ODDBJØRN LEIRVIK

PROSTRATE AND ERECT

Some Christian-Muslim Reflections on Religious Body Language

My initial memories of close encounters with Islam, while serving as a Lutheran parish minister in a multireligious district of Oslo, are of a bodily nature. As a guest in small and intimate Muslim prayer rooms in Oslo, I never quite knew how to situate my own body when the men prostrated themselves with their forehead against the floor or sat on their knees with open, upturned hands. I felt that I was in a different bodily space and was confronted by the absence of a body-conscious religiosity in northern European Lutheranism.

The bowed bodies of men in prayer nevertheless reminded me of something. They evoked memories of my adolescence—memories of low church chapels in western Norway with male bodies bent over chairs in earnest prayer. However, the bowed bodies in those chapels never became my religious body language. Maybe I was too preoccupied with being a modern Christian. Modern bodies tend to sit in a casual and distanced way. Or they stand up with Luther and only reluctantly bow down. European Lutherans do kneel during the Eucharist but take care not to exaggerate their body language. In particular, many would be sceptical of raising their hands when standing up to sing in the church, lest they be suspected of having become Pentecostal or charismatic Christians.

The vantage point for this article’s reflection on the bodily gestures of prostration and uplifted hands in prayer is that of a Lutheran Christian being exposed to the comparatively richer body language not only of Islam but also of other forms of Christian spirituality. It is not easy for Norwegian Lutheran Christians living in a pluralist context to know what to do with their bodies, surrounded as they are by Catholics crossing themselves, Buddhists in meditation, dancing New Age adherents, charismatic Christians with uplifted hands—and Muslims bowing deeply.

In what follows I will reflect liturgically and in a semiotic way on the sign language of the human being in prayer, in prostrate and erect postures. I will take Islam and the Muslim body in prayer as my starting point and proceed with some reflections on religious body language in Judaism and Christianity.
Prostration: A Transcultural Gesture

In this article I will use the expression “prostration” as a phenomenological notion for bowing deeply with the forehead to the ground. The Latin *prostratio* corresponds more or less to the Assyrian expression *sukênu*, the Hebrew verb *hištaha-wâh*, the Greek *proskînein*, and the Arabic verbal noun *sujâd* or *sajda*.

The intercultural vocabulary indicates that what is considered by most people to be typically Islamic was in fact a common expression for awe and adoration in the ancient Orient as well as in Greek antiquity. A figurative expression of what prostration meant can be found in an Assyrian obelisk from the eighth century BC, in which the Israelite King Jehu throws himself down for the Assyrian King Salmanazar III.1

In phenomenological terms, there are reasons to believe that prostration before a god contains the same elements of submission as bowing down before a secular lord. In this context I will leave aside the question of whether the secular gesture is primary to the religious one or *vice versa*. In any event, in the history of religions prostration has been a widespread expression of veneration—not only in the Middle East but even more so further to the East. It has signalled awe and submission—either to worldly lords, a guru, a buddha, or a god (Ohm 1948: 359ff). From Tibetan Buddhism to Zen bowings and prostrations (even full prostration) are part of the customary and recommended Buddhist discipline. Writing from the vantage point of Korean Zen as practised in the US, Andi Young in her book *The Sacred Art of Bowing: Preparing to Practice* interprets prostration not as submission but as an expression of repentant awareness and a bodily means of “waking up” (Young 2003).

Bowing and prostration are clearly intercultural and interreligious phenomena. At the semiotic level, however, the meaning of prostration may differ from one context to another. In what follows I will focus mainly on its possible meanings in the symbolic universe of the closely related religious traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Bowing Down before God as a Muslim

This is how we encounter Muslims in prayer in the Qur’ân:

---

1 See the reproduction on the website http://www.unige.ch/lettres/antic/mesopotamie/voyageetude2004/Siegenthaler.html.
Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah and those who are with him are hard on the unbelievers, merciful towards each other. You will see them kneeling \( (\text{rukkā}') \) and prostrating themselves \( (\text{sujjād}) \), seeking bounty and good pleasure from Allah; their mark is upon their faces, as a trace of their prostration \( (\text{sujūd}) \). That is their likeness in the Torah … (Qurʾān 48: 29; Fakhry 1997).⁵

In this passage we find an indication of what became the ritualised form of prayer in Islam, with prescribed bows \( (\text{rukū}') \), genuflections and prostrations \( (\text{sujūd}) \). The reference to the Torah indicates that the first Muslims did not think of this way of praying as specific to Islam.

