

## Four Characteristics Distinguishing Genuine Religiosity from Sacred Practices

### Does Observance of Sacred Practices Necessarily Equate to True Religiosity?

Why do we worship? What is the ultimate purpose of remembrance of God (*dhikr*), supplication, glorification (*tasbih*), and prayer? Does donning clerical attire, becoming a *mujtahid* or a *marja'* (source of emulation), commitment to *salat al-layl* (night prayer), the Hajj, or organizing religious gatherings inevitably guarantee salvation and benefit us under all circumstances? Does adherence to sacred practices and engaging in various acts of worship necessarily refine us into better human beings?

What, fundamentally, is the criterion for being “better”? By which criteria can we assert one individual’s superiority over another? Is a person who has performed the Hajj multiple times necessarily superior? Does performing *salat al-layl* render one inherently better than someone who does not? Is a religious scholar necessarily superior to an ordinary individual? Does a person with strict hijab surpass those with less modest attire? Ultimately, what is the scale? Which criterion prevails? How do we assess the quality and effectiveness of our sacred deeds and acts of worship?

Frequently, we assess others’ religiosity according to outward criteria and sacred practices of religion. When mentioning the faithful and the religious, the mental image often evoked is that of a woman wearing the hijab or a man with prayer beads and beard, steadfast in attending sessions of *dhikr* and supplication, regularly

visiting mosques and holy shrines. This type of valuation, however, is not limited to how we perceive others; it also governs our own self-assessment. Consequently, when we achieve the opportunity for *salat al-layl*, the Hajj, or participation in various religious rituals, we categorize ourselves among the faithful and feel assured of our religiosity.

Yet, to what extent is such an understanding of religiosity valid? Does mere adherence to outward forms and preoccupation with sacred practices necessarily indicate true faith and possession of a sound heart? The following section addresses these inquiries.

### **Religiosity Has Rules**

As previously mentioned, the structure of the system of creation is fundamentally mathematical and rule-based across all dimensions. In mathematical structures, each action yields a specific inherent effect and definitive outcome. For instance, the inherent effect of water is to *wet*; it is impossible for water to fall somewhere without moistening that place. Similarly, the inherent effect of light is to illuminate, and no place can be lit without light shining upon it.

Moreover, mathematical structures possess precise criteria for evaluating the outcome of any action. Judgments based on conjecture, imaginary, or fabricated criteria cannot reliably declare an action effective. For example, in empirical sciences, a physician does not rely solely on a patient's verbal claims or speculations to determine a drug's efficacy but uses empirical findings to verify whether the medication has effected the necessary transformations in the patient's body. This

principle applies universally: The utility of any action must be assessed based on its output.

Someone who has spent considerable time behind the wheel and undergone instruction should eventually be able to drive independently. Failure to achieve this indicates that the training was ineffective and the intended output unattained. Similarly, a learner of the English language must eventually competently translate texts. Without this ability, the training did not yield the desired acquisition of knowledge. Merely learning the rules of driving or English grammar does not entitle one to be called a driver or translator. These capabilities, known as acquisition of names in the field of self-knowledge, must manifest themselves in us and be observable in action.

The same logic applies to religiosity. The structure of religion is entirely mathematical and purposeful and addresses the *heart* or the human dimension of our existence. When religious rulings pass from the intellect to the heart, they inevitably produce inherent effects on the soul and spirit. These effects manifest in interpersonal relations, thought patterns, prioritizations, and all facets of life. Consequently, mere observance of sacred practices and outward manifestations does not qualify one as truly religious. Religiosity, like medicine, driving, or translation, requires tangible outputs. But what ought these outputs to be? Who truly qualifies as religious and faithful?

**Recognize the Faithful by These Attributes**

Just as a healthy birth is the criterion for a fetus's arrival into this world, so too is the acquisition of a sound heart the criterion for transitioning from this world to the hereafter. Therefore, no one can claim "Because I am a seminarian, perform *salat al-layl*, observe strict *hijab*, have performed the Hajj, strived in the way of God, or serve others, I am necessarily a good and faithful person." A good and faithful individual can be defined using mathematical and precise parameters. One cannot call oneself or others a true believer based solely on superficial or illusory criteria.

A true believer is one whose heart is sound. A sound heart is the direct result of regulating the love hierarchy and organizing the beloveds. A sound heart is one that has embraced the truth of "There is no deity but Allah" and places Allah at the top of all beloveds. The moment this hierarchy is inverted and something else displaces the love of God in the heart—even if that "something" is a sacred matter—the individual loses their human dignity.

One might ask: Do those who observe outward religious practices not love God? The answer is: Loving God is one thing; placing God as the most beloved is another. All worshippers love God, but not all prioritize Him as the supreme beloved in their lives. The sign of this is that when tested, if compelled to choose between divine pleasure and worldly or animalistic perfections, they prefer the latter over gaining God's satisfaction.

Accordingly, the attributes of a truly religious and faithful person can be summarized into four distinctive characteristics:

- Being beneficent (*Rahman*): Exhibiting general beneficence toward all creations, whether humans of all races and beliefs, animals, plants, or even inanimate beings.
- Being merciful (*Rahim*): Manifesting particular mercy and kindness toward faithful people.
- Being constantly happy and joyful: Nothing can plunge them into sadness or depression.
- Inner peace and security: Retaining composure and balance in life's challenges, unshaken by fear or anxiety.

Just as the sun's rising inevitably illuminates, no one can genuinely accept God as their *Rabb* (Lord and Trainer) and possess faith without God's Attributes manifesting within. Therefore, how much we pray, fast, or engage in sacred practices such as attending *mosques*, religious gathering, saying *dhikr*, or going on pilgrimage is secondary. What truly matters is how much these actions contribute to our becoming and how effectively they are absorbed by our human dimension. If becoming and spiritual growth do not occur, then engagement with sacred practices not only loses value but can corrupt the heart as much as—or even more than—sin.

Islamic narrations state that some may pray for fifty years without even one unit (*rak'a*) being accepted <sup>1</sup> because the necessary inner transformation does not occur. Acts of worship and sacred practices resemble riding a state-of-the-art

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<sup>1</sup>. Imam Sadiq (Peace be upon him) said: "By Allah, there will come a time when a man may live for fifty years and not have a single prayer accepted by Allah." (*Mizan al-Hikmah*, vol. 5, p. 387)

vehicle that can bring us swiftly to our destination, provided we accompany this speed with careful self-observation and protection of the soul.

In summary, religiosity can be encapsulated as “the movement from “general beneficence to particular mercy.” The greater the manifestation of *beneficence and mercy* in us, the closer we become to God and the more genuinely religious we are. Hence, those who are aggressive and irritable, who explode over minor incidents, narcissistic and arrogant individuals who quickly become offended and cause commotion, jealous and spiteful people unable to face others’ blessings with a pure and resentment-free heart, and those who are depressed and anxious, losing balance easily and despairing, undoubtedly lack faith—even if outwardly they strictly engage in all sacred practices, fast daily, and worship all night.

In this lesson, we addressed one of the gravest and most perilous afflictions of a sound heart: preoccupation with sacred practices. We emphasized that if this preoccupation is not accompanied by care for the heart and soul, it is as harmful as sin and can corrupt the heart. We also underscored that religiosity does not correlate with the quantity of worship. A true believer is one who is, like God, beneficent and merciful, and whose heart has attained security and inner peace through connection with God.

We hope that through acquiring this awareness, we develop a more precise and critical perspective regarding our state of religiosity.