

Chapter II

WORSHIP

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Worship has a principal role in Islam. The five pillars of Islam, as the prophet named them, are (for both men and women):

1. **Shahada:** that is to bear witness that there is no deity but God (Allah) and that Mohammad is the messenger of God.
2. **Prayer:** obligatory prayers are performed in a certain format five times during every day. These are the early morning, noon, afternoon, early evening (after sunset) and night. To perform prayer the Muslim man or woman must be in a state of Tahara (cleanliness or purity). This usually entails a ritual washing (wudou or ablution) of face (and mouth and nose), forearms, stroking head with water and washing the feet and toes. Ablution has to be repeated (renewed if broken by certain events including micturition, defecation, passing flatus, sleep and certain other conditions. Sex (or night dreams leading to orgasm) necessitates a full (ritual) bath.
3. **Fasting:** every year, for the full length of the month of Ramadan, daily abstinence from food, drink and sex from dawn to sunset is observed.
4. **Zakat or alms:** this is a tax amounting to two and one half percent of hoarded money owned for a full year.
5. **Pilgrimage:** the ritual journey to Kaaba (at Mekka) and remembrance of Abraham and his son Ismail, born to Hagar, should be made once in a life time at a special season if the Muslim can physically and financially afford it.

We are omitting further details that the interested reader may easily pursue in specialised books. Needless to say that the pillars of Islam do not include the totality of Islam, for the pillars are only meant to carry a whole building. What we propose to cover in this chapter is the special rulings concerning certain situations peculiar to women and how they relate to the general outline of worship addressed to all Muslims, men and women.

Menstruation

During the menstrual period a woman should cease to carry out her prayers. After cessation of menstruation she will perform the “tuhr” bath and resume her prayers again. She is in no debt for the prayers she has missed and need not repeat them later.

Fasting also is not permissible during menstruation, whether it is the obligatory Ramadan fasting or voluntary fasting. The woman, however, is required to make for the days obligatory fasting was broken and she will later fast for an equal number of days.

Sexual intercourse is prohibited during the menstrual period. The Quran says:

“They ask you concerning menstruation. Say it is a hurt and a pollution, so keep away from women during their periods and do not approach them until they become clean. But when they have purified themselves you may approach them in any manner, time or place ordained for you by God. For God loves those who repent to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.”
(2:222)

The prohibition applies to actual vaginal intercourse. Other forms of sexual play are permitted. When his companions asked him, the prophet said:

“You may do everything but intercourse.” (Muslim-Termizi)

It is reported that on occasion the prophet covered the genital area of his menstruating wife with a cloth (Abu-Dawood) and became intimate with her. Aisha, wife of the prophet, was once asked about how free a husband was, concerning his menstruating wife, and she answered: “Everything but intercourse” (Al-Bukhari).

Medical literature concerning intercourse during menstruation has been divergent. Various authors reported that it plays an aetiological role in male urethritis, introduction or flare up of infection in the female genital tract and increased uterine bleeding. Other literature claims that it bears no harms whatsoever, but this comes from quarters that also exonerated homosexuality and anal coitus from having any harm. And the inside goings-on in the sphere of medical research over the past few decades have introduced an element of justifiable suspicion or at least reserve in unconditional acceptance of published data as all who see that sphere from inside feel.

Whether esthetic or medical reasons testify for or against intercourse during menstruation, the fact remains that it is prohibited by Islam (as it is by Judaism, with many more restrictions).

During Hajj (pilgrimage) or umra (ritual visit to Kaaba) menstruation prohibits a woman from the Tawaf (circumnavigation or walking around the Kaaba for seven turns) which is an integral part of the proceedings. The prophet was reported to say:

“Tawaf is prayer except that God permitted talking during it. . . so if you talk say only good words.” (Termizi, Darokotny)

Aisha, the wife of the prophet, is reported to have said: The prophet came in one day and found me crying (because her period had started before she made her tawaf). The prophet said:

“This is something that God has written on the daughters of Adam. Proceed with all the rituals and finish them except that you will not make tawaf until you took your (postmenstrual) bath.” (Muslim)

