



THE PHILOSOPHY OF WORSHIP IN ISLAM

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The philosophy of worship is a different topic from worship as such. The former seeks to explain the concept of worship, the principles on which it is based, the goal it aims to achieve, the benefits from practicing it and its relationship to similar or related ideas such as man's role as vicegerent upon earth. All these matters are approached from a rational angle in a way that promotes awareness of the true meaning of worship so that when a person performs an act of worship he knows exactly what he is doing and what it implies.

While we intend to examine worship in Islam from a rational point of view, we should also point out here that – as Islam is the subject of our discussion - its starting point must be the Islamic texts. However, these are not difficult to interpret in rational terms.

Let us begin with the statement that “Allah is the Creator of all things”. It is the fundamental truth in

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science, religion, philosophy, thought, ethics and the management of affairs – and indeed in every area of life, since no theoretical or ideational structure or practical system can be viable unless one accepts it; moreover, it is the First Existential Truth from which all other existential truths flow. However, while it is stated in precisely these terms in the Holy Qur’an¹, over the ages the human intellect has also put forward various proofs to establish that it is indeed the case.

An examination of the evidence offered by thinkers to establish the existence of Allah reveals that in every case it is based on proof that Allah created this world and everything in existence; that is to say, He created it out of nothing, or from primordial matter without form, to quote Plato, who described Allah as the Maker, or “Demiurgos”, and stated that “Allah is the Creator of all things” meant that Creation is a process that takes place out of nothing.²

One basic condition of any theory is that it must be based on firm, definite and certain existential truths. If that condition is lacking, it will be easy to demolish the theory. Most major philosophers over the ages have noted this fact including Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and the philosophers of Mediaeval Europe and the modern era such as Descartes, Kant and numerous others, as well as the Muslim philosophers. This First Existential Truth was basic to their respective philosophies and was only rejected by a small group of atheists.

The worship of Allah by His creatures

If Allah is the Creator of all things, then this must mean that all things are subordinate, or subject, to that Creator. They cannot act independently of His Will and Authority or contrary to what He has decreed. Creation did not exist. Then the Creator brought it into existence through His Will and He is able to remove it from existence if He so wills. It is necessarily in a

¹ This theme occurs repeatedly in the Holy Qur’an, including: *Al An’am*, 102; *Al Ra’d*, 16; *Al Zumar*, 62; *Ghafir*, 62. The wording is not always identical, but the message is the same.

² Numerous philosophers and theologians use the term “creation from ‘adam (nonexistence)”. We prefer “creation out of *la shay’* (nothing)” as being more accurate.



state of subjugation to Him and no part of it is able to function outside His Will and Decree. It has no power except the power to obey its Creator, unless its Creator should grant it attributes that enable it to obey or disobey for a purpose for which its Creator has destined it. This is the case with man, to whom Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, has given the power of obedience and disobedience.

What we are saying here is confirmed by Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High in His Book when He says: “Whatever beings there are in the heavens and earth do prostrate themselves to Allah (acknowledging subjection) – voluntarily or involuntarily” (*Al Ra’d*, 15), and “To Allah doth prostrate itself all that is in the heavens and on earth” (*Al Nahl*, 49). Prostration is an expression of submission and obedience, and every creature in the heavens and on earth expresses its obedience according to its nature as created and decreed by Allah. No behaviour is possible without Allah’s consent. The behaviour of the heavenly bodies is in accordance with the laws and attributes created by Allah, and this is true of every created thing or being.

Allah the Creator holds all His creatures in subjection: “Say: Allah is the Creator of all things. He is the One, the Supreme and the Subduer” (*Al Ra’d*, 16).

Whatever is in the heavens and earth glorifies Allah, its Creator, Glory be to Him, the Most High. This – together with prostration - is another form of obedience and submission. The Qur’an says: “Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, let it declare the Praises and Glory of Allah. For He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” (*Al Hashr*, 1) and “The seven heavens and the earth and all beings therein declare His Glory” (*Al Isra’*, 44). However, man does not recognise the form and manner in which Allah’s creatures glorify Him, since every created being has its own way of glorifying: “There is not a thing but celebrates His Praise, and yet ye understand not how they declare His Glory” (*Al Isra’* 44).

So when creatures prostrate themselves and glorify Allah they are demonstrating their obedience and submission to Him – i.e. that is they way they worship Him.



How man worships his Creator

Since man is one of Allah's creatures, the "Law of Prostration and Glorification" must of necessity apply to him. Just like the rest of Creation, he is required to obey Allah and submit to Him. Allah is the Creator of all things; this is the First Existential Truth and obedience and submission are the rational, logical consequences that follow from it. The Qur'an sums it up as follows: "That is Allah, your *Rabb* (Lord, Cherisher and Sustainer) There is no god but He, the Creator of all things. So worship Him" (*Al An'am*, 102). Worship as a necessary consequence of Allah being the Creator of all things recurs in several verses of the Holy Qur'an.

