

REMEMBRANCE OF GOD: UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF ISLAM

MICHAEL D. CALABRIA, O.F.M.

At the beginning of 2001 I was making plans for my pastoral (or internship) year in my formation as a Franciscan friar. Inspired by both the story of Francis's encounter with the Sultan and by his experience among the lepers, I requested to spend a year serving in Egypt at a leprosarium in a village called Abu Za'bal, located some thirty-five kilometers northeast of Cairo. I remember well the daily journey by minivan. The road from Cairo to Abu Za'bal leads past the airport and then runs along the edge of the eastern desert. There isn't much to see along the road at that point, but I remember two road signs in particular.

The first sign was one indicating the direction and mileage to the town of Bilbeis. Bilbeis, as I was to learn, was the site of a terrible massacre in 1168 when Almaric I, the Christian king of Jerusalem, indiscriminately put the city's population to the sword, both Muslims and Coptic Christians alike. It was an event that ultimately united Muslims and Copts against the common crusader threat. In a year in which President Bush had called for a "crusade" against terrorism, the sign to Bilbeis was a daily reminder to me of the terrible impact that Crusades had and still have on both Muslims and Christians alike.

The other sign that I remember looked like most other road signs, but it gave directions of a different variety. In Arabic, it read: *Udhkur Allah*. In English, "Remember God." You sometimes see an interesting variation of this sign above the exit door in a train car which reads: *La tansa dhikr Allah* – "Don't forget to remember God." Remembering God is, I believe, at the heart of Islam. It is only by remembering God, by calling to mind God's presence and activity, God's sovereignty and munificence, that an individual

is able to heed the divine command: *Islam* – “Submit,” submit to the will of God, and thereby become a *muslim*, literally “one who submits.” Humanity does not have to be “saved” or “redeemed” according to the teachings of Islam; it needs to be reminded, to be awakened from the “dream of forgetfulness.”¹

The centrality of this concept to Islam is demonstrated by the ubiquitous occurrence in the Qur’an of the word *dhakara* “to remember” and its many derivatives, used some 290 times in a text that is roughly the size of the New Testament. A few examples will suffice:²

“Remember the name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him whole-heartedly.” (73.8)

“And remember your Lord within yourself with humility and in reverence, without loudness in words, in the mornings and evenings; and do not be one of the heedless.” (7.205)

“Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of God; For they are in clear error.” (39.22)

“Those who believe, and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of God, in the remembrance of God are at rest the hearts of those believe and do good; theirs is bliss and a good return” (13.28-20)

This concept of *dhikr*, “remembrance,” is equally important in the *Abadith* (sing. *Hadith*), collections of stories about the words

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 38.

² No translation of the Qur’an is ultimately satisfying. There are, of course, better and worse translations. I often use Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation as a basis (9th ed. Elmhurst: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 2002), but find that his translation of words like *dhakara* and its derivatives is not consistent. Therefore, I occasionally depart from his translation and resort to my own. *The Koran Interpreted* by Arthur Arberry (1955, various editions) has consistently received praise among academics. For a comparative study review of translations, see: Khaleel Mohammed, “Assessing English Translations of the Qur’an,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, 12.2 (Spring 2005), available online at: www.meforum.org/article/717.

and deeds of Muhammad and other early Muslims. In one such hadith, “when a Companion of Muhammad’s asks him what act is most meritorious, Muhammad replies it is to ‘die while your tongue is moistened’ with the remembrance of God.”³ Remembrance of God and his nature, his creation, actions, revelations, and prophets, underlies every Islamic observance, practice and ritual. Every day some 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide, of which there are some six- to seven-million in the United States alone, engage in some form of *dhikr*, whether in the form of private or communal prayer, reciting the Qur’an, fasting, performing acts of charity, going on pilgrimage, meditating on God’s ninety-nine names, or whirling in ecstasy.

