

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.

