

Prayer in the Islamic Tradition I

YEs, would be only a fractionary response to the question often asked about the islamic faith and its adherents, the Muslims: 'Aren't they the ones who pray five times a day facing Mecca?' Regular 'ritual' prayer, preceded by a symbolic ablution, may well be viewed as the foundation and beginning of islamic prayer; but it is by no means the end. In the words of one of Islam's most esteemed poet-saints, the 'five prayers are as the five senses'; and though the seeker of God can ill afford to neglect them, he must nevertheless transcend them through 'presence of the heart'. Islam's vital tradition of individual prayer complements the religion's emphasis on the communal. That tradition represents a full spectrum of prayerful attitudes and responses, of praise, desire for union, intercession, repentance, and bewildered expectation: all reflecting the manifold effects of the Divine Light on the human prism. Classic prayers have come down to us from a wide variety of sources within the history of Islam. Some are quite predictable, others more unlikely and perhaps downright arresting in both origin and content. What follows is a prospector's sample that betokens a rich lode. Beginning with the Qur'an, bedrock of all islamic prayer, and moving on half a dozen centuries, here are some nuggets of prayer from the islamic tradition.¹⁰

An integral feature of every Mecca-oriented ritual prayer is the opening chapter of the Qur'an. If the five prayers are the senses, the 'Seven Verses' are the secret recesses of the heart, distilled from all the heart's desires:

In the Name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful:
 Praise to God, Lord of the universe.
 The Compassionate, the Merciful,
 Master of the Day of Judgment.
 Thee alone do we serve; from thee alone do we seek help.
 Lead us along the straight path,
 the path of those who experience the shower of thy grace,
 not of those who have merited thine anger
 or of those who have gone astray.

Countless commentaries have been written on this simple prayer. From very earliest islamic times, it was considered the core of ritual and communal prayer. One of the early sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad calls the prayer 'the Mother of the Qur'an', and counsels the faithful to say the prayer 'to themselves', even if the leader of the ritual prayer did not lead them in it. The statement explains further that God once spoke of

¹⁰ Except where otherwise specified, translations are the author's.

dividing the prayer 'in two halves, between me and my servant'. In the first half of the prayer, the servant praises, extols, and glorifies God. Of the second half, God said: 'This is between me and my servant, and my servant shall have what he asks'.¹¹

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273), who coined the imagery of the senses and the heart in relation to the Qur'an's opening verses, sees in the second half of the prayer the hopeful plea of all creation as symbolized by the garden:

'Thee alone do we serve' is the garden's winter prayer;
 'From thee alone do we seek help' it says when spring arrives:
 'Thee alone do we serve' means I have come to your door begging;
 Open delight for me and leave me not in sadness.
 'From Thee alone do we seek help' means O Helper, I am broken
 with over-abundant fruit: keep watch over me.¹²

Nearly every page of the Qur'an calls believers to seek forgiveness, to offer praise, to bring every need to the Lord. God's prophets set the example in prayer for Muslims, and the Qur'an provides a glimpse at the prayers offered by nearly all the divine messengers. One such supplication is that of Moses, who said upon receiving his mission to confront Pharaoh:

Lord, expand the core of my being; make easy the discharge of your command to me; loosen my tongue that the people might understand what I say; give me Aaron, my brother, as a helper from among my people. Affirm in him my strength by making him my co-worker, so that we may give you great glory and be mindful of you in all things. Indeed you are ever watchful over us (20: 25-35).

Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad provide, as already suggested, abundant information as to how the Qur'an was to be interpreted, and how Muslims were to behave in cases not explicitly treated in the Qur'an. The sayings exhort the faithful Muslim to meet God in remembrance, to pray both alone and in community, to pray patiently and in a low voice, before sleeping and upon rising, and so on. Scarcely a facet of prayer escapes mention in these traditions. However, the Prophet also said that no creature will ever out-remember the Creator. One tradition records that Muhammad heard God say:

If anyone comes towards me a hand's breadth, I will approach by an arm's length. If anyone comes towards me an arm's length, I will come forward the space of outstretched arms. If anyone comes to me walking, I will come running.

¹¹ Cf Graham, W.: *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague, 1977), pp 182-83. ¹² *Divan-i Shams* 2046: 6-8.

That would appear to be quite enough in itself; but the saying continues, 'and if someone brings me sins the size of the earth, my forgiveness will be a match for them'. Similar conviction of God's readiness to respond to prayer is evidenced in the writing of an early and influential mystic of Persia, Bayazid al-Bistami (d. 875):

At the beginning I was mistaken in four respects. I concerned myself to remember God, to know him, to love him and to seek him. When I had come to the end I saw that he had remembered me before I remembered him, that his knowledge of me had preceded my knowledge of him, his love towards me had existed before my love to him, and he had sought me before I sought him.

