

Thick Description of *Salah*, ritual prayer, in Islam

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“God is greater, God is greater...come to prayer, come to success!” so the *mua'dhin*, the person who calls to prayer, would say. The *mua'dhin* could have been my late father or myself, or my brother or one of my sisters. It could also be a Jordanian or Moroccan person while I was living in Jordan and Morocco. *Salah*, ritual prayer, is one of the bedrocks of Islam. And the call to prayer would initiate this daily act five times a day with the *mua'dhin*'s voice beautifying the space they are in.

In this paper, I seek to give an (brief) historical development of *salah*, relying on primary sources including the Qur'an, and secondary sources, such as Marion Katz's *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* from a Western scholarly perspective and Ingrid Mattson's *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, also from a Western source, but furthermore a Muslim believer's scholarly perspective. Additionally, I will use the 12th century Persian scholar al-Ghazali's *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship* from a Sufi perspective and a 20th century prayer manual book *Knowledge of God* by a late Saudi Arabian Sufi scholar. Finally, I intend to illustrate transformations in the meaning and purpose of ritual prayer, and then will conclude with contemporary challenges and possibilities.

Historical Development

The ritual prayer of *salah* in Islam is not new nor unique to this tradition. According to the Qur'an, Jews, Christians, Sabeans¹ and the "pagan"² Arabs were praying with physical movement including bowing and prostrating.

Indeed, "[t]he Qur'an also gives *salah* an ancient pedigree, using the word to refer to the forms of prayer that were performed and commanded by the previous prophets. Prayer -- including physical prostration -- is represented as a prophetic heritage going back to the beginnings of the human race."³

Traditional Islamic accounts report that one of the earliest revelations to the Prophet Muhammad was to recite and glorify God's name. Ibn Ishaq was an early Qur'anic exegete who records the following account in which the Prophet Muhammad describes his experience in a cave while he was reflecting. This was the first revelation according to Muslim tradition:

While I was asleep (Gabriel) came to me with a (coverlet of brocade) upon which was some writing. He said, "Read." I said, "What shall I read?" He squeezed me so tightly that I thought it was death, then he released me and said, "Read!" I said, "What shall I read?" He squeezed me again until I thought I would die, then he let me go and said, "Read!" I said, "What shall I read?" He squeezed me a third time until I thought I would die and said "Read!" I said, "What then shall I read?" I said this only to save myself from him, in case he would do the same thing to me again. Then he said,

*Read in the name of your Lord who created --
Created the human from a suspended clot.
Read! And your Lord is most bountiful.
The One who instructed using the pen.*

(Qur'an 'Alaq 96: 1 - 5)⁴

¹ "The Sabians might have been Manichaeans, i.e. those whom Muslim writers on pre-Islamic Arabia called the *zanādiqa* among the [Quraysh](#) (q.v.). In this case, the Arabic *ṣābi*' (or *ṣābī*) would not be a Babylonian dialect form of the Aramaic *ṣābi* ; "baptizing," as previously proposed (linking it either to the Elchasaites or the Mandaeans, both of whom placed great emphasis on baptism), but an Arabic participle from *ṣabā*, "to turn towards," here with the sense of "to convert to a different religion," as was proposed by some of the medieval Arabic philologists" cf. Francois de Blois, "Sabians," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*.

² The Arabs the Qur'an is referring to may have been henotheistic. Pagan is a loaded term which is why I put it in quotation marks.

³ Marion Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice*, 10.

⁴ Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an*, 19.

After this revelation, the Prophet received more revelation from God via the medium of the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years. Initial revelation included the command to engage in ritual prayer, such as these verses

*O you who are wrapped up:
Rise and give warning
And glorify your Lord,
And purify your garments,
And shun all idols!*

(Qur'an Mudatthir 74: 1 - 5)

The Prophet was also commanded to pray nearly two-thirds of the night in vigil in other Qur'anic verses. However, during the first three years of Qur'anic revelation, there was no clear guideline about the method or timing of prayer.⁵ There is evidence of method in timing in the *sira*, or prophetic biography, literature. The event of the first formal prayer is described by one of the Prophet's companions, Yahya bin Afif:

When the sun rose and hung high as I was overlooking the ka'ba, a young man approached. He looked up at the sky then went to the ka'ba and stood there facing it. A boy soon arrived and stood there to his right, and shortly thereafter a woman came and stood behind them. The man bowed down and so did the boy and the woman. Next the man made a prostration and they both did, along with him.⁶

The young man was Prophet Muhammad, the woman was his wife and the boy was Ali, his nephew. This demonstration was probably in the year 611 and is possibly the earliest available description of a Muslim's prayer which shows one unit or *rak'a* of prayer with a *ruku*, bowing at the waist, and *sujud*, prostration on the ground.⁷

⁵ M Anwarul Islam, *The Inception of 'Prayer' in Islam: A Chronological Study*, 19.

⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

The Prophet, and later on, the new Muslim community, was told to pray at least the five ritual prayers⁸ daily for the purpose of attaining God-consciousness: “O humanity, worship your Lord who created you and those before you, in order for you to realize taqwa” (Qur’an 2: 21).⁹

Transformations in meaning or purpose

Salah was commanded by God to be done individually, as in the case of the Prophet praying a large portion of the night. However, as the new Muslim community grew, it became communally-ordained. Also, Qur’anic revelations were received in Mecca and Medina. Traditional Islamic scholarship classifies Qur’anic chapters as Meccan and Medinan depending on the geographic location where the Prophet was. This is important because different ethical obligations and practices were prescribed in Mecca, for example, and then abrogated in Medina, or vice-a-versa. Among them related to salah is the change of prayer direction. Originally, Muslims were ordered to direct their prayer towards Jerusalem. However, in 624, several Qur’anic verses were revealed which changed the direction toward the ka’ba in Mecca. One reason is to make the Muslim community distinct from its Jewish and Christian predecessors. More scholarly work needs to be done on this change, however, because it reveals how a shift in communal identity came about.

⁸ In Islam, you can pray and supplicate any time you wish. However, if one is mentally sane and has reached maturity, they must pray the five ritual prayers, which are the dawn, noon, midday, after sunset, and evening prayers. Maturity refers to puberty. For a female, it is when she starts her period, and for a male, it is when one of three things occurs: wet dreams, growth of coarse hair in the pubic area, or reaching the age of 15. There are probably exceptions to these, but this is the norm.

⁹ Taqwa can be roughly translated as God consciousness. The idea is to inculcate an awareness of God’s presence at all times. “In his book of definitions, Imam al-Jurjani defines it accordingly: Linguistically, it means, “to ward off.” In other words, it is “to take precaution.” According to the scholars of truth, it is “to protect oneself from the punishment of God by obedience to Him.” It is “to guard the self from God’s punishment due to an omission of a right action or commission of a wrong action.” What is intended in one’s obedience is sincerity” (Cf. Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir in *Agenda to Change our Condition*, 12).

In terms of the purpose of prayer, it is to connect with God. According to al-Ghazali, God “...allows His servants to converse with Him intimately in their Prayers, under all circumstances, be they in Congregation or in isolation. Not merely allowing, indeed, he gently urges and invites!”¹⁰ This purpose has stayed the same since its inception until today. Prayer transformed as an exercise in self-discipline. It is to remind the lower self of God and one’s capacity to overcome the lower, commanding self. Indeed, this idea of discipline is prominent in Sufism and in this next section, I will concentrate on two Sufi scholars and their perspectives on prayer.

Sufi perspective on prayer

I took a course during the spring 2015 quarter called “Muslim Worship,” and in this course, we were presented with a more Sufi perspective on ritual acts in Islam.¹¹ This perspective tries to redress the disintegration of person and society and mind and body. Many Sufis worried that focusing on just mere performance of ritual with movement went away from the reason that ritual prayer was prescribed in the first place. Al-Ghazali (d.1111), known as the “Proof of Islam” for his depth of thought and work on Islamic philosophy, wrote many treatises on purifying the heart and soul. Among them was *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*. Another, more modern Sufi who was prominent in reviving the deeper meanings behind all ritual acts was Ibn ‘Alawi (d. 2004) from Saudi Arabia. He wrote *Knowledge of God* and I will refer to both texts in this next section to illustrate a prominent perspective in Islamic thought on prayer, Sufism.

¹⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*, 19.

¹¹ “*Taşawwuf*, Islamic mysticism, is an ascetic-mystical trend in Islam characterized by a distinct life-style, values, ritual practices, doctrines and institutions. Şūfism emerged as a distinct ascetic and mystical trend in Islamic piety under the early ‘Abbāsids at about the same [time](#) as similar movements in [Syria](#), Iran and central Asia which, though designated by different names, shared the same [world](#)-renouncing, inward-looking and esoteric attitude” Cf. Knysh, Alexander Knysh, “Sufism,” in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*” 5:137.

