

Ritual of Orientation: Gestures of Ritual Worship and the Space of the Mosque

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The Suleymaniye mosque in Istanbul is a monumental building, but conceived in response to intimate gestures. It is shaped to conform to the postures of ritual worship, as required of all mosques. And yet, as required of an imperial monument, it does so in grand manner. This wide range of operation has much to say about conceptions of space in Islam. The following traces the relationship between postures of worship and the space they produce, with the Suleymaniye mosque as focus and backdrop.

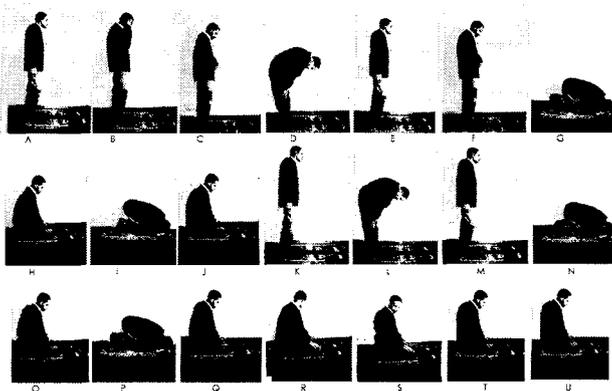


Fig. 1. Sequence of worship postures: A) orientation; B) declaration; C, F, K) standing recitation; D, L) half prostration; E, M) standing; G, I, N, P) full prostration; H, O) sitting; J, Q) seated recitation; R, S) salutation; T, U) contemplation

ORIENTATION

Mecca is faced while remaining in place, which can be any place. This orientation, called the *kibla*, is experienced tangibly; the way crossing the Meridian might be for the mariner. A virtual, but geometrically precise axis, cuts through the profane world and connects directly with the physical and spiritual hub of prayer. A new and sanctified space is superimposed on the space of the everyday for the duration of worship. This is further magnified through certainty that many others are aligned, worldwide, along the same geometric web. Thus every location, however ordinary and profane, in being related to the center, is potentially sacred. All locations, dispersed and disconnected since the beginning of time, are now reconnected, reassembled around the center.

The ritual thus begins with a simple turning away from everyday space, and a stepping forward on the prayer rug (Fig.1A). The Suleymaniye can be said to accomplish something similar at the scale of the city. The main volume, especially when seen in profile from across the Golden Horn, seems to be advancing forward, past its minarets. This elongation of the building makes visible the invisible *kibla*. As if

magnetized, the building turns away from its urban geometry towards a distant source. Its dependencies absorb the misalignments that surround it, from which the worshipers approach. By degree, worshipers shed ordinary space, as they leave the city labyrinth to enter the outer perimeter and then inner courtyard. They perform ablutions to sanctify the body and further remove the exterior, before they finally come to stand in the prayer hall, each on their individual prayer rug, all aligned inside the massive domed cube.

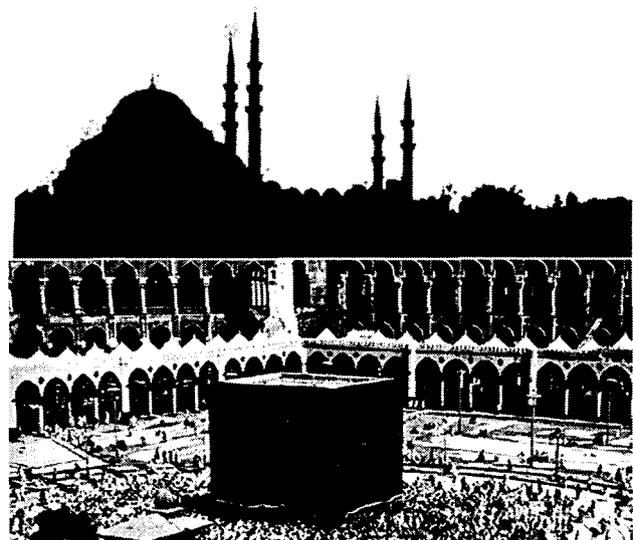


Fig. 2. East profile of Suleymaniye; Ka'ba in Mecca.

