

Chapter 25
Muslim Piety
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Chapter Summary

The Muslim Calander

Muslim piety is closely related to the Islamic calendar. Although there are some variations, the standard Muslim calendar begins with the first day of Hegira, the flight of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in September 622 AD. The Islamic calendar differs from Western calendars in following the lunar year while the Western calendar follows the solar year. As a result, although there are twelve months in the Muslim year, an average year has 354 days because the average interval between new moons means lunar months vary between twenty-nine and thirty days in length.

Because of differences between the solar and lunar years and the prohibition against inserting what might be described as a thirteenth month to create a type of leap year at regular intervals, Muslim calendar months actually move backwards by eleven days each year. As a result the Muslim year works on a thirty-three-year cycle and contains the following months: Muharram; Safar; Rab' I; Rabi' II; Jamadi I; Jamadi II; Rajab; Ramadan; Shawwal; Dhul-Qu'da; Dhul-Hajja.

No God but God

Muslim piety begins with a confession: "*Ilaha illa Alla. Muhammad rasul Allah*" translated, "There is no God but God. Muhammad is his Prophet." This is the basis for conversion to Islam. The confession is whispered into a child's ear at birth, forms part of Muslim prayer, and is confessed daily. As such, it is the basis of Islam.

Prayer

Central to Muslim piety is the practice of what is usually called "prayer" by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Yet Muslim prayer is quite different from what most North American Christians and even non-Christians consider prayer. It is, however, similar to acts of prayer found in liturgical Christian traditions such as Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

Practicing Muslims are commanded to pray five times every day: (1) upon awaking between dawn and sunrise; (2) between noon and midafternoon; (3) between midafternoon and sunset; (4) between sunset and the onset of darkness; and (5) after dark, before break of dawn. At each time of prayer, worshipers prepare by carefully prescribed acts of cleansing called *ablutions*, designed to separate themselves from this profane world. Before praying in the mosque, they wash their bodies—hands, mouth, nostrils, faces and forehead, feet and ankles—three times each. They then prepare a surface where they can kneel in prayer while facing the direction of Mecca.

Worshipers then perform a series of ritual actions called *rakahs*—standing, kneeling, standing again, and falling down on one's face while reciting passages from the Qur'an. Personal prayer as most Christians know it does exist in Islam as supplications or *du'a*. These are essentially prayers to God for guidance and thanksgiving for personal things. Muslims believe it is best to pray with a group of other Muslims as part of a community. The best place to pray is in a mosque and facing Mecca. Friday is known as the day of assembly and all male Muslims who are able are required to pray at noon in the mosque. Women, the sick, and travelers are excluded from this requirement and considerable leniency is granted

for excuses like illness and bad weather. Prayer is seen as a time to acknowledge God and failure to do so is considered a great sin.

Praying to God in the intimate manner of North American evangelicals wherein God is approached as a loving, heavenly father is virtually blasphemous to pious Muslims. For them, God is creator and preserver, not father, and prayer is to demonstrate total submission to God, which epitomizes the entire Islamic outlook on life. The five purposes of prayer for Muslims are: to acknowledge servitude to God; to be reminded of duty to God; to create a “consciousness of God” so to avoid “his punishments”; to be reminded of God’s law by reciting the Qur’an; and the creation of community.

Understanding the *Qur’an*

Michael Cook’s book *The Qur’an: A Very Short Introduction* provides examples of some problems regarding how Muslims interpret the Qur’an. The first issue involves “the Qur’an and the scientific worldview” and relates to the way many modern Muslim apologists attempt to read scientific discoveries back into the Qur’an, a practice that creates difficulties. Secondly, he addresses the difficulty of reconciling various verses in the Qur’an that appear contradictory in discussing the appropriate treatment of nonbelievers such as Christians and Jews. Similarly, Cook discusses the conflicting interpretations with regard to how Muslim men are to treat Muslim women, a matter that has been complicated by Western views concerning human rights.