

Muslims Participation in Non-Muslim Burial Rites: The Position of Islam

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Abstract

Considering the modern realities and the need to promote interfaith relations, which would in turn engender peaceful coexistence among people of various faiths, tribes, and cultures, this paper explored the permissibility of Muslims participating in funeral rites of a non-Muslim without compromising the fundamental Islamic principles, most especially as clearly spelt out in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Some of these non-Muslim burial rites, inter alia, are filing past a dead non-Muslim lying in state, following the corpse to the cemetery, entering the church, etc. The paper scrutinized the lecture previously delivered by the author at a Nasrul-Lahi-l-fatih (NASFAT) youth conference employing qualitative methods (textual analysis) and MIA

(Meaning, Implication, and Application) analysis traced to Sheikh Ahmad Lemu (RA) to analyse key relevant texts. The findings show that, apart from the clear textual prohibition of praying for a dead non-Muslim, there is no clear evidence against other rites, rather there are hadiths permitting some aspects such as following the corpse following the corpse to the grave yard, burying the body and paying condolences visit to the family. In conclusion, while the Islamic principles of fostering family, neighborhood and societal harmony permits Muslims to participate in certain aspects of Christian burial rites, a Muslim must not transgress to the prohibited acts such as praying for or on the corpse.

Keywords: Non-Muslim Burial Rites, Muslims

participation.

Introduction

Burial activities in Islam are part of the legislated activities in the religion. Muslim bury fellow Muslims as a way of paying their very last brotherhood duty towards him, and this must be done in accordance to the dictates of Islam in the Qur'an and Sunnah. This is why when the corpse is being placed in the grave, the carriers are meant to say "bismillah wa 'ala millati rasulillah", ie "in the name of Allah and in accordance with the way of the messenger of Allah". But when it comes to the burial of a non-Muslim, such brotherhood obligation is not there for Muslims to pay. However we found some traditions that imply that some some honours and cares were shown by the Prophet and some of his companions during the burial of some non-muslims. This shall be explored in this paper.

Literature Review

Much works were not found on the subject matter. However, here are some of the related studies:

"A Study of Participation of Luo Muslim Women in Funeral Rituals in Kendu Bay,

Kenya: Implications for Christian Witness" by Lawrence Oseje (2021): This research explores how Luo Muslim women in Kenya blend traditional Luo funeral customs with Islamic practices. It highlights their roles in rituals such as wailing and wife inheritance, illustrating a synthesis of indigenous and Islamic funeral traditions. The study also discusses the implications for Christian outreach in the region.

"A Comparative Analysis of Burial Rites in Christianity and Islam" by Adekoya J. S. (2021): This paper examines the burial rites of both religions, emphasizing the importance of adhering to traditional procedures. It addresses contemporary deviations from established norms and stresses the need for practices that align with biblical and Qur'anic standards.

"Resolving the Interfaith Conflict Over Burial Preparation: Who Has the Right to Bury the Dead?" by Ansori Ansori, Karimatul Khasanah, and Mohamad Sobirin (2022): This study investigates conflicts arising when family members of different faiths disagree on burial rites. It emphasizes respecting the deceased's religious identity and suggests that burial practices should

align with the deceased's professed faith, whether Christian or Muslim.

"The Irony in Funeral of Two Religious Sects in Ghana: A Comparative Study in Islam and Christianity" by Bernard Toffa Akuetey, Mawuli Adzei, and Alberta Aseye Ama Duhoe (2020): This research compares funeral practices in Islamic and Christian communities in Ghana, highlighting similarities and differences. It provides insights into how both religions conduct funeral services and the cultural contexts influencing these practices.

"Islamic Reform and Historical Change in the Care of the Dead: Conflicts Over Funerary Practice Among Tanzanian Muslims" by Marloes Janson (2011): This article examines internal conflicts within Tanzanian Muslim communities regarding funeral practices. It discusses debates over traditional customs versus reformed Islamic practices and the impact of these discussions on community cohesion and identity.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research in which the historical, descriptive and analytical methods have been adopted. The **MIA (Meaning, Implication, and**

Application) structure was as used to extract the meaning of the major textual quote of the research. The research findings are analyzed theoretically from the study of various arguments and proofs deduced from the Qur'an and Sunnah which are the primary framework of Islamic studies.

