

The Role of Congregational Rituals in Islamic Pattern of Life

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Abstract

From the time religious beliefs sprang into existence, attending congregational religious rituals was one the main ways to express devotion to gods and to demonstrate the power and preserve unity of the adherents. This kind of social behavior was not only important to the founders but also to the followers of religions. Gradually, this religious phenomenon became one of the inseparable parts of people's lives and one of the easiest ways for maintaining the ties of relationship. For Muslims, communal religious rituals play prominent roles in preparing the ground for socio-religious felicity and for strengthening ties of devotion to God. In this article, an attempt has been made to offer a brief historical survey of Islamic congregational rituals and to discover the most important elements, roles and Impacts of this socio-religious behavior in developing social values in Muslim communities.

Keywords: *Congregational rituals, Religion, Islam, Social life, Mosque.*

1. Introduction

Human as a social being, has always been interested in social activities, communication with others and afraid of seclusion and isolation to such an extent that exile is considered as a very severe penalty for criminals. It seems this principal quality is applied to most aspects of human's life, e.g. business, study, entertainment and decision making. Indeed, to bring different arguments and examples regarding human's social life is to utter an obvious truth, in fact a tautology.

The importance of this natural quality becomes more obvious when we realize that the messengers of God and founders of religions, lay emphasis on social aspects of life to remind people of their social God-given nature and on the fact that all humans are in need of one another. This emphasis on congregation was also to strengthen the foundation of religion and to increase public trend towards religious life; this was because, intercultural and interethnic conflicts and enmities had caused considerable loss and hatred among people; hence, it seems that unity and congregation is an influential factor in reinforcing adherents' tendency towards religiosity. The importance of communal rituals is nicely presented by Rippin (2006):

"Ritual activities and their attendant buildings, clothes and assorted paraphernalia provide the emblems of a religion and become, for the members of the religion themselves, modes for the expressions of their identity". (p. 103)

Islam is one of the finest examples of a religion in which brotherhood and unity act as pillars for Muslim community. There are many uniting features in Islam, but what this article specifically tries to survey is the influence of the congregational religious rituals on Muslim societies and to find out the reasons because of which God legislated communal rituals for Muslims as for many other believers.

To chart this religious and cultural phenomenon, needs a comprehensive research on the history of developments and the functions of congregational rituals; we also need precise reflection on the narrated traditions. In this piece of writing, we will firstly try to provide a brief explanation about the significance, types and levels of congregational religious rituals in Islam. Secondly, a short historical survey about developments and functions of the mosque as the most important place in Muslims' social life will be offered. Thirdly, there will be an attempt to present the roles and the impacts of congregational rituals on Islamic societies. Finally, we will discuss briefly how these congregational rituals can provide a good pattern for peace seekers in the world.

2. The Significance of Congregational Religious Rituals

Although some religions including Islam admired and praised those believers who worship God in private avoiding people's eyes, at the same time they invited the adherents to participate in religious rituals along with other believers in congregation. "The most meritorious worship before Allah is when performed in private" (Majlisi, 1983, vol. 70, p. 251). "Good deeds performed in private will be seventy times more meritorious than the one performed in public" (Saduq, 1990, p. 179).

These two approaches towards worship, seemingly contradict each other. How can we reconcile between these two religious orders? Some thinkers contend that the divine order of worshipping God in private is special for recommended acts of worship (non-obligatory); and, the divine order of attending congregational rituals and prayers is special for obligatory rituals (Hilli, 1984, vol. 1, p 59). The reason behind this persuasion might be originated from the quality of pretension and showing off; that is because, in obligatory acts there is less possibility for pretension because all people ought to perform their obligation and usually people do not get proud of doing their duties; but, if someone perform a recommended act e.g. helping the poor, he/she is more subject to pretension and hypocrisy.

