

Should Christians Pray the Muslim Salat?

How to avoid syncretism when applying contextualization to real situations is critical for successful church planting. A key factor is worship and prayer. Here are 15 reasons for rejecting praying the Muslim prayer salat.

by Warren C. Chastain

Some Muslims are puzzled by Christians who are trying to adopt Muslim practices and rituals. How do Muslims interpret this behavior which they themselves might consider to be compromising: i.e., to practice alien religious forms which they consider false or obsolete? Some, perhaps, are secretly gratified that the superiority of Islam is admitted when non-Muslims take on Muslim practices. Others may see this as a step toward conversion and rejoice.

Also what does it mean to those Christian workers who are facing Mecca and praying the *salat*? Often this is done in meetings where Muslims are present. It is seen as a tool for improving communications and making the Gospel more acceptable? Others actually do it at home or in private because they consider it to be an improvement on traditional Christian forms, though we have not heard of any workers praying at mosques when they return to their home country. Many may do it because of they believe that *salat* type praying is required in order to properly contextualize the Christian message. Probably in most cases, if not in all, the motives are good and commendable.

What is the essence of *salat*? Christians usually interpret the word *salat* as meaning “prayer” which then invites comparisons between Christian and Muslim ideas of prayer. In the Muslim worldview, it is actually the fundamental act of worship which includes a few recognizable “prayers”. In particular, it is a prayer for blessings on Muhammad, prayers for forgiveness, etc. Other statements are made in the *salat* which are praises, or the creeds of

Islam, and are not strictly prayers. A.J. Wensinck in E. J. Brill’s *First Encyclopedia of Islam* says of *salat*, that the translation ‘prayer’ simply is not accurate; the Arabic *du’a* corresponds closer to our idea of prayer. Cyril Glasse in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* agrees, defines *salat* as “a ritual, liturgy, or an act of worship” rather than the supplication usually associated with the word “prayer” in the West. E. E. Calverly W. Montgomery Watt, and S. M. Zwemer also concur that *salat* is worship, not “prayer.” *Salat* is the Muslim substitute, not merely for Christian prayer, but also for the basic idea and act of Christian worship. Here follows 15 reasons why praying the *salat* is highly questionable if not entirely wrong.

Displacement of Revealed Worship

It can be dangerous to think we are engaged in one act when actually we are doing something distinctly different though similar, or even overlapping. Bad theory leads to bad practice. Worship is the highest of all human acts, and the God of heaven actually is seeking worshipers. However, not just any kind of worship man creates is acceptable to Him. The Muslim *salat* is not done in the spirit, nor in truth, nor in the name of Jesus. Rather it is a ritualized worship form created by Muhammad, in rejection of true Jewish and Christian worship, which in some form or other had already been available for centuries. *Du’a*, however, superficially looks like free Christian prayer, but it is anti-Trinitarian in that *du’a* is not addressed to the Father as Jesus taught, (indeed the concept of God as Father is rejected by Muslims). It is not prayer in

the Name of the Son, and it is not evoked by the Holy Spirit (who is merely an angel in Islam theology). Rather, the *du’a* requires certain sacred phrases invoking blessing on Muhammad as, Cyril Glasse, a Muslim scholar confirms: “The *du’a*, which follows the *salah* [*salat*], is always introduced with a prayer on the prophet” (ibid. p. 317). Our conclusion therefore is that neither *salat* nor *du’a* is a proper substitute for, nor parallel to, nor an addition to authentic Christian worship or prayer. It seems to me that to restructure worship so as to appeal to human nature, even when done for good reasons, will produce nothing but a worship in the flesh. To revise true prayer and devotion so as to appeal and perhaps appease Muslims is to water down our faith and represent an affront to our God.

