



*Dua in the 21st Century:  
exploring women's perspectives*

*People can ‘talk’ to God about anything: what they feel, what they want, what they hope. Does God answer my prayers? There are WAY too many examples. Would every cell in my body still work if it wasn’t for Allah? Would I be living in this city if it wasn’t for Allah? Would I have my daughter? Some prayers certainly wait to be answered, but it’s always worth it.*<sup>42</sup>

Prayer is something we know Muslims do. We see men heading towards the mosque, prayer clothing on and carrying their prayer mats. We see women crowded into a smaller mosque space and separated from the men, or at home praying by themselves. We see the performance of ritual movements and hear the set words. Women tell us they are abstaining from prayer because they are menstruating, and that they will ‘make up’ their prayers at a later date. These practices of prayer which we most often see and hear about are usually concerned with the five formal *salah* prayers that Muslims are required to pray each day. Furthermore, if one searches the internet for “prayer in Islam,” the results focus specifically on *salah*.

But *salah* is just one of the three types of prayer found in Islam, the other two being *du’a* and *dhikr*. When Muslim women speak about *du’a*, in contrast to *salah*, many of them use language that sounds more familiar to Christians—they speak of being ‘close’ to God in prayer, for example. This article focuses on conversations recounted by Christian women around the world that they have had with their Muslim friends:

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<sup>42</sup> Words of a Southeast Asian Muslim woman: unless otherwise noted, all quotes come from When Women Speak... I-View Course participants. The I-View courses are conducted online for women working among Muslim communities who want to connect with others and share their learning about women’s experiences of Islam.

women in very different contexts, from different strands of Islam (Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi), and of different ages, educational levels, and backgrounds. It also draws from current online sources, and seeks to answer the questions: What are *du'a*? What is the etiquette of *du'a*? Why make *du'a*? Is *du'a* effective? What do *du'a* tell us about women's views of God? What is the relationship between *du'a* and Christian prayer?

### **What are du'a?**

One of the ways Muslims call upon God apart from *salah* is through supplications or requests known as *du'a*. *Du'a* are encouraged in both the Qur'an and *hadith*: "And your Lord says: 'Call on Me; I will answer [your prayer]'" (Surah Ghafir, 40:60), and "*du'a* is the essence of worship" (Jami` at-Tirmidhi book 48, chapter 1, *hadith* 3371).

There are two types of *du'a*. The first type are those with fixed words which come from the Qur'an or *hadith*. These are often learned from a young age, and are prayed in specific situations and at specific times, such as before and after meals, before bedtime, upon waking, before entering a house, when going to the toilet, when starting a trip, when ill, as part of funeral prayers,<sup>43</sup> and so forth. Every aspect of life seems to be covered by such *du'a*. Fixed *du'a* are widely available as booklets, in phone apps, or in compiled books in various sizes and for various circumstances: for children, for travelling, for daily use, and so forth. One website advocates that women in particular are in need of the "spiritual nourishment" provided by the learning and frequent repetition of *du'a* from the *hadith*: "In this way, her heart will remain focused

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<sup>43</sup> There are different *du'a* for deceased adults as opposed to children. "Selected Passages from Journey to Afterlife." In *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 190-191, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.istor.org/stable/i.ctt6wpkxs.22>

on Allah (SWT), her soul will be cleansed and purified, and her iman [faith] will increase.”<sup>44</sup>

The second type of *du'a* are those which are personal, prayed by someone in their own words. These can be prayed in a person's "heart" language. Some Southeast Asian women were "very adamant that Allah understands their heart language and it is just as acceptable to him as Arabic." In South Central Asia, a different word for God is used in *du'a* as opposed to *salah*, which indicates "whether someone is talking from their heart or head." A Central Asian BMB related that when she was a child, her aunt told her that

'At the end of your ritual prayer you can ask God whatever is in your heart in your own language.' So this is what I did. I would just quickly recite *namaz* [*salah*] waiting for the end so I can talk to Him.

### **What is the etiquette of *du'a*?**

Since *du'a* are not prayed to make merit (unlike *salah*), an individual is not required to be ritually clean and pure in order to pray them. Women are therefore able to pray *du'a* when they are menstruating and during other times in which they are considered impure.

While not required to be ritually clean, Muslims are encouraged to make *du'a* in an appropriate way. One Southeast Asian lady said, "there is an etiquette to follow, such as starting with *Bismillah*, using good and polite language, using a soft voice, and ending with *amin*." Most Muslims pray *du'a* prayers with both palms upwards or cupped

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<sup>44</sup> "The Muslim Woman and her Ownself," Mission Islam, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.missionislam.com/family/mwomanownself.htm>.

to receive blessing,<sup>45</sup> and afterwards wipe their hands over their face to apply the blessing.<sup>46</sup> Other instructions include using “the clearest and most concise words,”<sup>47</sup> having an attitude of humility (which may be demonstrated by prostrating),<sup>48</sup> calling upon God “with a mixture of hope and fear” (hope that God will hear the *du’a* and fear that God will be displeased with the actions of the supplicant),<sup>49</sup> facing the *qiblah* (the direction of Mecca),<sup>50</sup> and repeating the *du’a* three times.

