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Miszelle

Christians, Muslims, and the Languages of Prayer

David Marshall

When people pray, what languages do they use?¹ The language they speak in daily life? Contemporary language, but with the addition of religious words rarely used in daily life? An archaic version of their mother tongue? Another language entirely, regarded as sacred, set apart for the task of addressing God? People pray in all these ways, and others too – in silence, for example.

To understand how religions shape people's lives, it is important to pay attention to the various ways in which prayer is related to language. Here, we will look briefly at some points that arise when we consider the languages used by Christians and Muslims to say their best-known prayers.

1. CHRISTIANS AT PRAYER: THE LORD'S PRAYER

If a Christian knows only one prayer, this will probably be 'the Lord's Prayer' or 'Our Father'. Surprisingly, perhaps, there is no definitive version of this prayer. The earliest forms of it are found in the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

1.1 Two versions of the Our Father in the Bible – What does this tell us?

In Luke's version, the disciples of Jesus ask him to teach them to pray, and he responds,

*When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

¹ These reflections were displayed as a poster, with accompanying illustrations, at an exhibition prepared by the Institut für Christkatholische Theologie at the 'Nacht der Forschung' of the University of Bern in September 2022.

But Matthew's Gospel contains a slightly longer version, which is closer to how most Christians say the prayer today.

What does this simple fact tell us? It suggests that to the early Christians it did not seem vital to preserve the prayer Jesus taught the disciples in one identical form. Also interesting is that in the New Testament this prayer was preserved *in Greek* – just as with nearly all of Jesus' sayings. Even though he presumably taught his disciples this prayer in Aramaic, a language close to Hebrew, the early Christians clearly felt it was fine to translate what Jesus had originally said in Aramaic into Greek, a more widely understood language. And the original Aramaic has not been preserved anywhere! For the early Christians, communicating the significance of Jesus was not about preserving the exact words he spoke in the language in which he uttered them.

1.2 The multiplication of translations

It followed naturally that as Christianity moved into new language zones, Christians translated the Lord's Prayer further into other languages of the ancient world. That process has continued over the centuries since. There have been times when some languages – for example, Latin – have achieved a sacred status among some Christians to the point where new translations of the Bible and of Christian liturgy were opposed. But however strong that opposition has been, the Christian consensus in favour of being able to pray in one's own language has regularly reasserted itself.

1.3 The Church of Pater Noster – celebrating translation

The Church of Pater Noster on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem offers a vivid illustration of this point. Translations of the Lord's Prayer in 140 languages are inscribed on colourful ceramic plaques displayed on walls around the church and its cloister.

In a vivid, visual way, this church powerfully communicates the principle that the linguistic diversity of the Christians of the world should be channelled into their praying. All human languages can become sacred languages as each one gives fresh expression to the prayer that Jesus himself taught his disciples.

1.4 “Each of us praying in our mother tongue...”

The same point is made in a different way when multilingual Christian congregations are sometimes invited to say the Lord’s Prayer simultaneously, but “each of us in our mother tongue”. The result can feel unsettling, even chaotic, but the intention behind this practice is to affirm the equal dignity of every human language as a vehicle of prayer.

2. MUSLIMS AT PRAYER: AL-FATIHA

If we ask which prayer has the place in Islam that the Lord’s Prayer has in Christianity, the natural answer is *al-Fatiha*. In the course of performing *salat* (the obligatory prayers to be said five times daily), Muslims recite *al-Fatiha* seventeen times every day. This short prayer also has the extraordinary status of being the opening passage of the Qur’an, Islam’s scripture. Here is the English translation by Pickthall, a Muslim scholar:

*In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds,
The Beneficent, the Merciful.
Owner of the Day of Judgment,
Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help.
Show us the straight path,
The path of those whom Thou hast favoured;
Not the (path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.*

2.1 Similar content – differences over language

There are clear similarities of content between the Lord’s Prayer and *al-Fatiha*. They have a similar structure, progressing from the majesty of God to human need before ending with appeals for safekeeping or guidance. But if we ask about the relationship between these two prayers to the diversity of human languages, a contrast emerges. While for Christians translations of the Lord’s Prayer into any human language are equally the Lord’s Prayer and equally valid, for Muslims *al-Fatiha* is only *al-Fatiha* in the same original Arabic words in which Muslims believe God revealed it to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

2.2 What about translations of the Qur'an?

Yes, *al-Fatiha*, along with the whole Qur'an, has been translated into many human languages. But Muslims believe that when the Qur'an is translated, it is no longer the Qur'an, because the Qur'an only is the Qur'an in the original Arabic. So when *al-Fatiha* is translated, this can be useful for those who need to be taught its meaning in their mother tongue, but the translation is not *al-Fatiha* itself. Here is the vital takeaway for daily Muslim practice: *al-Fatiha* should only be prayed in Arabic.

