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King Fahd National Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data
S.M. Darsh ... et al.
The role of the mosque in Islam -Riyadh.
40p., 14x21cm (understanding Islam series; 6)
ISBN: 9960-740-60-9
1- Mosques 1- Darsh, S.M. (j.a.) II- Series
215. 1 dc 0102/16
Legal Deposit no. 0102/16
ISBN: 9960-740-60-9

دور المساجد فى الاسلام

THE ROLE OF THE MOSQUE IN ISLAM

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Published by:
Darussalm
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Foreword

The Mosque has continously played an active role in the guidance of the Muslim community, teachings both the young and older generations, as well as producing a venue for Muslims to meet each other on religious occassions. But the Mosque has much more potential than this, and we need to utilize it fully so that many more areas of the lives of Muslims may benefit from it.

As a starting point, the Council of Mosques: U.K and Eire held a Seminar in 1988 which was attended by representatives of many Muslim organizations. Short papers on the theme of The Role of the Mosque were delivered during this Seminar by Sheikh Suhaib Hasan, Dr. S.Darsh, Mr. M. Akram Cheema, and Mr. Yusuf Islam. The text of these papers was later published in the bi-monthly An-Nida, and now Al-Qur'an Society is pleased to reproduce them.

We hope that these four papers will help Muslims to re-discover the immense potential of the Mosque, so that once again it can become the heart which pumps life and energy into the Muslim community.

K. HASAN
The Editor

THE MOSQUE AS A COMMUNITY CENTRE

BY DR. SAYED AD-DARSH

The Mosque is the most important institution in Islam. After the home and working place, it is the most frequented place. The Muslim visits it at least twice, if not three or five times a day. There, he rekindles his spirituality, strengthens his relationship with his Creator, meets his fellow Muslim brothers and renews his sense of belonging.

Places of worship are known from the time the history of man was recorded. This is a confirmation of the fact that man is created as a religious creature. He had to satisfy his religious craving to establish a relationship with his Creator. He built the temple, the shrine, the synagogue, the church and the mosque for that purpose. These places fulfilled, in one way or another, this baisc task, in accordance with the vision of the role of religion in the life of given religious tradition.

ISLAMIC CONCEPT

Al-Islam is the final religion to have been revealed by Allâh. Its Book is the final revelation. Its Messenger is the seal of all Prophets and Messengers. As such, it dealt with the affairs of this life in a comprehensive way. It is a religion, spiritual force, and a way of life. It aims to produce the type of man who is described in its Book as the best man, the community as the best community to be brought forward to human beings. To evolve and bring about such pioneering personality, there should be the instrument capable of achieving this goal. It was not a school, nor an educational institution. For education is conceived, to a great extent as a means of handing over a skill or a profession. It was not a place of meditation, for a place of meditation caters for the spiritual dimension. It was the Mosque. For the mosque, in

Islam, was synonymous with appearance of the Muslim community.

THE MAKKAN PERIOD

Looking at the early stage in the Islamic Mission, in particular the Makkan era, we see a group of converts living in a sea of polytheists. They exercised their basic religious acts as individuals. The authority, the way of life, the social norms were all dominated by non-Muslims. Muslims were living as strangers in such an environment. The change here was directed towards the faith in a Supreme, Transcendant, Everlasting One Creator. This awareness, on the part of man, was the most important aspect of the new mission at that stage. This may account for the absence, then the far-reaching social change which was to take place later on as a result of the change in the environment. That was the Madina era.

THE APPEARANCE OF THE MOSQUE

The migration of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) from Makkah to al-Madina signalled a great change in the character of the Muslim community. For the first time, the Prophet felt free from the dominant authority of the polytheists at Makkah. On arrival at the outskirts of the new city, at Quba, he spent a few days resting and preparing for the entrance to the city. But he did not waste any time. He built the first mosque there, the mosque of Quba. The Prophet stayed in Quba from Monday to Friday morning when he started marching to al-Madina proper. In this way the time for Jum'a a prayer caught up with him at the valley of Rânunâ'a, the settlement of Banu Salim. There he offered the first Jum'a congregational prayer. The mosque there was the second mosque in Islam. Many people came to intercept the Prophet offering their protection and hospitality. The Prophet gratefully acknowledged their good feelings requesting them to release the leash of his she-camel, for it was directed by Allâh to

the place where the Prophet is to stay. Finally the she-camel came to a halt. The Prophet descended and later on his Great Mosque was built. So, we see in a short period of time three mosques were built. This is a great indication to the far-reaching role the mosque is to play in moulding the shape of the community which is chosen by Allâh to lead humanity in the spiritual, moral and social change which was going to change the future history of mankind till the last day.

