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PRAYER—Continued

discussion." He admitted that cultural barriers still limit the practice of kneeling among evangelicals. "It doesn't quite go along with looking good, which is a great American value." Merrill said.

While kneeling was rejected by Puritans, said Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, there is historical precedent for the posture—in the revivalistic camp meeting tradition of evangelicalism. In 1991, Charles Stanley, a former Southern Baptist Convention president and television evangelist from Atlanta, slowly encouraged an annual gathering of influential politicians and businessmen to get down on their knees. At the First Baptist Church in Dallas, everyone kneels to receive Communion.

"When church leaders such as Stanley and W.A. Criswell of the Dallas church endorse the practice, it has a legitimizing effect," George said. "If they do it, it must be all right."

Why such a diverse viewpoint on how to worship God among people of the same religion? Even within the same group or sect, the liturgy may change depending on the mood of the time and the charisma of the leader. Why not follow the example from the Scripture? After all, it is common ground for the different groups within religion, in this case Christianity.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus kneels down in Gethsemane, shortly before his arrest, to utter the famous prayer, "not my will, but Yours be done." There are other indications in the Gospels that Jesus and his disciples humbled themselves before God during prayer.

Biblical texts also show that prominent Jewish leaders and prophets from Solomon to Daniel knelt in prayer. However, the practice is not in public worship today except for the Avodah rite during

Yom Kippur. Even on that day, only the service leaders may sometimes kneel or prostrate themselves.

It is part of the daily prayers of Judaism: "We bow the head and bend the knee before God," but not a knee hits the ground.

"Aside from that one day each year when you re-enact ancient custom, the practice of kneeling has been eliminated from the Jewish liturgy altogether," said Rabbi Daniel Syme of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. He said an idea in Jewish tradition that has grown stronger over the centuries is that Jewish people and God are partners in 'fixing the world.' "While one may show deference to a partner, one doesn't bow down to a partner," Syme said. Hoffman, a liturgy professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, said most Jews take the theological position that they have a covenant with God. "We are not unworthy. We are worthy. So we stand face to face with God," he said.

The idea that 'God is not omnipotent' is promoted by some Jews. Rabbi Harold Kushner put it aptly in his best selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: "...God would like people to get what they deserve, but He cannot always arrange it ... I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by law of nature, and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom".

It is probably this view of God that brought about the elimination of kneeling in the Jewish daily prayer. When God is no longer all powerful and is reduced to a mere 'partner' of humanity, there is no need to humble oneself before Him.

This "foolish and arrogant" attitude—using Philip Kiernan's words—is not surprising, in light of the Quranic verse 17:4.

It fulfills the prophecy that the Children of Israel will fall to the extremes of arrogance. It also reflects a hyper-inflated ego which becomes a form of idolatry, a human trait shared by anybody who believes in God but ascribes partner(s) to Him.

According to the Quran, a specific way of prayer—*salat* (contact prayer)—was practiced by God's messengers, from Abraham, Ismail, to Moses and Jesus, as well as Muhammad (48:29, 21:73, 10:87, 19:31,55). The correct practice of contact prayer involves not only acts of humbling oneself before the Creator. More importantly, the contact prayer is observed to remember God and God only—to worship Him alone—because there is no other god beside Him (20:14, 72:18).

However, even among those who practice the *salat* today, i.e. the Muslims, invoking other names during *salat* is the norm. This defeats the purpose of the *salat*. Unknowingly, they nullify their *salat*. Hence, even the correct posture during prayer can be no more than a mockery and an act of hypocrisy, as we learn in 8:35 and 4:142.

By discarding the words of God in the Scripture, a large majority of Jews and Christians, as well as Muslims, have fallen into the category of 'those who lost the contact prayers' (19:59).

(This article is a sidebar to sister Janet's article in last month's Perspective. Much of the material is based on two articles "You can't tell the religion by who kneels anymore", and "Islam, Judaism are extremes in their postures of worship" by A.P. correspondent David Briggs, published in the Arizona Daily Star on May 9, 1992).

Gatut Adisoma

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

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The Man Behind the



Who is the real man behind the "X"?