Worship means obedience, submission and subservience to the *Rabb* and Master Who is Allah, the Creator. Obedience entails obeying all the Divine commands and prohibitions, whether they are great or small.

Worship also entails following *al sirat al mustaqim* (the straight path) – that is, the best, shortest and easiest way to reach the goal for which man has been created. This is the path that will lead him to happiness, perfection and blessings in abundance. In the Holy Qur'an, Jesus says: "It is Allah Who is my *Rabb* and your *Rabb*, so worship Him. This is a path that is straight" (*Al 'Imran*, 51).

Noting that people were aware of the logical link between Allah the Creator and worship of Him, but that they were prone to forget it and needed reminding, the Qur'an also says: "This is Allah, your *Rabb*. Therefore serve Him. Will ye not remember?" (*Yunus*, 3). The question "Will ye not remember?" is a reminder of something that people were already aware of and could also be a reference to these verses: "When thy *Rabb* drew forth from the Children of Adam - from their loins - their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying) 'Am I not your *Rabb*?'- They said: 'Yea! We do testify!' (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: 'Of this we were never mindful': or lest ye should say: 'Our fathers before us may have taken false gods, but we are (their) descendants after them: wilt Thou then destroy us because of the deeds of men who were futile?'" (*Al A'raf* 172-173) This is an attestation from Allah to the Children of Adam from the time before they existed on this earth (in a way we do not know how). At the



same time, it is a confirmation from them that that Allah is their *Rabb*, since they were created (in some form or another) and that creation can only come from Allah. Thus they were already aware of the fact that Allah had created them, but Allah made it plain to them that He was also their *Rabb* (in a way we do not know how). Hence the Children of Adam knew two things: that Allah was their Creator and that at the same time Allah was their *Rabb*. Therefore the attestation was a confirmation from the Children of Adam of Allah's attribute as Lord, Cherisher and Sustainer, which must inevitably be associated with His Divine attribute.

Here we should like to add a comment on the above verses, which confirm that worship of Allah is a necessary consequence of His being both God and *Rabb*, and we should like to stress that Creation is the “most necessary of Divinity's necessary attributes”¹. Logically, the status of *Rabb* should come after Creation, since Allah created all things and then ensured that all His creatures were provided with sustenance, care, protection and all their other needs. The logic behind the status of Creation as the prime attribute is explained in this verse: “It is Allah Who has created you. Further, He has provided for your sustenance; then He will cause you to die; and again He will give you life” (*Al Rum*, 40). So Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, is both God and *Rabb* of all things – a message clearly conveyed in the following verse: “Verily your Lord is Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth” (*Yunus*, 3). Even if we only see Him as Creator, Allah deserves to be worshipped; and if we only see Him as *Rabb*, he deserves to be worshipped. This is confirmed in the following verse: “And worship thy *Rabb* until there come to thee the (Hour that is) Certain” (*Al Hijr*, 99). And naturally, He also deserves to be worshipped as both Creator and *Rabb*. However, the argument that worship is a necessary requirement for all creatures, including man, is strongest in the last of these three cases.

1 Scholars see *Khaliqiyyah* (the attribute of creation) as secondary to *Rububiyyah* (the attribute of being a *Rabb*). In our view Allah first created, then He assumed the role of *Rabb*, so *Khaliqiyyah* would actually be secondary to *Uluhiyyah* (the attribute of Divinity), which entails worship and a recognition of the Oneness of Allah. Careful scrutiny of the meaning of the term “Oneness of Allah” will reveal that Allah is the sole being to whom the word *Khaliqiyyah* applies. It is also true that He is the sole being worthy of worship, but logically this must follow from His attribute of *Khaliqiyyah*. It is on this point that we differ from the scholars who maintain that *Khaliqiyyah* is secondary to *Rububiyyah*.



From the above analysis we can conclude that man's worship of Allah as his *Rabb*, Glory be to Him, the Most High, is a right to which He is entitled. This is further confirmed by a *Hadith* in which the Messenger (PBUH) asked Mu'adh: "Do you know what right Allah can claim from mankind?" Mu'adh replied: "Allah and His Messenger know best". Then he (PBUH) said: "The right Allah can claim from mankind is that they should worship Him and not associate anything with Him".¹

So Allah has the right to require mankind to worship Him. This entails obedience, submission and subservience to Allah, the Lord, Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds. And since man's worship is directed to Allah, the *Rabb* (since Allah is the *Rabb*), we should point to another element in that worship which we have not mentioned in our analysis so far. That element – "the love of Allah" – is described by Ibn Taymiyyah as follows: "However, the worship (man is) commanded (to perform) comprises both submission and love. It is the ultimate in submission to Allah the Most High, as well as the ultimate in love for Him".² We can infer this from the meaning of *Rabb* – the Being Who provides care, sustenance and all the other benefits and blessings to those in receipt of His bounties, so that the beneficiary of all these good things must inevitably respond with a deep sense of love for his Benefactor. Wise men in ancient times observed that "hearts instinctively feel love towards those who treat them well".

