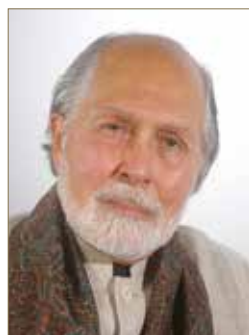


Metaphysical Significance of Makkah

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Makkah is the earthly centre of the Islamic universe from a spiritual and religious point of view, not only because that is where the Blessed Prophet ﷺ of Islam was born and lived most of his life, where the first revelation descended, the place from which the Prophet began his nocturnal journey and ascent (*al-isrā' and al-mi'rāj*) and where the first Islamic community was created, but above all because of the fact that the "House of God", the Kaaba, is situated at its heart. According to traditional Islamic belief, the Kaaba was built by the prophet Abraham, but even that structure was a reconstruction of the original Kaaba built by Adam as the primordial sacred edifice dedicated to the One God. The rites of the Islamic pilgrimage or *hajj* are Abrahamic in origin and reconstituted by the Prophet of Islam by God's orders and symbolise the return of Islam to primordial monotheism. The dimensions of the cube of the Kaaba are based on harmonics and symbolise the harmony of God's creation.

The *Ihrām* worn by pilgrims represents not only man's poverty before God, but also a return to man's primordial state. The colour white of the garment of both men and women possesses the same symbolism, representing the purity of the state of *fiṭrah* in which man was created, his primordiality. The circumambulation around the Kaaba is counter clockwise, reversing the effect of the fall, returning the pilgrim to the primordial state and undoing the consequence of the downward march of time. Millions of pilgrims come to Makkah from all over the world, with different colours, facial features and languages, but they perform the same rituals around the same sacred centre. They thus experience directly the unity of the *ummah* above all differences and also *Tawhīd*, which means both unity and integration, the reality that stands at the heart of the Islamic message.

Why do devout Muslims make the *Hajj*? The most immediate response is that it is made obligatory (*farḍ*) by God, obviously. But there is also in the heart of the pilgrims the love for God and *His* Prophet. They come to visit God's House, to breathe the air that *His* Prophet breathed, to walk on the ground that he walked, to behold the site of hills that he beheld. Alas, the house of the Prophet, part of which was still extant when I visited the Makkah during an early pilgrimage, is no longer there. Pilgrims also come to experience physically God's House, the Kaaba, to touch and kiss the *Kiswah* that covers it and to kiss the blackstone that symbolises the eternal covenant (*al-mīthāq*) that Adam and his progeny made with God when in pre-eternity according to the Quran, He asked all of the children of Adam, "Am I not your Lord (*alastu bi-rabbikum*)" and they, which includes you and I, answered, "Yea (*Balā*)."
Touching and kissing the black stone should remind every pilgrim who performs the ritual of our eternal covenant with God and the consequences of that *balā* for how we should live our lives on Earth.

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As far as Shi'ism is concerned, and here I have Twelve-Imam Shi'ism in mind, the rites of the *Hajj* are the same for them as they are for Sunnis except for some minor details. The Shi'ites also wear *Ihrām* under similar conditions, such as abstention from sexuality and all illicit acts while in *Ihrām*, and many, like their Sunni brothers, preserve the two pieces of white cloth of their *Ihrām* worn during their first pilgrimage for their shroud. If, during recent years, some Shi'ites have from time to time carried out one kind or another activity of a political nature, such events must not be seen as part of the Shi'ite rites of pilgrimage. During Islamic history, such types of activity were also carried out from time to time by some Sunni groups, not to speak of the Khawārij.

As for the Sufis, both Sunni and Shi'ite, they have made the pilgrimage over the centuries in the same manner as other Muslims and many of the

greatest Sufi masters made certain that they performed this obligatory rite from Rūzbihān Baqlī and Jalāl Al Din Rūmī, who were Persian, to Ibn ‘Arabī and Abu’l-Hasan Al Shādhili, who were Arabs. Iman Shāhili in fact died in the desert of southern Egypt in Humaythara, where he is buried, on his way to Makkah to make again the pilgrimage to the Kaaba. The Sufis and gnostics (*‘urafā*) have written much about the symbolism of various rites of the *hajj* such as *rajm* of Shaytān and sacrifice of animals, and some, like Qāḍī Sa‘īd Qummī, have even written the profoundest words on the metaphysical significance of the geometry, orientation and symbolism of the Kaaba itself.

Moreover, many Sufis have written about the rites of the *Hajj* and pilgrimage to the Kaaba as external symbols of the journey to the heart, that is the spiritual centre of our being. A *ḥadīth* of the Prophet states, “The heart of the faithful is the Throne of Compassionate” (*qalb al-mu’min ‘arsh al-Raḥmān*). The heart is the inner Kaaba or House of God. Rūmī sings in a famous Persian poem:

**“O people who have gone on Hajj where are you, where are you?
The Beloved is right here, come forth, come forth.”**

Many Sufis have written about the rites of the Hajj and pilgrimage to the Kaaba as external symbols of the journey to the heart, that is the spiritual centre of our being

Lest one forget, it should be recalled that this inner *Hajj* is not meant to replace the *Shari’ite* obligation of the physical *Hajj*. Authentic Sufism does not put aside the *Shari’ah* but insists upon following it, for no *Tariqah* or Sufi path has any authenticity or spiritual efficacy unless based on the Divine Law. The Quran states that God is both the Outward (*al-Zāhir*) and the Inward (*al-Bāṭin*) and in Islamic spirituality one cannot reach the *bāṭin* without the *zāhir*. Participation in the outward sacred form is the necessary condition for access to the inward essence. The sacred rite of the *Hajj* is no exception. **E**

A painting of the Holy Sanctuary, 19th Century, North India or possibly Makkah (ink, gold and opaque watercolour on paper)



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