The Authority of Muhammad

A *hadith* has the prophet Muhammad teaching, “*Salah* is the pillar of Islam and whosoever abandons it, demolishes the very pillar of religion.” Muhammad had notions that worship was all important, however, he turned his back on Jerusalem and the Torah, with its focus on the sacrificial system, the priesthood, the Law and the coming Messiah, and substituted his own pattern of intricate, detailed daily prayers. Likewise he rejected the freedom of Christian worship to the Father and the Son, as children, not slaves. The three basic elements of apostolic worship: a) the remembrance of Jesus in the “sacrament of the Lord’s Supper”) hearing and obedience to the Word of God (which Islam rejects as corrupted or superseded by the Koran); ministry of spiritual

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gifts through the presence of the Holy Spirit, all were set aside for a pattern of ritual words and movements with a new ethnocentric focus on Arabic. The spirit underlying this innovation is non-biblical worship, despite the adoption of some innocent gestures and recitation of some partial truths (e.g. “God is great,” and “God is One”), does not justify Christians to participate in Muslim practices and its underlying system—a theological error that has kept millions away from salvation in Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Samaritanism

To perform *salat* one must pray toward the Kaabah in Mecca. Jesus rejected the whole idea of a special direction in prayer. We would have expected Him to teach the apostles to face Jerusalem but there is no evidence for this even for Jewish converts. Jesus corrected the Samaritan woman who prayed at or toward Mt. Gerizim saying: “... neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall you worship the Father” (Jn. 4:21). The whole idea of converts being required to face any certain direction clearly contradicts apostolic faith. To worship toward Mecca is to disregard both the clear word and the spirit of Jesus’ teaching. In this age, Jesus himself is our “direction” of prayer. He is “the Way” and we are to pray “in His Name.” The conclusion we can draw here: How can you pray in the Jesus’ name if we obey Muhammad?

Chrislam

After Muhammad took power in Mecca, he made a major decision concerning the Kaabah which was the source of the idolatry that Muhammad hated. Unfortunately he did not have the courage of the 20 year old king Josiah who totally destroyed all the images groves, centers of false religion and all relics of idolatry (2 Chron. 34:3-7). “And Josiah removed all the abominations from all the lands belonging to the sons of Israel” (34:33). Perhaps

in a half-way measure Muhammad removed the images out of the Kaabah, but he retained the pagan structure itself with its Black Stone, which he kissed, believing that it became black because sins were transferred to it. Kissing the Black Stone when Muhammad had the political, military, and religious power to set up a system of true submission to the One God, reveals a fatal compromise. Muslims are not merely facing a wrong direction, but they are honoring a pagan shrine and a piece of rock. The only building and stone that the Christian should honor is that mentioned in 1 Pet 2:4-10: “Behold I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him shall not be disappointed.” If we teach converts to look to the Kaabah, how can we also teach them to be “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2)? If we think they can look both ways, we are modeling syncretism and developing a “double-minded” believer, one “unstable in all his ways” (Jas. 1:7). The conclusion is that “Chrislam” leads to syncretism.

Cleanliness is Far from Godliness

According to Muslims, prayer is totally invalid unless it is preceded by total or partial washing. Muslims have developed an extensive theology of washing. Their stress on cleanliness is very admirable. But when it is made a requirement for approaching God then we enter into dangerous theology. In the Old Testament when water was used for purification it had to be accompanied with blood: “And according to the law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Heb. 9:22).

But even blood had only temporary validity since it was the blood of animals. As the author of Hebrews clarifies: “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” (10:14) And... “we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Christ.” Christian water baptism

is no exception to cleansing by blood, as Rom 6:3 says: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

Muslims reject the Christian idea that man has a sinful nature, and therefore reject the need for atonement. Muslim worship accepts mere washing with water as an adequate cleansing for approaching God. Even when Muslims sacrifice an animal it is not an essential part of any theology of salvation from sin.. Muslims emphasize water while Christians stress blood; specifically the blood of Christ. When Muslims do use water, it is merely for cleansing like the outside of a cup. Hence, missionaries who approve of the *salat* will by implication teach a theology that they would reject orally. So doing the *salat* will in fact be justifying Muslim theology and stand against the whole biblical theology of sacrifice for sin as essential to worshipping God. Perhaps a theology of water can be very appealing, but nevertheless deceptive, because it will not cleanse even the outside of the cup!

Christian Alchemy

Are some modern missionaries trying to perform a bit of magic by turning the lead of Muslim *salat* into the gold of Christian worship? How are they attempting to accomplish this? By a very well-meaning attempt to cleanse objectionable elements from the *salat*. The confession that Muhammad is the apostle of Allah is exchanged in this case for a statement about Jesus, and prayers for Muhammad and his family are deleted. Unfortunately this effort fails since the *salat* permits no innovations, particularly any that uplift Jesus over Muhammad. The end result is like the man who was offered Grape Nut Flakes for breakfast. When asked if he could taste more nuts or more grapes, with a puzzled look, he said he could taste neither. Conclusion: A Christian *salat* is alien both to authentic Islam as well as to real Christianity.

