

‘Ibādah

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‘Ibādah (pl. *‘ibādāt*) refers to service, servitude, and, by extension, the very essence of religious worship in the Islamic tradition. The concept of *‘ibādah* lies at the very heart of the expression of the relationship between humanity and God in the Qur’ān and its subsequent elaborations in Islamic law and religious practice. The Qur’ān uses the verbal form *ya‘budūn* (to worship) to illustrate the creation of human beings as linked to the notion of a primacy placed on the worship of God: “I did not create the jinn and human beings but to worship me (*illā li-ya‘budūnī*)” (1:56). This concept of servitude is extended to all of creation in a number of Qur’ānic passages, including, “None is in the heavens and the earth but comes before the All-Merciful as a servant” (19:93). Thus, the demonstration of service or worship by the servants of God (*‘ibād Allāh*) is ultimately the prescribed goal of all existence. Although Qur’ānic discourses recognize that there are distinctions between women and men, these distinctions do not operate at the level of the essential nature of human beings, nor do they prescribe a gendered hierarchy in the Divine recognition and acceptance of the *‘ibādah* undertaken by women and men.

The performance of ritual acts of worship has been the subject of considerable Qur’ānic and legal discourse. Works of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) commonly treat acts of religious worship (*‘ibādāt*) in contrast to religious transactions involving individuals (*mu‘āmalāt*). The distinction between religious worship and transactions is a theoretical distinction, rather than one that corresponds to the multivalent expressions of religious worship in social practice. While both Shī‘ī and Sunnī works on law tend to treat *‘ibādāt*, preceded by issues of ritual purity (*ṭahārah*), in a manner based on the exposition of the ritual acts of worship among the “five pillars of Islam,” the relationship between *‘ibādāt* and *mu‘āmalāt* is not unambiguous. For instance, the connection between the performance of ritual acts of worship and *mu‘āmalāt* can be seen in the prescriptions related to a range of religious obligations that extend beyond the five pillars of Islam, such as the provisions relating to marriage, the hunting and slaughter of animals, the taking of oaths, the expiation of sin, circumambulation of the Ka‘bah during pilgrimage, and even the degree to which transactional matters are to include praise, glorification, and remembrance of God. In terms of the distinction between *‘ibādāt* and *mu‘āmalāt*, there are few, if any, distinctions related to *‘ibādāt* or ritual acts of worship and the obligation to perform them that are gender-specific.

'ibādah in Islamic discourses cannot be seen as solely resulting from the accumulated weight of textual stipulations, but rather should be viewed as the product of cumulative interpretive enterprises forged by Muslim communities over time. Thus, the range of acts of worship considered a reflection of *'ibādah* have been historically determined with reference to the Qur'ān, *sunnah*, and social practice. For example, the Qur'ān was revealed in seventh-century Arabia when its first audience of Arab reciters or "readers" held certain culturally embedded and socially inscribed ideas about women. Thus, specific injunctions were addressed to that culture. Some prevailing practices were prohibited explicitly: infanticide, sexual abuse of female slaves, denial of inheritance to women, and the denial of conjugal rights to women, and prohibiting women from remarriage. Other practices were modified in accordance with new patterns of worship and their corresponding forms of social regulation: polygamy, the oath of divorce, sexual violence and spousal abuse, and concubinage.

The Qur'ān rarely addresses the details of specific forms of religious worship and their relationship to gender. Instead, the text alludes to a number of dimensions of religious worship and social practices that are assumed to be known elements of religious life while remaining neutral concerning their practical manifestations, such as patriarchy, economic hierarchy, the division of labor between men and women within a particular family, and the role of women in the economic sphere.

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