Muslims often explain that \text{sujūd} or prostration is a quite natural reaction on the part of the human being before God. One should prostrate oneself, flat on one’s face, before the divine. In the Qurʾān we read that ‘… before Allah all creatures on the earth and the angels prostrate themselves, and they are not proud. They fear the Lord, high above them, and they do what they are commanded’ (Qurʾān 16: 49f.). From this perspective, prostrating oneself in prayer five times a day is only a visualisation of what is already there as a hidden sign in nature and in the realm of the angels. According to the Qurʾān, it was the angels who instructed Mary to bow down in prayer, in ritual \text{sujūd} and \text{rukū}’: ‘And when the angels said: ‘Oh Mary, be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself \( (\text{sajda}, \text{sujūd}) \) and bow down \( (\text{arka'ī} > \text{rukū}') \) with those who bow down!’’ (Qurʾān 3: 42f.).

Mary was obviously not a Muslim in the confessional sense. She was a Jew. But historically that does not make much of a difference. Bowing and prostration are still part of Jewish liturgies (Young 2003: 58-61). If we turn to the Jewish Bible, we find a great many references to pious Jews who fall down not only in adoration before God but also before human beings who are worthy of honour. Abraham, for instance, fell down before God (Genesis 17:3; 22:5), before God’s angelic messengers (Genesis 18:2)—and before honourable representatives of the Hittites, his human neighbours from whom he bought a burial site in Hebron (Genesis 23:7, 12).

At this point Muslims are likely to insist that God alone is worthy of prostration and might be prone to improve on the Biblical image of Abraham, the ancestor of all monotheists, in this respect. However, in the Bible too we find that prostration before the Lord with a capital L is paired with a crystal-clear rejection of total submission to worldly masters. Mordecai, a hero of Jewish resistance, refused to bow down to the Persian King Xerxes Haman (Esther 3:5). Daniel was thrown into the den of lions because he fell down on his knees three times a day.

---

⁵ Fakhry’s translation goes on ‘… and in the Gospel.’ Most translators, however, take ‘in the Gospel’ as the beginning of a new sentence.
in the direction of Jerusalem, instead of worshipping Darius (Daniel 6). Similarly, in the Qur’ān we encounter God-fearing people who bow down before God and the next moment stand up and proclaim that they would never adore any lord other than Him (Qur’ān 18:14).

Both Jewish heroes of resistance and Islamists may thus, for good semiotic reasons, claim that the liturgical, bodily sign of prostration can be interpreted correctly only when seen in its interaction with the erect body that stands up to all too tall worldly lords. Bowing bodies in western Norwegian chapels may also, on the day following an evening prayer meeting, be rather unyielding in their countercultural will to resist what is deemed to be non-Christian.

**Biblical Bowings**

What are the semiotic implications then of the words used in the Bible for bowing down before God? Is it “natural” (in view of the respective religious sign systems) for Jews and Christian to bow down to the extent that Muslims do? In many places in the Psalms we encounter liturgical invitations that at face value seem to imply prostration, as in Psalm 95:6: “O come, let us worship and bow down [verb: hištahāwā́ḥ], let us kneel [verb: raka’] before the Lord, our Maker!” (New Revised Standard Version)

Most English Bibles use the words “worship and bow down” to render hištahāwā́ḥ. An older Norwegian (nynorsk)4 translation from 1938 has a more literal, almost “Muslim,” understanding of the same verse and translates hištahāwā́ḥ as “fall down.” As for Norwegian Bible translators, it seems, in fact, that they wavered a bit in choosing the right kind of bodily connotations when translating the verb hištahāwā́ḥ.5 In the Old Testament this Hebrew word is employed no less than 170 times. In Western Bible translations, however, it is often rendered in less explicit terms as “worship” or modified as “bowing down.” To be sure, it is a difficult to determine whether body language can be extracted from the scriptures. Old Testament scholars suggest that already in the Psalms the verb hištahāwā́ḥ

---

1 The reference is from Sarat al-kahf, which retells the ancient Christian legend of the seven sleepers, a legend about seven young men who refused to yield to the infidel emperor and had to take refuge from his men in a cave.

