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The Instrumentalism of Rosary in Contemporary Textual Interpretations of Muslims

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Abstract

This paper made an effort to examine the rosary as a spiritual instrument and one of the emblems and identifiers of Muslims world over. Not only that, the controversies expressed over its use and significance in Islam attracted a research attention. Therefore, the exposition was a deliberate attempt to verify the source and the incursion of this identifier into the world of Islam. Besides, the significance of the identifier in terms of uses were subjected to juristic and holistic criticisms with the aim of differentiating the puritanical uses of the rosary from its abusive instrumentalization. The paper also did a critical assessment of texts of ahādīth which scholars of Islam interpreted differently to argue on the legality or otherwise of the use of the rosary in Islam. From the findings of the study, the origin of the rosary was discovered to have predated the advent of Islam while its significance was established to have gone beyond the four walls of the mosque. As for the controversies generated among scholars concerning the position of Islam on its use, different interpretations of texts and association with diverse Muslim groups were found responsible. To some, the use of the rosary was considered an innovation while some others viewed it as Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W.). To some other people, its use was seen as compulsory and as an integral part of Ṣalāt and supplication. In the concluding part of the study, it was argued that as much as the rosary is put to puritanical uses, the controversies surrounding its use are frivolous, needless and capable of creating discord among Muslims from different groups and diverse backgrounds.

Introduction

In this paper, the rosary was studied as a spiritual instrument and a major identifier of Muslims around the world. The expository study therefore examined the meaning and evolution of rosary in Islam, its types and significance, and the controversies which trail its use by Muslims.

The Meaning and Evolution of Rosary in Islam

The proper name for the rosary in Arabic is *Subḥāh*. It is derived from the trilateral verb *sabaha* which means to give praise.¹ The praise referred to here is to declare God free from every imperfection or impurity from anything derogatory of His Glory. The word *Subḥāh* was first used for the performance of supererogatory prayer and then, in post-classical literature applied to the rosary for the purpose of praises to God.²

There are many controversial views on the evolution and origin of rosary as known in Islam. Citing the submission of Goldziher, the rosary was not generally known until after the Third Century of the *Hijrah*. To support this assertion, Goldziher states the fact that

When the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Hadi (169-170 A.H.) forbade his mother Chejzuran who tried to exercise her influence in political affairs, to take part in the affairs of state, he said: 'it is not a woman's business to meddle with the affairs of state, you should occupy your time with prayer and the *Subḥāh*.' From this, it seems certain that in that century, the use of the *subḥāh* as an instrument of devotion was common only among the inferior classes and had no place among the learned. When a rosary was found in the possession of a certain pious saints, Abu- l-Qasim al- Junayd who died in 297 A.H., they attacked him for using it, although he belonged to the best society. 'I cannot give up' said he 'a thing that serves to bring me nearer to God.'³

From the above quotation, it was evident that the use of the rosary as traced to the Third Century A.H. was popular among both lower and higher classes. Apart from that, it also becomes evident that rosary emerged as an object of worship in the aspect of praises, glorifications and magnifications to secure the pleasure of Allah, in private religious life.⁴

Despite the controversies that trail the status of rosary in Islam, as will be examined later, it introduced itself later from private religious life to the very heart of the mosque. A.J. Wensinck argues that the rosary has been in use as early as the year 800 A.D. This view seems to agree with Goldziher that its use came from India to Western Asia. These two orientalists are also unanimous quoting the tradition which mentions the earlier use of stones, date-kernels etc. as objects of counting the eulogies of the Muslim prayer ritual.⁵ According to P. Edgar, the use of rosary came from India but that it was through Christian channels the Islam adopted it. This contact came about when Islam crossed the borders of Arabia to the world of Hellenic-Christian culture with its dogmatic and scholastic ideas. Then and there, it met the use of rosary and adopted it with many other Christian practices.⁶

The above painted background implies the incursion of the rosary into Islam from the oriental church. As to its incursion into Christianity, it found its way to the West during the crusades and from there to the Roman Catholic Church. Cornelius H. Patton further remarks that from India, the spread of rosary could be traced to the Buddhists of Ceylon, Burma and Siam known as the Hinayana or the Southern School and to the Tibet wherein Lamaism, the faith of Gautama reached its lowest level, and whence the rosary along with other customs spread to Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan.⁷ Accepting or rejecting the assertion that the use of rosary was borrowed, it is established beyond doubt that it soon took a strong hold on the common people, from Morocco to China.⁸

