

ALLĀH - THE INFINITE AND OMNIPRESENT GOD
SOUGHT ALONG
WELL-DEFINED SPATIAL LINES

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Introduction

In Islam, and precisely on the background of monotheism, there always seems to have been a radical conflict between popular customs and the official religious orthodoxy, or rather orthopraxis. Such practices on the level of local populations were either considered “*Reste arabischen Heidentums*” (Wellhausen 1897), i.e. old superstitions and rites dating back to the time of *ǧāhiliyya*, or they were condemned as “*bidaʿ*”, hence unorthodox innovations. All initiatives were expected to come “from above” through revelation, or at least they had to be sanctioned by deeds, omissions, sayings, or injunctions by the Prophet promulgated through authoritative *ahādīth*. In the absence of an authoritative magisterium or rabbinate, one of the most effective means to universalize this monolithic system no doubt was (and still is) the *qibla*, the orientation towards the Kaʿba in Mecca, not only while performing prayer, but also for instance while slaughtering animals and in all kinds of actions till the lying down for the last rest in the grave.

However, the *qibla* was also the door through which pre-Islamic rituals and world views entered into the fortress of Islam¹ – and “post-Islamic” ideas and practices (*sit venia verbo...*) continue to enter². The Wahhābī authorities, I am told, are aware of the danger, although we might expect them to be especially fervent partisans of Mecca’s central

¹ Quite illustrative, also in this regard, is the description of Mecca and the Kaʿba given by the influential geographer Ibn al-Faḳīh (*Buldān* esp. 16-22).

² One might think of the Laser beam installed on the new mosque in Casablanca for the purpose of indicating the exact *qibla* over a distance of some 35 km.

role in the Islamic world. To the alarm not only of some politically sensitized Iranians, but also of academic Sunnīs, the religious authorities in Mecca oppose any “sacralisation” of their city by the restoration of memorable houses, graves, or whatever may be ascribed to companions of the Prophet, and even of Zamzam and Ka‘ba. But on the central question what the *qibla* really means in pure monotheism they seem reluctant to reflect, and even more so to publish. Rather, new answers and clarifications in recent years have come from a re-evaluation of the historical sources with the support of modern cartography and the history of astronomy.

The vital function of the *qibla* in the monolithic structure of Islam has aroused my curiosity for some time already (see Heinen 1982: esp. 76-120), and even more so after some of my fearfully proposed theories were taken up and confirmed by recent investigations of other historians of Muslim science (see King 1985 and 1987). I believe that it is of vital relevance also to the theme we are discussing in this colloquium on “Popular Customs and the Monotheistic Religions”. On a more general level, the Islamic *qibla* raises questions that are bound to affect the modern, oftentimes overly political, discussion of a possible secularisation in Islam, and that “on its own ground”. No doubt, much has been written on the various aspects of the *qibla*. I therefore select only a few points that are relevant to the themes we are discussing here, or such ones that – according to my research – need clarification.

*1 Qur’ānic monotheism centered on Allāh’s infinity and incorporeity:
Hence a God without contact with the physical world?*

No one doubts that from the beginning of Muḥammad’s Prophetic message Allāh’s infinity and incorporeity was emphasized at least as strongly in Islam as in any other Semitic tradition. Who could forget the early *sūrat al-Ihlās* (112) or the *āyat al-kursī* (Q.2.255), that cornerstone of strictest monotheism and omnipotence of Allāh, which so emphatically rejects any physical contact between the Creator and His

creation? For, “to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth.... His Throne comprises the heavens and earth”.

Hence: Why should there be any *qibla* at all? God is everywhere. And wherever man turns, there he will find “the face of Allāh” – this “pantheistic” spirit represents a considerable part of Islamic tradition, especially that section that most vigorously radiates living religiosity and even mystical fervor. But there is the explicit injunction in Q.2.145: “From whatsoever place thou issuest, turn thy face towards the Holy Mosque (*al-Masğid al-ḥarām*); and wherever you may be, turn your faces towards it, that the people may not have any argument against you, excepting the evildoers of them; and fear you them not, but fear you Me; and that I may perfect My blessing upon you, and that haply so you may be guided”.