We, Christian and Muslim alike, are invited to remember, to remember how the encounter of two men, Francis of Assisi and the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, might serve as a paradigm for dialogue and peace. (We do well to recall that the words *Islam* and *Salaam* – “peace” – are derived from the same root, expressing the sense that one achieves true and lasting peace in the submission to God’s will.)

We are also invited to remember the foundational beliefs of the faiths that inspired these individuals, the faiths that have brought us here together. It is my goal to set before you the basic tenets and practices of the Islamic faith. I do this in all humility, as a Franciscan-Catholic, who in the over twenty-five years I have been traveling to the Middle East have come to know and love Islam, to sincerely call Muslims my brothers and sisters, to “*dhikr*” – remember – with them, and as someone who is touched, inspired and challenged by the Holy Qur’an.

History

In the Qur’an, God repeatedly commands humanity to remember its history, from its creation out of the earth’s clay, animated by

³ John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 54.

His Spirit, until now. Our historical discussion begins in the sixth-century of the common era when around the year 570 Muhammad (pbuh) was born in the city of Mecca in western Arabia.⁴ His childhood was neither easy nor idyllic. His father, 'Abdallah, died before Muhammad was born, and his mother, Amina, died when he was but six years of age. His paternal grandfather 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who had taken the boy into his care, died just two years later. Muhammad was thereafter raised by his uncle Abu Ṭalib, earning his keep by helping him with his trading business. As a young man in his twenties, Muhammad was employed to lead the caravans of a wealthy widow named Khadijah. Although reputedly some fifteen years his senior, she would become his first wife, and the only wife he had for the next twenty-five years until her death in 619 CE. She would bear him six children: two sons who died in infancy, and four daughters.

Faith (*Iman*)

It was in 610 CE when Muhammad, then forty years of age, while meditating in a cave on Mount Hira outside Mecca, first heard the divine imperative: *Iqra'* – "Recite!"

Recite in the name of your Lord who created,
Created humanity from a clot.
Recite and your Lord is most generous,
Who taught by the pen,
Who taught humanity what he knows not. (96.1-5)

These simple and direct words were the first verses of what was to become known as the Qur'an, literally "the Recitation," which was revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel in 114 *suras*

⁴ It is a practice among Muslims to invoke God's blessings and peace upon the Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, after speaking his name. This is often abbreviated in English as: pbuh – "Peace be upon him." I will henceforth dispense with that custom for ease in speaking, although the greatest respect for the Prophet is always intended.

(or "chapters") over the next twenty-two years, sporadically, a few verses at a time.⁵ Its essential teaching:

Say: He is God, One, God, eternal, absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him (112).

This was the God of whom the Hebrew and Christians prophets had long spoken:

We did not send before you a messenger except with what We revealed to him: that there is no god but Me, so worship Me" (21.25).

Allah (literally "the God"), the Qur'an insists, is utterly transcendent:

"To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; God has power over all things" (3.189).

"He it is that encompasses all things" (4.126).

And yet, the Qur'an also speaks of Allah's immanence:

"When My servants ask you concerning Me, I am indeed close: I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calls on Me" (2.186).

"We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein" (50.16).

"To God belong the East & the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God." (2.115)

This God, Merciful (*ar-Rahmān*) and Compassionate (*ar-Rahīm*) above all, as virtually every sura of the Qur'an reminds us, has provided humanity with **signs** (*ayat* in Arabic), that humanity might remember God, as the road sign I saw in Egypt exhorted. God promises:

⁵ The *suras* of the Qur'an were not ultimately arranged chronologically, but generally from longest to shortest in length. The earliest *suras* thus tend to be those grouped towards the end of the book.

"We shall show them Our signs in the farthest regions and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth (41.53)."