So when a person recognises that Allah is the Creator, he must inevitably adopt an attitude of obedience, submission and subservience to Him, and when he knows that He is his Cherisher and Sustainer, he must inevitably respond with love for Him. And when he recognises the attributes of both God and *Rabb*, he will be an obedient, submissive servant imbued with a feeling of love towards his God and *Rabb*. At the same time, he will feel no sense of coercion or compulsion.

Degrees of obedience and submission vary from one person to another and the same is true of love. "Perfect worship" demands the ultimate in both submission and love.

¹ This *Hadith* is cited in the *Sahih* collections of al Bukhari and Muslim.

² Ibn Taymiyyah: *Al 'Ubudiyah*, Dar al Bashir, Amman, 1992, P. 34.

Worship is the purpose for which man has been created

It is no easy task for man to identify the purpose behind his creation if he relies upon reason and science alone with no outside assistance, because it requires certain conditions that a human being does not, and never will, be able to satisfy – neither as an individual nor as a member of the human race. These conditions are that a person should:

- truly and fully know himself as a member of the human race, as well as every individual member of that race, and
- truly and fully know the entire cosmos with which he coexists.

These are impossible conditions for any human being to meet and the only being qualified to inform us of the purpose for which we have been created is the Creator Himself. If the Creator should inform us of the purpose, then the purpose will be as He explains it, and if He does not inform us, then it will remain within the realm of speculation.

It is a sign of our Creator’s Grace to us that He has indeed told us why we were created and, moreover, that we were not created in vain or for no purpose and that He decreed that purpose before our creation. These points are stated clearly in the Qur’an as follows: “**Did ye then think that We had created ye in vain, and that ye would not be brought back to Us (for account)?**” (*Al Mu’minun*, 115), “**I have only created Jinns and men that they may worship Me**” (*Al Dhariyat*, 56) and “**Thy Lord (*Rabb*) hath decreed that ye worship none but Him**” (*Al Isra’*, 23).

As we pointed out earlier, a human being worships Allah because this is the inevitable consequence of his having been created by Him. The Creator explains this on numerous occasions in His Book to remind us of this truth, which is both rational and almost obvious – even if it is not completely and absolutely so. When He says: “**O mankind! Worship your Guardian Lord, Who created you and those who came before you, that ye may become righteous**” (*Al Baqarah*, 21), this affirms my previous point that man’s worship of Allah is an inevitable result of His being simultaneously both Creator and *Rabb*.

If worship means obedience and submission to Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, the manner of that worship cannot be determined by the



worshipper himself. Rather, it must be ordained by his Creator, since obedience essentially means observing the injunctions and prohibitions issued by the One Who Must Be Obeyed to the subject who obeys Him; the one who obeys does not issue those commands to himself. Allah, the Creator and *Rabb* of mankind has shown us humans how to worship Him through the agency of His prophets and messengers who conveyed the Message of the worship of Allah and the manner of performing it over the ages. Every messenger said to his people: “O my people! Worship Allah! Ye have no other god but Him” (*Al A'raf*, 59); then he showed them how to do it and told them of His commands and prohibitions.

This has been expressed by the ‘ulama (scholars) with the words: “Allah is only worshipped in the way He has ordained by His Law”.

Muslims worship their Creator in the way the Messenger of Islam – Muhammad (PBUH) – showed them after being informed how to do so by Allah. This in itself was an act of obedience by the Messenger of Allah to Allah – i.e. in showing the people how to obey Allah as Allah wishes. He (i.e. the Messenger) did not issue orders on his own initiative so that they could be obeyed, since he was a created human being; however, he differed from other human beings in receiving Divine revelations that included information about how to worship and obey Allah. This is why the Qur’an says: “He who obeys the Messenger obeys Allah” (*Al Nisa’*, 80), “Say: I am but a man like yourselves, (but) the revelation has come to me” (*Al Kahf*, 110) – that is, Muhammad (PBUH) is both a human being and a messenger - and “Say: Glory to my Lord! Am I aught but a man – a messenger?” (*Al Isra’* 93). The Messenger was charged with the duty of conveying the message of his Creator which would show the people how to worship and obey Him: “The Messenger’s duty is but to proclaim (the Message)” (*Al Mai'idah*, 99).

The cosmic harmony of worship

We have seen how all creatures, including man, worship their Creator and *Rabb*, and how this is a necessary rational and logical consequence of the First Existential and Fundamental Truth – “Allah is the Creator of all things”. We have also seen that Allah the Creator has ordained worship as the purpose behind man’s creation and that He decreed it before man was



created with His Will, which knows no bounds. So there is a harmony between the goal of man's existence, cosmic reality and the Law of Existence, which we have called "the Law of Prostration and Glorification". (We may also call it "the Law of Obedience" or "the Law of Worship", since it is a law which requires obedience from the created to their Creator).

