

Understanding Islam **Series Two: Standing before God**

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Part Six: The visitation of holy places

The presence of places that because of their association with person or events of great spiritual intensity attract believers to visit them is common in most religions of the world. Theologically, we can say that God is not limited by space and time and so is omnipresent and cannot be confined in certain places but, at the same time, because a place is associated with someone of great spiritual purity and excellence, it is as though the veil that separates our world from the transcendent world of God is thinned or lifted. In Islamic understanding, this needs to be linked to an understanding of *barzakh*, which we can think of as a transition state in another dimension between this life and the life hereafter in which those who have died repose until the Day of Judgement. In this way, when our earthly bodies are laid in their graves and decompose, our inner self or our spiritual reality is in some way present in a sentient way in that place. This means that the graves of people who were on a higher spiritual plane in this life are associated with this nearness to God because in some way the spirit of the person is alive and active in that place. This is reflected in a tradition that it is as though the soil had been forbidden to consume the bodies of the prophets, so they are present in a special way and aware of those who come to visit them.

This is obviously a sensitive subject and one in which our empirical knowledge is stretched beyond its limits. This is a spiritual reality accessible by faith and not by the tools of an archaeologist. Not surprisingly, although this phenomenon of holy places is of great importance for the majority of groups within Islam, from many cultures, there are a minority of Muslims who are opposed to such a notion and who have been responsible, when they have the power, for destroying such pilgrimage centres and firmly discouraging the practice.

The impact of the *ka'ba*

The obligatory place of pilgrimage for all Muslims through the ages is the *ka'ba* in Makka. It is sometimes referred to as the House of God, although no-one thinks that God resides there but in some way the veil between the believer and God is thinned in that place. It is associated not only with Prophet Muhammad and his family and companions but also with Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael and on through them to Adam and Eve. Some Muslims will speak of it as though it were “the navel” of the earth and there have been projections made that show it to be the possible centre of the original landmass of the earth before the continental plates began to drift apart. All Muslims pray in the direction of the *ka'ba* at every *salat* and so it is in their consciousness several times each day. When they eventually manage to visit Makka, it is universal that Muslims speak about the spiritual impact of being there. It is as though here they are “near to God” in a special way. People making their first visit to the *ka'ba* are

advised to enter the sacred precincts with their eyes cast down until they are right in front of the *ka'ba* itself and then to raise their eyes and experience that awesome closeness.

The grave of Prophet Muhammad

The impact that Muhammad had in his life on those who encountered him must have been huge for them to break with their old ways and follow him. There was a spiritual character or *charism* about him that spoke to something deep within themselves. They came not only to know that he was the Messenger of God but also to feel it in his presence. This sense of the presence of the Prophet lingered on after his death when people went to spend time near his grave. He was felt to be active and aware and thus they were able to ask him to join his prayers to theirs when they prayed to God at his tomb. It is crucial here to understand that the one to whom all Muslims pray is God alone, they do not pray to or worship Muhammad when visiting his tomb in Madina. They do however ask him to join his prayers to theirs when they address them to God. Because of his spiritual excellence and closeness to God, his prayers alongside theirs have a certain power. In the same way, for the same reasons, he is able to be a conduit through which the blessings of God can be experienced; the technical term here is *baraka* (a force for good of divine origin).

Over time, this sense of being close to Muhammad was extended to places where he was recorded as having prayed or visited and so mosques or shrines were built there too. People go to visit these holy places and feel close to God and his Prophet. This was extended further to things associated with Muhammad; there are shrines in the Indian subcontinent, for example, that are said to contain a hair from the Prophet's beard or the imprint of his foot on stones that have been transported there. Similarly in Turkey there are reported items of his clothing or footwear.

Holy places associated with the Friends of God

Anyone who travels in the Indian subcontinent cannot help but notice the hundreds of Muslim shrines. Many of these are majestic buildings of great splendour built over the centuries in places where a Friend of God (*waliullah*) has been buried. These were men and women, who in their lifetimes were recognised as being of great spiritual excellence and closeness to God. They were often teachers who attracted numbers of followers, who were helped on their spiritual journey of purification by the teaching of the holy man or woman. It was not unusual for them to be associated with healing (physical, mental or spiritual) or performing miracles by the power of God working through them. When they died, their followers built a shrine at their place of burial and visited it to ask them to add their prayers to their own. Such shrines are known by the term *dargah*. Many miracles of various sorts are associated with these *waliullah* at their shrines as they are understood to be, after the example of Muhammad, a conduit through which *baraka* flows.

As the Prophet, through his particular spiritual *charism*, attracted companions to gather around him, so the *waliullah* have their groups of followers too, which, in many cases, continue through the centuries. Sometimes they were important teachers on the sufi paths and so initiated others in their way of drawing closer to God. Sometimes they enter deeply into the culture of a local region, so that the people of that place have an on-going sense of closeness to them. The day of their death is considered to be a day of special union or intimacy with God and this is spoken of as their *'urs* or spiritual wedding day. This is celebrated annually with great gatherings for prayer and thanksgiving; communal meals are served and offerings are made for the upkeep of the shrine. This visit to the tomb (*mazar*) is spoken of as a *ziyara* or visitation. Particular prayers and rituals have become associated with such visitations and these are often accompanied by poetry recitals and pious music and songs, depending on the local culture.