4 Nynorsk and bokmål refers to the two different forms of written Norwegian.

5 Among present-day scholars, the commonly held view is that hištahāwā́ḥ is not (as it was often claimed) the hithpael form of the verb sh-h-h but a rare example of the old causative form shaphel of the root h-w-y. See Preuss 1980: 252.
might have acquired the more general meaning of praying or carrying out a cultic act before God (Preuss 1980: 252).

The relation between text and liturgical history is generally complex. Let us take the example of liturgical worship in the Church of Norway (as in many other Lutheran churches): When invited by passages in the Hymn Book to kneel down before God, to stand up together or to raise one’s hands in prayer for the world, worshippers rarely take these invitations in the literal sense. In this respect, the word does not become flesh.

In the New Testament the corresponding Greek verb to the Hebrew hištahawāh is proskúnein, which means throwing oneself down in awe. The verb proskúnein is used almost as many times in the New Testament as the verbal root s-j-d in the Qurʾān (the two Scriptures are of a comparable size). In modern Bible translations, however, the implied body language is often spiritualised into expressions such as “paying homage” and “adore” or watered down to kneeling—as in the story about the wise men who came to adore the child Jesus: “they knelt down and paid him homage” (pesóntes prosekūnēsan, Matthew 2:11, New Revised Standard Version).

Norwegian Bible translations in the two written forms of Norwegian, nynorsk and bokmål, sometimes differ in their rendering of proskúnein. In the Norwegian Bible Society’s nynorsk translation from 1978 an expression identical to that of the New Revised Standard Version is used in translating Matthew 2:11. The Norwegian bokmål translation from 1930 employs a stronger expression that visualises the implied body language: not only did the wise men kneel, they actually “fell down.”

In the gospel of Matthew it is also narrated that the disciples fell down before Jesus when they acknowledged that he was the Son of God (Matthew 14:33). In many cases New Testament prostrations express a desperate prayer for help, as when sick people throw themselves down before Jesus (for example, in Matthew 8:2). When Jesus himself utters his desperate prayer in Gethsemane, struggling to become obedient to God, he throws himself to the ground: “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground (épesen epi prósopon autoû) and prayed,
‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’” (Matthew 26:39).7

As in the Qur’ān, in the gospels submission to God may also strengthen the will to resist when faced with illegitimate lords. In the story about the temptation of Jesus the devil tries to seduce him into falling down prostrate before the Evil One. But Jesus resists, reciting the Mosaic injunction “Worship (proskunēseis) the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Matthew 4:9f.; cf. Deuteronomy 6:13). In both the Bible and in the Qur’ān, then, a semiotic connection can be detected between the prostrate and the erect human being: submitting oneself to the one God implies rejection of any kind of submission to illegitimate lordship.

Even in a liturgical setting it makes good sense to envisage an interplay between the prostrate and the erect posture. In the history of liturgy prostration has probably never been absolute: those who prostrate themselves before God wait for a signal to rise again (Preuss 1980: 251).

Rising with Hands Uplifted

Turning once more to the Old Testament and the Psalms, we find that the injunction to fall down in worship is actually paired with images of people who stand in worship with uplifted hands: “So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name” (Psalms 63: 4).

