# Prayer in Islam and Christianity

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ABSTRACT

Prayer, a pillar of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, takes different forms within and between each tradition. At the same time, it reflects the foundational articles of faith in each tradition. This short article reviews the various elements that shape the basic forms of the practice and how they reflect the doctrines of each tradition. It calls for mutual understanding and questioning whilst showing why there is no escaping our doctrinal differences. As such, Muslims and Christians are not simply fighting for better answers to the same questions. Rather, they begin with different questions about the nature of creation and of humanity in the first place, which is why their answers and practices differ.

KEYWORDS

DOCTRINE, ISLAM, MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS, MYSTICAL,PRAYER, QURAN

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Prayer is one of the most central topics in the practice of any faith tradition. For the Muslim and the Christian, prayer is not simply about an optional activity or about a way in which human beings get in touch with a remote or a distant God. As Rowan Williams once noted, ‘prayer is about a way in which a relationship is realised and sustained’ (Marshal and Mosher, 2013).

In Islam, the word *din* stands for ‘religion’. It has the same root as the word *dayn*, which means debt. In this understanding, prayer reflects, perhaps, Thomas Aquinas’ view of *religio* as a virtue. It’s about learning what is owed to people around us and the world. This suggests that both the Christian and the Muslim imagination oscillates between prayer and action. The normative teacher of medieval Islam, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) established this principle of ‘faith/knowledge and action’ together as part of his broad definition of Islamic Orthodoxy. Ghazali interestingly refers to a popular saying attributed to Jesus among Sufi saints: ‘the one who knows and who acts and who teaches is called great in the Kingdom of heaven’ (Ghazali, *Ihya*, I: 51 n/d). In the Christian tradition, this oscillation is symbolised famously by Martha and Mary at Bethany (Luke 10: 38-42). While Mary sat at the Lord’s feet’, Martha was ‘distracted by much serving’. When she complained, Jesus told her that ‘Mary has chosen the better part’. ‘Is prayer more important than working for Justice?’, one might ask. Religious faith reminds us that we will get a better perspective on a whole range of public issues, ethical, social, or political, if we get our contemplative life well balanced. In the Quran, it is said: ‘successful indeed are the believers, those who humble themselves in their prayers; who avoid vain talk and who are active in alms-giving’ (Q. 23: 1-3).

There are various helpful publications on prayer in both Islam and Christianity available (e.g. Marshal and Mosher 2013). This short article aims to introduce how each tradition speaks of prayer and to reflect on the implication of mutual perceptions as a way for questioning that does not simply shun away the differences between both traditions. Indeed, the practice and understanding of the purpose of prayer is tied up with the history of the faith and its implication for doctrine. In Christian terms, it is often said *Lex orandi; lex credendi*: the authorised prayer of the church provides the guide to its doctrine (Elizabeth 2016). To put it this way illustrates the central significance of prayer in each tradition. This means that if we take as a starting point the idea that prayer is a common foundation of the faith, or ‘pillar’ of the faith as it is celebrated in Islam, this does not mean that we are engaging here with a neutral abstract understanding of prayer on which doctrine is subsequently added. Rather, an interesting question arises about the various elements that form the basic shape of Muslim and Christian prayer, as they have been passed through generations. This exploration will allow us to appreciate the doctrinal differences more creatively, not as a source of any competitive claim to righteousness, but as an appreciation that each tradition begins with a different question in relationship to Revelation, creation and of human nature.

It is often suggested that Christianity is a historical faith tradition (Frykenberg 1996). Therefore, Christians cannot ignore the historical Jewish context of Jesus’ own tradition. As such the Psalms played an important role that was continuous with Jewish prayer. They remain an important part of the Church’s official prayer. The daily offices of Catholic and Orthodox priests and monks and of Anglican Mattins and Evensong includes the recitation of the Psalms. Jesus added his own two contributions, which shaped Christian practice: The Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6: 9-14 and Lk. 11: 2-4) and his words at the Last Supper, received and handed over by Paul, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood’ (1 Cor. 11: 24-25). This thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) in memory of Jesus remained the central public prayer of the Church for all the Christian traditions. It is the heart of Christian understanding of the union with Christ, and therefore, with God. Out of these ancient two pillars of public prayer in Christian history, the unstructured style of personal prayer develops as well. In the gospels, we have various instances of personal prayer. Jesus often prays alone (Lk. 5: 16; 16: 16). His disciples are keen to ask him how to pray. Jesus prays in agony in Gethsemane: ‘Not what I will’, says Jesus to the Father, ‘but what you will’ (Mk. 14: 36).