2 *The change of the qibla: A re-orientation only for political reasons?*

However, as we remember from Islamic history, this clearly fixed orientation toward “*al-Masğid al-ḥarām*” came at the end of a longer development; it was the result of a revolutionary turn around, or according to the traditionalist an-Nasā’ī (*Talāq* 75), the *qibla* was the first element that was abrogated. In the mosque of the Banū Salīma the Prophet is said to have performed two *rakʿas* of the *zuhr* prayer in the direction of Jerusalem and then to have turned around towards Mecca – obviously an explanation of the name of that mosque as “the mosque of the two *qiblas*”. This revolutionary turn around is dated into *rağab* or *šaʿbān* of the year 2, hence some 16 or 17 months after the *hiğra*, probably on reliable testimony because this remarkable event understandably stuck to the memories of many companions of the Prophet.

For our theme, the essential question raised by this turn around is whether this was truly, as some orientalists have believed, merely one of those concessionary acts by which the popular religious customs of pre-Islamic Mecca were welcomed into the young prophetic religion that until then claimed to “live from God’s words alone”; or, if we look into the future, did the Prophet, with this act, step back and leave

the determination of this most important orientation to the human ingenuity of the ablest mathematicians in the community? And what was its inner meaning then? In both cases, it would seem that Islam's strict monotheism did make some room for the human element as well.

The Prophet, similarly, did not abolish the pre-Islamic pilgrimage to the Ka'ba as he ordered the destruction of the idols inside and outside of it. The widely accepted explanation of Qur'anic scholars hinges on the so-called "Abraham legend": Because the Ka'ba was constructed already by the monotheistic Abraham, it had for all times become the centre of a cult pleasing to God Almighty. Hence the change of the *qibla* for the true worshippers from Jerusalem to the Ka'ba in Mecca was not – as non-Islamic authors repeat till this day – merely a political decision of the young Muslim community striving for independence from the Jewish nation, but the restoration of the ancient monotheistic orientation.

But, the most common explanation of western orientalists remains the political one: The Prophet turned away from Jerusalem and towards Mecca in order to gain independence from Jewish traditions, to establish and emphasize the social identity of the young community, as being neither Jewish nor Christian. The radical conclusion has to be then that the Islamic *qibla*, and perhaps also prayer itself, was and is a mere political act. Such a conclusion may adequately express the inner judgment of many of those critical authors, it may also fit a reductionary sociological evaluation of all popular customs, but it hardly corresponds with the testimony of texts and traditions about the practice of the Prophet. He did not lack political sagacity, and even shrewdness, this cannot be denied; but that ritual acts for Muhammad were mere political demonstrations, this must be denied without hesitation as alien to all established facts accessible to us. In the face of the modern reduction of Islam to a merely political movement, an honest recognition of its authentic inner spirit demands that this point should be strongly emphasized.

In any case: If the orientation of the faithful towards Jerusalem or Mecca is considered on the more general basis of monotheism – the

more “political” aspect of the change seems of secondary importance; the inner-Islamic problem of a somewhat blemished omnipresence of Allāh is much more serious. That the faithful worshipper is told to turn towards any specific direction, this is the real problem. Thus al-Bayḍāwī, who can be proposed as a man representing a quite broad spectrum of theological expertise, in his commentary on Q.2.145 goes back a few verses and squarely insists on the verse that says that “To God belong the East and the West” (143): “No place is so constituted by its nature that it belongs especially to God more than another place and would not be interchangeable with another such (place). The concern here is not to designate a special place but to portray God’s dominion (*amr*) (over all places of the world)”³. The commentator also discusses the value of prayer performed in the abrogated *qibla* of Jerusalem, and quite revealingly cites the explanation that Jerusalem was chosen as *qibla* “in order to put the people to a test and in order to ascertain who follows you in facing towards Jerusalem in prayer and who is faithless regarding your religion out of devotion to the direction of prayer of his (unbelieving) forefathers” (Gätje & Welch 1976:130-133). Hence, both changes of the *qibla* were tests for the early Muslims, away from the heathen orientation (mind that last part of the sentence “the direction of prayer of his (unbelieving) forefathers”...) and again away from Jerusalem. Was the *qibla* then more than just a testing device?

al-Bayḍāwī curiously also gives thought to a tradition according to which Ibn ‘Abbās declared that Muḥammad observed the direction towards Jerusalem even in Mecca (before the *hiğra*?); and he tries an impossible conciliatory explanation: “To be sure, he [i.e. Muḥammad]

³ The surprising conclusion of al-Bayḍāwī, therefore, is that the *qibla* frees the faithful from any attachment to a specific location, even to the Ka’ba. In the background is probably an ancient astrological-geographical scheme of 360 privileged places (“towers” or “windows” of the Sun), known through a fragment of Tradition that was derived from Ibn ‘Abbās, from which special favours would be expected to emanate: Cf. Heinen 1982: 101f.

positioned himself so that the Ka'ba came to stand between him and the (Dome of the) Rock" (*ibid.*, 133). The historical evidence for the *qibla* observed by the Prophet in Mecca before the *hiğra*, unfortunately, is extremely scanty and controversial. Instead of opting for an early Jerusalem or Ka'ba *qibla*, the safest conjecture is probably that Muḥammad in the time before the *hiğra* did not feel bound by any *qibla* (so Watt 1981:198). But for his companions it became a vital issue in Medina, because their Meccan relatives still practiced that "direction of prayer of the unbelieving forefathers".

