

The Mosque in Islam

Petra Uphoff¹

The Arabic term for mosque, *masjid*, derives from the trilateral root s-j-d with the sense of prostration. The mosque is thus the place where one prostrates oneself before God.² Mosques are also often designated as *bait Allah*, 'house of God'. This is particularly true of the main mosque in Mecca and the two other important mosques in Medina and Jerusalem.

From the 15th century onwards the term *masjid* came to be used for smaller, less significant mosques, while a town's central mosque came generally to be referred to as *al-Jami'*, the Friday mosque. Muslim theologians disagree whether there can more than one Friday mosque in one locality. The Shaf'iite school insists for instance there can be only one Friday mosque as long as it can accommodate all the faithful.

Muslims attend mosques to pray and hear the sermon, especially on Friday, which is equivalent to some degree to the Christian Sunday. Traditional sayings affirm that every step on the way to the mosque counts toward the forgiveness of sins.

Sacred buildings in Islam and Christianity

In the early period the mosque, unlike Christian sacred architecture, did not

¹ Petra Uphoff is a studied Islamicist, mentor and paedagogic and is presently enrolled in adults' education.

² According to surah 62:9 believers have to pray within the community.

have an exclusively sacred function as a place for worship and prayer but was also used as a place where business deals were clinched, legal cases settled, political meetings held and administrative decisions such as tax relief proclaimed. Mosques served as state treasury, educational establishment, accommodation for travellers, employees or students, and scholars would eat there with their disciples.

The intimate connection in between religion, politics, society and, in early Islam, the conduct of war meant that riots and armed conflict not infrequently took place in the mosque.

There is a set of traditions which regard the mosque as the proper place for prayer, and some even consider prayer offered outside it to be invalid,³ yet on the other hand, according to tradition, Muhammad wanted to underline Islam's universality by proclaiming the whole earth as an appropriate place for prayer and regarded this as a distinctive difference to previous monotheistic religions.

The Muslim conquerors did not hesitate to transform synagogues, churches and temples of fire into mosques,⁴ and in

³ For J. Pedersen the conviction of some Muslims who hold a prayer within a mosque to be 20 to 25 times more valuable is rooted in pre-Islamic Ka'ba traditions: J. Pedersen, *Masdjid*. in: A. J. Wensinck, J. H. Kramers. *Handwörterbuch des Islam*. Leiden 1941, p. 430.

⁴ Early Muslim conquerors allowed the adherents of other religions to further use their sacred buildings, whereas in violently conquered regions sacred buildings were often

certain locations Muslims and Christians shared church buildings,⁵ something one can scarcely imagine today, when many Muslims consider it prohibited to enter a Christian church. At the same time more and more disused church buildings in Western Europe are being offered to Muslims as places of worship.⁶

With the passing centuries mosques came increasingly to be regarded as sacred places to be entered only in a state of ritual purity and not be desecrated by being entered with one's shoes on or by the presence of unclean animals or infidels.⁷

Design

To begin with there were no special places set aside for meetings and prayer, and Muhammad and his first disciples used to conduct prayers in the streets of Medina, in the open air or in private homes. Muhammad is traditionally affirmed to have purchased the place where his camel first sat down upon his arrival in Medina in 622 AD and to have built his house there and enclosed a space for

changed into mosques, houses or administration buildings.

⁵ The former church of John the Baptist in Damascus is often quoted as a prominent example. Christians and Muslims are said to have used that church together until the Muslims later acquired the building from the Christians.

⁶ We hear this mostly from the Netherlands where more and more churches remain empty.

⁷ Surah 9:17 f. forbids infidels to enter a mosque, although at the time of Muhammad and in early Islam this was not put into practice. Muslim theologians disagree of what is allowed to Christians. In some regions entering a mosque for them is generally forbidden (e. g. in parts of North Africa), whereas in Syria, Turkey or Yemen it is allowed in most cases.

meetings. The second Caliph, 'Umar (died 644), is said to built a 6 foot high wall round this enclosure. Tradition is not unanimous as to whether the construction of the first mosque is to be traced back to the angel Gabriel's command to Muhammad. Covered porticos were built along the walls and parts screened off for Muhammad's wives or as shelter for the homeless.