Pakistani-American Muslim preacher Yasir Qadhi’s book about *du’a* provides two chapters on “The Pre-conditions of *Du’ā*” and “The Etiquette of *Du’ā*,” as well as a chapter on “Discouraged Acts During *Du’ā*.” He suggests that because *du’ā* is a “type of worship,” one’s *du’a* will not be accepted if certain pre-requirements are not met, and one discouraged act includes making grammatical mistakes in one’s Arabic (suggesting

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<sup>45</sup> The posture for *du’a* is somewhat contested, with various *hadith* being cited as evidence that Muhammad raised his palms upward on some occasions but not all. Some Muslims are taught to perform *du’a* with their palms together. See: Ustadh Salman Younas, “How Should the Hands Be Held During Supplication?” SeekersGuidance, June 13, 2011, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://seekersguidance.org/answers/hanafi-fiqh/how-should-the-hands-be-held-during-supplication/> and “Is Raising Hands in *du’a* (dua) bid’ah?” Islam Stack Exchange, August 26, 2012, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://islam.stackexchange.com/questions/2341/is-raising-hands-in-dua-dua-bidah>.

<sup>46</sup> As with posture, the wiping of hands over the face is a common, though somewhat contested, practice. For a discussion of the practice in various schools of Islam, see “What is the ruling on wiping one’s face with his hand after supplication?” Dar Al-Ifta Al-Missriyah, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=6741>.

<sup>47</sup> Aisha Stacey, “Dua (Supplication) (part 2 of 4): Praise God in the way He deserves to be praised,” The Religion of Islam, December 6, 2010, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/4044/dua-supplication-part-2/>.

<sup>48</sup> Huda, “Du’a: Personal Supplication in Islam,” Learn Religions, May 3, 2017, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.learnreligions.com/dua-personal-supplication-in-islam-2003809>.

<sup>49</sup> Stacey, “Dua (Supplication).”

<sup>50</sup> Huda, “Du’a: Personal Supplication in Islam,” Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.learnreligions.com/dua-personal-supplication-in-islam-2003809>.

that Arabic is the preferred language of *du'a*).<sup>51</sup> All of Qadhi's recommendations regarding *du'a* are made with reference to the Qur'an and *hadith*.

It may be that such etiquette and pre-requisites relate primarily to the fixed type of *du'a* which come from the Qur'an or *hadith*, because other Muslims speak of being able to come before God in *du'a* prayer at any time and in any way. Ayesha Syahira, a Malaysian author, suggests that "The things we recite are verses that we were told to memorise, but rarely do we truly talk to Allah about the troubles that are weighing down our hearts. Because it feels awkward."<sup>52</sup> Another author states that

We can make a direct call to Allah (swt) anytime, anywhere. You don't have to wait for the right time to call or spend thousands on the phone bill. All you need to do is to call on Allah (swt) with sincerity. You can whisper to Him (swt) or talk out loud; you can cry before Him (swt) or even laugh; you can remember Him (swt) standing, sitting or lying on your side, in solitude or in a crowd. And He (swt) will most definitely be there for you – guaranteed!<sup>53</sup>

### **Why make *du'a*?**

*Du'a* are made for a variety of reasons. Ayesha Syahira encourages her readers to find comfort through making *du'a*. She says

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<sup>51</sup> Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, "Du'ā The Weapon of the Believer: a treatise on the status and etiquette of du'ā in Islām" (Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidaayah), 59. Accessed July 6, 2020,

<http://kalamullah.com/Books/Dua%20The%20Weapon%20Of%20The%20Believer.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Ayesha Syahira, "Talk to Allah," goodreads, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/52863192-talk-to-allah>.

<sup>53</sup> Binte Aqeel, "Talk to Allah," Hiba Magazine, August 8, 2017, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.hibamaqazine.com/talk-to-allah-swt/#>.

...when we are down and sad, we seek other means for comforting ourselves, but often they offer only temporary respite. We forget that true comfort lies only with Allah.

Crying out to God when experiencing troubles appears to be a common reason for making freer *du'a* prayers. One Middle Eastern lady told me how she prays and writes in a journal to God everything that is on her heart and mind, because God is the only one that she can trust - not even her own mother or sister. Afterwards she feels a sense of relief. Last week, she was sharing with me about a situation that involved disappointment, sadness, longing and some fear and confusion in decision-making. She had prayed about the situation (during her informal prayer [*du'a*] after her formal evening & early morning prayers), and the next morning felt uneasy and frightened—i.e. not at peace about going ahead with a particular choice—and interpreted that lack of peace as an indication that it was not the 'fate' that God wanted for her. She told me how she had been crying all night, and crying to God, asking him why he is withholding good things from her, why her situation is still as it is.