It is for this reason that women tried since the early days of Islam to have some control over the time of onset of the period, and if possible to be able to postpone it until they have comfortably made their tawaf. A concoction made from the leaves of the Arak tree was tried, as well as other plant preparations. This need is much more pressing nowadays, since Hajj and umra are performed by large groups of people bound by a fixed schedule and flight bookings that limit the ability of women to manoeuvre their time. Now that we have at our disposal safe, easy and reliable means of postponing the onset of menstruation, this problem is nearly solved. Female hormone-containing pills such as contraceptive pills are given daily by mouth so that they preserve the integrity of the lining of the uterus at the time when the woman's own natural hormones are waning and thus can no more support this lining with the result that it bleeds, breaks and fragments and is discharged as menstruation. The prescription of such pills for this purpose (or for the purpose of completion of the fasting of Ramadan) is now common practice unless of course there is a medical contraindication. The best chance of success is to start the pill early enough usually on the fifth day of the period preceding Hajj or umra. A late start carries less promise, and for the purpose of contraception is certainly nonreliable. The doctor has to fore-warn the woman that while on the pill she might have some blood spotting, and that to cure it she should NOT stop taking the pill. As a matter of fact she should take a higher dose (two or more pills daily) in order to stop this spotting. This

blood spotting is called breakthrough bleeding, and denotes that more hormone is needed to preserve the lining of the uterus and prevent it from breaking up. This bleeding is also NOT menstruation and should not ban her from tawaf or prayer. Technically such women belong in the group called “Mustahada” that will be described shortly.

There is no religious basis to blemish this practice of willfull postponement of menstruation. The legal dictum maintains that originally all things are permitted except those that are specifically prohibited. The practice fulfills one of the goals of jurisprudence, which is to make things easier for people.

Nonmenstrual Bleeding The Mustahada

The mustahada is the woman who has bleeding per vaginam other than her menstruation. Usually a woman knows about her menstruation, how it looks like and feels like, the date it is expected and the duration it lasts. As a matter of fact one of the terms referring to menstruation in the Arabic language is “aada” which literally means habit or custom, and is known by ongoing observation time after time. Istihada, that we might for convenience call pseudomenstruation, is bleeding other than a woman’s menstruation and outside her personal pattern she is chronically accustomed to. Although “Istihada” might sometimes belie structural or functional disease, jurisprudence treats it as a different entity from menstruation. The mustahada should not refrain from prayer provided she performs a local wash, puts a pad (or tampon) and performs a separate wudou (ablution) for each of the five prayer times every day. She is not subject to the total bath (ghusl or tuhr) as is the case with menstruation. She also does not abstain from fasting. She can carry out the tawaf around the Kaaba.

Whether the case is one of recurrence of bleeding after the end of menstruation, or a continuation of menstruation beyond the limit she is used to as her normal, the condition is “istihada” or pseudomenstruation from the religious point of view. Um-Salama, the wife of the prophet consulted him about a woman with prolonged bleeding and he said:

“Let her wait for the number of days and nights her period used to last without prayer, and then take her (ritual) bath, pad herself, and resume her prayers.”
(Malik, Al-Shafeai)

Another pattern of the “mustahada” is the woman who lacks the ex-

instance or the knowledge of a definite personal menstrual pattern to use as a reference. Examples of this are the menarche (first period ever in the life of the female) or the woman forgetful of her normal pattern. When Amna bint Jahsh, the sister in law of the prophet, sought his counsel whether to pray while she had a lengthy episode of bleeding and could not recognize her menstrual span, he gave her advice including:

“Menstruate like other women menstruate for the same time they menstruate and cease bleeding. . . and do that every month. . .”

(Ahmad, Termizi, Abu Dawood)

The average duration of menstruation prevailing among other women was acknowledged as a suitable standard to go by in her case. The quality of the bleeding can also be considered. The woman might lack normal menstruation but have knowledge of the features of menstrual blood and is therefore able to tell whether her current bleeding has the features of menstrual blood, and if not, it would be regarded as “istihada”. Such was the case of Fatima Um Habeesh when the prophet told her:

“If it is menstrual blood it is blackish and can be identified, in which case you should refrain from prayer. But if it is a different blood then do “wodou” and pray. . .”

(Abu Dawood, Nissa’i, Darokotni,
Ibn Habban)

Certain other conditions are treated on the same lines as “istihada”. The first is the passage of discharge from the vagina apart from blood (leucorrhoea). Vaginal discharge of a yellowish or white turbid character occurring at the tailing off of menstruation is considered part of menstruation. Women used to introduce a cotton pledge into the opening to know whether menstruation has gone or not, and used to send the cotton bearing this discharge to Aisha, wife of the prophet (and his direct student and therefore reliable authority) and she would say: “Don’t hurry, wait until the cotton comes out white.” (Malik, Mohammad ibn al Hassan)

But when the period was over and the ritual bath taken, vaginal discharge would not be given heed according to Um-Atiyya who was an equally reliable authority. She said “We did not use to pay any heed to a yellowish or turbid discharge once we have taken the bath.” (Abu Dawood)

The same applies to the medical condition called stress incontinence of urine, which entails the involuntary passage of some urine even at a slight effort. It might affect men as well as women. Medical treatment should be sought, but from the point of view of worship, local wash and a “wodou” for each of the five prayer times, and the patient is allowed

to resume prayer, fasting and tawaf around the Kaaba, and need not worry for they have their excuse even if urine dribbles during worship.

