

Understanding Islam

Series II: Standing before God

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

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Part One: Three forms of prayer

Why did God create human beings? The Qur'an answers the question by saying that God created human beings for no other reason than that we should worship God [Q. 51:56]. From this statement, two points emerge: first, that we should worship God alone and nothing else, and second, that human beings fulfil their highest reason for existence in worshipping God.

All human worship is to be focussed on God alone [Q. 112], as is made clear by the *shahada*, the principal statement of faith: "I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Nothing else is worthy of worship instead of God, or in addition to God, or in partnership with God. This obviously rules out the worship of idols, multiple or local gods, semi-divine people, and things that were worshipped by our ancestors. It also rules out modern-day idols, such as money, power, ideology, racial superiority or military might. This is not just a one-off declaration. Muslims need to consider whether their work serves God or something else. Do our financial or political practices serve God? Am I serving God in my family relations or are there other values at work?

The worship of God (*ibada*) is a wide term in Islamic thought. We can speak of turning to God in obedience, service and love, through actions, words, thoughts and feelings. In other words, to worship God is to bring the whole of human life in all its facets and actions under the sovereignty of God in conformity with the revealed ethical divine will. Two key virtues are linked with this: *taqwa* and *sabr*. The whole of life, all our religious practices, are a training ground in *taqwa*, which we can translate as God-consciousness: that I may be aware in every element of my life, words, actions and thoughts, that I am the creature of God, that God has given me a high vocation to serve, love, obey and worship God, that I am accountable to God and that, even though I cannot see God, God sees me all the time. The modern Arabic word for vaccination is drawn from the same root as *taqwa*. We can see that part of the meaning is about protection. If we were able to live fully God-conscious all the time, then we would be protected from sin. There would be no room for the devil to enter in. To live constantly fully conscious of God is *ihsan* – "to live as though you see God, for even though you cannot now see God, God sees you." This is the goal of human life but it is not necessarily an easy or smooth path, therefore the struggle needs patience (*sabr*) and perseverance.

Because human beings were created for the worship of God, we can say that, to be fully human requires that one is worshipping God. Worship, as we have seen, carries with it the dispositions of service and obedience, and it is motivated by love.

Prayer at the heart of the worship of God

Prayer is central to the worship of God and Muslims are commanded to perform the formal prayer (*salat*) five times each day. This forms the backbone of a day spent in the worship of God. The whole day is punctuated by *salat* so that never more than a few hours go by without the Muslim turning to God in prayer. We will explore this in more detail in the next article but it is the prayer with which we are all familiar from TV pictures where Muslims line up in ranks and stand, bow, kneel and prostrate before God. The climax of *salat* is the prostration, in which Muslim men and women place their foreheads and hands on the floor before God in an act of total humility and submission. As the climax of prayer, we can see this as the moment in which the human being is most fully engaged in the worship of God. This is the ultimate disposition of the human being in relation to God: heart, mind and body in total submission.

The actions of Muslims in *salat* tell us a good deal about the God-human relationship:

- God is all-merciful and always willing to forgive those who acknowledge their sin and turn to God seeking forgiveness: the preparation for prayer gives each person the opportunity to consider their lives, recollect their sins and bring them before God for forgiveness.
- God is concerned about every human being both individually and collectively: *salat* can be performed alone but is best performed in congregation with others in which everyone is conscious of their responsibility towards the whole community (*umma*).
- God has provided guidance to humankind on the way in which human life should be lived, most particularly in the Qur'an: passages from the Qur'an are recited during every *salat* so that worshippers are reminded afresh of that guidance.
- God is close to every human being and wants us to be aware of that closeness and concern: *salat* acts as a conduit through which we can receive and experience forgiveness and devotion to God. It is like a river of mercy into which worshippers immerse themselves and experience the balm of God's presence.
- God has sent Muhammad as the last prophet and perfect example of a godly way of life: each *salat* includes the invocation of God's blessings upon Muhammad and his family. This reminds the believer of their gratitude to Muhammad and his family, who should be imitated by all who would worship, obey, serve and love God.
- God has no favourites but has sent a chain of prophets to all humankind to call us to a godly way of life: Muslims are reminded of this in the invocation of God's blessings on Abraham and his family.
- God is present always and everywhere: in recognition of this, the only fitting human response is to lay one's head and hands; the "best parts" of the human being, the parts with which we think and act, on the floor in humility, submission, love and gratitude.

Salat is the highpoint of the Muslim way of prayer and should be performed by each Muslim five times every day with full recollection and consciousness of what it entails but there are intervals between formal prayers during which one can become forgetful and so Muslims seek other means to build up their relationship with God and promote a sense of *taqwa*; these additional forms of prayer are *du'a* and *dhikr*.

Talking to God

Du'a is informal prayer. It is the believer talking to God or making a petition or supplication. This can happen in any language, at any time, in any place. There are *du'a* found in the Qur'an and in the sayings of Muhammad. Holy people of earlier generations left collections of their *du'a*. Muslims can simply use their own words to talk to God. *Du'a* cover every aspect of life: prayers of praise, glorifying God, thanksgiving, seeking forgiveness and intercessions. They can be thought of as raising the mind to God throughout the day to dedicate every action to the worship of God. The most commonly used *du'a* is simply to say *Bismillah*: "In the name of God". If every thought, word and action during the day is truly *Bismillah*, then this pushes up our level of *taqwa* and keeps us away from sin.

There are books of *du'a* that have been assembled in various schools of Islam over the centuries. They include prayers to be offered at times of crisis, such as droughts or floods, at times of natural happenings, such as eclipses or disasters, as well as at all the celebrations that mark out the key points of the life-cycle: birth, the stages of a child's life, marriage, death and so on. *Du'a* are included for all aspects of life: in time of temptation or fear, before setting off on a journey, before embarking on work or study, at the beginning and end of the day, and so on. *Du'a* can be made individually or collectively; times of congregational *salat* end with collective *du'a* and some communities have the practice of meeting at regular times, such as each Thursday night, to recite *du'a* together.

Some examples of *du'a* are:

From the Qur'an [Q. 2:255] the Throne Verse:

God—there is no god except Him—
is the Living One, the All-sustainer.
Neither drowsiness befalls Him nor sleep.
To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens
and whatever is on the earth.
Who is it that may intercede with Him
except with His permission?
He knows that which is before them
and that which is behind them,
and they do not comprehend
anything of His knowledge
except what He wishes.
His seat embraces the heavens and the earth,

and He is not wearied by their preservation,
and He is the All-exalted, the All-supreme.

From the Hadith of Muhammad:

O God. You are my Lord. There is no god except you. You have created me. I am your servant and I will observe my commitment to you and will keep my promise to you. I take refuge against the evil of my deeds and actions. I admit that I have sinned. Forgive me O Lord. There is none other that can grant forgiveness.

A blessing upon the Prophet:

O God, bless Muhammad, your Servant and your Messenger, and bless every believer, man and woman, and every Muslim, man and woman.

A prayer of repentance:

I seek forgiveness of God, the Great, and turn to Him. I call God as my witness, together with all His angels, and His prophets, and His messengers, and the bearers of His throne, and all His creatures, that I repent of my past sins and vices, and I acknowledge them. I am resolved not to repeat them, and I commit myself to this before God, the Almighty, with a thousand promises around my neck which will be claimed from me on the day of the resurrection. May God's blessing be upon Muhammad and his progeny.

Prayer in the morning:

I begin this day with the name of God, in the company of whose name nothing in the heavens and the earth can bring harm, and he is All-hearing, All-knowing.

When someone is going on a journey:

May God bless you with the provision of *taqwa* and may he forgive your sins and keep you turned towards whatever is good wherever you go.

When visiting the sick:

O Lord of humankind, send suffering away and restore health. You are the healer. There is no healing other than the healing that you would bless someone with, a healing that would leave no trace of sickness behind.

When someone is marrying:

May God make this marriage happy and fortunate for you and may he bestow his blessings on you and may he keep the two of you together in whatever is good.

Prayer of the heart

Dhikr is training our hearts to remember God continuously [Q. 33:41-42]. It is the raising of our hearts to God by repeating the beautiful names of God and other short

prayers. When our bodies and minds are doing other things, our hearts can be singing God's praises. This is recommended for all Muslims but the sufis or mystics have developed special methods to lead people into such remembrance. Simple prayers, like the Arabic name of God, Allah, are recited. First by the lips. Then the breath takes up the prayer. Then it begins to enter deeper within us to our hearts. Eventually our whole being can be praising God. This pushes up our level of *taqwa* even though we are not conscious of this deeper "remembrance" of God.

Dhikr can be done individually or collectively. Many Muslims will repeat thirty-three times each: all glory be to God – *Subhan Allah*, all praise be to God – *al-Hamdu lillah*, and God is the greatest – *Allahu Akbar* at the end of each prayer session but it is also recommended frequently during the day. The sufis meet in a gathering or circle for *dhikr*.

Some lines of *dhikr* which would be repeated in Arabic:

God is present with me
God sees me
God is a witness to me
God is with me
God is my helper
And he encompasses everything.

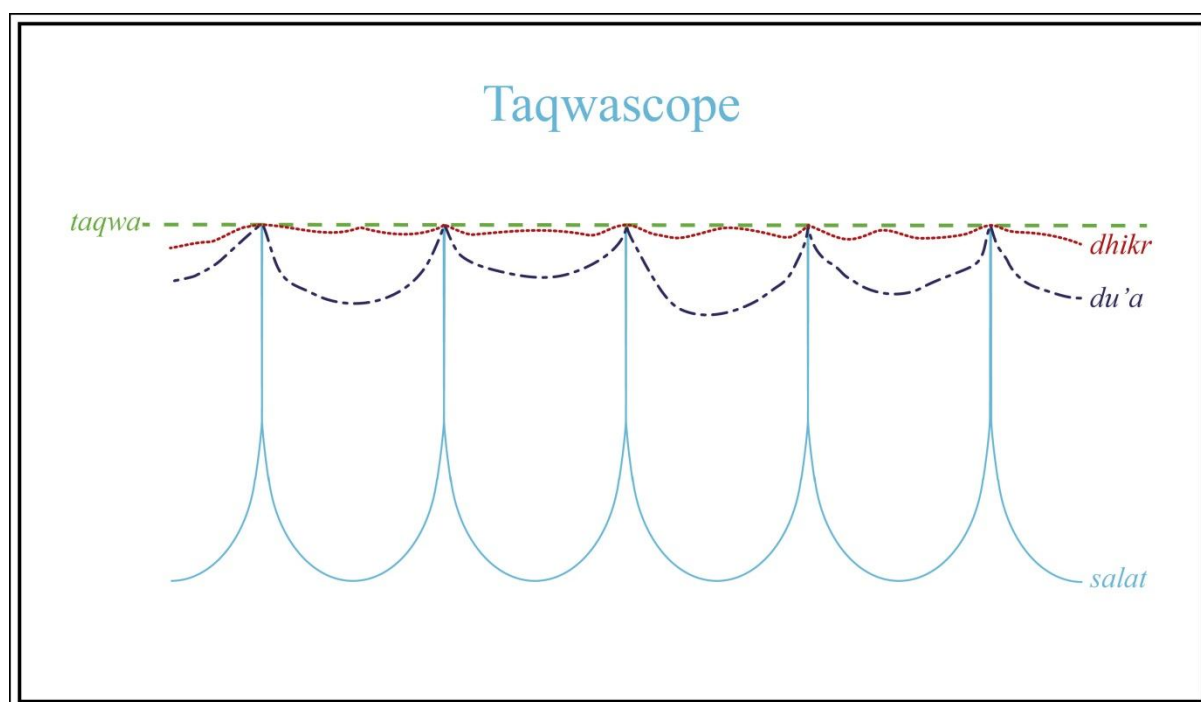
Prayer is a transforming process. It raises our level of *taqwa* until, God willing, we reach the permanent state of "living as though we see God" (*ihsan*). Over the centuries, Muslims have developed ways of training the heart to remember God and facilitate this process of transformation. Through this transformation, the believer ascends in closeness to God just as Muhammad ascended on his night journey and ascent into heaven. God has more names than we could know but there is a famous list of ninety-nine beautiful names, which are found in the Qur'an and Hadith. Each name speaks of a quality of God. Through taking these names deep within our hearts, these qualities can begin to shine through us. Some of these names are: Most-merciful, All-forgiving, Giver of Peace, Most-gracious, All-knowing, the Truth, and the Trusted Friend.

An example of a session of *dhikr* based on the beautiful names of God in which each line would be repeated in Arabic, with the breath and movement, typically fifty times each:

O God, O Ever-living, O Eternal
O God, God is my master
O He
O Ever-living
O One
O Invincible
O Loving
O Gracious
O Merciful

Putting the three forms together

The following diagramme shows a “*taqwascop*e”. It is a way of showing how the three forms of prayer combine to push up and maintain our levels of *taqwa* during the day. The solid line with five peaks shows the skeleton of our daily *salat*. The broken line at the top is the line of *taqwa*. We reach *taqwa* at the climax of our daily *salat*. Unfortunately, we get distracted by other things and drift into a trough of forgetfulness. Never more than a few hours go by before we are called again to seek forgiveness and guidance and enter again into the state of *taqwa*. The line with dashes shows the troughs being pushed up through our *du'a*. This raises our level of *taqwa* between formal prayers. The dotted line finally shows our heart at work making *dhikr*, to keep us closer to *taqwa* all through the day.



Part Two: Focus on *salat*

During the early years of the Muslim community in Makka, Muhammad was taken on his mysterious night journey to Jerusalem, from where he ascended into heaven and had an audience with God (*mi'raj*). One of the things that he was told on this occasion was that Muslims should pray the *salat* five times each day. The form of the *salat* was shown to him by the angel Gabriel. Observing the *salat* is a central, obligatory element of Islam for all men and women after the age of puberty, although many young children will catch the habit much earlier.

The *salat* is always performed in Arabic and has the same basic form world-wide. This is part of the universal character of Islam, so that a Muslim could join a congregation anywhere on earth and be at home. There are minor variations between the different schools of Islam but the basic structure is common. The use of Arabic means that even those who do not know the language will learn the prayers phonetically and appreciate their meaning in their own language. Similarly, when the Qur'an is recited during *salat*, it must be done in Arabic and from memory not read from a book, which means that every Muslim who is active in prayer will have learnt some verses of the Qur'an in Arabic by heart.

