

The Role of Masajid (Mosques) In Islam:

إِنَّمَا يَعْمُرُ مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ مَنِ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَأَقَامَ
الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَلَمْ يَخْشَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَعَسَىٰ أُولَٰئِكَ أَنْ
يَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُهْتَدِينَ

“The Mosques of Allah should be maintained by those *who believes in Allah and the Last Day and establishes proper salat and practices zakat and fears none but Allah...*” [Qur’an, 9:18]

Islam is not a religion in the customary sense or a collection of some noble ritualistic practices. It is an integrative disciplined way of life guided by revealed principles that are intrinsic to human conscience and by the universal standards of justice across the spectrum. A selective application of these standards is the source of all forms of injustice and atrocities humanity has suffered through time. Ironically, in this day and age, even peaceful protests, for instance, against human catastrophes are unacceptable to those who themselves are genocidal complacent, and active sponsors of the wholesale decimation of powerless people around the world. All this is done under the pretext of national interests. They target their geopolitical victims based on race, religion, wealth, and territorial control. Hypocrisy is the most disgraceful betrayal of self-conscience with no bottom to human indignity. Power and money without moral force will never achieve modernism – only barbarism. Disingenuous people are blindsided by their abhorrent ambitions obscuring their awareness that there exists a higher authority who will one day call all to stand accountable for their willful acts so that justice

could be served. We must then work tirelessly on this aspect of self-inflicted human deficiency to create a just and balanced society, as Islam envisions, where all are treated equally with full protection of rights, liberties, and true dignity.

Islam can be summarized in three words describing faith and practice: *Tawheed* – One Sovereign Allah and *Akhirah* – Accountability on the Day of Judgment (faith), and *Ibadah* – Obedience to Allah (practice).

Everything else is complementary to facilitate the culmination of a comprehensive system. If we believe that there is a Creator Who will call us to account for our willful deeds, the only sensible thing is to act responsibly. These central values are at the heart of a masjid – the nucleus of the Muslim community, and the stimulants of its functional dynamics. Among the functions a masjid performs, it initiates and promotes activities that define the character of a Muslim society. It plays a pivotal role in spiritual growth, character building, exploring, and focusing on the purpose of life and the way to pursue it. It shapes consensus around issues facing the community.

On the other hand, a masjid symbolizes a place of worship based on the concept of Tawheed, the Qur’anic message and education, Islamic virtues, and the global view of humanity. As the home base of all Islamic institutions and programs that are fundamental to creating and sustaining a righteous and vibrant society, “...*masajid*,” says the Prophet Muhammad SAW, “*are the Houses of Allah on earth...*” [Baihaqi] They are built to serve as a unifying force for Muslims around their core values and moral principles, as articulated by Islam, to establish a just and peaceful society.

As a symbol of Tawheed and the first place of worship on earth, Ka’ba was built in Mecca by the first man who arrived, Prophet Adam:

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِي بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

“Indeed, *the first House (of Worship of Allah) established for mankind is the one at Bakkah, a blessed site and a guidance for all the worlds.*”

After migrating to Medina, the first major act of the Prophet SAW was to establish Masjid-e-Nabwi (the Prophet's Mosque). He used that facility as his headquarters to worship Allah SWT, carry out his mission, restore human dignity, construct a healthy and noble society, provide social services, initiate outreach activities, and inject the universal vision of justice and equality across the board. It was the center of learning, mentoring and disciplining, strategic planning, judicial dispositions, social and family reforms, and safeguarding human rights and freedom of religion. Essentially, it was the government seat of the Islamic State at Medina.

Because of the overreaching role of the masjid in a Muslim society, supporting a masjid is to support Allah's cause; and to establish a masjid is to establish Allah's rule in that area. It is in this spirit that the Prophet SAW says:

“Whoever builds a masjid for Allah, Allah will build for him a house like it in Paradise.” [Bukhari, Muslim]

A Muslim's life is built around what a masjid stands for. Establishing a masjid is a necessity for Muslims wherever they settle, and the extraordinary reward inspires them to continue launching these institutions as beacons to brighten every corner of the world with the enlightening message of Islam. Those who establish a masjid or become its custodians, however, are distinguished individuals recognized by Allah SWT for their exceptional characteristics of leadership and commitment to the well being of their communities.

