Takbīr

By:
Tariq al-Jamil

Source:
The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World

Bibliography

The Arabic word takbīr (a gerund from the root k-b-r) means “praise, extolment, glorification, magnification, celebration.” In religious use, takbīr refers to the uttering of the phrase Allāhu akbar (God is the Greatest). The use of the verb in this sense appears in the Qur’ān in the imperfect active form yukabbiru in “He wants you to glorify Him because He has guided you” (2:185), and “He has subjected them to you, that you may glorify God” (22:37). The verb is also used in the imperative form kabbir (glorify your Lord; 74:3), and in both the imperative and gerund forms with God as the object in the Qur’ān in “glorify Him with glorification” (17:111).

In Muslim religious practice, takbīr is used in a wide range of contexts. The description of God as akbar (the greatest) is an expression of God’s transcendence as a central Muslim epistemological principle. The word akbar is used in the takbīr in the superlative sense to convey the absolute, omnipotent, and noncontingent essence of God in relation to human beings.

Takbīr is used frequently in religious devotion and social practice. The Islamic call to prayer (adhān) and the call to commence prayer (iqāmah) both contain the pronouncement of takbīr. Prayer according to both the Shi‘ī and Sunnī schools begins with the obligatory, consecratory expression of takbīr, takbīrat al-iḥrām. It is also recommended to recite takbīr after each of the postures assumed successively during prayer. According to the Imāmī Shi‘ī school, it is recommended to end prayer by reciting takbīr three times.

A formula of takbīr is recited on the eve of the last night of fasting during the month of Ramadan with the confirmation that the moon of the month of Shawwāl has been sighted. It is recommended to continue the recitation of takbīr until the beginning of the prayer the following morning marking ‘Īd al-Fitr (festival of the breaking of the fast). Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have encouraged the recitation of takbīr throughout ḥajj rites, and more generally at the conclusion of a journey. Though there is disagreement over
the prescribed number based on variant ḥadīth texts, the funeral prayer has come to contain the recitation of takbīr four times in Sunnī contexts and five times in Shīʿī funeral rites.

In daily religious life and cultural expression takbīr has a wide range of usage, spanning all Muslim culture, ranging from commencing the lawful slaughter of animals, to expressing adulation and exuberance during a sermon or cultural performance, and conversely, even to communicating a sense of shock or distress upon learning of the death of a loved one.