Wudu (Ritual purification)

One cannot start prayer without purification. There are three types of water: impure, pure and very pure. The first represents one who is in love with this world inclining toward the world. The second represents the one who loves the next world and yearns towards it until she forgets the love of God. The third type is one who only wants God: nothing is mixed with it, nor anything added to it. Wudu is made with pure water (sharia), which represents the water of the unseen (haqiqa), according to Ibn 'Alawi. Water also represents the science of *tawhid* (God's oneness) which is taught by the shaykh. The murid, the follower/student, washes in water of the unseen from the murshid because it is a life-giving light that enables one to see the *haqaiq*. Main water purifies one from other than God. One uses the water in a rubbing motion in order purify herself of attributes that would be a barrier to her.

The larger purification, ghusl, represents the haqiqa of stripping way of other-than-God. Also, the removal of dirt represents removing the reprehensible attributes. Washing the genitals is purification from disobedience. If one cannot find water, representing the reality, *tayammum* (using dust/clay/dirt) must be done. The latter represents that the murid stop with the outward of the shari'a. According to ibn 'Alawi, *tayammum* is inferior to water. The water represents the teacher who can teach the unseen. So, an absence of it and *tayammum* in its place signifies this lack. Water is superior because it represents meaning whereas the earth represents the sensory. Whereas water is for the *khawas*, *tayammum* is for the *'awwam*. The *sunnan* of *tayammum* are three: first, wiping represents getting a firm hold of the doctrine. The elbow signifies the companion taken by the one performing this act. Second, the order of performance means one must have firmness in following the doctrines of the ahl al-sunna wal-jam'aa. The third act,

striking one's hands on earth, represents taking teachings from the correct people who possess such knowledge.

In al-Ghazali's text, the inner state of ritual purity means the physical act but also cleansing one's inner being with repentance and feeling remorse for one's excesses. One should feel resolute not to repeat such offenses in the future.

Prayer

Ibn 'Alawi's path for the murshid begins with recognizing only God and no "otherness." This state is necessary to enter prayer. Indeed, ibn 'Alawi writes, "If the one who performs prayer notices otherness, he cannot enter the protected zone of prayer." Due to space limitations, all of the obligations and conditions in their outward and inward forms will not be identified here, but several will be selected to represent the sharia/haqiqa pairing. The obligatory prayer has 16 obligations and four conditions. The first condition is directing oneself toward the qibla (sharia). This represents the wayfarer's heart being directed towards God's presence. The ka'aba represents the existence of Lordship. The second condition is the removal of filth which represents opposition - "leaving the tricks of the self like jealousy, envy, pride, hypocrisy and so on." Condition three is covering the private parts. Haqiqa-wise, this represents being silent about what must be kept silent about the path.

In terms of the actual acts during the prayer, these include the iqama, prostration and the like. Iqama represents the Sufi gathering her prayer garments (the robe of prayer) before orienting towards God. This represents gathering what will orient the Sufi on the path.

Humility and conscious awareness of God are the prerequisites identified by al-Ghazali for prayer. Although al-Ghazali does not use the same terminology as ibn 'Alawi, 'otherness of

God,' he uses the term absent-mindedness, *ghafla*, which cannot be part of prayer, for "what is the point of praying: 'Show us the Straight Path,' if one is in a state of absent-mindedness? If it is not intended as humble entreaty and supplication, why bother with the idle mouthing of the words, especially if it has become a habit?" Furthermore, al-Ghazali's exegesis on Qur'an 4:43, "Do not approach the Prayer when you are intoxicated, until you know what you are saying" represents this desire to understand the *haqiqa*. "Some say that 'intoxicated' means inebriated by many anxieties, while others say it means drunk on the love of this world. According to Wahb, the meaning is obviously a caution against worldly attachment, since the words 'until you know what you are saying' explain the underlying reason."

There are 14 inner states at each stage of the obligatory prayer with a sharia and haqiqa. First, the adhan represents the terror one should feel during the *hashr* on the Day of Judgment. Interestingly, al-Ghazali writes that the one who responds to the *muezzin's* call quickly will likewise be the ones gathered gently on this Day. Covering one's private parts indicates that one tries to be conscious of their faults, trying to make them a secret. But, one should realize they can never be hidden from God. Facing the qibla means turning one's heart away from everything other than God. Standing upright means keeping oneself erect in their body and spirit in front of God. When one hears the *takbir*, their heart truly should feel that there is indeed something greater than God. Qur'anic recitation indicates the tongue's awareness, which should act as an interpreter for inner feeling. When one does *ruku'*, they renew their submissiveness and humility, striving to refine one's "inner feeling through a fresh awareness of [one's] own impotence and insignificance before...God."

