



The Concept of Mosque Based on Islamic Philosophy: A Review Based on Early Islamic Texts and Practices of the Early Generation of the Muslims

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of Islam the institution of mosque has been playing the central role in establishing, developing and flourishing Muslim communities. Scholars all over the world in a wide range of time period have unanimously agreed that the significance of mosque in the life of Muslims are undeniable. However present day mosques are failing to fulfil their role and lost their impact on the Muslim communities around the globe. Assuming the reason for this phenomena is mainly the deterioration of the concept of mosque from its original idea, this paper aims to review the early Islamic texts i.e. the perspective of Quran, Hadith and texts of the early scholars to propose a template for contemporary mosques based on its original concept and value.

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INTRODUCTION

"This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed my favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion" [Surah al-Maidah: 3] [13].

According to Ibn Katheer, the well-known classical scholar of Islam, in this Qur'anic verse the word religion (*deen* in Arabic) refers to 'a complete way of life' for the Muslim communities [1]. This word is commonly translated as "religion" but the translation narrows down the vast meaning it contains as well as the significance it has on the life of Muslim communities. Revealing this verse as the ending verse of the Qur'an, Allah has approved Islam as the complete way of life for all generations of Muslim.

Hence, as a religion, Islam offers the complete set of guidance both in spiritual and physical or social contexts. And undoubtedly from the very beginning of the religion these spiritual and physical contexts were guided through the institution of mosque, around which the lives of Muslims' revolved as the communities grew gradually [7]. Robert Hillenbrand refers to the mosque as the principle religious building of Islam [5]. Dr. Tajuddin, prominent contemporary scholar on Islamic architecture, stated the same opinion with more emphasis that mosque is the most important building in Islam [9]

Dr. Spahic Omer's comment should be noted for highlighting the significance of mosque institution in the life of Muslims. He stated that without any confusion the mosque is and always will be the center of Muslim life. He also mentioned two justification for this comment. First one being the inherent nature of man to long for worshipping its creator while the second one is man's tendency for social interaction and communal gathering in order to solidify the bonds of society which in return secure the welfare of the individual as well as the community life [8]. It should also be noted how this statement echoed the teaching of the Qur'anic verse stated before. On portraying the importance of mosque as a central institution for the Muslims, Dr. Omer combined the spiritual and the social role side by side, thus establishing the concept of Islam and mosque as its central institution in order to guide the Muslim communities toward their complete way of life.

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Reinterpretation from the conventional object centered perception of mosque towards a functional perspective

Although defining a religious institution in the conventional approach is much easier, often it limits the vast meaning which an institution may contain. Defining the institution of mosque have been facing the same obstacle and unfortunately lots of literature took the approach in which the definition of mosque suffered from reductionism. In this regard, Dr. Tajuddin said, the notion of mosque as a religious architecture is one of the major problem in defining mosque [11]. Ismail Serageldin in his article 'Faith and the environment' summarized the crisis of defining mosque. He stated that apart from the households, the role of mosque of mosque is superior to any other individual structures because for any Muslim agglomeration it acts as the focal point [14]. Moreover he stated something which serves as one of the platform for this research work that mosque is not only the place of worship but also the key to community activities.

Indeed, the approach towards limiting the role of mosque only within the realm of prayer or confining the prayer in the premise of the mosque is nullified by the saying of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It was reported that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Wherever you pray, that place is a mosque." [5]. An interesting and factual notion can be found in the book *Islamic Architecture: form, function and meaning*, where the author stated that, a wall oriented towards the Kaa'ba in Makka, can be designated as a mosque so much so that no roofing, no minimum size, no enclosing wall, no liturgical accessories are required. Immediately after this comment he said again, even the wall is also not necessary and as a support he brought up the hadith stated above [5].

This hadith needs careful interpretation in order to generate guideline from it. Prophet (peace be upon him) broaden the horizon of mosque as an institution by secluding the notion of activities from any physical structure which not only delimited the meaning of mosque but also offers flexibility to adopt the institution of mosque according to the context and culture of different Muslim communities.