Perhaps in Jewish liturgical life there was a harmonious interrelation between prostration and prayer with uplifted hands. But a tension in liturgical history between the prostrate and the erect posture is also thinkable—comparable, perhaps, in spiritual terms to the Lutheran dialectic between fearing and loving God (as explained by Luther in his Small Catechism in his explanation of the Ten Commandments). We may take the Book of Daniel, which belongs to the latest writings of the Old Testament, as an example. Being a God-fearing Jew, Daniel refuses to bow down before other lords than God. But he also experiences being raised by a divine power—in a relation marked not by fear but by the language of love. When Daniel had his powerful vision of the Son of Man in the skies, it is said that he fell into a trance, with his face to the ground. But a hand touches him, raises him first to his hands and knees, then to his feet:

“Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.” So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. He said to me, “Do not fear, Daniel .... ” (Daniel 10:4-12)

Intertextually, the scene in the Book of Daniel probably served as a model for Matthew’s narrative about the transfiguration. When the disciples saw the face of Jesus shining like the sun and heard a voice from heaven declaring “This is my Son,” their immediate reaction (as in the case of Daniel) was to throw themselves down, “overcome by fear.” But touching them, Jesus says: “Get up and do not be afraid” (Matthew 17:6f.).

We might be led to think, then, that the transfiguration on the mountain (perhaps in continuation with the later parts of the Jewish Bible) signals a grand shift in the bodily history of religions: the human being is raised from fearful prostration to a more joyful position, as (possibly) reflected in the Jewish-Christian history of liturgy.

But we should not be too simplistic about this, implicitly corroborating popular prejudices, according to which Islam means submission whereas Christianity means being raised up. As many Muslims would point out, both the word *islām* and the gesture *sujūd* may just as well mean glad devotion as fearful submission. In New Testament contexts, too, prostration connotes both fear and joy. In Luke’s narrative about the ascension of Jesus to heaven, it is reported that the disciples fell down and worshipped him—before returning to Jerusalem ”with great joy” (Luke 24:52).

In terms of liturgical history, it is nevertheless clear that in early Christianity, the erect position with uplifted hands gradually became the prevailing expression of prayer. In the New Testament there are many references to standing with uplifted hands when praying.8 When the Jesus movement spread in the Mediterranean area and was transformed from a Jewish renewal movement into early Christianity, there are many indications that, liturgically, the erect position struck the dominant note over against kneeling and prostration. Was it faith in the risen Christ that lifted the believing body from earth towards heaven? As can be seen from early Christian art in the catacombs of Rome, the dominant sign of early Christian worship was the so-called *orant*—a standing figure with both hands uplifted.

In this process Greek philosophical impulses may also have played a part. It is well known that in parts of ancient Christianity, “other-worldly” Neo-Platonism had a strong influence on Christian thought and belief. Such influences may also have put their mark on Christians’ body language. In the church father Clement

---

8 The instructions on prayer in the gospel of Mark are introduced by the expression “Whenever you stand praying ...” (Mark 11:25). In I Timothy we find the following admonition: “I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands ...” (I Timothy 2:8).
(his works were written in Alexandria at the end of the second century), the gestures of raising one’s head and lifting one’s hands are seen as bodily signs of “the striving of the Spirit in the spiritual world.” Clement stretches his images—and his liturgical invitations—to the extent of recommending that heaven-bound Christians stand on tiptoe during worship (Von Severus 1972: 1216; Ohm 1948: 352f).

Kneeling and Prostration in Christian Tradition

In parts of ancient Christianity the erect and upturned position was so dominant that even the weakened expression of prostration known as kneeling was seriously questioned. When eastern (Alexandrian) church fathers such as Clement and Origen write about prayer, they hardly touch on kneeling, not to mention prostration.

In western Christianity, however, kneeling gradually became an accepted expression of Christian prayer, but only in restricted liturgical contexts. The Western church father Tertullian, writing in Carthage at the end of the second century, lays down detailed regulations for when to kneel and when to stand. From the regulations it becomes clear that kneeling was associated with penance. The conclusion was finally reached that kneeling does not fit the joyful celebration of Christ’s resurrection in Sunday worship (Von Severus 1972: 1228f.; Ohm 1948: 353). In 325 AD the Council of Nicea went so far as to forbid kneeling on Sundays and in the period between Easter and Pentecost:

Because there are some who kneel on the Lord’s Day and in the days of Pentecost [the fifty days between Easter and Whit Sunday]; that all things may be uniformly performed in every parish or diocese, it seems good to the Holy Synod that the prayer [tas euchas] be all made to God, standing (cf. Bergh n.d.).