A couple of weeks ago, I was driving in my car and heard a radio announcer commenting about newly released movies. I could tell by his voice that the announcer was a white American. Joking about Spike Lee's new movie "Malcolm X," he said: "That one is not for us!" I asked myself (although I knew the answer) who is "the us" he is referring to? Frankly, I found it quite interesting to hear someone unwittingly "broadcast" their group exclusiveness, denial, and fear of the legacy of Malcolm "X" with such a strong sense that the listening audience was in agreement. Despite the fact that the man behind the "X" genuinely denounced all forms of racism near the end of his life, I also hear some African-Americans espouse hatred of whites in his name. Regardless of their reasons, it seems that many people currently cannot see or do not choose to see the man behind the "X." But, the "X" is in fashion—on hats, shirts, posters, mugs, just about anything that can hold impression and sell. But, the "X" cannot invite you to think and reflect on the man. Although no holiday has been set aside in his name, the man is and has been a hero to many minorities in this country and people from third world countries. There are also whites in America and abroad who recognize his contributions to the struggle for human rights and freedom for all people.

The man behind the "X" journeyed from abject conditions of racism and poverty, coupled with crime in his early life to the attainment of the purpose of life. Enraged by racism and social injustice, and propelled by a drive to get "his share," he pursued idols along his journey that he thought would bring dignity and happiness—money, drugs, women, and expensive clothes.

The man behind the "X" hated what was passed off as "religion." So much so that he was nicknamed "Satan" during his prison days. By denouncing the falsehoods, distortions, and hypocrisy of Christianity while in prison, the man was relieved of the group pressure to follow the practices of a misguided majority and minority—be it ethnic or religious. Yet, his thirst for spiritual direction did not die. He was invited and sought refuge in the Nation of Islam—a large group of self-supporting African-Americans who taught a combined doctrine of distorted teachings of Islam and reverse racism to nullify their imposed inferiority complex. Malcolm literally revered the organization and its leader Elijah Muhammad until he realized Elijah's on-going hypocritical practices. This was the biggest idol of them all, the toughest test for him in his journey.

His trip to Mecca to observe the Hajj pilgrimage had a dramatic effect on him. The following quote was taken from his autobiography as told to Alex Haley (Ballantine Books, New York, 1973):

"My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the Holy Land, I saw what I never had seen in thirty-nine years here in America. I saw all races, all colors,—blue-eyed blonds to black skinned Africans—in true brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshiping as one! ..."

He had promised himself never to follow any individual or teaching that proved to be false. Early on, he committed himself to the truth and sought it where he could find it. At any given time, the man behind the "X" tried to adhere to the truth as he understood it. But, upon realizing his false practices, he would readily give them up.

"In Mecca, too, I had played back for myself the twelve years I had spent with Elijah

continued

First day of Ramadan: February 22, 1993

Last day of Ramadan: March 22, 1993

(Note: May vary depending on your location. In the next issue, we will explain how you can determine the month of fasting in your area, God willing.)

Muhammad as if it were a motion picture. I guess, it would be impossible for anyone ever to realize fully how complete was my belief in Elijah Muhammad. I believed in him not only as a leader in the ordinary human sense, but also I believed in him as a divine leader. I believed he had no human weaknesses or faults, and that, therefore, he could make no mistakes and he could do no wrong. There on a Holy World hilltop, I realized how very dangerous it is for people to hold any human being in such esteem ..."

There is a psychological principle that the more a person commits himself to another person, an organization or belief, the more difficult it is for him to separate from that person, group or belief that he sacrificed so much for. Most people simply deny any new found negative information about the people they admire. On the contrary, they strengthen their attachment to whatever they sacrificed for. In short, they are unwilling to kill their egos. Some may sell their souls for a brief material gain. Some fear others more than God. By the grace of God, the man behind the "X" passed this test.

"I only knew what I had left in America, how it contrasted with what I had found in the Muslim world. About twenty of us Muslims who had finished the Hajj were sitting in a huge tent on Mount Arafat. As a Muslim from America, I was the center of attention. They asked me what about the Hajj had impressed me the most. One of the several who spoke English asked; they translated my answers for the others. My answers to that question was not the one they expected, it drove home my point.

