

Salah (Worship, Prayer)

THE word *salah* is better translated as “worship” than “prayer.” Prayer, it is well known, is not necessarily formal. It has no prescribed style, and can be recited almost anywhere, anytime. It is not obligatory, like the sacrament of communion in Christianity, or indispensable like baptism. Islam knows a form of communion with God which fits the appellation “prayer,” and it is called *du‘ā*, literally invocation or calling. Like “prayer,” it varies according to the content, as in prayer of thanksgiving, of praise, of supplication, of forgiveness, etc.

Unlike *du‘ā*, *salah* has a definite and precise form. It has to be recited five times a day at given intervals. If the time assigned to it is missed, it can be made up, but under the express consciousness that one is only making up what has been missed. It is an absolute commandment of God imposed upon all adult Muslims, male and female. There is no Islam without it, if it is denied defiantly. If it is neglected, the Muslim has committed a grave sin which must be repented and made up. However, no Muslim has authority to force an adult to hold it; and no one may prosecute or charge with heresy, a Muslim for delinquency in its performance unless that delinquency is accompanied by public defiance of the commandment enjoining it.

Salah is preceded by ablution. This is both real and symbolic, and both levels of meaning are required in Islam. The Muslim may not

approach the divine Presence, as he does in salah, with a dirty body or appearance. Just as the place where he prays is required to be clean (and hence the ubiquitous “prayer” rug throughout the world of Islam), so his clothing and body must be equally clean. Soiled clothes have to be changed. Hands, mouth and teeth, nose, face, head, neck and ears, arms to the elbows and feet to the ankle, have to be washed in clean, preferably running, water. The whole operation must be preceded with a silent declaration of intention to oneself that one is entering into it for the sake of God.

As far as physical cleanliness is concerned, ablution is a welcome exercise. We can appreciate its prophylactic value when applied to desert people where dust abounds, and to farmers in irrigated lands where mud is the order of the day, everyday. But we can also appreciate its blessings in our industrial cities where soot and other air polluting agents threaten to choke us. Psychologists everywhere would applaud its refreshing and rejuvenative effect as it comes at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night. As to its symbolic meaning, it is a ritual whose purpose is self-preparation for communion with God. The *niyyah*, or declaration of intent, which precedes it, sets the mood for seriousness and gravity, as man approaches the precincts of the Holy.

Salah can be performed anywhere; for wherever the Muslim stands, there is God present. No ground is holy; and the mosque is only a place dedicated for worship, but not “consecrated.” Salah can be performed by the worshipper alone, since there is no sacrament and no priesthood in Islam. Performing it with one’s fellows is desirable, not obligatory; but obligatory is the Muslim’s performance of congregational salah on Friday (*jum‘ah*). The congregational salah is led by an imam (leader) whose function is to synchronize the movements of beginning and ending, of genuflection and prostration. Any Muslim may lead the salah, provided his recitation of the Qur’an is correct. On Friday, the imam delivers a *khuṭbah*, or sermon, in addition to these duties. The subject of the sermon should be a living issue in Muslim life; and the imam should try to relate the relevant passages of the Qur’an and hadith to the issue at hand.

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For the congregational salah, the Qur'an advises that beautiful clothes be worn with decorum. Before starting it, the imam makes sure that the lines of worshippers are full and solid and straight. All face in the direction of the Ka'bah in Makkah. The sight of Muslims in salah, whether standing in their straight rows or kneeling and prostrating themselves, is indeed a forcefully expressive and deeply moving sight. The straight line bespeaks the equality of all, and the solid fullness, brotherhood and the community's cohesiveness.

The night ends at dawn and the day begins. Islam prescribes that the day begin with salah, where God is praised, His guidance is sought and His blessing and mercy are prayed for. Between dawn and the noon salah, there is usually a stretch of 7-8 hours which can and should be used to do the day's work. Where the work is of a heavy nature, this period is adequate to satisfy the needs of a progressive, well organized economy. Where the work is light, it can be resumed after the noon salah, which can also constitute a refreshing break. No one needs work beyond the mid-afternoon salah, unless it is for an emergency situation or for his own pleasure and desire. The sunset salah terminates the day, and the night salah marks the Muslim's retirement.

Salah is a discipline. Its ablution, its form, its movement, timing and number of genuflections and prostrations – all these constitute, exercises in self-attunement to the call of God. The Qur'an says that salah is futile unless it conduces to moral action. The fact is that salah properly performed does conduce to moral action and self-exertion in the greater cause, the cause of God. It does not only remind man of God. For its duration, five times a day, it causes man to live for a time face to face, as it were, with his Lord, Master and Creator. There can be no greater or more direct route to righteousness.