The prayer of the Christian is, it seems, a flowering of the connection of Christians now with the narrative and the stories that relate to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. That life is the ‘Law’ for the Christian. We cannot set ourselves loose from that history, or we may end up in gnostic unhistorical realms. Public and personal prayer, therefore, is not a small thing for Christian believers. At the same time, this is part of the challenge and promise of interfaith encounter. If history matters to Christian faith and practice, then we cannot avoid our relation not just to Judaism, but also to Islam, despite the temptation to do so. However, whilst Jews and Christians share scriptures together (the Psalms and the Hebrew Bible), Muslims and Christians do not share the same Scripture. Nonetheless, if Christians pray in such a way that allows Jesus to act, as the Word of God, through the power of the Spirit, Muslims too respond to the Word, which is the Quranic summons. In these two different ways of responding to the Word, we do recognize some common marks of holiness. We might know how a relationship with God is lived out in a life of prayer, fasting, contemplation and adoration. We understand how God affects our lives in certain common ways.

But, in this similarity there appears to be the main difference. If Christians and Muslims learn how to pray in response to the act and call of God, the emphasis here is that prayer is a deepening of a personal relationship, reflecting a *personal* God, who acts in history. Christians and Muslims respond to different historical revelations as they learn how to pray, reflecting different understandings of human nature. Our fuller comprehension of what is involved in ‘prayer’ depends on how we understand the act of God in revelation. Put simply, if Christians are accountable to the events around the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in shaping their life of prayer, Muslims are accountable before the text of the Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad called ‘Hadith’. The notion of ‘conversion’ through the act of God is unfamiliar to the Quranic terminology (Percy 2000). The Arabic term ‘Islam’ seems to incorporate it (Percy 2000). The Quran calls people to ‘enter into deliverance (*silm*) altogether’ (Q. 2: 208). It assumes that all human beings are not fallen as such but are forgetful and need to be reminded of what to do to achieve success in this world and the next: ‘Establish prayer for my remembrance’ (Q. 20: 14). Indeed, prayer is an act against evil: ‘Prayer forbids from obscenity and evil’ (Q. 29: 45).

From the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet, the most central act of worship for the Muslim is the formal ritual prayer called *salat*. Like various Quranic terms, the word *salat* has varied meanings. It means to pray and to bless. God performs *salat* in the Quran, in the sense that God blesses (Q. 33: 43). All creatures perform *salat* (Q. 24: 41). Every Muslim is called to perform *salat*, including all previous prophets (Q. 21: 71-73). But the most common usage is that of the ritual prayer. It is one of the five pillars of the religion: ‘Oh you who believe, bow down and prostrate, and worship the Lord’ (Q. 22: 77); a clear warning is given to those who do not pray (Q. 74: 42-47).

The most famous hadith that Muslim thinkers use, which sums up in a capsule the whole religion is called the Hadith of Gabriel. In it, the Prophet has an encounter with the angel Gabriel in the presence of his companions. In response to a series of questions mounted to him by the angel, the Prophet spells out the different dimensions of the religion, which include practice and the five pillars (Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri 1991). Whilst prayer is clearly commanded as a pillar, there are no clear instructions as to how to perform the prayer in the Quranic text. The Hadith, in this instance, comes to complement the Quran and fills the void with the example of the Prophet. For instance, one Hadith reports:

Sayyidna Abu Hurayrah narrates that when the Prophet would stand up for *salah* he would say the *takbir* (*Allahu akbar*) when standing, then whilst bowing for *ruku’* (prostration). He would then read ‘*sami’a Allahu li man hamidah*’ (Allah heard the one who praised him) when rising from *ruku*’. Whilst standing he would say ‘*Rabbana lakal hamd* (Oh Allah! All praise belongs to you). He would then say the *takbir* when falling into prostration and again when rising. He would do this throughout the salah until he completed it. He would also say the *takbir* when standing up from the sitting of the second *rak’ah*.

There are five daily prayers that are incumbent upon each Muslim who have reached puberty. Why five? The tradition suggests that the prophet received *salat* from God during his night journey, mounted on a *Buraq*, a winged horse, which is referred to in the Quran (17: 1, 53: 1-21). First, he heads to Jerusalem, where all the prophets are assembled. Then the journey, known as the *mi’raj*, which means literally, the ‘ladder’, continues to heaven. The image of the ladder recalls, of course, the ladder of Jacob, with angels ascending and descending (Gen. 28: 12). Muhammad took the ladder and then came back down on the ladder to the people. A delightful anecdote in this journey appears when Muhammad meets with Moses in the sixth heaven, paraphrased in one source like this:

Moses asked him what sort of acts of worship God had given him for his community. He replied that God had given him fifty *salats* per day. Moses told him that he had better go back and ask God to lighten the burden. He knew from sorry experience that the people would not be able to carry out such difficult instructions. The Prophet continues: ‘I went back, and when He had reduced them by ten, I returned to Moses. Moses said the same as before, so I went back, and when He had reduced them by ten more, I returned to Moses’…Finally, after Muhammad had moved back and forth between God and Moses several times, God reduced the *salats* to five. Moses then said to Muhammad: ‘Your people are not capable of observing five *salats*. I have tested people before your time and have laboured earnestly to prevail over the Children of Israel. So go back to your Lord and ask Him to make things lighter for your people’. By this point, the Prophet was too embarrassed to continue asking for reductions. Hence, he said: ‘I have asked my Lord till I am ashamed, but now I am satisfied and I submit’ (Murata and Chittick 1996: 167).

