Muslim Response to “To be a Pilgrim”

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Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim. In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

I must begin this evening by expressing my sincere gratitude for the invitation to participate in tonight’s discussion and to hopefully contribute a few additional insights to the many that have already been proffered by Fr. Ryan and Dr. Mintz.

In preparation for tonight’s conversation, I found myself, as I oft do, preparing for salat, or the ritual Islamic prayer. This preparation includes performing purification and formulating proper intention, among other things. However, it was not these aspects of my preparation that caught my attention on this occasion. Rather, my attention was directed to another minor yet habitual action I perform with every prayer, a minor adjustment of the directional orientation of the rug on which I pray. I don’t take out a compass and figure the direction technically, but I always move the rug somewhat…and I fancy (perhaps naively) that I can tell when it has been moved into the correct alignment.

This rug, of course, faces in the direction of Mecca and the Ka’ba, the site of the annual hajj pilgrimage. And there is a connection with that site that penetrates and pulsates throughout the ritual of prayer and throughout the lives of Muslims. The directional orientation to the Ka’ba is in fact a spiritual and symbolic orientation that shapes understandings of human existence in the world and human relation to God.

In my brief remarks tonight, I would like to draw attention to this spiritual and symbolic orientation, building upon Fr. Ryan’s discerning introduction to many of the central rites and features of the Islamic pilgrimage, the hajj.

As indicated, this orientation pervades the lives of Muslims. But what exactly is the nature and purpose of this orientation? What are Muslims being oriented towards when they face or journey to the Ka’ba? The easy—and partially accurate—answer is that they are being oriented to God. However, this is not the whole picture.

One of the central theological tenets within the Islamic tradition is the notion of taqwā. The Qur’an describes taqwā as the most esteemed human trait and the only basis upon which God will differentiate between humans: Qur’an 49:13 states, “O humankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you in the sight of God is the person who manifests the most taqwā…”

Usually translated insufficiently as piety, taqwā more accurately denotes a particular and pervasive consciousness of God. But, it is not simply an acknowledgment of God’s existence or a belief in God. Rather, it is a recognition of God as the Creator, Sustainer, Judge and Grantor of Mercy that is expressed in a constant and habitual manner through two forms of action: ibadat and muamalat, ritual actions and social actions. In other words, taqwā is a habitual mindfulness of God that shapes a person’s actions in relation to God, in relation to one’s self and in social relation to other human beings. In fact, taqwā is the ideal integration of all of these various
realms, an integration that prioritizes awareness of God, but necessitates social engagement as a manifestation of that awareness.

Fr. Ryan astutely notes that the hajj interrupts the ordinary, day-to-day life of pilgrims. This interruption, however, is not so much a separation but a reorientation, an massive interruption that profoundly reminds pilgrims of the ideal relationships with God, self, and humanity. The hajj, like all other Islamic rites and practices, has at its core the goal of cultivating taqwā. From preparation for the pilgrimage to performance of the specified rites to return, every component of the hajj acts to solidify and reassert this taqwā-centric orientation.

Individuals who wish to embark upon hajj, for example, should fulfill conditions prior to doing so. While a certain level of religious education and understanding of the hajj rites is encouraged, the majority of the conditions relate to social actions and relationships. Would be pilgrims must be able to afford the hajj without entering into debt (no small feat today), and they must also be able to provide for dependents that they leave behind while on hajj. Moreover, individuals who carry debt are strongly advised to pay it off prior to embarking. As an aside, this condition alone connects to a larger Islamic view on debt and the structural oppression that is frequently associated with debt.

Finally, it is not uncommon, especially in the days of email, to receive blanket requests from would-be pilgrims asking for forgiveness for specific and general, known and unknown offenses. In all of these examples, the foundation for hajj is not withdrawal from the social, but reconfiguration and “setting right” of the social. And the acceptance of an individual’s hajj by God is seen to rely in part on such reconfiguration.

The actual rites of hajj overflow with the symbolic and spiritual reorientation to taqwā. One area in which this is particularly evident is the depiction of the hajj as a literal dress rehearsal for death and the Day of Judgment. Many of the rituals described by Fr. Ryan point directly to this depiction. For example, the ihram, the two un-seamed pieces of white cloth that male pilgrims wear is comparable to the cloth in which the deceased body is wrapped.

Moreover, the communal assembly at hajj in general, and specifically at Mt. Arafat, at Jabal al-Rahman, prefigure the call to resurrection and judgment that will occur on Yawm al-Qiyamah, the Day of Resurrection, literally the Day of Standing. Every human being will stand en masse yet alone in the presence of her Lord and receive the judgment and mercy of God.

But what is the purpose of this dress rehearsal? What do we humans gain from a symbolic performance of death? One response to these questions is found in the writings of Islamic scholars that emphasize the utility of meditating on death in cultivating the human soul and in establishing a proper relationship with God.

The early Islamic scholar al-Muhasibi, for instance, in outlining the ills that tend to plague human beings—such as conceit, pride, vanity and self-delusion—argued that one of the best ways to combat these deficiencies and their negative social and spiritual by-products was through meditation on death and resurrection, through the pointed consideration of death, its reality, our impotency in relation to it, and our ultimate accountability. Al-Muhasibi’s reflections in this area unveil another dimension of hajj. Participants in the hajj are called to go beyond meditation; they are called to enact death and resurrection. Through this enactment, they are not
“reborn” but realigned, reminded. They undergo what al-Muhasibi and others would refer to as a polishing of the self, a polishing that illuminates our relationship with God and with other human beings. Through the ritual enactment of death and resurrection, we are reminded of how to truly live, how to live in constant pursuit of taqwā.