It seems that the philosophy behind congregational rituals in Islam is originated from a reality higher than merely being recommended or obligatory, because there are some recommended religious acts which are performed in congregation e.g. prayer of rain and funeral prayer. Due to this fact, we might conclude that the main factor for this Divine legislation is based on the social felicity and interest and because of these advantages God prioritized congregational activities over private ones in many situations. It is true that worshipping God in public would possibly have some disadvantages regarding pretension, but social advantages of congregational rituals surely outweigh the disadvantages.

3. Levels and Types of Congregational Religious Rituals

There are several religious Islamic rituals; some are obligatory and some recommended. To understand the levels and types of these rituals we need to introduce the most famous and most important types of them.

- 1- Daily Prayers: The first religious ritual sprang into being in the history of Islam was congregational daily prayers, *Salat al-Jamaah*. As we will point out later to the historical background of daily prayer, it was firstly performed by the Prophet of Islam along with his wife and his cousin. These five prayers are performed everyday by Muslims in Mosques. They usually attend the nearest Mosque in their neighborhood. These daily prayers can be performed in the house but it is highly recommended to be performed in mosque congregationally (Tabatabai, 2008, p. 241).
- 2- Friday Prayer: The second congregational ritual is Friday prayer, *Salat al-jumah*. At the time of the Prophet people were performing their daily prayer in their neighborhoods' mosque, but they would come to the mosque of the Prophet every Friday to pray with him (McAliffe, Encyclopedia of the Quran, vol. 2, p. 271).
- 3- Prayer of Fast breaking feast & Prayer of Sacrifice feast: *Eid al-fitr* Feast of Fast breaking is a holiday celebrated by Muslims once a year at the end of Ramadan Month; in this holiday, Muslims gather in their mosques and perform feast prayer (Abu samra, p. 170). Second important holiday for Muslims is the Feast of sacrifice; "this festival marks the annual completion of the Hajj; it falls on the tenth of the month of *dhul-hajjah*" (Haneef, 1996, p. 151).
- 4- Signs Prayers: This prayer is performed at the time of happening of some natural phenomena such as earthquake, eclipse and some other natural phenomena which create wonder and fear among people (Tabatabai, 2008, p. 240).
- 5- Prayer of Rain: It is recommended to perform rain prayer, *Salat al-istisqa* when people suffering from drought and shortage of rain. In this prayer people ordered to leave the town and go outside onto the plain and in an open spaceto ask God for rain (Al-tusi, 2008, p. 106).
- 6- Funeral Prayer (Prayer over the deceased): Before burying the corpse of a dead Muslim, his/her relatives and friends participate in the funeral ceremony and pray together *Salat al-mayyit* and ask God to bestow His mercy upon him/her and seek His forgiveness (Al-Hilli, 2009, p. 105).
- 7- Hajj: In fact *Hajj* is the greatest ritual in Muslims life and it is obligatory for Muslims to perform pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The greatness of Hajj ritual is firstly because of the holiness of the place in which this ritual takes place, and secondly the great number of participants. "The Hajj was performed in pre-Islamic times and its rituals are believed to go back to [the Prophet] Ibrahim and his son Ismail (Shepard, 2005, p. 94).

- 8- Retreat in the Mosque (*I'tikaf*): this ritual is a period of retreat in a central mosque and Muslims in some occasions in the year stay in the mosque for a certain number of days specially the last ten days of Ramadan month. This act of worship is not obligatory but highly recommended (Gibb, 1960, vol. 4, p. 280).
- 9- Keeping ties of Kinship: Visiting relatives and maintaining ties of kinship (*Silat al-rahim*) is one of the binding obligations in Islam which God ordered Muslims to perform and observe it in their lives (The Holy Quran, 4:1).
- 10- Celebration of anniversary of birth date of the Prophet of Islam and Imams (*Mawlid*): Many Muslims around the world, celebrate the anniversary of the Prophet's birth date in their local mosques. In some other Islamic countries, Muslims not only celebrate the anniversary of the Prophet's birth date, but also they celebrate the birth date of the Prophet's household (Jones, vol. 9, p. 5588).