Prayer times

The times for *salat* are set according to the passage of the sun. This means that Muslims do not need to be rich enough to own a watch or be able to read one; everyone can see the sun moving through the sky. In the same way, no adult needs someone else to tell them when it is time for prayer; each is responsible for their own observance without the prompting of a religious leader. These are two signs of the equality of human beings in Islam. Many mosques now publish prayer timetables as times change from week to week according to the seasons of the year. As the sun rises and sets at different times in different places, a prayer timetable must be worked out for each location.

The five times for *salat* are:

Salat al-Fajr before sunrise

Salat al-Zuhr a little after the sun has passed its midpoint

Salat al-'Asr in the late afternoon when the shadows lengthen

Salat al-Maghrib directly after sunset

Salat al-'Isha at night-time.

For each *salat*, there is flexibility about the precise timing. This allows people to arrange their lives so that the prayers naturally fit it. It is a principle of Islamic law that God does not want to make life difficult for people [Q. 2:185, 286]. The various schools of Islam have rules about how these prayers can be grouped together (e.g., the Shi'a habitually combine the five prayers into three occasions but Sunnis only permit this in exceptional circumstances), shortened (e.g., when travelling) or caught up if they have to be delayed, depending on circumstances. *Salat* can be performed alone

or together with others. Fulfilling the duty as part of a congregation does have additional blessings and benefits, being an occasion for communal meeting and support. If people are going to join the congregation in a mosque, then there needs to be an agreed time, which is usually at the start of the allowable period, so that people know when to attend. These times of prayer are drawn to people's attention by the call to prayer or *adhan*. This is called in Arabic from a tower or *minaret* by a man called a *mu'azzin*. These days this can be done with loud-speakers and some mosques even play a beautiful recording. Even if people do not stop what they are doing for prayer, the *adhan* acts as a reminder that they should pray. For example, in some schools of Islam, the *adhan* for the early-morning prayer includes the line "Prayer is better than sleep."

There are minor variations in the form of the *adhan* between the different schools of Islam but the basic formula is as follows, with each line being repeated:

Allahu akbar – God is most great

Ashhadu an la ilaha illa allah – I bear witness that there is no god but God

Ashhadu anna muhammadan rasul allah – I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God

Hayya 'ala al-salat – Hurry to prayer

Hayya 'ala al-falah – Hurry to success

Allahu akbar – God is most great

La ilaha illa allah – There is no god but God

The place and direction of prayer

Muhammad said that the whole world is a mosque and this spirit still survives in the fact that any place can be used for prayer – as long as it is clean [Q. 2:115, 177]. "Clean" here in two senses: it does not have an unclean use, like a toilet, and it is physically swept out and cleaned. We often associate prayer mats with Muslim prayer and these are used to transform a space into a clean surface for prayer. If someone is going to pray in the office, on a floor on which people walk with their street shoes, then the prayer mat can be rolled out so that it can be used for prayer. Mosques are usually carpeted and shoes removed to maintain their cleanliness. In many cultures around the world, Muslims leave their shoes at the door of the house so that all the carpets can be kept clean for prayer. Sunni Muslims prostrate directly onto the carpet but Shi'a men and women prostrate so that their foreheads rest on a small tablet of dry unbaked clay, called a *turba*. This dates back to the time of Muhammad when people would take a small portion of the sand or pebbles on which they were to pray and cool it by running it through their hands, then making a little mound and using it for prostration so that their foreheads would not be burnt. Many *turba* today are made from the clay of Karbala in Iraq where Imam Husayn and his companions were massacred.

Salat is performed facing in the direction of the *ka'ba* in Makka. Direction in Arabic is *qibla*. Muslims find the *qibla* by using a compass and then mark it for the future, whether in a mosque, at home or at work. All over the world Muslims turn towards the

ka'ba for prayer. This means that the *ka'ba* is like the hub at the centre of a wheel. Worshippers are united by this orientation and there are traditions that speak of a heavenly *ka'ba* corresponding to that in Makka. Prayers are timed by the passage of the sun, which is rising and setting somewhere on earth at every minute. This means that there is no moment in any day when there are not Muslims somewhere on earth turning towards the *ka'ba* in prayer. Not just today but back through history and on into the future. Each time that Muslims turn to face the *ka'ba*, they are united with all other Muslims on earth, in heaven and throughout the ages. This united community of believers is called the Muslim *umma*. *Salat* raises awareness of the *umma* and reminds people of their responsibility for one another.

In the early period in Makka, Muhammad and (sometimes) the infant Muslim community would assemble for prayer at the *ka'ba*. When they moved to Madina, an area was set aside for prayer and Muhammad orientated his congregation towards Jerusalem until a verse of the Qur'an was revealed that set the *qibla* on the *ka'ba* [Q. 2:144]. This then became the communal place for people to assemble for *salat*. This set a pattern of praying in congregation with others; in Madina these prayers were led by Muhammad himself unless he named a substitute during periods of absence. Chaos and individualism in congregational *salat* are disliked in Islam; when two or more people gather to pray, one leads and the others follow. This applies anywhere, not just in a mosque. One of the particular responsibilities given to married women in Muslim society is to establish the rhythm of prayer at home, where they may be joined by other women and children from the family. This not only invokes God's blessing on the home but it also sets a pattern for young children to join in and adopt. This is not to suggest that women should not attend the mosque, quite the opposite, they have had their own place in the mosque since the time of the Prophet in Madina.

Preparation for prayer

Just as the place of prayer must be clean, so must the worshipper – both physically and ritually. Physically, the body in general must be cleaned if necessary by, for example, showering or bathing. Under particular circumstances, e.g., after sexual activity or menstrual bleeding, ritual cleansing requires a full bath (*ghusl*). At other times ritual cleansing is achieved by washing or *wudu* – of the hands, face (mouth, nose, ears), head, arms and feet, although the precise manner varies between the different schools of Islam. There are washing facilities in the mosque for this purpose. This is symbolic in the sense that it involves cleansing the parts of the body that we use as part of our working lives, and thus breaking off to spend time with God. We might also use these parts to commit sin and so the washing gives us a chance to think of those things for which we need to ask God's forgiveness. The state of being ritually clean is broken by various bodily activities, such as sleeping, visiting the toilet or vomiting. It is possible to retain a ritually clean state from one prayer time to another provided that it has not been broken by any of these activities. If water is not available for *wudu* or if someone's illness prevents its use, then a ritually clean state is attained by dry ablutions (*tayammum*). This involves striking the hands on clean dust, sand or stone and then wiping them on the face, hands and forearms.

The final preparation for *salat* is a pure intention. Muslims silently declare their intention (*niyya*) to draw closer to God through an act of obedience and generally indicate the nature of the prayer that they are about to perform, i.e., obligatory (*fard*) or an act of devotion following the custom of Muhammad (*sunna*), before each prayer begins.

The form of *salat*

Each obligatory (*fard*) *salat* is made up of a number of cycles of prayer or *rak'at*. The number of these varies depending on the time of day:

Salat al-Fajr before sunrise – two cycles

Salat al-Zuhr a little after the sun has passed its midpoint – four cycles

Salat al-'Asr in the late afternoon when the shadows lengthen – four cycles

Salat al-Maghrib directly after sunset – three cycles

Salat al-'Isha at night-time – four cycles

Each *rak'a* comprises recitation of the Qur'an, bodily postures and prayers, said aloud or silently. The sequence is:

1. Raising of the hands in a gesture of submission and withdrawal from the world, accompanied by the words *Allahu akbar* (God is most great)
2. Recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an
3. Recitation of a selection of verses from the Qur'an
4. Bowing from the waist to acknowledge the guidance of God in the Qur'an, the worshipper saying in Arabic, 'All glory be to my Lord, the Greatest' (three times)
5. Standing in silent prayer in praise of God
6. The first prostration with the forehead and palms of the hands placed on the floor in submission to God during which the worshipper says 'All glory to my Lord, the Highest' (three times). To prostrate with the head, hands, knees and feet on the floor before God is the ultimate sign of humility and submission.
7. Sitting back on the feet
8. A second prostration of praise and glorifying God
9. Returning to a standing position

Surat al-Fatiha (the opening chapter of the Qur'an) reads as follows:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Praise be to God, the Lord of Creation,

The Compassionate, the Merciful,

Master of the Day of Judgement.

You alone do we worship and to you alone we pray for help.

Guide us to the Straight Path,

The path of those whom you have favoured,

Not of those who have incurred your wrath,

Nor of those who have gone astray.

At the end of the prescribed number of *rak'at*, the Muslim recites the two-part statement of faith (*shahada*): "I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God," and calls for God's blessings upon Muhammad and his family and Abraham and his family.

At the end, the *salat* concludes with the worshippers greeting their immediate neighbours with *al-Salamu alaykum* (Peace be with you) and this is extended to the angels and the whole of creation. It is customary that there now follows a time of intercession (*du'a*).

Final points

The verses recited from the Qur'an are always in Arabic and must be spoken from memory and not read from a book. Every Muslim is required to have memorised some verses of Qur'an in order to be able to pray. The more one has in one's memory, then the wider the selection that can be made. New Muslims are encouraged to attend congregational prayer where the *imam* recites on behalf of all. The length of each period of recitation is determined by the person praying, provided that it is more than three verses. Those who have more time at their disposal are at liberty to include longer portions. Those leading congregational prayers are encouraged not to lengthen the Qur'anic recitation unduly so as not to inconvenience those who pray with them but do not have so much free time. Each *salat* will last in the order of five to ten minutes, giving a combined total during the day of around forty-five minutes.

The performance of *salat* is obligatory and should not be abandoned, even if physical movement is limited. Someone who needs to remain seated for *salat* can indicate prostration by moving their upper body; someone who needs to lie down can move an arm; ultimately even the movement of an eyelid will suffice, with the right intention.

Many Muslims follow the customary example of Muhammad (*sunna*) and perform additional voluntary (*nawafil*) prayers before and after *salat*. These take the same form but it was the practice of Muhammad to change his position to indicate that these were not obligatory and so Muslims follow this example and move to another position after the end of formal prayers. The precise number and arrangement of these additional voluntary prayers varies from one school of Islam to another.

The *Salat al-Jum'a* or Friday Prayer is the principal congregational prayer of the week and is celebrated collectively, with everyone gathering at main mosques if at all possible. It replaces the normal prayer in the middle of the day but the prayer is shortened so that an address or *khutba* can be given by a *khatib* or learned person. Friday is not a day of rest in Muslim societies and people go back to work after prayers.

Part Three: The mosque in the life of Muslims

During the early years in Makka, Muhammad had made his private prayers at the corner of the *ka'ba* so that he was facing through the *ka'ba* towards Jerusalem, the city associated with the earlier Abrahamic line of prophets. At times, when the idol-worshipping guardians of the *ka'ba* had permitted it, some of the early Muslim community would join him there for congregational prayers. Sometimes they gathered in the courtyard of Muhammad's house in Makka and some of the early Muslims, notably Abu Bakr, had a small place set aside at home for prayer.

When Muhammad made his own migration (*hijra*) from Makka to Madina, he travelled by camel with his companion Abu Bakr. As they approached Madina, they rested for some days in an outlying village. When Muhammad entered Madina, there were offers of hospitality but the tradition records that he allowed his camel to wander freely until it stopped at a neglected piece of ground covered with palm trees that had been used as a burial ground. This was owned by a couple of orphans, from whom Muhammad purchased the site to be transformed into his personal and community quarters. The trees and grave markers were cleared and two small houses were built for his then two wives, Sawda and Ayesha. The courtyard alongside these houses became the place where the community assembled for prayer and other communal activities. This was transformed into the Prophet's mosque. The Arabic term for mosque, *masjid*, literally means a place of prostration; the climax of the formal *salat*.

Mud bricks were baked in the sun to construct the walls surrounding the courtyard and three gates were made to allow access. In this way, the area was kept clean from wandering animals and marked out for communal use. The houses were on the east side of the courtyard and eventually additional similar simple houses were built for Muhammad's subsequent wives. To the north side of the courtyard, the side facing towards Jerusalem, some palm trunks were set up to provide a shelter, which was roofed with palm leaves. The floor was left as the original dust although later this was strewn with pebbles to help keep it clean. Muhammad is reported to have used a mat of palm leaves for prayer and from this developed cloth mats and eventually carpets on the floors of mosques.

Setting the direction for prayer

For the first sixteen months in Madina, Muhammad orientated his community for prayer towards Jerusalem. When he addressed them, he would stand with his back to one of the palm trunks of the north-facing shelter. When the verse setting the direction for prayer (*qibla*) towards the *ka'ba* in Makka was revealed [Q. 2:144], Muhammad re-orientated his congregation towards the *ka'ba* from then onwards. This revelation did not occur in the Prophet's mosque but in another mosque in Madina, which is called to this day "The Mosque of the Two Qiblas." After this, another shelter of palm trunks roofed with palm leaves was built on the south side of the Prophet's mosque from where he led the communal prayers. The shelter on the north side became the *suffa* where poor and homeless Muslims could gather and lodge and

where they were fed. This was the location of those who sought Muhammad's training in spiritual matters, the sufis.

The centre of community life

The Prophet's mosque became the communal meeting place for the Muslim community. They gathered there for prayer but also for community meetings and to receive instruction from him. Visiting delegations were received there, including non-Muslims. Sometimes tents were erected there for shelter and those wounded in battle were brought there to be cared for. Sometimes even prisoners were tied up there. People would sit on the floor, sometimes resting their backs against the walls, and food was often served there. It was the place where Muhammad would proclaim new verses of the Qur'an as they were revealed.

The centrality of the mosque in the life of the community can be seen as Muslim rule spread to new territories. The first thing to be built in newly acquired territory was a mosque, which was normally just a cleared space with walls of sun-dried bricks and a roof of grass or leaves. Such mosques became associated with the base commander's house and the place where he held court, after the pattern of the Prophet's mosque in Madina. As time went by, such mosques were improved in structure with the walls being plastered and stonework included, depending on locally available materials. As Muslim rule spread to places where Christians predominated, it was not unusual for churches to be divided so that part of the building was used as a mosque with the remainder continuing to serve as a church. This can be seen in the church dedicated to John the Baptist in Damascus. In some places, fire temples and suchlike were transformed into mosques. It became common in Palestine for mosques to be built or converted in places associated with biblical figures such as Abraham. The second caliph, Umar, notably declined to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, so that it could be retained by the Christians, but instead he built a mosque on the former Temple Mount, then a piece of waste ground; the al-Aqsa Mosque. Eventually, mosques were built at places around Makka and Madina where history recorded that Muhammad had prayed.