Types of Rosary

There are various types of rosary which are informed by places where they are found or what they are used for. As this paper will not provide an avenue to examine all, the most common ones will be briefly discussed. According to the remarkable collection of rosaries made by Dr. Conelius H. Patton of the American Board, Boston and which were deposited in the Theological Seminary Museum in Princeton, N.J., there are forty specimens of Muslim rosaries among which that having ninety-nine beads, separated into three divisions of thirty-three beads each with a longer bead or pointer is quite popular.⁹

There is another type, though less commonly used, with two hundred and one pellets or beads. The number of beads contained in this rosary is said to correspond to two hundred and one names given

to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). Another type of rosary which is also common among Muslims is the shorter type with thirty-three beads. There are also other types which are longer than all we have mentioned. These types are of five hundred and one thousand beads. That of one thousand beads, as will be examined later, is known as *alfiyah* which means a thousand.¹⁰ Immanuel gives the description of these rosaries as having two ends of the strings, made of gold thread, cotton or silk in nearly every case and passed through small ornamental beads, and then through a fusiform tube of the same size and material as the rosary beads, terminating in a not or tassel, black, red, or green in colour. He goes further to state that the material used consists of date-stones or other hard seeds, shells, jet, olive wood, Indian balsam, Ivory, mother-of-pearl, horn, bone, agate, chalcedony, amber (very seldom metal) or precious stones.¹¹

Significance of the Rosary

This segment of the paper will have a look at the uses of the rosary around the Muslim world. This is to enable us bring to the research fore, other significant values of the rosary apart from its popular use in prayer. Apart from its popular use for prayer, John P. points out another use of the rosary for *Dhikr* (constant remembrance of Allah), especially among the *Sufis* (ascetics). For example, he quotes the founder of the Qadriyyah Sufi Order, Abdul Qadri al-Jilani to have said that some of the names of God have colours. According to him, *Lāilāhailallāh* has its light as blue and it must be recited one hundred thousand times; Allah, called *IsmulJalālah* or beauteous name is yellow and must be recited 78,586 times. We also, according to this source, have *Ismu Hu* (name He) whose light is read with its number as 44,630; *Ismu Hayy* (name of the Eternal) whose light is white to be recited 20,092; *Wāhid* (The One God) whose light is green to be recited 93,420; *'Azīz* (The Precious God) whose light is black to be recited 74,644; and *Wadūd* (The Loving God) which has no light and to be recited 30,202.¹² When one considers the totals of such repetitions, which in this case is 441,574 different ejaculations, the need for a very long rosary comes to mind.

Apart from the devotional use of the rosary in *Dhikr*, it is also used in the form of prayer called *Istikhāra*. This is a technical name given to the securing of divine guidance in perplexity regarding any enterprise, journey, sickness, marriage etc. The use of *Istikhāra*,

according to this source, was a practice from the earliest time by the casting of lots; at first, perhaps by the use of the Qur'ān itself (bibliomancy) and later by the use of rosary.¹³

As long as we agree with the above use of the rosary, we still want to argue that the Prophet (S.A.W.) has prescribed some specific prayers to be used for *Istikhāra*. It is therefore our supposition that it is this prescription of the Prophet which is wrongly interpreted by Swemer that to use the rosary for *Istikhāra*, the rosary must be grasped within the palms of both hands which are then rubbed together, then *Fātiḥah* (Qur'ān Chapter 1) solemnly repeated after which the user breathes upon the rosary with his breath in order to put the magic power of the sacred chapter into the beads, then he seizes....¹⁴

In Java, the rosary is said to be in use for the healing of the sick, or (in black magic) for inducing sickness. It is erroneously described that with the rosary in the hand, one reads any chapter from the Qur'ān up to the fifteenth verse which are considered as containing a word of talismanic power. While these verses are being read, the rosary is counted and the result follows.¹⁵

In Egypt, the rosary is widely used for the cure of the sick. In this case, the efficacy of the rosary to heal depends largely on the material from which its beads are made. According to this argument, those made of ordinary wood or of mother-of-pearl are not as efficacious as a rosary made of jet (*yusr*) or *Kuk* (a particular kind of wood from Makkah). In Egypt both among Copts and Muslims, the rosary is also argued to be used for the cure of retention of urine in children. To achieve this, it is put on the infant's neck, or is laid on the roof in the starlight to catch the dew, then it is washed and the water given to the child to drink.¹⁶ Also in Turkey, some rosaries made of gall-stones or other intestinal stones of sheep and cattle are said to be of great medicinal value, used as sovereign remedy against gall-stones, as contained in the Patton collection.¹⁷