4. Historical Survey

It seems that there is no historical evidence for the accurate time in which congregational rituals and public places of worship became existent. According to Muslims' belief based on the Qur'anic verses and the Prophetic narrations, the first house of God and place of worship was *Ka'bah*, the central part of *Masjid al-harām* (Sanctified Mosque) in Mecca. "The first house appointed for men was that at *Bekka*, full of blessing and guidance for all kinds of beings" (The Holy Quran, 3: 96); some collections of tradition narrated some *Hadith* about the construction and the early days of *Ka'bah*, indicating that Almighty God sent an angel to *Adam* (pbuh) to show him the place of the house and *Adam* was the first who constructed the *Ka'bah* (Kurdī, 2008, p. 24). This house was collapsed by the flood in the period of the Prophet *Noah* (pbuh) and God ordered the Prophet Abraham (pbuh) to reconstruct His house (Azraqī, 1956, p. 6).

There are some evidences presenting the construction of the first mosque prior to the emigration of the Prophet of Islam to Medina (Samhūdī, 1973, vol. 1, P. 250.); but some of the historians report that the first mosque founded by the Prophet of Islam was allegedly the mosque of *Qubā*, with the assistance of his new followers in the village of *Qubā* in the outlying environs of *Yathrib* (Medina). This mosque constructed in *Qubā* while the Prophet's stay, waiting for his cousin 'Ali b. 'Abitalīb who emigrated along with the Prophet's family. Subsequent to that incident, after arriving to Medina the Prophet built his house and mosque (*Masjid al-nabī*) in the neighborhood of *banīnajibār* (one of the tribes in Medina) near the house of *abūayyūb al-ansārī*. It did not take long until nine other mosques were built in nine neighborhoods of Medina in the life time of the Prophet. People would gather in the mosque of the Prophet as a central mosque for Friday prayer ('Amrī, 2002 vol. 1, p. 62), but mostly because of far distance and daily activities, they would perform daily prayers in the nearest mosque to their houses.

There were also several mosques out of Medina that have been constructed in different places in which the Prophet stayed, set his tent or preformed prayer. *Ibn hishām*, the famous historian narrated names of the mosques which have been built during the Prophet's journey to *Tabūk* (the name of a place and a battle); the number of those mosques reaches to seventeen (Ibn Hishām, 1963, vol. 4, p. 108).

The early mosques in the period of the Prophet had very simple structure and there were no roof nor pulpit; the Prophet were standing, leaning his back against a palm and preaching to the believers; after a while, Muslims made a wooden pulpit for the Prophet to facilitate sermonizing for him (Dārimī, 1931, Vol. 1, p. 16). The ceiling of the mosque was made of date palm's branches to avoid sun's heat; when the companions asked the Prophet to allow them for making a new ceiling with mud and brick, the Prophet said I like my mosque to be the same as the Moses' place of worship which was a simple sunshade (Ibn-kathīr, 1976, vol. 2, p. 304). After the Prophet and during the leadership of the Caliphs the structure of mosques was simple and the conduct of the Prophet served as a model for the Muslim community, but because of royal government of *banī-umayyah* and above all, the contact of Muslims with other organized religions, they tried to make their mosques much more attractive and glorious in comparison to other religion's places (Muqaddast, 2006, vol. 1, p. 224).

Muslims were encouraged by the Prophet to build mosque in their cities. There are many reports transmitted from the Prophet and his progeny, presenting the worthy rewards for a person who build mosque; "Almighty God will grant a palace in paradise to a person who build a mosque" (Kuleynī, 1988, vol. 3, p. 368), "one who light a lamp in the mosque, the angels would pray for him as long as illuminating" (Bahrānī, 1899, vol.7, p. 275). These advices were persuasive enough to increase the number of mosques in some cities as many as several thousand until the third century.