That the Ka'ba as such is the fixed point for the *qibla*, this is a common misunderstanding, most surprising if it is found in such a widely used commentary of the Qur'ān as that of al-Bayḏāwī; but it is quite general in modern authors, and it certainly needs a clear-cut correction: Not the building of the Ka'ba as such is the *qibla*, or the mosque in Mecca as the Qur'ān seems to say quite literally, but only a point between the water-spout (*mīzāb*) over its north-western sidewall and the corner on the western side.⁴ The Ka'ba surely is circumambulated by the faithful, but the structure itself in the center of that circle merely gives the faithful their orientation towards the Creator of the universe. Always the same direction of all worshippers is maintained, along one and the same imaginary line passing through the building of the Ka'ba; and that is definitely not the direction towards Jerusalem or another such geographical location, even if the fervent worshipper on his long pilgrimage may sometimes forget. As was said before, it is still debated whether in the Mecca before the *hiğra* the Prophet observed any *qibla*, perhaps a vague *qibla* towards the East as the Christians predominantly did from early on, or the "Jewish *qibla*" towards Jerusalem. But if the Prophet respected the Ka'ba, as long as he remained in Mecca (and all indications are that he did), he must have stood facing towards the south-eastern horizon. For, the structure of the Ka'ba is aligned in such a way that the major axis points to the rising of Canopus on the south-eastern horizon. The *qibla* is not towards the

⁴ See Wensinck's article "*Kibla*" in *EI* & *EP*, with the sources quoted there.

Black Stone, as often believed,⁵ but exactly the point between the *mizāb* (water-spout) over the north-western wall and the western corner of the Ka'ba.

This then is the essential and newly clarified point: The Ka'ba itself is aligned according to an astronomically determined direction, namely towards the rising of Canopus on the southern sky. Such an astronomical alignment was known to medieval Muslim scholars, but it has been re-discovered with modern cartographic methods in recent years and almost sensationally published by Gerald Hawkins and David King.⁶

The conclusion, then, is quite clear: The Ka'ba itself is not "the most sacred shrine of Islam", in the sense those words usually have. According to the traditions, not even the Prophet took the trouble to enter it whenever he was in Mecca. It is rather like an instrument that collects and redirects human striving towards a cosmological point; however, it is not immediately obvious for which reason. Only this much seems to be clear that already at the time of the Prophet the ultimate goal of this *qibla* was sufficiently indefinite and impersonal so

⁵ This argument has often entered into the dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, cf. Halevi's biting scorn in his *Kuzari* about the adoration of a stone: "Fast möchte man sagen, dass der wiederholte Ausspruch Gottes: 'Ihr werdet dort anderen Göttern dienen, Holz und Stein' (*Devarim* 28, 64, 36) sich auf die einen bezieht, die das Holz, und auf die andern, die den Stein anbeten und denen wir leider mit der Zeit ähnlich werden" (Cassel 1990:355).

⁶ "The *qibla* walls on some medieval mosques were intended to be 'parallel' to one wall of the Ka'ba, this 'parallelism' being achieved by facing the mosque towards the same astronomical horizon phenomena as one would be facing when standing in front of the appropriate wall of the Ka'ba... The use of astronomical alignments (and also directions associated with the winds) for the *qibla* was actually favoured by the religious authorities over the *qibla* directions which were computed by medieval Muslim astronomers using available geographic data and correct trigonometric formulae" (Hawkins & King 1982:102). It should be noted in this context that an anachronistic recourse to spherical trigonometry can surely not be expected during the first centuries of Islamic history: Not only were the geographical distances, and hence the longitudes, of most places only vaguely known; more important was perhaps the lack of a widely shared cosmological world model of a globular universe. Spherical trigonometry, after all, can only be applied to a globe...

that no immediate clash with the principles of Islamic monotheism could occur. The "cleaning" of the Ka'ba from all idols, as the modern Waḥḥābī reaction against any forms of "sacralisation" inside the precincts of *al-Ḥarām*, all such purist monotheistic action tended to emphasize the "purely directional aspect" of the *qibla*. The fact that the building of the Ka'ba gradually again became the main focus for Muslim worshippers, this has to be ascribed to the power of popular customs, as we study them here.