There were several mosques in Madina in Muhammad's time. These were located in the settlements occupied by the various clans, who would gather there for daily prayers and communal meetings. On Friday, for the principal Friday Prayer in the middle of the day, people would leave their own settlements and gather instead in the Prophet's mosque, where he would address them. On major festivals or 'Id gatherings, the whole community would gather with Muhammad at a larger open air location. This established a pattern that became common in Muslim societies of smaller day-to-day mosques in households or neighbourhoods. The largest mosque in the town would become the Friday Mosque, where people gathered each week. If the town was small and one Friday Mosque could be constructed large enough to hold them all, then there would only be one congregation for Friday Prayer. If the town were larger, then more Friday Mosques would be built as required. Many villages and towns identified a field or open piece of ground where everyone would gather for 'Id

prayers. The ultimate gathering of the Muslim community was the annual Hajj pilgrimage, which would take place on the Plain of Arafat outside Makka.

The various functions served by the Prophet's mosque set the pattern for mosque usage in Muslim societies. They would be places of congregational and private prayer. The community would gather there for meetings and in times of crisis. Mosques were places of education where people could hear the Qur'an recited and receive instruction. Eventually a chair was installed for the principal scholar; the origin of the professorial "chair." They were the natural places to which people would go who were in need of wise counsel or had a problem on which they needed a ruling. Strangers would head for the mosque and could sleep there if nowhere else could be found. Poor people would go there for assistance. Those wishing to gather together for the remembrance of God, the *dhikr* circles of the sufis, would meet there. It was a practice of Muhammad to spend nights in seclusion in the mosque; this was the origin of the practice of *i'tikaf* during the last ten days of Ramadan. Mosques were clearly respected as places set aside for prayer and communal usage but they were not "consecrated space" as in some other religions. Muhammad is reported to have said that "the whole world is my mosque." The tradition grew up of entering the mosque with the right foot first and of visitors performing two *rak'at* of prayer on entering the mosque; a practice based on Muhammad's own *sunna* when he returned from a journey.

The community at prayer

The whole community, men and women, met in the Prophet's mosque throughout his time in Madina. The men would pray towards the front of the mosque and the women behind them. A separate doorway was constructed so that the women could enter and leave the mosque without being jostled by the men. Such a pattern was widely copied in other places and, after a couple of centuries, we read of such women's sections being separated by a rope to mark them out. This led to the various layouts of mosques that we see around the world today. Some congregations gather in the one space with the men to the front and the women behind to preserve modesty and prevent people being distracted whilst at prayer. As architectural styles developed, two-room mosques were built with men and women having parallel prayer rooms side-by-side divided by a wall, partition or curtain. With appropriate building techniques, women's galleries became common with separate entrances, staircases and washing facilities. The principle was that the community gathered as one congregation but with the sexes physically separated; all prayed in the same way behind one common prayer leader with everyone facing towards the *ka'ba*.

The prayer leader stands at the front in the middle of the men's section, then the men line up in a straight rank behind him until the first row is completely full. Then the second row starts from the middle and fills to both side walls, and so on until all the men are accommodated. They stand touching shoulder to shoulder and in some schools of Islam, the sides of the feet touch also. To make it easier to keep the rows straight, mosque carpets often have a design woven into them with prominent straight

lines running across the room. The women form their ranks in just the same way depending on the layout of the mosque. By tradition, there are no reserved places for political or religious leaders, although there were times in history when political leaders had their own protected areas. The tight rows of men and women at prayer, irrespective of social, economic, family or educational status is one of the signs of the equality of all human beings, which is a central tenet of Islam. Children old enough to control themselves can be seen joining in the ranks even if they have not yet mastered the precise prayer ritual.

The proximity of people at prayer and thus the potential for distraction if standing touching a member of the opposite sex is the principal reason for men and women praying as one congregation but in two physical blocks. The only time that it is common to see men and women standing immediately side-by-side is on the Hajj pilgrimage when the crowds make separation impossible (although there is part of the mosque around the *ka'ba* reserved just for women) and pilgrims should have their minds set on higher things. In a similar way, the custom of the women praying behind the men (with a gap between the two blocks) prevents men from being distracted by gazing at women standing in front of them. To promote this sense of freedom from distraction, the practice is for worshippers to fix their eyes on the place on the floor where their heads will come to rest in prostration.

Inside the mosque

No representations of human or animal forms are permitted in the mosque; nothing is to be worshipped save God alone. Mosques tend to be plain in decoration so that nothing distracts from the worship of God. It is common to find verses of the Qur'an and the basic statement of faith: "There is no god save God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God," in beautiful calligraphy around the inner walls of the mosque. Sometimes there might be geometrical pattern-work either painted or executed in ceramic tiles.

People sit on the floor except when they are engaged in *salat* so there will be no chairs, except perhaps for a few for those who have difficulty in sitting on the floor. Copies of the Qur'an are generally made available and stands for people to rest them on whilst reading. It is common to find some strings of beads (*tasbeih*) for the use of those who wish to make repetitive prayers.

Washing facilities for men and women to perform *wudu* and toilets are located either within the mosque building itself or adjacent to it. Modern times have seen the introduction of access provision for disabled people and lifts to take them to the different floors. Facilities for babies and small children are to be found near the women's quarters.

When a mosque is purpose-built, one wall will face directly towards the *ka'ba*; this is called the *qibla* wall. Mosques tend to be built rectangular in floor-plan so that when people line up for prayer no space is wasted. The *qibla* was originally marked inside

the mosque with a block of stone set into this wall. This developed into a niche built into the *qibla* wall, called the *mihrab*. From around the year 700 onwards, this started to become an architectural feature and in various cultures and styles it was richly figured and decorated. As it was right in front of the worshippers as they gathered for prayer, it became a focal point. The custom developed of the prayer leader standing in the *mihrab* to pray, which maximised the use of space behind him. A curved ceiling to the *mihrab* was often found as it acted like a sounding board to throw the voice backwards towards the congregation. In modern times, it is common to find a microphone in the *mihrab* to pick up and amplify the voice.

When Muhammad stood to address the congregation, he would put his back to one of the palm trunks that supported the shelter in the *qibla* wall. In time, he came to use the stump of a palm tree to stand on and eventually a platform was made to raise him so that he could be seen and heard by all. This was called the *minbar*, which is derived from the root, “to be raised up.” This was placed near the *qibla* wall and from it Muhammad would teach, proclaim the latest revelations of Qur'anic verses and make announcements. Sometimes he would sit on the *minbar* and so it was thought to be akin to the throne of a ruler.

As time went on, in different cultures and architectural styles, and as building materials changed, *minbars* became quite a dominant feature of some mosques. If the mosque was large, they could comprise of ten or more steps with a platform at the top. Some had the addition of a sounding board to assist in the carry of the voice. They might be built of carved stone, metal or wood. At times there were more than one *minbar* as some were reserved for use only by the caliph or an outstanding scholar. With the advent of loud-speakers, such physical devices to make the speaker heard become less necessary. In a similar way, in exceptionally large mosques when people could not see or hear the leader during prayers, a raised platform was built at a strategic position on which someone would stand to perform the prayers and thus give the timing to those who could see him but not the prayer leader.

External features

Externally, mosques can be found in many architectural styles depending on local custom. It is common to find a dome on a mosque but not obligatory. The dome could act to amplify the voice in the prayer hall, it provided an additional volume of air to refresh and cool worshippers, and gave a sense of the wide expanse of creation. When Muhammad wanted to call the Muslims to prayer, he asked the Abyssinian Muslim, Bilal, who had a powerful voice, to climb to the roof of a nearby building and make the *adhan*. In time, this led to people calling the *adhan* from the roof of the mosque and an external set of stairs was sometimes built into one wall. This developed into the building of a tower from which the *adhan* was called. It was called a *minaret* from the Arabic *manara*, which is a lighthouse or tower containing a fire beacon. The *minaret* served three purposes: it provided an elevated position for the *adhan*, it acted as a sign of the presence of a mosque that could be seen from a distance to guide people, and, in difficult times, it could serve as a watchtower.

Before the development of directional, external loud-speakers, it was not uncommon to find up to four *minarets* surrounding a mosque facing in the direction of local settlement. The *adhan* would be called simultaneously to increase its audibility. In Muslim cities, the *adhan* is often started at the central mosque, and then taken up in concentric circles until there is a wave of sound that spreads throughout the city. It is common now to find loud-speakers in use for the *adhan* and some mosques even play a beautiful recording. Other devices to alert people to the time for prayer have been developed such as a radio broadcast system to which people can tune at home or programmed watches or cellular telephone applications that sound an alarm.

The prayer leader

Whenever two or more Muslims gather together to pray *salat*, one must lead and the others follow. This prayer leader is called the *imam*. There are three uses of this term, so we need to avoid confusion. There are the divinely-appointed Imams recognised by the Shi'a and there are outstanding scholars whose influence endures for centuries, who are also called Imams, such as Imam al-Ghazali. We speak here of the person who leads others in prayer. There is no priesthood in Islam; none have sacramental powers that lay members do not have. There are no sacraments; the relationship between the individual believer and God is direct. If the gathering is all women or women and children, then the *imam* will be a woman. If the gathering is all men or mixed, then the *imam* will be a man for the reasons of modesty that have already been mentioned.

Who should lead the prayer? The one amongst us who is most pious and wise; someone who can recite from the Qur'an in Arabic, who knows how to conduct the prayer and who is of upright life. As it is not an ordained ministry, someone might technically be asked to lead the prayer only on one occasion in their whole life. If it is a small, informal gathering, then this can be sorted out quickly but there cannot be a prolonged discussion in the mosque every time that congregational *salat* requires a leader. Those who are responsible for running the mosque, perhaps a mosque committee, will draw up a list of people who are authorised by them to lead prayers in that mosque and it will be up to those on the list to make sure that at least one of them is present for each of the daily prayers.

A professional *imam*

If the mosque is large enough and has sufficient money to pay an *imam*, then things take on a more professional character. First, the mosque committee will decide what the job entails in their particular circumstances. This might include: leading prayers, teaching children, running adult classes, being present to lead prayers at weddings and funerals, giving the address at Friday Prayer, representing the mosque to outside bodies, instructing prospective converts and being available to give guidance on Islamic law to anyone who is uncertain what to do. Depending on the job to be done, the mosque committee will set out what kind of education and experience a potential

candidate requires. As a minimum, this will normally require having completed a recognised course of study according to the particular school of the mosque concerned. This level of scholarship might well entail four to twelve years of higher studies. Indeed, in some mosques, such a person might be called the Resident Alim or scholar.

One of the duties that is required is to deliver an address at Friday Prayer, called a *khutba*. This would normally be done by the *imam* or Resident Alim. In some mosques this duty is given to a specialist scholar, who would be called the *khatib*. The *khutba* is in two parts, one of which is given in Arabic and the other in the main language(s) of the people attending the prayer; this might mean that it has to be repeated in different languages in multi-lingual congregations. It can range over any subject touching on the life of the community. It could, for example, be guidance about a forthcoming religious observance or encouraging people to play an active part in the civic life of the society. To provide time for the *khutba* without burdening the congregation, Friday Prayer contains only two *rak'at* instead of the customary four at this time of day on other days of the week.

It is an obligation for men to attend Friday Prayer if at all possible. Women are permitted and encouraged to attend but are not under the same obligation. In traditional societies, women have responsibility for the children, sick and elderly, therefore to put them under the same obligation as men would be doubly to burden them. Islamic law does not approve of that. If women do not attend the mosque for Friday Prayer, they pray the usual middle-of-the-day prayer wherever they are. Some mosques are transmitting the *khutba* over a limited radio network so that those prevented from coming can tune in and not be isolated from what is happening.

The educational aspect of mosque life can take many forms. The oldest universities in the Muslim world began life as mosques that attracted scholars to live nearby and teach there. A Muslim saying makes this point: A good mosque should have a scholar sitting at every pillar with a group of students seated around him. Some of these centres of learning have become world-renowned and developed their own networks, such as al-Azhar in Egypt, Deoband in India or Qum in Iran. Universally, mosques act as centres for the education of children and adults, running classes in Qur'anic recitation and memorisation, Arabic and Islamic faith and practice.

Part Four: The discipline of fasting

One of the things that has entered into most people's understanding of Islam is the association with Ramadan being a month of fasting for Muslims. In fact, Ramadan is the name of the ninth month in the Arab calendar, which was designated as the month of fasting by the Qur'an [Q. 2:185]. As with many ancient calendars worldwide, the Arab calendar was regulated by the moon. In any desert climate, with clear skies at night, it is easy to observe the phases of the moon and thus measure the passing of time. The Qur'an laid down the moon as the measure of time for Muslims [Q. 10:5]. Each month begins with the sighting of the new moon and runs until the next new moon is sighted.

A lunar or moon month is technically 29.5 days long and a lunar year is 354 days long. This makes it eleven days shorter than a solar year, so when time is measured by the solar calendar, any event in the lunar calendar appears to fall approximately eleven days earlier each year. This means that Ramadan, like all other lunar events, moves through the seasons, advancing by approximately eleven days each year. In countries at some distance from the equator, the length of the day varies considerably with the seasons. This means that an event like Ramadan, which requires daylight fasting, can see the length of the fast vary considerably from winter, when it can be as little as around eight hours, to summer, when it can be as much as nineteen hours. In countries that are so close to the earth's poles that the normal rhythm of day and night cannot be seen, Muslim scholars have devised solutions based on taking timings from other countries where the natural rhythm can be observed.

It is not practical to have months of 29.5 days in length, so in practice lunar months are either 29 or 30 days long. At the end of the 29th day, reliable people go out to attempt to sight the new moon, if they see it, then the next day is the first of the new month; if they do not, then the next day is the 30th of the current month and the day after is automatically the first of the next month. In the days before mass communication, this could mean that one village, where the new moon was sighted, would be on the first of the new month, while a village some distance away, where perhaps they did not sight the new moon, would be on the 30th of the old month. The difficulty is compounded when one considers that the new moon would normally be faint, low down near the horizon and might only be visible for a matter of minutes due to the curvature of the earth.