This lady's experience of 'journaling' may be developing as a modern trend, with *du'a* journals aimed at Muslim women being advertised online through Amazon and other outlets.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> One particular journal is listed as "currently unavailable" from Amazon, access August 7, 2020, <https://www.amazon.com/Dua-Journal-Quran-Reflection-reflection/dp/0692136487?th=1>, but has 40 four- to five-star ratings. It also has its own website, accessed July 1, 2020: <https://theduajournal.com/>

The prayer that this lady prayed may have been the *salat al-istikhara*, the prayer for guidance. This prayer has two components, one being two sets of formal *raka'āt* (prayer with prescribed movements and words), and the other being a *du'a*. A couple of websites advise that the *du'a* can be prayed by itself without the *raka'āt*. For example:

Some people believe that you can only perform istikhara in a state of wudu or after a salah, but if it is not possible to perform the istikhara prayer, like as a traveler or on your menstruation, you can simply read the istikhara dua on its own.<sup>55</sup>

The gaining of blessings, particularly asking for healing or good health, are also primary reasons why *du'a* are made. In South Asia, older women who attend labouring mothers regularly recite fixed *du'a* from booklets. COVID-19 has raised the prominence of these types of *du'a*, with many circulating on social media platforms. Besides prayers for health, women frequently pray for their children's educational and business success. Women's desires are often related to their relational safety:

They want to be free of family tension & obligation, to live at peace with others, to have good husbands/romantic marriages, to be known deeply and loved and pursued, to feel safe in family relationships (i.e. not to be the victims of family gossip, husband's emotional neglect or financial or physical abuse), to be honoured, to have meaning and hope for the future (i.e. marriage, good work and education opportunities).

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<sup>55</sup> Zakeeya, "A Muslima's Guide to Istikhara," Muslimommy, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.muslimommy.com/blog/simple-guide-istikhara-prayer-seeking-guidance-allah?rq=dua>

Protection from evil is a further key theme in *du'a*. One Southeast Asian university student said that she makes *du'a* after *sholat* “to be protected from Satan,” while another said “My mother always reminds me that whenever I feel like something bad is bothering me I have to pray *du'a*, which are Ayat Kursi and [Surah] Yaseen.”<sup>56</sup> *Surah Yaseen* is also recited to ward off misfortune/jinn/ghosts from a place:

One friend described the bathroom as the meeting place of Satan and the demons and talked at length about what cannot be done in the bathroom. She said ‘Every time you go in you must pray for protection from the deceiver and deceptions... You need to be careful pouring hot water on the ground because you will burn Satan and the demons so you always need to pray a *du'a* for protection.’

Another woman spoke about a Muslim friend who shared how she had felt attacked by evil spirits at night and had struggled for weeks to find a solution—quoting special verses or seeking advice from an Imam, until she finally prayed directly for God to help and found relief.

Intriguingly, David Parkin suggests that among Swahili speaking people in East Africa, *du'a* can be prayed to other spirits or harmful forces in order to “enable someone to avenge themselves of an enemy, nothing less than witchcraft,” and that one meaning of *du'a* in Swahili can be “curse.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Ayat al-Kursi* is verse 255 of Surah al-Baqarah, and is often recited to ward off evil spirits. Surah Yaseen (Yasin) is the 36<sup>th</sup> Surah in the Qur'an, which talks about God's sovereignty and unlimited power.

<sup>57</sup> This reminds us that terminology can be used differently across the Islamic world. David Parkin, “Invocation: *Salaa, Dua, Sadaka* and the Question of Self-determination,” in *Islamic Prayer across the Indian Ocean: Inside and Outside the Mosque*, ed. David Parkin and Stephen Headley (Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2000), 144.

Some Muslims do not feel as though they can talk to God freely about things they're struggling with: "Foreigners talk about feelings with God, but we don't." They see *du'a* as situational, what they say in specific situations, rather than for specific personal needs.

Women in North Africa commented that they cannot pray to God about problems in their marriages: "We should solve that. Allah isn't the one we should ask." A Middle Eastern woman spoke with a Christian friend about the pain in her life. The friend read a Psalm with her that spoke about telling God of the pain, pouring it out to him and him giving peace: "She looked at me with such sadness in her eyes and said, 'we can never do that.'" Another Christian woman commented that "it seems to me there is no breathing space for wrestling when things are hurtful or don't make sense." Many Muslim women feel unable to bare their souls to God and to cry out to him, despite a desire to do so:

My friend thinks it is disrespectful to Allah to express sorrow or pain to him. 'We must always say thank you no matter what you are feeling.' When I asked why, she said 'We must honour Allah, it is shameful to complain or show feelings because then you aren't honouring him. It's shame.' I asked, 'Doesn't Allah know how we are feeling anyway?' The response was 'yes, but we can't show it. It is shame.'

### **Is *du'a* effective?**

Those who are 'pure of heart' are often thought to make more effective *du'a* than others.

My Middle Eastern friend prays *du'a* on the night of power hoping that she's doing it 'right' and that God might accept her prayers, hoping that she has a pure

enough heart to be acceptable because she believes that God only answers the prayers of the pure hearted.