There is a harmony between the reality of human existence, the reality that man is a created being, the reality of the goal established for man by his Creator and the reality of existence in general.

The significance of this harmony becomes apparent if we posit that man's creation has no purpose. (This is a view that some people mistakenly maintain). If it were the case, man's existence would be incompatible with the Law of Universal Obedience, man's day-to-day existence would be in turmoil and the concept of goodness and morality would be meaningless, since there would be no way of distinguishing between good and evil and life would have no purpose or value.¹ These would be the consequences of the disharmony between the reality of existence and the purpose which the gainsayers maintain does not exist.

The same situation will arise if a person believes that he exists for a purpose other than worship – if, for example, he sees his aim in life as being the accumulation of wealth, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures or any other purpose apart from the one laid down by the Creator, which is worship.

It is a similar situation, but even more so, when a person worships something apart from Allah, or worships Allah along with a partner or partners. This is known as *shirk* (worshipping false gods) in Qur'anic and Shariah terminology. Anyone who indulges in this has gone astray from the path set out for him by his Creator and is acting at variance with the reality of existence – his existence as an individual as well as existence in global or cosmic terms – since it makes no sense for one of Allah's creatures to obey, with conviction and of his own free will, any being other than his

1 The questions the poet Abu'l 'Ala' al Ma'arri raises about the reason for man's creation would appear to confirm what we have said here, since they show how his view that his creation has no purpose led him to go beyond the acceptable bounds of how a created being should interact with the Creator.



Creator. Except, that is, if his obedience to that being is in fact obedience to Allah - as is the case with our obedience to the Messenger (PBUH), since, as we have already pointed out, obeying the Messenger is an act of obedience to Allah.

The Qur'an makes this clear in numerous verses in which it contrasts *shirk* with worship. For example: "The worshippers of the false gods say: If Allah had so willed, we should not have worshipped aught but Him" (*Al Nahl*, 35), "Say: I am commanded to worship Allah and not to join partners with Him" (*Al Ra'd*, 36) and "Worship Allah and do not join any partners with Him" (*Al Nisa'* 36).

If worship means obeying Allah alone and being true to His commands and prohibitions, then disobeying Allah by choosing a purpose other than worship, or falling into *shirk*, is the converse of worship. That is to say, it is the opposite of the purpose for which man was created. Hence all acts of disobedience – whether great or small – are incompatible with "existential harmony" and will inevitably lead to turmoil in a person's day-to-day life. This is because:

- Firstly – they distract him from his true goal, and when a person's behaviour is at odds with the goal he should seek to attain he will be a deviant who has strayed far from the straight path. This is explained in several verses, including: "And who is more astray than one who follows his own lusts, devoid of guidance from Allah?" (*Al Qasas*, 50) and "Say: I will not follow your vain desires: if I did, I would stray from the path, and be not of the company of those who receive guidance" (*Al An'am*, 56), and
- Secondly, acts of disobedience create disharmony in the "system of existence" in general, because they are at variance with the purpose for which man was created. Consider the following verses: "Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned" (*Al Rum*, 41) and "If the truth had been in accord with their desires, truly the heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, would have been in confusion and corruption" (*Al Mu'minun*, 71).



Shirk is an aspect of “following one’s desires”. However, Allah has classed it as “the highest wrongdoing” and a “most heinous sin” because it ascribes Divine attributes and the right of worship to other than Him – the Only One Who is entitled to that right. This is all incompatible with “existential harmony” since one element of that harmony – human behaviour – is out of tune with the realities and Law of the cosmos. We find this point in several verses, including: “O my son! Join not in worship (others) with Allah: for false worship is indeed the highest wrongdoing” (*Luqman*, 13), “To set up partners with Allah is to devise a sin most heinous indeed” (*Al Nisa’*, 48) and – most graphically – “if anyone assigns partners to Allah, he is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds, or the wind had swooped (like an eagle on its prey) and thrown him into a far-distant place” (*Al Hajj*, 31).

So worship of Allah alone is the factor that ensures harmony between man and the cosmos (which we have called “existential harmony”).

Worship encompasses every aspect of human behaviour

Since worship is the goal for which man was created, every aspect of man’s behaviour must be directed towards attaining it. That is to say, everything he does must be an act of worship, whether it be overt or covert and unseen by others¹. This is the logical consequence of the meaning of worship, since if one aspect of human behaviour is conducive to that goal, while another aspect is not, the goal will not be achieved in full; indeed, it may not be achieved at all.

If following one’s vain desires against the Commands and Will of Allah – that is to say disobedience – upsets the entire cosmic system (i.e. the existence of man and the universe), then the only way to set it right (at both the human and cosmic level) is for man to ensure that everything he does is a form of Divine worship and devoid of even the slightest element of wrongdoing. So worship must include every element of man’s behaviour during his life on earth.

