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Windows on the House of Islam

*Muslim Sources on Spirituality
and Religious Life*

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* Nurcholish Madjid
Worship as an Institution of Faith

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A contemporary Indonesian discussion of the question of ritual prayer's place in the larger context of Muslims' faith and worship now builds on Maneri's foundational reflections on intention. Muslim authors all over the world continue to write books on Islamic doctrine for the purpose of reinterpreting the tradition in ever-changing circumstances. Dr. Nurcholish Madjid's "Worship as an Institution of Faith" ("Ibadat Sebagai Institusi Iman") is part of a much larger treatise on Islamic doctrine and ethics.²

THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN WORSHIP AND FAITH

Touching upon the connection between worship and faith is not simply a hypothetical question, for people often raise the question, "Isn't it enough for someone to have faith and do good works, without also having to worship?" Einstein has been quoted, for example, as saying that he believed in God and the necessity of doing good, without feeling a need to join a formal religion such as Judaism or Christianity, which he considered useless.

In passing, we might note that a question of this type suggests an attitude both logical and reasonable. Moreover, the Holy Book itself always speaks about faith and good works as two associated values that people must possess. However, if we examine the matter more closely, the question can raise various problems. First, in historical reality, no system of beliefs has ever appeared that has not introduced, to a greater or lesser extent, rituals. Even a view of life that has absolutely no pretense to religiosity, including those like communism that strive to eliminate religion, has its own ritual system. Through the use of ritual, seen both in the show of respect to the party symbol and in a dogmatic living-out of party doctrines and ideology, a communist strengthens his commitment and dedication to its [the system's] profession of life as well as to its ideals. Similarly, Javanese mystical [*kebatinan*] teachings and informal spiritualities, such as those of theosophical movements and Freemasonry,