In one North African country there is a particular word for a person who is close to God, and others will go to that person for prayer because God will hear them. Schulz notes that “many Malian Muslims seek the assistance of religious specialists ... to increase the efficiency of petitionary prayer...”<sup>58</sup>. Muslim women often see Christian women as having a “closer” relationship with God, or as having “purer hearts,” and thus have desired their prayers, believing them to be more effective. A lady from North Africa saw answer to a prayer that a Christian friend had prayed, “and then she thought I was her talisman to get answers from Jesus...she thinks some people’s prayers are more effective.” A Christian in the Middle East commented that friends perceive her and her husband as “people who can access God’s ear and power,” and that they identify her as “a real Christian, and God listens to her, she’s a good person, and these works make her close to God.” A health worker in South Asia said, “People here beg us to pray for them. There is a big belief in it that it helps.” One South-Central Asian woman felt that she could not come to God because she was having an affair, and she could not call on him because of her actions. She was then happy for a Christian friend to pray for her, using the friend as an intercessor before God.

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<sup>58</sup> Dorothea E. Schulz, “(Re)Turning to Proper Muslim Practice: Islamic Moral Renewal and Women’s Conflicting Assertions of Sunni Identity in Urban Mali,” *Africa Today* 54, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 21-43, Indiana University Press, 40. Accessed July 22, 2020, <http://www.istor.com/stable/27666929>.

There are situations, and times where *du'a* are more likely to be accepted. In the last third of the night, while drinking *Zamzam* water, between the call to prayer and the start of *salah*, at the end of *salah*, while prostrating, and particularly on the Night of Power, are all thought to be times of particular efficacy. As explained in more detail below, attitude is also important. Those making *du'a* should not doubt that God is listening and can answer. They should not lose hope or become impatient when they do not see “the results” they want.

The question of how, when, and even if, God answers petitionary prayers is discussed in an article by Atif Khalil, who examines the work of classical Qur'anic exegetes and Sufi psychologists. He concludes that God does respond to every petition, but that the nature of that response differs for each petitioner. Firstly, God will deny the petition of those who do “not fulfill or strive to meet the conditions of *du'a*,”<sup>59</sup> conditions which include the etiquette and pre-requisites already discussed above. The petitioner must “refrain, within one’s capacity, from sinful behaviour,” because God does not love transgressors and therefore he cannot be obliged to respond to their petitions.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, while striving to meet all the conditions of *du'a* is “the surest way to guarantee a response in the particular form one desires,” Khalil acknowledges that even then there is no actual guarantee one will receive one’s petition. If this is the case, then the petitioner will receive a greater reward in the afterlife. Thirdly, if the petitioner has asked for something which is not in their best

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<sup>59</sup> Atif Khalil, “Is God Obligated to Answer Prayers of Petition (Du'a)? The Response of Classical Sufis and Qur'anic Exegetes,” *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 37, no. 2 (2011): 93-109, Penn State University Press, 105. Accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jmedirelicult.37.2.0093>.

<sup>60</sup> Qur'an Surah 7:55 “Call upon your Lord in humility and privately; indeed, He does not like transgressors.” (Saheed International version) Khalil, “Is God Obligated,” 97.

interest, God will not grant that petition, but may provide a different, more suitable “gift,” and a “worldly tribulation may also be averted as a consequence of the prayer.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, through *du’ā* the petitioner ultimately gains “the gift of experiencing intimate communion with God.”<sup>62</sup>

Christian women report being amazed at the ability of their Muslim friends to endure hardship and suffering, being cautious not to question God’s care for them, or speak out about the difficulties of life. Those who suffer, or whose *du’ā* prayers are not answered in the way they would like, say that it is God’s will for them, to make them “stronger” or to “help them pray more” or make them “a better parent” or make them “the person they are today.” They make comments such as “Allah’s given me this suffering, it’s a blessing, Allah thinks I’m strong enough to endure this,” and some express the belief that “God tests humans, to see if they’ll follow his ways.”

### **What do *du’ā* tell us about women’s views of God?**

For many Sunni Muslims, conviction about predestination (*al-qadr*) is a strong central teaching, and leads to a stoicism in the face of difficulties and struggles which finds its expression in comments such as “God allows it, so it must be in his will, we can’t change it, must accept it and move on.” The commonly used phrase *insha’allah*, “if God is willing,” recognises that “God is sovereign, and knows all things and what’s best for us, we have to be content and trust Him and look at the bad experiences as opportunities to learn...the reality is that God allows bad things to happen for our own

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<sup>61</sup> Khalil, “Is God Obligated,” 105-106.