The forward displacement of the cubic hall inevitably recalls its affinity with the Ka'ba, mysterious cube and prototype at the center of Mecca, pulling both worshiper and mosque towards it. Once a lifetime, pilgrims cover the distance literally, and, in seven ritual circumambulations, make real the proximity they enacted in prayer. Here, the horizontal axes of worship are said to finally intersect the cosmic axis, of which the Ka'ba is thought to be the terrestrial component, the lowest of a stack of heavenly Ka'bas. This primary object, of distant and unknown origins, nullifies spatial difference with its six equal sides. The Suleymaniye's plan registers the pull along its axial components: the forecourt is slightly narrower than the worship hall, which is slightly narrower than the cemetery, as if they had been pulled out of each other, and will fit back together at end of time.

To worship along the axis is to be bracketed between extremities: the sophisticated Suleymaniye and the elemental Ka'ba, architecture and proto-architecture, development and origin, time-bound and timeless. The list encompasses all opposition. In the parallel context of

body postures, to worship is to transform worldly vertical movement into horizontal stasis, culminating in the forehead touching the ground in a most elemental of prostrations. The Suleimaniye precinct's main axis is also bracketed with forcefully elemental components: the cemetery keeper's house, the wrestling courtyard, the main gate, the executioner's block.

The affinity with the Ka'ba helps explain the origins of the kiblah wall, a feature common to all mosques, and, in fact, the only required liturgical element. Walls facing Mecca (kibla walls) have been a part of worship ever since the Prophet's courtyard in Medina, where the newly exiled community knelt next to the courtyard's Mecca-facing south wall. Over the centuries, such Kiblah walls, interposed between the worshipers and what they sought, must have evoked a nostalgia for origins—perhaps paradise itself was veiled beyond the substance of the wall. Thus, a thousand years later, the builders of the Suleymaniye gave form to themes of absence and of return when, unconsciously perhaps, they inscribed the center of their kiblah wall with a square figure whose dimensions are remarkably similar to those of the Ka'ba elevation. Worshipers stand facing a shadow Ka'ba inside the building, outlined with blue tiles and colored glass. When the light is right, in the evening with oil lamps, the reflective surface becomes thin membrane, perhaps permeable to the truly devout. The wall is, thus, simultaneously barrier and passage, of this world and of the next. In fact, as with every mosque, a niche in the shape of a portal is carved in the center of the wall. This highly symbolic niche, called a mihrab, is often identical to the main entry. Thus, for the devout, it must represent a virtual door—perhaps a mystic's gate into paradise.

The kiblah wall is further related to a particular manner of standing in communal worship. Worshipers face the wall standing side-by-side, shoulders touching. The first spaces were generated from this expression of equality, natural to Bedouins used to desert horizons. The front line of worshipers constitutes a virtual plane, reiterating the wall they face, with additional rows repeating the first plane. Some symbolism associates the empty mihrab niche with the absence of the Prophet, thus suggesting that the niche has been sized for a person, and reinforcing the analogy between wall and bodies.

The manner of standing side-by-side resulted in worship spaces whose emphasis was cross-axial, (like Roman basilicas, unlike Christian churches, for example). Only gradually did prayer halls acquire depth, but they never became axial. Even in the centralized space of the Suleimaniye, lateral compression is felt. The advance of space is abruptly interrupted by the kiblah wall, which appears flatter than the other three walls, its piers having been placed on the outside. Additionally, the forecourt is wider than it is long, important entrances are along the cross axis, and outer piers on the East and West are more pronounced and divide the space laterally.