In modern, technically advanced societies, it is possible to make astronomical calculations precisely to say whether the new moon might have been visible in a given place on a particular day. This leads to some complexity of calculations and scholarly opinion about the start of each month. If one particular community was unable to sight the moon with the naked eye, due to cloud cover or local mountain ranges, can they take the word of another community in the same country or a neighbouring country, where the moon was sighted? National boundaries are arbitrary, so how should proximity be judged: the same landmass, or the same continent, or the same hemisphere? The situation is rendered more complex still in countries where there is

habitual cloud cover and much light pollution from electric lighting, which makes physical new moon sighting almost impossible. Some groups of Muslims have come to rely on astronomical data to say that the new moon would have been visible if one could have penetrated the cloud and light pollution. Some Muslim-majority countries that have to set things like airline schedules well in advance have come to rely heavily on such scientific data. All these complexities mean that it is not unusual for different groups of Muslims, even within the same school of Islam and in the same country or city, to be operating on different calendars for Ramadan and other months. Hence we see different days for the start and end of Ramadan in spite of attempts to standardise these dates.

Fasting commanded by God

The Qur'anic verses commanding Muslims to fast [Q. 2:183-186], make it clear that this is part of the essential guidance of God for humanity, which was commanded by earlier revelations too, so that human beings may grow in God-consciousness (*taqwa*). So the fast is something owed directly to God, who alone sees the inner disposition of the one fasting, as well as something of benefit to human beings.

The Qur'anic command is for a fast of total abstention from food, drink and sexual activities from before dawn (first light) until after the sun has set [Q. 2:187]. First light is spoken of as streaks of light in the dark sky and was traditionally determined by there being sufficient light to distinguish between a black thread and a white thread. Different schools of Islam understand sunset as the disappearance of the disk of the sun or “nightfall” understood as the disappearance of the reflected light of the sun in the sky, which is generally some minutes later. Before the days’ fasting begins, it is recommended to drink plenty and eat sustaining, non-salty foods; this meal is called *sahur*. Fasting is the act of a free and competent person, so it is necessary for one fasting to declare their intention (*niyya*) to fast; some schools require this to be done each day whilst others permit that one declaration of intention will suffice for the whole month. The time between stopping eating and the pre-sunrise prayer (*fajr*) is usually spent in quiet reading of the Qur'an. The end of the fasting day is marked precisely by taking liquids and something light to eat; the tradition of Muhammad was to eat a few dates. This is followed by the prayer after sunset (*maghrib*) and then one can proceed to eat a more substantial meal. The meal that breaks the fast is called *iftar* and this is often taken communally, with people inviting friends and neighbours to break the fast with them.

The prohibition of food, drink and sexual relations does not in any way imply that these are bad or impure activities. They are permitted during the hours of darkness. They represent some of the most powerful urges that human beings have, so by exercising control and abstaining from these, one learns self-discipline, which is a benefit to human beings in all aspects of life. The key to understanding fasting during Ramadan is that it concerns discipline and not torture; it is forbidden, for example, to extend the fast – discipline requires that one submits to the divine command. Muslims observe the time of fasting with minute attention to detail, not only as regards the

timing but also by refraining from activities that might break the fast unintentionally, such as showering or brushing one's teeth.

Why fast?

First of all, fasting is a command of God to be observed by all who would live in obedience to God's commands. It is an important part of religious training, promoting a sense of *taqwa*. It increases our awareness of the hunger and thirst that millions of people experience every day. They do not choose to go hungry; it is just a fact of life. Part of the injustice of our world is that some go hungry and others have too much to eat and become ill. Fasting makes us aware of how dependent we are on things beyond our control, like the sun and rain. It reminds us that all our habits can be broken at God's command, which frees us from becoming slaves to our desires. It prepares people to face times of hardship and prevents us from taking things for granted. It reminds people of their higher selves; we are more than just bodies, thus it strengthens the spiritual dimension of the human being by allowing us to be more like the angels, who neither eat nor drink.

The month of the Qur'an

Ramadan is a sacred month for Muslims because it was during this month that the revelation of the Qur'an began in the year 610. The Qur'an is God's greatest gift to humankind because it contains the final guidance on how to live a truly human life. Attention is given to Qur'anic reading and study during this month. Muslims observe the tradition of listening to the entire Qur'an being recited during Ramadan. Those who have both memorised the whole Qur'an (*hafiz*) and mastered the art of beautiful reciting (*qari*) are in demand to give communal recitations. The Qur'an has been divided into thirty parts, one to be recited each day during Ramadan. Sunni Muslims have the tradition of doing this recitation combined with communal prayers (*tarawih*) during the night-time, whilst the Shi'a attend communal recitations and pray privately.

A community activity

Islam knows two traditions of fasting; the communal, during Ramadan, and individual fasting at other times and for various reasons. The communal aspects of Ramadan are important. The whole community strengthens its bonds by fasting together and supporting one another. The pattern of life in Muslim societies is altered during this month. People rise early for the pre-dawn meal and then set about their daily activities. Business is often conducted only during the morning with people returning home to rest in the afternoon. After sunset, it is common for shops and offices to re-open so that people can buy what they need and complete the day's work. Families help one another through the hardest times. It's a time for healing old disputes and looking forward to a better future. People reflect on their actions, facing up to their faults and failings and seeking forgiveness. The overall effect is to stimulate the individual's awareness of God in their lives and reinforce their sense of living in harmony with God and all creation.

Individuals chose to fast at other times of the year. Some follow the *sunna* of Muhammad by fasting on certain days each week or month, or during other months of the year. As fasting strengthens discipline, it is used at times of temptation, if one is aware of a tendency to sin. Adults who are prevented from marriage, for example, through poverty or because they have set aside some time to pursue studies, who feel themselves tempted to illicit sexual activities, would be counselled to fast to strengthen their resolve not to sin. Those who have broken an oath might make recompense through fasting [Q. 5:89]. Those who have broken the command not to hunt or kill animals during the Hajj season [Q. 5:95], who are making restitution for killing someone [Q. 4:92] or for illicitly setting aside their wife [Q. 58:4] will undertake a prolonged fast. Those who are seeking God's guidance on a particular question (*istikhara*) prepare themselves by three days of fasting.

A review of life

Ramadan is not just about fasting. It is also about a review of one's whole life. It is a time of annual stock-taking: Do I fulfil my family duties properly? Do I play my part in the life of the community? How do I earn and spend my money? Do I give enough time to prayer and study? Am I careful about what I read and look at? Do I gossip or tell lies? Do I give a proper proportion of my surplus money to those in need? Ramadan is the time of year when many Muslims calculate their annual contributions to the welfare of others (*zakat* or *khums*).

When not to fast

The fast during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*) is obligatory for all Muslims after the age of puberty. Some people do not fast because it would injure their health. Those who are too young or too old, those who are sick or travelling are exempt. Women do not fast when they have their periods and are excused during pregnancy and while breast-feeding. Fasting requires a mental decision, so those who do not have the mental capacity to decide for themselves do not fast. Older people decide when they are too old to fast. Fasting is not required of children before puberty but many like to take part in some measure of fasting during Ramadan before that. They just want to be part of things! Those who miss days of fasting for some temporary reason, like travelling or illness, catch up on missed days later. Those who are prevented permanently, like those with certain types of illness that require a regular controlled intake of food, join in the spirit of fasting by feeding those who are in need and observing the other elements of Ramadan.

Islamic law sets out certain recompenses that must be made by those who break the fast and these differ in severity according to the deliberate or accidental nature of the act. However the Islamic principle of God wanting our ease and not our hardship applies so that under certain conditions of extreme hardship it is permitted to break the fast or if there is a sudden unforeseen emergency. In such circumstances the missed day would be caught up later or, if that is not possible, charitable acts are prescribed.

A time of spiritual intensity

Fasting during Ramadan is regarded as a major way of showing one's contrition for any sins committed during the year and seeking God's forgiveness. Spiritual practices are to the fore. Muslims will spend additional time in private prayer, meditation, reflection and making resolutions for the future. The nights are especially used for spending time in prayer and traditionally the month is divided into three thirds, each devoted to consideration of God's mercy, seeking forgiveness and salvation from hell-fire.

The odd-numbered night towards the end of Ramadan when the first revelation took place is called Lailat al-Qadr, the Night of Power or Destiny. This is considered by many to be the 27th night but some groups of Muslims will observe several of the odd-numbered nights in the last third of the month. Many pious Muslims will try to spend the whole of this night in prayer and listening to any message from God that might be spoken in their hearts. Ramadan is "the Month of God" when God is the host and people the guests gathering in God's presence. Muhammad said that the gates of heaven are wide open during this month for our prayers to ascend and God's messages to be sent down to us. At the same time, the gates of hell are closed and the *Shaytan* (Satan) is chained so we are spared his temptations.

Muhammad set the example of spending time in seclusion seeking the presence of God. He was observing such a period of seclusion when the first revelation of the Qur'an took place and he used to observe such periods later during the time in Madina. From this the practice grew of some people observing the last ten days of the month as a time of seclusion in the mosque (*i'tikaf*). Some mosques will make provision for small retreat booths for people wishing to observe this, with people only leaving them for formal prayers and to answer calls of nature.

The Festival of Fast-breaking

The first day of the month after Ramadan is a special day of celebration called 'Id al-Fitr. Muslims take a day off work or school. Because the date is fixed by the sighting of the new moon and there can be variations in this, employers might need to be flexible in allowing the holiday. It begins with everyone taking a shower and putting on clean clothes. They take breakfast after dawn followed by the whole community gathering for festival prayers, either in the largest mosques or in the open air. Gifts are given, especially to children. Families gather for a celebration meal and food is shared with neighbours. Before this festive day, charity must be given to those in need (*zakat al-fitr*) to make sure that they have enough to celebrate too. How could a person celebrate knowing that a poor neighbour does not have enough money to buy food or give their children presents? There is much visiting of friends and family, including visits to the graves of loved ones. Often there are sports and games for the children. Ramadan is over for another year and people miss its special character and look forward to its arrival again next year.

Part Five: United on pilgrimage

The largest annual gathering of human beings anywhere on earth; today attracting some 3,500,000 people. Surely one of the most cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual assemblies that we can imagine. Adult Muslim men and women of every age, from every social class, across the spectrum of education, wealth and experience. That's the Hajj; the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Makka.

As the pilgrims prepare to enter into the city of Makka, they put on their pilgrims' dress. All the men are dressed alike in two white unsewn sheets of cloth; one wrapped around the lower body and one around the upper. This pilgrim dress is called *ihram*. For women *ihram* comprises a plain simple dress (often made of the same white material) without jewellery or ornament. Putting on this *ihram* is a symbol of entering into the dedicated state of pilgrimage during which all anger of speech or deed is forbidden, to the extent of not even doing violence to a flower by plucking it, and married couples abstain from sexual relations. This *ihram* is a great leveller; all human beings, irrespective of their differences away from Makka, are elevated to their essential human dignity. Malcolm X, the 1960s African-American civil rights activist, who came from an extreme black-supremacist splinter group within Islam made the Hajj and came to the realisation that "Islam is colour blind" and that he must leave the group to which he belonged and join mainstream Sunni Islam. That is the spirit of unity that permeates the pilgrimage.

Abrahamic and Adamic roots

The Hajj not only binds together people alive today. It also emphasises a bond that goes way back before the time of Muhammad. All the main activities of the Hajj go back through Muhammad to Abraham (in Arabic, Ibrahim), Ishmael (in Arabic, Isma'il) and Hagar (in Arabic, Hajar); some even go back to Adam and Eve. Abraham, according to both Bible (Genesis 16, 17 and 21) and Qur'an, was married to Sarah but she was unable to have children. Abraham took a second wife, Hagar, an Egyptian, and together they had a son, Ishmael. Later, Sarah was also blessed with a son in her old age, Isaac. According to the Bible, Sarah wanted Hagar and Ishmael sent away and Abraham finally agreed to do this after receiving a message from God, which said that God would protect them and raise up a mighty nation from Ishmael. The events of the Hajj are connected with Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael, and are located in and around the holy city of Makka. They were given a definite shape by the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad but they uniquely tie in the faith of Islam and Muslims with the earlier tradition going back through Abraham and Ishmael to Adam and Eve.

When Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael went into the desert, they were guided by God to the site of the present-day city of Makka (sometimes written Bakka), where Abraham left them. They grew short of water. Hagar left the young Ishmael to go in search of it. She ran to the top of each of two small hills, al-Safa and al-Marwa, to look for any sign of water. Finding none, she became more frantic and ran backwards and

forwards between the two hills. She returned to Ishmael, only to find that he had dug his heels into the ground and God had caused a spring of water to well-up in that place. This was named *zamzam* and flows to this day in the same place, which has now been incorporated into the Sacred Mosque in Makka.

Abraham continued to visit his family in Makka and on one of his visits he and Ishmael rebuilt the *ka'ba*, which stands to this day at the centre of Makka [Q. 2:126-127]. After they had completed the building, they walked around it giving thanks and praise to God. The original *ka'ba* is held by Muslims to be the first building on earth built for the worship of God [Q. 3:96]. A stone was brought by the angel Gabriel (Jibril) from heaven and was incorporated into a corner of the *ka'ba*. This black stone is revered by visitors to the *ka'ba* today.

The Bible and Qur'an agree that Abraham was put to the test by God. He was asked to sacrifice his son. The Bible names him as Isaac. The Qur'an is not explicit about which son was to be sacrificed. Muslim tradition has overwhelmingly understood this to be Ishmael on the grounds that, as the first-born son of Abraham, Ishmael was "the son" before Isaac was born [Q. 37:102-109]. The remarkable thing about the story in the Qur'an is that Abraham told Ishmael what he had been commanded to do and asked him what he thought about it. Ishmael willingly agreed to do whatever God had commanded. The sacrifice is a test of obedience on both their parts. When they were on their way to make the sacrifice, they were tempted by the Devil to rebel against God's command and not go through with it. They threw stones at the Devil to resist his temptation and drive him away. The three places where the tradition records that this temptation and stoning took place are marked today by three stone pillars. As Ishmael knew and was willing to be sacrificed, there was no question of his being tied or forced. He was prostrate on the floor waiting for Abraham to kill him when God told Abraham to stop. Both had proved their obedience. Instead God provided an animal for them to sacrifice.

The climax of the Hajj comes on the Plain of Arafat, some twelve kilometres outside Makka, where Muhammad preached his Farewell Sermon. This site is associated with Adam and Eve; by tradition it was here that they were reconciled with God after being sent down to the earth from the garden.

This is the sequence of events that is re-enacted and commemorated at the annual pilgrimage of the Hajj. The fact that the Hajj is part of a tradition that goes back through Muhammad, through Abraham, to be linked to Adam and Eve demonstrates that Islam is part of the Abrahamic family of faiths, of which Muhammad is held by Muslims to be the Last and the Seal of the Prophets [Q. 33:40]. During the centuries between the times of Abraham and Muhammad, some sense of the pilgrimage remained in the consciousness of the Arabs.