<sup>62</sup> Khalil, “Is God Obligated,” 106.

good.” As a consequence, prayer is less about a relationship with God and more about duty and submission to what God has ordained—though this does not negate supplication, since even the supplications themselves are predestined.<sup>63</sup>

In light of this it can be surprising to hear Muslim women from a variety of backgrounds speak about feeling “near” or “close” to God while they are praying *du’a*. A Christian working in South Central Asia commented that “A lady very close to me describes constantly praying to God and feeling God’s nearness.” Other women from South Central Asia made statements such as “Sometimes I feel like he [God] is directly inside my heart and spirit,” “When I say God’s name, I feel my heart beat,” “Because I am a Muslim, I am friendly with God... we should talk directly to God.” Women in North Africa describe feeling as if they are “between God’s hands.” A Central Asian lady felt that God does listen to her prayers. In the Middle East, one lady “feels God with her personally, surrounding her, supporting her. God is never distant. He is kind, patient, forgiving, loving, supportive and wants us to draw near to him.” Another described feeling close to God while performing the optional, very early morning prayer “because everyone else is asleep, everything is calm and I can concentrate, and I get a feeling of God being close in my heart/mind/soul, and I can pour out my heart to Him and often cry.” In a blog post, Sadijah Ali states that

When we really break it down, Du’a is a fundamental part of our existence, because it is just talking. We are talking to Allah (swt). How much more simple can it be? As a child, Du’a was never relayed to me in that way, and I always

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<sup>63</sup> Rabee’ Al-Aakhir, “The Effects of Prayer and Destiny: Fatwa no. 90117,” islamweb.net, June 6, 2005, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.islamweb.net/en/fatwa/90117/>.

viewed it as something formal, something we have to do at the end of prayer and gatherings. Now, I realise Du'a is so much more, it is a direct way of communicating with the One who wants to listen, anytime, anywhere...Allah...loves it when you ask of Him, and it is through asking from Him that you gain a deeper closeness.<sup>64</sup>

Women often describe God's nearness in terms of an emotional peace that they feel when they're calmly meditating, during the *haji*, or in communal prayer. Some women may refer to a verse in the Qur'an which says "We [God] are closer to him [man] than his jugular vein." (Surah Qaaf 50:16), or another verse which says "And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me." (Surah Al-Baqara 2:186).<sup>65</sup>

It is easy to assume that Muslim women who speak about being "near" or "close" to God mean the same thing that Christians mean. However, if we dig deeper, we find that while the terminology may appear similar, the meanings behind the words are quite different. The context of Surah Qaaf 50:16, is more about judgment than a statement of comfort: the preceding part of the verse speaks of God as Creator knowing what "dark suggestions his [man's] soul makes to him,"<sup>66</sup> and the following verses tell of the two angels which sit upon the right and left shoulders of each person, recording their deeds and words.

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<sup>64</sup> Sadijah Ali, "The Power of a Conversation with Allah: Du'a," Amaliah, January 9, 2018, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.amaliah.com/post/40623/power-conversation-dua>.

<sup>65</sup> [www.searchtruth.com](http://www.searchtruth.com).

<sup>66</sup> Yusuf Ali translation. [https://www.searchtruth.com/chapter\\_display.php?chapter=50&translator=2](https://www.searchtruth.com/chapter_display.php?chapter=50&translator=2)

A Muslim website expresses the idea that “closeness” to God entails human movement towards him rather than the other way around: “Du’a is a way *we* become closer to God, acknowledging that He alone can give us our wishes, as well as recognising our shortcomings.”<sup>67</sup> Thus when Muslim women speak of “closeness” or “nearness” to God, what they may actually be expressing is that they are doing what they can to get near to him. For some, this desire for connection and closeness may be found through *du’a*. Others find it during the intensity of community experiences, particularly *hajj* or *umrah*. For some Shi’ite women the “nearness of God was linked to doing the *hajj*, being born again, having peace, because they knew God knew them.” A Sunni lady said she felt close to God on *umrah* because: “you were close to all the people around you, with no fighting between people, but a kind of unity and all desiring to be close to God.” Another explained that “because everyone on *umrah* or *hajj* is ritually clean, the place is holy, and planes are not allowed to fly over and get in the space between people and God, God is more present.” A Christian said that “Many people I’ve spoken to who’ve been on *hajj* or *umrah* talk about it as a spiritual, almost supernatural experience. They talk about peace and feeling a heightened spirituality/interaction with God.”

This feeling of closeness to God through intense community experiences was also described by a Muslim woman speaking about the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*) during Ramadan:

It's about weeping and submissiveness. God comes down the first heaven and answers prayers. It's seclusion, you and God alone. You feel as if you're flying,

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<sup>67</sup> Italics added. “Islamic Prayer/Du’a,” ARCC, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.arrcc.org.au/reflect-prayers-islamic>.

pray till tears come, it's a strange feeling, tears come suddenly. You pray to God, feel with everyone, love everyone, feel soft, forget worries...

A couple of women have mentioned that the Muslims they know want to feel a closeness with God, perhaps that they have felt before on some occasion, and the way this can happen is through obedience: “If they obey then they move themselves closer to God.” “To get back to that closeness, she needs to be observant. She sees closeness and connection as something to be maintained by being a good and religious person.” When a Southeast Asian lady agreed with a Christian that her desire was to know God more and draw closer to him through prayer and fasting, the Christian noted that “her account of fasting and other duties always goes back to reward and rules.”