Analysis and Discussion

The Hadith of Qays: Qays ibn Sa'd reported: A funeral passed by the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and he stood up. It was said to him, "It is a Jew." The Prophet said, "Was he not a soul?" In another narration, the Prophet said, "Verily, you stand to glorify Allah, who is the receiver of souls." (Muslim 2000).

As students of the deen, it is essential to apply an organized methodology for easy understanding of Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an and Hadith. The **MIA (Meaning, Implication, and Application)** structure, ascribed to Sheikh Ahmad Lemu (RA), provides a systematic approach for extracting insights from Islamic sources. This discussion applies the MIA framework to the hadith of Qays ibn Sa'd (RA) to explore the permissibility of Muslims' participation in certain aspects of non-Muslim funeral rites, such as lying-in-state, entering

a church or Christian cemetery.

Meaning: The meaning of a text could be linguistic, apparent, inferred, contextual, universal, specialized, mystical or allegorical. e.g. (Quran 17:72) whoever lived in this world as blind shall live as blind in the Life to Come...”

The meaning of the above verse is allegorical. In this context, "blindness" serves as a metaphor for spiritual ignorance or the rejection of divine guidance.

In the hadith of Qays ibn Sa'd, the meaning is apparent. When the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) stood for the funeral of a Jew, he accentuated the inherent dignity of every human soul. His statement, “Was he not a soul?” highlights that all human beings, regardless of faith, deserve a degree of respect, dignity, honour and recognition, even after death. This agreed with the Qur’anic declaration: “And indeed, we have honored the children of Adam...” (Quran 17:70). Thus, the hadith emphasizes the sanctity of human life and dignity.

Implication: Implication is a noun that refers to the act of implying (i.e., suggesting something

without explicitly stating it) and to something that is implied or suggested.

The implication of the hadith in question extends beyond the act of standing for the deceased. It suggests that according honour and respect to humanity is a core and universal principle in Islam. An example of implied actions in Islamic practice is Kissing the Black Stone during Tawaf. If touching or kissing the Black Stone is difficult for a pilgrim, pointing at it suffices. This shows that symbolic gestures can carry significant meaning in Islamic acts of worship. Similarly, standing for a deceased non-Muslim symbolises respect without necessarily participating in prohibited rites, so also are some other burial rites that don’t unambiguously run contrary to Quran and Sunnah. Applying this to the hadith, standing for the Jewish corpse implies that Muslims can honour a non-Muslim deceased without endorsing un-Islamic practices. This act of respect is a means of appreciating and glorifying Allah, the Creator of all souls who has the sole power of giving and taking lives. However, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) did not follow the funeral procession or partake in burial rites. There was also no evidence that such an

invitation was extended to him and he rejected it.

Application: The application of this hadith to contemporary circumstances, such as participation in some non-Muslim funeral rites, involves balancing Islamic principles with societal realities, considering the interfaith relations and the fact that, Muslims cannot live in isolation.

A broader application will take us to the scholastic *fiqh* contemplations on the permissibility or otherwise of participation in the burial activities of a non-muslim and the part of it in which a Muslim can actually participate, in line with the Qur'an, Sunnah and the opinion of the great Imams. Unlike in Islam where the processes of burial involves *ghaslu* (bath), *takfīn* (clothing/shrouding), *salat* (prayer), *tashyī'* (following the dead to the grave yard and *dafn* (burying), the people of the book (jews and Christians) usually shroud their dead ones in the normal worldly cloth inside some beautiful coffin without any ritual bath. The obvious congregational activities in their burial activities are:

- i. following the dead to the grave yard
- ii. prayer for the dead

- iii. burying the body
- iv. condolences involving dining and wining with the family of the deceased
- v. Participating in feasts, merriments, getting group attires for the wake keeping etc.

In place of burying the body in the ground as obtainable in the Abrahamic religions, the Buddhist, Hindu and other similar religions often burn their own dead people to ashes.

