

The mosque in Islam

What is the role of the mosque in Islam? *Masjid*, or mosque, literally means 'a place for self-prostration,' that is, a place formally designated for the saying of prayers. According to a *hadith*, the Prophet of Islam observed: "The *masjid* is a house of God-fearing people." This means, in effect, that it is a centre for the inculcation of reverence, where individuals learn what is meant by piety and are thus prepared for a life of devotion to the Almighty.

The *Masjid* is built so that people may visit it to read the Book of God, to remember their Creator, silently and in prayer, and to hear His commandments on how they should lead their lives, that is, how to conduct themselves according to His will.

The most important of all these activities is the saying of prayers, a ritual to be carried out five times a day as prescribed by Islam. This act of worship, the greatest means of instilling a sense of awe in the devotee, may be carried out at any place, but ideally, is performed in an organised manner, in congregation, within the mosque. There the worshippers range themselves in orderly rows behind a single prayer leader, the Imam. (The acceptance by the group of just one individual to lead to congregation avoids any dissension which might arise from there being more than one.) The number of the worshippers may be ten or ten thousand; all have to stand in rows behind the Imam. This teaches the lesson of unity. Nevertheless, *namaz* in essence, is an individual action. Everyone recites his own prayer and is rewarded an account of its innate rectitude and sincerity.

The prayer begins with ablution, that is, with the washing of the face, hands and feet. The bodily cleansing is a symbolic reminder that the Muslim should lead his life in this world in a state of purification of the feelings and the soul.

What is recited during prayer consists either of verses from the Qur'an or *dhikr*, remembrance, of God, and *dua*, invocations and sup-

Horizons



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plications. All of this is aimed at bringing about a spiritual awakening such as will induce the worshipper to renounce his life of ignorance and heedlessness in favour of a life inspired by Islamic moral values.

Throughout the prayer (*namaz*) the phrase, Allah-o Akbar, God is great, is repeated several times. Implicit in these words is the idea that the person uttering them is not great. Their frequent repetition is a lesson in modesty, designed to rid the worshipper is conditioned by *namaz* to surrender himself to his Maker in all humility.

The various postures in the *namaz* climax in the act of self-prostration — the ultimate demonstration of submission. Real proof of this submission to God will only become manifest, however, in subsequent dealings with other hu-

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man beings, in which it is clear that self-glorification has been replaced by glorification of the Almighty, and that feelings of superiority have given away to profound humility.

The *namaz* ends with each worshipper turning his face sideways and uttering these words: "May God's peace and blessings be upon you. Every day, all around the globe, Muslims perform this rite. It is as if they were saying to their fellow men all over the world: O people, we have no feelings for you but those of peace. Your lives, property and honour — all are safe. It is this spirit with which worshippers are enthused before they return to society.

Besides the five daily obligatory prayers, there is a weekly Friday prayer which is necessarily offered in the mosque. In practice and content it is just like any other prayer which is but since a larger number of people gather on his occasion, a sermon (*khutba*), giving religious guidance, is also preached by the Imam before the prayers begin.

In this, he reminds worshippers of their accountability to God, of the commandments pertaining to Islamic character and of the proper way to deal with others in society. In this way, the Friday refreshes the memory on religious commitments.

The mosque, initially intended as a place to worship, has come to be built to serve other related purposes, such as housing the *madrasa*, library, lecture hall, guest house and dispensary. According to a *hadith* the Prophet advised the building of mosques in a simple style, so that there should be no dissipation or dilution of the true religious and spiritual atmosphere.

All mosques (with the exception of three) are of equal religious standing, whether large or small, plainly conceived or architecturally magnificent.

The three mosques which have a greater degree of sanctity because of their historical and religious associations are the Prophet's mosques in Mecca and Medina and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. •