultimately unified with the center of the heart and the rhythm which determines human life itself.

The same process of interiorization takes place as far as the other central rites or pillars of Islam are concerned. Fasting is incumbent upon all Muslims who are capable of it during the holy month of Ramadan, a month full of blessings when according to the well-known hadith “the gates of heaven are opened”. But the outward observation of its rules, while necessary, is one thing and the full realization of its meaning is another. Fasting means not only abstention from eating, drinking and passions during daylight but above all the realization of the ultimate independence of man's being from the external world and his dependence upon the spiritual reality which resides within him. Fasting is, therefore, at once a means of purification and interiorization complementing the prayers. In fact, it is itself a form of prayer.

The same truth holds true of the other rites. The pilgrimage or *hajj* is outwardly the journey towards the house of God in Mecca and inwardly circumnavigation around the Ka'bah of the heart which is also the house of God. Moreover, the outward *hajj* is the means and support for that inner journey to the Center which is at once nowhere and everywhere and which is the goal of every wayfaring and journeying.

The *zakat* or religious tax is likewise not only the “purifying” of one's wealth through the act of charity which helps the poor, but also the giving of oneself and the realization of the truth that by virtue of the Divine origin of all things, and not because of some form of sentimental humanitarianism, the other or the neighbor *is* myself. *Zakat*, therefore, is, in addition to a means of preserving social equilibrium, a way of self-purification and interiorization, of creating awareness of one's inner nature shown from artificial attachment to all that externalizes and dissipates.

Finally, the holy war or *jihad* is not simply the defense or extension of the Islamic borders which has taken place only during certain episodes of Islamic history, but the constant inner war against all that veils man from the Truth and destroys his inner equilibrium.

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