Introduction

Over a number of years teaching a course on comparative religion early in my career, I found that students had differential expectations of the subject areas we would cover when studying specific traditions. Although (for instance) discussion of Buddhism evoked immediate interest in meditative practices, the subject of Islam reliably elicited questions about gender relations and politics. Both of these, of course, are important areas of inquiry (and both will be discussed at various points in this book). However, over time I began to wonder both whether Buddhist meditation and monasticism were actually as innocent of gendered and political connotations as my students seemed to assume, and whether it was possible to direct more attention to aspects of Islam that were more constitutive of Islamic faith and identity. Although Sufi contemplative practices did garner interest, they are not prevalent in all Muslim communities, and American students often perceived them in generic "spiritual" terms scarcely identifiable as Islamic. Hence this work on prayer, which focuses primarily on *ṣalāt*[1] (the canonical prayers ideally performed five times daily), but also on the more free-form *du'ā'*, or supplication. It hopes to direct needed attention to the practice most central both to personal faith and to the public constitution of Muslim communities, while showing that the spiritual and theological concerns inherent to prayer are not disembodied matters isolated from the issues of knowledge and authority that have exercised thinkers in other areas of Islamic law and thought.

This study is primarily a historical one, based on premodern sources (the majority of them dating from the ninth through sixteenth centuries C.E.). Because of this, it is framed largely in the past tense, although many of the practices and ideas described continue to be current. Many of the major sources, although centuries old, are still in print due to demand among contemporary believers, rather than primarily among historians; they are "classical" in the sense of retrospectively forming lasting points of reference for later communities of Muslims (although individual authorities are differently evaluated by

[1] The final "t" in this transliteration represents the Arabic *tā' marbūṭa*; the word can also be rendered as *ṣalāh*.

various sectarian or ideological groupings). Because it is hoped that this book will also be of some use to those whose interests focus on more recent times, in cases where modern developments have introduced major changes in practice or interpretation these have been briefly discussed. This study is based primarily on Arabic-language sources from the Middle East and North Africa, although the underlying issues examined are of broader interest and examples from other areas have been cited where possible.

The subject of prayer is also a useful entry point to the study of Islam because prayer, although certainly not practiced by all individuals, is ubiquitous enough to be familiar to almost everyone. Unlike many other aspects of life in Muslim societies, which were often regarded by Western observers with incomprehension and contempt, historically Islamic prayer practices were often perceived with some degree of sympathy and admiration. For the many devout travelers who wrote of their experiences in centuries past (including many members of the clergy, both Catholic and Protestant), prayer held an uncontested place of honor in their value system, and many of the criteria that Muslims used to evaluate it – including regularity, concentration, and humility – were familiar and shared. If (for instance) marriage in Muslim societies often failed to fulfill evolving European ideals of companionate marriage and female domesticity, and indigenous forms of governance were increasingly decried as "despotic" as Europeans developed (if not necessarily achieved) ideals of egalitarianism and democracy, European and American travelers were often frankly impressed by Islamic worship. Whatever their contempt for the beliefs of Muslims, Westerners often found the devotion of their prayer to be a reproach to the comparative laxity of Christians.

In a very early example, Riccold de Monte Croce, a Dominican missionary from Florence who set out for the Middle East in 1288, wrote, "What shall I say of their prayer? For they pray with such concentration and devotion that I was astonished when I was able to see it personally and observe it with my own eyes."[2] Two centuries later another Dominican, Felix Fabri, sadly observed the contrast between the "gravity and seriousness" of the daily prayers of his Muslim guides and those of his fellow Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land, who pray "with levity and wantonness, with unspeakable lukewarmness at all times, with wandering thoughts and weariness." What is more, many Christians let the entire day pass without engaging in prayer, while this could never occur among Muslims or Jews, "for all these heathens have even a fixed attitude and fashion wherein to pray, which they do not depart from in any case unless compelled by force."[3] A later sixteenth-century Catholic traveler, Guillaume

[2] Riccold de Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en Terre Sainte et au Proche Orient, Texte latin et traduction*, ed. and trans. René Kappler (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1997), p. 161.
[3] Felix Fabri, *The Wanderings of Felix Fabri*, The library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, vol. VII (New York: AMS Press, 1971, reprinted from London edition of 1887–97), pp. 262–3.

