

Flight from the Masjid^c

By Imam Zaid Shakir

(www.zaytuna.org) “In houses which Allah has permitted to be raised up, that His Name may be remembered therein. In them He is glorified, morning and evening.” [1]

One of the noblest and most beneficial institutions in the history of humanity has been the Masjid (Mosque). It was in the Masjid that the great scholars of Islam were first shaped: linguists, jurists, theologians, saints, and countless devout worshippers. The Masjid has produced men and women who have left an indelible mark on the world. It was around the Masjid that the great universities, hospitals, observatories, hostels, and the other institutions that became the hallmarks of the great Islamic civilization enterprise appeared. The Masjid has always been the heart of the Islamic community, serving as a house of worship, an educational center, a center for the dispensing of valuable social services, a meeting place, and a place of solace and refuge.

Unfortunately, today in America, we find many Muslims who have either left, or were never fully involved in the life of the Masjid.

There are many reasons for this regrettable situation. The purpose of this article is to examine some of those reasons, and to suggest some measures that may prove beneficial in overcoming them.

One of the greatest causes of the flight from the Masjid is

ignorance. This ignorance begins with a lack of knowledge concerning the very word itself. If asked, how many Muslims would be able to define “Masjid,” linguistically and legally?

This may seem a trivial point; however, the meaning of the word is intrinsically associated with its principal function. If we were all more cognizant of the primary function of the Masjid, we would possibly be more careful to avoid some of the questionable practices, which commonly occur in them. Many of those practices, as we will seek to explain in this article, are instrumental in the flight from the Masjid.

The word “Masjid,” in Arabic, is a place noun that means the place of prostration. This particular noun has also been related as “Masjad.” Al-Razi mentions in Mukhtar al-Sihah: ... and Masjad, with an “a” after the “j”, is the forehead of the man, in the sense that the trace of his prostration is visible on it.” [2]

Legally, “Masjid” means any place of Earth where a Muslim establishes prayer.

The proof of this definition is the prophetic tradition:

“... The Earth has been made a place of prayer (Masjid) for me, and pure. Therefore, any man from my community who is overtaken by the time of prayer let him pray [wherever he may be]. [3]

This facilitation is among the distinctions given to our community. Qadi ‘Iyadh notes, in this regard

The believers before us would only pray in demarcated areas whose purity was ascertained. We have been distinguished by being able to pray anywhere

on Earth, except in those areas whose filthiness has been ascertained. [4] The word “Masjid” has then been conventionally applied to a specific place that has been consecrated to accommodate the five daily prayers. Other places where prayer may occur, such as a prayer room (Musalla), or a monastery (Ribat), or a religious school, are not given the same legal status of the Masjid. [5]

Knowing this, we should never lose sight of the fact that the primary function of the Masjid is to accommodate prayer and by extension other acts of worship. We should strive in our communities to make the Masjid appealing to the worshippers, regardless of their organizational affiliations. This involves keeping out all unnecessary distractions, beautifying the Masjid to make it a place conducive to spiritual devotion, and keeping it clean to minimize the appearance of foul odors, insects associated with filth, and vermin. All of these things, when present, diminish the quality of spiritual reflection in ones devotional acts.

Many people fail to realize how important these points are for converts. Many converts are turned away from the Masjids because of the confusion and repulsive physical condition that characterizes many of them. Converts from other religious traditions are leaving houses of worship, which are the epitome of cleanliness, order, and serenity. One would be hard pressed to find a church or synagogue with food smudged into the carpets, overflowing trash cans inside

the premises, devotional literature piled willy-nilly on the bookshelves, filthy bathrooms, and worship services disturbed by roving bands of unruly, undisciplined children. After encountering such situations in many Masjids, some converts simply choose to stay home.

Another reason behind the flight from the Masjid is the way they have been politicized. Almighty God clearly declares in the Qur'an:

“And the Masjids are for Almighty God, therefore call on no one along with God.”

[6]

This politicizing leads to a sectarianism that tears at the unity of our communities. One of the functions of the Masjid is the unification of the believers. This unifying function can be gathered from reflecting on the description Allah gives of Masjid al-Dirar, a Masjid the believers have been commanded to never stand in:

“There are those who build a Masjid by way of mischief and unbelief, in order to disunite the believers...” [7]

One of the linguistic implications of this verse is that an acceptable Masjid is one that unifies the believers. That unity is based on a communion fostered by the shared devotion of the believers in the Masjid. Conflicting political agendas tear at the very heart of that unity. In many instances, those conflicting agendas become associated with particular Masjids. We frequently hear terms such as a Salafi Masjid, an Ikhwani Masjid, a Sufi Masjid, and other such aberrations.

Although the orientations that form the basis of these appellations may have great benefit for their individual adherents, when they become exclusionary appendages affixed to the Masjid, they can be extremely alienating.

This is one of the factors pushing many people away from the House of Allah.

This politicizing of the Masjid sometimes leads to excessive arguing and disputation. In many cases, heated disputes among the defenders of varying interpretations of Islam, repulses many Muslims. This is especially true in the case of converts from Christianity, who was attracted to Islam because of its clarity, and the unity of its theology.

Muslims in this category are extremely idealistic. Nothing shatters that idealism like sectarian bickering.