Although some women do describe feeling ‘near’ to God, they do not express a sense of personal intimacy with God and feel that such a relationship with him “is too foreign” from what they know. Those who express a feeling of closeness to God are doing so on the basis that *they* have done things to achieve that. It is a one way relationship—“God can be close to us, hear us, and know us, but we can’t know him.” One Christian has suggested that a Muslim sense of closeness to God is “Sort of like coming close to a beautiful, awesome wonder—being close to it inspires awe, but the object or wonder itself is not moved or affected by you.”

Many other Muslim women also suggest that closeness to God is not something that can be achieved. North African women have expressed the belief that closeness with God “is not their right, not something they could search for. They have to submit, and God is far away. If you try to bring him close, that’s a sign of irreverence and disrespect.” Women in East Africa were offended by Christian talk of God as Father and friend. They declared that it was “sinful” to speak of him in such a way. A woman in

East Asia said that “God is far and great and doesn’t have a relationship with us like the way you [Christians] describe it.” For women in Southeast Asia, it seems as though their *du’a* “are more about requests, rather than finding God or even looking for him.”

One question we can ask is that if women do feel close to God through *du’a*, is that a two-way connection? How does God communicate with them? Can they hear God for themselves? The answer to these questions appears to be that no-one expects to hear from God, since there is no personal relationship with him. One woman said “God doesn’t talk to us. We talk to God.” Since it is not expected, when it does appear that God is trying to communicate, women may not believe it:

A friend is going through tough time at the moment. She says she’s waking up in the middle of the night, outside normal prayer times, and really wanting to spend time with God. I’ve asked her “could it be that God is calling you to spend time with him?” She said, “do you think that’s possible?” She feels like that’s happening, but unsure it is possible.

If Christians try to explain their personal relationship with God and how they hear from God, it can be met with blank looks and a lack of understanding. One Central Asian BMB relates that Muslim women have corrected her when she says that God has spoken to her: “the better way to say that is ‘God put in my heart this or that.’” She surmises that “God for them is pure, powerful, fearful and they need to respect him (like a king not like a father), and not just have conversation with him.” When a Christian spoke with women about reading Scripture, looking at what it says and what God is saying to her through it, the response was “that’s different, the Qur’an is explained to us, what God wants us to do”—thus focussing on obedience to what God has already laid out, rather than developing an ongoing relationship with him. Another

response that has been heard is “if you hear a voice from God, it signifies that death is near,” and one BMB “spoke about great fear and a sense for impending death when he heard God calling him as part of his conversion journey.”

### **What is the relationship between *du'a* and Christian prayer?**

In making a distinction between Christian prayer and Islamic prayer, one website asserts that prayer **is** *salah*, and that “Dua certainly holds certain similarities to the prayer of Christians, however it should not be confused with what Muslims call prayer.” *Du'a* in this understanding is a “way of feeling that connection [the direct connection one has during *salah*] to God at anytime (sic), in any place.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, another website separates *du'a* from “prayer” when discussing when it is appropriate to make *du'a*.<sup>69</sup> It is possible that the distinction which this author is making between *du'a* and Christian prayer is referring to the fixed type of *du'a*. Whether this is actually the case or not, *du'a* may be seen as something different to “prayer,” (i.e. *salah*) which may explain why many Muslims feel that Christians “don’t pray.” Furthermore, if *du'a* are primarily thought of as fixed verses from the Qur’an and *hadith*, it explains why some Christians have had the experience of giving someone a written prayer quoting Scripture, which is then kept and continually repeated—for example, over a sick person, as would be done with a fixed *du'a*.

So what is prayer for Christians? What do our prayers say about our relationship with God? What are the similarities and differences between our prayers

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<sup>68</sup> Aisha Stacey, “Dua (Supplication) (part 1 of 4): What is Dua?” The Religion of Islam, December 6, 2010, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/4005/dua-supplication-part-1/>.

<sup>69</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, “The Proper Way to Make Dua,” IslamiCity, January 20, 2020, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.islamicity.org/8536/the-proper-way-to-make-dua/>.

and Muslim *du'a*? Given that there are numerous Christian perspectives on prayer, just as there are different Muslim perspectives on *du'a*, this article focuses on what biblical prayer can tell us about God's character, his accessibility, and how his people have a relationship with him.<sup>70</sup>

The foundation of biblical prayer is a covenant relationship with God, an “everlasting covenant” made with Abraham and his offspring “throughout their generations” (Gen 17:1-14). God promised to Moses that he would be the Israelite's God, and that they would be his people (Ex 6:6-8). On this basis, the Israelites can speak to, call out to, or cry out to God (expressions which are frequently used to denote prayer). The nature of God is that he reveals himself to people, and those of other nations are not excluded from this revelation—the Lord comes to Hagar in the wilderness, and she declares that “You are a God who sees me...Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” (Gen 16:8-13)

Jesus' death initiates the new covenant that is prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34, the culmination of God's covenant-making actions to redeem and form a people for himself. In this new covenant, followers now have an intimacy with and access to God which was only foreshadowed in the Old Testament. It is this intimacy with God which is an unfulfilled longing within the hearts of many Muslims. With the coming of Jesus, God himself has taken the action to draw near to us, and to approach us. The coming of Christ is God's final and foremost revelation, the Living Word in personal form.

