

Review Article

The Role of Congregational Prayer in Fostering Unity among Muslims in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Salat* (Prayer) is the second hierarchical pillar (*Rukn*) of Islam after *Tauhid* (Islamic Monotheism). It is a philosophical mode of communion between the servant and his God. Apart from being the second pillar of Islam it further played an important role in cementing the relationship or unity of the Muslims. Hence congregational prayer is of utmost important to Muslims. Furthermore, besides the spiritual benefits of congregational prayer; many benefits in relation to this world could be derived from congregational prayer. It is a means of creating love among people in Muslim society not only in Nigeria. In the congregation, rich and poor, high and low all stand shoulder to shoulder; this destroys the haughtiness of the rich and creates self-respect in the poor. This paper therefore aimed at discussing the role of congregational prayer towards the strengthening the unity of Muslim in this country.

Keywords: Congregational Prayer, Fostering Unity, Islamic Monotheism and Muslims in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The word *Salat* carries closely related but different meanings and therefore doesn't have a single clear English equivalent. Although usually accurately rendered as "prayer". It can sometimes refer to something else. Generally speaking, prayer (*Salat*) from Allah to its servants carries meanings of sending blessings to them, mercy or praise. For instance Allah S.W.T says in the Qur'an.

Those are they on whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those are the followers of the right course.ⁱ

The meaning of prayer (*Salat*) in the Arabic language

Prayer (*Salat*) originally carries the meaning of either:

- i) Supplication (*Du'a*) when the Qur'an commands and pray for them; your prayer is a source of peace for them. Allah says:

Take alms out of their proceeds, you would cleanse them and purify them thereby, and pray for them; surely your prayer is a relief for them, and Allah is hearing, knowingⁱⁱ

In a tradition of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) he said:

When one of you is invited to participate in a meal, he should accept, if he is fasting, he should supplicate for them (Falyusalli) ⁱⁱⁱ

- ii) Veneration, or mercy and blessing; the narration "O Allah, bless and have mercy on (Salli'ala) the family of Abu Awfa" is a prayer for Allah to have mercy on and bless that family, while in the Qur'an Allah (S.W.T) says:

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Surely Allah and His angels bless the prophet, O you who believe! Call for (Divine) blessings on him and salute him with a (becoming) salutation. ^{iv}

Meaning of Prayer

Prayer is a worship that contains specific sayings and actions, started with *Takbir* and ended with *Taslim*^v

Prayer is one of the main obligations which Allah (S.W.T) has ordained on His servants. It's the first act of worship decreed on the Muslim nation (*Ummah*) by Allah (S.W.T) and was ordained on the night of the prophet's (peace be upon him) ascension to the seventh heavens. It is the second of the five pillars of Islam after the proclamation of the "Shahadah" (the words of witness).

It is enjoined on the Muslims and an obligatory act by Allah (S.W.T) as can be noted from the following verses of the Glorious Qur'an:

Establish regular prayers at the sun's decline till the darkness of the night, and the Morning Prayer. ^{vi}

In another verse Allah (S.W.T) says:

And establish regular prayers at the two ends of the day and at the approaches of the night. ^{vii}

The importance of *Salat* has also been explicitly exposed by Allah's Messenger (Peace be upon him), as can be noted from the following sayings:

What lies between a perfect man and disbelief is the leaving of prayer. ^{viii}

In another tradition, the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported to have said:

The obligation which separates us from them (the non-believers) is the prayer and he who renounces it becomes a disbeliever. ^{ix}

The above quoted verses of the glorious Qur'an and *ahadith* of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) clearly indicate the importance of *Salat* such that it is unanimously agreed by all Muslim scholars that renouncing it is regarded an act of disbelief (Kufr).

