

Al-ṣalāt: the Ritual of Rituals in Islam

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In this chapter, I contribute to the age-old discussion of rituals as central to group meaning-making (Durkheim 2008; Geertz 1966),¹ arguing that this is an important way to understand rituals, if put in context. Further, I suggest that if the focus on meaning-making is combined with theories inspired by discourse studies in the Foucauldian tradition the result can also be useful for those with a greater focus on the individual's relation to rituals. To illustrate this, I have chosen to engage in a very detailed description of the ritual of rituals in Islam – *al-ṣalāt*,² the daily prayers – while making theoretical points. Finally, I present the key findings.

1 Approaching *al-ṣalāt*

There are numerous Islamic rituals. Some are well-known and almost universally practiced, like *sawm*, fasting, while others are debated. For example, while Sunnis generally embrace the *tarawīḥ* – collective extra evening prayers during Ramadan – Shiites typically do not. Yet other rituals may only be known and performed by a certain group, locally or regionally. *Al-ṣalāt*, on the other hand, is unanimously embraced in the discourse of theology of Sunni Islam and the majority branch of the Shiites even though the pronunciation and term may vary in different regions; *namāz*, for example, is the widely used Persian word for *al-ṣalāt*. There are also types of prayers that are separate from the daily prayers and known by other terms; in fact, there is a rich and precise terminology for different types of prayer from private contemplation to communal rituals (Parkin and Haedley 2000).

According to a *ḥadīth* in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, the task of *al-ṣalāt* was given to Muslims by Allah on Muhammad's ascendance voyage to the heavens (*al-mi'rāj*), which is claimed to have happened in his lifetime. In a didactic

1 Parts of this article overlap with my previous publication in Swedish called "Det rituella livet [the Ritual Life]" in S. Olsson and S. Sorgenfrei (eds), *Islam: En religionsvetenskaplig introduktion* (2021, Stockholm: Liber).

2 The Arabic word is often written *salah* in English.

story, Muslims are first prescribed by Allah to perform *al-ṣalāt* fifty times a day. Muhammad leaves Allah's presence and encounters Moses waiting for him, eager to know what Allah is asking of the Muslims. Moses convinces Muhammad to return to Allah as fifty times per day is a too heavy burden. After the fourth visit – when tasked to pray five daily prayers – Muhammad refuses to reappear before Allah as he feels embarrassed (*istaḥyaytu*), even though Moses encourages him to do so. The message to Muslims is clear: it could have been more than five a day – be grateful.

The Arabic noun *ṣalāt*, or its plural *ṣalawāt*, is mentioned eighty-two times in the Quran. A typical Quranic quote containing this noun is 20:14: “Indeed, I am Allah, there is no deity but I, therefore serve me (*aʿbudnī*) and establish/keep up (*aqimi*) the prayers (*al-ṣalawāt*) for my remembrance (*dhikrī*).” Several of the most crucial ideas about *al-ṣalāt* are present in this quote. There is only one god, people are as servants to Allah (*ʿabd*, pl. *ʿabīd*) and should engage in the remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) through prayer, not least *al-ṣalāt*. Performing *al-ṣalāt* is one of the main, recurrent rituals of *al-ʿibadāt*, the duties before Allah, and part of all the lists of the pillars of Islam (most Sunni lists have five, most Shiite lists have six or seven).

The message is repeated in the Quran, in the writings and preaching of Islamic scholars and within the social groups and institutions to which people with a Muslim background belong. It is a hegemonic message with the strongest possible plausibility structure backup that resonates through Muslim lives. Historically, it was not news when it was introduced. The idea of a sole deity to which believers are in a submissive relation, a relation that requires of the servants to pray and actively remember the deity, has long roots stretching way back before the prophecy of Muhammad. It is evergreen in the region, acknowledged by both historians and the historiography of the Quran: for example, in 14:37 in relation to the prophet Ibrahim or in 2:38–9 in relation to Ādam and Ḥawwāʾ.