In other periods of the liturgical year, however, kneeling was accepted and even recommended. In the western church, kneeling thus eventually found a well-regulated place. In both Catholic and Protestant contexts kneeling was later reintroduced into the Sunday service, as can be seen from the prescribed kneeling in the Catholic Mass and from Lutheran altar rails. In most Christian traditions kneeling has also become part of personal body language in prayer, not only as an expression of penance but even—one must suppose—as a sign of confident intimacy with the divine.

From an ecumenical perspective we find that even prostration did not disappear entirely from the Christian history of liturgy. It has survived in liturgies of penance and ordination and as part of the prayer life in monasteries—particularly in eastern Christianity (Ohm 1948: 365f). From old Orthodox tradition has distinguished between the greater and lesser penance (metânoia megalē/mikra). According to Basil the Great, writing in the fourth century, the lesser penance
should be conducted with heads bowed, whereas the greater penance requires prostration— even in its most radical form of laying down flat (cf. Bergh n.d.; Ohm 1948: 342).

In both Syrian Orthodox and Coptic devotional life prostration is a current practice. In his book *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* (1998) William Dalrymple gives a vivid image of his encounter with Syrian Orthodox worship in the Mar Gabriel monastery in present-day Turkey. He describes how the assembly repeatedly threw themselves down from the erect position, almost banging their head against the floor. The only difference from what might have taken place in a mosque, says Dalrymple, was that the suppliants were crossing themselves when falling flat on their faces. He concludes that Islam and eastern Christianity have preserved what was originally an early Christian convention, whereas western Christians have broken with a holy tradition (Dalrymple 2000: 110, 170).

However, to speak of an early Christian “convention” in this respect might be taking the matter too far. In the early Christian history of liturgy, the movement upwards seems to have prevailed over against the downward movement. It must thus be admitted that Pentecostal and charismatic Christians have a strong case when imitating early Christian forms of prayer and stretching the *oran* to its utmost.

**Islamic Bowing**

Islam shows less variation in its liturgical history. Muslims too stand in prayer. But the dominant movement would seem to be downwards: in bows when standing (*ruku*'), in full prostrations (*sujūd*), and in kneeling or sitting on one’s heels. But there are also the uplifted, open hands—when saying the personal supplications (*duʿa*) that follow the ritual prayers.

The decisive sign, however, is to bow down to the ground. The Arabic word for mosque, *masjid*, is derived from the same verbal root as *sujūd*. Literally, it means the place where one bows down, with one’s face to the ground. Correspondingly, the prayer mat is called *sajjāda*. Prostration is such a salient feature of Muslim prayer that one can hardly avoid asking what daily prostrations tell us about Islam. Can one think of Islam without this bodily expression? Is it perhaps prostration that *is* Islam? In that case, what does the word *islām* mean?

It belongs to the basic insights of semiotics that any sign, whether in scripture or bodily, is ambiguous. The relation between the sign, the signified and interpreter is complex and changeable. Some would see a divine secret behind that. In an article on the dialogical relationship between Islam and Christianity, the Shi’ite Muslim Hasan Askari suggests that “A common religious sign must be differently apprehended. It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise
to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings” (Askari 1972: 485).

The word *islām* and the bodily sign of *sujūd* are also ambiguous: they may connote submission or devotion. In some meditative traditions the so-called “Allah position” is a bodily posture that gives free rein to breath. If so, bowing down as a Muslim would mean breathing freely rather than being forced to one’s knees.

*From Prostration to “Happy Man?”*

Not everyone, however, would let those who carry “the mark of prostration ... upon their faces” (Qurʾān 48:29) get away with benign interpretations that see breathing bodies and voluntary devotion where others see nothing but submission. Parallel to the history of religions, there has always been philosophical protest against prostration of any kind. The Latin poet and philosopher Lucretius (1st century BC) was a materialist and adherent of Epicurean teachings. In his view, prostration was detrimental to the erect human being, regardless of who the object of prostration might be: “Shivering, the mortals keep bowing their mind, and fearful of the gods, they humiliate the spirit. They bend, even press the human being to the ground” (Lucretius, *De rerum natura* VI: 52; cf. Ohm 1948: 366).