The universe *in toto* is a **sign** for humanity:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the Night and Day; in the sailing of ships on the ocean for the benefit of humanity; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that was dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the changing of the winds, and the clouds which float between heaven and earth; surely these are **signs** for a people who are wise. (2.164)

Angels

The Qur'an reminds its hearers of the existence of God's luminous messengers and honored servants (21.27), the angels who "celebrate the praises of their Lord and ask forgiveness for those on earth" (42.5). Among the most prominent are Gabriel (Jibreel), the angel of revelation; Mika'il; Izra'il, the angel of death; and Israfil, who sounds the trumpet on the Last Day. The Qur'an recalls the angels who announced to Mary:

... glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the Hereafter, and among those closest to God (3.45).

And lest anyone regard the belief in angels as a sentimental and superfluous superstition of *Jabiliyya*, that is pagan times, the Qur'an avows:

Whoever is an enemy to God, His angels, and His messengers, to Jibreel and Mika'il, surely God is an enemy to those who do not believe" (2:97-98).

Sacred Scripture

The Qur'an tells us that sacred scriptures are also **signs** which God has provided to humanity as reminders. These sacred books are identified specifically as the Torah that was revealed to Moses, the Psalms given to David, the Gospel given to Jesus, and the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad:

He has sent down to you the Book in truth, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel before this as a guide to humanity, and He sent down the Criterion [i.e. the Qur'an]. Those who do not believe in the **signs** of God, for them is severe punishment (3.3-4).

The Qur'an itself is called "the Remembrance" (*al-dhikr*) and each verse of the Qur'an is called a "**sign**" (*aya*). If read and understood, these **signs**, whether observed in nature, events, people or Scripture, lead to remembrance of God. It should be noted here that the Qur'an occupies a position in Islam that is analogous in Christianity, not to the New Testament, but to Jesus Christ himself; for Muslims, the Word of God did not become flesh, it became Book, eternal and uncreated.⁶ As the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic (as the Qur'an itself frequently reminds us), Muslims, regardless of their linguistic background, are required to pray the Qur'an in its original language.⁷

⁶ Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994), 177. The concept of an eternal and uncreated Qur'an was promulgated by the 'Asharite school in opposition to the Mutazilites who, in the eighth century, taught that the Qur'an was in fact created. The Mutazilite position was enforced by means of a *mihna* (Inquisition) during the reign of the caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-33) and his two successors until al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) suppressed this teaching.

⁷ Translations may be used for "reading" but not for prayer. Indeed, no translation, however "accurate," preserves the aural and linguistic beauty and coherence of the text, nor the depth of its meaning.

Prophets

In the Qur'an we are reminded that "to every people (was sent) a messenger (10.47)," and that from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and others down to Zechariah, John the Baptist (Yahya), Jesus ('Isa) and Muhammad, their purpose has been to *remind* humanity: there is no god but God, so worship Him (21.25). Like the forces of nature and sacred scripture, God's faithful servants are **signs**:

We breathed into [Mary] of Our spirit, and We made her and her son a **sign** for all peoples (21.91).

Moreover, the miracles performed by God's prophets, such as those of Jesus, are **signs**:

I have come to you with a **sign** from your Lord ... I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I bring the dead to life by God's permission.... Surely there is a **sign** in this for you, if you are believers. (3.49)

The Day of Judgment

The final destiny of humanity, the Qur'an tells us, is nothing less than its original source – God: "As He originated you, so will you return" (7.29). This return is accomplished by means of *dhikr* – the remembrance of God. As God enjoins his people: "Then remember me; I will remember you" (2.152). The day on which one desires most to have remembered God and to be remembered by God is the Day of Judgment, the last important article of faith in the Qur'an, and certainly one of the most frequently mentioned and vividly described:

Whoever turns away from my reminder, surely for him is a hard life, and We shall raise him blind on the Day of Resurrection. He will say: "My Lord, why have you raised me up blind when I used to see? He will say: Just as you forgot our **signs** that came to you, so are you forgotten on this

day. And thus do We recompense those are heedless and who do not believe in the **signs** of his Lord (20.124-7).