However, the Quran does not describe *al-ṣalāt* in detail, neither the movements, nor the words to be uttered, nor the times of prayer (only that there are prescribed times, 4:103). To establish the exact form, Islamic scholars have sifted out details from the Quran and the sunna – that is, the narratives about behaviour, rulings, and interpretations mainly by Muhammad, but also his companions, that can be found in the collections of *aḥādīth*, the reports about this. The most famous collections of *aḥādīth* are well structured into sections, often called *kitāb* (book). For example, in my edition of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nine volumes with parallel English and Arabic text, much of Volumes One and Two is devoted to rituals surrounding different forms of prayer, not least *al-ṣalāt*.

Different schools of interpretation have established overlapping versions of how to perform *al-ṣalāt*. However, all agree on the importance of it and that

if a Muslim repeatedly fails to perform it, that person only remains Muslim in name. In the grave, angels will treat such a person harshly after this is admitted. Thus, two of the most powerful disciplinary tools known to humankind, that of inclusion/exclusion and reward/punishment – in this case, both in this life and the afterlife – support the idea of *al-ṣalāt*. The choice to perform *al-ṣalāt* or not can be used as a fine illustration of Foucauldian theories of disciplinary discourses (Foucault 1972, 1997). The risk of social exclusion, including the threat of being subjected to sanctions, rumours, violence, and punishment in hell, contrasted with the promise of social inclusion and paradise, invite internalised disciplinary mechanisms, consciously or not, to play out. Promises and threats have a performative quality. Whether fulfilled or not, they have the potential to act discursively upon believers, creating hopes, expectations and fears (Kapchan 2016), at least up to the point when the surrounding society relaxes its pressure or loses the plausibility structures supportive of *al-ṣalāt*. Without such support it is likely that theological ideas striving for hegemony will not have the same reach.

All schools of interpretation will also emphasise the importance of performing movements and speech acts according to a script, making them highly formalised and difficult to disrupt (Bell 1997: 140). Deviation will invalidate prayer. In fact, deviation may be seen as challenging the legitimacy of the act as inherited knowledge from the first community of believers (Bowen 2000). Most Muslims will know the rules and regulations of *al-ṣalāt* through the writing and teaching of Islamic scholars or simply by being taught by parents, peers, and teachers and by copying others. Further, the internet is full of advice but also questions that indicate an ongoing argument about *al-ṣalāt*, not least in environments without a hegemonic Islamic order.

I do not wish to give the impression that *al-ṣalāt* is performed the same way globally. Neither do all Muslims perform *al-ṣalāt* as a part of their faith. I refer the reader to the excellent edited book by Parkin and Headley (2000) for examples. However, for most Muslims what follows should be recognisable.

2 The Times of *al-ṣalāt*

Al-ṣalāt is performed at set times based on the sun's movements across the sky in relation to the conditions in Mecca (which is at latitude 21.4); Table 14.1 explicates these more precisely. Today, two things help regulate the time of *al-ṣalāt*: the call to prayer (*al-adhān*) and exact calculations of the times are widely available on clocks inside mosques, on leaflets, online, or through a digital app.

TABLE 14.1 When to perform *al-ṣalāt*

Name	Time	Number of <i>rak'āt</i> (see below) that are required
<i>ḥajr</i>	Dawn, before sunrise	2
<i>zuhr</i>	Immediately after zenith, before the middle of the afternoon	4, or 2 if it is <i>al-ṣalātu al-jumu'a</i>
<i>ʿaṣr</i>	From the middle of the afternoon before sunset	4
<i>maghrib</i>	After sunset before dusk	3
<i>ʿishā'</i>	After dusk until (preferably) before midnight	4 Twelver Shiites merge <i>zuhr</i> and <i>ʿaṣr</i> as well as <i>maghrib</i> and <i>ʿishā'</i> . Consequently, they perform <i>al-ṣalāt</i> five times but on three occasions.