I thought that I had arrived at the very Throne of God and I said to it: 'O Throne, they tell us that God rests upon thee'. 'O Bayazid', replied the Throne, 'we are told that he dwells in a humble heart'.¹³

Muslim authors have long been in the habit of beginning their books, on whatever subject, with an invocation and, often, also with a prayer for the reader. A famous scholar of ninth-century Baghdad composed such a prayerful address to his readers at the outset of a kind of encyclopedia of natural history, entitled *The Book of Animals*. Al-Jahiz, the 'goggle-eyed' (d. 869), was one of the most learned men of his day. His celebrated ugliness was exceeded only by his wit, so that he was prompted to liken his own appearance to that of the devil himself. Be that as it may, al-Jahiz did occasionally think beautiful thoughts, as in this prayer for his reader:

May God guard you from doubt and keep perplexity far from you.
 May he raise you as a child of knowledge and truth;
 May he imbue you with a love of investigation and search.
 May he embroider justice upon your eyes and feed you with the
 sweetness of conversion.
 May he cause your heart to experience the glory of the truth, and
 refresh your heart with the coolness of firm faith.
 May he put aside from you the degradation of hopelessness, and bestow
 on you a conviction of the unworthiness of falsehood and the pettiness
 of ignorance.

Islamic literary history is full of engaging characters, many of whom, like al-Jahiz, seem unlikely sources of material for prayer. Abu Nuwas (d. 803) was a poet of Baghdad unsurpassed in the crafting of drinking songs and ribald lyrics. He seems to have undergone something of a *metanoia* in the autumn of his years, for the genuineness of these two prayer-poems can scarcely be doubted:

¹³ Smith, Margaret: *Readings from the Mystics of Islam* (London, 1972), p 27.

O you from whom none can protect me,
 I seek refuge from your punishment in your forgiveness.
 I am the servant who confesses every sin;
 You, the Master, the Lord, the Forgiving.
 Should you chastise me, I am guilty enough;
 should you forgive, forgiveness most becomes you.
 I have escaped to you from you — where but to you can I flee as I
 seek protection from you?
 If my sins be great in number,

I have learned with certainty that your forgiveness is greater.
 If only those who do good can hope in you,
 in whom will the sinner seek and find refuge?
 I call to you as you command, in supplication;
 if you thrust aside my hand, who would show mercy?
 Hope in the beauty of your forgiveness is my only way to you
 — then I have become a true believer.

From the prayer of a man who looked like the devil, and that of one who repented of acting like the devil, it is a shorter distance than one might suspect to the prayer of the devil himself. Demonology in islamic thought is imaginative and complex, and, to our way of thinking, quite unorthodox. The figure of Iblis (the arabic transformation of the greek word for devil, *diabolos*) has been variously interpreted by muslim spiritual writers and theologians. In general, Iblis is not considered to be the quintessence of evil, is never conceded absolute power over humankind, and remains always a creature of God and an instrument in God's hand.¹⁴ Beyond that, Iblis has been for some mystic types in Islam the epitome of the misunderstood and unrequited lover of God. The Qur'an tells of how God commanded his angels to do homage to the newly-created body of Adam. All but Iblis complied. Iblis defended his refusal by saying to God, 'My denial is to affirm your holiness; for your sake I have thus reasoned myself into madness. Who is Adam if not you, and who am I, Iblis, to distinguish between you?' God's command put Iblis into a major dilemma: how could he bow to Adam and still worship none but God? In the words of the martyr-mystic of Baghdad, al-Hallaj (d. 922), God's decree threw Iblis into the sea and ordered him not to get wet. Al-Hallaj has left us this conversation between God and Iblis:

Iblis fell into the ocean of divine power and was blinded. He said 'I have no path to anyone but you; I am a humble lover'. God said to him: 'you are becoming proud'. Iblis replied: 'If we had exchanged but a single glance, it would have been sufficient reason for me to become swollen with pride; but I have known you since before time's

¹⁴ Schimmel, Annemarie: *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), pp 193ff.

beginning. I am better than Adam because I have served you longer. In all of creation no one has more knowledge of you than I. You and I paid attention to each other long before Adam's day. Whether or not I bow to one beside you, I must return to my origin; for you fashioned me of fire, and, according to your disposition and decree, fire must return to fire. Because I have found distance and nearness to be one and the same, there can be no separation from you for me. Love and parting are indeed one. All praise to you for your abiding concern and for your unapproachability, all for this devotee who bows to none but you'.

