



In Touch with the Divine

I had gone with Ahmed to his Sufi group a couple of times, and this time there was an initiation rite for several new disciples. The initiation rites followed the more familiar activities of a sermon, ritual prayers and quiet chanting. After this the initiands gathered in a small group, a long scarf from the saint (the *pir*) went around the circle and all involved held on to it. There were ritual words and readings and then the *pir* touched each disciple to show where they had a special connection with the divine. For some it was the spleen, for others it was liver, heart or other bodily organs. The session ended with joint prayers and then a meal.

For such disciples in South Asia, belonging to a Sufi group (a Sufi *Torika*) is a key part of their religious life. Many hours are devoted to prayer and spiritual practices that they hope will enrich their lives and bring them closer to Allah. These practices include fairly orthodox looking times of communal prayer (a shared time of *dua* following on from *salah* prayers), chanting and listening to sermons, as well as practices more unfamiliar to me such as a small group of men chanting different sections of the Qur'an in unison. However, it's not just the unfamiliar practises that highlight differences in approach from what I am used to, but also the practises I thought reflect mine but are actually approached with different assumptions and aims. Understanding foundational assumptions and world views are important in engaging well with our Muslim neighbours and its worth looking at what these might be within the communities we are called to.

Grace – Physical and Empowering

As a Kiwi from a fairly evangelical background, I've imbibed descriptions of grace as "God's Riches At Christ's Expense". Grace is seen as God's goodness and benevolence

in action so that we are undeservedly saved as part of God's loving kindness. Moments of grace may show it in action, but we tend to conceive of his grace as an overarching will to goodness.

The idea of grace in many Muslim settings is rather different. The Arabic word *barakha* is changed in Bengali and pronounced *borkhot*, but the same concept seems to be in play. Rather than an overarching will to goodness, *borkhot/barakha* is more an active power, harboured in physical things, bringing about goodness when we are in touch with it. This idea of grace sees it as something physical and something spread by touch. A place, such as a saint's grave, may be a strong repository of this grace. Similarly a holy person, or holy object (such as holy *zamzam* water from the well in Mecca) may be a repository for this.

I've witnessed people coming back from the Haj being welcomed and embraced chest to chest, in the knowledge that some of their *borkhot* will rub off on to the welcomer. The immediate family will then limit such welcomes as they don't want all the *borkhot* to be eroded. Similarly, their hand luggage was 20kg of water from Mecca, which is kept and used judiciously for those wanting blessing (e.g. illness or fertility). We see a similar concept of grace in a physicality in the New Testament. Thus we can see in Acts 19.12 Paul's handkerchief and aprons were sent off to bring healing to sick people, as a physical carrier of grace and power. Similarly, we can note that for the Centurion to tell Jesus that he didn't need to come to touch to bring healing was seen as a marker of extraordinary faith, as normally touch would be required.

This concept of grace as a physical reality spread by touch lies behind activities such as pilgrimage, relics, holy water, being touched by holy people, amulets or other such mediators of touch. For example, a sick person may be taken to the imam, who, having made a diagnosis, chooses the right verses of the Qur'an and may copy them out

onto paper. Having done that he will burn the paper and put it in water which is then given to the patient for them to drink. This is an example of literally taking in the power and grace of scripture. However, the question arises, does that affect an understanding of prayer.

Prayer – Physical Grace Bringing Power and Blessing by the Touching of Sound

One of the activities that Ahmed would partake in, is that of a small group of men reciting the Qur'an. They will get together and divide the Qur'anic chapters up into even length segments. Sitting in a circle, they will all jointly loudly recite their section of the Qur'an. I had often wondered at the perceived benefits of this and being told it was "to receive blessing" didn't shed much light on matters. The blessing obviously doesn't lie in the mental cognition of understanding the word, as too much was happening at once. Something else is in play here.

A deeper understanding is gained when we realise that the sound of the Qur'an is a physical sense. As the sound washes over the hearer, so the physicality of the *barakha* of the words touches the hearer and brings blessing. The perception is of being touched by grace and blessed. It doesn't matter that there are 12 men reciting aloud at the same time, as that is just 12 sources of physical grace washing over them. It doesn't matter that, like 80% of Muslims, they don't understand Arabic. Rather, the holy language (c.f Latin) washes over them. This isn't about intellectual understanding, its physical reception of grace and power.

Audible Recitation – an Aural Icon?

It seems to me that looking at how icons in the orthodox church are perceived can further deepen our understanding of audible prayer for my Muslim neighbours. Icons have been described as being "windows to the divine". They are not seen as divine in

themselves, but like thin panes of glass in a window separating us from the outside, the warmth on the other side is almost palpable. As sunlight warms glass and can be felt through the glass, so the divine can be experienced through the icon. Thus we see actions like kissing icons, holding them to one's chest and otherwise touching them. To touch an icon is to be in touch with the divine by thin separation.

As an icon has a physicality, so the audible recitation of the Qur'an and other prayers is to have a physical carrier of the divine that can touch me and wash over me. The stance one takes in *dua* prayers is to stand with hands outstretched at waist height with palms up. When the prayer is finished, then I bring my hands up and wipe them over my face, almost like I've received handful of grace and I then wipe it on myself as a covering. So, one way of looking at this is recognising the similarity between Christian icon use and prayers by my Muslim neighbour. Its almost like prayer acts as an aural icon, an icon that touches my ears, instead of eyes and hands.

The Spirit in Mission

For Christians, this touch by the divine is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It's not just being touched by a power, but filled with the person of the Spirit, led by Him, and empowered by Him (Luke 4.1, 14). We know his power and his relating to us, speaking to us, and leading of us. Yes, the power (*dunamis*) of the Spirit is real, but more than that, so is His joining with us in our life.

One discussion on ritual purity and prayer that I had with some Muslim colleagues touched on how they see that we are ritually unclean and need to wash before prayers in order for our prayers to be effective. The sad fact was that ritual uncleanness happened so quickly after this. For them, the world touched us and made us unclean and we were trapped by that. I then made my point:

We're supposed to be slaves to Allah (*abd'Allah*), but it seems that to live like this is to be slaves to dirt, slaves to impurity. This separates us from Allah, and keeps us separated from Him. Wouldn't it be good if, instead of the world touching us and making us unclean, wouldn't it be good if his Holy Spirit (His *pak-Ruh*), came into us, filled us and flowed out from us. So instead of the world touching us and making us unclean, His Holy Spirit would flow through us, touch the world and make it clean.

To say my friends were amazed and astonished that this might even be possible is an understatement. "Yes, if that was possible, that would be good news indeed!". Good news, indeed.

Conclusion

The power of grace, *barakha*, is seen as having a strong physical sense to it. Thus grace is thought of as spreading by touch. When my Muslim neighbours are at prayer, for them, the sound is imbued with grace, with *barakha*. To hear this is to be touched by grace, to be blessed and receive physical benefits. As a Christian, I can add to that. This grace is not just possible through external physicality, but is part of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the Spirit that helps us know God as *abba*, Father. When we pray his grace doesn't only flow over us, it flows through us, as the Spirit helps us pray.