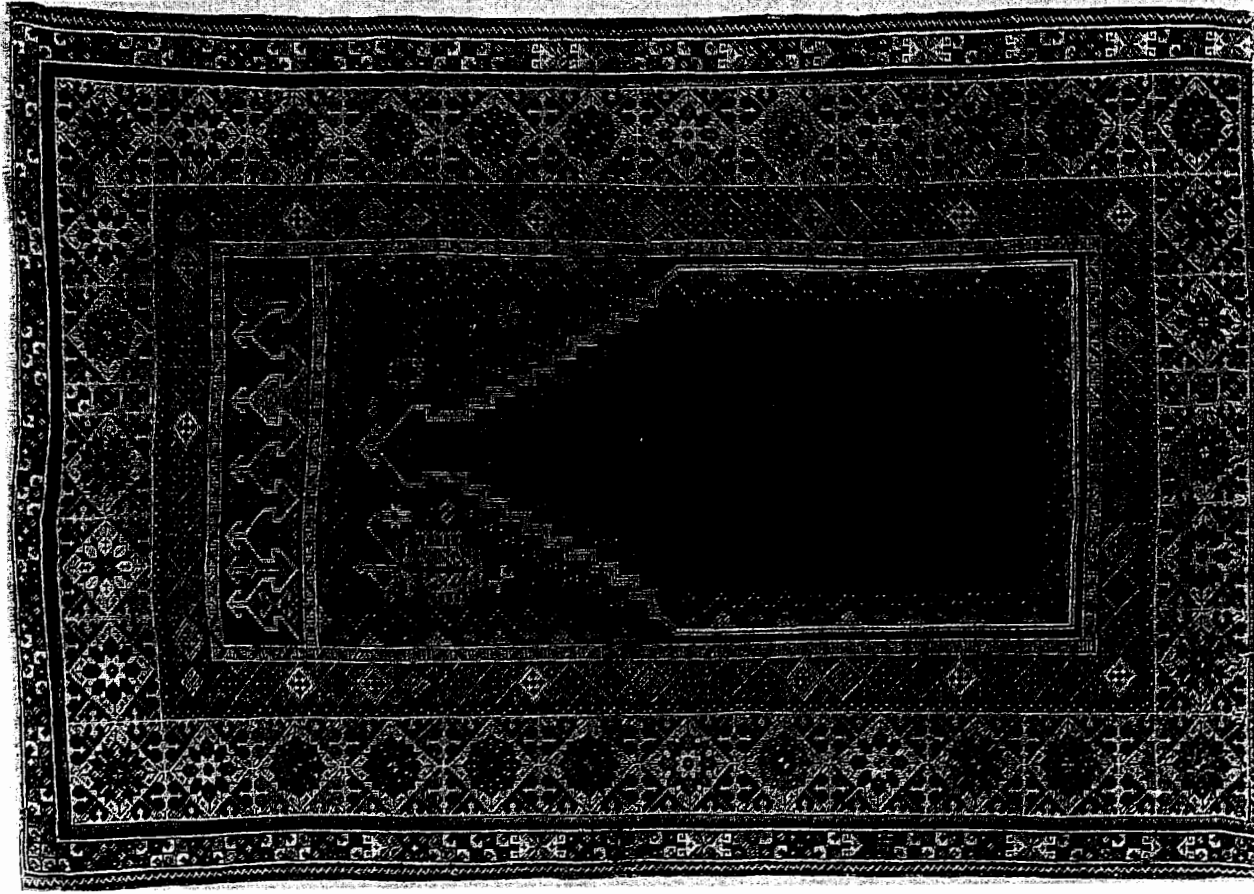


Figure 12. All traditional prayer rugs depict a two-dimensional version of the mihrab. In this early-nineteenth-century Turkish design, geometry nearly overpowers floral elements; stylized ewers in the spandrels (above the arch on both sides) may allude to the ablution required before every ritual prayer. St. Louis: St. Louis Art Museum, 108:29.

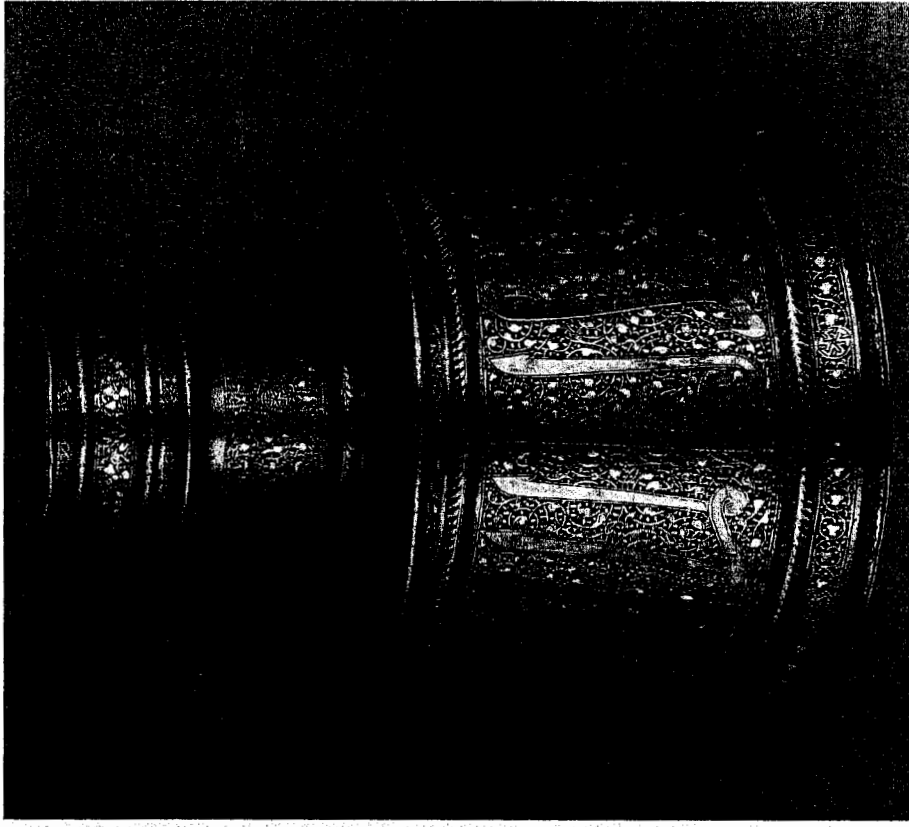


Figure 13. A fourteenth-century Iranian brass engraved, silver- and gold-inlaid, mosque candlestick holder, one of a pair designed to flank the mihrab (as in fig. 8). It is inscribed to the patron: "Glory to our master, the lofty king, the sultan, the magnificent, the wise, the just." St. Louis: St. Louis Art Museum, 43:1926.

have introduced certain forms of ritual for their members. At the very minimum there is a process of initiation of members, with a ceremony of profession and the pronouncement of a pledge of faithfulness as a type of oath of allegiance.

