

MUSLIMS and CHRISTIANS at PRAYER

Vivienne Stacey, 1999

1 INTRODUCTION

Piety and devotion are part of everyday Muslim life. One is always aware of the daily ritual. The dawn call to prayer before the noise of the city has properly started will linger as a memory with anyone who has lived in a Muslim land. It is chanted in Arabic by the muezzin (the one who gives the azzan or call to prayer.) The next varies a little according to the rite or school of Islamic law prevalent in the area. Here is one translation of the call to prayer:

God is most great (*Allahu Akbar*), (four times)
I testify there is no god but God (twice)
I testify that Muhammed is the Messenger of God (twice)
Come to prayer (twice)
Come to success (twice)
God is most great (once)
There is no god but God (once)
Prayer is better than sleep (at dawn only).

Whenever we who are Christians hear the call to prayer, let us hear it as a call to pray for Muslims.

2 RITUAL PRAYER OR *SALAT*

Salat is the second of the five pillars of Islam. From puberty on, after the prescribed ablutions, all Muslims are required to offer the five daily prayers. Ritual prayers can be said in private or in a mosque or special prayer area. Usually, women say their prayers at home. If we have a Muslim guests we should make provision for them to pray if they wish. We can also indicate that we too will spend the same time praying.

The first Surah is recited as part of the daily ritual prayer all over the world:

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds,
The Beneficent, the Merciful.
Owner of the Day of Judgment,
Thee (alone) we worship: Thee (alone) we ask for help.
Show us the straight path,
The path of those whom Thou has favoured:
Not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.

As Christians we can share how and when we use the Lord's prayer and how it is similar and dissimilar from this opening surah of the Qur'an.

Pilgrims recite the following invocation in Arabic thousands of times during the first days of the pilgrimage and before going to Mount Arafat.

You call us, we are here, O God! We are here!
We are here, there is none beside You. We are here!
Praise and good deeds belong to you, and the empire!
There is none but You!

Christians like Muslims should be seen to be people of prayer. (e.g. Christy Wilson)

3 PERSONAL, INFORMAL PRAYER OR *DUA*

It is important to distinguish between ritual prayer or salat, and du'a or an informal, personal prayer. *Du'a* consist of invocations, requests,

intercessions, memorized and extempore prayer. The literal meaning of du'a is a cry or call. Many of these prayers are written down in prayer manuals and books of devotions. At bus-stops and at the railway bookshops the traveller can buy little devotional books containing such prayers. Individuals will also supplement them with their own personal prayers, in their own words and language. One of my Muslim friends, telling me of her family problems, said: 'If it were not for prayer I do not know how I could have coped'.

Most Muslims will be grateful if we tell them we are praying for them and will also nearly always welcome an offer for us to pray for them in their presence e.g. in illness, family crisis, help in examinations.

Let us pray for them in this way more often

4 SUFIS AND PRAYER

The Sufis are the mystics of Islam. They are found among Sunnis as well as Shias who seek union with God through the mystic path. Women are included among them, both as guides and followers. Sufis often follow a spiritual guide, either individually or in small groups. There are also larger groups called Brotherhoods. For example, Baha al-Din Naqshbandi, (d. AD 791), founded Sufi groups in Iran and Bukhara. They practised the recollection of God in the act of inhaling and exhaling of breath. Geoffrey Parrinder, in his book on *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (pp. 130, 131), writes of the Sufi emphasis on mystical exercises and retreats as means to spiritual progress. "Repetitions of litanies (*dhikr*), especially on the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God, aided by prayer beads, helped both to concentrate the mind and produce an emotional

state by swaying and chanting. Music banned from the mosque, came into its own in mystical devotions."

One of the greatest Sufi, Rabi'a al-Adawiya (d. AD 801) wrote: "My Lord, eyes are at rest, the stars are setting, hushed are the movements of the birds, of the monsters in the deep. And Thou art the Just who knoweth no change, the Equity that swerveth not, the Everlasting that passeth not away. The doors of kings are locked and guarded by their henchmen. But Thy door is open to whoso calleth on Thee My Lord, each lover is now alone with his beloved. And I am alone with Thee".

I well remember a chorus sung with deep personal devotion by a Sufi neighbour as he walked along the street and suddenly turned the corner to where I was walking. Through the previous night his fraternity had been chanting and repeating the name of Allah as they often did. On a special day, in honour of their saint, they processed through the village, over and over again repeating Allahu, Allahu, Allahu. They were remembering God by calling his name.

How may we share more of our Christian devotional material with Muslims?

5 MUSLIM WOMEN AND PRAYER

In Rabi'a's experience we see love of God replacing fear. The Indian Bishop John Subhan, who was himself a Sufi before he became a Christian, said of Rabi'a: "It is to her that Sufism owes the conception of prayer as free and intimate intercourse with God". She did not regard prayer or any religious observances as meritorious acts. For her, prayer was a way of access to God and an experience of communion with him. One of her famous prayers is as

follows: “O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell. If I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me from thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake then withfold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.”

Several of the Christian midwives that I have known in North Africa and Asia find that their patients, in addition to being naturally nervous of the dangers of childbirth, are also fearful because of the superstitions and practices which are part of their culture. The patients sometimes ask their midwives to pray for them. The christian may use this opportunity to teach along the following lines during the several visits to the home: “You are now the mother of a new baby. God has brought him or her safely into this world and has kept you safe too. Let us thank God for his love and goodness to you, and for bringing this new life into your family. Jesus the Messiah, the eternal Lord and Saviour of this world, was born as a baby just like your baby. His mother Mary experienced the pain of labour as you have, and rejoiced in the birth of her baby as you have. Jesus, son of Mary,

came into this world to save us from sin and to make us righteous before God. God has given physical life to you and your baby by the process of natural birth. He also wants to give spiritual life. This is his gift which comes through faith in Jesus the Messiah”.

Another suggested prayer for use at the birth of a child is: “O Creater God, we thank you that through your goodness this child has been safely born and that the mother has been freed from suffering. Now we beseech you that these to whom you have given physical life may also obtain eternal life through the sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah.”

QUESTIONS:

- How may we better prepare the prayers we use with Muslims?
- How would you teach a Muslim to pray with you?
- How would you guide her to pray alone?