The Abyssinian Asylum (615 CE)

Like Christianity, Islam was born into a society which, in part, rejected its message, persecuted its prophet, and sought to eradicate his followers. In 615 CE, just five years after the initial revelation of the Qur'an, Muhammad decided to send part of the nascent community of believers, including one of his daughters, away from Mecca to seek asylum from the Negus, the Christian king of Abyssinia. Accused by their enemies from Mecca, the Muslims were questioned by the Negus about their beliefs. He asked Ja'far, the leader of the refugees, if he could recite something from the Revelation given to their prophet. Ja'far began to recite from the *sura* of the Qur'an titled *Maryam* (Mary):

And recall in the Book [the story of] Mary ... and We sent to her Our Spirit, and he appeared to her as a man in all aspects. She said: "I seek refuge from you in the shelter of the All-Merciful, if you fear Him." He said: "I am only a messenger from your Lord to give to you the gift of a pure son." She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and that I am not unchaste?" He said: "So [it will be]; your Lord says: 'This is easy for Me and [We wish] to appoint him as a **sign** to people and a mercy from Us': it is a matter decreed." (19.16-21)

When the Meccans argued, however, that these Muslims did not believe in Jesus as the son of God, the Negus pressed them further about their beliefs. Ja'far responded: "We believe what our prophet has taught us: [Jesus] is God's servant, His messenger, His Spirit, His word that He has breathed into Mary, the Holy Virgin."⁸ Concluding that their differences did not exceed the length

⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61.

of his staff, the Negus granted the Muslims asylum. This encounter between Muslims and Christians has too often been forgotten by adherents of both faiths, but speaks well of the early and positive relationship between these two communities. As we are all painfully aware, this would not always be the case. Although the Qur'an takes issue with some Christian beliefs that seem to compromise the oneness of God, ultimately it has no argument with anyone of good faith:

Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and who does good, they shall have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve. (2.62)

The Hijra

Although part of the Muslim community had found sanctuary in Abyssinia, conditions for Muhammad and his followers in Mecca had reached a critical stage even as the number of converts increased. As long as his uncle Abu Talib was alive, Muhammad was guaranteed his clan's protection from physical harm; but that assurance ended with Abu Talib's death 619 CE. In the city of Yathrib, located some 300 miles north of Mecca, two rival tribes had ended their age-old hostilities by accepting Islam, and offered refuge to their Meccan brothers and sisters in faith. Thus, in 622 CE the Muslim community made the journey there. This event known as the *hijra* was the defining moment for the Muslim community and the year with which the Islamic calendar begins.

In Yathrib, hereafter known as *Medinat an-Nabi*, "the city of the Prophet," or simply *Medina* ("the city"), Muhammad became more than a prophet; he became the defender of the faith as Mecca continued its aggression towards the Muslims; he combined the duties of civic leader, judge, diplomat, and head of state, as well as husband and father. As such, Muhammad had more in common

with figures from the Hebrew Bible such as Moses and Joshua than Jesus who was subject to both Jewish and Roman law and authorities. Similarly, the Qur'an itself is more like the Hebrew Bible than the New Testament in that it contains laws, rules and regulations for governing a community in addition to its theological content.

At this point, it is worthwhile to briefly address the subject of Muslim-Jewish relations. The Qur'an refers to both Jews and Christians as "People of the Book," indicating that these faith communities were the recipients of God's revelation. The Qur'an recalls the special relationship between God and the Jews:

And certainly we gave to the Children of Israel the Book and judgment and prophethood and provided them with good things, and favored them above the nations (45.16).

The Qur'an even speaks to Jews directly, exhorting them to remember:

O Children of Israel! Remember My favor which I bestowed upon you, and fulfill the Covenant with Me, and I will fulfill the Covenant with you" (2.40).

Some of the Jewish leaders and tribes in Medina, however, did not accept the revelation Muhammad brought, opposed his authority and conspired with the Meccans to eliminate him and his followers. It is important to note, however, that these events did not forever taint Muslim-Jewish relations. In fact, in subsequent periods, when Islam became a vast empire, Jews often occupied high positions in the administrations of the *caliphs* (literally, "the successors" of Muhammad). Jews have historically fared much better under Muslim rule than they have under Christian rule.