It is not surprising that al-Hallaj's own experience of union with God, as described in his many intriguing poems, has seldom been met with neutral response. The poet's contemporaries judged his ecstatic utterances to be pantheistic and heretical in the extreme. Al-Hallaj was publicly executed in 922. His remarkable verses are often starkly simple as they describe the mystic's desire for oneness with his Lord:

I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart, and I said, 'Who are you? He said, 'You!' There is no 'where', that I might ask of you 'Where?' And where you are there is no 'where'. And for the imagination there is no imagining you; how then, can the understanding come to know where you are? You are the one who owns every 'where' as though it were a 'no-where'; and where are you? In my passing away in you even my dying to self has perished, and in my being lost you are found.¹⁵ In the effacement of my self-identity and of my bodily traces I asked about myself, and I replied, 'You'. My inmost being beckoned to you until I lost myself and you lived on. You are my life and the secret of my heart, and wherever I am, you are. You have surrounded my knowledge of every thing, so that everything I see is you. Forgive most generously, O my God, for I hope in none but you.

Justice to the depth of al-Hallaj's poetry could be done only through years of dedicated study and reflection. For the present, we shall have to content ourselves with a passing mention of several other outstanding men of prayer, religious poets upon whom the spell of al-Hallaj worked the magic of its enduring influence.

^cAbdullah Ansari (d. 1089) of Herat (in present-day Afghanistan) is most famous for his small book of Invocations. A brief selection of his prayers will serve to suggest a number of themes which became most popular with muslim mystical poets in subsequent generations.

¹⁵ The poet uses the same word-root here four times; 'passing away', 'dying to self', 'perished', and 'being lost' are thus exactly interchangeable in the original text.

O Lord, give me eyes which see nothing but thy glory.
 Give me a mind that finds delight in thy service.
 Give me a soul drunk in the wine of thy wisdom.
 O Lord, he whom thou killest doth not smell of blood,
 And he whom thou burnest doth not smell of smoke,
 For he whom thōu burnest is happy in the burning,
 And he whom thou killest rejoiceth in being killed.
 O Lord, every one desires to behold thee,
 I desire that thou mayest cast a glance at me.
 If in hell I obtain union with thee,
 what care I for those who dwell in Paradise?
 And were I called to Heaven without thee,
 the pleasures of Paradise would then be worse than the fires of hell.
 On the path of God, two places of worship mark the stages.
 The material temple and the temple of the heart.
 Make your best endeavour to worship at the temple of the heart.¹⁶

In the next translation, Ibn al-Farid of Cairo and Damascus (d. 1235) develops the themes of pilgrimage and temple suggested by the last-quoted verses of Ansari. Here he plays on the image of the journey that every Muslim must endeavour to make once in a lifetime, to the city of Mecca and its holy 'temple', the Ka'ba. Islamic tradition has it that Abraham built the holy house of Mecca. Metaphorically speaking, the tradition is accurate; for much of the prayer offered by pilgrims to the sacred precincts of the Ka'ba is offered in the spirit of the prophet Abraham as he is venerated in Islam. Ibn al-Farid addresses the Divine Presence as the Ka'ba of perfect beauty, and goes on to describe his longing for the beloved, his Creator and Lord:

O Ka'ba of splendour, toward your beauty the hearts of those intent
 on you make pilgrimage and cry,
 'Twice at your pleasure!
 Lightning blazing through mountain-passes has brought us the finest
 of gifts: your flashing smile, revealing to my eye that my heart was
 your neighbour; and I longed for the full vision of your loveliness.
 But for you, I would not have sought guidance in lightning, and my
 heart would not have saddened and wept at the birdsong from forest
 depths.
 Still, the lightning guided me, and birds on their branches of wood
 sang me past need of tunes from lute of wood.
 For so long I have wanted you to look my way, and how much blood
 have I shed between desire and fulfilment!

¹⁶ *The Invocations of Sheikh^c Abdallah Ansari*, trans. Jogendra Singh (London, 1959), *passim*.

They called me fearless before I came to love you; but I have set bravery aside and no longer hold myself in safety.

My endurance has fled from me and I am led captive; my former sadness gone, new grief has come to my aid.

Will you not turn from your aversion, from your preference for tyranny over kindness, from cruelty will you not turn?

Greatest of all gifts would be your slaking the thirst of one at the point of death, that he might revive.

It is not my longing for one beside you that has wasted me: out of affection for you alone have I perished.

The beauty of your face has quickened me and left me dead, for I am barred even from kissing its veil.

Ibn al-Farid complains that the Divine Presence has made chaos of his life, that he has grown old in desire while yet a young man, and that his friends and companions shun and berate him. At length, however, he tells how his bitterest critic was won over to understanding. Still speaking to the Divine Beauty, the poet says: 'Though it was not the time for arguing about you, when I rebutted him who censured me concerning you, your face became the proof of my contention'.