Postel, wrote that "whoever saw the modesty, silence, and reverence that the Turks have in their mosques, would be extremely ashamed to see that the churches here are used for chatting, strolling, [and] doing business."[4]

Other Christian observers of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries similarly praised the "fervor and earnestness," the concentration and the regularity displayed by Muslims in their prayers, which they regarded as a humbling example to their fellow Christians.[5] Typical sentiments were expressed by the late seventeenth-century French Protestant traveler Jean Chardin, who wrote:

> I cannot prevent myself from saying once more that the prayer of the Mahometans [*sic*] is made with an unimaginable reverence, and that one cannot observe the concentration that they bring to it, the zeal and humility with which they accompany it, without admiration. They do not move their eyes; all the movements of their bodies are made most precisely. . . . All of this is so composed, so exact, so considered that they surely put us Christians completely to shame.[6]

Even in the nineteenth century, at the apex of European imperialism, travelers continued to write of Islamic prayer with envy and respect. Edward William Lane, a devoted observer of Egyptian life in the 1830s, affirmed that "the utmost solemnity and decorum are observed in the public worship of the Muslims. . . . Never are they guilty of a designedly irregular word or action during their prayers."[7] Interestingly, one of the themes that gains new prominence in nineteenth-century travelers' descriptions is the egalitarianism of Muslim congregational prayer and of the public space of the mosque. They often regretfully concluded that Muslims were more successful in effacing markers of rank in the unity of prayer than their own Christian communities. Julia Pardoe, who made an extended visit to Istanbul in the 1830s, wrote that an upper-class Ottoman Turk "carries no pomp with him into the presence of his God," unlike the Christian who may "pass into the house of God to tenant a crimson-lined and well-wadded pew, and to listen to the words of inspiration

[4] Guillaume Postel, *Des Histoires Orientales, text modernisé, introduction et notes par Jacques Rollet* (Istanbul: Les Editions Isis, 1999), p. 115.

[5] See Karl H. Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf, Sixteenth-Century Physician, Botanist, and Traveler* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 182; Antonius Gonzales, *Le Voyage en Egypte du Père Antonius Gonzales, 1665–1666*, ed., trans. from the Dutch, and annotated by Charles Libois, S. J. (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1977), 1:213; Joseph Pitts, *A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammetans, with an Account of the Author's Being Taken Captive* (Exon, 1704), pp. 35, 42; Paul Lucas, *Troisieme voyage du Sieur Paul Lucas, fait en MDCCXIV, &c. par ordre de Louis XIV dans la Turquie . . .* (Rouen: Robert Machuel le jeune, 1719), 1:90–1.

[6] Sir John Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse, et autres lieux de l'orient, enrichis d'un grand nombre de belles figures en taille-douce, représentant les antiquités et les choses remarquables du pays*, new ed., rev. L. Langlès (Paris: Le Normant, Imprimeur-Libraire, 1811), 7:30–1.

[7] Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, introduced by Jason Thompson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003), pp. 83–4.

beside a comfortable stove, in dreamy indifference."[8] The Reverend J. A. Spencer wrote in the mid-nineteenth century of the mosques of Cairo:

> Mats are spread over the entire space, and the worshippers go through with their devotions, high and low, rich and poor, all together, without distinction of classes – a feature of Mohammedanism, which reminded me rather painfully of the different notion of things, which Protestant Christians are apt to entertain in arranging their houses of prayer.[9]

The British traveler Harriet Martineau concurred, writing around the same time:

> We are accustomed to say that there is no respect of persons, and that all men are equal, within the walls of our churches: but I never felt this so strongly in any Christian place of worship as in this Mohammedan one, with its air of freedom, peace, and welcome to all the faithful.[10]

Even missionaries who sought to convert Muslims sometimes found the devotion and humility of their prayers to be a tacit rebuke of Christian failings. In the early twentieth century, Paul Harrison wrote of his observations in the Arabian Peninsula:

> Line behind line, they stand and kneel and prostrate themselves together. The master is there with his slave. The man who has spent twenty years in the schools stands next to a Bedouin who can neither read nor write. The richest man of the community stands next to one who is just out of jail for debt. No one is surprised, for it is the ordinary thing. It would surprise them to be told that there are places in this world where men persist in their conceits and divisions even when standing in the presence of the omnipotent God.[11]

The admiration expressed by nineteenth-century Western commentators for the egalitarianism and inclusiveness of Islamic prayer was balanced (usually by different observers) by a more critical theme, the condemnation of its "formal" and "external" qualities. If some observers were struck by the humble sincerity of Islamic worship, others took the set content of the prayers and the prominent role played in them by bodily postures as indicators that they were merely a matter of exterior show. As we have seen, Felix Fabri – a Catholic who himself performed the liturgy of the hours – had been positively impressed by the fact that Muslims and Jews had "a fixed attitude and fashion wherein to pray." The seventeenth-century Swedish diplomat Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson, a Christian of the Armenian rite who wrote a description of the Ottoman Empire, credited the

[8] Miss Pardoe [Julia Pardoe], *The City of the Sultan; and Domestic Manners of the Turks, in 1836*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1838), 1:95.
[9] Rev. J. A. Spencer, *The East: Sketches of Travel in Egypt and the Holy Land* (New York: George G. Putnam, 1850), p. 193.
[10] Harriet Martineau, *Eastern Life, Past and Present* (London: Edward Moxon, 1848), 2:122.
[11] Cited in Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 96–7.

physical discipline of Islamic prayer with creating dispositions with a broad effect on Muslim personal comportment and social life.[12] In contrast, later Protestants – whose own denominations generally eschewed such physical gestures as genuflection in prayer – were often openly disdainful of the physical and rule-bound quality of Muslim canonical worship.

Richard Pococke, a Protestant Irish bishop, wrote sneeringly in the eighteenth century of Egyptian Muslims that "the outward appearance of religion is in fashion among them, and it is looked on as genteel to say their prayers in any place at the usual hours."[13] In the middle of the nineteenth century, Sarah Barclay Johnson acknowledged that Palestinian women assiduously performed their five daily prayers, "thus setting us an example" that would be beneficial if emulated, but dismissed their worship as a mere "bodily exercise" reflecting a theologically incorrect "reliance upon form alone." She is contemptuous of the "numberless kneelings, bowings, prostrations, and unmeaning gesticulations" of Muslim prayer.[14] Mary R. S. Bird, a Protestant missionary working in Iran in the late nineteenth century, notes the "gravity and devoutness" with which Muslims perform their prayers but concludes:

> Yet they are but "vain repetitions"; the greater proportion of the Muslims (at least, in Persia) not understanding Arabic, the "language of God and paradise," in which all their prayers are repeated. They are taught that a mistake in form or position renders the prayer valueless.[15]

In Bird's view, the prayers of Iranian Muslims reflect not only a mistaken attitude towards the importance and efficacy of ritual performance, but a wrong way of addressing themselves to God. The result is, in her view, that their prayers must fail to be morally transformative (as, she implied, were the prayers of Protestant Christians):

> To a Mohammedan prayer is all *duty*; not the happy communing of a child with its Father, nor the child's cry of sorrow or need to the One Who it knows is always able and willing to help. The result is that no power to change the life is gained, no fresh lesson as to how to gain the victory over besetting sin learnt.[16]

Such views were influential in the development of Western scholarship on Islam. William St. Clair Tisdall, another missionary to Iran and the author of a number of studies on Islam, wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century that

[12] d'Ohsson [Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Ignatius], *Tableau Général de l'Empire Othoman* (Paris, 1788), 2:95–6.
[13] Richard Pococke, *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries* (London: W. Bowyer, 1743), 1:181.
[14] Sarah Barclay Johnson, *Hadji in Syria, or Three Years in Jerusalem* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Sons, 1858; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1977), pp. 222–3, 236, 237.
[15] Mary R. S. Bird, *Persian Women and Their Creed* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1899), p. 7.
[16] Ibid.