In time, even the Meccan opponents of Muhammad would acquiesce to the influence and strength of the Muslim community (*umma*), and opened the city's gates to them in 630 CE. Although Mecca had previously violated a truce with the Muslims, no revenge was exacted on the city's inhabitants as was a conqueror's right according to prevailing custom. The only casualties of the Muslim conquest of Mecca were the pagan idols and images that

were housed in the city's principal shrine, the Ka'aba, now cleansed by Muhammad and restored to the worship of the one true God. According to some accounts, when the inside walls of the Ka'aba were being cleaned of their images, icons of Mary and Jesus were left untouched at Muhammad's request.⁹

At the time of Muhammad's death in 632 CE, half of the Arabian Peninsula, which had formerly been comprised of competing and warring tribes without a central authority, had been united into one community by the faith of Islam. By all accounts, the expansion of Islam in its first century was truly phenomenal. Within a hundred years of Muhammad's death, the community of believers, which had to fight to survive in Mecca and Medina, now stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the Indus Valley. Although its first converts were Arabs, the Muslim community would in time come to encompass every race and ethnicity, such that today only about a fifth of all Muslims are ethnic Arabs, and the country with the largest population of Muslims is not Saudi Arabia but Indonesia.¹⁰

It is often incorrectly said that Islam was "spread by the sword." While it is true that Islam's political control was extended by means of military force, Jews and Christians brought under Islamic authority continued to exercise freedom of worship, for the most part. The Qur'an clearly states: "There is no compulsion in religion" (2.256). While it is certainly true that in later centuries and to this day some Muslim states have limited if not eliminated religious freedom entirely, this is clearly a betrayal of the Islamic tradition, and has often been motivated by tensions within the Islamic community and/or aggression from without. That many parts of the Byzantine Empire so quickly accepted Islamic rule can, at least to some extent, be attributed to the great animosity many eastern Christian communities felt towards the Byzantine Church,

⁹ Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006), 314.

¹⁰ Egypt, the most populous country in the Middle East, has a Muslim population of some 70 million compared to Saudi Arabia's population of 24.1 million. Indonesia has a Muslim population of 195 million. (<http://www.islamicpopulation.com>).

particularly following the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), which resulted in the persecution of dissenting churches.

Like the Christian world, early in its history the Islamic community experienced internal division. The most significant schism, but certainly not the only one, occurred over the question of legitimate leadership following the death of Muhammad, a schism that would ultimately produce the *Shi'a*, those who advocated leadership by blood-relations of the Prophet, specifically his cousin 'Ali and his descendents, and the *Sunni* whose leaders derived their authority from the consensus of the community. Not unlike the Protestant Reform in Christianity, the *Shi'a* challenge to the greater Islamic community resulted in a number of splinter groups, some of whom battled one another for authority. Today, the *Shi'a* account for some 10-15% of the total Muslim community worldwide.

Islam: the Five Pillars

When Francis traveled to Egypt in 1219, undoubtedly he had very little real knowledge of Islam, and not unlike many people today, he would have been subjected to a great deal of inaccurate, negative, inflammatory, and hate-filled indictments of the faith in order to justify the military conquest of the Holy Land.¹¹ What Francis learned of Islam came from Muslims like the Sultan al-Kamil, and by his observations of Islamic practices in Egypt and the Holy Land. It is to these outward expressions of the faith that we now turn. Together, these essential practices, described in the Qur'an and lived by the Prophet, constitute what are commonly referred to as "the Five Pillars" (*arkān ad-din*) of Islam. They are *shahādah*, *salāt*, *zakah*, *sawm* & *hajj*. "Through these rituals the tradition has communicated to its adherents the importance not only

¹¹ Theoretically he could have read a translation of the Qur'an that had been rendered into Latin by Robert of Ketton in 1143. Writing to Peter the Venerable, the coordinator of the translation project, Robert expressed his intentions behind his translations: "I have uncovered Mohammed's smoke so that it may be extinguished by your bellows." Rollin Armour, Sr., *Islam, Christianity and the West: A Troubled History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 82.

of basic practical observance but also of the spirit that must breathe life into that practice.”¹²

1. *Shahādah*.