I said, "The brotherhood! The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as one! It has proved to me the power of the One God."

"America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white'—but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.

"You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to re-arrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of

my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.

"Every free moment I can find, I did a lot of talking to key people whom I knew around Harlem, and I made a lot of speeches, saying: "True Islam taught me that it takes all of the religious, political, economic, psychological, and racial ingredients, or characteristics, to make the Human Family and the Human Society complete.

"Since I learned the truth in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include all kinds—some Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists! I have friends who are called capitalists, socialists, and communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, extremists—some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are black, brown, red, yellow, and white!

"I said to Harlem street audiences that only when mankind would submit to the One God who created all—only then would mankind even approach the "peace" of which so much talk could be heard ... but toward which so little action was seen."

At birth, the man behind the "X" was named Malcolm Little, later known as "Detroit Red," "Satan," "Malcolm X," and "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz." Like you and me, and millions of our kind, he is a descendant of Adam placed in this world to recover the purpose of his life—submission to God alone. Malcolm's "X" is really a question for us all. Are you ready and willing to sever your relationships with other than God who created you and worship God alone? (22:15)

"Every morning when I wake up, now, I regard it as having another borrowed day. In any city, wherever I go, making

speeches, holding meetings of my organization, or attending to other business, black men are watching every move I make, awaiting their chance to kill me. I have said publicly many times that I know that they have their orders. Anyone who chooses not to believe what I am saying doesn't know the Muslims in the Nation of Islam...

"I know, too, that I could die in the hands of white racists. Or I could die at the hands of some Negro hired by the white man. Or it could be some brain washed Negro acting on his own idea that by eliminating me he would be helping out the white man, because I talk about the white man the way I do.

"Anyway, now, each day I live as if I am already dead, and I tell you what I would like for you to do. When I am dead—I say it that way because from the things I know, I do not expect to live long enough to read this book in its finished form—I want you just watch and see if I am not right in what I say: that the white man, in his press, is going to identify me with "hate."

"Yes, I have cherished my "demagogue" role. I know that societies often have killed the people who helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America—then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine."

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925. He was 57 days shy of his 40th birthday when he was assassinated on February 21, 1965.

The soul and Him who created it. Then showed it what is evil and what is good. Successful is one who redeems it. Failing is one who neglects it.

(Quran 91:7-10)

Dr. Douglass Brown

QURAN

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PRAYER

How do others do it?

People of different religions have different ways of worshipping the deity. What a kneeling Catholic may consider a posture of adoration toward God, a sitting-down Presbyterian may consider craven. Buddhists with Japanese origins may bow, while Tibetan Buddhists may prostrate themselves, just as those who belong to the Russian Orthodox Church do in another part of the world.

It used to be very simple: Catholics kneeled, Baptists didn't. But like so many other things, the posture of prayer has become much more complicated in the 1990s. Prominent evangelical pastors, long adherents of Reformer John Knox's warning that kneeling is a "Romish" de-

ception, are now calling their flocks to their knees. On the other hand, American Catholics are considering a proposal to make kneeling optional.

After the Second Vatican Council, Catholic churches did away with kneeling while receiving communion, in part to emphasize the dignity of human beings before God. "When one is praying a prayer of thanksgiving, it seems a more appropriate posture is ... an affirming posture," said the Rev. Richard Vosko of Albany, N.Y. But kneeling stayed elsewhere in the Mass, and bishops kept the kneeling position from beginning of a prayer to the "great amen" at the end.

There is also a movement among some Lutherans and Episcopalians to stand. "Kneeling (is seen) as more like a medieval custom that owes more to feudalism than primitive religious practice," said Gordon Lathrop, a liturgy professor at the

Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. But many people in the pews object to tampering with a sacred ritual. "I've heard people say to me fiercely, 'I kneel nowhere else, but it's immensely important to me to kneel before God,'" Lathrop said. Philip Kiernan, head of the Albany chapter of Catholics United for the Faith, said in lifting churchgoers to their feet, the church hierarchy runs the risk of losing followers of faith. "If you're too lazy or too foolish to kneel in front of God ... why don't you want to? What's wrong with you? It's a bit of an arrogance, isn't it?"