3 *Al-adhān*

As a reminder that *al-ṣalāt* is impending, a call to it is made by a male *mu'adhdhīn*, although obviously this is not the case everywhere Muslims live. Where Muslims are in a minority, it is common with restrictions of this public call. Further, in North America, Israel, and several countries in Europe, calling over loudspeakers is not allowed or is restricted to the *jumu'a* prayers, the Friday midday prayer. But even in some places where Muslims form a majority, restrictions may apply: for example, in Tajikistan, calling *al-adhān* using loudspeakers was banned in 2009.³

There is both a signalling aspect and a message to *al-adhān*. The former was clear from the very beginning, according to the *aḥādīth* (see *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* vol. 1, book XI, 577). The first generation of Muslims made suggestions that a call could be made with bells like the Christians or with a horn like the Jews, but 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb suggested that a man should do it and Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, known for his strong voice, was assigned the task. Although these reports were written down later, they follow a pattern suggesting a need for the early community to mark its difference to other groups. This was done by developing a

3 It was banned in Tajikistan according to Law No. 489 of 26 March 2009 on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions.

semiotic repertoire that included its proponents' own distinctive way of calling to prayer. Once, it was men with strong voices who called the *al-adhān*, today the exclamations are amplified with megaphones or loudspeaker systems to overpower the noise of modern cities.

Regardless of people's relation to the call, as it is sound waves it puts people in a relation to it when heard, just like church bells or sirens. The sound of *al-adhān* is intertwined with complex perceptions about aesthetics, the sense of belonging, tradition and continuity, duty and the very flow of time. It is also connected to ideas of territory and domination, as can be seen both in Muslim discourse and anti-Muslim discourses in Europe adamant about not allowing *al-adhān* (Shavit and Spengler 2016). The following is recited, according to the Sunni Hanafi school:

allāhu akbar (4 times)

Allah is greater.

ashhadu an lā ilāha illā allāh (2 times)

I testify that there is no deity but Allah.

ashhadu anna muḥammadan rasūlullāh (2 times)

I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

hayya 'alā al-ṣalā(t) (2 times, the final t is silent)

Come to prayer!

hayya 'alā al-falāḥ (2 times)

Come to salvation (or "joy")!

al-ṣalātu khayrun min al-nawm (2 times)

Prayer is better than sleep (only at the fajr prayer)!

allāhu akbar (2 times)

Allah is greater.

lā ilāha illā allāh (1 times)

There is no deity but Allah.

Just before *al-ṣalāt* begins there is another call, the *iqāma*. The same phrases are said, only faster and at a lower volume, only heard in and around the place of *al-ṣalāt*. The *mu'adhḥīn* adds a phrase after "Come to salvation," *qad qāmati*

al-ṣalāt (2 times), meaning the prayer has begun. In Twelver Shia, the calling is different in some respects, and includes the phrase “I testify that ‘Ali is Allah’s chosen friend (*wāli*)” after the one about Muhammad.

Core ideas of Islam are reiterated in *al-adhān*: the idea of Allah’s unique greatness, Muhammad’s role as messenger and the importance of prayer. The message is so well-known that many non-Arabic speakers, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, will be aware of it regardless of their ability to understand the embellished recited words. It can even be appropriated in the emotional aesthetics and nostalgia of non-Muslims living in Muslim contexts. Obviously, some do not like the sound of *al-adhān* (Shavit and Sprengler 2016), yet, as the call is made repeatedly during a day, it risks not being noticed while being heard. The semiotics of this archetypical Islamic sound and its message can easily be bracketed in the flow of everyday life.

4 Purifying the Body and *al-ṣalāt*

The body is regulated by ideas about the ritual purity of the believer (*ṭahāra*). To obtain ritual purity, the adherents perform ablutions (*wuḍūʿ*), a cleansing ritual in which the hands, oral cavity, nose, face, head, ears and feet are washed in water, most parts being washed three times. The body’s right side is purified first which reinforces a ritualised separation of the body into a preferred right side and a secondary left side. This also manifests in some ritualised behaviour connected with the left and right hands and feet and is thus not an isolated phenomenon. Before beginning *al-wuḍūʿ*, believers declare, in their heart, before Allah, that they have the intention (*niyya*) to perform it, adding *bismillāh* (in the name of Allah). After *al-wuḍūʿ*, the words of the testimony (*al-shahāda*) are said, attesting that there is only one deity, and that Muhammad is the messenger. If people are already certain that they are ritually pure they may skip it under certain circumstances.

