

# The Mosque



One of the entries for the days of Lent in Pope John Paul II's book, *Prayers and Devotions*, ends with these words:

Christ tells us that man is not humiliated, but is exalted in his own dignity whenever he prostrates himself and adores the Infinite Being, his Creator and Father: "You shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore." (Matthew 4.10)<sup>1</sup>

This Christian belief that human beings find their true dignity confirmed by submission to the Creator and through adoration of God alone, is shared by Muslims, who follow the path prescribed by the religion of Islam. The primary meaning of the word Islam is 'submission' to God.<sup>2</sup> Every religious community needs a place in which matters of common belief, concern, and experience, can be celebrated, discussed, and shared. This is usually a building that has been erected for the purpose. In a Catholic church Christ, the incarnate God, is uniquely present among the faithful in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Muslims do not believe in the divinity of Jesus who,

they accept, is to be honoured as a Prophet, but only as a human being. The mosque, in which Muslims meet, is a 'house of God' for Muslims, but not in the same way or the same sense as the church is for Catholics.

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## A place in which to worship God

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The Prophet Muhammad is said to have observed that he had been given the whole world as a mosque. The implication is that Muslims do not need a building in which to offer worship to God, because they can perform their daily prayers wherever they happen to be at the prescribed times for prayer. God can be worshipped anywhere (with the exception of 'unclean places' such as slaughterhouses and tombs, as Muhammad is recorded to have said). The place where such prayer is offered becomes, in effect, a temporary mosque. Yet there can be no solitary, 'open-air' Muslims, any more than there can be solitary 'open-air' Christians. Neither Christians nor Muslims are permitted the luxury of a private religion, in which their personal relationship with God ignores the rest of the believing community. Community

witness and congregational worship are of great importance to Muslims. A mosque is, thus, a place in which Muslims assemble in order to worship God (Allah) in the various ways prescribed by the religion of Islam and exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad. In Islamic societies the mosque can also serve as a court of law, a school, even as a parade ground, with the adjoining rooms housing a library or a hospital.

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### **‘A Place of Prostration’**

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The word ‘mosque’ comes from an Arabic word, *masjid*, which means, literally, ‘a place of prostration’. We need to be careful, however, to note that this act of prostration is an essentially religious act, recognising that Muslims prostrate themselves before God, and only before him. In Arabic, the language universally used by Muslims for public prayer and worship, and in which the Holy Book of Islam, *al-Qur’ân*, is written, there is another word that refers to a large mosque. It is the word *jâmi‘*. When Muslims attend the mosque at noon on Friday (their holy day) they gather together as a congregation of believers, united in their desire to perform the ritual of public worship and to listen to the weekly sermon preached by the local leader of the Islamic community. The custom is for men and women to be separated, men in one part of the mosque and women in another. If *masjid* suggests ‘worship’, *jâmi‘* suggests ‘meeting’. The provision of suitable facilities for Muslims to meet, not least in rooms adjacent to the central area of the mosque used for religious ceremonies, is another vital function of the mosque as an Islamic institution. Apart from public worship on regular occasions throughout the year, a mosque also provides members of the Islamic community with a centre in which they can meet together in order to receive instruction in the beliefs and practices of Islam from suitably qualified teachers. It is there that Muslims receive encouragement to maintain their distinctive

beliefs and customs. It is there that education based upon Islamic principles is provided.

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### **Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem**

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These three cities are of special importance to Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca. In Medina he established the way of life that Muslims have sought to follow ever since. In Jerusalem, as Muslims believe, he was granted a unique vision of the presence of God. Mecca and Medina, in what is today known as Saudi Arabia, together with the city of Jerusalem in Israel, contain the most important religious sites in the history of Islam, sites to which Muslims continue to make regular pilgrimages. In all three cities there are impressive mosques. Perhaps the best known mosque in the Islamic world is the one built in Mecca on the site of a sanctuary that was known even before the time of Muhammad as ‘the House of God’. In the centre of this mosque area stands *al-Ka‘bah* (‘the cube-shaped’) structure, which every Muslim hopes to visit as part of the ritual of the *hajj*, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, which adult Muslims are encouraged to make at least once in their lifetime.