A masjid is an epicenter of Islam's ideology of Tawheed. Those who do not uphold that ideology are not fit for the stewardship of such a place. It is not the job of those who are idolaters and disbelievers to visit and maintain a masjid and its sanctity. This is simply because such people lack sincerity and understanding of the purpose of a masjid. They temper with Allah's Sovereignty and follow their unfounded ideas only to advance their worldly aspirations. Their personal behavior is a testimony to their beliefs, which are contradictory to the teachings of Islam. Thus, they are not suited to the trusteeship of a masjid:

مَا كَانَ لِلْمُشْرِكِينَ أَنْ يَعْمُرُوا مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ شَاهِدِينَ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِهِمْ بِالْكُفْرِ أُولَٰئِكَ حَبِطَتْ
أَعْمَالُهُمْ وَفِي النَّارِ هُمْ خَالِدُونَ

“It is not for the idolaters to visit and tend Allah’s masjid, bearing witness against themselves of disbelief...” [Q, 9: 17]

On the contrary, four basic attributes constitute the Islamic orientation in human thoughts and behavior. First, man should base his life on justice. Second, his worship and all his endeavors should have the right motivation totally focused on serving Allah SWT. Third, he should invoke Allah SWT alone for guidance and support in pursuit of all good causes. Fourth, he should have the conviction that, as Allah SWT caused him to be born in this world, the same Creator will also restore him to life after death to stand before Him to render an account of his life.

The Qur’an so eloquently collects all these gems of noble character in just one thread:

قُلْ أَمَرَ رَبِّي بِالْقِسْطِ وَأَقِيمُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ عِندَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ كَمَا
بَدَأَكُمْ تَعُودُونَ

“Say: my Lord enjoins justice; and that you set your face aright in all prayers; and that you call upon Him, solely dedicating your faith to Him. You shall return to Him as you were created.”
[Q, 7: 29]

In the context of masjid, some benchmarks further sharpen the profile of a believer. In addition to an undivided devotion to Allah SWT and the fear of Akhirah (faith), a believer who assumes a leadership role in a masjid must also be steadfast in performing his regular salat and paying zakat (practice). Moreover, he must not yield to worldly pressures of temptations or intimidation by evil forces that would drift him away from his core principles in defiance of Allah’s commandments. Such are the rightly guided people:

إِنَّمَا يَعْمُرُ مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَلَمْ يَحْشَ
إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَعَسَىٰ أُولَٰئِكَ أَنْ يَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُهْتَدِينَ

“He only shall tend Allah’s masjid who believes in Allah and the Last Day and establishes proper salat and practices zakat and fears none but Allah. For such (only) is it possible that they can be of the rightly guided.” [Q, 9:18]

Only Muslims of such excellence are expected to show a sense of duty with utmost concern and commitment to the institution of masjid, its establishment, and its proper functioning. Such people when entrusted with the task of managing the affairs of a masjid are likely to provide effective leadership to the Muslim community and take it to a higher level of moral excellence.

While sincere and competent leadership is essential for the stewardship of a masjid, in the natural process of the physical world, however, other means and material resources are also equally important and needed for the acquisition, upkeep, and running of such a facility and its programs successfully. Providing financial support for good causes, such as this, is much stressed in the Qur’an:

إِن تَقْرَضُوا اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا يُضَاعِفْهُ لَكُمْ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ شَكُورٌ حَلِيمٌ

If you lend to Allah a qard-e-hasanah (goodly loan), He will pay you back manifold and will forgive your sins. Allah is appreciative and forbearing...” [Q, 64: 17]

It is Allah’s utmost generosity that if a person spends his wealth given by Him – to begin with – in His way, He considers that as a loan to Him and promises to return it manifold.

A qard-e-hasanah signifies whatever one gives to another entity selflessly and with absolutely pure motives. Three conditions are stipulated for spending to be considered as qard-e-hasanah: Money spent should have been earned through lawful means; the cause the money is spent on must be a worthy cause; and, finally, it must be purely for the pleasure of Allah SWT alone. Thus, financial support for a masjid is not only necessary to receive benefits from it, it is a collective obligation of the community for its viability; and is a form of much-valued ibadah.

