Ramadan Reflection 2021

Week 3

For many years now, I have prayed with the Muslim community in my area – the Islamic Society of the Southern Tier in western New York – when my schedule permits. In my international travels, I also make it a practice of praying (salaat) in the mosques that I visit, some of the them great works of architecture: the Suleymaniye in Istanbul and the Jama Masjid in Delhi, for example, as well as other more contemporary structures like the Regent’s Park Mosque in London and the Mosque of Rome.

This might seem like an odd practice for a Franciscan friar and Catholic priest; but I’ve always been struck by the beauty and power of Islamic prayer, particularly when performed communally. I can still remember the first time I saw Muslims praying: I was a college sophomore on an archaeological survey in the Egyptian desert in 1981. I was awakened shortly before dawn by murmuring from outside my tent. Peering outside, I saw a few of our workmen praying in the stark, sandy landscape in the red glow of the early morning – a memorable image.

My admiration for Islamic prayer has deepened over the years as I learned the postures – standing, bowing, and prostrating – and the invocations uttered with each movement. When praying, I’m frequently struck by the simple sitting that occurs between the two prostrations in each prayer cycle (rak’ah). Rising from the prostration, and sitting back on my heels, I pray in Arabic: Rabbi ighfir lī Rabbi ighfir lī - “My Lord, forgive me. My Lord forgive me.”

Within the course of each day, with five compulsory prayers, minimally a Muslim entreats God’s (Allah swt) forgiveness some thirty-four times. Additional optional prayers may bring that total to more than sixty. When performed with sincerity, Islamic prayer is an experience of humility and healing, a simple admission that each of us has sinned and that we need forgiveness from the One who is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful (ar-Rahmān ar-Raḥīm).

Ramadan, like sacred seasons in other faith traditions, is particularly a time for humility before God and healing from God. Violence stemming from racism, sectarianism, and nationalism continues to traumatize our country and communities throughout the world, is indicative of a social and spiritual sickness that beckons us – as individuals, as faith communities, as societies and nations – to confess our sins and to seek forgiveness from God and with one another.

Uttering the simple phrase – “My Lord, forgive me” – several times in the course of our day is a good way of acknowledging our faults and failings, and expressing our faith in our Merciful God, not only during Ramadan or Lent, but throughout the year.

© Michael D. Calabria, OFM, PhD, Center for Arab & Islamic Studies, St. Bonaventure University