

# Religious Festivals Rites and Ceremonies

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This article seeks to explain briefly the nature, position, and function of festivals, rites and ceremonies in religion. The terms “rites and ceremonies” will be used interchangeably to mean the religious ceremonies rather than non-religious ones because the ensuing discussion concentrates on the meaning of ceremonies in a religious sense.

## **Festivals**

Religious festivals embody special historical and spiritual events, which are crucial to the history and identity of the religion concerned. They are commemorated at specific times during the year and the celebrations consist of the ceremonies specific to the festival in point. The celebration of the festival reasserts the identity and unity of the community and provides an occasion to re-examine and revive the religious attitude of the individuals and the community in general within the context of the specific theme of the festival.

## **Necessity of the religious rites and ceremonies**

No religion, primitive or higher, can survive in the mind only. It necessarily needs a set of rites and ceremonies to manifest itself on time-space level and continue to maintain its identity in history. Religious festivals, rites and ceremonies, in turn relate to the world-view i.e. central principals, ideals and values of the religion concerned. They, therefore, represent and reflect these principals and values of religion.

Since rites and ceremonies play the function of formalizing and representing the concepts and values of religion, they can safely be considered as the body or form of the religion. Just as the soul necessarily requires a body or a physical form to manifest itself, similarly the principles of religion as its spirit or essence, necessarily requires a body in the form of rites and ceremonies. Thus the position of rites and ceremonies as the form of religion stands clear in that they cannot be dispensed with in any holistic understanding or practice of religion. In fact religion becomes practicable through the existence of rites and ceremonies.

Religion can also be understood as a system of concepts combined with actions. One form of action is performed through the practice of rites and ceremonies and the other form is the human conduct in the society based on the religious ethical principles. The practice of rites and ceremonies and ethical behavior together enable the believer to realize the ideals of his religion.

## **Ceremonies reflect the religious world-view**

The sum total of our religious ceremonies represent the overall world-view of religion. The repeated performances of these ceremonies reconstruct the world-view everyday. The process of reconstructing is not mechanical but progressive and dynamic because each performance is related to a gradual change and transformation of the soul. It is important that the participant should be aware of the organic link that exists between various individual ceremonies.

## **Ceremonies as the medium of communication between man and his creator.**

A religious ceremony can also be understood as an intense communication with the creator. The content of this communication can be either asking for forgiveness (tubah), supplicating for Divine grace (rahmat) or offering thanks (shukr) for the boundless bounties that He has bestowed upon us. These themes are central to religion and specifically and thorough them the believer acquires the spiritual growth and build a meaningful relationship with the Creator. The religious ceremonies reflect and demonstrate these themes.

## **Religious rites and ceremonies are symbolic in nature.**

The religious ceremonies are strictly symbolic due to their formal and representative nature. They are, in other words, a means to an end rather than being an end in themselves. Keeping this characteristic nature of religious ceremonies in view, the participant should be conscious of the symbolized i.e. meaning contained in the ceremony rather than the symbol or form only.

The meaning and interpretation of each ceremony may vary from participant to participant. There is a possibility that the individual may experience an unfolding of different levels of meaning of the same ceremony when it is practiced regularly with faith and awareness. However complete vacuum of meaning may render the ceremony mechanical and ultimately insignificant.

### **Religious rites and ceremonies involve the whole person**

The religious ceremony is apparently a physical act but, in reality, it also involves the mind and the soul of a person because of the intellectual and spritual implications therein. In other words, the activity of performing a religious ceremony involves all the fundamental dimensions of the human personality. If the performance of a ceremony takes place without the involvement of one or more levels mentioned above, then this ceremony cannot leave its desired effect on the performer. Let us elaborate this point further in that the lack of bodily involvement means ignoring specific form of action related to the body exclusively, while the lack of mental or intellectual involvement means ignoring the meaning or the content of the ceremony. Finally the lack of spiritual involvement means ignoring or being empty of faith while participating in the ceremony.

### **Religious ceremonies are consecrated**

Although the specific action in any given ceremony is physical in its apparent form like any other physical action, however, it becomes consecrated and sanctified because of the divine sanction. When a believer (mu'min) performs a ceremony with faith, understanding and clear awareness of its sacred nature, then the ceremony whether simple or complex, leaves its desired impact on his entire personality.