The reason Islam places so much emphasis on spending on good causes is important to understand because lacking this spirit a person cannot be a devout Muslim:

لَنْ تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّى تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ بِهِ عَلِيمٌ

“You shall not attain piety until you spend of that which you love and whatever you spend, surely, it is known to Allah.” [Q, 3: 92]

The followers of Islam are urged to sacrifice what they love most for the sake of the higher causes they subscribe to. Of course, it is a tough and monumental task that will demand sacrifices of all kinds. It is difficult, however, to persuade those whose economic outlook has not changed to rise above personal, group, or national interests and to dispense their wealth wholeheartedly for the sake of worthy causes. People, who have a materialistic outlook and whose life continues to be an uninterrupted pursuit of money, can never have the capacity to do anything for the sake of noble goals unless they see something in it for them. With such an outlook, a person cannot go one step forward along the path of a mission that requires man to become indifferent to the considerations of worldly gains and constantly spend time, energy, and money to make the word of Allah SWT reign supreme.

To follow such a code of life requires a moral outlook of altogether a different kind. It requires depth of vision, open-mindedness, an altruistic spirit, and sustained devotion to Allah SWT. At the same time, it requires that man’s collective life should be so reshaped as to become favorable to the growth of moral qualities rather than endlessly sinking into the dark abyss of materialism. Hence, the Qur’an devotes considerable space emphasizing the importance of philanthropic works and enunciating instructions designed to foster such an outlook with immense rewards promised.

Even if a masjid is under the supervision of competent leadership and is looked after well financially, it cannot be treated merely as a physical structure. It is an institution whose real capital is the programs and activities it conducts. Worship, character building, learning, lectures, moral development, family services, youth programs, civic engagement, and outreach initiatives are its real assets. As a public entity and authentic source of Islamic knowledge, a masjid should be open to

people of other faiths in a way they feel comfortable and welcomed while observing its sanctity and etiquette. This ought to be done on an ongoing basis, and not as a stress call.

Islam invites mankind to join under the Sovereignty of their Creator. In His scheme of creation, however, Allah SWT has granted man the knowledge and freedom to choose his own path. Freedom of religion is part of human rights. Yet, since everyone is created by Allah SWT, all humans are equal and must be treated so with honor, respect, and kindness, regardless of their denomination:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

“Indeed, We honored the progeny of Adam... and exalted them above many of our creatures.” [Q, 17: 70.]

Out of respect, for example, the Qur’an refers to the Jews and Christians as the People of the Book. All places of worship and shrines must be respected and protected. As fellow humans, building good relations with followers of other faiths is the key to creating an environment of peaceful co-existence, and must rank high on priority:

الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ إِلَّا أَنْ يَقُولُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ لَهَدِمَتْ صَوَامِعُ وَبِيَعٌ وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدُ يُذْكَرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَنْصُرُهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ

“...If Allah were not to repel some men through others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is much mentioned, would certainly have been pulled down...” [Q, 22: 40]

Also, a masjid often becomes a center of religious controversy due to differences among *mazahib* (schools of Islamic thought). It is not befitting for a masjid and it should not be used as a stage for conflict resolution, digressing from its mission. Such squabbling is contrary to the sanctity of masjid, defeats its purpose, and diminishes its versatility. To the detriment of Muslim fraternity, there are Muslim populations

where multiple masajid are built in the same locality, each designated to a specific ideology for the follower of that denomination. This differential approach of segregation is the reverse of Islam's spirit of integration in pursuit of a common creed.

There are numerous examples of diversity during the time of the Prophet SAW and his companions. Islamic scholarship is rich because of differences of opinion. The four major schools of thought are institutions that shed light from different angles on every aspect of Islam and put them in perspective with vision, wisdom, knowledge, and integrity. In fact, honest differences among scholars are healthy and normal for intellectual development and worthy contributions. What facilitates overcoming a disagreement is the cherished common cause served jointly and congenially despite diverse opinions. If followed, everyone will be a winner. Internal chaos can be brought to calm through dialogue involving visionary community leadership with a focus on the mission that can wisely navigate the community through fiscal and managerial challenges and the roadblocks caused by diverse intellectual orientations. The key is wherever the instructions are unambiguous, cling to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet SAW, narrowing the area of conflicts, and then working through the rest in the same spirit to converge.

