

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

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### **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 (*tasbeeh*) 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.