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The Call to Prayer

The non-Muslim visitor to an Islamic country quickly notices the call to the canonical prayer sacrament. The Turkish word for this call is *ezan*. It rises above the city noise during the day, and is clearly heard in the early mornings and evenings. What is it saying, and what does it mean to Muslims?

How to assemble people for the sacramental prayer was a concern of the Prophet Muhammad and his community. Inspired by a vision, a special meeting between the Prophet and his followers produced the words of the call as we have them today. The Prophet then asked one of his followers, Bilal, to stand on an elevated spot and proclaim the agreed upon words. Jews traditionally have used a ram’s horn as a call, while Christians have rung bells to summon people. Bilal used his powerful voice to call the faithful. He is still considered the model of the one who calls to prayer, the muezzin.

The call to prayer is one of the necessary preparations for worship. If a handful of Muslims have gathered for the canonical prayer, and if they are far from any mosque, or did not hear the call to prayer, or if they are in a building where the call was not made, then one worshipper will offer to make the call to prayer, and one, or possibly the same person, will act as the leader of the prayer sacrament. And if the muezzin in a mosque is ill or absent, volunteers will take his place.

The text of the call

The *ezan*, the call to prayer, sounds by loudspeaker from the minaret or other high place on the mosque structure. It consists of precisely the same Arabic words decided 14 centuries earlier. These words are chanted or sung in a stylized manner – we use the term *cantillated* – a few minutes
before the congregational canonical prayer is to take place. During this interval, or even before, individuals make their ablutions if they are in a state of impurity, do canonical prayer by themselves, and then wait quietly for the corporate sacrament of prayer to begin.

More than an invitation to prayer, the call to prayer also acts as a time signal. It informs Muslims that the respective time for the prayer sacrament has begun. But the call to prayer is not restricted to the five daily liturgical times of canonical prayer. Whenever a group of Muslims engages in corporate canonical prayer, for whatever occasion, the call to prayer is cantillated.

The ezan is still more than an invitation to pray and a time signal that the period for the canonical prayer has begun. The words of the call are the doctrinal and universal essence of Islamic faith. They are the words of the confession, or the testimony: 'There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the one sent from Allah'. This means that five times each day, the essentials of Islam are broadcast to the neighborhood surrounding every mosque. It is regarded as a blessing on the neighborhood, on the environment, on time, and on life. Thus the call to prayer is much more than a call to come to the mosque. It is a call to the human being to serve Allah. It should be heard everywhere. It should be made known constantly every day and throughout the day that service to Allah is the existential objective of every human being.

The text of the call to prayer features the Magnification of Allah; an invitation to pray; and in the morning, a reminder that worldly or physical concerns are second best to engaging in the canonical prayer. Here is the call to prayer in English:

It is Allah who is magnificent! [repeated four times]
I testify that there is no god but Allah. I testify that Muhammad is sent from Allah. [twice]
Hasten to the sacrament of prayer. [twice]
Hasten to salvation. [twice]
Praising Allah is more blessed than sleeping. [twice, and only in the dawn call]
It is Allah who is magnificent! [twice]
There is no god but Allah.

The 'salvation' referred to in the call is whatever 'the best' can mean, transcendentally. It refers in contemporary terms to ultimate happiness and freedom, success and victory. To enter the canonical prayer ritual is therefore freely to put one's soul before Allah in obedience and joy.