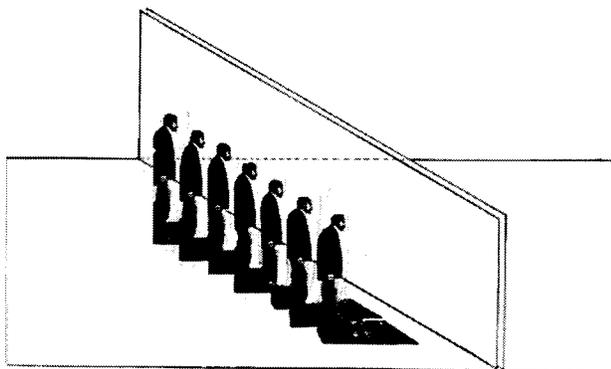


Fig. 3. Facing the Kiblah wall

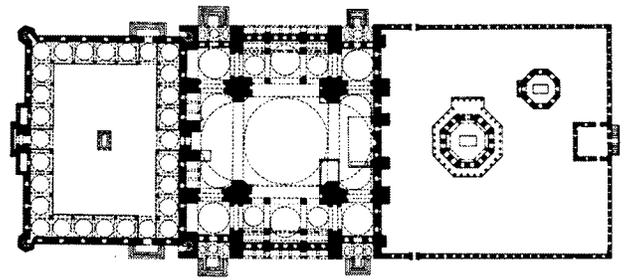


Fig. 4. Plan of the Suleimaniye: forecourt, worship hall, cemetery

INTENTION

Having prepared oneself by ritual ablution, and having establishing the proper orientation, the worshiper now begins the sequence of formal postures, which start with a formal declaration of intention. A curious hand posture is adopted in which the thumbs are placed behind the ears, and the face is cupped (Fig. 1B) It may be that the worshiper is standing directly in front of the mihrab niche, in which case the affinity between posture and niche becomes obvious. The hands suggest a narrowing of the field of vision, representing an increase in concentration, not unlike the way the mihrab focuses the wall on the Mecca axis. The hands also suggest an acoustic gesture, as if to hear better, or project the voice further. Similarly, in a religion whose only icon is the Koran, the empty mihrab is sometimes thought of as a receptacle for the Word. (In fact it is sometimes used literally as an acoustic instrument to magnify the voice of the Imam, as the Koran is recited to those gathered behind).

At the same time as the worshiper is formally declaring the intention to pray, he or she is also performing an important mental operation: an imaginary screen is invoked that veils the visible world, two paces in front, and cross axial. This 'sutra', from the root word for hidden or veiled, screens the worshiper from the mundane space in front. The kibla wall is the physical embodiment of the sutra. For the duration of prayer, ordinary space is symbolically and psychically erased from view. Visible everyday space is ruptured, and distance between worshiper and Ka'ba collapses. Thus, the worshiper stands shielded in a bubble of sanctified space produced by 3 primordial axes: the horizontal axis connecting to the Ka'ba, the vertical axis-mundi, and the cross-axis of the sutra. The ritual prostrations take place inside this abstract space, and can thus be seen as elemental oscillations between the divine vertical and the terrestrial horizontal. The individual prayer rug is the tangible outline of this personal templum, and the mosque its communal form. Something of this primordial space can be sensed in the space defined by the Suleymaniye's four minarets, the cubic void just vacated by the advancing main volume.

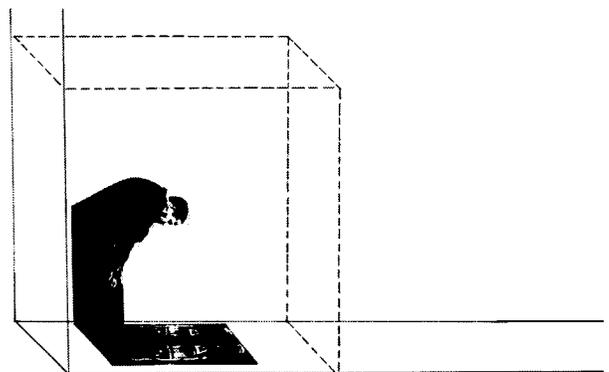


Fig. 5. Sutra space

RECITATION

Standing recitation is the most basic of postures, involving silently reciting memorized Koranic verses, with hands below or on the navel (Fig. 1C). Here choice and duration are involved, related to the length of the chapter chosen for recitation. Stillness is the desired effect, in preparation for complete cessation later. The special stillness one finds in mosques is the appropriate spatial equivalent. This is partly the result of the carpets, absorbing the sound of footsteps, but also because standing is often experienced against a background of slight movement, as people traverse the space in all directions.