In the centuries before easy mass travel, it was rare for ordinary Muslims to be able to make the Hajj to Makka. It was not something that the poor masses outside the Arabian peninsula could ever afford or contemplate. In a sense, a visitation to the shrine of a *waliullah* became an achievable second-best to the irreplaceable Hajj pilgrimage. Here they felt a moment of spiritual intimacy with God and a source of consolation. It was common that people would make the journey as a spiritual exercise as part of their prayer, especially if they were seeking to express their sorrow for a sin for which they wanted to ask God's forgiveness or to reinforce a prayer for healing or other favour from God.

In a place like India, where there were centuries of spiritual practice before the coming of Islam, it is not uncommon to find people from various religions making a visit to a shrine: Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Christians. In countries where Christians and Muslims have lived side-by-side for centuries, like Syria, certain holy places were revered by both communities and Muslims would join with Christians in visiting, for example, a church in which an icon of the Virgin Mary was installed; Mary being commonly revered by both faith communities as being someone specially favoured by God to be the virgin mother of Jesus, and prayers would be offered to God there with the request that Mary would add her prayers to theirs. In Palestine, the home of the Hebrew prophets, there is a long tradition of making visits to Jerusalem and Hebron, the latter being associated with Prophet Abraham.

Martyrs (*shahids*) have always had high esteem in Islam as they have made the ultimate act of submission to the divine will and preferred death at the hands of their enemies rather than submit to injustice or falsehood. They are believed to be destined for Paradise on account of their martyrdom [Q. 3:169-172, 195] and so their places of burial have often become shrines in the same way and people make visitations there.

In the Shi'a tradition

The great twentieth century Shi'a scholar, Ayatollah Tabataba'i, drew on this tradition of the *waliullah* as a way of drawing attention to the pre-eminence of the Shi'a Imams

as being of the highest degree of closeness to God (*qutb*). From the earliest years after the death of Imam Ali, his followers made visitations to remember him and pledge their allegiance to his designation as the rightful successor of Muhammad. He was buried in Najaf and later a shrine was built to him there. Over the centuries, certain rituals were formalised for these visitations and special prayers (also called *ziyara*) were composed.

The same can be seen in the case of the other Imams. The second, fourth, fifth and sixth Imams (Hasan, Zayn al-Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq) were all buried in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Madina, where there was a magnificent shrine until it was destroyed by a puritanical movement in 1925. The seventh and ninth Imams (Musa al-Kazim and Muhammad al-Taqi) were buried and a shrine erected in Baghdad. The eighth Imam (Ali al-Rida) was buried in the Iranian city of Tus, which was later re-named Mashhad (“the martyr’s shrine”). The tenth and eleventh Imams (Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-Askari) died in the Iraqi city of Samarra. All these burial places were dignified with the erection of a shrine and became centres of *ziyara*. Over the centuries, shrines of lesser importance were erected and visited at the places of burial of descendants of the Imams (*Imamzadas*), martyrs and *waliullah* in the Shi'a tradition.

The burial place of Imam Husayn at Karbala has a special place within this tradition, which makes some of the deeper elements of *ziyara* clearer. The events of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions are commemorated each year during the first ten days of the month of Muharram, culminating in the Day of Ashura, and for forty days thereafter. The details of the events are retold and acted out with passion plays (*ta'ziyah*) and processions. The events have taken on a significance that transcends history or have become meta-historical, beyond history. They are remembered with such an intensity that they are actually re-lived in a spiritual sense, they are made present, in the spirit of “if only I had been there” and “every day is Ashura and every place is Karbala.” This “making present” shows their meta-historical nature. All the emotions, the pain and the dedication to the will of God and the cause of resisting injustice are lived through as a spiritual exercise. Through the acts of commemoration, one becomes “in touch with the heavens, in company with Imam Husayn” and thus drawn close to God in a special way. This is especially so if one is able to make the visitation to Karbala at this time.

The fact is that only a small proportion of Shi'a Muslims are able to visit Karbala for the annual commemoration so a further element must be considered. In each community around the world, the commemoration takes place and people are united with the community gathered at Karbala and with one another in this meta-historical, universal sense. The reality of Karbala, we can say, interpenetrates with the present. As God is outside of time and space, so the Field of Karbala is present now to God, so the communities commemorating in every time and place are lifted into the presence of God in a special way. As all the prophets are also “in the presence of God” so there is a timeless union with creation from beginning to end in the supreme act of the martyrdom of Husayn, which binds humanity together. To focus this identity with

Karbala itself, replicas of the shrine (*rowzah*) are made and placed before the congregation gathered in this act of remembrance. These places of gathering within the Shi'a community are called *Imambargahs* and the term *Husayniyya* is used for places of honour within them where objects associated with the Karbala commemoration are placed. It is common in some Shi'a communities to find replicas of the shrines of other Imams, which are used in a similar way. Taking part in such a visitation, whether at the shrines themselves or in the various communities around the world, is a way for the Shi'a to present themselves before the Imams and pledge their allegiance and obedience to their teaching, it revitalises their personal devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt and reinforced their identity as their followers.