Virtues of Prayer

Salat (Prayer) performed genuinely with humility and submission to Allah (S.W.T) has unlimited virtues and benefits. It is the noblest expression of faith and surest way of thanking Allah (S.W.T) for His unlimited favours. It is the way of obtaining Allah's mercy, generosity, kindness and a sure way to paradise. Allah (S.W.T) says in the glorious Qur'an:

Prosperous indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers. ^x

It is also deliverance on the Day of Judgment for those who used to observe it well. The Prophet (peace be upon him) says:

The first thing that the servant of Allah (S.W.T) will be called to account for on the Day of Judgment will be the prayer; and if it was good the persons deeds will have been good, but if it was bad, the person's deeds will have been bad. ^{xi}

Prayer purifies the soul, refines the character and inculcates in man the excellent virtues of truthfulness, honesty and modesty. It keeps one who performs it from falsehood and from all forbidden actions as categorically confirmed by the following verse of the Glorious Qur'an:

Verily, prayer refrains from indecency and evil^{xii}

Prayer further strengthens the belief in the existence and goodness of God and transmits this belief into the innermost recess of the men's heart. It enlivens the belief and makes it constructive in the practical course of life. It helps man realize his natural and instinctive aspirations to greatness and high morality, to excellent and virtuous growth. It purifies the heart and develops the minds, cultivates the conscience and comforts the soul. ^{xiii} It fosters the good and decent elements in man, and suppresses the evil and indecent inclinations.

Prayer and Muslims Unity in Nigeria

The word unity according to Collins Co build English Dictionary is the state of different areas or groups being joined together to conform a single country or organization, or coming of people together in agreement and act together for a particular purpose.^{xiv}

On the basis of these meanings, this paper aimed at discussing the role played by the prayer in addressing Muslims unity in Nigeria.

The following are some of these roles:

One Direction

Muslims in general, regardless of gender, tribe or status turn their faces towards the direction of the *Ka'abah* five times a day. This directionality is known as the *Qiblah*, a direction that is one, singular reminding us that there is one God which is Allah, we are one *Ummah* and that we are all on the same path back to Him.^{xv}

If we remember this directionality and goal oriented thinking in our communities and organizations we can have better unity. More so in congregational prayer, Muslims are acting as individuals and a unit at once. If we just take a look at how this is achieved, we can translate this team exercise found in prayer into order in our everyday lives and order in our organization to create good manners and unity.

Congregation in Prayer

In praying together and not separately the believers would gather together, bow down, prostrate and worship Allah as one group, together fulfilling the commandments of Allah. All those who profess the oneness of Allah and their support for the messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) despite their skin color, amount of wealth, status would gather and worship and the act would unite them together for their common goal; spreading the message of Islam to the world.^{xvi} Through the prayer in congregation the Muslims are united not only in Nigeria but in the whole Muslims world.

Furthermore, our prophet (peace be upon him) states the importance of praying in congregation in various *ahadith*; some of which point to the unification of the believers during *Salat* as adding to their bond of brotherhood. For example the structure of believers during *Salat* is of the utmost importance. The prophet (peace be upon him) urged us to straighten the rows of prayer and leave no space between one another.

Nu'man bin Basher reported that the messenger of Allah said:

Straighten your rows; otherwise, Allah will create dissension among you.^{xvii}

The commentary of this *hadith* states that Allah will create dissension rather than unity, weakness rather than strength and power, and that the Muslims will be overwhelmed with the fear and terror of their enemies. This strikingly illuminates the point that the prayer in congregation and the straight rows of the Muslims during the prayer have the power to unite the believers and strengthen their bond of brotherhood, creating an incomparable force and power.

Love and Co-operation

This is also one of the roles of congregational prayer in achieving the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria and the world at large.

People meet with one another in the congregational prayer. They know the hardships and worries of each other and try to help each other. New things are known there, mutual love develops, and circle of friendship is widened. We get an opportunity to perfect our life in the light of others' experiences.

Congregational Prayer and Islamic Prestige

Prayer in congregation shows the greatness of Islam as well the population of the Muslim *Ummah*. By the way Muslims' coming out from the mosque in mass after the completion^{xviii} of prayer no doubt indicates the power of Islam in the eyes of the world, and at the same time shows how Muslims are united not only in Nigeria but in the entire world at large.

Our Mosques remain thriving due to prayer in *Jama'ah* (congregation). It enhances the prestige of the Muslims; and the unity of the Muslims affects enemies greatly.

Islamic Equality

In the congregation, rich and poor, high and low, all stand shoulder to shoulder; this destroys the haughtiness of the rich and creates self-respect in the poor.^{xix} The best scene of mankind's equality comes before us in congregational

prayer. In fact the richest and the poorest in the society meet in the same row during the congregational prayer. This no doubt helps in bringing the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria and the whole world at large.

