

UNPUBLISHED WORKING PAPER

Aql in Service of Naql

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SET QUESTION

'Analytic approaches to liturgy risk over-intellectualising inherently mysterious practices.' Critically evaluate this claim.

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Awarded a merit.

In this paper, I discuss, from an Islamic perspective, the importance of an analytical approach to better understand liturgy as it allows the worshipper to meaningfully connect with God's wisdom. Simply put, if God has wisdom and knowledge that transcends anyone or thing, then it is evident that the aforementioned traits would be featured in His ordained liturgical acts to mankind rendering said acts open to analytical processing (as opposed to absolutely mysterious). Therefore, a better connection and understanding of God could be achieved if mankind ponders and approach said acts with humility (since God is not answerable to anyone, it would be out of His mercy to reveal to mankind reasons for His ordination) and analytical rigor while being conscious of the possibility that a complete understanding of the sought-after liturgical act may either (i) be possible or, (ii) not possible at the current time of humanity or, (iii) not possible at all.

I further discuss that the risk of analytical approaches may not be over-intellectualization at all. The real risk that manifests itself may be (i) altering the ordained liturgical acts to fit human reason or, (ii) refusing to engage in an ordained liturgical act merely because "they don't make sense" or, (iii) completely throwing out the baby with the bathwater by reducing the liturgical act in question as meaningless; this risks reducing God from possessing infinite and complete knowledge and wisdom, into an arbitrary tyrant who enjoys seeing His puppets dance.

To sum up, analytical approaches to understanding liturgical acts are not only encouraged but should be mandatory. This very pondering ultimately allows mankind to achieve an emphasized meaningful connection with God (through seeing His infinite and complete wisdom and knowledge expressed in His ordained liturgical acts to mankind), I further discuss this in section (I).

However, nothing is without risks. The prototypical risk of analytical approaches to liturgy is putting human reasoning facilities above divine ordination which may result in: (i) altercation to the ordained acts, (ii) refusal to engage in them because it does not appeal to intellect, (iii) labelling them as meaningless – I discuss this further in section (II). This rounds up to two points of contention where, firstly, analytical approaches to liturgical acts should be mandatory, and secondly, the real risks are (i), (ii) and (iii).

Section (I)

A. The Vitality of Adopting an Analytical Approach to Liturgical Acts – Quranic

Perspective

From an Islamic perspective, God, through his own self-disclosure emphasizes that:

- 1 Indeed, We have created everything, perfectly preordained (Quran, 54:49)
- 2 Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned? (Quran, 23:115)
- 3 ...He has created everything, ordaining it precisely. (Quran, 25:2)

This allows for two quintessential components for the point I intend to make. Firstly, God is not random in His will. In other words, famously put by Einstein, God does not play dice (Kofler and Zeilinger, 2010). There is no arbitrariness involved in His ordination or creation. Secondly, there is nothing that God wills which has no grand (or ultimate) purpose behind it. With those two components in place, as believers of a God that is not random nor purposeless in His creation and ordination, there must always be reason behind everything. Therefore, reflection and pondering over anything created or ordained by God is actually a mark of a true believer from an Islamic perspective.

This follows perfectly from God's words in the Quran as He describes true believers and says:

Who remember Allāh while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], "Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing]... (Quran, 3:191)

In the light of this, it is important, nay integral for the believer to practice reflective contemplation of God's ordinances and creations so as to develop a meaningful understanding of the divine through His works. However, this is

only a theory I submit. There is a famous concept in Islam: “Aql vs. Naql” which is one of the most foundational and contested tensions in Islamic intellectual history. “Aql” is reason or intellect, whereas “Naql” is transmitted revelation. There are many schools of thought that set up camp on either side. The divide is less about whether an analytic approach is allowed, and more about the type of thinking that is appropriate.

B. Analytical Approach to Liturgical Acts According to the Traditionalist View

Beginning with caveat that worship and liturgical acts are inextricably tied. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the question of whether one ought take an analytical approach to liturgical acts can be answered by the understanding he submits on what worship fundamentally is. His view on worship, as commonly held by all Muslims has two foundations: that none is worshipped except God, and that God is worshipped as per His command. Innovations beyond that is considered a misguidance and a stray from the revelationally fixed form and practices of liturgical acts. Therefore, there is no tolerance for rational reconstruction or analytical interrogation of their structure.

