



PRAYER AND PRAYERS IN ISLAM

The mosque is today a familiar sight in many large towns, and we have all seen Muslims at prayer. What is the meaning of this ritual - of Muslims, either singly or in ordered rows, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating before God? Perhaps it is first of all a reminder that Islam is not merely a political and cultural phenomenon but a way of life by which over a million people in Britain seek to surrender their lives to God in obedience.

The documents of Vatican II remind us that Muslims '... along with us adore the One and Merciful God, who on the Last Day will judge mankind'. (Lumen Gentium n. 16). As human beings, we all share the need to address ourselves to our Creator. The word 'prayer' has different meanings: what sort of prayer takes place in a mosque?

Formal Worship

If we are able to attend a mosque to observe

the prayer, we shall notice that Muslims arrange themselves in rows, all facing the same direction - towards the *mihrab* (niche), marking the *qibla* (direction of Mecca), behind one man who leads the recitation. There is no noticeable interaction between worshippers, no mediation, and no equivalent to priest or minister. The ritual of prayer is quite short, with carefully co-ordinated words and movements: bowing, standing upright, kneeling, prostrating with the head to the ground.

This worship, in Arabic *salat*, in Persian/Urdu *namaz*, is performed five times a day, at set times: this can be at home or at work, in any ritually clean place. Men and women nearly always pray separately. It is recommended however for Muslims to gather together in a mosque, where possible and this is generally regarded as obligatory at the Friday prayer, which is at mid-day. During the worship, one prayer is always recited:

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the
 Compassionate!
 Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, the
 Merciful, the Compassionate,
 Master of the Day of Judgement.
 Thee alone we worship, Thee alone we
 ask for help.
 Guide us in the straight path,
 The path of those to whom Thou hast
 been gracious,
 not of those who have incurred Thy
 wrath, nor those who have gone astray.



Informal Prayer

This is the first *sura* (chapter) of the Qur'an, the Muslim scripture, and is often repeated, as a blessing, a prayer of intercession, praise or petition. There is no variation in the ritual worship; the formulas (in Arabic) are easy to memorise, and can be repeated alone or in company.

The *salat* is preceded by the *adhan*, the call to prayer, which in Muslim countries is relayed by loudspeakers from the top of the minaret, but can equally well be chanted quietly by the leader of the worship.

God is most great! God is most great!
 I bear witness that there is only
 one God (x2)
 I bear witness that Muhammad is the
 Messenger of God (x2)
 Come to prayer! (x2)
 Come to wellbeing! (x2)
 [Shi'a add here: Come to the best work!]
 Prayer is better than sleep! (x2, at
 the dawn prayer)
 God is most great! God is most great!
 There is no god but God!

The opening phrase, in Arabic *Allahu akbar*, is a great affirmation of the Muslims' submission (one meaning of the word *islam*).

At other times, if we visit the mosque, we may see individuals performing the *salat* alone or in small groups, or sitting quietly reading the Qur'an or reciting by heart. The very words of the Qur'an are thought to sanctify the one reciting them, and to have power. So another frequently repeated *sura* is:

I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn,
 from the evil of created things,
 from the evil of darkness spreading,
 from the evil of those who practise
 secret arts,
 and from the evil of the envious one.

The Name of God has great power: every enterprise should be begun 'In the Name of the most Merciful God'. A Qur'anic verse says: 'His are the Beautiful Names, so call upon Him by them' (7:180), and this Muslims have always done, trusting that He will respond by displaying that quality of mercy, strength, or power in their lives.

Informal or personal prayer is known as *du'a*' supplication, but the words used may be quite formal; there is less spontaneous prayer in Islam. An individual is most likely to repeat verses from the Qur'an, or prayers composed for special occasions such as *hajj* (the pilgrimage).

Another kind of prayer is called *dhikr*, remembrance or mentioning (the Name of God). The Qur'an commands, in God's name, 'Remember Me and I shall remember you' (2:152). *Dhikr*, mindfulness of God, also signifies the constant repetition of short prayers, as in Sufi (mystic) practice. These can be recited in groups:

astaghfir-ullah! astaghfir-ullah!

(I seek God's forgiveness), or
al-hamdu lillah, ash-shukr lillah,
ash-shukr lillah, al-hamdu lillah
 (praise be to God, thanks be to God)

which can build up to an almost hypnotic effect, or bring the worshipper to a state of recollection and distance from the everyday world.

Some Sufis are well-known outside Islam, and the expression of their love and worship of God can remind us of Christian mystics. Indeed, some Sufis have revered Jesus as one of the highest examples of the mystical-ascetic life, though they follow the Qur'anic picture of him as a prophet preceding Muhammad, and who was saved from death and thus did not rise from the dead.

Rabi'a, a woman Sufi of Basra in the 8th century, prayed:

O God! If I worship Thee in fear of hell,
 burn me in hell
 If I worship Thee in hope of Paradise,
 exclude me from Paradise!
 But if I worship Thee for Thine own sake,
 withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty!

Customs of prayer, and the beliefs behind them, are very different in Islam and Christianity. Muslims sometimes have the impression that 'Christians don't pray', because we have a less public image for much of our

prayer. We sometimes find their worship too formal and rigid - where is the sense of God as a loving Father? It is perhaps with the writings and lives of practising Sufis that Christians can feel most at home, but Muslims in this country do not generally belong to Sufi orders.

While they, with us, 'adore the One Merciful God', we have a different view of God, as Three in One, a mystery never to be fully understood. We respect the faith and piety of Muslims, who feel themselves called upon particularly to safeguard the belief in the Oneness of God. We can, however, when meeting with Muslims, focus on what we share: belief in One God, respect for the whole of creation, concern for justice and peace, for greater mutual understanding. As a Muslim prays during the pilgrimage at Mecca:

Here I am at Thy service, O Lord!

Here I am at Thy service!

To Thee the glory, the riches and the empire of the world!

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Questions:

- How does the Muslim concept of prayer differ from our own?
What is the same?
- How important to us are times and places for prayer?
- What would a Muslim think of one of our churches?
- 'Christians only pray once a week' - what would you reply?

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The Committee is grateful to its member Dr Penelope Johnstone for this contribution.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

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