Kiernan would find unexpected support among evangelical Christians these days. "We Americans are very egalitarian. Egalitarianism is fine, with one major exception, and that's God," said Dean Merrill, a vice president of Focus on the Family, an evangelical group. "Kneeling is a non-verbal way of reminding us who's who in this

continued

Who is Ezra ('Uzair)?

Brother Omar from Hong Kong has a question about Ezra who is mentioned in Verse 9:30 given below.

The Jews said, "Ezra is the son of God," while the Christians said, "Jesus is the son of God!" These are blasphemies uttered by their mouths. They thus match the blasphemies of those who have disbelieved in the past. God condemns them. They have surely deviated. (9:30)

Question: Is Ezra considered a prophet by Islam and Judaism or as a priest or scholar only?

Verse 9:30 is the only place where Ezra is mentioned in the Quran. According to traditional Islam, Ezra is considered to be one of the messengers of God. However, as you can see from the verse, God does not specifically identify Ezra as messenger. Yet, since it is mentioned in the Quran that he was idolized as Jesus was, it is reasonable to assume that he was a saintly man, if not a messenger. Jews, on the other hand, hold him in very high esteem. The following quote was taken from the Introduction to the Book of Ezra in the Old Testament (The New American Bible for Catholics, World Catholic Press, 1986).

"The genealogy of Ezra traces his priesthood back to Aaron, brother of Moses. This was the accepted way of establishing the legality of one's priestly office. He is also called a scribe, well-versed in the law of Moses, indicating Ezra's dedication to the study of Torah, which he sought to make the basic rule of life in the restored community. It was religious and cultic reform rather than in political affairs that Ezra made his mark as a postexilic leader. Jewish tradition holds him in great honor; the Talmud even regards him as a second Moses, claiming that the Torah would have been given to Israel through Ezra had not Moses preceded him.

Ezra is sometimes accused of having been a mere legalist who gave excessive attention to the letter of the law. His work, however, should be seen and judged within a specific historical context. He gave to his people a cohesion and spiritual unity which prevented disintegration of the small Jewish community. Had it not been for the intransigence of Ezra and those who adopted his ideal, it is doubtful

that Judaism would have so effectively resisted Hellenism, then or in later centuries. Ezra set the tone of the postexilic community, and it was characterized by fidelity to the Torah, Judaism's authentic way of life."

Being considered a "second Moses," it is possible that some Jews during the time of Ezra or afterwards might have called Ezra "the son of God." The Quran teaches us that this was so.

This view of Ezra which has evolved in the Judaic tradition is yet another example of the human tendency to assign ranks to God's messengers. Notice that there are even those who have the arrogance to say that Ezra would have delivered the Torah if he had preceded Moses. In this way they take it upon themselves to judge and make a decision that none but God can make.

This inclination towards ranking God's messengers allows the devil to inject idolatry into the worship of God alone. Once one allows for the possibility that one messenger is better than another, it means that he is then closer to God than other messengers and believers. From there it is not difficult to make the fatal mistake of assigning "superior" messenger the rank of "God's partner." In the verse immediately following the one in question (9:30) we read: *They have set up their religious leaders and scholars as lords, instead of God. Others deified the Messiah, son of Mary. They were all commanded to worship only one God: there is no god except He. Be He glorified, high above having any partners. (9:31)*

The Quran protects us from the dangers of idolatry by teaching us that it is a fundamental trait of the believers that they do not attempt to assign ranks to God's messengers. An example of this teaching is found in the following verse:

The messenger believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord, and so do the believers. They believe in God, His angels, His scripture, and His messengers: "We make no distinction among any of His messengers," and they proclaim: "We hear, and we obey. Forgive us, our Lord. To You is the ultimate destiny." (2:285)

We pray that we will not fall into this satanic trap of idol worship in the name of "honoring" God's messengers.

Abdullah Arik / Martha Schulte-Nafeh