

The Higher the Minaret, the Nearer the Day of Judgement

By

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“Did you see our new Masjid? The Turkish carpets are so advanced that just by walking bare-footed on them, you’ll get a free reflexology massage. We flew in a team of calligraphers from Indonesia to do the Qur’anic inscriptions in the dome which has so much copper in it that it can link up the whole of South Africa if all the telephone lines get stolen. And that’s not all...you can see our 30 meter minaret from the N2 highway; and when we light it up at night, wow, it looks like the Eiffel Tower of Paris!”

As people race with each other in building more beautiful Masjids or renovating the old ones in this modern age, the old arguments are usually heard to justify the millions of rands being wasted in their construction: “

What is wrong with building a beautiful Masjid when God gave us the money to live in beautiful homes and drive flashy cars. Can’t we also treat our Masjid the same? And if anyone asks us why we spent so much, we’ll just tell them: “Mind your own business. It’s our money. No one is forcing you to perform your salaah in this Masjid!”

Numerous Masjids

As the Muslim population is spreading out and increasing in South Africa, many a Masjid has either been constructed or is being currently constructed by well-meaning and sincere people. However, as noble as it is to build a Masjid, it cannot be done according to our standard of extravagance, but by the standards of simplicity laid by Islam. As noble as it is to spend money for the cause of Islam, it has to be done according to how Islam wants you to spend it, and not how you wish to spend it. If you do not agree with these laws, then God nor Islam needs your money. God is the Creator of money Who has made you a mere trustee over it, whilst Islam can survive without your money as it did for 1430 years now. Rather take a cruise to the moon and bust your useless million just like how Mike Shuttleworth did.

Granted, the reasoning that our Masjids need to be according to our standard of living does make sense to a certain degree, but it is illogical sense. It’s like saying: “If I’m on drugs, then everybody else also needs to be on drugs.” If you choose to live like a king contrary to the example of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it doesn’t mean that you must start “kinglifying” religion and apply your standards of extravagance to the Masjid also. Islam has its own sense. It is called divine wisdom which is much more superior to human non-sense. The picture of the original Masjidun Nabawi which our Noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself built in Madinah, bears testimony to this. Divine wisdom condemns extravagance in the building of high-rise Masjids and says that such behaviour is indicative of the type of evil behaviour that signals the nearness of doomsday.

Sayyadina Anas reports that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "From amongst the signs of the Last day is that people will take pride (in the construction) of their Masjids, but there will be few to attend it." (Mishkat) Another saying reads thus: "The Masjids will be full of decorative architecture, but will be scarce of guidance." (Nuzhat al-Nazirin) Sayyadina 'Abdullah ibn Masud once passed a decorated Masjid and cursed the people who decorated it saying: "The poor are needier of this!"

A tradition recorded in Baihaqi says that when God deprives people of blessings in their wealth, they squander it in soil and water i.e unnecessary building. Masjids are known as the Sha'air (landmarks) of Islam by which the presence of Islam is shown. Masjids should present an awesome spectacle conveying the serenity, dynamism, truthfulness and simplicity of Islam in its architecture, not extravagance, pomp and pride. We should be careful what message we are conveying to the world via our buildings in the same manner we convey a particular message via our dressing and appearance.

Most areas of South Africa where a significant population of Muslims reside have numerous Masjids on their doorstep. Everyone is spoilt for choice as to which Masjid to attend. Should it be the one with the sensor taps or the one with the most powerful air conditioner? In order to attract people, some Masjids have been known to shamelessly copy the architecture and distinct features of a more "popular" Masjid in order to also make it equally popular... behaving like two rival soccer teams.

Sadly for such ignorant people, the chief attraction of a Masjid is its tall minarets and stately domes, rather than its spirituality and vibrancy. Rather than earning rewards for building such a sanctified structure, they only earn curses for their everlasting monuments of show. Wasting money on Masjid embellishment holds no reward, just as living in a five star hotel during Hajj doesn't increase your reward of Hajj.

Investment in Bricks, not in Humanity

The Masjid is our gateway to Paradise. However, instead of making it our spiritual investment, we have made it our investment in worldly prestige and honour. This is why we focus so much on its exterior architectural aspects, rather than the inner significance and role it supposed to play in our lives. If we treat this gateway with so much disdain, how will we ever reach Paradise?

