

Funerals and Burial Rites

Imam A. M. Khattab

The subject of my talk today was necessitated by my observations lately in our mosque. When someone goes to a mosque, normally, he knows why he is going, and what he is supposed to do, and he comes prepared accordingly. Normally, we leave our houses in a state of wudu',¹ or we may perform wudu' here (the Islamic Center) because facilities exist, and we come with the intention to learn a word or two every Sunday, since education is from cradle to grave. No one will ever reach the peak in education; knowledge is infinite. Wherever we go, we learn something new. But, instead, I have noticed that there is a big group of our people whiling away their time in the social hall, instead of attending the learning sessions, or even the prayer. They are in the social hall, not just ignoring or neglecting the goal for which they came here, but in addition to that, they are committing mistakes by gossiping and backbiting. And I think the mosque should not be a place for this. It is a very terrible precedent for our children when we bring our children and ask them to do the impossible. We say to them, go to the

mosque, learn how to speak Arabic, learn everything there is to know about your religion. Then, when they come out of their classes, or even between classes, they find their parents chitchatting in the social hall. It is a very terrible precedent. It is tantamount to a parent saying to his son or daughter not to smoke while the cigarette is in his mouth. Children sometimes respect their parents and obey what is said to them, but deep down in their hearts, they question why their parents are not acting on their own advice. Don't forget that the new generation of today is the computer-literate generation. Kids are not stupid. They know more, while they are in grade school, than us, when we were in the university. We cannot deceive them. We have to be, ourselves, the examples which they are expected to follow. To try and remedy the situation, my talk today is being heard in the social hall, too – I am using the two microphones – as if we are imposing upon them to listen by force. But, in fact, we are not forcing. We are giving advice and the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: *ad-deen al-naseeha*.² We are advising. And by doing this, we are doing our

¹ Mandatory ablutions prior to the five daily ritual prayers

² "Religion is an advice"

duty.

Today, immediately after the prayer, we are going to read on the occasion of the 40th day of the death of Brother Muhammad Abdul Haqq's mother who passed away in Lebanon.³ He donated the food being served today and he requested that we pray for her. And since I am going to talk about *janaza*,⁴ I would like to talk frankly about something.

It has come to my attention that some people are complaining about the Islamic Center. What is this complaint? The complaint is that when someone dies, "the Imam wants to get rid of him, or her, as soon as possible, burying him or her underground." That is very bad.⁵ And the other complaint is that, in my sermon, following a death, I say that person was walking on this earth yesterday, and today he will be 6 feet underground so, you people, prepare yourself for a similar day; and that is what some people don't like to hear.

What would the people like to hear? They want to hear what is called, here in America, an eulogy. The man may never have performed a prayer in his life, and you come in front of the audience and say, *Allah yarhamu*⁶ he never missed a prayer; he was a very charitable man, while he never paid zakah in his life; he was Hajj,⁷ and he had never been to Saudi Arabia; he was fasting Ramadan, while he never fasted one day; he was a good man in his life, while he was on drugs. That is a eulogy, and it is a Christian tradition. It has nothing to do with Islam.

What does the Qur'an say in this respect? It says, don't put yourself in a high position because God knows your *taqwa*,⁸ or what is in your heart, and if God knows, then, you don't need to say it. Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"...He knows you well when He brings you into being out of dust, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs: do not, then, justify yourselves for He knows best who it is that guards against evil" [53:32].

Now let us go back to the history of Islam. When Muhammad, *'alayhi as-salato wa-s-salaam*,⁹ the leader of the

Muslims, passed away, the people did not believe it. When the news was spreading, and one person would tell another that Muhammad passed away, he would retort: "You are a liar." They all thought that he was not supposed to die. That was because of the intense love the people – his followers – felt for Muhammad. Some people lost their minds, including Omar bin Khattab. He was out of touch with reality because he loved Muhammad dearly. He said: "If anyone tells me Muhammad has died, I'll chop his head off."

That prevailing situation – namely, one of disbelief – was corrected and brought under control by Abu-Bakr. He stood up and delivered a speech which is very famous in the history of Islam. He said: "O People! Any of you who were worshipping Muhammad, Muhammad is dead – he is no longer here. Any of you were worshipping Allah, Allah is living and will never die. Muhammad was no more than a messenger of Allah; many messengers came, and died, before him" and he quoted for them the Qur'anic verse 'Āl-e-'Imrān, 3:144. That's the attitude of Islam. And that is the way we follow in this mosque. That is our practice, and history, since I came to this mosque.¹⁰ And I don't know why *now* (1996) there are complaints. If this was the case with the death of Muhammad, then who is better than him?