The historical background of Muslim's congregational prayer goes back to the early days of Islam. 'Afīf al-kindī narrated that he was a businessman and in one of his journeys to Mecca before development of Islam, he saw an peculiar scene in *Masjid al-harām* (sanctified mosque); that, all people were worshipping idols, but a middle-aged man arrived to the mosque and stood in front of *Ka'bah*, turning his face towards Jerusalem, then a young man and a woman

stood beside him and started to pray and prostrate; then, 'Aff asked his friend 'Abbās b. 'Abd al-mutallib, out of amazement: who are these? "The middle-aged man is Muhammad, the woman is his wife *Khadījah* and the young man is his cousin 'Ali b. *Abīṭalib*; Muhammad came up with a new religion but there is not any follower of this religion other than these three", 'Abbās answered (Ibn athīr, 1994, vol. 2, p. 75).

After the development of Islam, idolaters of Mecca disenfranchised the Prophet and his followers from performing prayer in the mosque. Accordingly, Muslims used to gather in the house of *Arqam b. abī Arqam* (one of the Muslims) and worship God congregationally afterwards; many companions of the Prophet embraced Islam in this house (Ibn sa'd, 2001, vol. 3, p. 242).

5. Functions of Mosque during History

Although mosque plays different vital roles to maintain the identity of Muslim community, the Qur'anic verses explicitly introduce the devotional expression, connection and submission to God the Almighty, as the main element for the validity of mosque without which there is no mosque worthy of name (The Holy Quran, 24:36, 2:114, 7:29). Hence, the validity of mosque is based on Friday prayer which is obligatory, and daily prayer which is more meritorious to be performed in the mosque (Gibb, 1960, vol. 4, p. 280).

Although other functions of mosque, e.g. educational effort, are considered as worship and deserve divine rewards, they are not counted as determining factors for the emergence of mosque in Muslim's life; because education is only a preliminary stage upon which religion paves the ground not only to teach lay people how to obey God, but also to promote the spiritual values of educated people. This God-based attitude towards presence in the mosque is evidently illustrated in Imam 'Ali b. *Abī talib* (pbuh) saying: "Being in the mosque is more pleasing and delightful for me than being in the paradise; since being in the paradise is my own desire and wish, but being in the mosque is the want of my Lord" (Majlisī, 1983, vol. 80, p. 362).

It seems that one of the most significant functions of the early mosques was education; that, teaching Islam, was the main goal of the Prophetic mission; the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: I surely have been sent to fulfill moral values (Tabrisī, 1995, vol. 10, p. 86). The Prophet once entered the mosque and saw two circles of Muslims, one of them were worshipping God and the other were studying; He said, both circles are in the right path, but the second gathering is more meritorious and I actually have been sent as a the Prophet to teach; then he joined the second group ('Amīlī, 1989, p.106).

The Prophet used to sit in the mosque in different times, chiefly after morning and night prayer to answer Muslim's questions and to preach to them. He would sit beside one of the columns in the mosque (*Ustuwānah al-wufūd*) and the representatives of different tribes and religions were coming to ask him about the new religion (Tustarī, 1985, vol. 18, p. 169). The Prophet prioritized education over other recommended deeds and he declared "whoever enter the mosque for teaching or learning, is identically rewarded as one who fights for the path of God" (Shokānī, 1973, vol. 2, p. 165).

There were also some of the companions of the Prophet teaching and sermonizing in the absence of the Prophet in his life time and after his death, not only in Medina but also in other cities (Zahabī, vol. 1, p. 14). Encouraging the Prophetic traditions has made the mosque as a center for educational endeavors, whilst there were less than twenty literate individuals among *Quraysh* (the most famous tribe in Mecca) before the emergence of Islam (Balāzarī, 1960, vol. 3, p. 580).

The companions were very eager to listen to the new revealed verses of the Quran and also the Prophetic advices to such extent that even if some Muslims could not participate everyday due to daily activities, they would participate in the mosque every other day and interchangeably, so that the absents could get informed of the details of the Prophet's sermon, by the presents (Bukharī, 1981, vol. 1, p. 31). Educational benefits in the mosque, more or less has continued at the time of Caliphs and up to the present time.