Prayer was originally to be spoken facing north, but the direction (*qibla* in Arabic) was changed to the south when Muhammad, after his break with Judaism, shifted the focus from Jerusalem to Mecca, now the practice of some 1.3 billion Muslims.

The first mosque in Medina was more like a headquarter⁸ that also but not exclusively served as a place for prayer and Friday sermons. Soon there were various tribal mosques which played an important role in times of unrest and disunity. Major mosques were erected immediately in conquered areas and in their region performed equivalent functions to the central mosque in Medina.

The Changing Role of the Mosque

Different types of mosque soon developed, such as memorial mosques at particular places where Muhammad prayed.⁹ The house where he was born and that of his first wife Khadija were turned into mosques, and a mosque commemorates the spot where spirits (*djinn* in Arabic)

⁸ See J. Pedersen, op. cit., p. 424.

⁹ The unquestionable example of Muhammad, and to some degree of the first four caliphes, makes Muslims pray where he and them had prayed. The second caliph 'Umar is said not to have prayed in certain churches so that they would later not be confiscated by the Muslim community.

are said to have eavesdropped on Muhammad.¹⁰

As more and more prestige came to be associated with founding a mosque, such foundations became more popular, often bearing the founder's name and not infrequently securing an income for their descendants. Mosques have been founded by differing schools of Islamic law or for prized scholars.

One particular kind of mosque are those dedicated to saints. Although in orthodox Islam it is strictly speaking *makruh*, forbidden, to build a mosque over a grave or to worship saints or prostrate oneself at their grave, pre-Islamic and Christian traditions may have inspired and influenced the veneration of saints in Islam. Many churches and synagogues built over the graves of saints also venerated by Muslims have been converted into mosques. People do not actually pray on the graves themselves but expected a blessing (*baraka* in Arabic) from spending time in such places and through contact with the burial ground. The veneration of saints continues to play a significant role in popular Islam, and there are even scholars who esteem a visit to a saint's grave to be equivalent to a pilgrimage to Mecca. As at the Ka'aba worshippers walk in ritual procession round the grave.

Their social and political role meant that mosques were mainly built in central locations and connected to the ruler's residence. Up until the time of the Abbasids (750-1258 AD) it was the ruler who led prayers and the Friday sermon, and the Abbasids were the first to provide state funding for Friday preachers and imams to preside over the mosque, so that the sultan rarely exercised these

functions. In smaller mosques the imam and the preacher tend to be one and the same person, while large and more important mosques may employ several imams and preachers who are responsible for the *salat*, prayers, five times daily and the sermon on Fridays and holidays.

The upkeep of the mosque and its employees depends on its importance or its founder, and they may be financed by the state or its ruler, otherwise by the faithful or a foundation trust.

Even today many mosques are centrally located, often in a city's business district and not infrequently part of the bazaar. Western visitors may be surprised to find people having a midday nap or lively debate in the mosque, but in theory mosques are supposed to be open for anyone at any time. They are a place of communal worship and stand for equality and community.

Mosque Architecture

In its original form the mosque was an open stone courtyard, but changes took place as churches and synagogues were adopted as mosques. The manifold function of the mosque led to additional rooms being built for travellers, employees, judges, students and their classes, administrative purposes, trials or even as a burial place for a saint on the roofed porticos or in adjacent buildings.

Islamic iconoclasm exerts its influence on the mosque's interior. Icons and statues are taboo and in their place the artistic calligraphy of Arabic script, held to be sacred, adorns the walls and even the architecture of the mosque.

An important feature is the niche in the wall indicating the direction towards Mecca. In the same wall is the *mihrab*, an

¹⁰ J. Pedersen, p. 427.

elaborately fashioned prayer niche¹¹ “whose form is derived from the canon of later antiquity”.¹² Most mosques today are built with a minaret (*manara* in Arabic), leading to controversy in the West over the permitted height of the building and the call to prayer over loudspeakers.

It is uncertain when features such as the prayer niche and the minaret became established and there is no evidence for them in the first mosques. There is also the chancel or pulpit (*minbar* in Arabic), usually located in the proximity of the prayer niche, from which the sermon can be preached in a sitting or standing position. Muhammad is reputed to have preached in Mecca from a palm tree trunk or the back of his mount. Early pulpits are said to have been mobile and used for rulers’ coronation ceremonies and pronouncements.