"the stress which [Islam] lays upon ceremonial observances, such as fasting, . . . the recitation of fixed prayers at stated hours, the proper mode of prostration, etc., *tends* to make the great mass of Muḥammadans mere formalists."[17] In the mid-twentieth century, the distinguished Islamicist Gustave von Grunebaum similarly wrote that Islamic prayer was characterized by a "peculiar formalism" that "left the believer satisfied with an arid, if physically exacting liturgy."[18]

In part, the devaluation of the set liturgy and prescribed physical postures involved in Islamic prayer reflected an internecine Christian dispute that had been in progress for centuries. Controversies over the recitation of set prayers, the use of a liturgical language incomprehensible to the majority of the faithful, and the appropriateness of bodily acts of devotion such as genuflection were central to the Reformation; as Mary Douglas put it in another context, "Shades of the Reformation and its complaint against meaningless rituals, mechanical religion, Latin as the language of cult, mindless recitation of litanies."[19] However, even within the domain of Christianity these issues cannot be reduced to a binary distinction between ritualist Catholics and anti-ritualist Protestants. Particularly among Protestants, they continued to be debated long after the Reformation. On the one hand, the prescription of liturgy raised complex questions about the relationship between external actions and subjective sentiments. Did ritualized bowing or kneeling constitute an exterior show of piety and submission that might belie the worshiper's true interior attitude, raising the specter of hypocrisy (or at least of futility)? Or, alternatively, did the repetition of appropriate physical postures contribute to the cultivation of proper interior dispositions, fundamentally shaping the person of faith? Did the prescription of specific words preclude the spontaneous expression of genuine religious feeling, or did appropriate, authoritative, and beautiful words alone guarantee the orthodoxy, communality, and effectiveness of prayer?

These questions were vigorously debated even among Christian thinkers working within a single Church, as the expediency of introducing uniform prayer books and the appropriateness of specific liturgical postures came under consideration. Eloquent voices were raised in support of a range of views. Responding to denial of communion on the grounds of his failure to kneel, the seventeenth-century English Puritan William Prynne wrote that God left all "corporal gestures" in prayer at the discretion of worshipers,

> not particularly or precisely commanding in the Old or New Testament, either the gestures of Kneeling, Sitting, Standing, Bowing, or Prostration in Publick or Private

[17] Cited in Paul R. Powers, "Interiors, Intentions, and the 'Spirituality' of Islamic Ritual Practice," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004), p. 426.
[18] Cited in ibid., p. 427.
[19] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 1.

Prayer. . . . The reason is apparent, because those Gestures are in themselves things merely indifferent, and one Gesture may be more decent, expedient to stir up affection, devotion, attention, upon several emergent occasions, in relation to the same, or different persons.[20]

In contrast, another seventeenth-century English divine argued for the "correspondency, and sympathy between the soul and the body," asking rhetorically, "And do we not perceive plainly that when we betake ourselves to our knees for prayer; the soul is humbled within us, by this very gesture?"[21] On the recitation of set prayers, John Milton argued: "This is evident, that they *who use no set forms of prayer*, have words from their affections." In contrast, to impose set prayer formula was "to imprison and confine by force . . . those two most unimprisonable things, our Prayers and that Divine Spirit of utterance that moves them."[22]

It is interesting that, although derogatory comments about Islamic prayer were of course not completely new in the nineteenth century, there seems to be a sharp rise in dismissive allusions to its supposedly exterior and formalistic qualities at that time. Since this issue was far from freshly raised among Christians in that period, it is unclear whether the doctrinal convictions of the individuals who expressed these views differed from those of Protestants who had expressed more complimentary views in the past, or (perhaps more likely) if this trend reflects a generally harsher attitude towards Muslims at the high tide of European colonialism.