In his commentary on the Qur'an, Al-Qurtubi wrote extensively on these two verses, bringing out a wide range of topics related to the mosque. I shall be touching on some of these topics:

THE FUNCTION OF THE MOSQUE

A — In the Qur'an: There are a number of verses in the Qur'an which stress, most importantly, the spiritual function of the mosque. In Chapter 24: *The Light*, Allâh Most High says:

فِي بُيُوتٍ أَذِنَ اللَّهُ أَن تُرْفَعَ وَيُذْكَرَ فِيهَا اسْمُهُ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ فِيهَا بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْآصَالِ ﴿٣٦﴾
رِجَالٌ لَّا تُلْهِيهِمْ تِجَارَةٌ وَلَا بَيْعٌ عَن ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَإِقَامِ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءِ الزَّكَاةِ يَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا
تَتَقَلَّبُ فِيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَالْأَبْصَارُ ﴿٣٧﴾

"In house which Allâh has allowed to be exalted and that His name shall be remembered therein. Therein do offer praise to Him at morning and evening. Men whom neither merchandise, nor sale beguile them from the remembrance of Allâh and constancy in prayer and paying to the poor their due, who fear the day when hearts and eyeballs will be overturned." (24: 36,37)

i) The word translated here "*Exalted*" is literally "*to be raised high*". But the two meanings are acceptable here. The literal meaning is to indicate that mosques are to be built in a respectalby impressive but non-expensive way. They are the

houses of Allâh. All due consideration are to be taken when building a mosque. At the same time, the mosques are to be exalted, due respect to be given to them and there should be no bickering, shouting or fighting in them.

ii) The mosques are the places for the regeneration of our spiritual power through prayers, the remembrance of Allâh, of reading the Qur'an and supplications. They are the places where the angels frequent most, where peace and tranquillity dwell upon those who are sitting there.

iii) And they are the most suitable places for the particular act of prayer. They are aloof from the hustle and bustle of the streets, working places or markets. There a sense of sanctity and reverence replaces the worry and trouble of daily life. If the mind is troubled outside, inside the mosque it is at peace. It is in communication with the ultimate source of comfort and spiritual joy.

B — In the Sunnah: Muslims are aware of the different types of Sunnah. Here, the practical Sunnah is the one under discussion. In the Makkah period, the Messenger of Allâh used to meet the companions either individually or in small groups. The most famous place of meeting was the house of al-Arqam. There, Islamic instructions were given in a secret way.

At Al-Madina, the Prophet was free to meet with his companions at any time in any place. The most suitable venue was the mosque. From the inaugural moment the mosque assumed responsibilities which were not known before to any place of worship. The life of the newly emerging community was gradually taking shape in and through the mosque.

These were, besides the prayers, the most important functions of the mosque of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم):

a) — Centre of learning:

Islam is the religion of learning. Its miracle is a rational miracle. It is a Book. The first revelation was about learning, reading and writing. There was no school or a college to enrol in. The place where those seeking guidance could easily find was the mosque of the Prophet. His house was next to the mosque. His whole life was dedicated to his mission. So, he spent a great deal of his time meeting, teaching, imparting knowledge in the mosque. He encouraged the Muslims to frequent the mosque. It was their school.

There are many episodes in which the importance of the mosque as a place of learning is emphasized. Al-Bukhari and Muslim related the story of the three who entered the mosque. There was a circle around the Prophet. One of the three found a place and sat in. The second sat at the back and the third went away. The Prophet said: The first person came forward, so Allâh came forward to him. The second was shy, so Allâh did not wish to embarrass him. The third turned away, so Allâh turned away from him. No moral, spiritual incentive to learn, could be more touching than such a parable. In the same vein, Abu Hurayrah one day was in the market place. He shouted: you are busy trading here and leaving your share of inheritance from the estate of the Prophet. Some of the people there left to the mosque, anticipating some financial rewards. They did not find such a thing. What they found were the circles of learning. They came back, not very pleased with what Abu Hurayrah did to them. They said: we did not find any wealth there to be divided. He said: what did you find there? They replied: The circles of learning. He said: this is inheritance of Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم).

b) —Receiving dignitaries and delegates:

In the wake of the success of the message, many delegates and dignitaries came to enquire, or negotiate a pact or to conclude agreements. The reception place was the Mosque of the Prophet. Most

important of these delegates, and more indicative of the tolerant attitude of al-Islam was the delegate of the Christians from Najran, in the South West, on the border near Yeman. When the time of their prayer came, they offered their prayer in the mosque itself. Al-Imam Abu Hanifa and Ash-Shafi took this precedent as a proof that the people of the Book may be allowed to enter the mosque.

c) —Charity distribution centre:

The money coming to the Prophet was distributed in the mosque. At the same time, when there was an emergency, the Prophet would deliver a sermon and call upon the community to give in the way of Allâh. Then he would give to those in need, as was the case of the Mudar people. It has to be mentioned here that Muslim treasury in different regions used to be next to the wall of the Qibla. The reason as given by Umar was that, at any given time, there is someone offering his prayer. This would stop anyone trying to break into treasury.

d) — The mosque as a shelter for the homeless:

Many Muslims who migrated with the Prophet were single, homeless and destitute. They were lodged in the mosque. They were known as the people of Suffah. Abu Hurayrah was one of them. Abdullah bin Umar, when he was young and single, the mosque was his bedroom. The great mosques in the Muslim cities were the hostels for Muslim travellers.

e) — The mosque as a Nursing Home:

One of the lady companions of the Prophet with the name of Rufayda used to nurse sick people in the Mosque of the Prophet. In her tent, in the Mosque, she nursed Sa'd bin Mu'adh until he passed away. She is described in the books of biographies as the woman who dedicated herself to nursing sick Muslims in the Mosque of the Prophet.

f) — A place of entertainment on special occasions:

The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) advised to have the marriage agreement in the mosque. He allowed the Abyssinians to perform a war or a folklore dance and Aysha was leaning on the shoulder of the Prophet watching their performance.

These were the most important functions of the Mosque in moulding the shape of the Muslim nation. This role continued in one way or another all through the Islamic history. Great mosques are still famous for their academic history. Al-Haramain ash-Sharifain, al-Masjidul Aqsa, Al-Azhar ash-Sharif, Jami uz-Zaytouna and Masjid ul-Qarawiyyin, the centre of learning where Pope Silvester 11 studied and graduated.

THE PRESENT FUNCTIONS OF THE MOSQUE

A: In the Muslim countries: The functions of the mosque in the Muslim countries nowadays are somehow limited in view of the fact that many institutions are established, besides the mosque which are performing the functions which are withdrawn from the mosque.

Education is being taken care of, by the schools, colleges and universities with varying degrees of interest in Islamic studies, or none at all. Hospitals are caring for the sick. Ministries of Justice are dispensing it in accordance with the legal system applicable in given country.

In the whole, the mosque as an institution on its own merit, suffered a great deal in the past one to two hundred years as a result of the invasion of non-Muslim ways of thinking. At one stage, the mosque came to be synonymous with aged, ignorant or peasant folk. Cultured, more enlightened aspiring young people were attracted to the newly establishsed nationally oriented parties. Even women were entirely excluded from attending the mosque. It became a male reserve, with the result that educated women drifted to the newly established cultural or social clubs or

parties. Anyone studying the Muslim societies fifty years ago, would have given the impression that such society is taking the same road of the secular materialist non-Christian Eastern and Western society. But this gloomy picture is fast disappearing, thanks to the reformist movements which took place in the last fifty years or so. This is the confirmation of the tradition of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) that "*A section of my Umma will continue to hold fast to the truth until the command of Allâh comes while they are firmly established.*"

These groups of Muslims, all through the Muslim countries took upon themselves to revive Islamic values and Muslim institutions. This task necessitated getting rid of the imperial powers which divided the Muslim nations into areas of interest and cultural dominations. The two battles went hand in hand. The mosque was rejuvenated and became the focus of attention of the reformers and the lovers of the Islamic way of life.

The call now, is to re-introduce as much activities to the mosque as was during the golden era of al-Islam. This call has been pronounced by individual reformist Muslims as well as organizations and even the official Ministries of Awqaf.

This new development was clearly reflected in the recommendations of the first International Islamic Conference for mission of the mosque held in the middle of the month of Ramadan 1395, September 1975 in the Office of the Muslim World League in Makkah al-Mukarramah and which was attended by the representatives of eighty Muslim nations. In Section 7 of these recommendations, and under the headline: *Architectural Planning of the Mosque*, it is mentioned that the Conference recommends as follows:

1. The Conference considers the mosque to be the centre of the social life in the Islamic society, where the social activities are an extension of the religious duties. On this

basis, the mosque should be built in the heart of the city or the community.

2. The mosque should be planned to serve the functions which are necessary for the Muslims, such as

a. The prayer hall satisfies the health requirements, ventilation, heating and light.

b. To have a section for Muslim women with separate facilities.

c. To have a library, reading room, lecture hall and social function hall.

d. A place for teaching the Qur'an and coaching the children in different subjects.

e. A playing ground, a hall for young kids for their free times, particularly during summer time.

f. A small clinic for emergency treatment and funeral facilities.

g. Accommodation facilities for guests.

In planning the mosque in this way, it must be kept in the mind that the mosque is a place of worship. It is a sanctuary. All due respect should be taken care of, so that there will be no infringement on its sacredness.

What is mentioned above are the most important recommendations in their section. They are a reflection of the new reality of the awakening of the Islamic society and the need to enlighten it and keep it in the right direction. This realization leads to the natural second step, the person who is to guide those who frequent the mosque i.e. the Imam.

I find myself obliged to quote, again from the recommendations of the first conference. In Section 2, the choice of the Imam, Khateeb and Da'aiya, it recommended that he should be

a. Having a strong relationship with Allâh, good example for others, commanding what is good, forbidding what is bad, able to declare the word of truth.