The rites of the Hajj

The Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam [Q. 22:25-30] and takes place only once each year on five days in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, called Dhu 'l-Hijja. Every adult Muslim should make the Hajj once in his or her lifetime, provided that they have the money and health so to do [Q. 3:97]. Having enough money means being able to afford to travel for the Hajj without compromising the wellbeing of one's family. Many millions of Muslims are too poor and will never be in a position to make the journey. Many can only afford it when they are older and their families can fend for themselves. Some of those who die before they can perform the Hajj have children who are able to perform it later in their name.

On the first day of the Hajj, pilgrims walk around the ka'ba seven times in an anticlockwise direction, praising God; this is called the tawaf. The ka'ba is generally covered by a black cloth on which verses from the Qur'an have been embroidered with gold thread. This is raised during the Hajj to reveal the stone walls beneath. When they pass the black stone, it is recommended that pilgrims kiss it, but due to the large numbers, most pilgrims salute it by raising their right hands as was the practice of Muhammad. Beside the ka'ba, another stone marks the Station of Abraham, where tradition has it that Abraham used to pray. If possible, pilgrims will try to pray at this special place.

Next, pilgrims walk or jog seven times between the two small hills of al-Safa and al-Marwa, as Hagar did, seeking the providence of God; this is called *sa'y*. Then they can drink the water of *zamzam* and fill bottles to take home. For those pilgrims who can arrive in Makka earlier, they can perform these two rites in advance and then resume their Hajj with all the other pilgrims. At other times in the year, people can make a visit to Makka and perform only these two rites. This minor pilgrimage is known as *umra*.

On the second day, the Hajj reaches its climax when everyone travels together to the Plain of Arafat. Most of the pilgrims walk but some travel by bus. Here they will spend the afternoon in prayer to God seeking mercy and forgiveness. Rising above the plain is a small hill, "the Mount of Mercy," from which Muhammad preached his Farewell Sermon, during the Hajj a few months before his death. The clothes that the male pilgrims are wearing will become their burial clothes. During the afternoon, the pilgrims anticipate the Day of Judgement, when all human beings will appear before God to give an account of their lives and actions. The association of this site with the reconciliation of Adam and Eve and also with the Day of Judgement in a way draws together the beginning and the end of the human saga. The pilgrims stand in prayer for a long time. It is an intensely powerful period of humility before God during which many pilgrims describe having a profound experience of peace, forgiveness and being intimately in the presence of God.

The theme is forgiveness, so we need to explore this from God's perspective and from the human side. Islamic law makes a distinction between sins that damage our

individual relationship with God, sins against oneself, and sins that damage both our relationship with God and other human beings. Failure to pray the *salat* is a sin that damages our relationship with God for which each individual is accountable on the Day of Judgement. Taking forbidden substances is a sin against oneself. Theft is not only a sin against God but also against the people from whom the goods were stolen. People have to put right their sins against other human beings before they can access fully the forgiveness of God. This means that pilgrims will spend the months before the Hajj putting right their offences against other people. They will have sought human forgiveness and made up for the damage that they have caused to others before going to the Plain of Arafat.

When we look at forgiveness from God's perspective, two sayings of God given to Muhammad to share with us (*Hadith qudsi*) give us guidance. In one, God says "My mercy overcomes my wrath." In the other, God says "If you have sinned such that your sins reach to the skies and then you ask for forgiveness, I would forgive you." From this we can see that God has declared that mercy and forgiveness are always available for the repentant sinner. The only thing that can stop that forgiveness reaching me is me myself [Q. 39:53].

Four things are necessary for a sinner to open themselves to the mercy of God. First, the sin must be acknowledged and responsibility accepted. "I did it, it was wrong, and it was my fault." Second, they must stop the sinful practice. If I make my living by exploiting other people, I can't expect God to forgive me if I am going to carry on doing the same thing in the future. Third, change the circumstances that led you to that sin. "The company that I work for is always asking me to do things that I know are wrong." Then change your job. Fourth, make up for the harm caused by your actions. Give back what you have stolen. Repair the damage by doing voluntary work in society.

Who knows if the sinner has done these four things? Only God and the person concerned. And God cannot be fooled! This is a key point in understanding Islam; there are no priests with special powers, no sacraments, no-one to tell you that you are forgiven. The relationship with God is direct and personal. Each one must believe in their own heart.

The assembly on the Plain of Arafat only takes place once each year during the Hajj. It is sadly true that most Muslims on earth today will never make the Hajj because they are too poor. God would be an unjust tyrant if this was the only way for someone to receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Rather, God's mercy can be reached at every second and in every place. A Muslim who becomes aware of sin will immediately seek to confess it to God, put it right and ask for forgiveness. What happens once in a lifetime on the Plain of Arafat symbolises in clear terms what is constantly available to any human being who will turn to God and seek forgiveness.

After the standing on the Plain of Arafat, the pilgrims make only a short journey in the direction of Makka then sleep the night in the open. They gather small stones here

and then walk to Mina **on the third day** to throw them at the pillars representing the places where the Devil tempted Abraham and Ishmael. They symbolically “drive away” Satan and all his temptations from their lives. “If only we could remain always in this state of *taqwa!*”

The third day of the Hajj is also 'Id al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, when the sacrifice of Abraham and Ishmael is remembered. Those on Hajj sacrifice a sheep, goat or camel. Nowadays, many pilgrims pay for an animal to be slaughtered humanely. There are modern slaughter-houses and an army of skilled men to ensure that the job is done properly with the least possible suffering to the animals. Some of the meat will be canned or frozen so that it can be given to the poor later. The men then have their heads shaved or trim their hair [Q. 2:196].

This is the only element of the Hajj that is celebrated by all Muslims around the world. An animal is killed and the meat divided into three parts: one for our family, one to be shared with neighbours and the third to be given to the poor. Festival prayers are said in an open-air gathering or in the main mosques of the town. A celebration meal is shared and there are presents, visits, sports and fun, like all festivals. In countries where there is no shortage of food, money is sent to places where people are hungry. This will be used to buy an animal and have it killed. The meat will then be given to those in need. The word *qurban*, meaning sacrifice, is often used for this meat. Both on the Hajj and in the wider world, this festival is the most important in the Muslim year.

On the fourth and fifth days of Hajj, pilgrims return again to stone the pillars representing the Devil. They can now change into their normal clothes. The pilgrims return to Makka to again circle the *ka'ba* praising God. There is a final “farewell” circling of the *ka'ba*, which completes the pilgrimage. They now have the right to add al-Hajj, for men, or al-Hajjah, for women, in front of their names. The Hajj is over but the experience remains with people ever after.

The pilgrimage, travelling and being in the heat of the Arabian desert is gruelling. Not surprisingly, with so many people, often elderly, gathered in Makka from around the world, some die during the Hajj. To die in this way is considered a great blessing and to be buried in Makka or Madina is a great privilege. Some pilgrims return over the years to repeat the experience but most do it once only.

After they have completed their Hajj (or *umra*) most Muslims will go on to make a *ziyara* or visitation of the Prophet's grave in Madina. Here they will pray to God and ask the Prophet to add his prayers to theirs. Many will go on to visit the tombs in the graveyards in Madina, especially those of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, Hasan, his grandson, and those of his other wives, family members and companions. Based on a Hadith, many try to remain eight days in Madina and pray the *salat* that occur on those days in the Prophet's Mosque. By so doing they hope for Muhammad's intercession on the Day of Judgement. Traditionally pilgrims on their way home went

via Jerusalem and Hebron to visit sites associated with Muhammad and the biblical prophets, especially Abraham and his family.

Part Six: The visitation of holy places

The presence of places that because of their association with persons 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.

Part Seven: Modesty: the special character of a Muslim

It is reported that Prophet Muhammad on one occasion spoke of the special character of religions. The followers of Jesus, the ascetic and compassionate prophet, were to be characterised by their tender-heartedness, whereas, “My community will be characterised by modesty.” How then is modesty the special character of a Muslim?

One of the few Arabic words that spring to the tongue of non-Muslims is *hijab*. In many media stories, it is taken to relate to women’s dress. Often it is a pejorative term used to refer to certain aspects of dress, such as the wearing of an enveloping black cloak (*chador*) or a one-piece garment that covers from the top of the head to the ground with a gauze or lattice window through which to see (*burka*). In Muslim circles, it can be used simply to refer to a headscarf: “Does she wear a *hijab*?” or “Is she a *hijabi*?” In many contexts, *hijab*, meaning “women’s dress,” is spoken of as though it were the most important aspect of being a Muslim; more important than justice, care for the needy, not exploiting others, or promoting good and opposing bad in society! This is an area in need of investigation and deeper understanding.

To begin with, modesty is a much wider concept than what people wear, whether they are women or men. “I don’t care what they make me wear,” one Muslim woman said to me, “as long as I have my eyes free, I can flirt with any man.” One only has to walk behind some beard-sprouting Muslim youths to hear language that could not be described as modest. The way that one stands or walks or conducts oneself in public can all betray a rather confused understanding of “the special character of a Muslim.”

Exploring the term *hijab*

We meet the term *hijab* in the Qur'an with a range of meanings: division, partition, curtain, barrier or something that secludes. There is a *hijab* between heaven and hell that cannot be crossed [Q. 7:46]. There is a *hijab* between those who hear the guidance of the Qur'an and those who are deaf to it [Q. 41:5] and also between those who believe in the life hereafter and those who do not [Q. 17:45]. God speaks to Moses from behind a *hijab* because no human being can encounter God face-to-face [Q. 42:51]. When Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, she put a *hijab* between herself and people; she set herself apart in seclusion [Q. 19:17]. Ultimately, the people of hell will be separated by a *hijab* from God; they will be alienated from God [Q. 83:15]. It is a characteristic of Paradise that the *hijab* between God and those admitted to Paradise will be lifted.

If we carry these meanings into our theme of modesty, then we can think of anything that partitions us, curtains us off or creates a barrier as being a form of *hijab* to preserve human dignity or modesty by shielding us from the eyes of others. The curtain that is drawn across the entrance to a changing cubicle in a clothes shop would be a *hijab*. Similarly the bedroom curtains that one draws when going to change one’s clothes during the daytime or the door to a shower or toilet cubicle would be examples

of *hijab*. Modesty, in Islamic understanding, is something that ennobles the human being; it increases our dignity and self-respect.

The term *hijab*, in the sense of a modesty curtain occurs in the Qur'an [Q. 33:53]. The early sources recall the circumstances in which this verse was revealed. It was the evening of Muhammad's marriage to Zainab bint Jahash and he had invited people to come to share a celebration meal but they overstayed their welcome. The Prophet left them and went for a walk in the hope that they would get the message. Eventually they did and he drew a curtain across the space to seclude his private area, where he could be with his wife, from the public area where others came to consult with him. This modesty curtain in effect divided the space into two spheres: an intimate one and a public one. This verse goes on to speak about people not intruding into the intimate sphere but rather, if they need to ask something of one of the Prophet's wives, to do so from the public side of the curtain.

This idea of dividing human life into different spheres is helpful to understand the concept of modesty. There is the intimate sphere in which husband and wife are alone and secluded by a *hijab*. A certain code of dress, of speech and of conduct is appropriate in this sphere of marital relations that would not be appropriate elsewhere. Then there is a wider but restricted sphere that we can describe as that of the family. Here there is a code of dress, speech and action that is neither intimate nor public: "The curtains are drawn, we are all family together." The third sphere is that of general public interaction, where a more reserved code is in place: "I wouldn't wear these clothes in public!" or "That is a family matter not be discussed with outsiders" or "That is conduct appropriate to the bedroom but not on the streets!" We can see that there is a partition or *hijab*, either physical or moral, between these three spheres.

This is something essentially human that dignifies the human being, so that Islam would be opposed to public nudity as something that demeans all human beings. As modesty is the hallmark of the Muslim community, we see this in an exemplary way that points the whole of society to certain human values. Muslim etiquette requires that no adult, male or female, should appear naked before anyone other than their marriage partner and this is carried on beyond death, where the dead person is to be washed by people from the same sex, and even then, the modesty of the dead person is preserved by a sheet being held over their body with the washing taking place beneath it. The desire to have medical attention from a doctor or nurse of the same sex is obvious, and even then to limit the sense of being uncovered to a minimum. Muslim children are brought up in this spirit so communal changing rooms for sports are problematic. One Muslim father told me of his eight-year-old son being involved in a minor road accident and being rendered unconscious. When the hospital nurses drew back his clothing to see if there were any injuries, he unconsciously covered himself again when their backs were turned.

Modesty of heart and tongue

When the Qur'an comes to speak about modesty, it addresses men and tells them to lower their gaze and guard their modesty, which will lead them to greater purity and God is well aware of what they do [Q. 24:30]. The following verse goes on to repeat the guidance for women. God, who alone knows the inner intentions of the human heart, knows best what they do, which implies that modesty is first of all a disposition of the human heart. This is the reason why the verses begin with the command to lower one's gaze; not to feast the eyes on things that do not contribute to human ennoblement. There is a Hadith that records Muhammad as saying to his son-in-law, Ali, "You are allowed the first glance but the second is against you and not in your favour." Islam knows the linkage between seeing images that lead to thoughts and thus to desires, which all too easily result in actions. Unfortunately, advertisers know this only too well also; this is the basis for filling our fields of vision with images that shock, entice or provoke desires so that we will buy their goods or services. The first stage of modesty is to regulate the heart and the eyes. Unless the heart, thus the intentions and the custody of the eyes, is in the right place, then there will be no spirit of modesty. We can think of this as the *hijab* of the heart.

The tongue is the principal organ for expressing the disposition of the heart. The idea of three spheres is useful as an indicator of modesty regulating the codes of acceptable speech from one to another. Muslim etiquette refers to modesty in manner of speech as well as content; the way that something is said can excite sexual interest just as much as the content itself. Islam is open about the natural desires and interests that people have for the opposite sex, which is why it needs to be controlled and kept within the parameters of marriage to prevent immorality. The body also expresses inward dispositions; we can gain an insight into someone's character by the way that they walk or stand. On the public transport vehicles in a crowded city, we are often much closer to strangers that we would choose to be, we regularly invade one another's personal space. Being conscious of this level of modesty can be thought of as the *hijab* of the tongue and body.