¹ This class of behaviour is known as “inner deeds” or “deeds of the heart” and includes: intentions, integrity, patience, satisfaction, envy, pride, etc.



This means that worship does not consist merely of the acts of worship described by scholars of *fiqh* (doctrine) as “‘ibadat”, such as the regular prayer, *zakat*, fasting, the Hajj pilgrimage, etc. While these are of course part of it, it also covers the way we walk, eat and drink, the way we respond to our immediate surroundings, whether they be the earth, animals, vegetables or minerals, the way we enter and leave our houses, our sleep and waking, our intentions, feelings, emotions etc. All these aspects of our lives should be forms of Divine worship and obedience to Allah, Glory be to Him.

The Qur’an expresses this as follows: “Say: Truly my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are (all) for Allah, the Lord and Cherisher of the Worlds”.

This - the fullest and most comprehensive meaning possible of the notion of worship – has become firmly fixed in the minds and consciences of Muslims everywhere. That is why they ask “Is it *halal* (permitted) or *haram* (prohibited)?” – i.e. is it or is it not an act of obedience to Allah and worship of Him - about every action or aspect of human behaviour.

Worship and man’s role as vicegerent on earth

For man to attain the goal for which he was created he needs to live in a certain way. The Qur’an has described this as “*al Khilafah fi’l Ardh*” (“Vicegerency upon Earth”), as in this verse: “Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: I will put a vicegerent on earth” (*Al Baqarah*, 30).

The word “put” (“*ja’l*”) when ascribed to Allah in this context in the Qur’an implies a definition of the function of the thing being “put”. For example, Allah created the heavens and the earth; then he arranged them in an orderly fashion and designated a function for each of their component parts. The idea of this should become clearer to us if we ponder on the following verses: “Praise be to Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth, and “put” the darkness and the light” (*Al An’am*, 1), “He it is that cleaveth the daybreak (from the dark): He “puts” the night for rest and tranquillity, and the sun and moon for the reckoning (of time). Such is the judgement and ordering (of Him), the Exalted in Power, the Omniscient. It is He Who “put” the stars (as beacons) that ye may guide yourselves, with



their help, through the dark spaces of land and sea. We detail Our Signs for people who know” (*Al An’am*, 96-97) and “We have “put” on the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with them, and We have “put” therein broad highways (between mountains) for them to pass through, that they may receive guidance” (*Al Anbiya’*, 31). There are also numerous other verses on the same theme.

We can understand that when the Qur’an says: “I will put a vicegerent on earth” (*Al Baqarah*, 30), it means that Allah had decided to create man, that He had defined the purpose of man’s creation, which is to worship Him, and that He had also designated the function He expected man to perform. His creation and the designation of his purpose and function are logically linked here, though not in a temporally consecutive fashion, since Allah’s knowledge is outside the realm of time and “before” and “after”. The definition of man’s function – that is, to be a vicegerent – leads to the fulfilment of the purpose for which man was created, which is worship.

This means that “Vicegerency upon Earth” and worship of Allah are inseparably interdependent, since the vicegerent is expected to function within the compass of life on this earth in accordance with the conditions laid down by the One Who “put” (*ja’l*) him there, Glory be to Him, the Most High, and His commands and directives. And since worship means obeying Allah, submitting to Him and complying with His orders, then in practical terms the two concepts amount to the same thing – that is, obeying Allah and carrying out His orders. So in fulfilling his role as vicegerent upon earth, man is in fact attaining the goal of worship for which he has been created.

Since it is Allah – and Allah alone – Who determines the purpose for which He created man, then it is also for Allah – and Allah alone – to designate the function man is expected to perform, since the two (i.e. worship and vicegerency) are interlinked. This is why we only find the concept of “Vicegerency upon Earth” in the Divinely revealed religions. It does not exist in this Qur’anic sense in the human philosophical systems.

There are several views on the precise meaning of man’s role as vicegerent on earth. According to one opinion, man is vicegerent on behalf



of Allah, while others maintain this is not the case, since Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, has no need for a vicegerent to act on His behalf. However, what we can confirm here is what the “Vicegerency verse” itself confirms, which also tells us what we believe we – as humans – need to know. What the verse tells us is that it was Allah who appointed a vicegerent and defined how he should live; moreover, that appointment comes with terms and conditions set by the Appointer for the Appointee to follow which amount to commands and prohibitions that man is required to obey and implement. Here again the notions of “Vicegerency upon Earth” and worship merge into one.

Worship and life

In this context we are of course referring to human life in its two phases – life on earth and life in the Hereafter. Between the two is a stage which has been called “*al hayat al barzakhyyah*” (“interim” or “divider”/ “partition” life).

Since the life of the Hereafter and the “interim” life are unknown to us here on earth, knowledge of them is based on faith and a belief in the True Divine Revelation. Moreover, as man’s destiny in the “interim” life and the Hereafter is determined by his deeds and the way he has conducted himself during his life on earth, we shall focus here on the life of this world.