Following the Dead Non-Muslim to the Grave:

In the Christianic burial procession, the dead body is taken on the shoulders of four carriers who will be marching gently with the corpse if it is a tragic death of a young person, or dance with it if it is an old person who is seen as supposed to die after a happy long life.

In either ways, Islam permits a Muslim to join the procession that is following the non-Muslim corpse to the grave yard, especially if it is that of a family member or neighbour.

Proofs for this:

- 1- Narrated by Ali Bin Abi Talib who said: " I said to the Prophet (PBUH): Your old and astray

uncle has died. He said: Go and bury your father, and then do not do anything until you come to me. So I went, buried him and came to him. He ordered me (to take a bath), so I took a bath, and he prayed for me." (Abu Dawud 1994).

2- Ibn Abi Shaibah narrated: "Al-Harith Bin Abi Rabee`a`s mother who is Christian passed away, and the Prophet`s companions took part in her funeral." (Ibn Abi Shaybah 2006).

3- Narrated by Sa`eed ibn Mansoor ... Abu Waa'il said, 'My Christian mother passed away; I went to `Umar and asked him (what to do), and he replied, 'Ride in her funeral procession and be in front of her.'"

4- Abdullah Bin Shoraik said: "I heard that Ibn Omar was asked about a Muslim following the funeral of his mother who is Christian? and he said: he should follow her funeral to the graveyard."

5- Sa`eed ibn Mansoor said that Sufyaan narrated on the authority of Abu Sinaan from Sa`eed ibn Jubayr that he said, 'I asked Ibn `Abbaas, may Allah be pleased with him, about a man whose father died as a Christian, and he said, 'He attends the funeral and buries him.'"' (Ibn Qayyim 2000)

6- Ibn Al-Qayyim may Allaah have mercy upon him said in his book *Ahkaam Ahl Ath-Thimmah* (Rulings relevant to non-Muslims in Muslim Lands): "Chapter on attending their funerals: Muhammad ibn Moosa said, 'I asked Abu `Abdullah (meaning Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal), 'Does a Muslim attend the funeral procession of a non-Muslim?' He said, 'Yes.'" (Ibn Qayyim 2000)

Praying for a Deceased Non-Muslim: The Christians pray for the dead at the churchyard before they move it to the actual burial spot. It is not permissible for a Muslim to take part in this.

Proofs

1- Q9:113 reads: It is not permissible for the Prophet and the believers to ask for forgiveness for the (deceased) polytheist, even though they should be near relatives, after it has become clear to them that they are inmates of the flaming fire.

The exegetes of the Qur'an (mufasssirun) are unanimous that this covers all non-Muslims and not only the polytheists. (Ibn Juzay 1340).

2- An-Nawawi may Allaah have mercy upon him said, "As for offering funeral prayer over a disbeliever or supplicating Allah to forgive him, it

is prohibited by the text of the Quran and the consensus of scholars ... and it is permissible for the Muslim to follow the funeral procession of his non-Muslim relative..." (An-Nawawi 2000).

Burying the body: This is permissible for Muslims. A Muslim can join in the burial process of a non-Muslim especially if it is a close relative or a neighbour.

Proof

1- Narrated by Ali Bin Abi Talib who said: " I said to the Prophet (PBUH): Your old and astray uncle has died. He said: Go and bury your father, and then do not do anything until you come to me. So I went, buried him and came to him. He ordered me (to take a bath), so I took a bath, and he prayed for me." (Abu Dawud 1994).

Condolences with the Family of the Deceased:

A Muslim can say words of pity and condolences to a non-Muslim on any affliction that befalls him. The same goes to the family of the deceased, a Muslim can pray for their wellbeing and that God will take care of them, and so on.

Proofs

1- The verse that gave an injunction on the subject of praying for the deceased clearly stated the deceased only and did not include his people.

2- Some of the companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) came across a tribe amongst the tribes of the Arabs, and that tribe did not entertain them. While they were in that state, the chief of that tribe was bitten by a snake (or stung by a scorpion). They said, (to the companions of the Prophet (ﷺ)), "Have you got any medicine with you or anybody who can treat with Ruqyah?" The Prophet's companions said, "You refuse to entertain us, so we will not treat (your chief) unless you pay us for it." So they agreed to pay them a flock of sheep. One of them (the Prophet's companions) started reciting Surat-al-Fatiha and gathering his saliva and spitting it (at the snake-bite). The patient got cured and his people presented the sheep to them, but they said, "We will not take it unless we ask the Prophet (whether it is lawful)." When they asked him, he smiled and said, "How do you know that Surat-al-Fatiha is a Ruqya? Take it (flock of sheep) and assign a share for me."

