

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

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Part Eight: The rituals of birth and death

Children are a natural and welcome part of married human life and are a blessing from God. They are not surprisingly a source of great rejoicing within Muslim families! The act of sexual intercourse with the intention and hope of having a child is an act of particular spiritual character as it is God's way for the couple to open themselves to co-operate in the creation of a new life, if God so wills. Some Muslims will follow the practice of husband and wife praying two *rak'at* of prayer before beginning to make love as a sign of this disposition. Others will say the *Basmala* ("In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate") before making love. There is a Hadith of the Prophet in which it is recommended to recite: "In the name of God. O God, keep Shaytan away from us and keep Shaytan away from what you provide us with" as a way of invoking God's blessing on any child that is conceived and keeping away the attentions of the Tempter from that child.

Pregnant women will give special attention to their nutrition during pregnancy to assist in the formation of a healthy child and some schools of Islam recommend special *du'a* as the pregnancy continues, thus stimulating the awareness of the spiritual character of the new life as it develops. In the later stages of pregnancy, mothers may need to adjust their bodily positions during *salat*. The process of giving birth for human mothers brings with it a certain amount of pain, which is natural, although pain relief methods are embraced when they are required. Again, in some schools of Islam, particular *du'a* are recommended during the labour itself.

The birth of the new baby is marked with greetings and congratulations to the parents and the whole family. Importantly, the greetings are to be of equal magnitude if the child is a girl or a boy. In pre-Islamic Arab society, boys were more highly esteemed than girls and indeed sometimes female infanticide was practised; this was explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an and people were counselled to rely of God's providence to be able to raise all their children [Q. 16:57-59; 81:8-9]. As soon as the baby is washed and clothed, the father or another senior man from the family or community will whisper the call to prayer (*adhan*) into the baby's right ear and the call for prayer to begin (*iqama*) into the left ear. This awakens the Muslim spirituality of the child and is a reminder that all children are born *muslim* and have a right to be brought up in a godly way of life. Many Muslims then follow another custom traced back to Muhammad, which was to chew a date and put some of the date juice into the baby's mouth along with a prayer for the child. It is customary for family and friends to come with gifts and prayers of blessing for the new child and the parents.

Sacrifice and shaving the head

A week after the child's birth, two ceremonies are performed. The child's head is shaved and the hair weighed against silver or gold with the equivalent monetary value being given in charity to the poor and needy. The *'aqiqa* ceremony is also performed as an act of thanksgiving for the life of the new-born. One or two animals are slaughtered and the meat divided between the poor, neighbours and family with a portion being cooked on that occasion to create a festive meal for guests.

The giving of names

Giving the child a name is something required in the first week or so of life. Naming is complex in Muslim society. First the child has a given name, which might be formed from one of the Beautiful Names of God. For boys, this is done with the addition of the prefix *abd*, meaning "servant of," so: Abdullah, Servant of God, or Abd al-Rahman, Servant of the Most Merciful, for example. For girls, a derivative name is formed from one of these Beautiful Names, such as: Salma, from as-Salam, the Source of Peace, or Karima, from al-Karim, the Most Generous. Boys are often named after earlier prophets: Adam, Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), John (Yahya), or Jesus ('Isa), for example, or great men of piety in the Islamic tradition, such as Ali, Husayn or Salman, or after a particular quality, such as Amin, the Trustworthy. Likewise girls are given the names of exemplary women, such as Mary, Fatima, Zahra, Sara or Khadija. It is common for Muslim boys to be given the name Muhammad as an honorific but there will often be another given name by which he will be called, such as Muhammad Khalid. Finally, there are many names that are drawn from the cultures from which various Muslim communities come.