Let us go back to our history here in the Islamic Center. We have moved a great deal towards Islam in our community, although we don't realize it. I remember the time when someone died in our community and the body would remain in the funeral home for five days, and every night members of the community would visit the deceased. If the deceased was a woman, the funeral home would dress her in her finest clothes, apply make-up on her lips and face, and lay her in an open casket for the visitors to come by and look at her face and say: "Isn't she beautiful." I have seen this happening. *What is so beautiful about a dead person? What is it?* I cannot understand it. My question is, if this woman were living, would she accept dozens of alien men to come and look at her face while she was asleep? I am sure she would not. But now that she is dead, she is defenseless; she cannot stop a man from coming and looking at her face. But "modernism" is teaching us this, and we think this is what we should be doing.

When we moved to this mosque, I changed all that.¹¹

³ May 17, 1996

⁴ Funerals

⁵ Imam means that, that is not his intention at all

⁶ May God have mercy on him

⁷ The title by which one may be called if he or she has performed the Pilgrimage to Makkah, in Saudi Arabia, one of the five pillars of Islam

⁸ Piety/God-consciousness

⁹ Upon him be prayers and peace

¹⁰ 1982

¹¹ The move was from the old mosque on Bancroft Street in Toledo to the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo in Perrysburg

Funerals and Burial Rites

The casket is closed, and as soon as it is closed, it is not opened again, except, if I am not here and some people open it – I am not joking – the people are not scared of Allah, but they are scared of Khattab. I also changed the type of casket in which the deceased is buried. I know of a Muslim funeral that cost \$15,000. Why? Because the son was very proud of his father and got him the best casket for \$10,000. Then it is put underground and it will be dust someday. That \$10,000 will pay for the education of a child for four years at the University of Toledo. The poor person has a casket for \$3000.00; the rich person's casket is for \$10,000.00. I changed all that so that there is only one kind of casket – the cheapest – and the rich and the poor have to be buried in it. Except, if I am not here some people may have gotten a better casket and that has happened, also. There are many things which I cannot talk about when there is a deceased because it may hurt the feelings of the family, but now that we have no funeral, we can talk freely.

What should we do? What are we supposed to do? Let us start from the time a person falls sick and is admitted to the hospital. It is the duty of Muslims to go and visit that person in the hospital, and that is known in Islam as *'iyadatul-mareed* – visiting the sick. Any Muslim can visit the sick person, whether or not related, or even acquainted or not. But, according to our tradition, if that person is terminally ill and is going to die, you will find that the hospital room is full because a whole village is standing around him. That is not appropriate. All we need is two or three people around the sick person or a dying person. And what should they do?

The people who are attending to a dying person should pronounce *Ashhadu Allah La ilaha illa Allah wa Ashhadu anna Muhammad-ur Rasool-ul Allah*¹² beside him. Some people say, read the Qur'an beside him. That is not in Islam. The main thing to do around him is to pronounce *ash-Shahadah*¹³ because this is a reminder for him or her. Then, as soon as that person dies, close his eyes, because if you don't close the eyes, it will be very hard to close them afterwards. The Muslim practice, from the time of the Prophet, is to tie a piece of cloth, tight, around the head and chin, so the mouth will not be open,

which was dedicated in 1982

¹² "I bear witness that there is no god but one God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God"

¹³ See footnote 12

because if the mouth is left open for two, three hours, it will not be possible to close it again. That is called *at-takmeem* in Islamic jurisprudence.

The body has to be washed (*ghusl*) before burial. And here [in America] our goal is to wash and bury the body within 24 hours. We say within 24 hours because we are in a foreign environment. Back in our Muslim countries, we wash and bury the body within two hours. But, it is easy to do that over there because the cemetery is very close and there are people who carry the body on their shoulders and bury it.¹⁴ Here, burial has to wait until legal procedures are completed, and a death certificate obtained, and the funeral home finalizes its arrangement and business with the cemetery and grave-diggers. For these reasons burial within 24 hours is okay. I have some people in our community who have requested me to allow their bodies to lie in the funeral home for "just three days" and¹⁵.... If... if you die before me I'll bury you *after 20 minutes!* So that is what should be done according to what is written in Islamic jurisprudence regarding the rites for funerals.