(Bukhari 2000)

The narration above generally confirms the permissibility of praying for a non-Muslim.

Meanwhile, an aspect of non-Muslim burial condolences that can be seen in this part of the world is the activities of dining and wining after burying the dead. This is unacceptable in Islam, as it is comparable to showing off the wealth or nobility of the dead (al-‘aqr) which Islam prohibits. (Abu Dawud 1994)

The Verdict of International Fatwa Committee of Saudi Arabia It is incumbent on you to be dutiful to your parents, even if they are non-Muslims, and to accompany them in the life of this world with kindness by providing for them, clothing them, treating them kindly and compassionately, speaking to them gently, calling them to Islam with wisdom and good advice, and guiding them to the signs of the truth. Hopefully Allah would guide them to Islam. If either of them refuses to embrace Islam, there is no objection that you bury him yourself and to do what is necessary in this regard without performing the funeral prayer over them or supplicating Allah for them, and without partaking in any religious innovations practiced by the followers of the deceased's false religion regarding their rituals in

funerals, burials, and what follows that of sinful practices. (Permanent Fatwa Committee 2018).

Wisdom behind the Permissibility Taking Part in Non-Muslim Burial

1- Honouring the Dignity Soul: This is seen in the way the Prophet (SAW) stood to pay a respect for the Jewish corpse. Honouring the deceased, even a non-Muslim, is permissible as long as it does not involve prohibited actions.

2- Mutual Kindness: Praying for the deceased's family and consoling them aligns with Islamic values of compassion and good character which we are meant to show to non-Muslims who are not in war with us as stated in Q60:9. "Allah only forbids you respecting those who made war upon you on account of (your) religion, and drove you forth from your homes and backed up (others) in your expulsion, that you make friends with them, and whoever makes friends with them, these are the unjust".

3- Custom and Social Cordiality: The fiqh principle, "Custom can be the basis of judgment," supports adapting practices based on societal norms, provided they do not contravene Islamic principles. (Chams-Pasha and Ali, 2019). A number of things retained in Islam were part of the good cultures of the

Arabs, including names of Humans, days and months. Similarly, Salman Al- Farisi suggested the digging of a ditch for the battle of Khandaq, which was said to be a Persian culture, Salman Al-Farsi told the Prophet (saws) “O Messenger of Allah, in Persia when we feared an attack of cavalry, we would surround ourselves with a trench, so let us dig a trench about us now.” (Mubarakfuri 2000)

Wake-Keeping and Merriments

A Muslim is not permitted to participate in burial merriment and wake-keeping. This is because, merriments after the demise of a soul is unislamic. It depict lacks of respect for the soul. In addition wake-keeping service involves praying for the deceased and because of that, a Muslim is not allowed to be part of it in line with the earlier quoted Qur’anic verses prohibiting that.

Conclusion

In whatever they do, Muslims must avoid any acts that suggest or imply endorsement of non-Islamic beliefs. This applies to all their endeavours among themselves as Muslims and in their relationship with non-Muslims. Going by that principle, Muslims’ participation in non-Muslim burial activities should

be limited to offering condolences, honouring the deceased with a stand or joining the procession if it is a close relative, sharing in the deceased family's grief, demonstrating respect for the deceased and participating in the burying if it is a close relative and there are no people of his religion to bury him. After guiding oneself from the extant prohibition on the subject, which is the prohibition of praying or seek forgiveness for the deceased non-Muslims, other activities are largely permissible, but with varying degree of involvement as demonstrated in this paper in the cases of some companions that were allowed to go to the extent of burying while some were told to follow them to the grave yard only. The level of involvement of a Muslim in the burial activities of a non-Muslim is therefore subject to contextual considerations guided by the principles of *fiqh*, societal norms, and closeness of the individual to the deceased.

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