So the two examples mentioned above of Christian celebration of the translatability of the Lord's Prayer are hard to imagine in an Islamic context. For a Muslim prayer-leader to invite a multilingual congregation to pray *al-Fatiha* simultaneously in all their different mother tongues would be very surprising, to say the least. Nor can one easily imagine on the walls of a mosque a permanent display of beautifully painted translations of *al-Fatiha* into 140 different languages. If such an exhibition were to happen, it could certainly never imply that it is equally valid for Muslims to say *al-Fatiha* in any human language.

2.3 Teaching children Arabic

It follows naturally that all Muslims (most of whom are not native Arabic-speakers) should learn at least enough Arabic to recite portions of the Qur'an and in particular to be able to pray *salat*. Hence the emphasis in traditional Muslim communities on children learning Arabic from an early age and indeed memorizing as much of the Qur'an in Arabic as they can. There may be very modest analogies to this in some Christian traditions, but in general this is an area of striking contrast in the experience of religious formation of Muslim and Christian children.

2.4 But Muslims can also say some prayers in other languages...

This contrast should, however, be nuanced in some important ways. First, *salat* is not the only way Muslims can pray. It is obligatory for Muslims and so is the central and dominant expression of prayer in Islam. However, there are other optional but widely practised forms of Muslim prayer which can be performed in one's mother tongue. For example, Muslims can offer intercessions (*du'a*) to God in any language. Second, there is some discussion among Muslims about whether newcomers to Islam can

say *salat* in their mother tongues. Some Muslims accept the validity of this practice, but even they agree that all Muslims should learn to say *salat* in Arabic as soon as possible. Third, while Arabic is indeed the unquestioned sacred language of Islam, we should not forget the significance in Islam of other languages – such as Persian and Turkish – which have also been the bearers of Islamic culture and spirituality.

3. SO WHAT?

Where does all this leave us? What's the point of this exploration of difference? Isn't it important today to draw attention to what religions have in common? (To that last question: yes, indeed, but not in a way that obscures real differences, which we need to understand respectfully.) The aim here is certainly not to make a massive generalizing claim that Christianity embraces human diversity and Islam does not. The focus is on the specific question of the central expressions of prayer in Islam and Christianity. Here, there is, in linguistic terms, an unmistakable difference. It is important, and very interesting, to understand this.

3.1 Understanding different perspectives

For Christians and Muslims to understand each other, it is important to grasp something of how human language functions within each faith.

For those who have grown up in Western countries like Switzerland, it may be difficult to appreciate what might be the benefits of praying in a sacred language such as Arabic. Modern Western Christianity has tended to play down the idea of sacred languages, and sometimes to oppose their use. Protestantism especially has emphasized how reading scripture and praying in one's normal language give an everyday immediacy to God's word and human response to God.

But in Muslim perspective, things might look quite different. Muslim beliefs about the revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic give to their practice of *salat* a great sense of confidence, security, and unity. The fact that Muslims know exactly what words (and also physical movements) to use in performing *salat* is experienced as a blessing, not a limitation. All the details of how to pray are provided by divine revelation. Muslims approach *salat* confident that throughout Islamic history and still today around the world, all Muslims have prayed and continue to pray in the same Arabic words. When millions of Muslims from all corners of the

world meet for the pilgrimage (*hajj*) at Mecca and Medina, they all pray in the same language – an extraordinary experience of how the diverse human race can be united by devotion to God rooted in the givenness of divine revelation.

3.2 Underlying theology

Reflection on the issues addressed here concerning the language of prayer can also give us a better understanding of an important underlying theological difference between Islam and Christianity. Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes: “The Word of God in Islam is the Quran; in Christianity it is Christ.” The central Islamic conviction is that God’s ultimate revelation came in Arabic words; the sacred status of Arabic is therefore entirely logical. For Christians, in contrast, Scripture, however important, is not the ultimate expression of divine revelation, which is found in the human life of Jesus Christ: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” So even though at different times in the history of Christianity various sacred languages have arisen, and may still continue to have special status in certain traditions, for Christians no human language can have the unique and universal sacred status which Arabic holds for Muslims.

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