The second problem connected with the notion of faith without worship is that, unlike scientific systems or philosophies that have only a rational dimension, faith always possesses a suprarational or spiritual

dimension that expresses itself in devotional actions by means of a system of worship. Such devotional acts not only have the effect of strengthening the feeling of belief and producing a higher consciousness concerning the implications of faith in the matter of deeds, but they also prepare one for an experience of holiness that has no little meaning for a feeling of joy. Such an experience of holiness, for example, is the feeling of closeness to God, the Object of Worship, the One Lord who is humankind's reason for existence and goal of life.

The third problem is that while it is true that what is important is faith and good works, that is, a combination of the two values of which the one [faith] is the basis for the other [good works], in order for abstract faith to move someone in the direction of performing good works, it must possess a warmth and intimacy in the soul of a believer, and this can be achieved by way of the activity of worship. There is even a general understanding that the reality of a religious life is always found connected with forms of worship activities.

It would seem clear from the above that worship systems are a continuation of the logic of any faith system. Otherwise, faith would become a kind of abstract formulation without the ability to motivate the individual inwardly to do something at the level of genuine sincerity. Thus, the act of faith must be institutionalized in worship as an expression of a person's servanthood before the Lord, the Center of meaning and the Goal of life.

WORSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

The above-mentioned problem can be taken as the basis for discussing the place of worship as an institution of faith, or an institution that links faith and its consequence, that is, good works.

As an interior attitude, faith or belief can exist at a very high level of abstraction so that it is difficult to understand its relationship to evident daily behavior. Every heavenly religion emphasizes salvation through faith. This emphasis is especially found in the Abrahamic religions—that is, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—because they go back in the central elements of their teaching to that of their ancestor, the prophet Abraham

in the eighteenth century before Christ. These religions strongly emphasize the connection or internal consistency between faith and works or deeds in favor of humankind. For those heavenly religions, the Lord is not understood to be found in things (totemism) or ceremonies (sacramentalism) as in some other religions, but rather in that which goes beyond the world. At the same time, the Lord demands that humanity pass through life following a specific path whose measure is the goodness of every member of human society. In other words, the Lord, in addition to being of a wholly transcendent and august nature, is, according to the perception of the heavenly religions, also by nature ethical, in the sense that God intends for humankind behavior that is *akhlāqī*, that is, ethical or moral.

The link between abstract faith and behavior or concrete good deeds is acts of worship. Worship, as a kind of concretizing of the sense of faith, bears the intrinsic meaning of closeness to the Lord (*taqarrub*) [see 96:19 and 9:99]. In worship, a servant of the Lord (or *‘abd Allah*) feels a spiritual intimacy with the Creator. This experience of holiness is something that can be said to be the essence of religious feeling or religiosity, which in the view of the mystics such as Sufis possesses the highest level of legitimacy. (Sufis even tend to hold that religious feeling must always have an inner dimension, while stressing that every exoteric [*lahiri*] act is legitimate only if it leads someone to this esoteric [*baiti*] experience.)

However, in addition to its intrinsic meaning, worship also bears an instrumental meaning, for it can be seen as an effort of private and communitarian education leading to a commitment or an interior adherence to moral behavior [see 29:45]. The assumption is that by way of worship, a believer nourishes and increases his individual and collective behavior in regard to his personal and social duties so as to enable the best possible life together in this world. The root of that awareness is a deep realization of one's responsibility for every deed before the Lord in the unavoidable Divine Judgment, at which a person appears strictly as an individual [see 2:28 and 3:13]. Thus because of its very personal nature (as a relationship between a servant and his Lord), worship can become a very deep and effective instrument of moral and ethical education. In the

Holy Book the hope is clearly expressed that an important effect of worship is the growth of a kind of social solidarity. It is even emphasized that, without the growth of that social solidarity, worship is not only worthless and incapable of bringing one to salvation, but is in fact cursed by the Lord.