The body and its clothes can easily become ritually unclean. For example, clothes stained by urine, menstrual blood, semen, or the saliva of dogs (but not oil, paint, or dust) are unfit to wear at *al-ṣalāt*; however, it is enough to try to get rid of visible stains with water. The body itself can also become ritually impure according to a basic logic. What leaves the body in the form of urine, faeces, vomit, menstruation blood, semen, excessive farting, *et cetera* may cause ritual impurity, as do certain activities, especially sex. Some ritual impurities can be handled by *al-wuḍūʿ*, but some, like intercourse, require *ghusl*, the washing of the whole body. Strong smells and bodily needs and urges are supposed to be bracketed out in *al-ṣalāt* although bodily odour from stale sweat is not targeted

as ritual impurity. The selection is culturally specific. Limits are in large part arbitrary and illustrate Mary Douglas' "dirt as matter out of place" (1992: 35) thesis excellently.

This ritualisation of the body and accompanying ideas about ritual purity are complexly interwoven in everyday life and resonate with age-old notions of the cleanliness or impurity of dogs, right and left hands, menstruation, sex, *et cetera*. To understand the body in relation to *al-ṣalāt* and the idea of the place of prayer, relations to both time and space are of importance.

5 Performing *al-ṣalāt*

The prayer consists of words and movements grouped in *rak'āt* (cycles of regulated movements, sing. *rak'ā*) performed in the direction (*qibla*) of Ka'ba in Mecca. The words of *al-ṣalāt* are usually said in Arabic. According to Islamic scholars, it is important to perform *al-ṣalāt* without rushing it. It should preferably be performed with others but can also be performed alone.

Al-ṣalāt is regulated according to a dualist gender system. Two sexes are assumed, and space and roles are arranged accordingly. Classically, when a woman leads prayer, only other women are supposed to pray with her. Historically, few have challenged this but in recent years, a couple of activists have broken with the pattern, the most famous of whom is Amina Wudud, who led a prayer for a gender-segregated group in New York in 2005 (Calderini 2021). At home, on the other hand, women with religious authority have been known to lead mixed prayers, and I have witnessed such occasions. Obviously, *al-ṣalāt* can be performed at the mosque, but also in other places. Following classical theology, it is perceived as a duty for Muslim men to pray together in a mosque during the *jumu'a* prayer, but not for women; in fact, in some areas – Afghanistan, for example – women have not been allowed in mosques. In many mosques, however, there is space for women in special rooms or sections, sometimes with a separate entrance and a designated room for women's ablutions. A lot of women wear headscarves during *al-ṣalāt* – or arrange them to accord more closely with pious ideals – even if they do not do so in everyday life; the same goes for some men who wear a prayer cap (Otterbeck 2010).

The advice of how exactly to perform *al-ṣalāt* differs slightly between different schools of law. For example, only Shiites lay their foreheads on a flat, round clay stone from Karbala or any other place of importance to Shiites when they pray, although all orders are adamant that the corporal performance is as important as the words, if not more important (Parkin and Headley 2000). Faulty practices invalidate the prayer. Below is a description in accordance

with the Hanbali school, which does not provide different advice for men and women (otherwise common) apart from spatial separation.

Al-ṣalāt begins with worshippers standing, silently proclaiming the intention (*niyya*) to pray. They bring their hands to their ears with palms facing forward, and state, “*allāhu akbar* (Allah is greater).” They cross their hands over the abdomen just under the navel (typically Hanbali), placing the right hand over the left. They fix their gaze on the floor at the place where their forehead will touch the ground and then recite silently, “*subḥānaka allahumma wa bi ḥamdika wa tabāraka ismuka wa ta‘ālā jadduka wa lā ilaha ghayruka* (Glory be to you, O Allah and praise be upon you. Blessed be your name and exalted is your majesty and there is no deity but you).” They quietly add, “*a‘udhu billāhi min al-shayṭān al-rajīm*, (I take refuge with Allah from the stoned Shayṭān),” and “*bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, (In the name of Allah, the merciful and compassionate).”