Modesty in dress

The way that we dress affects both the person concerned, their dignity, honour and sense of self-esteem, and the people around who observe that person. Each individual has a responsibility to dress modestly for their own sake and for the sake of other people too. Again, the idea of different spheres is helpful: different codes of dress apply in the intimate, the family and the public spheres. This gives rise to two Islamic principles concerning the material and the cut of clothing: the material should not be "see-through" and the cut should not reveal the contours of the body. There is no such thing as "Islamic dress" as the climate and local culture will direct which materials and cut are chosen but these Islamic principles apply to someone living in the polar regions or the tropics and have been embodied in various loose-fitting styles worn by Arabs, Africans, Asians, Europeans and so on. An appropriately cut western business suit can fulfil these requirements just as well as an Arab robe hanging from the

shoulders (*abaya*) or the trouser/over-shirt suit of the Indian subcontinent (*shalwar/kameez*). Particular attention is given not to draw attention to the intimate mid-section, so tops (jackets, shirts, tunics) that come down to mid-thigh level are the norm. Loose-fitting, longer and flowing styles are favoured for men and women; they provide some dignity when sitting, especially if sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Being modest beautifully

To dress modestly does not equate to looking dowdy or having no care about one's beauty or appearance. The verse of the Qur'an, addressed to all women and men, that speaks of clothing to cover one's nakedness goes on to speak about it being an adornment for us [Q. 7:26]. Muhammad spoke of God as being beautiful and loving beauty. Beauty is a quality of God that should radiate from the God-conscious human being. However beauty is seen as an inner quality that radiates from the person rather than something only on the outside; the same verse speaks of "the garment of *taqwa*." Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad is reported to have said, "The adornment of your inner selves is more beautiful than the adornment of the outer." It is useful in this context to consider the difference between "being beautiful" and "being attractive or alluring or sexy." Help is given by a verse of the Qur'an speaking to women, "And tell them not to thump their feet to make known their hidden ornaments" [Q. 24:31]. It appears that the prostitutes of pre-Islamic times used to wear ankle bracelets that made a noise when the foot was struck on the floor to advertise their availability to potential clients. Thus the prohibition here is on provocative gestures, dress, perfume or ornaments to allure people of the opposite sex.

The idea of wearing beautiful clothes and "making oneself beautiful" for the sake of God and out of respect for others is part of Islamic etiquette [Q. 7:31]. Those who are preparing to go to the mosque, especially when there will be dense congregations such as on Fridays, are required to make themselves pleasant to be with in a confined place by bathing, having clean teeth and breath, and wearing clean clothes. It is common to find that when the separate men's and women's parts of the congregation have assembled, a bottle of perfume is passed along the rows to share the pleasant scent.

The general rule: cover-up!

The general principle of clothes enhancing human dignity and preserving modesty applies to how much of someone's body should be covered. The general principle is to "cover up" except those parts that naturally are seen (face, hands and feet) but this can be relaxed if there is practical need. As a minimum the intimate areas of the body should be covered: for men, from the navel to below the knees, and for women, to include also the top half of her body. This allows for men being in a dirty workplace and rolling up trousers and sleeves or working in the heat and removing their shirts. Similarly, one could imagine women working in a water-logged field or having their arms in a washing tub. The general principles can be summarised as high neck-line, long sleeves and long trousers/skirts although some schools will interpret the precise

limits of these requirements differently. The key is not to put oneself on display to attract attention or disturb others' or one's own sense of modesty.

The hair included for women

Covering the head for men and women was a natural part of life in the desert in Muhammad's time as it is today. It protects from the sun and wind and helps to keep the sand out of the ears, nose and mouth. It was common to have long ends that could be pulled across to shield the lower part of the face when the sand was blowing. The higher one's social class in seventh century Arabia, the more likely one was to cover up in this way. By the time that the Shari'a came to be written, the Islamic empire had spread well beyond the desert setting and ideas from Greek and Persian societies had had an influence, for example, high class Persian women would wear a face veil in public. The key verse of the Qur'an in this regard is Q. 24:31, which tells women not to display their *awra* in public except what ordinarily appears. The term *awra* here is not easy to translate or define, normally terms such as adornments, allurements or charms are used. Most scholars include the hair under this term and thus the practice of women wearing a headscarf when mixing outside the family circle (technically this is with men who are sufficiently removed in terms of relationship that they could be a potential marriage partner, for example, brothers are part of the family circle and one need not cover the hair in their presence but brothers-in-law could, under certain circumstances, be potential marriage partners, therefore one must cover up in their presence).

The face too?

The overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars do not consider the face veil (*niqab*) to be an obligation for Muslim women. A tiny minority believe it to be desirable and a sign of piety. An even tinier minority believe it to be a requirement.

Closing remark

Islam sees human beings as an integrated whole and thus provides guidance for every aspect of human lives. The wisdom of the Qur'an and *sunna* guides intimate, family and public spheres of life. Human dignity requires respect for oneself and others, and thus the high value placed on modesty. Our sexuality is a good and enhancing aspect of being human but it is powerful and needs to be under the restraint of marriage. Indeed, one way that Islam understands the teaching on modesty is that it neutralises the sexual attraction as a focus in relationships so that men and women can be judged by their characters, knowledge and conduct.

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 on 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.

Part Nine: Angels, Jinn and the Final Judgement

Angels

One of the articles of faith for Muslims is to believe in the angels. They are mentioned numerous times in the Qur'an and, like everything else, they were created by God [Q. 35:1], therefore they had a beginning and eventually they will come to an end. But angels do not reproduce, so once angels are created by God they live until the final conclusion of the existence of all created things. We do not know how many angels there are in total, but there are Hadith that state that they are more than any other kind of creature. We are told that there are vast numbers in heaven, where they are constantly engaged in the worship of God.

Angels are spirit beings 'created of light.' They do not eat or drink. They don't have free will, which means that they are always completely obedient to God and therefore *muslim*, and so this makes them ideally suited to carrying out the tasks set for them by God [Q. 19:64; 66:6]. They act as God's agents to keep the creation operating as God wills. One of their most important tasks is to act as messengers from God's world to the created world. Because they do not have the capacity to disobey God, they are able to deliver God's messages in a complete and unadulterated form.

The most widely known angel is Jibril (the Arabic form of the name Gabriel), who carries messages from God to the prophets. It was Jibril who appeared to Muhammad on Mount Hira when the Qur'an was first revealed. Angels can take on different forms, appearing and disappearing. Jibril came to Muhammad on many occasions and was associated with the form of a handsome young man, who appeared unannounced bearing no signs of a journey. Like all angels, Jibril has no free will, therefore is incapable of distorting the message of the Qur'an as it was sent down from the realm of God [Q. 2:97]. This is one of the important elements in the Islamic belief that the Qur'an is the word of God, preserved without change from the realm of God to the earth, where it continues to be protected by God from all error. Jibril is sometimes called in the Qur'an, the Trustworthy Spirit [Q. 26:193] and Muslim philosophers have referred to Jibril's role as the Agent of Revelation.

There are other angels who are identified in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, e.g., Mika'il, who guards places of worship [Q. 2:98]; Israfil, who will sound the trumpet on the Day of Resurrection [Q. 39:68; 69:13]; Izra'il, the bringer of death [Q. 32:11]; Ridzwan, the guardian of heaven; Malik, the guardian of hell [Q. 43:77]; and Munkar and Nakir, who interrogate the souls in the grave [see Q. 79:1-2].

Jinn

In Islamic understanding, angels by their very nature cannot disobey God; therefore there is no possibility of a "fallen angel." There is, however, a third order of sentient life called the *jinn*. As angels are created from light and humans from clay, *jinn* are created from fire. They live in a parallel universe and we cannot usually see them,

although some people claim to be able to. The *jinn* have some freewill; therefore they can be obedient servants of God or disobedient and thus rebellious agents of temptation. Like us, the *jinn* will be judged by God.

Before human beings or *jinn* were first sent to the earth, God held a “conference of the souls” of the angels and all the humans and *jinn* that would ever exist [Q. 2:30-34]. God asked all human beings, “Am I not your Lord?” and they answered “Yes indeed!” Thus no-one can claim to be in ignorance on the Day of Judgement [Q. 7:172-173]. God gave knowledge of the things of the earth to Adam. Then God said that humans were to be sent to the earth as God’s regents or representatives. All the angels were commanded to bow down and acknowledge the superior status and knowledge of Adam. They all obeyed at once. But one of the *jinn*, called Iblis, was in the company of the angels and he chose to rebel [Q. 38:71-85; 18: 50]. His piety gave way to arrogance and he pitted his judgement against that of God and said that he knew best the havoc that humans would create on the earth. In this way, Iblis became the Great Tempter, the *Shaytan* or Satan, who was given leave by God not to die until the end of the world [Q. 15:30-43]. With his party of rebellious *jinn*, who decided to follow him, Iblis seeks to tempt human beings to rebel against the will of God [Q. 7:11-18]. God told him that he would have no power over those who are full of *taqwa*, God-consciousness, but those who neglect the guidance of God are prone to rebellion and sin [Q. 20:115].

Some *jinn* are good and we can think of those who might lend assistance to poets or composers. Others are bad and can tempt people to disobedience. They are the source of the literary figure of the genie. They are constantly surrounding human beings and play an important part in popular Islam. They can be dangerous for innocent people to deal with or to take as spirit guides as they can lead people into evil ways and destruction. They can possess people and some Muslims specialise in driving them out through exorcism. In traditional societies, many bad things are blamed on the *jinn*; they explain what appears to be beyond explanation. Not surprisingly, some people have been quick to describe people that they do not like or who oppose them as “being possessed by a bad *jinn*.” This is sometimes used to explain childlessness, neurosis, mental illness, strong characters, epilepsy and so on.

Life in the grave

Islam believes that all human beings who follow God’s guidance by treading the path, the Shari’a, that has been laid out for them, are capable of living an ethical life. This life is not all there is. It is only a testing ground and preparation for the life hereafter. Every human being who becomes truly the servant of God in all things can rely upon the mercy of God on the Day of Judgement [Q. 2:286]. This life is a test that prepares us for death, which is inevitable [Q. 28:88, 3:185]. Death is the point of transition to the afterlife or *akhira*.

Every human being has two angels assigned to them to record their good and bad deeds throughout their lives [Q. 82:10-12]. It is a mercy from God that good deeds

are written as soon as the intention is formulated, whilst bad deeds are not written until after the act has been performed, thus leaving room for failure to carry out a bad intention without penalty. These records will be brought out on the Day of Judgement. When we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do to affect our records of good or bad deeds – except for three things that we can leave behind us. Upright children full of *taqwa* can be an on-going credit to us after we die. If we do something for education, as a teacher or through writing a book, the knowledge goes on spreading long after we are dead. Finally, we can establish a charitable trust (*waqf*) to go on doing good for later generations.

As soon as human beings are buried and the mourners have filled in the grave and left, the angels of the interrogation, Munkar and Nakir, appear. They ask the dead person: Who is your Lord? What religion did you follow? and Who was your prophet? This is followed by a foretaste of the joys of heaven or the torments of hell. If heaven, the grave expands, becomes light and airy and is filled with the sweet scents of heaven. If hell, the grave contracts, becomes dark and cold and is filled with the stench of hell.

Life in the grave, or *barzakh*, is understood in Islam as a timeless state in another dimension, in which one awaits the resurrection [Q. 23:100]. Some Muslims believe that they can perform pious acts in the name of the person who has died and thus assist them during their time in *barzakh*. The state of *barzakh* is difficult fully to understand. After death one enters into another realm that lies beyond our powers to describe. On the one hand, it is real and is to be feared or awaited, but on the other hand, Muslims know that if one digs up a dead body some time later, the process of decay will have taken place.

Our human language and knowledge break down beyond death. One way of glimpsing this is to recall the *mi'raj* or night journey and ascent to heaven of Muhammad. Muhammad was taken from Makka to Jerusalem and from there ascended to heaven where he had an audience with God. All this took place in a single instant. Yet the tradition tells us that on the way to Jerusalem, Muhammad passed the grave of Moses and saw Moses there in prayer. When he arrived in Jerusalem, Muhammad was greeted by all the earlier prophets, including Moses, and he led them in prayer. After his initial audience with God, Muhammad met Moses in heaven and held conversation with him. That is three meetings with Moses in three quite different contexts all in a single instant. In this way we can see that something that happens after death can be both 'real' and beyond our earthly comprehension.

The End of Time

Before the end of the world, there will be a period of time known as the End of Time. Nobody knows how long this will last, but at the start the Rightly-Guided One, *al-Mahdi*, will appear to begin a rule of justice on the earth. For the Shi'a, *al-Mahdi* is identified as the returned Twelfth Imam, who is currently in occultation. Over time, many have falsely claimed to be the *Mahdi* as a way of rallying Muslims to their

cause. One example would be the Mahdi of Sudan (d. 1885), who fought the British for independence.

Jesus will also return to the earth at this time to resume his earthly life and with *al-Mahdi* to lead the great battle of good against evil. The forces of evil will be led by the Great Impostor – *al-Dajjal*. Jesus and *al-Mahdi* will lead all true believers in this battle and will be victorious over *al-Dajjal* and the evil he represents. They will then rule the world for a period of time in complete obedience to the will of God, that is, in the state of *islam*. During this time Jesus will be able to do all those things that were not possible during the first part of his earthly life. At the end of this time, Jesus will die and will be buried alongside Muhammad in Madina, where his grave-space awaits him. This will be the signal for the end of the world.

At the end of the world, all humans and other creatures that are then alive will die. Tradition has it that this will be followed by a bleak period of unknown duration. Then will come the sign for the general resurrection. The angel Israfil will sound the trumpet to signal the resurrection. All will rise from their graves and be clothed in 'new bodies' [Q. 56:60-61]. Every single person will stand alone before God as judge and be held to account for their actions [Q. 23:99-101, 35:18]. This will be the final judgement.

The Final Judgement

On that day, no-one will be held responsible for the sins of another, blame cannot be offloaded and merit cannot be transferred to anyone else [Q. 82:19]. There will be no place to hide anything. Everything will be known by God and must be acknowledged. The records kept by the recording angels will be produced and each person will be weighed in the balance of God's justice [Q. 84:7-12]. The tradition is that every good deed will count ten times more than every bad deed. This is a clear indication that God's wrath is overcome and justice is tempered by mercy. This can be seen by two Hadith:

When God decreed the creation, he pledged himself by writing in his book, which is with him: my mercy shall overwhelm my wrath.

Almighty God has said: O son of Adam, so long as you call upon me and ask of me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face me, giving me no partner, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it.