Shahādah means “witnessing” and refers to the profession of faith by which someone identifies themselves as part of the Islamic community. It comprises but two short statements. The first is: *Ashadu ‘an la ilaha illa’llah*, “I witness that there is no god but God” (2.163). It is the unshakeable and uncompromising affirmation of the oneness and unity of God (*tawhīd*), and at the same time a caution against the greatest transgression, that is, ascribing divinity to someone or something other than God (*shirk*). In affirming the oneness of God, the individual reflects the very action of God and the angels who witness there is no god but He (3.18).

The second part of the *Shahādah* declares: *Wa Muhammadun rasul Allah* – “and Muhammad is God’s messenger” (33.40). Referred to as the “Seal of the Prophets,” he is considered to be the last in the long line of God’s human messengers. By affirming belief in Muhammad as God’s prophet, one accepts the Qur’an which he transmitted as divine revelation.

Together, these two statements, “I testify that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s prophet,” are incorporated into the *Adhān*, the call to prayer:

“God is the most great.	<i>Allahu akbar.</i>
I testify that there is no god but God.	<i>Ash-badu an la ilaha ila Allah.</i>
I testify that Muhammad is God’s messenger.	<i>Ash-badu an Muhammadan rasul Allah.</i>
Come to prayer.	<i>Hayya ‘ala as-salaah.</i>
Come to success.	<i>Hayaa ‘ala al-falaah.</i>
God is the most great.	<i>Allahu akbar.</i>
There is no god but God.”	<i>La ilaha ila Allah.</i>

¹² John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, 37.

2. *Salāt*

Five times a day, the *Adhān* is called, shouted, blared and blasted from minarets over villages, towns and cities around the world calling the faithful to perform the required ritual prayers just before sunrise (*fajr*), around noonday (*zubr*), late afternoon (*‘asr*), just after sunset (*maghrib*), and at night (*‘isha*). According to one observer, the purpose of *salāt* is to keep the Muslim:

from ever forgetting that he belongs, not to himself or even to the people who are closest to him, but to God, and that he is His servant, obedient to His command. The remembrance of Him and glorification of Him for even a brief, concentrated period in the midst of his daily activities keeps this perspective always clear and intact.¹³

The Qur’an and Torah share similar conceptions of and concerns about ritual purity. Thus *salāt* should only be undertaken after a person has performed ablutions – washing of the hands, mouth, nostrils, face, arms, head, ears and feet (*wudu’*) – or the complete bathing of the body (*ghusl*). Not merely an exterior washing, it is an interior preparation for the awesome task of remembering and praising God. As is said in the Qur’an: “Successful is one who purifies himself, remembers the name of his Lord, and then prays” (87.14-15).

All of the five daily prayers are performed facing the *qiblah*, the direction to Mecca, or more precisely the Ka’aba in Mecca. Originally the Muslim community prayed in the direction of Jerusalem, demonstrating its connection to Judaism and Christianity; but following the flight (*hijra*) of the community from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, Muhammad received a revelation (2.142-144) that they were to pray towards Mecca. Jerusalem remains for Muslims, however, the holiest city after Mecca and Medina. According to the Qur’an (17.1) and Muslim tradition, it was to Jerusalem that Muhammad was led by the angel Gabriel on a night journey (*al-Isra’*),

¹³ Suzanne Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 14th ed. (Library of Islam, 1996), 53.

and from the Temple Mount he ascended (*al-Mi'raj*) to the Divine Presence through the seven heavens. The Dome of the Rock today marks the location of this celestial ascent.

