

# CHRISTIAN UND MUSLIM PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION

Muslim prayer differs fundamentally from Christian prayer in style, content, form and intention. Prayer is central significance in Islam. Its significance can hardly be overemphasised. When a Muslim mentions ‘prayer’, he generally means the mandatory ritual prayer, which he repeats five times daily. Ritual prayer is called “salat” in Arabic and must be performed daily at specific times by every adult Muslim, men and women, in Arabic, while facing Mecca. A Muslim who has forgotten or just omitted one of the five prayers must pray at a later point of time.

## FIXED TIMES TO PRAY

The Muezzin (in Arabic: “mu’addin”) – calls the believers to prayer from the Minaret of the mosque: nowadays, this is usually taken over by a recording. When the call to prayer has sounded (“Allah is the greatest ... there is no God but Allah ... Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”), only ritual prayers are permitted, not freely formulated prayers, as Muslim tradition states. Ritual prayer must be performed at the defined hours. In many mosques we find five clocks (watches), so the Muslim believer knows when the prayer must be performed. As time changes a little from day to day: morning prayer must be performed before sunrise (in the summer, that can be before 4:00 a.m.), the midday prayer -just before the sun reaches its zenith, the afternoon prayer- after the sun has reached its zenith but before sunset, the evening prayer -after sunset, and the night prayer when it has become dark. At other (specified) times, prayer is forbidden: during sunrise or when the sun has reached its zenith, for example. The prayers of non-Muslims are invalid on principle.

## HOW DID MANDATORY PRAYER DEVELOP

The requirement to pray five times a day was not a part of the original 7<sup>th</sup> century teachings of Islam. Surah 11:14, dated at times of the “hijra”, the exile of the first Muslim congregation from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, first mentions that Muhammad was commanded to pray three times a day. It seems as if between 620-624 AD the duty to perform ritual prayer was fixed for all Muslims (7:204-206 etc.). Surah 24:58 also mentions three daily prayers – in the mornings, at noon and in the evenings. Not until about one hundred years later, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, tradition indicates that Muslims were required to pray five times a day. In the first years after the proclamation of Islam, Muhammad called his adherents to pray while facing Jerusalem (which was most probably meant to make the Jewish community accept Muhammad as their prophet, too) whereas after 624 AD Muhammad changed the direction of praying towards Mecca.

The Koran does not describe how Muslims should pray and at what times. Only tradition gives some hints and explanations, while the four Sunni schools and the main Shi’a school of law differ from each other in some details. Folk Islam tells us that Muhammad was lifted up to heaven on the back of the “buraq” (a white animal similar to a horse with two wings), and God commanded Muhammad to teach the Muslim believers to pray 50 times a day. But when Moses urged Muhammad to plead God for reducing the number of prayers to five, God consented and Muhammad returned to earth.

The ritual prayer which is only prayed by Muslims is not just a prayer. Content, form, style and manner are prescribed in the detail. The very idea of ritual prayer is not that a Muslims prays at all, but that they fulfill exactly all the detailed requirements to make his prayer “valid”:

## **POSITIONS FOR THE PRAYER AND PROPER CLOTHING**

There are several prescribed positions for prayer. First, the Muslim must look towards the Ka'ba in Mecca, Islam's central sanctuary. Then He speaks the first verse of the last surah of the Koran: "I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind" (114:1). The 'declaration of purpose' (in Arabic: "niyya"), which follows, is necessary to make the prayer valid and determines how often the Muslim will bow down during the following prayer (in Arabic: "rak'a"). Then the Muslim says, "God is great (or: greater)!" and enters a state of dedication until prayer is over. After that, he may speak a prayer of praise such as, "Blessed are you, oh God, blessed are you! Great is your name ... there is no other God!" Then he recites the first surah, the "Fatiha", additional Koran verses and again bows down to praise God. Then he says, "May God be glorified!" or "May my Lord, the Exalted One, be glorified. Glory to Him!" He gets up and says, "May God hear those who praise him!" Then he kneels and says, "God is great!" He falls down to the earth so that his toes, knees, palms of his hands and his forehead touch the ground and says, "Praise be to you, my Lord, the most High," which is repeated at least three times. Then he returns to his knees and repeats, "God is great!" When falling on to his face he begs, "My Lord, forgive me, have mercy on me, give me what is due to me and lead me the straight path." This completes the first obeisance.