Review from Qur'anic perspective:

"And let there be (arising) from you a nation inviting to (all that is) good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful." [Surah Ali-Imran: 104] [13].

This divine commandments draws the concept that Islam is a tradition that is oriented towards community and Muslims are commanded by Allah to establish goodness and justice within the community [6].

Similar commandments are found in other verses where Allah says,

"You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah...." [Surah Ali-Imran: 110] [13].

The practice of solidarity should reflect in Muslim communities where everyone should support each other. [6]. This again reflects the opinion of Dr. Mattson who prescribed for the Muslim society to form communities rather than cults. During the time of Prophet (peace be upon him) and early generation of Muslims, this formation of communities and its role in supporting its members in every aspect of life was very common in practice. Moreover, the complex task of managing coherence in communities was done through the institution of mosque. (Citation needed). These two divine verses clarify the role of Muslims within the community.

There are some other verses from which directions towards materializing the built environment could be derived. Allah says,

"O children of Adam, take your adornment (i.e., wear your clothing) at every masjid, and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess." [Surah Al-Araf: 31] [13].

Thus wastefulness is strictly prohibited and being wasteful either in life-style or even in built environment would be a violation of Islamic principles. Today, practicing of competing in building extravagant mosques in different parts of the world either to demonstrate political power or to show-off individual wealth should be criticized for being too wasteful. Rather lessons should be drawn from the Prophet's (peace be upon him) which was very humble in expression [9], yet it was the center of gravity in the wide ranging activities of an emerging Muslim community [7]. Indeed, when the mosque was objectified to express power, wealth and glory, the decline of its functional significance initiated simultaneously.

As a resolution towards nullifying this attitude, the verse of Surah At-Tawba in Qur'an should be mentioned.

"It is not for the polytheists to maintain the mosques of Allah (while) witnessing against themselves with disbelief. (For) those, their deeds have become worthless, and in the Fire they will abide eternally. The mosques of Allah are only to be maintained by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day and establish prayer and give zakah and do not fear except Allah, for it is expected that those will be of the (rightly) guided." [Surah At-Tawba: 17-18] [13].

Explained by Dr. Omer, the key word in these verses is 'amara, ya'muru'. If it is applied to the subject of mosque, four guidelines could be derived, 1) to build or to repair, 2) to maintain in fitting dignity, 3) to visit for purpose of devotion, 4) to fill with light, life and activity [8].

Review from hadith and texts of early scholars:

Previous discussion highlighted on some Qur'anic verses in search of guidance regarding mosque and built environment in a generalized manner. But in order to have more specific direction regarding the issue, the hadith of Prophet (peace be upon him) and texts from early Islamic scholars should be taken into account.

Stated by Dr. Tajuddin, it is important to describe the nature of Muslim community before talking about mosque as a building [11]. The following two hadiths contain the message regarding the nature of Muslim community.

Abu Dhar reported the apostle of Allah (May peace be upon him) as saying: He who separates the community within a span takes off the noose of Islam from his neck [4].

Jabir (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's messenger (May peace be upon him) as saying: Never a Muslim plants a tree, but he has the reward for charity for him, for what is eaten out of that is charity; what is stolen out of that, what the beast eat out of that, what the birds eat out of that is charity for him. (In short) none incurs a loss to him but it becomes a charity on his part [15].

He further commented on these two hadiths that, mosque is but one expression of communal responsibility in Islam [11].

Evidence for this statement can be derived from the life of Prophet (peace be upon him) and his actions right after the migration from Makkah to Madinah. On his arrival at Madinah, the first thing Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions did was to mark out and build the mosque of Madinah i.e. the Prophet's (peace be upon him) mosque. This was the first communal activity that took place among the Muhajir (migrants from Makkah) and the Ansaar (helpers at Madinah) [8]. Apart from other aspects, it clearly illustrates how important the role of mosque in the establishment of a Muslim community.