### **The religious ceremonies are tranform in nature**

This means that the performance of ceremony brings about a change in the consciousness of the performer according to its intended meaning. This change, in turn, dissociates the performer from processes of the material thought which occupy and over burden his mind and thus he, in effect experiences a higher level of existence through cleared consciousness. Otherwise continuous occupation of human consciousness by the thoughts of the material world is agonizing for the human soul. Thus releasing the human mind from these material thoughts is extremely healthy and refreshing for the human soul. Religious ceremonies are aimed at removing these thoughts thereby invigorating and refreshing the human soul.

### **Religious ceremonies bring transcendental and physical together**

As it is discussed above, religious rites and ceremonies are essentially directed at the meanings they symbolize and the meaning belongs to the transcendental or the spritual aspect of reality. In this sense the religious ceremonies bring the physical and transcendental aspects of reality face to face and direct the human consciousness to experience the later, which is by nature non-temporal. The effective transition from physical to spritual takes place when the participation in the ceremony is active and total. The effective performance of the religious ceremony can also be described as deepening or expanding of the human consciousness in accordance with the meaning of the ceremony.

### **Preparation**

The effective performance of the ceremony is preceded by pre-ceremony preparation. Through preparation and developing a right attitude of mind will enable the individual to realize the full impact of the meaning of the ceremony. For example reciting the name of Allah takes a very little time. However, if the individual is continuously conscious of Allah's presence and is in a state of humility then the recitation of Allah's name can have a profound impact on the individual's soul.

### **Ceremonies and congregation (ja'amat)**

Performing ceremonies in congregation (ja'amaat) is encouraged and emphasized in Islam because the congregational performance is considered to be more effective than that of the individual. Through congregational performance of the ceremonies, the participants support each other spritually. The stronger soul among the Jamat help weaker ones. In general, the environment becomes enabling and conducive to meditation and concentration. Religious ceremonies, performed together with others in the Jamat, also reflect and symbolize the principle of spritual unity among the participants, unity among all the human should and unity with Allah.

### **The consequences of religious ceremonies**

By observing the rites and ceremonies, the believer feels in the presence of the Divine Light. The feeling of the presence of the divine is, in turn, purifying and cleansing because the Divine is associated with purity and cleanliness. The religious ceremonies create a feeling of dependence on the Divine in the mind of the participant.

This dependence in turn give rise to intense humility because the participant has no reason to be vain and arrogant because he is dependent on his Creator for everything including his very existence. The experience of humility also leads to subduing and discipline animal instincts in a human being. The participant is expected to be conscious of the overall aim of the ceremonies and not only focus his attention on the minor details of the outward form.

### **Social implications of religious ceremonies**

The intense involvement of the individual in the performance of the religious ceremonies also contributes towards the development of a positive moral behavior in society in general. The spiritual inspiration experienced while performing the ceremonies helps the individual to behave according to the moral principles recommended by the Faith. In this manner, the rites and ceremonies have a positive social dimension as well.

### **Religious ceremonies are time marked**

Although a set of rites and ceremonies are necessary for religion as it has been discussed above but forms of individual rites and ceremonies can change with time and place. The entire history of religion clearly indicates that rites and ceremonies have been changing with time because the forms of rites and ceremonies are time-bound. However, the meaning for the essential message they symbolize is eternal. Taking forms to be eternal would contradict the dynamic character of Islam. It would also mean weakening the essence of the religion. Thus the forms of rites and ceremonies, by nature are considered to be time-space related and therefore they can be adjusted to the changed circumstances. In this way the practice of the faith remains functional, effective and dynamic.

### **Religious rites and ceremonies and culture**

The rites and ceremonies can only be practiced in a cultural milieu. Individuals living and growing up in a particular culture can relate to the images of that culture effortlessly and therefore, it is any natural that the religious ceremonies will borrow certain forms from the surrounding culture. Culture itself is dynamic phenomenon and therefore culture-bound forms of the religious ceremonies may also require change.

### **Conclusion**

The rites and ceremonies are an integral part of religion and religious life of a believer. They are a vehicle or a tool to transcend time-space related life and to experience the spiritual life. Meaningful performance of the ceremonies involve the individual in an intense communication with the creator and to help stabiles moral life of the believer as well. The forms of rites and ceremonies although consecrated would be understood in a time-space context whereas the meaning they symbolize is eternal.