The prophets too will be present at the judgement and will appear before God to testify as witnesses. God, as an act of mercy, will invite the prophets to plead on behalf of their followers. Muhammad will be invited to intercede for Muslims; indeed most Muslims believe that he can intercede for them with God now, before the Day of Judgement. Some believe that many holy people, e.g., the Imams and the Friends of

God (*waliullah*), may have a share in intercession, with God's permission. Once the actions of each person are weighed in the balance, they will be sent to heaven or hell. There is no third option.

The Qur'an tells us that heaven and hell are beyond our earthly capacity to understand [Q. 32:17]. Heaven is most often referred to as The Garden, or *al-Jannah*, in which we will be in the presence of God. The Qur'an uses images of heaven that are not only spiritual: joy and peace, gardens with running streams, food without labour, wonderful companions, and "whatever souls desire" [Q. 88:2-16, 36:57]. Some scholars have interpreted these images as figurative rather than literal, basing this on a Hadith that speaks of heaven as a state that no human eye has ever seen or human ear heard, and which has not been imagined by the human heart. Heaven is as difficult for us to imagine as it must be for a caterpillar to imagine the life of a butterfly.

Hell has many descriptions and names in the Qur'an. The most commonly used are terms of fire, e.g., *al-Nar*. The common theme is of unimaginable torment and loss.

The question was asked by some: Is hell eternal? Some scholars have argued on the basis of some verses in the Qur'an that there may be some who are sent there 'only for a time' to be purged from their sins, after which the mercy of God will admit them into heaven [Q. 11:106-108]. However the Qur'an states explicitly that those who die unrepentant of *shirk*, or maintaining that God shares divinity with any being or thing, will never be forgiven [Q. 4:48].

Part Ten: The Imams as spiritual guides

To avoid confusion, the term imam is used in three senses within Islam. First, there is the imam who leads the community at prayer. Second, the term is used of outstanding scholars, whose teaching is esteemed throughout generations, such as Imam al-Ghazali. It is the third usage to which we shall refer here; these are the divinely-appointed Imams who are the sinless, infallible guides of the community after Muhammad. This is the particular Shi'a meaning of the term and this article is written to increase understanding of this Shi'a perspective. For background information on the historical and theological position of the Imams, please refer to: Series One: The Big Picture, Part Twelve.

Equality and degrees of excellence

It is obvious to us all on reflection that not all human beings are equally endowed with knowledge, piety and spiritual qualities. Human beings are all called equally to worship, obey, serve and love God but we need help in order to do this. The first guidance for all humankind is in the form of the scriptures that have been sent by God but these scriptures need to be put into practice by human beings like us. These scriptures were sent to prophets, who were endowed with the highest gifts of spirituality, knowledge, piety, courage and justice. These prophets had such a refined sense of moral knowledge given by God that they realised the consequences of sin and so did not sin in any way from birth until death. Similarly, this knowledge removed any sense of doubt or uncertainty from their minds. Such were the people that God sent as prophets to guide humankind in a chain from Adam to Muhammad.

Some of the prophets sent by God had not only spiritual authority on the earth but also political, legal and military authority. We can take the example of Abraham, for whom the Qur'an uses not only the term Prophet but also Imam [Q. 2:124]. Moses felt the need of a co-worker and God indicated that his brother Aaron (in Arabic Haroun) was also a prophet. He would work alongside Moses, be his minister (in Arabic *wazir*) and indeed take on the leadership of the community after the death of Moses [Q. 28:33-35; 19:53; 25:35; 7:142]. Indeed, the Qur'an tells us that God will raise up Imams amongst the Children of Israel as guides [Q. 32:24; 21:73]. In a similar way, the Prophet Jesus gathered an inner circle of disciples around him, with their leader Simon Peter, who would guide the community after his ascension into heaven.

The need for Guides

Why do human beings need such guides present in the community? In the same way that prophets were needed to interpret the scriptures with authority based on the light of knowledge given to them by God, so all generations of human beings need the presence of an infallible guide. There is a natural forgetfulness in human beings and the pull of the ego can cause us to go astray. Because of this human weakness, God has provided sinless, infallible guides who can lead the community of humankind with authority and certainty. It is a mercy from God that human society will never be

without such a guide or else, left to ourselves, we would be bound to go astray. Under their guidance, men and women are able to draw ever-closer to God until the ultimate closeness of the life of Paradise. In Shi'a understanding, from the time of Adam onwards until the present day, the world has never been without such Imams to provide certain guidance to human beings and guide us in our spiritual ascent.

Prophet Muhammad received the last scripture revealed for humankind, the Qur'an. Direct revelation ended with his death but guidance continued through the chain of Imams. They act as a guide (*hadi*) and also as a proof of God (*hujja*). The Qur'an commands people to obey God and his prophet, Muhammad, and “those possessing authority” [Q. 4:59] who, in Shi'a understanding, are the Imams. They act as protectors for humankind and provide right guidance. God would be unjust if humankind were left without such infallible guides. They draw their guidance from the Qur'an, from the teaching of Muhammad and by a direct illumination from God through the divine light or the Holy Spirit. Therefore they are possessed of knowledge and spiritual excellence that is beyond the scope of the mass of humanity.

The two lights

The Shi'a believe that God created a light before the creation of the material world. This light was the cause and instrument of the rest of creation. This light was the light of prophethood and guidance that was borne by Adam, as the first prophet, and then was passed through all the chain of prophets and Imams throughout the ages. The original light is held to have been in two parts, one of which comes to its final resting place in Muhammad, the last prophet, and the other to its final resting place in Ali, the first Imam after Muhammad. The two lights were ultimately united in the womb of Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad and wife of Ali, when she conceived her sons Hasan and Husayn, the second and third Imams of the Muslim line. Thereafter they were passed on to the remaining Imams, who were descended from them. These two lights can be thought of as the Word of God and the Spirit of God, thus providing certain knowledge for humankind. This line of descent of Muhammad through Fatima comprises the Ahl al-Bayt, the Family of the Prophet, who are referred to in the Qur'an as the highest (*illiyun*) of all creation [Q. 83:19].

The Imams are not the bearers of direct revelation (*wahy*) from God, as in the scriptures sent to the prophets alone. Rather their light of divine guidance is of another form, generally called inspiration (*ilham*), such as is referred to in the Qur'an as being sent to the mother of Moses [Q. 28:7], Mary, the mother of Jesus [Q. 3:45] and the bee [Q. 16:68]. In one tradition, this is referred to as being “like a pillar of light descending from heaven to the Imam.”

The light of interpretation

The prophets brought exoteric (manifest, outer) knowledge from God in the scriptures but the Imams brought esoteric (hidden, inner) knowledge and thus had privileged knowledge that cannot be accessed by the masses. In the Shi'a tradition, there is

reference to additional books of guidance, one derived directly from Muhammad and another containing wisdom imparted to Fatima by the angel Gabriel after the Prophet's death. Included in this knowledge is an awareness of the Greatest Name of God, which has not yet been made known. The Qur'an says of itself that some of its verses have a clear and definitive meaning but for others the meaning is ambiguous or metaphorical, the meaning of these verses is known only to those "firmly grounded in knowledge," who are understood to be the Imams [Q. 3:7]. If those who are not endowed with this knowledge attempt to interpret these verses, it will lead to confusion; therefore the need for the Imams, who alone are given the light to interpret them.

Reading the Qur'an from the perspective of the Imams

There are many verses in the Qur'an that are interpreted in the Shi'a tradition as indirect references to the Imams. They are: "Signs of God" [Q. 29:49], the "Straight Path" [Q. 1:6], the "Bounty of God" [Q. 14:28-29], the "Firmest Handle" [Q. 2:256], the "Rope of God" [3:102], the "Light of God" [Q. 64:8], the "Trust" [Q. 33:72], the "Guides of Humankind" [Q. 7:181], the "Possessors of Knowledge" [Q. 3:7], the "Inheritors of the Book" [Q. 35:32], the "Possessors of Authority" [Q. 4:59] and many other such titles.

These titles make it clear why the Imams are essential to correct following of the guidance of God and growing in piety and wisdom. Such functions could not be fulfilled by sinful human beings, no matter how pious, or by people functioning only with natural knowledge, no matter how wise. In this way, the Shi'a understand the Imams as a necessary blessing from God to guide humankind. They are without sin and without error (*ma'sum*) and thus the most excellent in spiritual knowledge, conduct and closeness to God, so that only they can serve as infallible guides to others.

The privileged knowledge of how to live a fully Muslim way of life was accumulated by some of the Imams and transferred to others. Ali, for example, was the constant companion of Muhammad from the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an throughout his life and thus best placed to observe the Prophet's implementation of the scripture and to learn directly from him the inner meaning of its message. He and Fatima could pass this on to their sons, Hasan and Husayn. They in turn could hand on this knowledge to their successors. The choice of successor did not rest with the Imams themselves but rather, by divine command, each in turn appointed the one who was destined to be the Imam after them. In the case of the ninth and tenth Imams, who were appointed to the Imamate as children, there is an understanding of a miraculous transfer of this accumulated knowledge. All this is in addition to the direct divine illumination (*ilham*) through the inner light that they bore.

This combination of accumulated and divinely inspired knowledge can be seen in the teachings of the Imams that have been preserved and handed down. They are the best guarantors of Hadith from Muhammad and any chain of transmission that includes

one of the infallible Imams can be taken as a confirmed, authentic Hadith. Even later Imams, who were born long after the Prophet's death, were able to give a degree of assurance about a Hadith that carried an authority above that of any historical chain. Their own teachings convey a degree of certainty that comes from their exalted status. This gives the Shi'a community the benefit of an additional three hundred years of infallible guidance after the death of Muhammad.

The centrality of the Imams

From the foregoing, we can see that the doctrine of the Imams (*walaya*) is central to the Shi'a understanding of Islam. Without their guidance, human beings are unable to navigate their way through this life and find their destination of growing progressively closer to the infinite God in the life hereafter. Muhammad is reported to have spoken of their role as being like the stars that save people from being drowned, so by holding fast to the Imams people are saved from being lost in confusion and error. The theme of salvation is emphasised by another Hadith that uses the example of the ark of Noah; those who entered it were saved, while those who rejected it were lost, so whoever holds fast to the Imams will be saved by that association and their sins will be forgiven.

The term *walaya* is important here as it comes from the Arabic term *wali*, which can mean both master and friend. So the Imams are both masters and spiritual friends to those who follow them. They guide people aright and initiate them into the hidden (*batini*) meanings of the Qur'an and way of Islam. They are a channel of God's grace in this life and will be the friend to their followers on the Day of Judgement. The Qur'an speaks of the prophets being given permission by God to intercede for their followers on the Day of Judgement. In Shi'a understanding, just as the Imams played an indispensable role in guiding people in life, they will also share in the role of intercession at the judgement [Q. 4:64; 12:97-98; 63:5].

A critical point is reached in the history of the Imams in 941 when the twelfth Imam entered into the Greater Occultation in which he lives a hidden existence out of contact with humankind until the day of his re-emergence. Although he is hidden from our sight, he is not absent or else the world would be without a source of divine guidance; the phrase is used that he is "like the sun that is hidden behind the clouds," the sun still shines and thus life on earth continues but we cannot see it when it is hidden. In this way, the twelfth Imam is currently both the Hidden Imam and the Imam of the Present Age and Shi'a will pledge their allegiance to him and pray for his imminent return. When he returns, it will be as Imam al-Mahdi, the Rightly-Guided One, who will bring in an era of justice, uprightness and peace on the earth, which will last until the end of the world.

Part Eleven: Encountering the Word of God in the Qur'an

One of the problems that has come in with the development of Religious Studies is to categorise things that do not really fit together. For example, there is a category of “Holy Book” but this does not cover the diversity between sacred texts in different religions or the variety of writings within a given book, like the Bible. To think of the Qur'an as a “Holy Book” is to misunderstand it.

Similarly, in our modern way of thinking, we think of a book as something that must be interrogated intellectually, the text must be deconstructed and analysed using various methods of literary criticism. With this approach, to think of analysing a text in a language that one does not command is meaningless. The book has no power or authority if one cannot decipher the writing. To approach the Qur'an merely as a text to be analysed is again to misunderstand it and to render much of its power inert.

Practice makes the importance clearer

If we consider how Muslims treat a copy of the Qur'an, then we can begin to explore its importance. Typically, the Qur'an will be wrapped in a worthy cloth or sometimes placed in a specially constructed and decorated box such as might be used for jewellery. The Qur'an will be kept on the highest shelf in the principal room of the house and no other books will be kept there to show that it is unique and special. A Muslim will make the ritual washing (*wudu*) before handling it and will often reverence it with a kiss or touch it to the forehead as a sign of respect before opening it. Old or worn copies of the Qur'an that need to be disposed of typically will be buried.

Two practical examples stress the point. Imagine a packed bus with every seat taken and people standing in every possible space. A man gets on with a copy of the Qur'an wrapped in a cloth and tucked under his arm for safety. He backs into the dense mass of people using his body to protect the Qur'an. Before long, someone notices what he is carrying and a seat is made available so that he can sit down. This honour is not on account of his person but because of the Qur'an that he carries. Secondly, imagine a major international conference about Islam. On the stage sit a group of renowned university professors. One is standing at a lectern giving a lecture and has just quoted something from a copy of the Qur'an, which he replaces on a shelf on the lectern. Somehow it topples and falls to the ground. Before he can react, another professor has jumped to his feet, knelt down, picked up the Qur'an, revered it with a kiss, dusted off any dirt that might have clung to it and replaced it on the shelf.

These actions speak of something worthy of the greatest respect. And yet there is a discussion amongst the scholars of Islam as to whether the Qur'an can ever be thought of as pages between two covers; it is in a literal sense, “the Word of God.”

Worthy of being committed to memory

There were those people in the infant Muslim community who could write and they took down in writing the verses of the Qur'an from the lips of Muhammad. There were many more, who committed the verses to memory. This was a society that worked on what we today call "oral history." This means that things that were important to them were memorised and passed on from one generation to the next. The same process was used to commit poetry to memory and stories that were important to the community. Many experiments have been done to show how remarkably retentive the memory is amongst people who rely on it alone. Poems that we would think of as "book-length" are habitually remembered and recited "word-perfect." Such were the memories of the people who memorised the Qur'an from the lips of Muhammad.

This aural tradition is important; when one hears the Qur'an recited and memorises it that way, one necessarily memorises also the pronunciation, the phraseology and the emphases. People committed the whole text of the Qur'an to memory, cross-checked one another and recited it in the presence of the Prophet. Such people, who have proven their memorisation of the Qur'an, are called in the Islamic tradition *hafiz* (for men) or *hafizah* (for women). They began a process that has endured in all Muslim countries around the world throughout the centuries of people committing the Qur'an to memory under the direction of a teacher who has memorised it. This passing from teacher to pupil set up a chain of transmitters (*silsila*) of the Qur'an. In this way, the Qur'an: words, pronunciation, phraseology and emphases, has lived in the hearts of Muslim believers.

