

## Called to Prayer

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What I learned from Muslims about God



GOD IS GREATER. Muslims celebrating Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the month of Ramadan, in Madrid, Spain.

Five times a day in Muslim urban centers around the world, the call to worship (*adhan*), chanted by muezzins of greater or lesser skill, echoes through the streets. Public address systems attached to the minarets of local mosques magnify the sound. I have listened to those words many times since I went to live and work in West Africa 50 years ago. I have heard them over the years since then in the Middle East and North Africa: Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Turkey. From a seaside mosque in Tunisia in 1970, I heard the call to worship late one afternoon, but the muezzin seemed to be repeating one phrase over and over again. It then dawned on me that there was no muezzin at all; the needle had become stuck in the groove of a vinyl record. I doubt a similar mosque in Tunisia today, a country more religious now than it was back then, would leave the invitation to worship to be broadcast by a machine.

What the first two words of the call to worship evoke is a whole approach to God, one from which I as a Catholic and a Jesuit have learned a great deal over the past five decades. The translations of the call to worship I have seen in various scholarly and journalistic publications strike me as inadequate to convey the deepest significance of the invitation issued. Let me render the Arabic myself, in all its repetitiveness, inspired in part by the skillful translation of Michael Sells of the University of Chicago. I give the basic call minus certain variations for the time of day or the sectarian affiliation of particular mosques:

God is greater than anything!

I testify: no god, only God!

I testify: no god, only God!

I testify: Muhammad God's messenger!

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Attend to worship!

Attend to worship!

Attend to flourishing!

Attend to flourishing!

God is greater than anything!

God is greater than anything!

No god, only God!

What I have rendered in English as "God is greater than anything!" is the justly famous short exclamation of praise for God that devout Muslims throughout the world utter many times daily, whether in liturgical settings or less formally. These two words in Arabic are usually referred to as the *takbir*, the magnifying of God: *Allahu akbar*. The phrase is commonly translated as "God is greatest" or even (incorrectly) as "God is great," but I prefer the translation "God is greater than anything!" In Semitic languages the borders between comparative and superlative are blurred. Modern-day paranoia has propagated the notion that this verbal magnifying of God is foreboding or even threatening, suggestive of a declaration of militant jihad. But the *takbir* issues no threat; it can even claim respectable parallels in the Hebrew Bible, like the account of David's liturgical praise of God's magnificence uttered in the presence of the Lord: "You are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you" (2 Sm 7:22). The New Testament similarly puts such words of praise in the mouth of the Virgin Mary visiting her kinswoman, Elizabeth: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:46-47).

*Akbar* and *takbir* as words in Arabic both derive from the triconsonantal root *K-B-R*, signifying greatness; in these forms they imply more than ordinary greatness, in fact the most exalted greatness, an attribute of God alone. Surprisingly, the phrase *Allahu akbar* never appears in the Quran, and the verbal noun *takbir* occurs only once, although related verbs do occur, if rarely. The cry *Allahu akbar* and verbs related to *takbir* suggest that those to whom they are addressed must proclaim God's unsurpassable transcendence, God's utter differentness from anyone merely human or anything that is only created. Thus one of the 114 basic segments of the Quran, the Surah of the Night Journey, ends with such a resounding proclamation of God's otherness: "Say: 'Praise be to God Who has taken no child. No partner exists for Him in majesty, nor has He any kinsman as his lowly dependent. Magnify Him magnificently!'" (Quran 17:111). Not only is the Incarnation, understood much too physically, criticized in this passage,

but also, and perhaps more appositely, pagan Arab devotion to daughters ascribed to God as well as any other form of *shirk*, a term in Arabic that points to partnering God with what is less than God.

There are many other short prayers, not unlike the *takbir*, in Muslim liturgical and individual devotional practice, usually described as acts of recollection of God. But use of the *takbir* outnumbers all the other acts of recollection; it accompanies moments of exaltation and moments of desolation alike. In the shortest of the five daily services of Muslim worship, a series of two cycles of ritual action (standing, bowing, prostrating), the *takbir* occurs 11 times in the call to worship and its responses as well as in the worship itself. In a worship of three cycles it occurs 17 times; in a worship of four cycles it occurs 22 times. When meat is slaughtered, the *takbir* is uttered. When battle begins or a victory is won, the unsurpassable greatness of God is invoked with the *takbir*. The medieval scholar and mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) prescribes three utterances of the *takbir* when the new moon of any lunar month is sighted. The simple funeral service of Muslims is characterized as a worship in which the *takbir* occurs four times. The famous 1966 film of Gillo Pontecorvo, "The Battle of Algiers," captures some of the awe the *takbir* evokes as the Algerian prisoners of the French colonial forces, witnessing one of their comrades being led out to execution, send that cry to God echoing throughout the prison.