NIFAS—The Puerperium

This refers to the blood coming out per vaginam following the conclusion of a pregnancy whether by birth or miscarriage. The same rulings concerning menstruation apply also to the puerpera. The duration of nifas is quite variable. It might be very short, in which case the woman would take the tuhr bath as soon as the blood stops, resume her prayers and may fast and do tawaf. Marital relations may be then resumed. If nifas continues for more than forty days this is taken as the upper limit, and she should take a bath and resume prayer. If the bleeding recurs after this, prayer should not be discontinued and the regulations of the 'mustahada' are followed.

The hadith of the prophet about nifas is relayed as an answer to Umm-Salama who asked: "How long would a woman stay (without prayer) after child birth?" The prophet said:

"Forty days unless she clears up before." (Darokotmy)

Menstruation and Handling the Quran

"Furthermore I call to witness the setting of the stars . . . and this is indeed a mighty adjuration, if you but knew. That this is indeed a Quran most honourable . . . in a book well guarded . . . which none shall touch but those who are clean: a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds." (56:75-80)

These verses from the Quran have posed the question of whether the menstruating woman should hold and read the Quran or not. Exegists expressed different views on this issue, depending on their interpretation of the meaning of the word 'clean.' We will here present a summary of the various views. Ibn Gareer—quoting Qatada—stresses that 'clean' means clean in the hereafter when God resurrects His subjects. . . but in this world anybody can touch the Mus'haf (the book in which the Quran is written or printed) including even the Majusis and the hypocrites who are not to be described as clean. Abul-Alia interprets the word 'clean' in a moral sense, as a distinction from sinners and the poor of morality. Ibn-Zaid

believes that the verse was an answer back to the unbelievers who claimed that the Quran was brought down by the devils (that cannot be considered clean). Many exegetes, however, interpreted 'clean' as 'clean from menstruation for women and janabah for both sexes' (after having coitus until the ritual bath is taken). They quote a hadith related to the prophet saying "Those in janabah or menstruation should not read any of the Quran". The authenticity of this hadith, however, was not acclaimed by Al-Bukhari, the most reliable authority on the science of Hadith. Amongst those with a more permissive attitude were Al-Bukhari, Al-Tabarani, Dawood, Ibn-Hazm and others. (Summary of Ibn Katheer's Exegesis—by Sabouni: publ. Dar al Quran al Kareem, Beirut, 5th ed., Part 3, p 439, 1400 AH. — Fiqh al Sunna, S Sabeq, publ. Darul Fikr, Beirut, 3rd ed., Part 1, p 59, 1981).

With this multiplicity of views and divergence of honest opinion, one feels there is no hard and fast rule to be followed. It seems reasonable, to be on the safe side, to propose that perhaps reading the Quran for the purpose of worship better be suspended during menstruation, as it is with formal prayers. For the purpose of studying, referencing, quotation, teaching, learning, along a call to God or during a psychological crisis when it is felt that reading the words of God offers the needed support, the decision should be an individual one, depending on the precautionary index of the individual or the consulted scholar.

The Pregnant and The Lactating

The pregnant woman and the lactating woman are considered among "those with a legitimate excuse" concerning the fast of Ramadam. The hadith of the prophet says:

"God has exempted the traveller during his journey from fasting and part of prayer (qasr), and exempted the pregnant and the lactating from fasting."
(Termizi, Nisai'i)

They should later on repeat the fasting of the days they missed. Some pregnant women, however, find it difficult to repeat at a later date the fasting of the days they missed to fast during Ramadan, as they should do after delivery. They tend therefore to opt to continue their fasting during Ramadan rather than make use of the option given them not to fast. It is more appropriate that the woman should seek the counsel of her physician who for the purpose of this counsel should be a practising Muslim.

Consideration of her general health, the condition of the pregnancy, home conditions regarding effort or stress, availability of home help etc. will enable her to make an informed decision whether to fast or not.

During pregnancy prayers are observed as usual, but on occasion modification of the posture during prayer may be made if the routine format becomes too uncomfortable.

Sex is not prohibited during pregnancy unless it entails danger to mother or baby as deemed by the doctor.

Bleeding during pregnancy is of course not menstruation. The causes are many and medical help should be sought. For the purpose of worship the bleeding during pregnancy is considered to be “istihada”, and therefore is no ban on prayer, fasting, tawaf etc.