In India, Khan writes that the rosary is used to protect the evil eye and other dangers. Sometimes, the rosary is washed in water and the water given as medicine to the sick to drink.¹⁸ Westermarck points out the symbolic use of the rosary as an object of pledge of impunity for a culprit or to confirm a covenant, especially if the rosary is that of a *shaykh*. For example, if a person has taken refuge at a shrine, his *shaykh* or governor may induce him to leave it by sending him his rosary as 'ahd (covenant or promise) that he is then saved from

persecution for some time at least. Also, when a boy keeps away from school for fear of punishment, the teacher will send him a rosary as pledge of impunity. So, the rosary in Morocco and elsewhere came to represent the personality of its possessor, like a seal or ring.¹⁹ Widows wear the rosaries of their husbands or the rosary is buried with the dead together with the paper called *mas'alah* (likely questions) which contains the answer the corpse gives the questioning angels, Munkar and Nakir.²⁰

Also, the rosary is commonly used as amulets or the carrier of amulets. Doute uses, though very erroneously, the laws of magic to explain or compare all the virtue (*barakah*) of the names of Allah which rosaries have to perform all the outlined functions.²¹ Also in the expression of Skeat, the rosary for a Muslim is either used as a charm for occasions where moral pressure can be brought to bear, divinations to assist in detecting dangers which in ordinary course must come but can be avoided and finally resignation to faith when he has to meet with the inevitable whether it be regarded as the course of faith or the eternal purpose of God.²²

The last but not the least significant use of the rosary to be examined in this paper is related to conversation. These beads (rosary) are used by Turks, Egyptians and by some Greeks and Americans as a means of occupying the hands while conversing or walking, like the swagger stick, of the soldier. These rosaries, while not in use, are put in the pocket as they consist of only thirty-three beads.²³

Controversies on the Use of the Rosary

The use of the rosary is embraced today by Muslims of all classes and in all lands with the exception of the Wahabbis in Arabia. This exception from the generalization signifies a major point of dialectical discussion. The Wahabbi Movement started in Arabia under Abdul Wahhab born in Najd in 1691. This movement was established to distinguish between essential Islam and its later additions. Apart from the use of the rosary, the sect also abominates the use of tobacco, jewels, silk and gold.²⁴ As pointed out above, the Wahhabis and their likes represent the reactionary scholars who jealously guard the sanctity and purity of the orthodox Islam from the likely pollution of civilization and the corruption of westernization through the opening of the gate of *Ijtihād*. As far as the use of the rosary is concerned, they refer to it as *Bid'ah* (innovation) which should be condemned in its

entirety. Opposition against the use of the rosary made itself heard as late as the Fifth Century A.D. when the great theologian, Suyuti composed an apology for it.²⁵ Also, Abū 'Abdullah Muhammad al-Abdarī, the learned author of al-Mukhdal who died 737 A.H. considers rosary as one of the strange practices (innovations) in Islam which should not be countenanced as follows:

Among the innovations, the rosary is to be noted. A special box is made where it is kept; a salary is fixed for someone to guard and keep it, and for those who use it for *Dhikr*.... A special *shaykh* is appointed for it, with the title *Shaykh as-Subha*. These innovations are quite modern (and) it is the duty of the Imam of the mosque to suppress such customs, as it is in his power to do so.²⁶

This reactionary scholar (al-Abdarī) does not only condemn the use of rosary, he also emphasizes the excesses of some of users, especially among the *Sufis*.

Despite various Apostolic proofs that the Prophet (S.A.W.) did not approve of the use of small stones, but fingers for the recitation of litanies when he was alive, it was the view of the non-conformist scholars that it should be allowed as good innovation (*bid'atun hasanah*) which came as a result of rational inquiry. One of such traditions against the use of the rosary, quoted by Goldziher from the *Sunan* of al-Darimi tradition reads:

Al- Hakam b. al- Mubarak relates on the authority of 'Amr b. Yahya, who had heard it from his father, and who in his turn had heard from his father: "we were sitting before the door of 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud, before the morning prayer, for we were in the habit of going to the mosque in his company. One day, we encountered Abū- Mūsa al-'Ash'arī... and very soon Abū- 'Abdur- Rahman came in his turn. Then Abū- Mūsa said: 'Informer times, O Abū- 'Abdur-Rahman, I saw in the mosque things that I did not approve of; but now, thank God, I see nothing but good. 'What do you mean by that? Said the other. 'If you live long enough,' answered Abu Musa, 'you will know. I have seen in the mosque, people who sat round in circles (*qawmanhilaqan*) awaiting the moment of *salat*. Each group was presided over by a man, and they held in