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<sup>70</sup> Since the vocabulary of prayer in the Bible is varied in both the original languages and in translation, this article will concentrate on a few key terms, as detailed in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*: ‘Cry’ 1:408-412; ‘Lament’ 2:416-424; ‘Prayer, Ask, Kneel, Beg, Worship, Knock’ 2:855-886; ‘Thank, Praise, Eucharist’ 3:816-820. It will not seek to explore all terms, nor construct a biblical theology of prayer. Bible quotes are taken from the English Standard Version.

In Jesus, God makes his blessing and power available to help all those in need, whether they are Israelites or not—he initiates the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, going against all cultural norms of behaviour (Jn 4); he heals the Roman centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1-10); and he frees the Gerasene man from unclean spirits (Mark 5:1-20).

The Trinitarian nature of God is important in prayer, since the persons of the Trinity enable and draw prayer in particular ways, always reflecting the intimacy of the triune relationship of God himself: we are assured that we are turning towards a relational entity, a God who loves us and abides in us (1 John 4:7-17). This is a major difference between *du’a* and prayer in the Bible. Jesus enables God’s people to “draw near to the throne of grace” with confidence “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need,” since we now have a high priest who sympathizes with us in our weaknesses because he “has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb 4:14-16) Jesus shows that we can address God as ‘Father’ when we pray (Luke 11:2). He also uses relational terms to address people, particularly women, directly—“Daughter, your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34). In Romans Paul asserts that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Rom 8:26-27)<sup>71</sup> The concept of intercession (*Shafa’ah*) is a highly contested one in Islam and is related to forgiveness on the Day of

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<sup>71</sup> These verses use the Greek *hyperentynchanei* and *entynchanei* from the root *entynchanō* and translate them as *intercede*.

Judgment.<sup>72</sup> This is very different to Paul's meaning, where he assures God's people that even when we do not know what God's will is and thus how best to pray, the Spirit "knows the will of the Father and he asks that the particular decisions and circumstances come to pass which will in fact magnify Christ best."<sup>73</sup> In this context, God is revealed as one who is present and actively involved together with the believer in prayer, through the Holy Spirit.

Thanksgiving, praise, and worship, in which God's people recognise who God is, what he has done, and what he can do, are major themes of prayer in the Bible: for example Hannah's prayer of praise and worship after Samuel is born in 1 Sam 2:1-10, and Mary's Magnificat upon receiving Elizabeth's greeting and blessing in Luke 1:46-55. In the Old Testament, praise of God is often associated with confession of sin and prayer for his mercy, as seen for example in Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8:22-53. In the New Testament, Paul exhorts his audience to make their petitions to God with simultaneous thanksgiving to him (e.g. Phil 4:6, Col 4:2). Similarly, in many fixed and free *du'a* Muslims express their thanks to God, acknowledging who he is, asking for his assistance, and requesting his forgiveness for sin.<sup>74</sup> Unlike in fixed *du'a*, however, there are no proscriptions for etiquette regarding prayer for God's people, though the actions of kneeling and prostration are both associated with it: kneeling at times of

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<sup>72</sup> There are verses in the Qur'an which both support the idea of intercession (e.g. Surah 2:255) and negate it (e.g. Surah 2:254). See for example, "The Concept of Intercession in Islam- Part 1," New Muslim, August 19, 2019, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.newmuslim.net/abcs-of-islam/articles-of-faith/the-concept-of-intercession-in-islam-part-1/> and <https://www.answerinq-islam.org/Quran/Contra/intercession.html>.

<sup>73</sup> John Piper, "The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness, Part 2," Desiring God, June 2, 2002, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-spirit-helps-us-in-our-weakness-part-2>

<sup>74</sup> Oh Allah! You are my Lord. There is no deity but You. You created me and I am your slave-servant. I am trying my best to keep my oath of faith to You, and to seek to live in the hope of Your promise. I seek refuge in You from my greatest evil deeds. I acknowledge Your blessings upon me, and I acknowledge my sins. So forgive me, for none but You can forgive sins. <https://www.learnreligions.com/prayers-of-thanks-2004522>; cf. <https://sunnah.com/urn/1616650>

urgent and earnest prayer (e.g. Luke 22:41, Acts 7:40 and 9:40), and to indicate the humility of the person praying before a holy, almighty God (e.g. Deut 9:18, 25). Just as some Muslims suggest they too can talk to God anywhere and at any time, God's people can come to pray before him anywhere, either in public or private—examples being at a well (Gen 24:26-27), from the belly of a fish (Jonah 2), on the side of a mountain (Matt 14:23), and while in prison (Acts 14:25).

