

The Day of ‘Arafah, and Eid al Adha: Virtual Doors to the Real

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Bismillah er Rahman er Rahim [In the Name of Allah, The One Who Acts with Mercy, The Source of Mercy]. All praise belongs to Allah. Allah owns everything. All power belongs to Allah and not to us. May Allah’s peace and blessings be on Prophet Muhammad and his family and on all the other prophets and their families.

The next holidays I have been asked to discuss are the day of ‘Arafah (or Eve of *Adha*) and *Eid al-Adha* (often translated as the Feast of Sacrifice). The Day of ‘Arafah is the second day of the Hajj pilgrimageⁱ. It comes the day before *Eid al-Adha*, which coincides with the third day of Hajj.

This *Eid* is a holiday instituted as a *virtual* Hajj (more on that presently). In turn, the Hajj itself is a *virtual* reenactment of Abraham’s *virtual* sacrifice of his sonⁱⁱ. Let me try to explain what is in my heart about this.

Rituals in Islam and other religions are often reenactments of past events in the lives of the prophets. The rituals as reenactments help us to imagine we are traveling in the path of the prophets, in sympathy and *rabita* with them, allowing some of their perspective to come into us. The Hajj pilgrimage is based on a reenactment of at least three events in the story of Prophet Abraham (pbuh). To sum them up, first: Abraham leaves Hagar and the infant Ishmael in the remote, barren desert. After their water runs out, Hagar in desperation runs seven times between two hills, an act that is now done by pilgrims as an essential ritual of the Hajj. Second, Abraham returns some years later and, with Ishmael, builds the Ka’aba there as a house for worshipping Allah. Third, Abraham gets a dream that **seems to suggest** he should sacrifice his beloved son. (Though the Bible says it was Isaac, in Muslim tradition, people say it was Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son. The Qur’an does not specify who it was).

Abraham is described in the Qur’an as “softhearted and gentle” (Qur’an, 9:114), so this third event was an indescribable test for him. Believing this is what Allah was commanding him to do, he got himself ready to surrender by actually physically sacrificing his son. He couldn’t do it without his son’s consent, so he consulted him. The youth replied, “go ahead and do what you are commanded” (see Qur’an 37:102). Abraham was about to cut his son’s throat, when Allah interrupted him with the words *ya Ibrahim, qad saddaqta al-ru’ya* (Qur’an 37:103-104). “O Abraham, you have fulfilled the truth of the dream.” **Or**, it can equally be taken to mean: “O Abraham, [Stop!] you have taken the dream as literally true [when it was symbolic].”ⁱⁱⁱ In any case, a ram appeared, to provide a **virtual sacrifice**, to take the place of his son. This substitute sacrifice forms a deep ritual basis in all the religions that trace back to Abraham (peace be upon him).^{iv} Rituals can be understood as virtual doors to the real (*haqq*).

Sufism’s concern is *haqq*, and involves dismantling our systems of thought that are in denial of truth or are immaturely obedient to it. Humans desire to get to truth, while carrying quasi-true baggage. This may include a lot of attachment to what we see as the literal meaning of things. In my understanding of Abraham’s story, the sacrifice of the ram showed that even Allah’s communication in a dream has an outward form (the words or images) and an inner meaning that needs to be interpreted. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is often described as the supreme example of surrender to the command of God. But it was still in *virtual reality*, since killing the youth wasn’t God’s intention or command to begin with. The ram is a symbolic substitute for the ego and the attachments we have to give up in order to be in a closer relationship

with Allah. Killing an animal doesn't give anything to Allah, feed Him or increase His power. The meat goes to relatives, neighbors, friends and the poor. The Qur'an confirms this in the verse that says "Their flesh and their blood does not reach Allah but the *taqwa* [devotion] from you reaches Him." (22:37)

Eid al-Adha was first celebrated in the Muslim community of Medina in the second year of Hijra, when the community of immigrants from Mecca were struggling with being displaced^v. By coinciding with the third day of Hajj (when the animals are sacrificed by the pilgrims), the holiday was a **virtual hajj**, a way of connecting to the spirit of Mecca and hajj **without being able to physically go there**.