It is also common for a child to be named after her or his father, with the addition of *bint*, "daughter of," or *ibn*, "son of." So a boy might be called Abdullah ibn Musa (Abdullah the son of Musa) or a girl Karima bint Ahmad (Karima the daughter of Ahmad). This stresses the importance of knowing where one comes from as every child is entitled to know its birth parentage. This additional name is called a *nasab*. In later life, when the child becomes a parent in turn, another name might be given with the addition of *abu*, "father of," or *umm*, "mother of." So, in our earlier examples, Abdullah ibn Musa might be known as Abu Qasim and Karima bint Ahmad might be known as Umm Zaynab. This addition is called a *kunya*. Finally, some people acquire a nickname or *laqab*, after the place from which they come (al-Ghazali – from Ghazala), a profession (al-Hallaj – the wool-carder), a great centre of learning where they studied (al-Azhari – from the University of al-Azhar) or even from a distinctive feature or achievement.

Circumcision

It is part of the customary practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet Abraham that boys are circumcised by the removal of the foreskin from the penis. This has been taken into the practice of Islam and all boys are circumcised (*khitan*). It is normal that men who

convert to Islam are also circumcised although not all schools regard this as obligatory (*fard*) unless one is going to make the Hajj, when it is a requirement thus stressing the Abrahamic character of the pilgrimage. There is no prescribed age for this to be done and practices have varied considerably in different cultures around the world. In modern times, most Muslim boys are circumcised when they are babies provided that their health permits this. In developed countries, this will be done under medical supervision in sterile conditions with anaesthetic. It is customary that this will be the occasion for a festive gathering and meal.

There is a practice that can be traced back to the times of the Pharaohs in Egypt that is sometimes called “female circumcision” or in Arabic *khafd*, which is often known in the West as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This involves the cutting or removal, in varying degrees of severity, of the labia or clitoris. It is known amongst Muslim and Christian communities, and followers of African Traditional Religions, mainly in countries bordering the Sahara Desert and Sub-Saharan Africa. It is not an obligatory act in Islam: in some schools it is a recommended act, in others merely permitted and in other societies quite unknown. Some governments, like that of Egypt, have declared it to be illegal. In other countries, there is a movement away from it but it persists in some societies. In many western countries, it is illegal to perform or procure another to perform it.

The inevitability of death

It is a consequence of being born that we will all eventually die; nothing is more certain [Q. 28:88, 3:185]. Death is not a final end, in Islamic understanding, but rather the point of transition to the Afterlife or *Akhira*. As such, it is not something to be resisted or feared but rather something for which one should be prepared and to which one should be reconciled. The same applies to the relatives of someone who dies; Islam does not permit excessive grieving but encourages appropriate mourning. When it becomes clear that death is approaching, the dying person is turned if possible to face in the direction of the *ka'ba* – the *qibla* towards which they prayed in life. Chapter 36 of the Qur'an is particularly recommended to be recited in the hearing of the dying person at this time. It deals with the themes of death, resurrection and judgement and is understood as a plea for the forgiveness of sins. The basic creed or *shahada* is recited repeatedly so that it fills the consciousness of the dying person. This reminds them of the centrality of belief in God alone and the prophethood of Muhammad. When the person has been buried, they enter into another dimension called *barzakh* (often called “life in the grave”), at the beginning of which the dead person will be questioned by angels about what it was that they believed; thus the repetition of the *shahada* acts as a final reminder.

Preparing the body for burial

Once death has occurred, the deceased person should be prepared for burial as soon as possible. This preparation consists of washing and shrouding the body. The dignity of the dead person is respected in that they are washed by people of the same sex

(except that the living marriage partner may wash their dead spouse) with a sheet held over the body so that one does not gaze on their nakedness. Different schools of Islam have particular traditions about the number of washings and additions to the water that is used. It is normal that the final washing is performed with water to which camphor has been added. The body is arranged for burial and the bodily openings are sealed. It is then shrouded in plain cloth; some Muslims follow the custom of shrouding a man who has performed the Hajj in the cloths worn by him on pilgrimage (*ihram*). Some will perform the shrouding in such a way that the face can be uncovered for a final farewell glance. Someone who is held to be a martyr, i.e., someone who has been killed in the cause of God, is not washed but rather it is held that they have been purified through their martyrdom and destined for Paradise [Q. 3:169-172, 195].