As life cannot be separated from man, and as man has been created by Allah, his life is also a creation of Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High. This is confirmed in the Qur’an in the following verses: “**Blessed be He in Whose hands is Dominion; and He hath power over all things – He who created Death and Life**” (*Al Mulk*, 1-2). Death is the opposite of life, but it does not mean the extinction of man; rather, it marks his transition to a new state, which – as the verses confirm – has been created by Allah, Glory be to Him the Most High.

The purpose of life and why Allah created it is another question altogether and it is Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, Who knows the answer to it. Since it is important that man should know what that purpose is, Allah has not left man to grope blindly in search of it by himself. Instead,



He explains it in the second verse of *Surat al Mulk*: “...that He may try which of you is best in deeds...” (*Al Mulk*, 2).

So life is a test. That is the purpose of it. The results of that test will be decided by Allah the Most High on the basis of a person’s deeds during his life on earth. Deeds are the most distinctive and recognisable aspect of his life; that is, his life consists of what he does and his deeds represent how he interacts with every component part of existence. By “existence” here we mean everything that exists. In the first place this comprises – as per the First Existential Truth – the Creator and His creatures. The Creator is One and has no partner, whereas it is beyond the power of the human mind to count the number of His creatures; however, they can be sorted into major categories which we class as the “self” (“selfhood”/ “singularity”) and the “other” (comprising a series of ever-widening circles including next of kin, family, relatives, neighbours, the local community, etc.), the natural world, ideas, time, the unknown, instruments and means.

Man “has dealings” with all these component parts of existence in his life on earth. He has dealings with the Creator and His creatures, including himself and other beings, the wider universe and instruments and means (both natural and man-made), as well as with time and the unknown. Man cannot separate himself from the rest of existence, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, positively or negatively.

At this point we can conclude that if life consists essentially of man’s interaction on earth with every aspect of existence, if it is a process in which he undergoes a test and a trial, if it is the Creator Who decides on the outcome of his test and trial, and if the yardstick for success is the degree of his obedience through his deeds to Allah the Most High and His Messenger (since obeying the Messenger is obedience to Allah), then this is all a confirmation of the verse in the Qur’an which says: “He that obeys Allah and His Messenger has already attained the highest Triumph” (*Al Ahzab*, 71). If we then add the point we have already made – that obedience to Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, is worship – the final conclusion we must reach is that the kind of life that leads to the “highest Achievement” is worship; that is, it is the kind of life in which man’s interaction with every aspect of existence consists of obedience to Allah – i.e. worship.



Thus the concepts of life - of the kind that leads to “the highest Achievement” - and worship converge. However, in the kind of life in which people see the goal and cause as being other than what has been laid down by Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, people will interact with existence in a way that has nothing to do with worship of the Creator or obedience to Him and they will not be destined for “Triumph” in the next world.

Although we have said that we intend to limit our discussion to life in this world without touching on life in the next or the “interim” life, we should like to make one point. When the Qur’an says: “I have only created jinns and men that they may worship Me” (*Al Dhariyat*, 56), it means that a person’s existence continues into the next life; he exists in the “interim” life, then he is resurrected in the life of the Hereafter. The goal of his creation is an ongoing one throughout his existence in every phase. Hence we can say that man in the next life will worship Allah, in the sense that by his nature he will obey Allah and submit to Him whether he is in Paradise or in the Fire. The difference is that obedience in this world is an obligation and a test; man is able to choose between obedience and disobedience and he will be rewarded or penalised for his deeds during this life. The concept of thralldom also applies to man during the “interim” life, since – in view of his situation - he is inevitably in a state of subjection to Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High. However – as we all know - he is not under any obligation and he has no choice.

Worship and man’s *khair* (good/well-being/blessing)

The *khair* (good/well-being/blessing) we are referring to here is man’s *khair*, which will bring him true happiness throughout his entire existence - in this world, the “interim” life and the Hereafter. The question here is: Who decides what is good for man? Man, the Creator or another, non-human, created being? If we want to find the answer to that question, it will help if we can identify the conditions that are conducive to man’s well-being. One of those conditions is that he (that is, the being that decides what is good for man) should know man inside out from every aspect, as well as the entire reality of the existence with which man interacts (because *khair* necessarily exists in a social and “cosmic” context). Another condition is



that this being should be perfect in every possible respect and free from whims, caprices, personal interests and objectives and any shortcomings of any kind. These are not attributes that can be enjoyed by a human or any other created being. The only being to whom they can apply is Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, the Creator of man and the Creator of all things. These conditions are confirmed by Allah in the following verses: “For verily it is they Lord who is the Master-Creator, Knowing all things” (*Al Hijr*, 86) and “Should He not know – He that created? And He is the One That understands the finest Mysteries (and) is well-acquainted with them” (*Al Mulk*, 14). And describing His perfection and freedom from all needs, the Qur’an says: “O ye men! It is ye that have need of Allah: but Allah is the One Free of all wants, Worthy of all praise” (*Fatir*, 15).