The orientation of the early Muslims definitely went *beyond* the Ka'ba, and no one needs to be concerned about the polytheistic misuses of the Ka'ba in pre-Islamic times. They were, according to al-Mas'ūdī (*Murūğ* IV, 47; transl. Pellat: § 1373), a cult of Sun, Moon, and the five planets, according to others the idol-worship of Hubal and the other Arabian deities, or even of Christian saints. But if the Ka'ba was not that place where a special divine presence was to be sought, towards which final goal did it direct the faithful?

3 *The qibla and the Throne of Allāh: The Ġahmiyya-controversy. Is Allāh truly (physically?) present in our universe?*

The remarkable thing about the *qibla* is that some essential points in its traditional fixation till this day and age still puzzle even experts like E.S. Kennedy. When I sought help in his commentary on al-Bīrūnī's *Tahdīd al-amākin*, certainly one of the most informative treatises on medieval mathematical geography and especially also the determination of the *qibla*, I was quite surprised to find a question mark just where I wanted a clear answer: "Among those working on this problem [i.e. the *qibla*], he who solved it by observation of the pole, known as Capricorn (?), is nearest to the truth, because its constant position gives the direction of the course"⁷. Although the name for "Capricorn" (*al-ġadī*) is clearly written in the Ms., Kennedy is sure that it cannot have

⁷ Ali 1967:13; Kennedy 1973:3 "3. First Remarks on the *qibla* (35:4-38:19)".

the usual meaning here, and he ventures that "it is a scribal corruption of some alternative designation of the pole (*qutb*)".

The problem becomes even more obscure when we find the same expression used in an *urğūza* on the *qibla* by the famous navigator Ibn Mağid, which probably was composed in a locality far to the South of Mecca (Ferrand 1928:209). In the latter case the fixation of the *qibla* is even more mysterious because Ibn Mağid proposes that one should place a *human figure* at the point of *al-ğadī* (Ferrand adds: "par la pensée", which does not really explain anything); and for the times when the pole-star disappears one should have other fixed points on the ground. The latter addition makes one wonder whether Capricorn is not the right star configuration after all, namely at its rising and setting point. The use of the human figure, on the other hand, may remind us of the temptation of Iblīs especially in *Şūfī* texts; but it is especially illustrative of the problematic function of the *qibla* in a monotheistic tradition like Islam.

As a matter of fact, the sign of Capricorn as pole for the fixation of the *qibla* was used by many other Muslim scholars of the Middle Ages. The astronomical reason is obviously the fact that at the winter solstice the sun is entering the sign of Capricorn, hence its rising point could be and was used for the exact determination of the *qibla*. Its usefulness, it may be suspected, had become more obvious also, because the Muslim calendar had become somewhat "instable" through the prohibition of intercalation (*nasi*;⁸ cf. Q.9.37)⁸.

On the other hand, and that opens up new avenues for a better understanding of the role of the *qibla* in early Muslim religious cosmology, the throne of Allāh was also located inside the sign of Capricorn. The same *Sūra* 9 ends with the adoring acknowledgment of "the Lord of the Mighty Throne"⁹. Even the distance of this throne was known

⁸ It still remains somewhat obscure how the lunar calendar entered into the pre-Islamic fixation of a *qibla*. Cf. Hawkins & David 1982:106ff.

⁹ "God is enough for me. There is no god but He. In Him I have put my trust. He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne". (Q.9.130 - Arberry's transl.)

to Ibn ʿAbbās: “From the seven heavens up to the throne there is a distance of 36,000 years” (Heinen 1982:134). According to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, it was imposed on the Sun as its course to cover this distance and make his reverence before the throne: “When the Sun rises, the two who are given charge over it rejoice with it. They follow it on its course until, at its pole, it comes in front of the foundation of the throne; and it prostrates in adoration. Then it is told: ‘Go forth!’ And it proceeds by the power of God, the Mighty and Glorious. When it rises its face spreads light over the seven heavens, and its backside over the people of the earth. – In the celestial sphere there are 360 towers; every tower among them is bigger than the Arabian Peninsula. The Sun has a station in every tower among them in which it stays, until it comes to its pole” (*ibid.*, 149).