Let me give you some examples of what I have observed in my experience. I went to Los Angeles, one day, to bury a Muslim woman and the funeral home was full of people – all of them Muslims. And when I called upon the people to pray the janaza, not a single man or woman stood up. So I had to pray the janaza *mufad*.¹⁶ They did not know what janaza prayer is, or what it means, yet, as soon as the body was taken to the cemetery and lowered in the grave, even before the *talqeen*,¹⁷ a lady came to me and asked, "Imam, can I deliver *qaseedah*¹⁸ on the deceased?" I said I expected her to pray the funeral prayer. She did not pray the funeral prayer, but now she was coming forward to deliver *qaseedah* on the grave. That's the "advancement". And, I'll tell you, I've learned if you give people one inch, after five years it will be one kilometer. So there should be **no leniency or relaxation of the rules at all** when it comes to Islam. If you don't like my system, there are

¹⁴ The body is carried on a bed by the relatives.

¹⁵ Imam could not finish his sentence because a lady from the audience speaks up requesting that she be allowed to lie in state like that. Imam's response provokes a burst of laughter.

¹⁶ One person

¹⁷ To recite or dictate to the dead the answers to the questions he/she will be asked by the angels, so he or she can remember them

¹⁸ Poem

other mosques and there are other funeral homes, take your deceased there and I'll come as a person just to console you and to pray for the deceased – like any other Muslim.¹⁹

Now, when a body is taken to the cemetery, some people say women are not supposed to go to the cemetery. And that is the practice in many Muslim countries, and followed by many Muslim communities in America, also. My Islam may be little bit different in that respect, because I look at the goal. What is the goal behind going to the cemetery? The goal is that it should be a lesson for everybody: to realize that this person was the mayor, or the governor, or some other important human being, and today he is under the ground. So you learn a lesson. And that is the hadith²⁰ of the Prophet when he said, "Whoever is seeking a real admonition, then, death should suffice as the greatest of all admonitions." Why should only the men go to the cemetery? Are the women not going to die? They have to prepare themselves, also. That's why I say males and females should go to the cemetery to learn a lesson.

After washing the body, the next step is the *kafan*, as we call it in Arabic, while the Anglicized word is coffin. *Kafan*, in Arabic, means two sheets, just like bed sheets, white in color and made of cotton. Cut one of them into two and with one-half wrap the upper half of the body, and with the other half the lower half of the body. Then you wrap the entire body with the full sheet, and tie it at the top of the head and at the bottom of the feet. That is the *kafan* for males which could work for females also, but some ulama²¹ of Islam say that the woman's chest should be tied with a fourth piece of cloth.

Why should it be made of cotton? Some people have expressed a preference to be buried in a silk *kafan*! And silk from Shanghai, China – good silk. No. It does not work that way. The idea of the *kafan* is the idea of *ihram*.²² Why does *ihram* consist of two towels made of cotton? Everybody wears them during the *tawāf*²³ around the Ka'bah,²⁴ so you cannot distinguish between the king and the janitor. They are equal before God. Unity. Equality. That is the idea behind it. So,

since you are paying farewell to this world, and going to meet your God, and all of us are equal, we have to wear the same clothes. One cannot be attired in silk while another is attired in cotton. There is no distinction on the basis of dress here. That is the idea of *kafan*.

I went one time to North Dakota for the burial of a Lebanese man because he stipulated in his will that a Muslim imam is to bury him. So the people phoned me because I was the nearest one to them, although I was in Edmonton, Alberta, 1000 miles away. I went. I found that the funeral home had already prepared the man: attired him in a very nice three-piece suit with diamond cufflinks in his shirtsleeves, a gold ring on his ring finger, and a gold watch on his wrist, lying in the casket. He had on a beautiful brand new pair of shoes – black – to match the suit. The man had 11 children. Eleven. And I asked:

"Did you wash the body?"

They said: "Why? Why do you have to wash it?"

I said: "Don't you know that the body has to be washed before burial?"

No, they didn't know. So I asked the funeral home man to take those clothes off, and prepare the body for washing, and I washed the body myself. Then I asked them to bring me sheets – bed sheets. The people were stunned by what I was doing. They thought the Imam must be crazy! As soon as the burial was over, they took us to the house for the mercy food. My wife was with me. We went and sat at the table and all the people, including the Imam and his wife, had in front of them, a beautiful plate of pork. You know why I am telling you these stories? To kiss your hand back and front – we don't feel the *ni'mah*, or the bounty, of Allah on us, here, for having such a community. Those people were completely lost. And since I mentioned the mercy food, let me elaborate on that.