This evidence must necessarily lead us to conclude that the only being able to decide on what is really conducive to man’s *khair* is Allah and that what we need to know is what Allah has decided is good for man. In fact, we already know because the Divine Messages conveyed by the messengers (peace be upon them) have informed mankind what Allah wants from them and what they must do to acquire *khair*.

If worship consists of doing what Allah wishes man to do - obediently and without coercion - and if man’s well-being is achieved (as we have pointed out) through doing what Allah wants – obediently and without coercion – the outcome of this simple equation with its immense meaning and significance will be: “Worship is *khair*”. It would be equally true to say: “*Khair* is worship”.

Man’s deeds fall into one of two categories – good or evil. This is confirmed by the Qur’an as follows: “Then shall anyone who has done an atom’s worth of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom’s worth of evil shall see it” (*Al Zalzalah*, 7-8). Evil is the converse of good, so if obedience and submission to Allah and carrying out His commands is worship, the converse is disobeying Allah and failing to carry out His commands. So if worship is *khair*, or good, then disobeying Allah is evil.

One can also reach this conclusion (worship = *khair*) by another route. Philosophers and great thinkers maintain that the “*khair*” of a



thing is achieved by attaining the perfection which is appropriate to it, and that a thing attains the perfection which is appropriate to it by achieving the objective for which it was brought into existence. When a thing attains its state of perfection it will have attained its *khair*. Therefore if worship is the objective for which man was created, the way to achieve this – as we have pointed out – is by attaining the appropriate state of perfection, and the appropriate state of perfection is his *khair*. Accordingly, man achieves *khair* through worship, and *khair* is worship and worship is *khair*.

Our conclusion gives us the opportunity to correct an idea (in the Islamic context) that worship and morality are two quite different things, or that worship is “a kind of” morality and morality is “a kind of” worship¹, since worship and morality are in fact essentially and substantially the same. There is also evidence for our view in Allah’s Revelation – both in the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

Speaking of his Mission and Message – which was Allah’s last Message to mankind - the Messenger (PBUH) said: “I have been sent to perfect high moral qualities”. This confirms that everything in his Message is “high moral qualities”. Moreover, when the Qur’an praises the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it singles him out for his moral qualities: “**And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character**” (*Al Qalam*, 4). “Exalted standards of character” owe their origin to Divine Inspiration and the Message of Islam, and to worship, which shows how to obey the Creator, follow His commands and live in a proper way.

When we understand that the focus of morality is on distinguishing *khair* (good) from *sharr* (evil) and that worship focuses on defining obedience and disobedience, we are convinced beyond all doubt that *khair* is obedience and *sharr* is disobedience. There is no third position. Every action – even an atom’s worth – is either *khair* or *sharr*; at the same time, it is either obedience or disobedience.

¹ See Yusuf al Qaradawi: *Al ‘Ibadah fi’l Islam*, 6th impression, Mu’assasat al Risalah, Beirut, 1979, Pp. 121-126. In this book the author links worship and morality, though he does not class them as substantially identical, as we do here.



Some people might say that what falls into the *mubah* (permitted) category is neither *khair* nor *sharr* and cannot be classed as either obedience or disobedience. They may claim this on the grounds that *mubah* is defined as “an act whose commission or omission is not required”. Our reply to such people is: “What is *mubah* has been permitted by Allah, so a person who commits or omits a *mubah* action is obeying Allah, so his action is an act of obedience to Him and obedience is *khair*”.

As a further comment on the relationship between morality, religion and worship, we may add that actions falling within the scope of one of the five Shariah categories - *fardh* (obligatory) and *wajib* (obligatory to a lesser degree than *fardh*), *mandub* (recommended), *mubah* (permitted), *makruh* (disliked) and *haram* (prohibited) – can be classed as either *khair* or *sharr*. What is ruled to be *khair* includes *fardh* and *wajib*, as well as *mandub* and *mubah* (which are also in the “obedience” category), while *sharr* comprises *makruh* and *haram*, which are in the “disobedience” or “wrongdoing” category.

We can therefore confirm that in an Islamic context there is no difference between religion and morality; what is good from a religious point of view – that is, worship, obedience and behaving in a way that is pleasing to Allah - is also good from a moral point of view and vice versa.

The fruits of worship

Worship produces positive results at every phase of a person’s life – his life on earth, in the “interim” and in the Hereafter. Drawing from the Qur’an, the Sunnah and the Traditions, theologians and others have written extensively on the subject and have concluded that a person who performs the act of worship lives a good life in this world free from distress, while in the Hereafter he will enter Paradise and enjoy the bounties and blessings Allah will provide for him there, and in the “interim” his grave will be “a garden from the Gardens of Paradise”.