For Muslim theologians throughout Islamic history the association of the infinite Creator with “His house in Mecca” apparently became less of a speculative problem than His connection with His throne so clearly enunciated in the revealed book. As ad-Dārimī’s (200-282/816-895) *Kitāb ar-radd ʿalā al-ḡahmiyya*¹⁰ shows, the purely metaphorical interpretation of Allāh’s sitting on the throne was rejected as not doing justice to the Qurʾānic and traditional texts. The question, therefore, arose how the really and physically existing throne of Allāh could be integrated into a “chaste monotheistic theology and practice of Islam”. Such intellectual efforts of Muslim theologians, trying to keep the Omnipotent Creator inside of the cosmos, but not physically connected with His creatures, continued over the generations throughout the Middle Ages and up to the present time. Considering the intellectual consequences, it can be expected that a totally secularized world will be considered as threatening as an exaggerated “sacralisation” of Kaʿba and *qibla*. About the latter part, I am sure, much more reflection will be necessary, especially also when the Creator is no longer distinguished from His throne, i.e. when He is believed to be reached by man’s mathematical, astronomical, or even physical science.

¹⁰ Cf. ad-Dārimī, *Radd* esp. 27; and Heinen 1982:57-61.

4 *The meaning of space and geography for modern Islam: "Religious (or: sacred?) geography" in the Islamic tradition?*

It is especially the pilgrimage (*ḥaǧǧ*) in Islam which manifests the spatial dimension of a monotheistic faith and practice.¹¹ If, on the one side, our curiosity is raised with respect to the survival and the modifications of older conceptions and attitudes - on the other side, we are urged to reflect on the peculiar determinations of space, geography, human existence on this earth as they emanate from the Islamic monotheistic tradition.

Thus we know that the *qibla* had a social significance in Mecca, too: The community was socially structured on the basis of parts of the Ka^cba. - In this regard the Prophet acted as reformer, refusing to continue the old system (only some exceptional privileges were kept). The central function of the *qibla* in Muslim geography has led some scholars to speak of a "sacred geography" of Islam. The textual evidence is already found quite convincingly in a treatise of the 12th-century Egyptian scholar ad-Dimyātī: "The Ka^cba with respect to the inhabited parts of the world is like the centre of a circle with respect to the circle. All regions face the Ka^cba, surrounding it as a circle surrounds its centre, and each region faces a particular part of the Ka^cba"¹². The curious thing about this text is not so much that it nicely demonstrates how far the Hellenistic world view of a circular cosmos had penetrated into the minds of traditional legal scholars reared on *Qur'ān* and *sunna*; but almost contemporary is a text by the Spanish Jewish writer Halevi in the *Kuzari*, where he comments on the *Book Ġazīra* by saying that God's temple is situated in the middle of a rectangular space: "... seven doubles, six planes along six sides and the holy temple in the middle. Praised be His glory from His location. He is the location of the world, but the world is not His location (place?)" (IV.25; Cassel 1990: 387). Since the regions in Muslim geography are related to the sides of

¹¹ This has been impressively illustrated by the recent monograph of Faroqhi (1990).

¹² Quoted in King 1985:321.

the Ka'ba, this picture of a temple in a rectangular space is obviously more precise than the circular arrangement.

It would also agree with the curious cosmology of Cosmas Indicopleustes who in the 6th century described the "truly biblical form of the universe" (*Topographie*).

The *qibla*, in our modern age of "scientism" (Nasr 1993: esp. 173ff), has become an emblem of the scientific spirit which is said to have been permeating Islam ever since its beginning. Thus navigational instruments, compasses and tables are distributed in great quantities by Saudi Airlines. As we learnt recently at the opening ceremony of the new mosque in Casablanca, even Laser beams reaching as far as 35 km are installed on new buildings to indicate the scientifically exact *qibla* for all citizens at any time; – and historians of science refer to the treatises of Arabic mathematicians on the trigonometric calculation of the *qibla* to conclude how eminently scientific Islam is. The awkward problem, however, is that most of this scientific accurateness is of recent date, that it is the result of a modern misunderstanding of the traditional meaning of the *qibla*. The master mathematicians of the Arabs, certainly, deserve our respect and even admiration; but they usually had little influence on the fixation of the *qibla* for new mosques (buildings at such scientific centers as Samarqand are the notable exceptions). In the glorious times of Islam there was such a tolerance with regard to the *qibla* that in the same city one legal school could fix the *qibla* in a western and the other in a southern direction; attempted corrections by people who knew better were simply rejected; this is most clearly stated in al-Bazdawī's personal and highly interesting treatise on the *qibla* (see King 1983).

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