Two examples to make this clear: When copies of the Qur'an were first sent out to the principal cities of the expanding Muslim Empire in 647, a *hafiz* was sent along with each copy to ensure that there were no errors in pronouncing or phrasing the written copy. When they arrived and settled, they began to teach others to memorise the Qur'an and thus began a new *silsila*. Secondly, when Muslims were taken as slaves from West Africa and put into encampments in the Americas, they went with no possessions of any kind; yet we know that they were later able to recite the Qur'an and it was taken down by dictation to begin a new deposit there.

The art of beautiful recitation of the Qur'an has become highly commendable in Islam. Those who have perfected it are given the title, Qari, and are held in great honour. Several different styles of recitation have developed in different places and an accomplished Qari will have mastered more than one. Such Qaris are in great demand to give formal public recitations at family events, such as weddings, and especially during the month of Ramadan. It was a traditional way for a blind person to earn a living. The hope, and indeed expectation, would be that the memorisation of the Qur'an would be a preliminary to gaining a command of the Arabic language but by no means all who have memorised the Qur'an or who can recite it beautifully can deconstruct the language in which it is written. Some Qaris, who can recite the Qur'an beautifully, have memorised it and learnt the art of recitation phonetically.

A minority of Arabic speakers

Only around fifteen percent of Muslims worldwide have Arabic as their mother-tongue. If we add a generous ten percent to this figure for those who have learnt to command the language, this still leaves us with seventy-five percent of Muslims worldwide who cannot deconstruct the language of the Qur'an. What is the impact of the Arabic Qur'an on the non-Arabic reader or hearer?

We need to think of the Qur'an as "Word of God" and not as a book or a text. To memorise even some of the Qur'an means that the Word of God lives in my heart. To recite it means that the Word of God passes over my lips; it is carried on my breath. Again, two examples: Imagine me standing on a street corner in a Muslim quarter in Britain talking to a group of Muslim lads aged around sixteen to nineteen. A greasy paper that has been used to wrap chips is carried by the wind and wraps around our feet. One young man bends down to pick it up but another stops him and does it himself. He throws it in a bin and I am bound to ask: "Why did you do that and stop him?" He replies that the first boy was a *hafiz* and so the Qur'an lives in his heart so he ought not to do such a dirty job. Secondly, think of the power of lyrical words on the human soul. "I love Italian opera!" "Can you understand Italian?" "That's not the point; it speaks to my soul and moves my spirit." When people hear the Qur'an being recited, they are moved by the power of the sound; it is as though it vibrates in the human heart.

This idea of the power of the spoken word can be seen in the use of verses of the Qur'an in healing. Certain verses can be recited over the sick person or even breathed over them. Similarly, verses of the Qur'an can be written with saffron water on paper and then placed in a glass of water until the writing disperses into it; the paper is then discarded and the water conveying the Qur'anic verse is drunk. In the same way, the Qur'an is used in exorcism, either by using spoken Qur'anic verses as commands or by writing them on a board and having the affected person stare at them so that the power of the verse enters through the eyes.

The deeper meanings of the Qur'anic verses are released through study and meditation; by sitting in silent meditation focused on a verse, it is as though one allows God to speak in the heart to give guidance. Beautiful calligraphy used in writing verses of the Qur'an is thought of as a visual prayer or *dhikr*. The Qur'an is used to protect people, as in the custom of writing a verse on a piece of parchment, rolling it and placing it in a small cylinder or *tarwiz*, which is then attached to the clothing or tied on the body. In some cultures, children sleep with a copy of the Qur'an under their pillows. In the practice of *istikhara* (discerning God's guidance when faced with a difficult situation), after prayer and fasting, the Qur'an is opened at random and the verses that appear are interpreted as guidance.

Part Twelve: Sufis and the inward journey to God

The journey deeper into a life lived according to God's guidance is traditionally seen as being threefold. These three stages go with the keywords *islam*, *iman* and *ihsan* [Q. 49:13-14; 16:90]. The first stage, *islam*, is the outer submission of every human act in obedience to the will of God, as transmitted by the Prophet. The second stage, *iman*, is faith based on the revealed Word of God in the Qur'an. Now we turn to the third stage, *ihsan*, which is "living the good and beautiful," and is normally spoken of as "to worship God as if you see him." This is a wide term, which applies to all Muslims, and can be thought of as "authentic religious experience." It is often associated with the sufis.

Sometimes this is referred to as the mystical dimension of Islam; a journey into the depths of the human heart and also the ascent of the heart to God. The heart is seen as the centre of life: of consciousness, intelligence and intentionality. The heart can thus be seen as the true "self." This heart or self needs to be "polished" or purified so that it radiates the light of God through the entire person in both thoughts and actions. This invisible spiritual presence, sometimes called the love of God, permeates all aspects of Islam.

In a text often quoted amongst the sufis, God says, "I was a hidden treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures so that I might be known." The great sufi poet Rumi uses the image of God as a beautiful woman sitting on a rooftop, who throws a stone into the crowds of people down below. The stone is the creation. It is not made to be admired in itself but rather to draw attention to God who created it. In this way, the act of God provokes the response of love, worship, service and obedience on the part of human beings. Bringing forth this response is the heart of the sufi way of living constantly in the love of God.

The imitation of Muhammad

How is this to be done? The key verse often quoted here is Q. 3:31, "Say [Muhammad], if you love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins." Here we see clearly that imitating Muhammad is the key to living a life that pleases God and thus will be rewarded by being drawn into the love of God. Muhammad is *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, so those who seek perfection should follow his example in all things. The first step in following the Prophet is to align the human will with the will of God by obeying all the commands and prohibitions of God. The second step is through additional voluntary acts of service, worship and love. This is summarised in a saying of God placed on the lips of Muhammad (*Hadith Qudsi*):

My servant draws near to me through nothing that I love more than what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to me through additional voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.

This is the state of absolute selflessness.

Muhammad is the embodiment of all the spiritual virtues. He more directly manifests the attributes of God than any other creature. He thus lives most fully in the state of *ihsan*. The path of human perfection, the path of love, is thus “doing the good and beautiful” in all things in this life. This is the path that leads, should God will, to Paradise where ultimately the “lover of God” will dwell beside him [Q. 54:55].

One of the ways in which Muhammad acts as a role model for Muslims is in the relative simplicity of his lifestyle and his lack of concern with material wealth and possessions. There was a group of Muslims at the time of the Prophet, the “people of the bench,” who used to seek his company so that they might be guided by him on the journey within; these were the first sufis. The word sufi may well be derived from *suf* meaning wool, which may refer to the simple clothing that they wore. This simplicity of life gives to many sufis their ascetical character, which led some to a life of voluntary poverty (*faqr*) or renunciation.

The ascent of the believer

At the heart of the sufi way lies the command of the Qur'an to remember God without ceasing [Q. 33:41-42]. This is achieved through the prayer of the heart or *dhikr*. Training the heart constantly to remember God, especially by reciting and meditating on the Divine Names, brings about a transformation of the whole of one's being and life. So the sufi way is one of interiorisation and intensification of faith (*iman*) and practice (*islam*). Through such practices one grows in God-consciousness or *taqwa*, until, God willing, one reaches the state of *ihsan*, the constant awareness that one stands always in the presence of the unseen God. Then God may draw them into a ‘spiritual embrace.’

A symbolic model for the sufi path is the ascent of Muhammad or *mi'raj* into the presence of God, during which he was given knowledge. This knowledge, sought by the sufi, is not knowledge of the intellect but knowledge of the heart. It brings an absolute certainty, grasped as a whole and through the power of intuition. It is like a light that radiates through the recipient, who becomes translucent to the light of God. In this way, the spiritual quest of the Muslim is like an ascent towards the divine presence, or something of a *mi'raj* [Q. 53:11-12]. As Muhammad is reported in a Hadith to have said: “Prayer is the ascent of the believer.”

Categories of sufi practice

Two broad categories were seen to emerge in sufi practice. These were known by the Arabic terms *sukr*, which can be translated as “intoxicated or enraptured,” and *sahw*, “sober or reserved.”

Those characterised by *sukr* became overcome by the presence of God. They tended to stress the presence of God everywhere, the nearness of God and the possibility of

ultimate union with God. Their experience was generally expressed through poetry, which contained themes of love, intimacy and joy at finding “the eternal source within.” Two of the great Persian sufi poets associated with this school were Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafiz (c1325-1390).

Some went as far as speaking of God as an all-embracing unity, in which the human being is united with God in their very being. They had a particular understanding of the Hadith of Muhammad that “God was, and nothing was with him.” As God is outside of time, the verb here is also timeless: so God was, is and will be the only truly existent being, and they longed to be united with God in this existence; indeed, at the extreme end of this school, there were those who spoke of “losing the delusion of “the self” as being independent of God.”

Those characterised by *sahw* tended to stress the difference between the creator and the creature, the otherness of God and the loving servanthood of the human being. They generally wrote in prose, which focused on the themes of wonder, awe, majesty, and fear of God, including God’s vengeance and wrath. Rather than direct experience, they sought a deeper knowledge of God. They rejected notions of union with God and emphasised a spirituality of action in conformity with God’s revealed ethical will. Abu'l Qasim al-Junayd (d.910) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350) might be mentioned as masters of this school.

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), who counselled people to “see with both eyes” or to keep a balance between these two schools, was the master of the esoteric knowledge of Islam or a form of gnosis. He spoke of direct knowledge of the self and of God that could flow freely through the purified heart. Through this process of purification, the veils of the heart were lifted by God so that one could see the true reality of things. The unpurified heart does not see with the clarity of God, like being constantly in the shade, but through the purification of knowledge, one was able to see things “from the sunny side,” from the true perspective of God.

Shaykhs and tariqas

Within the sufi tradition different groups or *tariqas* were formed, whose members follow different practices or systems to journey towards their ultimate goal. These are often referred to as Sufi Orders, but not in the sense of a monastic order, more an established system or path associated with the group and its teachers. Most are based around repeated rituals of *dhikr*. These may consist of certain phrases that are repeated and counted on the *tasbeih* (string of beads). Some groups chant *dhikr* aloud, either alone or in a sufi gathering or circle. Often *dhikr* involves the regulation of the breath, so that certain phrases are said as one breathes in and out. The tempo of both chanting and breathing can vary. Some groups concentrate on silent *dhikr*; other groups add music or rhythm to the chanting. The use of bodily movement has also been incorporated by some groups, this may be rhythmic swaying, bowing or jumping, or spinning round on an axis (as in the whirling of the dervishes).

Under the supervision of a *shaykh* (f. *shaykah*, a sufi teacher or spiritual guide) the use of music, movement or control of the breath can lead to changes in the composition of blood gases and so bring the devotee to an altered state of consciousness. The importance of the *shaykh(ah)* must be emphasised. There is a tradition amongst the sufis that those who attempt to follow the sufi paths without the guidance of a *shaykh(ah)* will go astray, “Shaytan himself will become their *shaykh*,” although historically there were a few who are understood to have travelled the path without one. These practices are not things to be taken lightly or used by the uninitiated by way of an experiment. There is a good deal in common between the practices of the sufis and those of Jewish and Christian mystics. Some scholars have even spoken of an ecumenism between them on the esoteric level. It is clear that there were sufi *tariqas* in Islamic Spain that took into full membership Jews and Christians as well as Muslims, and in India, it is known that Hindus prayed with sufi *tariqas*.

Sufi systems of spiritual growth

A typical pattern amongst many sufi *tariqas* is to progress along a series of stations or *maqamat*. In some systems there are twenty stations through which one must pass in order without missing any. The length of time that one spends in a station is under the direction of the *shaykh* who sets exercises to be done until a certain spiritual character has been reached through the blessing of God. Such stations are given names like repentance (*tawbat*), conversion (*inabat*), renunciation (*zuhd*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*). Having passed through these stations, most sufis hold that once attained they are never withdrawn. One is then in a disposition to have a higher state bestowed by God. These states or *ahwal* are held to be more fleeting and have names such as love (*mahabba*) and yearning to be constantly with God (*shawq*).

Muhammad is the key to understanding the sufi system. His life was spent in seeking the pleasure of God and being filled with the ultimate awareness of and closeness to God. He is *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being. He became the first teacher or *shaykh* to his companions on the sufi path. He passed on to them the hidden knowledge contained in the Qur'an and wisdom that was given to him by God. They in turn became *shaykhs* to those who took them as teachers and guides. In this way, a spiritual lineage or *silsila* was created whereby contemporary sufi *shaykhs* can trace their *silsila*, from disciple to teacher, all the way back to the Prophet himself. One of these *silsilas* is traced back through the Caliph Abu Bakr, but all the rest go back through Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad, who the Shi'a hold to be the rightful successor of the Prophet and heir to his esoteric knowledge, the first Imam, and the Sunnis respect as the fourth Caliph. Therefore those who follow the sufi ways can be found in both Sunni and Shi'a communities.

Diverse sufi ways

Trying to pin down a precise definition of the sufi ways is not possible. For some, this means an organised system in one of the sufi *tariqas*, for others, especially amongst the Shi'a, it is much more an individual experience. The most widely accepted “path

to human perfection” was simply to follow the life and practice of Muhammad as closely as possible and to be filled with devotion to the Prophet: “an imitation and celebration of the Prophet.” There were those who developed their sufi way into a kind of religious order of chivalry, especially when men were needed to fight in *jihads*, to defend the borders of the Muslim territories, from Morocco in the west to the far eastern borders during the Ottoman period. Some went beyond all generally accepted norms, like the Qalandars from the 13th century onwards, who lived a wandering unmarried life of voluntary poverty and license, ignoring all social conventions and outer observances.

Some Muslim individuals and groups will want nothing to do with sufi practices. They regard the whole issue as deviating from the pure practice of Islam, which is based on the Qur'an and *sunna* understood in a literal way and regulated by the shari'a. Such Muslims point to those sufis who have become so rapt in ecstasy that they have lost contact with the basic duties and practices of Islam and highlight the risk of exploiting the innocent. There have been a small minority of sufis who have taught that once one ascends higher on the sufi path, the outer forms of the shari'a no longer apply. The majority of sufi groups are adamant about the need to observe the full shari'a at all times.