The worshippers then recite the first *sūra* (chapter) of the Quran, *al-fātiha*, in which the believer asks for guidance to the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) and praises Allah as the lord of humanity and the worlds. After *al-fātiha*, the word *āmīn* (amen) is added after a short pause. Then they bow, put their hands on their thighs and say, “*allāhu akbar*,” and then silently, “*subḥāna rabbī al-‘aẓīm* (Praise be to my lord, the magnificent),” at least once but preferably three times. The same applies to anything below when I stress at least once. They stand tall again saying, “*sami‘ allah li man ḥamidahu* (Allah listens to the one who praises him),” while raising their hands up to their shoulders, and “*rabbanā laka al-ḥamd* (Our Lord, to you belongs the praise).” The worshippers drop to their knees, fold the upper body forward and touch the ground with their hands, forehead and nose (the nose is typically Hanbali, but is only recommended), while saying “*allāhu akbar*” during the movement. This is called a *sujūd*, prostration, a word that shares etymology with the word *masjid*, mosque, the place where one prostrates. “*Subḥāna rabbiya al-a‘lā* (Blessed be my lord, the exalted)” is said quietly, at least once. Then the worshippers straighten their backs, remain kneeling with hands on thighs, and say, “*Rabbi ighfirli* (Lord, forgive me),” at least once. Then they prostrate themselves again and repeat the process, then straighten their backs and say, “*allāhu akbar*.” A *rak‘a* has been performed.

After the second *rak‘a*, they quietly recite *al-tashahhud*, the confirmation of the faith:

al-taḥiyyātu lillahi wa al-ṣalawātu wa al-ṭayyibatu.

The tributes, the prayer and the good are for Allah

al-salāmu ‘alayka ayyuhā al-nabiyyu wa raḥmatullāhi wa barakātuḥu.
Peace be upon you, O Prophet, and the grace and blessing of Allah be
upon you

al-salāmu ‘alaynā wa‘alā ‘ibādillāhi al-ṣāliḥīn.
Peace be upon us and upon the righteous servants of Allah

ashhadu an lā ilāha illa allāh
I testify that there is no deity but Allah,

wa ashadu anna muḥammadan ‘abduḥu wa rasūluḥu.
and I testify that Muhammad is his servant and messenger.

After that they say, “*allāhu akbar*” and any additional *rak‘a* is performed. The last ends with the believers sitting and silently reciting “*al-ṣalawātu al-ibrahīmiyya*,” a prayer that asks Allah to bless both Muhammad and Ibrahim and their families. Then they recite silently:

allāhumma innī a‘ūdhu bika min ‘adhābi jahannam,
O Allah! I seek your protection from the torments of hell,

wa min ‘adhābi al-qabri wa min fitnati al-maḥyā wa al-mamāt,
and from the torments of the grave, and from the temptations and strife
of life and death,

wa min fitnati al-masiḥi al-dajjāl,
and the temptation and chaos of the false masiḥ al-dajjal [that is, the
equivalent of the antichrist].

After this *du‘a*, supplications from the tradition can be added, tailoring the content to the individuals’ needs: for example, “*rabbi ighfirli wa li wālidayya rabbi irḥamhumā kamā rabbayānī ṣaghīra(n)* (My Lord, forgive me and my parents. My Lord, show them mercy as they showed me when I was a child).” Then they turn their faces to the right and say, “*al-salāmu ‘alaykum wa raḥmatullāh* (Peace be upon you and the grace of Allah [upon you]).” This greeting is to the angel who writes down one’s good deeds. The same is done to the left, greeting the angel who writes down one’s bad deeds. This concludes the formal part of *al-ṣalāt*.

6 The Worldview

If understood, the spoken words reiterate the overarching worldview of Islam in line with *al-adhān*. Muslims are cast in their role as servant (*‘abd*) to Allah – the Lord of all things (*al-rabb*), the magnificent (*al-‘azīm*), the exalted (*al-‘lā*) – as they ask for guidance to stay clear of temptation or strife (*fitna*) and hell (*jahannam*). Some recurring names are significant to the world order. Muslims ask for protection from *al-shaytān al-raǧīm* (the stoned Satan, that is, the rejected) and *masiḥ al-dajǧāl* (the antichrist of Islam), the assumption being that these can actively lead believers astray, while Allah may help believers keep to the straight path. In addition, Allah is asked to bless Muhammad as Ibrahim was blessed. The servants are in a precarious position in a linear drama starting with the double exile of Ādam and Ḥawwā’, on the one hand, and Iblīs/Shaytān, on the other, that will continue until *yawn al-qiyāma*, the day of reckoning at the end of times when all shall be judged by Allah. It is well attested that the threat of hell and the promise of heaven is very much alive among contemporary Muslims and has been so throughout history (al-Issa et al. 2020; Lange 2016; Otterbeck 2010).

