

The Mosque

(part 1 of 2): More than a Place of Prayer



The mosque or the building that Muslims refer to as the *masjid* is a familiar sight in most parts of the world. No matter what country or era, the mosque is built in it is always renowned for its unique architecture and noble ambiance. In addition due to the sweeping nature of globalisation most people know that the mosque is a house of worship; the place where the Muslim faithful offer prayer. But the mosque is much more than that. From the beginning it always fulfilled many needs and God willing it will continue to do so until the end of time as we know it.

An orientalist, and strong evangelical Christian, Scottish colonial administrator Sir William Muir (1819-1905 CE) was for many years the West's leading scholar of Islam despite the fact that he was negative and critical of Islam. However in his book, published in 1852, *The Life of Mahomet*, he described the role of the mosque in Muslim society quite brilliantly. From the description, even from a man such as this, we are able to see that the mosque was always meant to be more than a place of prayer.

"Though crude in material, and insignificant in dimensions, the Mosque of Muhammad is glorious in the history of Islam. Here, the Prophet and his Companions spent most of their time; here, the daily service, with its oft-recurring prayers was first publicly established; and here, the great congregation assembled every Friday, listening with reverence and awe to messages from Heaven. Here, the Prophet planned his victories; here he received embassies from vanquished and contrite tribes; and from hence issued edicts... "[\[1\]](#)

In 622 CE, immediately after the migration from Mecca to Medina, the Muslims built the 'Prophet's Mosque', and the Prophet himself participated in its construction. From that moment the mosque became a focal point of any Islamic city. It became a place of worship, a meeting place, an educational institute, a

place of social activities and a place of rest. The mosque became the centre of ritual, social, political and cultural life. There is however one function the mosque does not fulfil - it is forbidden to engage in business or trading transactions within the mosque confines.

Although business could not be conducted in the mosque, towns and villages complete with markets and merchants, would often be built around the mosque. This being because the mosque was the centre of daily life. Prayers were conducted five times a day and the local people would hear the latest news both through the sermons and groups that gathered in and outside the mosque.

Throughout the history of Islam the mosque has played a major role in the spread of Islam and the education of the Muslims. Wherever Islam took hold, mosques were established and basic education began. Mosques taught the people (men, women, boys and girls) not only to recite the Quran and understand Islamic rulings but to read, write and form opinions and debate. Education via the mosques follows the tradition established by Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet's Mosque was a school and a hostel for the poor and wayfarers.

"In scarcely any other culture has the literary life played such a role as in Islam. Learning (ilm), by which is meant the whole world of the intellect, engaged the interest of Muslims more than anything... The life that evolved in the mosques spread outward to put its mark upon influential circles everywhere."^[2]

In 859CE a university was established in the Qarawiyin Mosque in the city of Fes Morocco. It is considered by many to be the oldest university in the world. There were three separate libraries containing books on subjects such as religion, science, intellect, and languages. The mosque conducted classes in various subjects including grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, and astronomy and quite possibly history, geography and chemistry.^[3]

Not only were mosques the perfect location for education, they also housed the Islamic court system. Judges and jurists would meet the daily legal needs of the community as well as delivered legal opinions, and conducted research. Due to very little bureaucracy, the court system was efficient and for the most part plaintiffs and defendants represented themselves. Legal interpretation was left up to the judge who would strive to make decisions based on the Quran and the authentic *Sunnah*. Once again Morocco's al-Qarawiyin Mosque is a perfect example of a mosque being the centre of life and learning, so too is Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque that continues to this day to exert an influence over the daily life of Egyptians.

In many places throughout the rapidly expanding Muslim world the mosque became the source of water. Islam requires believers to perform ritual washing before prayer thus the mosque courtyard has traditionally contained water fountains. The decorative effect of water became central to Islamic architecture

thus intricate and decorative pools and fountains can be found across the Islamic world and Andalusia. The Sultan Ahmed mosque in Istanbul Turkey and the Mosque of Cordoba in Spain contain splendid examples of the decorative effect of water. Wells and fountains in mosques cleanse the body and cool the air and in times past supplied water to the local community.

The mosque is the cornerstone of the Muslim community. They were rarely used as places solely for prayer but served as community centres. People went to the mosque for education both religious and secular, to settle disputes and visit the library. They went to the mosque to pray, and to rest in secure and quiet gardens and buildings. Mosques were places of rest for the poor and destitute. Mosques traditionally distributed food and clothing to the needy. They taught countless generations how to read and memorise the Quran and other Islamic sciences. The mosque was the meeting place and the source of news in times of trouble and strife. In short the mosque was the centre of the Muslim society.

Do mosques still perform these functions? What is the role of the mosque in the 21st century? We will answer these questions and more in part 2.

Footnotes:

[1] *The life of Mahomet from original sources* 2nd abridged one-volume ed. 1878, 624 pp. London: Smith, Elder, & Co. P177

[2] J Pedersen: *The Arabic Book*, Tr. Geoffrey French, Princeton University Press; Princeton, New Jersey, 1984.