Social functions of the mosque have varied from time to time with a view to Muslim's need. At the time of the Prophet, mosque was not only a place of worship and education, but also a comfortable place for travelers to have a rest, an accommodation for the poor emigrants, a place providing treatment for injured soldiers, a court of law and even a place for matchmaking. Political functions mostly used to deal with the consultation on martial affairs, choosing and performing allegiance to new caliph and also a place for awakening and revolting against cruelty and tyrannies (Wāqidī, 2005, p. 152).

This variety of function, was evidently due to the simplicity of the early Muslim's cities and lack of facilities; therefore, after the development of Muslim communities and considerable growth in the number of believers, other institutions such as *Madrasah* (religious school), *Dār al-Imārah* (the house of government), hospital and caravanserai,

replaced mosque and carried out most of the socio-political functions.

6. The Role of Religious Congregational Rituals in Muslims' Life

In order to find out decisive roles of congregational rituals on Muslims' social life, we need to focus on various types and levels of these rituals to find their differences and commonalities. Through this process, the first thing draws our attention is the variety of situations and occasions in which congregational rituals legislated and recommended. Happiness and sadness, relatives and strangers, compatriots and foreigners, in mosque or in open space, all are different ways, people and places associated with congregational rituals.

These communal rituals make social, political, economic and emotional links between participants. When people of a neighborhood meet one another everyday in the mosque, they will get acquainted and become like members of a family and they support each other in different situations. The levels of these congregations form a variety of links between Muslim individuals; they meet their neighbors every day in their local Mosque, townspeople, once a week in the central Mosque and Muslims of other cities and countries once a year in *Hajj* pilgrimage. They meet other Muslims in happiness when they participate in prayer of fast-breaking feast and sacrifice feast. They try to extend their sympathy to their Muslim relatives and friends when they attend funeral prayer. In hardship and inconvenience, they participate in some congregational rituals to be able to endure and tolerate the difficulties easier and to ask God to rescue them. Another motive which instigates Muslims to attend communal religious rituals is recurred in several narrations according to which God is answering communal prayers sooner than prayers in private (Hilli, 1987, p. 157).

One other factor which makes these uniting ties stronger and broadens the circle of unity is the unity of language. All Muslims around the world express their devotion towards God in one language almost with the same phrases and words. This unity of language of expression, evidently makes Muslims to feel more intimacy; wherever they travel from east to west, they will find someone who has at least some words and sentences in common. Moreover, the oneness of language could be understood as a manifestation of one God towards whom all Muslims prostrate. Another example of unity in Muslims' congregational prayers is the unity of direction. Muslims stand together and they turn their faces towards one direction which is also a sign of unity of believers and unity of God.

In the present age in which terror, violence, radicalism and enmity destroyed the dignity of human as the best creature of God, Islamic communal rituals can offer a good model for making people's heart closer to each other. Some of the main features in Islamic communal rituals are as follow: unity of language, unity of direction, various occasions and places and numerous functions of congregational rituals.

It seems that the communal conflicts and enmities spring from widespread ignorance of the reality of religious and ethnic diversity; hence, this is a fundamental duty of all religions to come together and find the ways through which people can reach unity and peace. It seems that one of the factors that unite adherents of a specific religion is communal rituals; thus, congregational rituals are a good case for scholarly discussions and researches. If we study these rituals and try to derive the commonalities, we can reach to a universal model of a kind of universal ritual to get people one step closer to peace and friendship. For instance, many people express their loyalty and love towards their country by singing national anthem in public occasions or every day; then, can't we express our love and esteem towards other people and thoughts around the world by having a universal ritual.

7. Conclusion

Unity among Muslims in its social scale is primarily due to various and influential aspects of congregational rituals such as unity of language, unity of direction (*Qiblah*), unity of place and variety of times and occasions. Many other religions possess rich historical background of communal rituals. Through comparative studying and researching of these rituals, we can achieve a universal model upon which people all around the world can get one step closer to a peaceful world.

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