Even if not understood in detail, many words are likely to be familiar, especially to those repeating them daily, irrespective of their level of Arabic, as many formulations and expressions can also be found in everyday language in Muslim majority contexts. At the very least, the words will function as phrases and be internalised as such regardless of comprehension, and their meaning might dawn on later occasions (Kapchan 2016). But as the worldview is generally found in Islamic beliefs, the overarching meaning is likely only to escape the few.

7 The Embodiment

The involvement of bodies in rituals can be understood through the meaning-making aspects of the involvement but also through the affects surrounding embodied practices. The bodily movement of the prayer rituals are reminders of other semiotic resources that have entered Islamic tradition to create an Islamic corporality. The prayer ritual incorporates a very widespread symbol of submission, prostration. Already present in the first states and city-states of the Middle East, the gesture’s meaning is deeply ingrained in the cultures among which Islamic rituals first took place. In this case, it evidently expresses the worshippers’ submission to Allah. Further, prostration before power is common in popular culture and again difficult not to connect with submission,

at least on a primary interpretative level (Eco 1994). Frequent prostration may cause a mark on the forehead (*zabība*) referred to as a sign of piety. The mark inscribes the embodiment and, additionally, serves as a reminder of the *al-ṣalāt* for the individual and in public.

Another important feature is the lining up. Straight lines collectivise the worshippers and even if coordination between practitioners is not quite the same as in an expertly performed military parade, many act in reasonable coordination. Acting together with others increases the level of compliance with the expected, disciplining the participants to find a direction in their performance of the bodily discourse of *al-ṣalāt*.

Being non-Muslim myself, I have only performed *al-ṣalāt* once, in Xanthi in Greece in the noughties. Out of curiosity, I visited a small mosque but found no one who shared a language with me. As it was around prayer time and the ten men who were about to pray likely found no other reason for my presence than prayer, they invited me to join them. As declining would have been impolite, I lined up and went through the movements with the rest of them. I had attended *al-ṣalāt* frequently enough to know what to do but not fully what to say. Imitating is, however, not the same as embodying. Instead of a smooth series of movements anticipating the move to come, I strung together poses from memory, reactive to the people around me. Internalised rituals are embodied competences; the ability to sit, stand, bow, or kneel according to orthopraxy is the result of practice in both senses of the word: training and performance. While words can be internalised and yet ignored or not understood, movements are more immediate. The preparations through ablution, getting to a mosque or unfolding a prayer carpet, the compartmentalisation in time and space, the collective directionality, and the almost universal symbolism of subjection through prostration are hard to ignore.

8 The Sounds of *al-ṣalāt*

The sounds of *al-ṣalāt* are not restricted to *al-adhān*, although that is iconic. The sound of the collectively pronounced words, the silences between words, the rustling of clothes when people prostrate themselves is part of a sonar texture. Participating in *al-ṣalāt* is a listening act, to use a concept from Kapchan (2016). The control of sounds is embodied through the listening act that accompanies practice. The formation of the words, the right strength of voice, the right silence at the right place, require technologies of the self (Foucault 1997), which imply discipline, training, and repeated performance. Sounds have the potential to create long-lasting emotions merging with the idea of the sacred.

While I knew the movements of *al-ṣalāt* and the expected sound performance when praying in Xanthi, I had yet to be sufficiently advanced in my listening to be able to fully participate with the right words. Indeed, *al-ṣalāt* is also a symbolic listening act as the participants raise their hands to their ears, ready to listen. Furthermore, the ritual contains a normative statement about Allah's listening: "Allah listens to the one who praises him." The listening becomes symbolic of the interaction.