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### **The design and furnishing of a Mosque**

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In countries where the religion of Islam has been established for centuries there are mosques that combine outstanding architectural beauty with notable simplicity of design, decoration, and interior furnishing. Although they vary in size and grandeur, mosques of every sort reflect this simplicity. All of them are designed and built to resemble, in essence, the first mosque that was erected in the year 622 AD at the home of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. Medina was originally known as Yathrib. In honour of Muhammad’s arrival it was renamed *madīnat [al-nabi‘]*, that is ‘the city [of the Prophet]’. In the same year he and a few loyal companions

had gone there from Mecca, some 300 miles to the south, where they had been subjected to persecution for practising Islam. This first mosque was of the simplest rectangular design and construction. One side showed the *qiblah*, the 'direction' in which Muslims were to turn before beginning their prayers. To begin with, this direction was towards Jerusalem. A few years later Muhammad received a revelation which authorised a change. The new *qiblah* was to be Mecca, a requirement that continues to this day.

Ever since the days of Muhammad, mosques have been built to contain the same basic elements that featured in the first mosque built in Medina, namely, a courtyard, a *qiblah* wall, and a roofed prayer-hall. Various refinements were added as the years passed. In the centre of the *qiblah* wall there is a *mihrab*, or niche, which shows the direction of Mecca. Next to the *mihrab* is a *minbar*, a pulpit, from which the Friday sermon is preached. The minaret (literally, 'lighthouse') is probably the architectural feature of later and larger mosques, which will be most familiar to non-Muslims. It serves as a vantage point from which a *muezzin* (meaning 'one who calls to prayer') summons the faithful to prayer at the five appointed times each day. Some minarets rise like slender pillars into the sky. Others are square-shaped, octagonal or spiral. Some of the grander mosques have several minarets.

The mosque and its precincts often convey a sense of spaciousness and timelessness. In desert or tropical areas where Islam counts its largest numbers of followers, the interior of a mosque provides welcome relief from the heat outside. The sight and sound of water running in fountains in the courtyard is refreshing. In all mosques some form of running water is provided for the preliminary ablutions that Muslims are required to make before prayer. When compared with the interiors of some Christian churches, mosques are seen to possess an almost austere simplicity of form and decoration. There are no pews

or benches. There is no congregational singing, no choir, and no organ or any other musical instrument. Instead, there is the rhythmic intoning of passages from the *Qur'ân* by those trained to perform the task. The floor of the mosque may be covered with mats or carpets. It is not usual (and in many Islamic countries forbidden) to find in a mosque any form of decoration which might distract the attention of worshippers. Instead of the pictures, ikons, stained glass, or statues, to be found in a Catholic church, mosques are decorated with quotations from the *Qur'ân*, with the Arabic words for God and Muhammad, all skilfully executed in Arabic calligraphy on colourful tiles, wood-carvings, or inlays. Abstract geometrical designs, arabesques, representations of birds and foliage, also feature.

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## Mosques in Britain

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Islam is a missionary religion. It continues to attract converts from other religions or from none. There are an estimated 2 million Muslims living in Britain. Many of them came here after the end of the Second World War, to settle in this country and to become British citizens. Over the years, they have come from different parts of the world, from India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh, East Africa, the West Indies, and even further afield. The provision of mosques in the cities and towns in which they live has presented a number of problems to members of local Islamic communities, not the least of which is funding. Few groups of Muslims are in a position to commission and to finance the building of the new mosques that many of them would undoubtedly like to have. For this reason, Muslims have sometimes been obliged to convert houses, parts of houses, or even redundant churches, into prayer rooms and mosques. Slowly, new purpose built mosques are being built, however. Near Regent's Park in London, for instance, or in Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, Glasgow, and several other cities and

large towns in the United Kingdom, you will find mosques which have been built to help Muslims in this country bear witness to their faith that 'There is no god but God (*Allāh*), and Muhammad is His Messenger'.

3. Discuss some of the things that Christians might learn from Muslims about the way in which Almighty God is to be worshipped in public and in private. What might Muslims learn from Christians about this?

### *Questions for discussion*

1. How far is it possible for Christians and Muslims to pray together, either in a church or in a mosque?
2. How true is it to say that your local church (or the local mosque, if there is one) is a centre for community life and action?

### **NOTES:**

- 1 Viking Penguin Books, in the 1994 edition, page 118
- 2 See an earlier leaflet in this series, *What is Islam?*

*This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

*The Committee is grateful to its member Professor Edward Hulmes KHSMA D Phil. for this contribution.*

+ Charles Henderson  
Chairman

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*Further information and copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from.*

*The Westminster Interfaith Programme, 2 Church Avenue, Southall, Middx UB2 4DH (0181) 843 0690.*