[3] <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/education-islam-role-mosque>

(part 2 of 2): The Role of the Mosque in the 21st Century

As we learned in Part 1, from the beginning of Islamic history the mosque was the cornerstone of the Muslim community. It was not established simply as a house of prayer. It is easy to arrive at this conclusion because God gave the nation of Muhammad a unique gift. The majority of the globe, with very few exceptions, is a place of prayer. Buildings, mosques, are not required to fulfil this need.

"The (whole) earth has been made a mosque (or a place of prayer) and a means of purification for me, so wherever a man of my Ummah^[1] may be when the time for prayer comes, let him pray."^[2]

Therefore one would assume that the mosque is more than just a sheltered area to pray in. It is of course, and we must not overlook this, a place where Muslims, irrespective of their race or ethnicity, gather together 5 times per day. This

conveys a subtle message about the importance of staying together, united as one nation of Muslims. Unity is particularly important in the 21st century because more than ever before the Muslim nation is disunited and spread throughout the globe.

But time and circumstance both have the habit of making small changes and small changes happened to the role of the mosque as history swept forward. As communities in Muslim nations became bigger, more than one well was required, more than one school, more than one marketplace and more than one mosque. In fact mosques were seemingly built on every corner but many of them became little more than places of prayer. The larger mosques continued to fulfil their various functions so in Muslim countries the mosque will often serve the same purpose for which it was established nearly 1500 years ago. Things are different in the west however, while Muslims might have their own shopping areas, restaurants and schools these are not the places that traditionally give and maintain a Muslim sense of identity. That place is the local mosque.

It is in the mosque that a Muslim keeps his spirituality alive, strengthens the bond with his Creator, meets and communicates with his fellow Muslims and renews his sense of belonging. Sadly many mosques currently serve as places of worship, for breaking the fast during Ramadan, and little else. However if mosques throughout the world reverted to their traditional purpose and place in Muslim society they could bring about great social change and influence non-Muslims to rethink the predominating views of Islam prevalent today. To be the heart of a vibrant Muslim society mosques need to face the challenges brought about by the globalisation and growth of the 21st century.

First and foremost is the challenge of offering a welcoming atmosphere. To perform a useful function in the Muslim society mosques of the 21st century need to throw the front door open to all sections of society, just as the first mosque did. Women, mothers with young children, the elderly, the youth, the poor and disenfranchised and non-Muslims interested in Islam should find the mosque a welcoming place. The mosque and its surrounds typically referred to in the west as the Islamic centre could house such facilities as a cafeteria, a sports facility most particularly for the youth, a library with computers and internet, classrooms, halal food store, and a child minding centre so that men and women can enjoy the educational and sports facilities without worrying about small children. The mosque could distribute aid to the poor and the needy. Many of these functions do take place but sadly many do not. The modern mosque should be the focal point of a Muslim's life. It should be a welcoming place for all Muslims, and all those interested in finding out about Muslims and Islam.

Throughout the Muslim world many mosques have become tourist attractions. They are known for their beautiful and often ground breaking architecture but sadly those most frequently visited by tourists are no longer

houses of prayer. The innumerable small mosques located in every neighbourhood in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries are uninviting to non-Muslims, tourists and women alike. In larger cities cultural and Islamic centres have been built specifically targeting the needs of non-Muslims. The needs of Muslims are often met by Zakat foundations and other charity organisations. Gone are the days when small mosque communities looked after each other. This is true throughout the western world too. We have all seen the signs that relegate women to back entrances and many non-Muslims have kept walking when confronted by groups of men standing outside mosque entrances.

In their research for the documentary film *Unmosqued* the film makers found some unsettling statistics about the mosques in America. Mosques they found are under-financed and understaffed. While mosque attendance is higher than other American religious congregations, mosque budgets are less than half the budget of other congregations. Only 44% of all *Imams* are full-time and paid. Half of all mosques have no full-time staff. Program staff such as youth directors or outreach directors account for only 5% of all full-time staff. Only 3% of mosques consider "New Muslim" classes a top priority.

It appears then that the challenges for the mosque in the 21st century, in both the Muslim and western spheres is to make the mosque a more inclusive space. In the time of Prophet Muhammad it was not unusual for the homeless to sleep in the mosque whilst matters of state were discussed in an area close by. Sadly now days some mosques are locked up between prayer times. Some mosques in some countries are facing up to the challenges.

A great example of a 21st century mosque blending tradition with modernity is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque Centre opened in 2008 in the United Arab Emirates. It is managed according to the most modern standards and its collections and features include a state of the art library equipped with modern facilities for the development of research and knowledge. Cultural and social events are organized and these include seminars, lectures, exhibitions, courses for teaching the Quran, Islamic architecture, Arabic calligraphy and Arabic syntax, as well as competitions on Quran recitation and the call to prayer. The mosque, in the traditional spirit, reflects an informed understanding of religions based on respect, stemming from the belief that Islam is a religion of tolerance and love. The Mosque is a welcoming, humanitarian space open to all visitors.

Footnotes:

[1] The Arabic word Ummah can be translated to nation.

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