It is customary to bury the deceased as soon as possible after death; traditionally this would have been the same day, if there is sufficient daylight to complete the burial, or the next day. Delay is to be avoided if at all possible as, in some sense, the person is not at ease until they have been buried. It is customary for the shrouded body not to be left alone between death and burial with the watchers reciting verses from the Qur'an and prayers. In societies where there is an inevitable delay due to legal procedures or the logistics of having a grave opened, it has become normal for mortuary facilities to be provided. If the law absolutely requires an autopsy, then this should be conducted as quickly as possible and with the minimum of interference with the body. In some countries and circumstances, it is possible to do this in a non-invasive way through the use of an MRI scanner. The use of a coffin is not customary but rather the shrouded body is placed on a bier to be carried to the grave; the law in certain countries requires the use of a coffin and Muslims must comply with this.

Preparing the grave

It is customary to bury people in the place where they died but some people are transported to their home place for burial. If this requires a long journey, then some form of embalming will be required. Some Muslim scholars discourage this process on account of the delay involved, the interference with the body and the substances used in embalming. Cremation is not a valid alternative for Muslims; people are to be buried in the earth or, in some geographical conditions, in rock tombs. A grave is used for one person only unless there is some exceptional circumstance, such as an epidemic, when some scholars will permit multiple use of graves. In some parts of the world, it is customary to re-use burial ground some years after burial if this is necessary. The general norm is that graves are not disturbed but the person allowed to rest in peace until the Day of Resurrection.

The grave is dug in such a way that when someone is laid in it on their right side, they are facing in the direction of the *ka'ba* in Makka. It is customary to dig a niche in the bottom of the grave to allow someone to arrange the body in this way. Once placed in the grave, the body may be covered with wooden boards or earth bricks before the grave is re-filled by mourners.

The funeral

If distances allow, the body will be taken in procession to the place where the funeral prayers are to be conducted. Dead bodies are not taken into the prayer hall of a mosque but funeral prayers were traditionally conducted in the open air in the courtyard in front of the mosque. When weather conditions make this impracticable, some mosques have built special funerary facilities within the mosque but outside the prayer hall so that those taking part in the prayers can stand in the prayer hall whilst the body rests beyond its bounds but close by.

The funeral prayers themselves or *salat al-janaza* are led by a senior member of the family or the mosque imam. The structure is similar to other *salat* comprising recitation of the Qur'an, the invocation of God's blessings on the Prophet and his family and prayers for God's mercy upon the deceased. The body is placed in front of the assembly, so they remain standing throughout, there is no prostration. It is a duty laid upon the whole Muslim community to bury the dead, which can be discharged if a group of Muslims perform it (*fard kifaya*). Many people will try to be present for these prayers to invoke God's blessings on the deceased, so funeral gatherings tend to be large.

After the funeral prayers, the body is taken in procession to the burial place. There is no show of excessive mourning or wailing. In some schools of Islam it is not customary for women to accompany the body to the grave. The body is placed into the grave and the mourners pray for the deceased. The grave is then filled in before the assembly breaks up with a final prayer. Mourners are often slow to withdraw from the graveyard but remain to offer additional individual prayers. In some societies, men will spend the first night in the graveyard near the newly buried person reciting from the Qur'an as the person can no longer do this for themselves.

After the burial

It is normal that the loss of a family member will require a period of time of adjustment and mourning. It is good Muslim practice to visit the bereaved family to offer condolences and expressions of sympathy and support. By tradition, bereaved families do not cook or entertain during the mourning period; rather friends and neighbours will prepare food and attend to guests. The mourning period depends on local custom but should not be too extended. People must be helped to return to the realities of life. A widow observes a period of *idda* after the death of her husband, this is a time of mourning but also waiting to see if she is pregnant from him or not. This lasts for four lunar months and ten days. She will dress in a reserved way during this period, at the end of which, she is permitted to re-marry should she so desire.

Graves are customarily mounded to prevent people walking over them. A simple grave marker is erected bearing the dead person's name. Ostentatious gravestones are not approved of in Islam and some schools will not mark the grave at all. It is

customary to visit the graves of deceased family members periodically and to offer prayers and recite verses of the Qur'an.