their hands small stones. The president said to them: 'Repeat one hundred *takbīr*!' and for one hundred times they recited the formula of the *takbīr*. Then he used to tell them: "'Repeat one hundred *tahlīl*' for one hundred times. Then he told them also: 'Repeat one hundred times of *tasbīh*!' And the persons who were in the group equally went through his exhortation also. Then, Abū- 'Abdur-Rahman asked: 'what did you say when you saw these things?' 'Nothing', answered Abū-Mūsa, 'because I first wanted to find out your view and your orders.' 'Did you not tell them that it would have been more profitable for them to have kept account of their sins and did you not tell them that their good actions would not have been in vain?' So we together repaired to the mosque, and we soon came across one of the groups. He stopped before them and said: 'What do you do here?' 'We have here' they answered, 'small stones which help us to count the *takīr*, the *tahlīl* and the *tasbīh*, which we recite.' But he answered them in these terms: 'sooner count your sins, and nothing will be lost of your good deeds. Woe to you, O Community of Muhammad! With what haste you are going towards damnation! Here are also in great numbers, companions of your Prophet; look at these garments which are not covered with dust, these vessels that are not yet broken; verily by him who holds my soul in His hands, your religion cannot lead you better than the contemporaries of Mohammad; will you not at least shut the door of wrong?' 'By Allah, O Abū- 'Abdur-Rahman,' they cried, 'we mean but to do right, but who cannot get at it'. It is to them that the word of the Prophet applies: 'There are of those who read the Qur'ān, but deny its teaching, and swear by God, I doubt whether the majority of these people are not among yourselves.'" ²⁷

Other traditions show us that the Prophet protested regarding some faithful women against their using these small stones when reciting the litanies just mentioned, and recommended the use of the fingers when counting their prayers. He (S.A.W.) said: "Let them count their prayer

on their fingers (*ya'qidnab'il'anāmil*); for an account will be taken of them.²⁸

At this juncture, the justification for the condemnation of the use of the rosary by the reactionary scholars such as as-Suyūti and the Wahabbis in Arabia is evident in some of the negative and derogatory uses of the rosary such as for inducing sickness, divination, as amulets or carriers of amulets and its wrong incorporation into the system of *Istikhāra* prescribed by the Prophet (S.A.W.). All these excesses could be argued here as being representative of the secularist scholars who could do or embrace anything in the name of modernity without weighing its implications against the orthodox principles of Islam.

The use of *alfiyah* rosary in Egypt and Sudan in connection with funerals of eminent saints is a typical example upon which the premise of our argument rests. The ritual which is described as the "ceremony of the rosary" is usually performed on the night succeeding the burial. The soul is then assumed to remain in the body, after which it departs to Hades, thereto awaits its final destiny. This night ritual according to McClintock and Strong goes as follows:

At night, Fikihis, sometimes as many as fifty, assemble and bring a rosary of one thousand beads, each as large as a pigeon's egg. They begin with the sixty-seven Chapter of the Qur'ān, then say three times, 'God is One,' then recite the last chapter but one and the first, and then say three times, 'O God, favour the most excellent and most happy of Your creatures, our Lord Muhammad, and his family and companions and preserve them.' To this they add, 'All who commemorate You are the mindful, and those who omit commemorating You are the negligent.' They next repeat three thousand times 'There is no god but God', one holding the rosary and counting each repetition. After each thousand, they sometimes rest and take coffee, then one hundred times '(I extol) the perfection of God with His praise.' Then the same number of times 'I beg forgiveness of God, the Great,' after which fifty times, 'The perfection of the Lord, the Eternal,' then 'The perfection of the Lord, the Lord of Might,' etc. Two or three of them then recite three or four more verses. This done, one asks his companions,

'Have you transferred (the merit of) what you have,' and add, 'Peace be on the Apostle.' This concludes the ceremony, which in the houses of the rich is repeated on the second and third nights.²⁹

Conclusion

In view of the controversies expressed on the use of the rosary as discussed in this paper, the position of this paper is that whatever the size or the type of the rosary adopted by Muslims, it should be used for puritanical and devotional acts which are capable of bringing one closer to the Creator instead of changing this identifier of Muslims into an object of occult and fetishism which in turn will give a derogatory re-definition of Islam and subject the identity of Muslims to public ridicule. As for the group who supports outright condemnation of the use of rosary, allowance should be given to the principle of *takhayyur* which, in *fiqh* parlance means liberty of an individual Muslim to be governed by the law of any of the four schools of Islamic Jurisprudence.³⁰ This should be without resulting to condemnation and unnecessary controversies capable of creating discord among Muslims from diverse groups and different backgrounds.

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