Also to be considered is the aesthetics of sounds. Some will have nostalgic relations with the sounds of particular mosques, not only their decoration and architecture. Grand mosques, like churches, provide soundscapes that are as specific as fingerprints. Sound travels in particular ways and architects strive to control this (Gül 2019), while, clearly, smaller mosques or *muṣallā* (prayer halls) may not offer this experience. Affective listening acts suggest that religious authenticity involves sound texture.

9 The Power of *al-ṣalāt*: Some Sort of Conclusion

Al-ṣalāt allows believers to allocate a fixed time, in a certain space, under specific conditions, to connect to Allah. The routine repetition of ritualised, embodied movements produces a "ritualized body" (Bell 1992: 98). The speech acts repeat and reinforce the central creed of Islam. The listening acts firmly situate the participants in relation to the many sounds of the ritual. Taken together, this allows for a role-taking regulated by discourse that can be seen as liberating and spiritual but also inhibitory and invasive, depending on perspective. From a scholarly perspective we need to acknowledge the ritual as powerful and ordering without attributing to it the interpellation powers suggested in Althusserian theory (1971).

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2006) discusses the power of directionalities in how a life is led and envisioned. The directionalities are formed in relation to powerful discourses upheld by significant others and institutions that together form plausibility structures: social structures that make the discourses of what is expected – now and in the future – potent and formative; they serve to orient. Opting for alternatives, resisting, may mobilise disciplinary techniques and position people as deviant – disoriented – and in need of help or condemnation.

In Islamic practices, many (exact figures are of no importance for my argument) are schooled into a close relation with *al-ṣalāt*. Early in life, a directionality is laid down. A childhood of viewing, listening, perceiving, and playing *al-ṣalāt* is followed by periods of learning the performance, the practice and

upholding of it, although slips are tolerated and rationalised – by narratives about youth, for example. *Al-ṣalāt* is present in language, aurally in the soundscape of cities, villages, and homes, visually in the cityscape through minarets and their mosques, and for many, it is emotionally embodied and discursively anchored in the directionalities expected. Thus, the practice and discourse of *al-ṣalāt* have great potential to become a part of what Muslims relate to actively in their subject formation, irrespective of whether attempting to perform or shun the ritual (Mahmood 2006; Topal 2017). Not taking part in this may challenge the meaningfulness of the ritual to others and may cause people to rethink the boundaries of whom they include in their perception of ‘we’ (Henkel 2012).

In a study about *al-hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, Abdullahi Hammoudi (2006) claims that the immense force of the rituals takes on a supra individual quality. In his anthropoetic description, the rituals make the pilgrims perform the worship. The formalised steps, words, deeds, and emotions, inscribed in the body through socialisation, training, and memorisation, are extracted from the pilgrims’ bodies more or less irrespective of their independent will. Once someone commits by attending, the choreography of a ritual like *al-hajj* or *al-ṣalāt* leaves little room for improvisation and directs the participants onwards (Henkel 2012). The ritual becomes larger than the group, in a Durkheimian sense.

Hammoudi adds that after performing *al-hajj*, the newly attained status of being ‘hajj Abdullahi’ had a lasting effect on his self-perception. In a thought-provoking article, Samuli Schielke (2019) poses the question of whether Allah has biopower, considering that the narrative of the existence of Allah is understood as true and is grounded in social structures. An internalised understanding of the existence of Allah makes *al-hajj* and *al-ṣalāt* relevant and acute and thus Allah can be understood as exerting biopower, disciplining bodies, suggesting taxonomies for what is clean, good, and beautiful, and ordering time and space.

Depending on the perspective taken, *al-ṣalāt* can be described as an extremely powerful ritual that interpellates – exercises power – by itself, or as one enacted through the complicity of the micro power practices of myriads of people. I tend to prefer the latter but acknowledge the pedagogical elegance of the former. Regardless, it is difficult not to recognise *al-ṣalāt* as worldview-preserving. Instead of only looking at words and acts, my suggestion is to take a broader look at the integration of *al-ṣalāt* into the social contexts of people, their socialisation, directionalities, and discourses. The meaning-making of rituals is part of the discourses attached to systems of beliefs interlaced broadly with societies. People who live in a relation to a faith

will have to relate to powerful rituals – their embodiment and discursiveness – if their relevance is backed up by powerful plausibility structures.

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