The downcast eyes continue the narrowing of the field of vision, indicated in the earlier posture with the cupped hands. Diminution of the visual is in proportional contrast to the increase in the verbal/abstract, which is privileged for being closer to the abstract nature of the Divine. The words being recited are believed to have been whispered directly in the Prophet's ear by the angel Gabriel. Thus, to recite the Koran is to evoke the Form Giver through His own form, His words. The two arts of the word, cantillation and calligraphy share the mihrab, which is properly empty of mere representations, containing only Koranic inscriptions, being a receptacle for the invisible Word, a place for the form of the formless. In a further symmetry between building and worshiper, some of the verses being recited are also inscribed on the building surfaces, in a paradoxical change of state, as if liquid became solid. As movement comes to a stand still, as body recedes, as the internal increases, the diminished physicality is compensated for by the materiality of the building.

The Ka'ba is similarly empty. The quintessential act of the new religion was the destruction of its idols, the purge of all visual representations, followed immediately by the call to prayer, delivered from its roof, completing the transition from image to word. Paradoxically, this most visible of buildings, at the center of all the axes, is shrouded with a black veil that hides it from the eye. Invisible behind its veil, it displays only sacred verses, embroidered with golden thread, (perhaps preserving the pre-Islamic habit of displaying parchments of poetry on its walls). The building, emptied of all representations, points to the abstract nature of God. The building thus remains mute, resisting vision, absorbing all light, giving nothing of its identity away. It is said to only contain a curtain, the Curtain of Mercy.

HALF PROSTRATION

In the half prostration, the vertical axis is challenged, but not yet overcome. While remaining standing, the upper body bends forward, hands on knees, forming a triangular profile, which is maintained briefly before the vertical is restored again (Fig. 1D). The worshiper repeats thrice a phrase of veneration: "O Greatest... O Greatest... O Greatest." In contrast to the sophisticated language of the vertical position, these incantations are elemental and powerfully concentrated.

There is here a reduction in the perception of space that parallels the return to more elemental speech, and that finds its conclusion in the full prostration. The eyes are now suspended in space, examining the abstract patterns of the prayer rug. The fully 3-dimensional world is reduced to flat geometry. Yet, the pattern is often extensive and without scale, so that the surface appears immaterial, and the worshiper's perceptions likewise yields to abstraction. Perhaps a Koranic verse is recited, describing the Day of Judgment as that day when mountains and valleys become flat. In contrast to the increase in the two-dimensional, the worshiper's own body, triangulated and animated, is becoming more figural. Worshipers gesturing in unison against ornate backgrounds seem to compensate for the absence of figural representation.

The oscillation between vertical and horizontal is best reflected in a liturgical staircase, next to the mihrab, called the minber. This triangular shape, rising to a point, is often the most figural object in the mosque. The top step is a curtained cubicle, sized for a single occupant, but one that remains unused. (The imam only ascends to the next to last step). The minber suggests a half-minaret, still inside, not yet fully vertical, nor occupied at the highest point. Its transitional shape is analogous to that of the worshiper, who, at the last moment before kneeling fully, reassumes the vertical position. Likewise, the asymmetrical space between the minbar and the mihrab is simultaneously tall and low, large and small, depending on one's location. This is the space used most often for regular worship when the mosque is not full, or for group discourses. Often the geometric motifs on the ground continue up the wall and the side of the stair, so that the sweep of the eye continues from vertical to horizontal to vertical again.