The five daily prayers may be performed in any clean location (hence the use of prayer mats). It is only the Friday midday prayer that is designated specifically to be performed communally in a mosque, and during which a sermon (*khutbah*) is delivered. Although over the centuries mosques have been built as elaborate edifices in a variety of architectural styles, essentially a mosque is an enclosure designated for prayer, one wall of which is distinguished with a niche (*mibrāb*) indicating the direction to Mecca.¹⁴ It has been observed that:

Unlike the cathedral, the mosque ... focuses the congregation's visual attention, not on a sacred action occurring within the structure, but on a spiritual center beyond the qibla wall ... [The mosque] creates a space conducive to the noncompetitive, coordinated effort of one people surrendering in unison to the one God in whom they believe.¹⁵

Salāt comprises prescribed prayers and postures which express one's attention and submission to God. It includes recitation of verses from the Qur'an selected and memorized by the individual. Central to these prayers is the *Fatiba* ("The Opening"), the first sura of the Qur'an, which is repeated in every unit (*rak'a*) of the individual prayers, a total of seventeen times in the course of a day:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe,
The Merciful, the Compassionate,
The Ruler of the Day of Judgment,
You do we serve, and to You we turn for help,
Guide us on the Straight Path,
The path of those whom You have blessed,

¹⁴ *Masjid* (mosque) literally means "place of prostration."

¹⁵ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, 46-47.

Not those who incur wrath,
Nor those who go astray.

In addition to *salāt*, there are the individual, spontaneous prayers or supplications referred to as *du'a*. *Salāt* is usually followed by *du'a*.

3. *Zakah*

One requirement of the faith in particular is almost always mentioned in the Qur'an in connection with prayer; it is *zakah*, the giving of alms to those in need:

Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and establish regular prayers and regular charity, will have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (2.277)

The word *zakah* signifies "purification," expressing the idea that in giving to the needy, one purifies what has been retained. The amount required varies according to the form of wealth one possesses. It is assessed minimally at 2.5% of one's annual liquid assets. Care for the needy was an early and essential part of the Qur'an's message:

Have you seen the one who belies religion? That is the one who repulses the orphan, and who does not urge the feeding of the needy. So woe to those who pray and are unmindful of their prayers, to those who want to be seen, but refuse charity (107).

An outpouring of charity is seen especially at the conclusion of Ramadan.

4. *Sawm*.

It is during the month of Ramadan that Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink and sexual activity from sunrise to sunset. The Qur'an tells us that, as in Judaism and Christianity, fasting

(*sawm*) is intended as a spiritual discipline: "Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may guard against evil" (2.183).

The word *taqwa*, here translated as "to guard against evil," is used some 250 times in the Qur'an, and like *dhikr*, is a central concept. Often translated as "to be God-fearing, righteous or pious," in its fullest sense it means to cultivate awe, awareness or consciousness of God. Thus, fasting, by helping an individual to become more conscious of one's dependence upon God, guards oneself against evil actions. Indeed "[e]verything that one does should be done in a spirit of *taqwa*, and everything should lead to a deeper awareness of oneself as the creature of God, called to be Abdallah, the Loving Servant of God, in everything."¹⁶

The fast prescribed in the Qur'an is undertaken during the Islamic month of Ramadan because it was during this month that the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad (2.185).

5. Hajj.

The fifth and final "pillar" of *Islam* is the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca enjoined upon all Muslims once in a lifetime if at all possible. This is not a pious, pleasure trip undertaken at one's convenience, but a journey that requires months of preparation, logistical and spiritual, and the expending of great resources, physical and spiritual. It consists of visits to a number of locations in and around Mecca where rituals must be performed on specified days of the year alongside the more than two million people who now annually converge on the city of Mecca in western Saudi Arabia. The *hajj* is the great leveler, stripping away the visual signs of wealth, power and prestige, limiting even the most affluent man to two seamless pieces of white cloth, and simple sandals as he bares his soul before his God.¹⁷ The pilgrim's attire is called *ibram*, a

¹⁶ C.T.R. Hewer, *Understanding Islam: an Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 11.