### **The Name of God**

The equivalent of these acts of recollection in the Western Christian tradition is called either an "aspiration" or an "ejaculation," the latter term comparing such short prayers to javelin thrusts aimed at heaven. In his letter to Proba (written in 412), Augustine attributed the practice of such prayerful javelin thrusts to monks of the Egyptian desert wishing to assure through brevity the intensity of their concentration on God, "so that wide-awake and sharp attention, which is necessary for anyone who prays, may not fade away over longer periods of prayer."

Certain famous aspirations derive from the New Testament itself. The unique Aramaic name with which Jesus addressed God as his father, *Abba* (Mk 14:36), seems to have been passed on to Paul, who thought of the ability to use that intimate name for God as a gift of God's Spirit for the faithful: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4: 6). This term of direct address used by Jesus in addressing his heavenly father lives on in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer: "Father, hallowed be your name" (Lk 11:2). Another liturgical and private aspiration in Aramaic, spoken in the name of the church, was preserved by Paul in the conclusion to the First Letter to the Corinthians: *Maran atha* ("Our Lord, come!"; 1 Cor 16:22). A somewhat longer aspiration, the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner"), has been much revered in the hesychastic traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy and has transported countless people to the throne of God. It even helped to focus the lives of J. D. Salinger's fictional siblings, Franny and Zooey Glass.

To utter the words *Allahu akbar* is to praise in a brief and intense form God's limitless greatness, the utter transcendence of God. Like *Abba* and *Maran atha*, the two words of the *takbir* can serve as an almost quintessential summary of the Islamic doctrine of God. Properly understood, God exceeds all comparison (great, greater, greatest). God far exceeds us, eludes our grasp, draws us toward God but never sates us, never submits to our petty imaginings. Any god that we could grasp completely would be nothing but an idol, not God who utterly transcends us and yet graciously discloses the divine selfhood to us, unveiling and yet still veiling the divine reality.

Jews symbolize this utter transcendence of God by verbal avoidance of the name disclosed by God to Moses in the burning bush, "I am who I am" (Ex 3:14), substituting instead the word "Lord" (*Adonai*). In spoken Hebrew, the Orthodox prefer to use *Ha-Shem*, "the Name," to denote the name of God or even *Ha-Maqom*, a mysterious term apparently meaning "the Place" but actually meaning something much less tangible: "God is the world's place, but the world is not God's place," to use the eloquent rendering of my long-term friend Rabbi Daniel Polish.

Some Muslims are almost as careless as some Jews and Christians in their invocation of God: *W'Allahi* ('By God!') competes for inanity with "Oh my God!" in American teen-speak, reduced to "OMG!" on Twitter. But formal Muslim speech generally exhibits a sense of the privilege involved in being able to pronounce the divine name. Fourteen times in the Quran and innumerable times in subsequent Muslim writing, the name of God or a pronoun referring to God is followed by a parenthetical single verb, *ta'ala*, best understood as another example of *dhikr*: "Be He exalted!" Usage of a verb based on the same three-consonant root ('-L-W) signifies that the one just referred to utterly transcends us and is not to be degraded to the rank of just one of many gods, many mundane realities about which we might speak. The Quran puts it pungently: "The Judgment by God is coming—do not try to hasten it! Be He exalted above anything with which they may partner God!" (Quran 16:1).

Someone told me recently that she is angry with God because her brother died young in a car accident, angry enough not to pray any more. We all have reasons why we might be tempted to be angry with God, to hate God. No one of us gets a perfect hand to play in the game of life. The problem with such anger with God, such rejection of God, is that the God with whom we are enraged is not God at all, only a small-g god, and a god of very small things indeed. Like any idol, a small-g god may seem to be an insurance policy against family tragedy, personal loss and the disappointments of life, a bit like a rabbit's food suspended from a rear-view mirror. That god is not God with a capital G.

Muslims have taught me that lesson over and over again whenever I hear them exclaim the first words of the call to worship: *Allahu akbar!* The First Epistle of John puts it almost as succinctly: "God is greater than our hearts" (1 Jn 3:20). When I am tempted to rely on my own strengths, when I wonder how I can do more than I can really manage, the *takbir* brings me back to letting God be God, and God alone—"Be He exalted!"

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