FULL PROSTRATION

The climax of the ritual is the full prostration, representing the full cessation of movement. In this gesture the forehead finally touches ground in full submission ("Islam" translates as "submission"). The horizontal surface is experienced bodily, and in this sense, the prostration is a small death (Fig. 1G). Vision is dimmed, eyes are closed, and space is reduced to a single point on the forehead. The visible is substituted for with the invisible. The transformation from action in the vertical to cessation on the horizontal is complete. As in the earlier half prostration, the accompanying incantation, repeated thrice, "O Highest... O Highest... O Highest..." is forcefully elemental and final.

Underlying the worship ritual is the belief that God is hidden in degrees, with some aspects completely invisible, and other aspects hidden but self-revealing, and that ritual worship is the instrument of access to the self-revealing aspects. The ritual is thus preoccupied with the realm of things thought to be on the edge of visibility, simultaneously visible and invisible, existing and not existing. The diminution of the visual in favor of the audible is only one such realm. The full prostration represents the threshold between the half visible and the invisible. Likewise, the space of the mosque is concerned with the relationship between the two realms, the abstract interior (mental) space, and visible external space. It has the quality of revealing as much as it hides.

Perhaps nothing illustrates this preoccupation with the invisible better than the relationship between cemeteries and worship spaces, which are never far from each other. In the Suleimaniye the similarity is striking. Identical in size, separated only by the kibla wall, and sharing the ground plane, they mirror each other. On the living side worshipers kneel on carpets with floral motifs, and on the garden side, the deceased, similarly facing Mecca, await the Day of Judgment. The last gesture performed on the body before interment is to turn the head towards Mecca, so that the eyes face the Ka'ba on the Day of Judgment. (This is the also the concluding gesture of the worship ritual). Tombs are laid in rows parallel to the kiblah wall, the shapes of some reiterating the shape of the mihrab, which in turn bears a striking resemblance to the main portal of the worship hall, thus completing the analogy between portal and grave, visible and invisible, arrival and departure. As space and time contract, as everything returns to its origins, the mosque promises a reconciliation between the vertical of the living and the horizontal of the deceased, the revealed and the hidden.

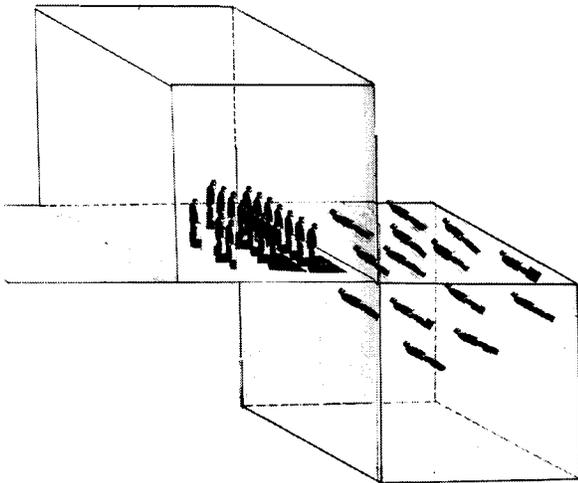


Fig. 6. *Worship hall and cemetery separated by kiblah wall.*

SEATED RECITATION AND SALUTATION

A seated recitation, slightly more informal in character, comes after the full prostration (Fig. 1J). Here the recited text, though sacred, is not of divine origin, but a human prayer. It is a prayer of thanks, of salutations to the prophets, of reaffirmation of faith, and a pledge of allegiance to the community of believers. Though the words are formal and venerable, they mark the gradual restoration of the everyday with their return the worldly and the time bound. Simultaneously, space is being rediscovered. The eyes are open and face forward.