DISCIPLINE

While offering prayer in *Jama'ah* (congregation) we stand in rows, follow the *Imam* and practice obedience to command. This instills in us the discipline which is the essential feature of a community life.^{xx} At the same time this remind us about the life of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his *Sahabah* (Companions) since the *Imam* stands in the position of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) while followers stands in the position of the *Sahabah*. This further puts the spirit of unity among the Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria and the entire world.

Punctuality

This is also one of the roles played by congregational prayer in achieving the unity of the Muslim *Ummah*. As Muslims we keep our eye on the clock, never losing track of the time, so that we can perform our prayers in their appropriate times. The mosque sets a time for each of the five daily prayers for those who wish to pray in congregation. And for the most part, we understand the importance of punctuality in prayer. Praying a prayer out side of its time limit is not acceptable. Coming to congregational prayer late means you will have missed it.

This no doubt puts the spirit of punctuality in the lives of Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria not only in prayer but also in their other daily businesses or activities which will definitely give birth to the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* & punctuality of the *Ummah* more especially nowadays when people hardly respect time.

Attending Congregational Prayer itself is *Ibadah* (worship).

So therefore, apart from achieving the Muslim's unity, we have also obeyed Allah's commandments, because He is the one who mandated us to pray congregationally. Though; Muslim scholars have different views concerning the position of congregational prayer in Islam. Some scholars said it is obligatory. They based their argument with the following facts: For instance, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported to have said:

A blind man said; O messenger of Allah! 'I do not have anyone to lead me to the mosque' and he asked the messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) to permit him to pray in his house (At first instance) he granted him permission to do so, but as he turned away, he called to him 'Do you hear the call to prayer' the man replied 'yes' the prophet (peace be upon him) then said 'respond to it'^{xxi}

In another *hadith* it was reported on the authority of Abdullah bn Mas'ud he said: I have seen the time when no one stayed away from prayer except a hypocrite, whose hypocrisy was well known or a sick men, but the (sick) men would walk between two persons (it with help of two persons, one on each side) so that he could stand in the row. While other scholars said praying in congregation is Sunnah, rather than an obligation. They based their augment with the following evidences:

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said;

Prayer in congregation is twenty seven degrees better than prayer alone.^{xxii}

In another tradition, he says:

The people who get the greatest reward for the prayer are those who are farthest away (from the mosque), and then those who are next farthest, and so on. Similarly, one who waits to pray with the Imam has a greater reward than one who prays and goes to bed.^{xxiii}

So prayer in congregation is among the most strongly confirmed acts of the sunnah, the greatest of Islamic rites, and among the best ways of drawing closer to Allah, based upon the aforementioned authentic *ahadith*.

Recommendations

The following are some of the recommendations given by this paper:

Muslims should not neglect prayer in congregation, because prayer in congregation played an important role in achieving the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria. More so prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported to have said:

No city or village whose three people live without observing congregational prayer except that the devil became a threat to them. I urged you with prayer in congregation since the wolf hunts the remote one from the sheep.^{xxiv}

This indicates the importance of observing prayer in congregation the unity of the Muslims. Likewise, after Ar Rabi' bin Khuthaym became partially paralyzed he used to go to the mosque helped by two men. He was told: "O Abu Yazid! You have given permission to pray at home" he said; 'you have said but I heard the caller heard '*'Hayya 'alal Falah* (come to success) and I thought that whoever hears this call should answer it even by crawling. This indicates how important congregational prayer is in Islam.

Muslims observing congregational prayer in a mosque at fixed or stipulated time will also help in achieving the unity of the Muslim *Ummah*. For instance, in the past in Saudi Arabia Muslims observed their congregational prayer at different times. Making, Hambali, Shafi' and Hanafi followers prayed at different times. But later for the sake of unity of the *Ummah* they are all observing their prayers at one fixed or stipulated time. With this, it is clear that if Muslims in Nigeria observe their daily congregational prayers at one stipulated time the unity of the *Ummah* will be achieved.

Muslims should believe and adhere to the equality, discipline, love, and co-operation achieved from the congregational prayers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role played by the congregational prayer among the Muslim *Ummah* in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. What this paper outlined are only a few out of many. Muslims are therefore, encouraged to adhere to the teachings gained from congregational prayer so as to achieve the unity of the Muslims in Nigeria.

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