Fr. Ryan has also drawn attention to the fact that many aspects of hajj, including the ka’ba, the stoning of the jamarat, and the sacrifice, are directly connected to Abraham, or Ibrahim. The ritual centrality of the events of Abraham’s life may well have a historic dimension. From a theological standpoint, though, their ritual centrality stems from the Qur’anic depiction of Abraham as the ideal believer and the source of emulation for all humans, including Muhammad:

“Abraham was indeed a model, devoutly obedient to God, (and) true in Faith. And he associated no partners with God. He showed gratitude for the favors of God, who chose him, and guided him to a Straight Way. And We gave him Good in this world, and he will be, in the Hereafter, in the ranks of the Righteous. So We have taught you these inspired words, ‘Follow the ways of Abraham the True in Faith, who joined no partners with God.’” (Qur’an 16:120-123)

There is much written on the specifics of the Abraham’s life and the related hajj rituals, and therefore I will not delve into them tonight. However, it seems necessary to acknowledge that the depiction of Abraham as an ideal, while broadly accepted, is not without tension. This tension is palpable, for example, in accounts of the sacrifice, of his interreligious (if you will) interactions, and of his relationship with his wife Hagar, or Hajar.

I wish to conclude tonight by probing the latter, his relationship with Hagar, and introducing the manner in which this tensive event is being re-visited and reinterpreted in contemporary Islamic discourse.

Commanded by God, Abraham leaves Hajar in the desert with minimal provisions and with a small child, her son Ishmael. When their meager provisions are exhausted, Hajar commences a frantic search for water to save her son and herself. She runs back and forth between two hills, and eventually returns to find a flow of water, the water of zam-zam, gushing from the ground near the foot of her child. This event is enshrined in one particular rite of the hajj: the Sa’i, or the seven runnings between the hills of Safa and Marwa.

In modern discussions, especially in Muslim women’s attempts to reclaim and re-envision historical exemplars, Hajar looms large. As a female domestic slave, she becomes a symbol of the multiply-oppressed human being, the human oppressed simultaneously due to race, gender, and class. She also is held up as a model of taqwā, a model of perseverance, strength and sincere reliance upon God. The connection to taqwā stems directly from the account of her experience in the desert that would become Mecca and the site of the hajj.

Islamic studies and Qur’an scholar Amina Wadud acknowledges that Hagar’s example and the rite of Sa’i highlight the centrality of perseverance and reliance upon God. But she also delves deeper into the significance of this event and ritual for elucidating the intricacies of taqwā in its social manifestations. She wonders, of the millions of Muslims who undertake hajj
annually and perform Sa’i as a requirement thereof, how many actually reflect on the true and harsh realities of Hajar, who Wadud describes as being “abandoned in the desert with her child as a homeless single parent” \(^1\) Hajar thus becomes not just a generalized model of strong faith and Islamically agreeable traits, but she also becomes a challenge, a challenge to reflect on and respond to the actual plight of many contemporary women. A challenge, not just to reassert the ideals of the Islamic tradition, but to actually reckon with the reality on the ground and to manifest our consciousness of God through social engagement. While Wadud espouses a distinctive perspective on Hagar, it is significant that she still connects the Hagar-related rites of hajj with the goal of reorienting humans to taqwā.

Another provocative reclamation of Hagar’s experience in the Arabia desert comes from writer and professor of literature Mohja Kahf. Echoing some ideas similar to Wadud, Kahf uses the medium of poetry to give voice to Hagar, to highlight the inherent and provocative tensions of her example, and to point to the possibilities of her example. I end my reflections this evening with one such poem by Kahf, a poem entitled “Hagar Writes a Cathartic Letter to Sarah as an Exercise Suggested by Her Therapist”:

Dear Sarah, life made us enemies  
But it doesn’t have to be that way  
What if we ditch the old man?  
He could have visitation rights with the boys  
Alternate weekends and holidays.  
Yeah, especially that Feast of the Sacrifice—  
Everybody has forgotten anyway  
That it began with me abandoned in the desert  
Watching my baby dehydrate for days—  
I dared God to let us die.

Anyway, you and I,  
We’d set up house,  
Raise the kids,  
Start a catering business, maybe.  
You have brains.  
So do I.  
We could travel.  
There are places to see  
Besides Ur and this nowheresville desert  
With its tribes of hooligans.

No. Your lips always thin when you disapprove,  
Like the mother I can hardly remember  
From before I wound up in your house.  
I was barely more than a girl. You are the one  
Who brought me there from Egypt.  
You used to laugh back then. In those days,  
You could bear to look at me.
Oh, Sarah, you need years of therapy
Can’t you admit that what he did to me was cruel?
Admit it—for just one second
It won’t make you hate him forever
Just long enough to know the world won’t fall apart
Just long enough to pity him,
To find yourself,
Laugh, Sarah,
Breathe,
Imagine
God, the Possibility
Sincerely Love,
Hagar
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