There is no doubt that the five daily prayers have helped shape a rhythm of life in traditional Islamic societies, where all Muslims are servants of God who submit, literally – reflecting an impressive sense of communal witness. Indeed, all the prophets in the Quran are first remembered as servants of God who submit, including Jesus (Q. 19: 30). However, the hadiths narrated of the Prophet include other types of prayer practices, complementing the Quranic references, such as *du’a*, personal supplication (Q. 54: 9-12), and *dhikr*, remembrance, as the means to overcome forgetfulness (Q. 20: 14). Like the history of Christian practices, these varied elements develop, each with its own history among various communities.

Whilst the basic shape of formal Christian and Muslim prayers remained unchanged from early days in both traditions, we can trace the development of personal and mystical prayer in both Islam and Christianity, which shaped various types of prayers, some more formal than others. Here Sufis in Islam have generated a rich literature and traditions of veneration of tombs and shrines of saints, such as the Christian habit of doing the stations of the cross and making pilgrimages to certain shrines. The Sufis and the Christian mystics have achieved a deeper unity of meaning for the purpose of prayer, which is not tied up with any reward, a naked love of God, even if God does not appear to hear their requests(Schimmel 1952). The Christian East provided some powerful early mystical traditional focusing on the union of all creation with God. One such practice was ‘hesychasm’ or ‘stillness in prayer’ (Ware 1983: 189-90). It was associated particularly with Mount Athos and Gregory Palamas, and was focused on the repetition of the Jesus Prayer: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me’; it was also linked to bodily postures. (For some comparative notes on this practice, see Custinger 2004).

This higher register of spiritual practice and prayer was focused on ‘knowing God’. The mystic is the one called to experience knowledge of God not in a rational manner, but in an experiential manner. Yet here again we cannot speak of total convergence of language, even if St. Paul’s confession in 2 Corinthians 12 that he was ‘caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows’, are strikingly reminiscent of Muhammad’s ascent episode mentioned above. For the Christian East, God was not to be known in essence. God is to be known in God’s action or ‘energy’, as Maximus the Confessor put it (Louth 1996). In other words, there is an active, outpouring relationship of God with the world, supremely revealed in Christ, most famously venerated in Icons. The mystic ascends in that he/she clears up space for Christ’s energy or ‘real presence’ to interweave with human life.

For Sufis, on the other hand, Jesus is the prophet of the heart. He is a perfect Sufi. He is not recognized as having a relationship with God in an identity of being, only in a qualified relationship, as he struggles to become like God. As I noted before, the fundamental dualities of created and Creator, sacred and profane, are overcome for the Sufis in terms of speculative ‘tasting’, *dhawq*, as Ghazali put it (Said 2013 11, 49-50), not through God’s own action in time, or through an embodied human life. Therefore, whilst on one level Islam and Christianity agree that human nature requires discipline – and that prayer is a pillar for that to be achieved – the practice and end of that pillar in both traditions, shaped by the doctrine of both traditions, does not totally converge. A thorough comparison between Christian and Muslim understanding of human nature warrants a whole study. But these arguments are worth pondering simply because in Christian practice, prayer ultimately assumes that we are no longer slaves but friends of Jesus who, because of Jesus, can call God Father. This involves opening up to God, like opening up to a parent, in a limitless language, at times with rage, anger or frustration (as in the Psalms and the book of Job), knowing that God will not reject us when we do so. The Quran, however, pictures Job as submissive and accepting God’s will with no language of protest (Q. 38: 44), suggesting a different understanding to our relationship with God and human nature.

Another interesting issue that will require greater attention is the question of gender roles in leading prayers in both traditions. Whilst there has been some good progress among Christian churches, not all managed to come to an agreement on the debates over the role of women in leading prayers; similarly, there are some voices today among Muslim scholars arguing for such reforms (Safi 2005), but they remain a minority.

In the light of the above, some will ask, can Muslims and Christians pray together? An interesting engagement with this question is offered by the Jesuit scholar of the Quran, Daniel Madigan. He suggests working first on deepening friendships in order to deepen love for one another; a Eucharist-like sharing of meals could one day lead to some form of worship together (Madigan 2013 ). Preserving the integrity of both traditions suggests that sharing spiritual practices is to be commended, so long as we do not pretend that that act of sharing overcomes the differences between the two traditions or makes it irrelevant. Otherwise, true friendship will be sacrificed at the altar of abstract sameness.

The purpose of all prayer is union with God, not ticking the right boxes. The closer we are to God, the more we turn back to one another and to the world around us with all its needs. As such the monastic life of daily prayer will remain an important part of the world, but this need not be as set apart from other communities and faith traditions and the service of those around us. Mary and Martha will need to accept one another and work together in their different callings. Muslim and Christians need to understand one another and work for the common good without denying the reasons and purpose of their inherited wisdom, which itself includes mission in both traditions.

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