

Is it a Bahai teaching that the obligatory prayers should be said in private?

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To: XX, <TARIKH-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU>  
Subject: Obligatory Prayer in the Mashriq meetings  
Date sent: Sun, 30 Sep 2007 14:15:50 +0200

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On 29 Sep 2007 at 18:04, XX wrote:

> I find no support for your contention that "we *\*should\** say our  
> obligatory prayers in the devotional meeting or mashriq".

As I understand the texts, they do not say that we should say our obligatory prayers in the meetings, but rather that *\*when\** we are in devotional meetings we should say the obligatory prayers there. In contrast to the situation in Islam, I do not know of anything that says that a prayer is more meritorious if said in the Mashriq meeting.

There are several tablets of `Abdu'l-Baha which set out a programme for a devotional meeting, and which specifically include the obligatory prayers:

Thy proposal that the friends should assemble on Sundays for the purpose of joining together in worship is most commendable. As for the manner in which such a devotional gathering should be conducted: first, the Friends should read prayers and turn themselves to God, invoking his aid and assistance; then, when all are assembled, there should be a period of silent prayer (namaaz); lastly, prayers and readings should be recited aloud, before the whole company of the Friends, in the sweetest and most melodious of accents. As this is the commencement of holding meetings, this is sufficient.

This translation was made at the Bahai World Centre in 1987, as published in Robert Stockman's *The Baha'i Faith in America: Early Expansion 1900-1912*, (vol. 2), p. 105. An earlier translation (1903) can be found in *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Baha Abbas*, pp. 15-16 and in *Armstrong-Ingram, Music, Devotions, and Mashriqu'l-Adhkar*, p. 318. The more recent translation omits the last sentence, which I have taken from the text in *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Baha Abbas*. The significance of

the word namaaz is noted by Armstrong-Ingram. Another tablet very similar in content is given in Ishráq Khaavarí's Ganjinih- i-Huduud va Akhaam, p. 231:

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkaar is the dawning-place of lights and the gathering of the devout. When some souls are gathered in that heavenly meeting and they begin to recite the obligatory prayer (namaaz), and turn to the recitation of the verses of scripture in wondrous arrangements, and chant the prayers, the concourse on high will share the blessings. They will carry the cries of "Thou, the most excellent" and "Thou, the Announcer" so that, praised be to God, any soul among the angels of the kingdom of Abha in the concourse below will join in the prayers and supplications and chant the verses of scripture in meetings for glorification. (my translation)

Namaaz, which the World Centre has translated as 'silent prayer,' in the first of these tablets, means, according to Steingass, "prayers, those especially prescribed by law (which are repeated five times a day)" - that is, it is the Persian equivalent of the Arabic word salaah, obligatory prayer.

This first of these tablets seems to have given rise to some questions, because in a later Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

As to the obligatory prayer (to be said three times a day): Each one must say his prayer alone by himself, and this is not conditional on a private place; that is, both at home and in the worshipping-place, which is a gathering-place, it is allowable for one to say his prayer; but each person must say his prayer by himself (i. e., not in company with others who might recite the same words and continue the same postures together at the same time). But if they chant supplications (communes, etc.) together (and in company), in a good and effective voice, that is very good. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas, p. 464. The explanation in parentheses are from the original translator.)

This opens up many possibilities for the enrichment of the devotional meetings. Any service which included the recitation of an obligatory prayer would be a distinctively Bahai service, just as the salaah and the Lord's Prayer or creed are distinctively Muslim and Christian forms. But might this also tend to exclude participation by people who do not consider themselves as Bahais, and so make it more difficult

for the Mashriqu'l-Adhkaar meetings to function as "God's universal House of Worship."? (Shoghi Effendi, in Baha'i Administration, page 77) If the obligatory prayer is to be included in a devotional programme, how is this to be done? The possibilities are intriguing, but they come with many questions.

The recital of the obligatory prayers and fasting are two of the key practices which define our individual Bahai identities, and our various individual ways of saying them are quite important to each of us. It would be unfortunate if anything was done which might discourage some of the friends from participating in the Mashriq meetings at all. Perhaps as the meetings develop in various forms, and as those who worship in the meetings gradually become a worshipping community with a deeper level of unity, and the local Bahai communities gradually re-orient themselves around "the Mashriqu'l Adhkar, the spiritual center of every Baha'i community," (Universal House of Justice, letter on Social and Economic Development, 1983) such questions of practice will become clear. For the present, I would advocate caution in making the theoretic norm which Abdu'l-Baha sets out in the tablets into a practical norm for Bahai community worship.

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