In the ritual's final formal gesture, the worshiper salutes the two companion angels, seated one on each shoulder, recording life's deeds and misdeeds in registers to be examined on judgment day. The salutation is directed in turn to the right and then left shoulders, and through this movement the eyes sweep across the entire wall. (Fig. 1 R, S). Finally, the eyes face forward, symbolically reconciling the opposed sides of right and left, good and evil, and returning to normal vision.

CONTEMPLATION

At the conclusion of prayer the worshiper finds himself or herself seated on the ground, remaining in unstructured contemplation. From this low vantage point one senses the cube and the dome more forcefully than if standing. The bottom of the cube is experienced bodily. The far edges of the square are at eye level, and the gaze is directed at the walls that meet them. As the eye travels upward to the dome, the horizontality of the ground is contrasted sharply with the space of the dome, clearly delineating the realms of earth and sky. The center of the dome has an enigmatic verse (Koran 35,41) elegantly scripted in a circular pattern. It describes God as He who upholds the earth and sky lest they disappear, but, should they disappear, none can uphold them after Him. The dome itself, likewise, pairs the earth and sky, with the cemetery on one side and the space suspended between the four minarets on the other.

Though people are moving under the great dome, they are soundless. Though there is light, it cast no shadows. The overall effect is of timelessness and of immobility. Though the space is monumental, there is an intimacy to it. The removal of shoes lends domesticity and a sense of arrival, maybe especially to a very large space. The space is uniform, so it is traversed it in all directions, trajectories intersecting randomly. Consequently, any spot where someone is standing confers a sensation of stasis and a degree of centrality.

The physical stillness at the conclusion of worship can be as the final result of a devolution of movement started outside. The worshiper, by degree, has moved from the exterior labyrinth of everyday space, and, through a series of postures and words, was brought down to the ground, and made to rediscover the surrounding space. Movement along the vertical axis is transformed into contemplative stasis along the horizontal. Space contracts around the body as it traverses the three main spaces of the mosque the forecourt, the worship hall, and the cemetery. The tripartite division can be seen to correspond to the postures of standing, half prostration, and full prostration. The trajectories of worshipers end in the cemetery, where a final movement is performed on the body—the head is turned so the eyes face Mecca. The interred wait in repetitive rows for the promised restoration.

Finally, it is worth noting other interpretation of ritual worship. According to a popular viewpoint, the three main postures correspond to the three categories of growth in the sensible world. Ascending represents man, whose head rises to heaven; horizontal movement represents the growth of animal; and descending represents the growth of plant, sinking its roots. In the more sophisticated cosmology of a mystic such as Ibn-Arabi, (1165-1240), the tripartite division of the ritual is interpreted in terms of movements of the Real (al Haqq). Prostration represents Reality's descent into the world, which It creates in Its descent. Standing corresponds to the ascent of spirits and souls towards the descending Real. Half prostration represents an intermediate realm, where Reality, in the form of archetypes, first manifests Itself to worshipers. Thus, the cycle of worship is a microcosm, and to perform it is, in a sense, to reproduce creation. It functions and thus architecture functions as a mirror in which the Real contemplates itself.

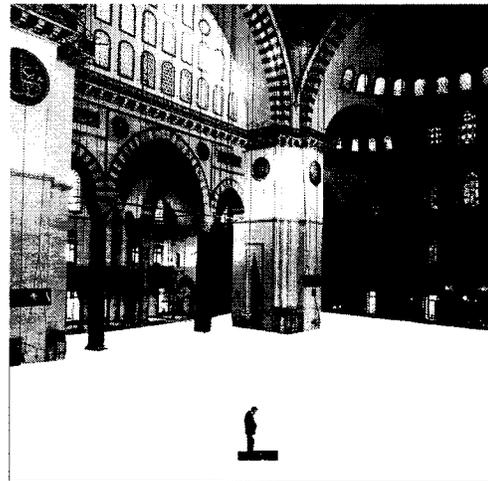


Fig. 7. *Bottom surface of Suleymaniye cube.*



Fig. 7. *Standing, half prostration, full prostration, contemplation*