A contemporary of Ibn al-Farid likewise develops the life and death implications of seeking to be one with the Creator. Farid ad-Din 'Attar (d. 1220) tells this story of the moths and the candle. One night a throng of moths gathered to discuss what would happen if they were to give in to their sole shared desire — to be united with the candle. One moth volunteered to fly to a nearby castle, catch a glimpse of the candle, and bring back a description of it. When the first moth returned, the wise presiding moth pronounced his description second-hand and worthless. A second moth flew off; he dared to brush the flame with his wings, but was repulsed by the candle's heat. His description, said the wise moth, was scarcely more illuminating than that of the first moth. A third moth ventured forth. He hurled himself recklessly into the flame and became aglow like the candle itself. Watching from a distance, the wise moth proclaimed: 'He has learnt what he wished to know; but only he understands, and one can say no more'.¹⁷

Islam's seventh century was as rich a treasure house as was Christianity's thirteenth, as the works and imagination of 'Attar and Ibn al-Farid attest. Jalal ad-Din Rumi was equally a product and shaper of that time's spirit, and one of its most eloquent and prolific heralds. Over 60,000 verses are attributed to him, including a 25,000 line religious epic and 3,500 lyric poems. All of his poetry is the sound of a man at prayer. In addition to embellishing many of his predecessors' themes and images, Jalal ad-Din gave voice to his own unique genius for tapping the springs of desire to return to God. A human being who prays is like the reed-flute that complains of separation from its

¹⁷ *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. C. S. Nott (New York, 1954), p 125.

bed of rushes. Its song is not the sound of wind, but of fire. Not everyone comprehends its plaint, but no one who lacks its fire forever can be truly alive. Some of the spirit of Rumi emerges in the three pieces included here:

You who attract lovers like sugar,
 lead my soul on gently, if lead me you would.
 Death at your hand is sweet and pleasant,
 for you give vision to one who would see.
 Eagerly I await your inevitable magic,
 for it is mostly at magic-time that you lead me on.
 Unanswerable in your speech, you deal out
 grief-dispelling grief.
 You who scatter, fan us like sparks, lead us on.
 Your every word is a rebuff — let them roll like a torrent.
 You who have set the sword at liberty, be my shield.

(*Divan-i Shams* 3019)

O Lord, you are Lord of the World,
 Sovereign of earth and of heaven.
 God of east and west, of shore and sea,
 God above and below, of my race and of me.
 You are King ever-present and peerless,
 Lord within space and without.

Before ever this world was, you were;
 though no trace of it remain, you will be.
 When no living thing on earth remains,
 Alive, Undying, Immortal you will be.
 You are the spark of flint upon steel:
 you are a world ablaze in their striking;
 Hardest of rock you ennoble, Creative;
 for stone and iron's sake you make the day dawn.

(*Divan-i Shams* 3172: 1-7)

Love for you has stolen my prayer-beads in exchange for poems and songs; my heart would not listen to my repentance and frequent cries of 'There is power only in God!'

At love's behest I have become a singer of odes and a hand-clapper; my love for you has put to the torch my name, my shame and all that is mine.

There was a time when I was modest and self-effacing and steady as a mountain; but where is the mountain that your blast cannot carry away like straw?

If I were to remain a mountain, I would contain the echo of your voice; if blown like straw, your fire will turn me to smoke.

(*Divan-i Shams* 940: 1-4)

As Rumi intimates in the third selection, he finds that he has been led past conventional and formalized prayer, and that his prayer is now his poetry and vice-versa.

Prayers for others, friend or foe, are always answered, in Rumi's opinion. Prayers for oneself are sometimes unheard, and that is for the best. The poet writes:

Thanks be to God that this prayer was rejected: I thought it was loss,
but it has turned out to be gain.

Many are the prayers which are loss and destruction, and from
kindness the Holy God does not hear them.¹⁸

On the other hand, Rumi is persuaded that the very desire to pray is itself God's answer; no further response is necessary. He illustrates the point with a story in his epic work, *The Masnavi* (literally, 'couplets'). There was once a man who prayed fervently, keeping long vigil. As the man began to flag in his efforts, Satan visited him and suggested that, for all the man's energetic outpouring, he should surely deserve to hear God's response. 'For all of your calling "O God", do you hear the reply, "Here I am"?' He did not. Noting the devoted servant's distress, God sent one of his messengers to inform the man that all his anguish and supplication and fervour was itself God's messenger to him. All the man's struggle to find a way to his Lord was itself God's leading the servant toward himself and freeing him. The praying man's fear and love, God's messenger went on, were a noose with which he had captured the divine favour: 'Beneath every "O Lord!" of yours lies many a "Here I am" from Me'.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi and the other contributors to this small anthology represent a wonderful and vigorous tradition of prayer. All have taken their inspiration from faith in a God who desires most of all to have 'conversation' with his people, a God who says in the Qur'an, both: 'Call to me and I will hear you', and 'I am near, to answer the call of the caller, when he prays to me; so let them respond to my call'. (40: 61 and 2: 186).

John Renard S.J.

¹⁸ Schimmel, Annemarie: *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London, 1978), p 361.