The mosque in Mecca today has a number of pulpits, one for each of the Sunni law schools and for the Shiite Zaidites, and the Friday sermons are preached from each in turn. Pulpits are often draped like the Ka’ba with costly material. There is sometimes a lectern for the Koran, which is the object of particular veneration and kept in a special receptacle (*sundug* in Arabic) along with other precious items.

Light came to be of increasing importance in the mosque as pilgrims and seekers after God would spend the night in prayer and contemplation, also for teachers and their students, and soon special attention was given to the fashioning of the lamps.

¹¹ The stars were used to determine the correct prayer direction or former church buildings.

¹² Barbara Finster: *Mihrab*. in: R. Elgers, F. Stolleis, *Kleines Islamlexikon*, München 2001, p. 211.

Purists such as the Saudi-Arabian Wahhabi branch pray on the bare ground, otherwise it is a widespread custom to pray on carpets, now often expensively woven. Muhammad himself is reputed to have used a special prayer mat.

Water is important in the mosque not simply for drinking and sanitary purposes but for the ritual cleansing to be performed before prayers and after contamination (for instance through contact with body fluids). Following the example of Mecca mosques are thus often furnished with wells in the inner courts.

Religious ceremonies in the Mosque

The mosque is the place for cultic activity and preaching, for prayers and for the worship of God and the invocation of his name. Sura 24:36 calls on Muslims to pray in the mosque morning and evening. Ascetics especially have adopted the custom ascribed to Muhammad of spending time in the mosque on grounds of piety. Muhammad is said to have spent between ten and twenty days in the mosque during the month-long Ramadan fast.

As mosques increasingly came to be regarded as sacred buildings, various rules and taboos developed, such as the custom, following Muhammad’s example, of crossing the threshold of the mosque with the right foot first. On returning from a journey one should prostrate oneself twice in prayer in the mosque. One is expected to attend Friday prayers clean and tidy, not to shave and especially not to spit in the mosque.¹³ The practice of removing one’s shoes before

¹³ This goes back to the tradition collector Bukhari: *Abu-r-Rida Rassoul*. *Handbuch der muslimischen Frau*. Köln 1996, p. 263.

entering a mosque is said to be traceable to the second Caliph 'Umar (died 644).

Traditional texts known to date from the Ummayyad dynasty (661-750) indicate that the outward appearance of mosques was considered increasingly important. Activities performed within the precincts of the mosque, whether religious, such as prayers or vows, or secular, such as contracts, are often regarded as having greater significance. Even more significant are vows taken at the Ka'aba, and they are often committed to writing. Marriages may be partly solemnized in a mosque. A marriage ended by a religious divorce decree must be dissolved in a mosque. On the other hand many scholars are opposed to the custom, widespread among both Sunnis and Shiites, of bringing the deceased into the mosque for requiem prayers before the funeral.

The close connection between religion and politics and between religious and political authority is apparent not only in the proximity of the mosque to the seat of government in early Islam but also in the political statements made in the Friday sermon and the publicly pronounced curses in prayer. Such mutual malediction between Sunnites and Shiites has a long tradition. Western observers may moreover have been somewhat taken aback to see ex-president Rafsanjani preaching the weekly Friday sermon in Teheran with a gun in his hand.

The Mosque today

The mosque continues to play an important role as meeting point and social centre. The Muslim Diaspora has if anything increased its significance as a place for fellowship, teaching, mutual assistance and communal celebration. Ali Kizilkaya, President of the Islamic Coun-

cil in Germany, denotes the mosque as House of God, meaning less a sacred building and rather a centre for prayer and fellowship¹⁴, open for edifying discussion, to spend time in prayer or for religious or secular dialogue. According to Kizilkaya, nothing is taboo in the mosque as long as what goes on is not contrary to religion.¹⁵

Membership of a mosque is determined either by the association a person belongs to or by place of residence. The majority of people attend the mosque nearest to them.