We will come to the same conclusions if we try to understand the benefits from a rational point of view. They may be summarised as follows:



Worship puts a person in harmony with every aspect of existence including the Creator and His creatures. This harmony brings him peace of mind and a sense of affinity and rapport with the whole of the cosmos and the laws that govern it, and has come about because of his obedience and submission to the Creator of the universe. Consequently he feels confident and tranquil and at ease materially, psychologically and spiritually, because in this world he is travelling along the straight path towards his goal, in full knowledge of the purpose for which he was created.

On the other hand, a person who does not know why he exists or the way to reach the goal of his existence will stray from the path and lead a miserable life. His heart will be lacking in confidence and his psyche will not be able to give him reassurance because he will not be a worshipper of Allah, his Creator. We have already shown how the Qur'an describes a person in this state: "if anyone assigns partners to Allah, he is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds, or the wind had swooped (like an eagle on its prey) and thrown him into a far-distant place" (*Al Hajj*, 31).

Noting that worship of Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, brings, joy, serenity and a sense of security to the heart, Ibn Taymiyyah says: "The heart needs Allah from two angles: so that it can worship, worship being the reason for man's existence¹, and so that it can seek assistance from Him and place its trust in Him, which is the 'active factor'. The heart cannot be sound, it cannot thrive and it cannot enjoy pleasure and happiness.... and it cannot feel secure, except through worship and love of its *Rabb*"².

When a person worships Allah, his *Rabb*, Glory be to Him, the Most High, he is imbued with existential perfection and sublimity and reaches the highest degree of perfection attainable for a human being, because he has achieved the objective for which he was created. Moreover, the higher he rises in terms of worship of Allah, the higher will be his degree of human perfection.

¹ The proofreader of this book misread *al gha'iyyah* as *al gha'ibah*. The correct version is the one we have here.

² Ibn Taymiyyah: *Al 'Ubuliyyah*, P. 63.



When a person worships Allah, and Allah alone, he attains a state of perfect freedom in this world and is liberated from bondage to any other being or thing, whether human, demon or idol, dirham, dinar or lust. When he submits himself to Allah alone, his heart, conscience and soul will be free even if his body may suffer imprisonment, torture or any other form of humiliating and degrading treatment. Over the ages believers who have worshipped Allah alone have proved that they are the ones who are truly free, even when they are subjected to oppression and injustice.

Being in thrall to Allah alone means that the slave toils, strives, submits and obeys. However, the benefits of all these efforts are not reaped by the Master, Glory be to Him, the Most High, but by the slave himself, because Allah is Perfect, Complete and Free from All Wants. He is the Lord of All Power and Worthy of All Praise, and it is mankind who are poor and needy. This is completely different from other kinds of slavery – being in thrall to other than Allah – in which the slave labours and toils and the fruits of his labour go to his master, while he himself receives virtually nothing.

Since - as we have explained - worship is *khair*, a worshipper will be a righteous human being infused with *khair*. Through a person's practice of worship he becomes a righteous individual; then when the individuals who make up society – or the vast majority of them – are righteous, the society itself will be righteous, since righteousness does not only have an impact upon the person to whom the term applies, because virtues have a social dimension and their influence permeates society as a whole.

When a person worships Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, Allah is pleased with him and loves him; indeed, His love for a human being who obeys Him and humbles himself before Him in total submission is the ultimate in love. He has told mankind what benefits will accrue to them if they worship Him in the manner that pleases Him in a well-known *Hadith Qudsi* (*Hadith* conveyed in the actual words of Allah): “I will declare war against him who shows hostility to a pious worshipper of Mine. And the most beloved thing with which My slave comes nearer to Me is that which I have made obligatory upon him; and My slave continues coming closer to Me through supererogatory deeds (*nawafil*) until I love him. And when I love



him, I become his eye with which he sees, his sense of hearing with which he hears, his tongue with which he speaks, and his hand with which he strikes.....etc”.

These are some of the fruits of Allah’s love for a person who worships. Just imagine how it would be for him if Allah were his eye, his hearing, his hand and his senses!

The above *Hadith* points out that the more a person worships Allah, the nearer he will be to Him. This high status can only be attained by those who worship their Creator in a way that encompasses every area of their lives and actions.

Conclusion

In this paper we have done our best to outline a philosophy of worship in which the rational approach is uppermost. We have shown that the Revealed Texts are consistent with reason and logic and indeed that they speak to the intellect. It is in fact impossible to establish a “philosophy of worship in Islam” without recourse to Divine Revelation (the Qur’an and Sunnah), since the philosophy is contained within it and all we are required to do is to figure it out.

In our opinion “worship” is one of the most fundamental concepts in Islam, since it represents the purpose for which man was created and is substantially identical to the concept of *khair*, which is the defining factor in human life and the purpose of human existence. Worship encompasses the whole of the Faith, as well as every aspect of human behaviour without exception.

An understanding of the true nature of worship and its relationship to man, life and existence will raise our level of awareness of the reality of our existence and our mission in life, and this in turn will ensure our well-being as members of the human race..