The ultimate reason for all this is anthropological. If a human uses the intellect which is limited and relatively inferior to God, employs this flawed tool to judge God’s ordained liturgical acts that featured his infinite knowledge, mercy, wisdom etc., then the underlying assumption is that human reason, logic and knowledge is the yardstick by which God must be judged. Ibn Taymiyya rejects an analytical approach that features manmade reason facilities like Aristotelean logic for instance (Rayan, 2011). He rejects using that as means for analytical approach to liturgy and offers an alternative.

The alternative is the “Fitrah”. The “Fitrah” is the innate human predisposition that drives the human to believe in and worship God alone. It operates in a similar fashion to an infant naturally and instinctively seeking its mother’s milk. On this view, analytical reasoning that does not go beyond the innate human predisposition is what is encouraged in pondering over liturgical acts and worship.

A stellar example of an analytical approach that is practiced out of the human’s innate predisposition is Ibrahim (Abraham) may peace be upon him. God transmits the story of Ibrahim (AS) submission to Him in six verses

(Quran, 6:74 – 6:79). Abraham reached belief in God in five analytical steps:

- 1 In the first verse, Ibrahim rejects idol worshipping
- 2 In the second and third verse, Ibrahim saw a star and called it God; the star then disappeared. Ibrahim saw that as an act of absence and rejected it as God.
- 3 In the fourth verse, Ibrahim saw the moon, called it God and rejected it for the same reason as the star.
- 4 In the fifth verse, Ibrahim saw the sun, called it God and rejected it for the same reason as the star.
- 5 In the sixth verse, Ibrahim declared his submission and belief in God (the God that created the stars, the moon and the sun) without any partner association.

The analytical process seems simple, non-complex and almost childlike. However, it features Ibrahim's condition for God to be permanent and transcendent. It features his condition for God to be beyond the cycles of nature, not bound by them. It features that God cannot be contingent. It features withholding conclusion until further observation as he watches, waits and then judges. It features progression from smallest to greatest, yet all fail the same test. It features the Anselmian thesis of God as "a being than which no greater can be conceived, and which exists" (Oppy, Rasmussen and Schmid, 2025). It also features negative theology, Ibrahim reaches God by identifying what God is not (Taliaferro, 2025). These are all currently existing philosophical positions that complement innate human predisposition.

Ibn Taymiyya's view allows for analytical approaches to liturgy and worship as long as it does not surpass the uncorrupted "Fitrah" as seen with Ibrahim.

Section (II)

A. Real Risks of "Over-intellectualizing" Liturgical Acts

At its core, every liturgical ordinance is simply an invitation to obey God. Take for instance, an everyday interaction between a patient and a doctor whereby the doctor diagnoses the patient with ailment X and medical treatment Y. A pharmacist may provide the patient with the prescribed

medicine Y. Following that, the patient would follow the guidelines of the doctor, no questions asked. The reason why it plays out that way is simply because the patient understands that the whole act, beginning from diagnosis until prescription has featured medical knowledge and experience from the doctor's and pharmacist's behalf. The patient accepts and submits to this expertise because the doctor "knows best". If the patient is abnormally mistrustful of the enterprise and believes that medicine is somehow conspiring against patients, prompting said patient to abandon their prescribed medications; then, the patient is the one who stands to lose.

There could be a suggestion to explain to the patient precisely the mechanics of ailment X and how medicine Y fixes it, but it would not only be unfeasible for the doctor to do so, but also it would require the doctor to be forbearing and patient. Still, after all, the patient's intellectual facilities may not be sufficient to fully grasp the explanation since medicine is a field for selective individuals after all.

Same example could be applied to liturgical acts. God gives humankind an invitation to obey through liturgical ordinance (equivalent to the "medicine"). Those liturgical acts are ultimately beneficial for the soul and eschatological well-being of mankind. There is absolutely a reason behind why they are designed in this particular way, however, just like medicine may sometimes be too complex to be grasped by just any person, same is true with God's wisdom in designing things the way He does.

The best course of action for a mistrustful patient (or an overly curious one for that matter) is to understand without (i) changing the prescription, (ii) refusing to take the medicine, (iii) calling the medical enterprise completely useless.

In this essay I have argued that analytical approaches to liturgical acts should not be avoided but encouraged. I explore the question from an Islamic perspective and show that a higher magnitude of belief and sincerity can be achieved if the matter is approached with humility. A God of infinite wisdom and purpose necessarily expresses those qualities through His ordained acts, making reflection an act of faith. Drawing on Quranic evidence, Ibn Taymiyya's concept of the Fitrah, and the example of Ibrahim, I demonstrated that reason, when grounded in innate human predisposition, deepens one's connection with God. The true dangers lie not in pondering, but in altering,

rejecting, tailoring or dismissing divine ordinance altogether.

NOTES

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