Allegiance to the Wrong Community

The Muslim who prays toward the Kaabah is not engaged in an individualistic act even when he does it alone. It is a statement of allegiance and of community. He joins with Muslims all over the world in facing the same center; all his words and actions, except for some trivial differences among different schools of thought, are the same. Thus he expresses his spiritual unity with the community of Muhammad.

There is no escaping the reality that in the past this community has been the enemy of the Body of Christ. It is definitely a distinct community that has displaced or destroyed the Church in many parts of the world. However, no one can really hold dual membership. The act of *salat* is the primary and most pervasive daily declaration of unity in this "anti-Church" community. Conclusion is: "Choose you this day whom you will serve,"-the *Ummah* of Muhammad or the Body of Christ.

Provocation to Violence

The Koran has strong words of condemnation for hypocrites who give the appearance of being Muslims 'but in whose heart is a disease' (8:49; 33:12). David W. Shenk, in an article entitled "Hypocrites are Dangerous" (*Seedbed*, IX 1, p.15), points out the severity of Muhammad's response to perceived duplicity, which was to execute 300 Jews in Medina. Obviously, if Muhammad himself gave a model of slaughter, then no Muslim today—no matter how liberal—can seriously challenge the leader who screams for the *ummah* to use violence against the *munafiqoun* (hypocrites) who try to infiltrate Islam by giving an external appearance of favor. Shenk adds. "Ever since Medina, the Muslim commu-

nity is inclined to develop a fixation on the need to secure their internal integrity. Hypocrites are not to be tolerated neither are revisionists. A serious problem arises, however, when Christians begin to function within the *ummah* with camouflage.

When Christians begin to worship or conduct themselves like Muslims, then the boundaries between the two communities which the *dhimmi* system has established become erased. In a region under the political control of Islam,

We must see that the *salat* is an integral part of a unified coherent whole. It is impossible to take out bits and pieces for our own purposes in order to appear like Muslims or to gain their friendship and approval.

that is intolerable. It feels like sabotage from within." Our conclusion here is that the message of truth must not use methods of hypocrisy.

Second Class Citizens

Historically women have not been expected to go to the mosque to unite with the men as equals in worship. In Saudi Arabia, the heartland of Islam, where the *shari'a* is the law of the land, women are not permitted in the mosques except during the fasting month. The spiritual well being of the men seems to be the primary consideration with the implication that women may worship at home. However, women in menstruation are not permitted to do the *salat* even privately. This is a fundamental rejection of the Christian concept of *koinonia* fellowship. If some missionary and others say, "We will teach the women that they may join in the Christian *salat*" that good intention will hardly overcome the Muslim worldview, and centuries of tradition, that

stresses the ritual purification that is inseparably linked to *salat*. Women converts will inevitably feel unclean and uncomfortable as well as unworthy to worship even if they stand in the back or the place of meeting. Conclusion: A seemingly one small step forward for a man is a giant step backward for womankind. We need to stop spiritual abuse of women.

Worship Without the Holy Spirit

Islam has no doctrine of the Holy

Spirit. Therefore it produces a worship which provides no place for the power or gifts of the Holy Spirit. At best, Muslims might conceive of a Holy Spirit as the Angel Gabriel. However, this has no practical benefit in or for their worship. The Imam leads the worship and as such there is no role for the Holy Spirit to lead. Also

it is inconceivable that the Spirit of God would associate with a religion which has been so antagonistic to Jesus as the Son of God. Nor could the apostles conceive of a worship without a doctrine or a presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that when He left He would send the Comforter who would lead us into all the truth (Jn. 16:7, 13) Conclusion: It does not surprise us that a religion which offers the people Muhammad in place of Jesus would also have a substitute for the Spirit of God. In the *salat*, Muhammad offers his example and the guidance of an *Imam* for worship in place of the gift of the Holy Spirit as promised and given by Jesus.