At the morning prayer, the Muslim prays two to four of such obeisances, at midday prayer and in the afternoon -four to eight, in the evening- three to five and during the night -at least, four or twelve at the most. The Muslim also offers salutations towards God and Muhammad while praying. The "Shahada", the Muslim creed, "There is no God but God and Muhammad is his messenger" is uttered several times, as well as, the blessings over Muhammad's family and Muhammad himself. Those blessings can be understood as a plea to God to save Muhammad, since nobody knows for sure if Muhammad has already entered paradise. At the end of prayer, Muslims say, "Peace be upon you and the grace of God," and looks to his right and left. While praying in the mosque, the Muslim addresses his neighbour, if he prays at home he addresses the two angels that Folk Islam believes to stand at each person's right and left side, watching over every good and bad deed of the believer.

The very nature of ritual prayer is to submit to Allah and his omnipotence, to demonstrate one's absolute surrender and devotion, a visible expression of man's proper attitude towards God, which is the mark of a true believer, for the term "Muslim" means "one who submits (to God)", as "Islam" means submission, devotion towards God, not "peace" as many Muslims claim (Muslims hold that there would be perfect peace on earth if mankind would completely converse to Islam.). The Islamic prayer ritual is thus primarily an act of obedience, the visible acknowledgement of God's omnipotence - but for many Muslims also an expression of true piety and praise to God (50:39-40). Many Muslims take their prayers very seriously.

Prayer also ties the individual to the greater Islamic congregation (in Arabic: the "umma"), to God and even to the prophet Muhammad, for in each required prayer blessing is called down on him.

While praying, the believer must be properly clothed and must observe all the necessary details, which include the order of the ceremony and the proper gestures of bowing and kneeling. Any deviation from the rituals - such as eating, speaking, walking etc. - invalidates the prayer (makes it "batil"), and no longer counts as one of the five daily required prayers. Not only the words of prayer and the clothing is prescribed, but also the direction and the specific times for praying. To obtain the purity of a ritual by abolution before prayer is as important as the 'declaration of purpose' (which defines how many obeisances the Muslim will perform). If the Muslim had made any mistake during prayer, the whole process must be repeated from the beginning till the end. Pious Muslims often add an extra prayer just in case they have made some mistake.

## **RITUAL PURITY AND ABOLUTION**

Before the prayer, the Muslim must complete either the 'lesser' or the 'greater' washing with water. If no water is available, he uses sand, since only those who have purified themselves, may approach God (surah 4:43). Men can become unclean by touching any body liquids, by touching or consuming alcohol or pork meat, women by menstruation or giving birth. Women must perform all omitted prayers later when they are "clean" again. Pious Muslims often worry that they may have become ritually unclean, for that weighs more heavily than 'small' sins, as the state of uncleanness makes worship invalid (futile), 'small sins' don't. The Koran says, "Truly, Allah loveth those who have a care for cleanliness," (surah 2:222; 9:108). According to the tradition, the purification ritual serves to strengthen faith, awakens repentance and purifies believers of the sin. In addition, men must be covered from their navel to their knees, women must be covered completely; only their hands and face can remain uncovered (although there are some differences between the schools of law).

## **VOLUNTARY AND FREELY FORMULATED PRAYERS**

Besides the required ritual prayers five times a day, extra ritual prayers may also be offered, e.g. when attending Friday worship in the Friday mosque or at special holidays, like the one at the end of Ramadan. Although the believer is free to formulate his prayers in his own way, prayer books (which are Sufi prayer books for the most part) contain the form of prayers. Islam also recommends prayers of praise and supplication, during times of illness or for forgiveness of sins. This sort of prayer (in Arabic: "du'â") has only secondary value in contrast to the required ritual prayers.

Besides, the Koran also tells about people who approached God with their requests and were heard (3:38; 19:2-4). God commands his people to seek his aid, so that he can fulfil their requests, "Pray unto me, and I will hear your prayer," (40:60) or "And when my servants question thee (i. e. Muhammad), then surely I am nigh. I answer the call of the suppliant when he crieth to me," (2:186). Muslims *hope* for God's assistance when they are in need, but they are not accustomed to bring their daily needs to God. Free prayers are generally offered as requests at the graves of the saints, or formulas are uttered like, "Lord, be merciful on me ..." etc., also when entering a house, before eating, when visiting the sick or travelling, or if somebody has died, or in the month of fasting and etc. Prayer formulas sound like, "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (the "Basmala"), "God is great" or "May God be glorified", "Praise to God" or "O God, bestow your blessing upon Muhammad and his family."

