

Masjids in the Prophet's Time and Now: What Has Gone Wrong?



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Masjid now

Most masjids in today's world are conspicuous by their exterior and interior architectural design and beauty. Their artistic features and aesthetic hallmarks have their own value and must be treated with respect. However, many of them are bereft of important functions and are valued chiefly for their meretricious ornamentation. Herein lies a cause for concern and pity; it indicates a weakness in the foundation of Muslim society.

In this regard, the Prophet left stark warnings which are widely known and equally widely ignored. In one hadith, the Prophet said:

"The Hour will not commence before people boast of their mosques." The narrator, Ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him), added: "You will ornament your mosques just as the Jews and Christians did with their temples." (qtd. in Elshinawy, 2018)

Forewarning about the future decadence and decline of the Muslim *ummah*, he reportedly said that there would be a time when masjids would be imposing and splendid structures but devoid of true guidance and enlightenment (*Mishkat Ul Masabeeh*, 2004: 72 [hadith no. 276]). Although this hadith is classified weak by scholars, we can see some of its predictions already materializing in our times. Given the sad condition in which most Muslims find themselves globally today, these premonitions should strike a chord with them.

Sadly, Muslim communities do not seem to take appropriate lessons from these prophecies that illustrate a fundamental paradox in the concept of masjid. At a time when Muslims are faced with "a drastic cultural and civilizational decline" and with other challenges, it is perhaps "inappropriate" for them "to be gripped with lavishly erecting, ornamenting and decorating their edifices" (Omer, 2015: 13).

In other words, as during the Prophet's time, it is perhaps not a priority for today's Muslim communities to erect gorgeous masjids only for architectural elaboration. The impact of such masjids on improving the quality of Muslims does not go far beyond aesthetic appeal.

What is missing



Towards Effective Mosques: Advice for Future Imams

It is true that many masjids are purpose-built and used as sites of socialization. Often "a source of pride, confidence and zeal" (Omer, 2015: 23), they play important roles in transmitting cultural and religious values to younger generations. Many magnificent masjids are highly respected structures, have artistic and historical significance, and have turned into tourist attractions. All these characteristics and uses of masjids are not necessarily incompatible with Islamic teachings. There is

perhaps no harm in decorating masjids with permissible images and in attracting visitors to their premises.

However, many important functions of masjids are missing and forgotten. In most cases, holding congregational prayers is considered the only activity for which masjids are now built. One most important purpose of masjids that has been sadly ignored and needs to be restored is educational service to the community. Nowadays, masjids are not considered centres for imparting knowledge; most imams and khatibs are not counted as educators; and khutbahs (sermons) are not treated as a means to educate the congregation.

What is needed

In order to bring back the educational role of masjids, the imams and khatibs need to be more knowledgeable about various aspects of Islamic teachings. They should also know about other religious traditions as well as secular worldviews. They must be better trained in educating the community and interpreting Islam for a contemporary setting. Their job scope needs to be re-examined and redefined.

Friday khutbahs in masjids should be tailored to meet the requirements of the community and their contents, updated on a regular basis in response to various developments in society. Khutbahs must touch on current debates and discuss problems and challenges facing Muslim society and the world at large.

Topics of khutbahs must be more relevant to contemporary developments and needs, which merits a separate study and further discussion and elaboration.

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