There are conflicting reports as to the source of finance for the construction and upkeep of mosques in Western Europe. It is often admitted that Da'wa foundations for the advancement of Islam in Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait or Pakistan have contributed to the cost of building and maintaining mosques in the West. The Islamic Council through its president Ali Kizilkaya affirms that all mosques federated with the Council are paid for and maintained by the local members, representing a severe burden for these often relatively small communities.

It is part of man's religious duty to attend prayers in the mosque, at least on Friday, but even today it is a subject of controversy whether women should pray in the mosque or rather at home. If the former, then in separate rooms or at least behind the men. Some scholars hold the women should leave the mosque before the men. According to tradition both Muhammad and the Caliph 'Umar were accompanied by their wives.

¹⁴ Ali Kizilkaya, president of the Islamic Council in Germany in an interview with the author, 3.1.2007.

¹⁵ This would be the case when it comes to drinking of alcohol or „showing of cinema films“, said Ali Kizilkaya.

It used to be said in many Islamic countries that only men over forty regularly attended the mosque, but this seems to be changing with the growing Islamisation of recent years, and mosques

appear to be more attractive to young men. Strangely enough this does not seem to be the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where people complain that the mosques are increasingly deserted.

Moscheebau und Versammlungsfreiheit für Muslime in Deutschland

Eberhard Troeger¹

1. Die rechtliche Lage

a. Die Versammlungsfreiheit

Muslime haben in Deutschland wie alle Einwohner, seien es Einheimische oder Ausländer, die Möglichkeit und das Recht,² sich zu religiösen und politischen Zusammenkünften in Privatwohnungen zu treffen.³ Sie können hier das rituelle Gebet verrichten, Koranunterricht ertei-

len, religiöse Feste feiern und Sufimediationen durchführen. Die einzige Beschränkung liegt in der Rücksichtnahme auf die Nachbarn, so dass keine Störungen durch übermäßige Lärmbelästigung entstehen, vor allem nachts und an Ruhetagen. Muslime haben ferner die Möglichkeit, größere Räumlichkeiten zu mieten, zu erwerben oder zu bauen, um dort ihre religiösen und anderen Veranstaltungen durchzuführen. Natürlich müssen dafür die geltenden behördlichen Auflagen beachtet werden, wie sie für alle gesellschaftlichen Gruppen gelten. Es kann sein, dass ein größeres Versammlungslokal in einem reinen Wohngebiet nicht genehmigt wird. Muslime haben darüber hinaus die Möglichkeit, für größere Veranstaltungen Säle oder gar Stadien zu mieten, falls sie die Bedingungen der jeweiligen Träger erfüllen. Es kann sein, dass sie dafür vom zuständigen Ordnungsamt eine Genehmigung benötigen.

Eine Genehmigung ist auch nötig für alle größeren Versammlungen in der Öffentlichkeit: für einen Marsch oder eine Demonstration, aber auch für öffentliche Werbung, z. B. in einer Fußgängerzone.⁴

¹ Eberhard Troeger (Jg. 1938) ist evangelischer Theologe, betreibt seit 1963 Studien zum Islam und zur Arabischen Welt, war u. a. in Ägypten tätig, unterrichtet an theologischen Seminaren und ist wohnhaft in Wiehl bei Gummersbach.

² Zur rechtlichen Situation vgl. Janbernd Oebbecke. Das deutsche Recht und der Islam. in: A. Th. Khoury; P. Heine; J. Oebbecke. Handbuch Recht und Kultur des Islams in der deutschen Gesellschaft. Gütersloh 2000, S. 287ff; Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. Zusammenleben mit Muslimen in Deutschland: Gestaltung der christlichen Begegnung mit Muslimen, Gütersloh, 2000, S. 46ff unter der Überschrift „Rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen des Islam in Deutschland“ und: „Klarheit und Gute Nachbarschaft“, Christen und Muslime in Deutschland. Eine Handreichung des Rates der EKD, EKD-Texte 86, Hannover 2006.

³ Artikel 8, Abs.1 des Grundgesetzes besagt: „Alle Deutschen haben das Recht, sich ohne Anmeldung oder Erlaubnis friedlich und ohne Waffen zu versammeln.“ Das gilt auch für Ausländer.

⁴ Artikel 8, Abs. 2 schränkt das Versammlungsrecht ein: „Für Versammlungen unter freiem Himmel kann dieses Recht durch Ge-