The same tradition was followed by the four rightly guided Khalifas (vicegerent). The mosque established during their time was humble in architectural expression but utilized in their full potential [10]. But the later period during the Muslim dynasties, the practice of building mosque gradually deteriorated from the Sunnah of Prophet (peace be upon him). During those times, mosque was built in an extravagant manner but had only little impact on the community that it served.

In a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra, Prophet (peace be upon him) clearly stated the practice of building extravagant mosque as a wrong attitude, thus prohibited in Islam.

Prophet (peace be upon him) said, I was not commanded to build high mosques [12].

In another hadith, Prophet (peace be upon him) said, One of the portents of the Day of Judgment is that you will vie with one another in building mosques [12].

These hadiths again echoed the Qur'anic verse prohibiting wastefulness. The practice of building mosque of humble expression targeted to the betterment of Muslim communities continues throughout the history of Muslim civilization until the later stumbled and started to endure decline in its numerous, if not all sections [8].

The first example can be traced back to the Umayyad Dynasty when the administrative activities which were previously conducted within the premise of mosque were shifted to the palace of the Khalifa [9]. Right after that, the establishment of Dar-ul-Hakam (courthouse) as a separate entity to conduct judicial activities ripped off the mosque institution from another of its significant role.

Despite these attempts the mosque was still the major institution for educational activities. The scholars used to have their own circles of students within the mosque premises and there was a culture of sharing knowledge which added to the richness of the Islamic scholarship of early periods. All these circles containing more than thousands student at a time could be compared to the institution of university of modern time [2]. In fact, the famous university at Egypt, Al-Azhar, was initiated as a study platform associated with a mosque which later became the largest university of the Islamic world [3].

Until today, the practice of utilizing mosque as a center for learning still continues but the presence of various other educational institute promoting the secular mode of education made the mosque an institution where only basic rules of Islam are taught devoid of the scholarly practices that it used to have throughout the history.

Discussion:

From what is presented above, it is evident that the present day perception of mosque among the Muslims as well as the non-Muslim people is not in coherence with the original concept of mosque. Early Islamic sources portrays an image of the mosque institution which is highly active and supportive to the needs of the Muslim communities. The concept of mosque thus should be reinterpreted with a view to integrating the mosque institution with the life of the Muslims.

For instance, as long as the mosque remain only a place for offering prayers and other necessary socio-cultural and socio-economical activities are kept detached from the premise of mosque, it will not be possible to generate a strong connection between the mosque and society although the direction found from Qur'an and Hadiths are completely opposite. As stated by Dr. Tajuddin, another problem regarding the issue is the 'over sanctification' of mosque so that Muslims are only allowed to conduct certain ritual activities within the premise

of the mosque (Rasdi, 1998). Again, from the practice of Prophet (pbuh) and the early generation of the Muslims we can see a very different picture where the newly set up Muslim community in Madinah made the Prophet's mosque, center of their religious, social, economic and political affairs.

Conclusion:

In order to revive the significance of mosque institution, is it mandatory to follow the direction of Qur'an and Hadiths and the practices of the early generation of the Muslims. Further research should be done for generating a planning guideline from these Islamic sources for the institution of mosque to be revived as the focal point of Muslim communities. Allah has commanded the Muslims to be the example for mankind and establish justice on the earth. Prophet (pbuh) demonstrated the practical aspect of being the ideal example for mankind by his practices throughout his life.

Unfortunately, we, Muslims today facing difficulties to implement the commandments of Allah and following the footsteps of Prophet (pbuh) as we have deteriorated from the guideline that was prescribed for us and adopted the western philosophy of life as a result the most significant institution of Muslim community i.e. the mosque has become insufficient to be integrated with the fabric of the Muslim societies. Now with the present resurgence of Islamic thoughts and philosophy, once again the time has come to revive the institution of mosque completely based on the direction that is prescribed in the Qur'an and the practices of Prophet (pbuh) and the early generation of the Muslims which portrays the practical aspect of utilizing the advantages mosque institution to its fullest extent.

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