The idea that *ṣalāt* is mechanical or formalistic is closely related to the notion that it is legalistic. Wael Hallaq has illuminatingly described how modern Western assumptions about the nature and scope of law have distorted perceptions of the sharia, in which rules of ritual performance play a central role.[23] Although the rules of ritual purification and prayer enjoy pride of place in traditional legal compilations, where they usually appear at the beginning and occupy a significant portion of the total space, they have been marginalized in the Western study of the sharia.[24] Very few of the issues addressed here are "legal" in the sense that they could be adjudicated in a court of law. However,

[20] William Prynne, *A moderate, seasonable apology for indulging just Christian liberty to truly tender consciences, conforming to the publike liturgy* . . . (London: Printed for the author by T.C. and L.P., 1662) [electronic resource], image 4.
[21] Cited in Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 10.
[22] Cited in ibid., p. 36.
[23] Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–3.
[24] In a typical example, Joseph Schacht's classic survey of the sharia simply omits the entire category of ritual law (Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* [London: Oxford University Press, 1964], p. 112). Hallaq's survey, while it restores ritual to its rightful place, offers only two pages on prayer (*Sharīʿa*, pp. 230–1).

they are recognizably legal, even by modern Western standards, in the sense that they are analyzed in light of concepts of obligation and validity. Muslim legal scholars (*fuqahāʾ*) ask who is competent to bear the obligation of prayer and under what conditions it is validly discharged or rendered void. Rather than being a purely technical matter, for these thinkers the recognition and fulfillment of a relationship of obligation towards God is a central religious value.

This study thus aims in part to help in restoring ritual to its proper place in the study of the sharia, and legal analysis to its proper place in our understanding of this category of ritual. However, legal analysis has never been the exclusive frame of reference for the interpretation of *ṣalāt*. The Sufi tradition, with its focus on the cultivation of subjective states of intimacy with God and on the interior meaning of religious texts and ritual actions, has offered a powerful alternative approach. Although historically there have sometimes been tensions between Islamic legal scholars and Sufi mystics, overall these two tendencies should not be imagined as reflecting separate and antagonistic groups of Muslims. Neither were introspective or esoteric concerns the exclusive purview of Sufism. Rather, legal analysis, affective engagement, and mystical speculation have been complementary components of the piety of vast numbers of individual Muslims, including scholars.

For centuries, prayer was an arena where European and (later) American observers of Islamic practice could identify more closely with Muslims than in most other areas of life. Coming from backgrounds where congregational prayer was a regular (and often mandatory) feature of public life and individual devotion was often an important personal value, they recognized Muslim prayer as exemplifying many of the religious virtues that they themselves held dear. Regularity of worship, concentration, humility, and the abandonment of pretensions towards one's fellow man were all qualities that required no translation for Christian observers. It is for this reason that they were able to evoke admiration and, in many cases, uncharacteristic moments of self-criticism. Islamic prayer practices also, of course, evoked the issues and conflicts that divided Christians among themselves.

More recently, the decline of organized religion in broad sectors of Western societies has made the language of formal prayer less universally intelligible. This development has been localized and uneven, with (for instance) many more Americans reporting regular attendance at religious services than Europeans. However, even in the United States, where public prayer and congregational life are still enormously prevalent (although not equally so in all regions and social milieus), formal prayer has become a culturally and politically polarizing issue. Organized prayer in public schools and governmental bodies has been the subject of bitter litigation. Even in private life there is an increasing predominance of (particularly younger) Americans who identify themselves as "spiritual" rather than "religious," eschewing many of the

trappings of official religion. A 2010 survey by the Pew Forum found that "less than half of adults under age 30 say they pray every day (48%), compared with . . . more than two-thirds of those 65 and older (68%)."[25] Perhaps even more indicative is the fact that the Pew survey apparently does not define "prayer"; the category of "daily prayer" seemingly subsumes anything from the laying of phylacteries to saying grace before meals or taking a moment of meditation before going to sleep. Particularly given the high proportion of Evangelical Christians identified by the survey, it seems likely that a dwindling proportion of Americans (particularly of the younger generation) directly identify with formal prayer as a personal practice or an ideal value.

In this context, non-Muslim readers of this book are less likely to react to the practices described with the admiration and envy recorded by so many premodern observers, or even with the theologically laden criticisms of the more recent past. However, the book's argument is that unfolding the ideals and implications of prayer has been an occasion for the examination of broader issues – regarding the ethically formative powers of human behavior, the individual's ability to discipline the psyche, and the ways in which human interactions with the divine mirror and shape this-worldly relationships and hierarchies – that are of abiding interest even for people who will never engage in the specific rituals under discussion.

[25] www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx#practices (accessed June 27, 2011).