¹⁷ Women are required only to dress modestly with their heads covered but faces uncovered.

term which also signifies the pure and peaceful state required of the pilgrim to perform the *Hajj*. As with prayer, one's external appearance is an expression of an internal disposition.

It was his experience of the *Hajj* in 1964 that turned Malcolm X from a man of hate into a man of hope. He wrote:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But all were participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white.¹⁸

Upon arriving in the holy city, pilgrims recite the words (*talbiyyah*) uttered by Abraham and the prophets who answered God's call: "Here I am, O God, here I am." Their first destination is the Ka'aba, the house of God, the earthly counterpart to God's heavenly throne, believed to have been built by Abraham and Isma'il (or alternatively built by Adam, and rebuilt by Abraham and Isma'il). There pilgrims make *tawaf*, circling around the Ka'aba not only as Muhammad did, but also in imitation of the angels who fly around God's heavenly throne.

They perform the *sa'ee*, the hurried walk that recalls Hagar's desperate search for water for her son Isma'il, and they drink water from the well of Zamzam that God provided to quench Isma'il's thirst. They stand at Arafat, at Jebel al-Rahmah, the Mount of Mercy, where Muhammad gave his last sermon. There at the figurative and literal height of the *Hajj*, each individual pilgrim among millions prays for God's forgiveness of their sins in anticipation of the Day of Judgment.

In a fervent attempt to conquer personal sin, they throw pebbles at three stone pillars, recalling the three times Abraham rebuffed the temptations of Iblis (the Devil) who tried to stop him from fulfilling God's command to sacrifice his son (Muslims believe God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isma'il). Finally, pilgrims sacrifice

¹⁸ *The Autobiography of Malcom X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 346-47.

an animal in thanks to God, recalling the sacrifice Abraham made after he was tested.

Jihad – a sixth pillar?

Some Muslims, and generally the more dissident Islamic sects or groups, sometimes identify *jihad* as Islam's sixth pillar. Unfortunately, *jihad* is a term that is used carelessly and erroneously by both Islamist extremists and Islamophobes. Essentially *jihad* means "striving" or "struggle." Since the days of the Prophet, the Muslim community has spoken in terms of the "greater" and "lesser" *jihad*. The "greater *jihad*" is the struggle within an individual to remember, to fight heedlessness and submit to the will of God (17.19). The "lesser *jihad*" is the struggle without, not, as is often said a "holy war," but rather a "just war," which can only be initiated under certain conditions, is fought according to strict rules, and which can never be waged against non-combatants.¹⁹ The aim of this struggle is nothing less than securing freedom and justice for the Muslim community, hence its widespread use against the colonial and imperialistic ambitions of European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its more recent resurgence.

Conclusion

I began by speaking about signs, signs that direct us, and signs that remind us. I spoke of how the Qur'an and the faith of Islam ask believers to look at signs – the signs of nature, of human history, of scripture, of the prophets, of ourselves – and remember God, remember God in witnessing to the faith, in prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, the struggle for wholeness and the struggle for justice.

¹⁹ Hewer, *Understanding Islam*, 153-57.

I would like to conclude with one more sign, a sign that was used by Egyptian Christians and Muslims at the turn of the last century. It was an expression of their common identity as sisters and brothers, united against injustice – the injustice of the military occupation of their country by the British that began in 1882. The flag had a simple green ground onto which was sewn the Crescent of Islam and the Christian Cross. It is a sign of a Christian-Muslim unity against injustice that has all but been forgotten, but one we would do well to remember; to remember the many fundamental beliefs, values, and aspirations that Christians and Muslims share; that the real differences between them, between *us*, amount to no more than the length of a staff, as the Negus of Abyssinia said.

As Christians and Muslims, as people inspired by the example of Francis and the Sultan, let us be signs as they were, not only of our respective faith traditions, but of *salām* – peace, so that people may look at us and *Udhkur Allah* – remember God.