

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Concept of Sacrifice in Islam

Author: Moulana Ebrahim Mokgabudi

Throughout the history of religion, it has been repeatedly witnessed that the followers of religion have reduced many acts of worship, which God's Messengers instituted through divine guidance for the beautification of mankind's inner beings, to a mere ritual.

Hence God sent Messenger upon Messenger to remind them and put into perspective the real essence of the acts of worship that had been instituted. In some instances, these acts of worship became so distorted that at a later stage they could not be recognised as acts of worship anymore. The "acts of worship" went on to assume a completely different meaning and form from what their original intent had been.

The offering of a sacrificial animal as an act of devotion to God alone is a perfect illustration of this phenomenon. We recall the incident mentioned in both the Bible and the Quran wherein the two sons of Adam were instructed to make an offering to God in order to establish their deep sincerity and devotion to Him. The Quran also relates to us the incident of the sons of Israel wherein they were commanded to slaughter a cow after an innocent man from amongst them had been killed.

Thus, the act of offering a sacrificial animal as an act of worship or devotion to God has been a well-known custom of various religions and cultures since the earliest record of human history. Unfortunately over the passage of time, this act of devotion has been metamorphosed from its original objective. Religion teaches that no life can ever be taken except with the permission of God – and the Messengers of God throughout the ages have demonstrated to us how to seek this permission in terms of sacrificing an animal.

Due to the devil always attempting to demand a share of the devotion of a person who is performing an act of worship, people have fallen into the trap of sacrificing animals for other than for the pleasure of God. Hence you will find people making sacrifices for ancestors, for exchange of assistance from the devils, for idols and so forth.

Islam has no objections to the sacrificing of animals, however the most important and fundamental difference is that we do not slaughter an animal other than for the sake of God. In numerous verses of the Quran as well as the Bible, we learn of incidents where God would test His servants' love and sincerity towards Him by ordering them to make an offering of an animal or something similar, sincerely for His sake.

When God wanted to establish Prophet Ebrahim's (Abraham) love and devotion towards Him, He ordered him to offer his only son, Ismail as sacrifice to Him. Ebrahim successfully proved himself to be a true devotee and lover of God by submitting to the will of God. In the end the sacrifice of his son was substituted with an animal. This is where the concept of sacrifice, which Muslims commemorate throughout the world in the 11th Islamic month of Dhil-Hijja, stems from.

Highlighting the real essence of the sacred act of sacrifice, the Quran says:

"It is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah, but it is piety from you that reaches Him." (22:37)

In Matthew 22:36, the Bible affirms a similar concept in highlighting an incident where a man came to Jesus and asked him: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus responded by saying: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment".

Again, we understand from the above that any act of devotion or worship that is carried out has to be done purely for the sake of demonstrating love to the Almighty and not as mere ritual that is bereft of deeper spirituality. The act of sacrificing an animal is in essence as deeply spiritual as it is outwardly ritualistic.

In Islam, more than the act of worship itself, emphasis is always made of the deeper essence of the act. Once a person truly understands that luck, good omen or any form of well-being lies in the hands of the Almighty, it becomes easy to devote everything one does to Him. The Prophet Ebrahim proved to possess this quality in the eyes of God and his name became lofty and glorified among all the monotheistic religions to date. The opposite of this we learn from the two sons of Adam from the fact that the one who did not give his sacrifice sincerely with a pure heart for the pleasure of God became so wretched that he even murdered his own brother.