From Lucretius a straight line may be drawn towards modern critique of religion and the ideal of the upright, autonomous human being who refuses to bow down before anyone. From that perspective it should be no surprise that the Humanist Association has chosen the erect human being as its symbol, as expressed by an emblem that is often referred to as the “happy man” (with the contours of a human being raising its hands high). When the symbol was introduced by the British Humanist Association in 1965, it was seen as a sign of either all-embracing humanism or a happy man reaching out for the sky (“not heaven”) in pure joy (Berg 1997).

The erect ideal also put its mark on religious studies in its early phase as a modern science. In the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* of 1908, kneeling and prostration are described as typical expressions of an unsophisticated, self-abasing spirituality:

Kneeling may be described as a natural reaction to the emotions of self-abasement and supplication. As such, it has been observed among unsophisticated peoples. In a less degree only than prostration, it symbolizes inferiority and dependence, by the abandonment of the erect posture of human active life. (Crawley 1908: 745)

Writing in the 1920s the Danish scholar Johannes Østrup refers to Muslim prostration in a more positive way. But he too sees it as a civilising and disciplining measure: “The Islamic ritual of prayer was the best training for a passionate and undisciplined son of the desert. It made the individual feel that he was part of a
community, and reminded him how small his own importance was” (Østrup 1929: 31; Ohm 1948: 363).

Is it true, then, that daily prostration presses the human being down, making the individual feel so small that he falls more easily into line with a greater will? Are Lucretius and the hardliners among the secular humanists right in seeing human dignity reflected in the evolution from a crawling creature towards an upright homoe erectus? One might even ask, in view of Christianity’s contribution to general European culture: Is the “happy man” of the Humanist Association nothing more than a secularised version of the early Christian orant? Have the secular humanists simply taken “happy Christianity” to its utmost consequence? Or should believers concerned about the body language of faith listen rather to Muslims and what they have to teach about the deep relation between prostrated bodies in the mosque and upright bodies in the outside world, ready to fight for the cause of God and that of the weak on earth (Qur’an 4:75)? Quieter Muslims, conscious of the healthy gains of a pious life, may also give the general public something else on which to reflect—for instance, the fact that daily prostrations keep the body sound and healthy, even in old age.

Still Sitting There?

In spite of the new interest in bodily religiosity, most European Lutherans are “still sitting there.” As bewildered onlookers to the softly bowed and blissfully uplifted ones, Lutheran (and Reformed) Christians of the North are still at a loss as to how and where to place their bodies in prayer. Muslims bow down, materialists criticise them, and Pentecostal Christians and the secular humanists compete in stretching as far upwards as possible. Lutheran and Reformed Christians typically try to find their place somewhere in the middle by practising the modern compromise of sitting or—if they venture further down—the classical compromise of kneeling.

It could still be that many of them have more inside than they dare to let out. At the Emmaus Centre for Dialogue and Spirituality in Oslo, which is connected to the Lutheran St. Paul’s Church, believers of different Christian traditions have constructed a sacred space of meditation and worship that accommodates the seated, the upright, and the prostrated body. The wall friezes in St. Paul’s Church were made in 1992 by the artist Veslemøy Stoltenberg for its 100th anniversary. They give form and colour to a vision of (Lutheran) Christians who bow down as deeply as the Muslims and stretch upwards as far as their co-Christians in Pentecostal churches. Paul, to whom the friezes allude, had to bow down completely, face to the ground, when he was blinded by the divine light and cried out his

---

9 For information on Emmaus see http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/emmaus.html.
Kyrie outside Damascus (Acts 9:4). But, as the friezes imply, he was raised up to joyful Gloria with uplifted hands.

Both the erect and the prostrate human being are carriers of signs that are ambiguous. Deciphering the signs is not the most difficult thing. It is more difficult to find the spiritual and bodily point of balance—in liturgy as well as in everyday life. Christians and Muslims can perhaps help each other in that respect. If so, dialogue activists must learn how to share experiences of body and spirit and not keep it at ethical and religio-political questions in their dialogues.

LITERATURE