From this perspective, worship can be called a framework and institutionalization of faith that manifests itself in forms of behavior and concrete deeds. Moreover, in addition to being a manifestation of faith in practice, worship also functions as an effort at nourishing faith and making it grow. Faith is not something static that appears once and for all. Faith, rather, is of a dynamic character that knows both the rhythm of negative development (decreasing, failing, becoming weak) and positive growth (increasing, deepening, becoming stronger). Positive growth requires continuous efforts at fostering and nourishing faith [see 48:4].

HUMAN NATURE AND WORSHIP

As a declaration of servanthood before the Lord, worship, which also bears the meaning of glorifying God, is truly a natural thing. That is, it is something that is inherently found in the native tendency of humankind and as a natural phenomenon in its own right. For this reason changing from one form of worship activity to another can be seen as simply a case of substitution. This is because in the living reality of humans there is almost no individual who is absolutely without some form of expression of worshipful or devotional character. If someone does not carry out a normative act of worship (such as salat in Islam), that person will nevertheless certainly carry out some other form of worship activity (such as, as we have mentioned, the strong tendency of communists to glorify their leaders.)

Thus, as with every other natural tendency, the human tendency to perform acts of worship must be properly channeled. The key test of the correctness of an act of worship is that it must raise the status and human dignity of the individual involved in it. True worship will certainly not result in fettering and restraining the worshipper as happens in mythological systems.

This means that worship must be directed only toward the Most Exalted Presence, who is truly "superior" to humankind because He is our Creator, while human beings are His creatures (even though, and precisely because, they are the pinnacle of His creation.) Moreover, the act of worship must be directed toward Him who, when one has certitude, consciousness, and an experience of His presence in life, produces the sincere desire to do something to earn his "pleasure," that is, good works.

From this perspective, worship can be seen as the symbol of a servant's glorifying his Creator as well as the declaration of the servant's accepting His moral demands. Through worship, a servant hopes that the Creator will help and guide his life to follow the path toward truth. In standing before Him, an individual becomes aware that in confronting the unavoidable challenge of leading a moral life he needs mercy and grace (in Arabic, *fadl*), for human beings cannot fully and perfectly seek and find the path of truth without His guidance [see 24:21].

WORSHIP AND RELIGIOSITY

The Qur'an recounts the story of the prophet Jacob (Ya'qub), who held the title *Isra'îl*, that is, *'abd Allah*, Servant of God, probably because he was very assiduous in his worship, who asked his sons when he was on the point of death: "What will you worship after I am gone?" They answered: "We shall worship your God and the God of your forefathers Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac: God alone! We surrender ourselves to Him" [2:133]. That account in the Sacred Book shows that an act of worship must be accompanied by an attitude of total self-surrender toward the One who is worshipped, that is, God the One Lord. Performing an act of worship without accompanying it with a sincere attitude of self-surrender nullifies the meaning of the act itself as an approach to and intimacy with al-Khaliq, the Great Creator.

This experience is the basis for a "leap" in the soul of a believer every time the name of the Lord is mentioned and arouses in the believer's heart a deep attitude of appreciation each time an expression of religion, such as God's word [in the Qur'an] is heard. It is this "leap" that arouses in the believer a longing to entrust and pledge one's entire life to God,

Creator and Protector [see 8:2]. In the consciousness of the presence of the Creator Lord in one's life, a human person finds his or her proper nature.

One form of worship in Islam that is highly symbolic of an awareness of the presence of the Lord in the life of humankind is salat. Making "contact" with the Lord is the highest purpose of salat (that is, its intrinsic purpose, as has been shown above). This is clear in the command of the Lord to the prophet Moses [see 20:14]. The Arabic word *salat* literally means "to call upon," the same meaning as is carried by the Arabic word *du'a'*, that is, the crying out of a servant to the Lord, Creator of the universe.

Furthermore, salat, defined as "a collection of readings and actions that begin with a proclamation of God's greatness (*takbir*) and conclude with the greeting of peace (*taslim*)," is highly symbolic of the submission and surrender (*islam*) of a person to the Lord. In the salat, after the opening takbir the person is commanded to direct his every attitude and attention exclusively to the object of his cry, that is, the Creator of the entire universe, in his position as a servant who is encountering his Lord. Any attitude, whether exterior or interior, that is not relevant to his situation of encountering the Lord is forbidden (thus the first takbir is called the *takbirat al-ihram*, that is, the takbir by which one enters the sacred state).