The pivotal Sufi figure Husayn Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj was charged with (and executed for) blasphemy by the state authorities. Of course the famous thing that got him in trouble was saying *ana al-Haqq*, ("I am the Truth", i.e., there is no truth but the "I" of Allah; my "I" has been annihilated). But another count against him was that he had made a model of the Ka'ba in his house in Baghdad. Apparently, he had told some people that rather than making the expensive and dangerous trip to Mecca, if they were poor or sick, they could perform their hajj at a virtual Ka'aba in their own home and it would be accepted by Allah. He was killed for this.^{vi}

Religion is all virtual doors to the REAL. The doors are virtual, the real is Haqq; the danger of religion is that we confuse them. When we don't recognize that Allah speaks in many different creations, words and signs that have different levels and layers, we make religion to be what we think or assume it is, or what we want it to be. And then it is incomplete. People with great intentions of being good and obedient can take the sacrifice mentality to places that Allah never told people to go. But we are talking (especially on the day of 'Arafah) about Allah having *completed* the religion and I think there is a Sufi meaning of this.

We need to really think about these things in a day when so many of the world's conflicts and hatreds stem from interpretations of the same stories. Prophet Jesus, pbuh, warned about this, reminding his followers about a verse that also appears in the older biblical text of Hosea: "I desire Mercy, not sacrifice".^{vii} What does it mean to be obedient to Allah without being able to understand His language of signs, symbols, hints?

ⁱ The Day of 'Arafah is a time tied to a place—the plain of 'Arafah outside of Mecca. Some say it is called 'Arafah because it is where Adam and Eve met each other again after leaving Paradise (i.e., got to meet, know, reconcile with each other once again). In Arabic, 'Arafah has the same root as 'arif and ma'rifa. On the Day of 'Arafah, pilgrims must make the several-mile walk to 'Arafah by noon, then stand in quiet prayer and contemplation till sunset. The scene of thousands of people standing before Allah (*wuquf*) has been likened to the Day of Judgment. Arafah is also famous as the place where the Islamic message was symbolically completed. The Qur'anic verse, "Today I have perfected your *din* [way of life; religion; path of righteousness to Allah path] for you and have completed my favor to you and have chosen Islam [surrender; submission] for you as a *din* [way of life]. " (Qur'an, 5:3) was revealed here, and the Prophet's (s) farewell sermon was at this place. It was said in a hadith that fasting on the day of 'Arafah wipes out sins of the past year and sins of the coming year.

ⁱⁱ According to the American Heritage Dictionary, *virtual* means "Existing or resulting in essence or effect though not in actual fact, form or name".

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibn 'Arabi interpreted the verse this way. See p. 30 of his *Fusus Al-Hikam* at the following site: <http://www.sufi.ir/books/download/english/ibn-arabi-en/fusus-al-hikam-en.pdf>

³ Animal sacrifice became the core of the Temple religion of ancient Judaism. The altar was in the inner sanctum of the temple, and a staff of priests were there full time to keep the sacrifices up on a continual basis. (Of course, the Temple itself didn't last, and, like the Muslims in Medina who couldn't visit Mecca, the Jews had to find a non-literal way to practice their *din*; this resulted in the development of Kabbalism, the parallel of Sufism within the Jewish community. So it was when people could not enact their literalist idea of religion that they were able to stretch their mind into the symbolic.)

^v Tanya Gulevitch, *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions*. Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2004, 365.

^{vi} This was part of the charge against him, even though the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tasim had commanded his troops to do the same thing, when they were stationed in a garrison distant from Mecca, so they wouldn't have to leave

their posts. See Louis Massignon, *Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr*, Abridged Edition, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982/1994), 263..

^{vii} See Matthew, 9:13, Matthew 12:7, and Hosea 6:6.

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