Muslims proudly claim that there is no clergy in Islam. Regrettably, however, this is exactly what they practice in many masajid. One person – say, religious director, is appointed to perform all religious functions. He is in charge, for example, of daily prayers, Friday Khutba, Qur'anic tafsir, Hadith sessions, children's classes, lectures on special topics on major occasions, and family services. Not only it negates the often-preached claim and is unwise from the effectiveness standpoint, it is also counter-productive. The religious director is overwhelmed, and everything is done ritualistically – perhaps mechanically, causing only mental stagnation in attendees rather than a spiritual stimulation and a learning experience. There is no intellectual challenge or motivation for alertness during these sessions other than aiding attention deficiency.

The reason for this lax or droopy attitude is a policy of non-involvement and non-participation in all these activities. If a culture that stimulates participation is developed in a masjid environment and people are

encouraged to partake in various activities and are assigned different tasks to carry out under the guidance of the religious director, very soon a talent pool can be developed. One will soon find new life induced in lifeless programs and more learning will occur. The audience will have an opportunity to listen to the Friday Khutba, for example, researched and delivered by different talented people with fresh ideas, thoughts, and analyses; or the Qur'anic tafsir conducted each time by a different leader. This is a highly effective way to challenge and mentor the future leaders. Leadership development opportunities should be open to all interested.

If such a position is important to fill for administrative reasons, caution must also be exercised in the selection process of the imam or the director. Since the congregation in most masajid is diverse, the person leading the congregation needs to have proper credentials with broad-based educational training and exposure to diverse groups of people. Such a resourceful person is effective in interacting, especially with the diverse younger generation. If he has tunnel vision or is fixed minded, soon he will face difficulty in interacting freely and serving the community meaningfully. Among other qualifications to be a good fit requires being flexible, as appropriate, and open to other views, yet firm in carrying out the essential duties of the assignment credibly.

One abusive practice in many masajid is substandard treatment toward women. Overall, sisters are no less than brothers. It is un-Islamic, uncalled for, and has done much damage to the image of Islam. It has been used as a propaganda stunt by those who miss no opportunity to discredit Islam, even though it is Islam that pioneered the code of gender balance and emancipation. Sisters' prayer area, for example, is in the back or in the basement in most masajid, often not a desirable area or well kept. There is a notion that women must stand behind males. Not true! They can be anywhere with three stipulations: There must be a physical distance between the two genders, such that women have their privacy and they do not become a distraction for men; They must follow Islamic code of dress and other restrictions mentioned in Surah "An Noor" and, like males, they cannot be ahead of the imam in salat. With these three notes, the ladies' area could be designated anywhere – in the back, on the side, lower or upper floor – depending on the floor plan and the traffic pattern. A balcony for sisters in the back of the prayer hall

offers the best of both worlds. They have seclusion at an elevated place and enjoy the full view of the main hall.

Still, another bias many women experience in a masjid is that they are not favored to hold any administrative position or play any leadership role, other than being women's coordinator or a social secretary – just to arrange dinners. Again, there is no shari'ah prohibition or segregation in Islam in this regard. It is a cultural baggage, pure and simple, and a bias. On the contrary, Islam has granted them many rights and privileges, including leadership in the public arena. Given that permission, modern research indicates that female leaders demonstrate a more transformational, dynamic, and collegial leadership style. A leadership team where both genders complement each other has an overarching impact. A community loses when it fails to tap into its talent fully.

Misconception must be dispelled. Women are not barred in Islam from holding any position, except, of course, they cannot be imam. If a sister has qualifications for a particular position, her gender cannot be used to disqualify her for that post. If elected, however, she must observe the protocol and all requirements ruled in Shari'ah for a Muslim woman participating in a public setting. Joint efforts have a multiplier effect and the impact is amplified being greater than the sum of the individuals:

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ
وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ أُولَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

“The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong ...Allah will have mercy upon them...” [Q, 9: 71]

In conclusion, a devout Muslim has a special bond with masjid. His life revolves around what a masjid stands for. He finds peace and serenity in a masjid environment where he is connected with Allah SWT.

It is the best part on earth as described by the Prophet SAW:

“The dearest parts on the face of the earth to Allah are its masjid [Muslim]

The presence of a person in a masjid is attributed to his faith: *“If you see a man committed to the mosque then bear witness to his faith.”* [Tirmidhi] .

On the Day of Judgment there will no shade except the shade of Allah SWT, exclusively for seven people. One of them will be the man whose heart was attached to the masjid: *“There are seven whom Allah will shade with His shade on the day when there will be no shade except His: ...a man whose heart is attached to the masjid ...”* [Bukhari, Muslim, etc.]