## **PRAYER CANCELS (OUT) SINS**

The deliberate failure to pray is one of the most terrible sins that a Muslim can commit; his negligence makes him similar to an unbeliever who will be thrown into hell, unless he repents before he dies, as tradition tells us. Islamic tradition says, "The first thing to be investigated on the day of judgement will be prayer." Men must participate weekly in the Friday prayers at the mosque. One tradition declares the faith of a man who fails to participate to be useless, for neither the fasting nor pilgrimages of such a person have any value in God's eyes. Praying at home is at the same value as praying in a mosque, although in Folk Islam, praying in the mosque is considered to be more meritorious. Popular Islam believes that prayer cancels smaller sins, and that prayer in the great mosque in Mecca expiates even major offences.

Neither sickness nor disability excuses the failure to pray, one must always make up for any missed prayers - the dying must carry out the prayers in their thoughts. Children must learn to pray starting at the age of seven, and some theologians recommend forcing them (even with blows) to pray once they have reached the age of about ten.

Because spoken prayer is a meritorious work, which will be laid on the scales at the judgement (like fasting or performing the pilgrimage), it contributes to the individual's salvation and his entrance into the paradise, but at the same time, the required prayers are also a burden, particularly when, for example, one must catch up on all the missed prayers during a long time. Since no one can pray five times every day of his life, the Muslim is continually haunted by the fear that he will die without having fulfilled his obligation. Prayer is thus not a joyful expression of one's relationship to God, for it is not a confident conversation with the loving Father.

## **PRAYER IN THE BIBLE**

In the Bible, prayer is always voluntary, never an obligation, although this does not contradict the fact, that God has told his children to pray. But still it is always a personal conversation with God and a great privilege: sinful man is not worthy of approaching God, but because Jesus pleads for the suppliant and purifies him from "all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9), man may approach God on his "Throne of Grace" (Hebrews 4:16). The Holy Spirit inspires the person's desires to turn to God in a prayer with his needs, whereas in Islam it is the commanded to fall down before God and fulfil what is required with the prescribed formulas.

According to the Bible, anyone can pray at any time bringing anything before God. The Bible tells us in many instances that Christians should pray continuously, and not at specific times (even if the Bible often mentions prayer in the morning, at midday and in the evening). Because God is a Father to his children, he hears their prayers and does what is best for them, although that does not mean that he automatically would give

everything to them what he is asked for. Prayer is an expression of a vivid relationship between creator and creation. Prayer can be offered when the believer wants to worship God or to thank him, to praise him, to intercede or to express his doubts, fears or helplessness, to find relief, to express his complaints or to ask for forgiveness. The prayers of churches and congregations stand under special promises (Matthew 18:18-20). God 's children may approach him with the intimate address "Dear Papa ("Abba, dear Father"; Romans 8:15). Is that not intimacy, confidence, concern and love? In Islam, God is not a father, only the creator, who could never be pulled down on the same level with his creation.

The Bible prescribes neither the form nor the amount of prayer required of the believer. Psalms and other texts, such as the prayers of Jesus, suggest possibilities, but these are not obligatory. Jesus himself refutes the idea that prayer ought to be offered in any certain direction or in a certain place (John 4:21), for He is the way to God (John 4:16). Scripture does not prescribe prayer times, minimum number of prayers, posture, particular dress, washings, form and language necessary to make the address pleasing or acceptable to God. Only the individual's attitude is necessary, not his words. His prayer should be earnest: he must believe (Matthew 21:22, James 1:6), be humble before God (James 4:6; Luke 18:13) and forgive others, just as God has forgiven him (us) (Matthew. 6:14-15). An unbeliever may also pray, for the Holy Spirit can speak to him, as well, and lead him to God through the experience of the answered prayer.

The water of ritual purification does not purify us in God's eyes: blood must be shed if we are to become pure (Hebrews 9:22), and only the blood of the very sacrifice, Jesus, suffices (Hebrews 10:14). Our prayers do not save us at the last judgement, for salvation is given only by grace through faith (Romans 5:1-2; Galatians 3:11-14).