

The Heart and Meaning of Prayer in the Quran

By Sibam Karami

Prayer, which is central to faith as a way to connect with the Deity, is usually considered as a supplication, humans reaching out to God. But the Quran, the final divine revelation in the Abrahamic tradition, gives us a more thoroughgoing idea about prayer, both the formal *salat* involving communal bowing and prostration five times a day facing Makkah, and the informal *du'a* or supplication, which is identical in usage to the English word “prayer.” The word *salat* means “contact,” and indeed all its prescribed elements help establish contact with the Creator that profoundly influences the sincere worshipper over time. The Quran teaches us the meaning and value of prayer in multiple dimensions and examples, to the point that one finds revelations about our connection to Allah in words, in the world around us, even in our bodies. (Quran 41:53 “*We will show them our signs in the horizons and within themselves...*”) We are shown signs of the Hereafter or the resurrection, a continuity which is pointed out in the many cycles (such as the diurnal and water cycles, and the circulatory system) referred to in the Quran that show passage from death/ depletion to life/ fulfillment, ultimately teaching us that prayer too is a kind of death and resurrection or transcendence, part of a greater system, visible in literally everything, which imbues life and creation with meaning and value despite temporality and death. But first we need to clarify what prayer *is* and its purpose or significance.

To that end, we shall examine prayer in the Quran, a divine revelation which notably has not been altered in its canonic Arabic text, either by loss through translation into a dominant language, or by transcription or any other means. One can then presume it would be, in the original, structurally coherent and meaningful in ways not possible in

other texts altered by translation or in other ways, by human hands. So, although one finds in the Prophet Mohammad's sayings or *hadiths* details of the physical perimeters and requirements of *salat*, including astronomically-determined prayer times, the *qibla* (orientation), the sequences of bowing and prostration, and additional details on ablution, these are, in a sense, *outer* requirements for its *performance*. The *inner* requirements are highlighted in the Quran, which provides the actual meaning and purpose of *salat* on a more expansive universal scale. We shall explore these and other aspects of prayer by structural analysis of the original Quranic text, as well as defining significant words by Quranic usage rather than other methods, contextualized further by the ideas regarding prayer of scholars who have studied Islam and comparative religion from a philosophical and universal standpoint. Thus, my own study can be further elucidated by those scholars who share my presumption of divine Truth as reality, hopefully finding in diverse perspectives a common basis for compassion, mutual understanding, and indeed transcendence.

Frithjof Schuon, in his essay "Modes of Prayer," in describing "canonical prayer," is essentially describing *salat*, so perfectly does the latter fit his definition of the former.¹ He uses the word "prayer" as an overarching category, which he describes as a "mode of orison—of contact between man and God," the "most elementary" mode of which is "individual prayer," the voluntary supplication of an individual, known in Arabic as *du'a*.² The most superficially obvious difference between *du'a* and *salat* is that the latter involves *physical* elements: ablution, the body language—bowing and prostration—of the act of *salat* itself, and the time/space perimeters it requires. Schuon notes other significant differences with which he defines canonical prayer across multiple religious traditions: its being *compulsory*, that "*God is its author*," and that it "shows its universality and timeless value by being expressed very often in the *first person plural* and also by its preference for using a *sacred* or liturgical and therefore symbolically universal *language*, so that it is impossible for whoever recites it not to pray for all and in all."³ These

¹ Schuon, Frithjof, "Modes of Prayer," *Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life* (World Wisdom, Inc., 2005), pp. 57-8. http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/viewpdf/default.aspx?article-title=Modes_of_Prayer_by_Frithjof_Schuon.pdf

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. [Emphases added.]

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