Prostration is the highest level of submission. It is recommended to prostrate on bare earth, intensifying one's submissive state. The worshipper must have a confident state of God's mercy through this inner feeling. At this stage, al-Ghazali emphasizes the lowliness that the worshipper should feel in front of God. During the *tashahhud*, where one almost concludes the prayer, one renews their intention in prayer as being for God alone. The worshipper should also be inwardly conscious of the blessed Prophet and the blessings that will reach him. Before giving the salams, the worshipper should make a supplication that includes one's parents and other believers. As for the last part, the salam, one is saying this to the angels and to others. The worshipper should feel grateful to God and imagine this is her last prayer.

Contemporary challenges and possibilities

There are challenges that confront the individual Muslim and also the community or the *umma*, the global community of believers. Carving out the time to pray five times a day, every day is a continuing challenge not just in the Western world, where Muslims are a minority and going to a mosque for each prayer is a bit difficult, but even in Muslim-majority countries. Regarding the former, I can speak personally. It takes discipline and time to turn away from the task at hand and engage in ritual prayer. It is to remind oneself that God is greater, as the call to prayer reminds us. However, waking up early for the sunrise prayer can certainly be hard. When I go to social events, I try to plan ahead by figuring out prayer times. It can be as easy or as difficult as one intends to make it. At the University of Chicago, there is a Muslim prayer room in Rockefeller Chapel. I'll often pray in one of the library rows of books and not make a big deal about it.¹²

¹² This is not to say I'm perfect by any means! I struggle with making my prayers, but this it has become habitual, if I don't make one of my prayers, I feel strange, like something is missing.

Furthermore, depending on their schedules, Muslims probably will not need to perform all five prayers while at work since the prayers are spread throughout the day. In addition, each of the five prayers has a window of time during which each prayer can be performed. This time frame extends from about one hour to as long as four hours depending on the specific prayer and the time of year, since the times shift depending on the season and length of day.

Throughout most of the year, the prayer time for the noon prayer does not end while students are at school, so they can perform it when they return home. During the time of year when the prayer time ends while students are still in school, they can take a few minutes during recess or lunch to pray. Students can ask their teachers if they can pray in the classroom or library. In the case of Muslim firefighters, if they are in the midst of fighting a fire and are unable to take a break to pray, they will perform the missed prayer as soon as they are able to, along with the next prayer.¹³

Another challenge in America and the Muslim world is women's access to mosques. There is not an iota of evidence stating that Muslim women can be forbidden from praying at the mosque in Islamic scripture or tradition.¹⁴ Indeed, "[t]he fundamental obligation to pray, and the components of prayer, are neutral with respect to gender."¹⁵ Despite the egalitarianism of prayer, cultural challenges exist globally. Due to this exclusion of women from some mosques, the Islamic Society of North America, the largest and most authoritative institution in North America

¹³ Islamic Networks Group, "100 Frequently Asked Questions about Muslims and Their Faith," <https://www.ing.org/top-100-frequently-asked-questions-about-muslims-and-their-faith/>.

¹⁴ Some scholars have said that if a woman is menstruating, it is preferable that she not come to the mosque. It's not because she's impure, but to show respect for the sacred house of God.

¹⁵ Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice*, 177.

that represents North American Muslims, is working to prevent such practices. They published a statement on the inclusion of women in mosques¹⁶ and here is a brief snippet:

We, the undersigned Muslim scholars, leaders, organizations and concerned Muslims, voice our strong commitment to uphold and realize the Prophetic ideal of masjids (mosques) being open and inclusive of women. Striving to realize the Prophetic model, we call upon all masjids to ensure that (1) women are welcomed as an integral part of masjids and encouraged to attend, (2) women have a prayer space in the main *musalla* (main prayer area) which is behind the lines of men but not behind a full barrier that disconnects women from the main *musalla* and prevents them from seeing the imam; and (3) women actively participate in the decision-making process of the masjid, best realized by having women on the governing bodies of masjids.

Some women in America do not want to deal with certain men's cultural imposing beliefs on women, so they will create third spaces or, in the case of the Los Angeles-based Women's Mosque of America, open up a mosque only for women and young children. Men can still attend classes and programming, but the Friday prayer sermon and the Friday prayer leader are all women-led.¹⁷

One of the biggest challenges for Muslims worldwide is praying with sincerity and concentration, rather than an automatic act. Just because one is doing the motions does not mean her heart is connected and this means constantly purifying the heart from so many distractions in the world. That is why many Muslims are drawn to Sufism because of its emphasis on purifying the heart and reminding the heart that God is greater...

¹⁶ "Islamic Society of North America," <http://www.isna.net/isna-statement.html>.

¹⁷ "The Women's Mosque of America," <http://womensmosque.com/about-2/>.

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