Many aspects of the Masjid merit discussion, but here I only want to point out three areas:

1. The Position of the Muezzin: The Muezzins (Callers to Prayer) are truly the unsung heroes of our society who will have the highest of stages in Paradise. Unfortunately, they are called "bangi saabs" (toilet cleaners) and treated with scant dignity. They are housed in a small room adjacent to the Masjid – often sleeping in the same room as the washing machine to clean the Masjid towels, - given very little annual leave, and made to live on slave wages. Many are imported from Malawi who suddenly become "Shaikh" when reaching South Africa, but who

cannot even pronounce some words of the Adhan properly!

The role of the Muezzin is like an advertisement to our business. Nobody spoils the image of his business by bad advertising, yet we do it all the time with our religion. The caller to success of both the worlds should be our best talent, just as Sayyadina Bilal, the Abyssinian, was to the Muslims of the first generation. He was one of the most respected and trustworthy Companions of his time, who was also afforded the honour of being the personal treasurer of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Everyone today conveniently thinks that a Black Muezzin is a Sunnat, so making him the treasurer of the Masjid should also be a Sunnat!

2.The Role of the Imam: If Engineers are scarce in South Africa, talented local Imams are even more scarce! A very small number of local young talent are being encouraged to become dynamic Imams, and in future they may even cease to exist. Why should our youngsters bother with a society which is prepared to invest millions in a building, but only a few crumbs in looking after the affairs of the building! A hadith informs us that a time will come when people will gather for the prayer, but there will be none to lead them. That time is very near.

Today, many of our Imams are imported from India or Africa to lead the salaah in our luxury Masjids, many of whom are not confident enough to deliver a lecture in English. Some Imams who do lecture either do not know when to stop talking, or will repeat the same lecture for the 100th time – not that the people take heed of his message in any case! For us, an Imam is just an employee to lead the salaah, nothing else. Our guidance on Islamic matters will come from our pockets, friends or the internet.

The irony of the situation is that if a person has a 30 million rand business, he will not hire an amateur accountant to do his books. Rather, he will seek the services of the best Chartered Accountant, pay him R60 000-00 per month, and follow his advice on how to improve his business. Yet, on the other hand, we will invest 30 million in building the most beautiful Masjid, pay the Muezzin R2 000-00 per month and the Imam R5 000-00 per month, and totally disregard their advice on our spiritual affairs. When the Imam advises us as to our Islamic duty in order to secure our own entry in to Paradise, we will severely criticise him behind his back and make comments such as “he needs to be fired because he can’t eat from us, and still vomit on top of us.” In some places, the Imam is even given a script to follow in his talks. He is just a stooge of the rich and powerful. To top it, society does nothing to protect him. So, it is not surprising that when some of them do deliver an impressive lecture or render a beautiful Qur’anic recitation, it is not directed at the hearts of the people, but rather towards their pockets.

Although our Imams are the most sincere and selfless people in the community, but they are largely not the cream of our society. This privilege belongs to our doctors, lawyers, and professionals. This problem is entirely the fault of the community who generally only send their poor, or “average Joes/school drop-outs” to a Darul Uloom which they maintain by means of their charities. The intelligent ones are enrolled at a university. Today, everyone is crying for dynamic Islamic leaders because western-educated Muslims have sold our cause, but nobody is investing in producing them!

3.The Function of the Trustees: Here the golden rule applies: “The more beautiful the Masjid, the more the politics!” Till today, the trustee does not understand that he has an administrative function, and the Imam an executive function, and he is constantly trespassing that line. The trustee is supposed to be acquainted with the laws of waqf (endowment) as he is the one who handles the financial affairs of the Masjid, be aware of the science of Masjid architecture, be honest and regular for his prayers, and also be humble and pious. How many make the mark? He doesn’t need to be a donor or a rich man. But quite the opposite is seen today. The donor becomes the owner who manages the Masjid finances like his petty-cash account, dictates to the Imam how to behave, places such designs on the Musalla (carpet) and front wall of the Masjid that causes a distraction in prayer, and most horridly, demands the loyalty of the people to attend his Masjid simply because he needs the popularity. Some trustees are only seen in the Masjid when there is a fire to be lit, whilst some are totally absent from the Masjid except for a Jumu’ah or on a Sunday evening when he has nowhere else to go.

Whilst all of us may be doing our best, but our current situation shows that it’s high time we start changing our attitudes in this regard. So, the next time you enter a Masjid, ask yourself the following question: “I’m here because of the powerful aircon, the luxury carpet and because the trustee gave my son a bursary or some zakaat money, or because this Masjid affords me the best quality prayer, the most dynamic religious activities and guided leadership?”

Does such a Masjid exist anywhere in South Africa?