Many so-called “modernist” or “secularized” Muslims are similarly repulsed by sectarianism. Such individuals, who sometimes see the Masjid as a bastion of “narrow-minded” fundamentalists, who have acclimated to the bureaucratic, administrative, and managerial processes which define modern

Western society, are easily frustrated in their efforts to become involved in the activities and running of the Masjid. Excessive arguing, administrative and managerial ineptitude, and uninspiring programs try the patience of many individuals who fall into this category.

Multitudes of Muslims women, here in the West, are working in every conceivable field of endeavor. We find among our Muslim sisters; doctors, lawyers, managers,

administrators, professors, teachers, and talented, efficient homemakers. Many of them approach the Masjid seeking to use their myriad talents to enhance the programs and running of the Masjid. In too many instances they find the doors of involvement slammed in their faces, many times by men who themselves have neither the time nor the expertise to make a meaningful contribution to the efficient running of the Masjid. As a result, many of our Masjids are “dead” institutions. Confronted with this situation, many of our sisters choose not to involve themselves in the life of the Masjid.

Many of our youth are also blocked from any effective involvement in the affairs of the Masjid, even if they are highly motivated religiously. They gain the impression that they have to wait for the “uncles” to die before they can have any say in the running of the Masjid.

Others, who may not be as religiously committed, drift away from the Masjid because there are no viable classes or programs to keep their interest,

Finally, in many areas, where the percentage of African American or Hispanic converts is too small to support the creation of a Masjid in their respective communities, there is a perception of a subtle racism which keeps them away from any meaningful leadership role in the existing “immigrant” Masjids. In many instances, the failure to even acknowledge the existence of any friction between various racial and ethnic groups only alienates

indigenous Muslims all the more, leading to a slow attrition process that results in their gradual migration from the Masjid.

Overcoming the flight from the Masjid will require a concerted effort on the part of us all, leaders and laity.

Below, we list some practical measures that will allow us to enhance the viability of our Masjids, and hopefully arrest the flight from them

1. Education.

Community leaders will have to endeavor to create and maintain viable education programs that will help to overcome the general lack of knowledge concerning the role of the Masjid and its associated rulings. This process of education is also the responsibility of the laity each individual Muslim has to work to enhance his or her understanding of the centrality of the Masjid in the life of the Muslim community, and then make a commitment to become involved in the life of this indispensable institution.

2. Avoiding Sectarian Politics. No one disputes the role of politics in Islam. Similarly, Islamic

Movements and groups have their part to play in the revival of the Ummah. However, the Masjid is neither the place for political organizing and recruiting, nor sectarian pontification. The Masjid is the House of Allah, consecrated for His worship. Every other function is secondary. Our homes, schools, campuses, offices, institutes, and meeting halls provide ample platforms for us to present our particular views concerning politics and society. The political

neutrality of the Masjid must be maintained. By so doing, perhaps our enhanced communion will put more love between our hearts, and this will go a long ways towards ultimately strengthening the Ummah. It should be noted that what is being condemned here is not the discussion of political issues which are of import to all Muslims, rather using the Masjid as a platform to advance sectarian political agendas.

3. Openness. The Masjids are for Allah. We should consciously work to foster an open atmosphere in the Masjid, an atmosphere that is inviting to all; men, women, youth, conservatives, modernists, converts, everyone. If we all commit ourselves to the creation of such an atmosphere, will bring it about. It is essential to remind ourselves that the collective “we” is weightier than the individual “me” in Islam. On the Day of Judgment when all of the people are concerned with themselves, our Noble Prophet, Peace and Blessings of Almighty God be upon Him, will be concerned with the entire community, he will be crying out, “Ummati, Ummati,” (my community, my community).

4. Cleanliness. As the old adage goes, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” Our Masjids should be a living embodiment of this saying. If we describe them as the “Houses of Allah,” we should make every effort to keep them clean and to beautify them. It is a shame that many Muslims maintain immaculate residences, but pay scant attention to the cleanliness of the Masjid. If

our edifices are aesthetically appealing, their innate attractiveness alone will encourage their visitation. A final point we wish to mention is the need to understand the religious stature of the Masjid and the virtue of worship in it. We are all familiar with the fact that the congregational prayer in the Masjid is twenty-seven times more virtuous when performed in the Masjid. [8] A great reward is also promised to those who sit in the Masjid between the congregational prayers. [9] Similarly, both the Tarawih prayers, and the prophetic tradition of ‘Itikaf encourage all Muslims, male and female, to involve themselves in the life of the Masjid during the blessed month of Ramadan. The Noble Prophet, Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him, has reminded us that among the people shaded by Allah in the shade of His Throne on the Day of Judgment will be a believer whose heart is attached to the Masjid. [10] All of these reminders should be sufficient to endear the Masjid to us, and to encourage us to frequent it regardless of problems that may be plaguing it. If we can reflect on these reminders, and take the steps we have outlined in this article, perhaps we will be able to arrest the flight from the Masjid. If we succeed, we can ensure that the Masjid assumes its rightful place as the center of our communal life.

*Imam Zaid Shakir
New Haven, CT
03-29-03
www.zaytuna.org*

© www.muslim-forum.org