In this way, at the moment of salat, a person, being totally overcome by his contact with the Lord in the vertical dimension, is free from the horizontal dimension of his life, including the social aspects of that life.

At the moment of salat, a servant should experience as deeply as possible the presence of the Lord in his life, [as in the hadith] "as if you see Him, and even if you do not see Him, truly He sees you." With the bodily positions of bowing (*ruk'u*) and prostration (*sujud*), which is performed by touching the forehead on the surface of the earth, accompanied by sacred readings which serve to prepare a dialogue with Him, humble obedience and submission to the Lord are shown most clearly. It is not an exaggeration to hold that properly performed salat, that is, when performed with devotion and attention and accompanied by the tranquility of every member of the body, is a perfect declaration of faith, as has

been said by 'Ali Ahmad al-Jurjawi.³ Salat creates a highly elevated feeling of religion or religiosity.

Moreover, that religiosity can have broad implications in this life, both in one's external life and in the interior. This is owing to the peacefulness of soul that comes about through communication with the Lord [see 13:28], so the person who performs salat with reverence will have a soul that is more balanced, full of hope, but not losing awareness of himself or becoming haughty, for he "does not despair if misfortune strikes, and does not become puffed up while he is experiencing good fortune" [see 70:19-23].

Thus, salat will be effective in producing an impact of forming an inner disposition that is free from the misplaced worries of facing life. This is not only because faith is always joined with hope, as the Sacred Book affirms, just as denying the Lord, or unbelief, is linked with despair [see 12:87], but also because a person truly grows in stability in orienting one's life to attain the pleasure of the Lord alone. One result of imbibing the meaning of salat is that "the angels will come down upon them [saying]: 'Do not fear or feel saddened, and rejoice in word about the Garden which you have been promised! We are your companions during worldly life and in the Hereafter'" [41:30].

Religiously, the experience of "being accompanied by angels" must be lived as a reality. Even though the Muslim philosophers tended to interpret this metaphorically, that experience nevertheless has concrete implications in daily life. It is clear that experience is a continuation or consequence of hoping in the Lord and His protection. Thus, even though such a person must suffer, he sees his suffering as a common human experience that can happen to anyone, while he himself, in his sufferings, keeps on believing and hoping in the Lord. This is an attitude that another person would not have [see 4:104].

From all that we have tried to explain above, we can conclude that salat, as well as other forms of worship such as, for example, fasting and the pilgrimage, are strongly connected with a strength of soul and resoluteness of heart in facing life, because there is hope in the Lord. At the same time, hope in the Lord is one aspect of faith that, among other

things, gives birth to a sense of security: faith (*al-iman*) gives birth to security (*al-amn*) [see 6:82]. Furthermore, that sense of security and of being under the protection of the Lord will equip someone to aspire to lead a moral life, that is, a life that is inspired by the highest social awareness. (That social awareness, for example, is symbolized by the greeting of peace at the conclusion of the salat to the persons on the right and left, by the *zakat fitra* at the end of the month of Ramadan, and by the white robes worn equally by all during the pilgrimage (*hajj*) and the devotional visitation of Mecca (*ʿumra*), as well as in fulfilling the obligation of paying the *zakat* (alms). As we have seen, worship that does not give birth to social awareness, clearly one of the most important manifestations of a moral life, would lose its true meaning, to the point that someone who performs any type of formal worship without social awareness is cursed by the Lord.

Because of its effects in producing resoluteness and peace of soul, the foundations of optimism in facing a life that is not always easy, worship, particularly salat, is a source of spiritual strength in facing difficulties, as is the case also with mental courage and endurance [see 2:153]. Creativity, inventive power, and resourcefulness in seeking to resolve the problems of life, for example, will grow even stronger in the individual who has found stability through sincere devotion (*taqwa*) [see 65:2]. Thus, worship as a manifestation of journeying the path of life toward the Lord, if it is performed with full consciousness and consistency, will result in a life of total well-being [see 72:16], because of the sense of security based on faith. In this way, worship is the institutionalization of faith.