As in *du'a*, God's people are encouraged to bring their requests to him and to ask him for the things they need (Matt 6:11). It is in these supplications and petitions that we see the most similarities between *du'a* and prayers in the Bible. Just as Muslims make *du'a* for children, protection, and health and healing, so too these are frequent requests made in the Bible. We read about Hannah's heartfelt, distressed prayer for a son in the temple of the Lord (1 Sam 1:17); Elijah cries out to God to heal the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kgs 17:17-24); James encourages believers to pray for those who are suffering and sick (Jas 5:13-16); and Paul says we should not "be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil 4:6) God's people ask with the assurance that he knows what they need and that he will not withhold from them (Luke 11:5-13). We also see prayers for protection from enemies, evil, and deliverance (1 Sam 7:8, Ps 142:5-7, Rom 15:30-33, Phil 1:18-19). Persistence in prayer is encouraged. A Canaanite woman who cries out to Jesus to deliver her demon-possessed daughter is not dissuaded by his initial silence and then rebuff, and her faith and persistence are rewarded by his granting of her request (Matt 15:21-28). Jesus also tells a parable about a widow and a judge specifically to show his disciples "that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1-8). Paul asks the Colossians to "continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." (Col 4:2)

As has been discussed above, while some Muslims do feel they can cry out to God, others do not, and they may certainly not feel free to complain to him about their situation. In contrast, intense, emotional lament prayers can be offered by God's people, as seen for example in the Psalms (e.g. Ps 69:3), in Lamentations (e.g. Lam 2:18-19), and in Habakkuk (e.g. Hab 1:2). On the Mount of Olives, Luke's gospel reports that Jesus "being in agony...prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Three times he entreats his Father "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me," yet still he prays "nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:38-44), and on the cross he cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1) In these prayers, God seems absent, far away, distant. God's people do not hold back their feelings, but openly pour out their hearts, beseeching God to act, to help them, and to not withhold his favour or mercy from them. God's people are not afraid to come to him and even complain to him but do so in as an expression of dependence upon him, trusting that he hears them, cares for them, and will answer them. The complaints, sorrow, and pain that are expressed in these prayers are framed within an understanding of God as both sovereign, all-powerful, and also all-loving, fundamentally good, and redemptive. Those praying do not doubt his goodness and commitment to them, but are complaining that their experience does not match the reality they believe in. In the same way, Martha states her complaint while at the same time making her faith explicit when she says to Jesus "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:32)

At the same time, our prayers are not purely for ourselves. The Lord's prayer puts praying for God's name to be kept holy ("hallowed") and for his kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven" above praying for our needs. We long for the day when the kingdom will fully come, and are to pray for the day when Jesus returns, when we will

be in the new heaven and the new earth, praising God eternally within his constant presence and blessing. We are to pray that others will come to know the Lord: Hezekiah prayed that God would not only save the Israelites from the king of Assyria, but that “all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone” (2 Kgs 19:19), and at Lazarus’ tomb Jesus thanks his Father for hearing him, praying this so that those standing around him would “believe that you sent me.” (John 11:42) Paul encourages the Colossians to continue in thankful prayer, and to pray for him and Timothy “that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” (Col 4:2-4) He also regularly models prayer which gives thanks for others and their faith, and which asks for their continued spiritual growth and understanding (Eph 1:15-21, Phil 1:3, Col 1:3-14).

## **Conclusion**

So what is the difference between the prayers that Christians make and those of Muslims? Sometimes, we may not feel that there is much difference in what our Muslim friends tell us, particularly when they speak of God being “near” or “close,” if they say they can “talk” to God, or if they speak about answered prayer. Thus, it is worth exploring their terminology more carefully. What does “nearness” or “closeness” to God mean for them—what does it look like? How is it manifest? If they can talk to God, can God talk to them, and if so, in what ways? What assurance do they have that God hears and answers their prayer and what does that assurance look like in practice? If God answers prayer, how does he do so? We can also acknowledge that God in his sovereignty may choose to answer their prayers in ways that are readily apparent to us as well as them and can thank God for that.

We can tell personal stories about how God is at work in our lives, and we can

speak about our relationship with him. We can pray with them and for them. Most of the time, women are happy to be prayed for and are often very touched, even crying. They say things like they've "never felt anything like that," or "it's so nice, you actually talk to God," and they comment that the prayers of Christians are "different," and "feel different," to theirs. They desire intimacy with God, yet are often unsure that they can come to Him: "My 'God loves your little girl very much, and cares that she is sick,' was met with 'Really? You think so? I hope so.'" For some Muslims "how Christians pray and actually relate to God has been the high point of coming to a Christian meeting. They're impressed by it." We can use more blessing prayers. We can give them written prayers or Scripture verses, trusting that God's word is "living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12) and that God can work through them:

A Muslim girl in our city was sent a text message by an ex-boyfriend, who was a Christian and who now lived on a different island. In it he challenged her to finish her evening prayers with the Lord's prayer. He wrote it out for her in the text message. So that evening she did exactly this - after her own evening prayers she recited the Lord's prayer, word for word. And that night God gave her a dream of Jesus. She did the same thing the next evening and had another dream of Jesus. The third evening she didn't bother with her own prayers and just recited the Lord's prayer. And God gave her a dream telling her where to go to get baptised. She did this and is now a strong follower of Christ despite facing serious opposition.

And we can keep praying for our friends, that they will come to know and experience a true intimacy with God that they are not yet able to imagine.