There is no such thing as mercy food in Islam. It is a Christian tradition. What Islam recommends is that the relatives and the neighbors are supposed to cook food in their houses, and take it to the house of the deceased, because they are sad and don't feel like cooking and they have no time to cook. That is Islam. Sometimes, tradition takes precedence over our religion. When you say to the people no mercy food, it is not Islamic, don't do it in the mosque, don't do this, don't... don't... they say, okay, let us go to Beirut restaurant; tradition upends religion. Why do they insist? Because the people will say, "Look at that guy, he is a miser, he doesn't like to spend; his late father, or, his late mother was a very nice

¹⁹ A long, pregnant, silent pause before Imam resumes talking; and dead silence in the audience

²⁰ A report or account of what the Prophet said

²¹ Scholars

²² The pilgrim's garb during Hajj

²³ Circumambulation

²⁴ The House of God

Funerals and Burial Rites

woman, see all they have done for him and he doesn't even feed the people on behalf of their soul." That is nonsense. *Completely un-Islamic!*

Then, when we go to Beirut restaurant for the mercy food, what do we do there? We find people laughing so loudly just as if people in downtown Perrysburg could hear the laughter of a party being held in the Islamic Center – as if we are celebrating a wedding. Won't that hurt the family of the deceased? Is that the way we show our sadness? Did not the Prophet, peace be upon him, when he was burying his son, Ibrahim, say: [Imam speaks with great tenderness and in a whisper, in Arabic. The English translation is:] "The eyes are pouring tears, the heart is feeling humiliated and for your separation from us *ya Ibrahim* we are very sad." That's what the Prophet said when his son died. So there is sadness, no matter who the dying or deceased is. And when you are going to those people, you are supposed to share their sadness, not going there to joke and laugh.

All this has happened in this mosque and I'm talking about it now because there is no funeral. If there is a funeral, I find it very hard to talk frankly. There is another tradition, of which I have no knowledge, and that is, after the third day of the burial, some of the family members go to the cemetery to "untie the knot". I don't know what that knot is, or where it came from, or what type of tradition that is. There is no such thing in Islam. Some people say they are making '*usbū'*: it means, "seven days" have elapsed since the person passed away, so they make '*usbū'* – food or whatever. There is no such thing in Islam.

Now we come to the reading ceremony on the 40th day after death for which we are gathered here today. It, too, is un-Islamic, but personally I look at it from the aspect of psychology. If the people are donating money on behalf of the soul of the deceased, that's good, because that is *sadaqa*.²⁵ If they are asking some people to read something (Qur'an or *tasbeeh*) and grant the reward of that type of '*ibadah*, or

worshipping, to the deceased then it is okay, but spending too much money on that business under the name of "40th day memorial" is un-Islamic. In fact, we have lots of traditions, and these traditions sometimes defeat Islam. However, I'm saying to you that we are okay here, because in our Muslim countries, they sometimes do things worse than this.

I have heard about certain people, back home, slaughtering a cow under the casket of the deceased. "His Excellency" passed away so they are slaughtering a cow under his casket, and inviting not only their village, but all the neighboring villages as well. That has nothing to do with Islam; it is what we call showing off.

Before I introduce Dr M. Y. Ahmed,²⁶ who has a message for you, I would like to tell you that I have, here, a check for \$500.00 for reading *Fatihah*²⁷ for Abu Ali Zrain. If we have one hundred *Fatihah* like that, we'll pay our mortgage! And this reminds me of something that I want to tell you.

Before the imams reached America, there was a man here²⁸ who used to conduct burials because he was the most learned one, and the only one who could read the Qur'an, even though he read it wrong sometimes. But he was the most learned one among all the people. One day, someone passed away and the family asked him to give them a bill for his services so, at least, they could get some of the money of the deceased from the public trust, because the court took his money, since there was no will. The man gave them a bill and itemized it for them:

1. Reading Qur'an in the mosque: \$100.
2. Reading Qur'an in the cemetery: \$100.
3. Ten *Fatihah* - every unit for \$10 - will be \$100, read in the mosque.

He itemized it nicely. It looks like I have to follow that pattern until we pay off the mortgage. [Imam recites *Fatihah* for Muhammad Abdul Haqq's mother and says *Allah yarhamu*.] Okay, Dr Ahmed, you come and give your message.

²⁵ Charity

²⁶ Council member

²⁷ The first chapter of the Qur'an consisting of seven verses

²⁸ In Detroit