Form of Flattery

A "Christian *salat*" sends the wrong message to our Muslim friends. They will have reason to believe that if the Christians were finding spiritual satisfaction and access to Allah in Christian worship then they would not need to adopt the Muslim forms of

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worship. Love may motivate Christians to adopt or adapt Muslim ways, but it is not love to put the Koran or Muhammad above the Scriptures. If we love Christ, we will want to obey Him, and not follow Muhammad's *salat* to find full spiritual satisfaction and access to God. Counterfeiters do not make \$3 dollar bills. To copy something is to affirm the authenticity of the original. Conclusion: By what biblical authority can we say that *salat* is authentic and acceptable in the Kingdom of God?

Violation of Communication Ethics

If Christians do not admit to the Muslim that *salat* is a superior approach to God, but do it anyway, then the Muslim has reason to question their motives. In communication with other humans, a person has the obligation to use words and actions that do not purposely mislead. Islam has proprietary rights over its own religious terminology and practices. For those who are not in sympathy with the goals of Islam to take upon themselves the right to use those terms and practices for their own private purposes, and in a non-Islamic context, is to violate both the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", but also violates a basic ethical demand in communications. Conclusion: Christian use of the *salat* gives the Muslim the right to suspect us of deception. The Spirit has said: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (I Thess. 5:22).

The Curse of Legalism

Muslims have a variety of ideas on salvation, and the Koran barely mentions it. However even when Muslims stress different terminology for attaining paradise there is clearly an underlying legalism associated with attaining blessing or being "rightly guided." If the Jew tried to use the Law to establish his own righteousness (Rom 10:3), the major tool of Muslims to try to establish their own standing before God is their daily perfor-

mance of the *salat*. There is an inextricable linking of works for salvation with a worship focusing on details, externals, ritual movements, holy words and proper washings. Grace and legalism never mix no matter how hard anyone may stir the brew. There is poison in the pot!—and you cannot eat any part of the soup without getting poisoned. Paul says: "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly. (Gal 2:21) Conclusion: If the law of Moses, attested by God, and given as a Schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, has never been nor today is binding unto salvation, then why should we or anyone lay a new burden on convert—the *salat*—an essential part of a law (the *Shar'iah*) which God never gave in the first place?

Creating New Problems

Not only is legalism theologically and biblically unsound, it makes planting churches more difficult. To hold a "Christian *salat*" believers will have to provide a water source in order to carry on worship. Certain times are more "holy" than others, and certainly more frequent—you cannot call it a *salat* if you do it once a week. The times of Muslim prayer regularly interfere with work and sleep. This can cause economic burdens. In a context of persecution the *salat* could expose believers who wish to control when they will witness. *Salat* makes special physical demands for worship, but this would make it difficult or impossible for the elderly, the weak, the sick and physically impaired to worship equally.

As already noted, *salat* effects the women also. Shall we let the Muslim culture determine how the women shall worship? Despite Muslim apologetics, it is clear that Islam devalues women in addition to segregating them. Can we with good conscience apply the separate but equal doctrine to women in a Christian fellowship? If rightfully we object to imposing Western pews and architecture on an emerging church, why

make worship dependent upon a compass, water troughs, prayer mats, Koran stands and an *imam* to lead prayers? We must see that the *salat* is an integral part of a unified coherent whole. It is impossible to take out bits and pieces for our own purposes in order to appear like Muslims or to gain their friendship and approval. This really does violence to context, since these items only have meaning in their own context. Conclusion. Bad theology leads to bad practice. As a practical matter, we must not lay burdens on others that we ourselves are unwilling to bear.

The Day the Music Died

Muslims believe music is a distraction to worship, so at best, the regular Friday worship may permit a brief chant, but songs and hymns and instrumental music are forbidden. Islam permits music on special occasions, but *salat*, the fundamental act of worship, a basic place to the language of music is prohibited. Conclusion: If Christian worship is to be united with the heavenly worship of the angels we had better learn to sing—and we won't learn it with the *salat*.

Summary

A "Christian *salat*" is really a contradiction in terms—faithful to neither Islam nor Christianity. It is a dangerous mutation that makes Muhammad an authority in the most basic of all religious acts—worship. It is a new legalism, a bandwagon inviting us to get on board, leading eventually to contention, confusion in the Church, and compromise of the faith. Surely we are not going to give up our heritage of true Christian worship, and certainly not exchange it for a mess of pottage—or a pseudo-*salat*.

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