

CHAPTER 8

Reflections and Recommendations



THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS have proffered a comprehensive overview of the issues related to the determination of prayer and fasting times, focussing on the factors specific to the high latitude countries that millions of Muslims now find themselves inhabiting. Cognisant of the fact that expansive investigations sometimes entail ‘the wood being lost for the trees’, the reader is reminded that the major chapters – 4, 5 & 6 – all have summaries appended to them, so that the key points may be more clearly kept in mind. Additionally, an executive summary of the entire work may be found at the outset of the book, and a summary of the recommendations at the end of this chapter [8.6].

I have explored what some of these issues are – framing the questions that they might better be conceptualised – on the basis that the clarity of the question oft-times determines the clarity of the answer [2.0]. The key terms in use in the discussion have also been clearly defined for the same reason [3.1], and demonstrated that the scientific and Islamic legal terms do not necessarily refer to the same phenomena [3.6]. Thereafter, the science of twilight has been explained, especially as relevant to its occurrence in northern latitudes [4.4], that we might better understand its mechanism and so predict what might happen in different situations.

This was followed by the main section of the work – probably the most challenging for the non-specialist reader. This detailed the classical and modern jurisprudence relating to prayer and fasting times at high latitudes: the twilights of dawn [5.1] and dusk [5.2], persistent twilight and the non-occurrence of isha [5.4], determination

of a time for isha [5.4.3, 5.4.6], the question of lengthy fasts [5.5], and the principles related to averting hardship [5.6]. Efforts were made to present accurate summaries of sometimes lengthy classical discussions, though the focus remained on the Hanafi school, and by-and-large, the more intricate approach of the legal theorists (*usuliyyun*) was eschewed in favour of pronouncements of the jurists (*fuqaha*).

There followed an overview of how definition, science and law came together in practice: a history of classical Muslim attempts to devise prayer timetables on the basis of both folk and mathematical astronomy [6.3]. The two methods were contrasted, with attempts at reconciliation also explored [6.5], before survey, discussion and critique of major modern endeavours to perform the same task in a post-colonial world that had seen the introduction of a 24 hour universal clock, daylight savings, and non-Muslim scientific advancements [6.7, 6.8]. Lastly, my own pilot field-study – an attempt to conduct the first systematic, scientifically rigorous and textually faithful observation of dawn in northern latitudes – was documented, with analysis and (self-)critique of its findings [7.2].

Through all of the above, I have endeavoured to remain academically neutral, presenting arguments (and counter-arguments) as fairly and rigorously as possible, that readers might acquire a flavour of the depth and complexity of the discussion as it has proceeded over the centuries, and especially in modern times. One's ability to accurately represent opinions that one may disagree with is perhaps the true measure of scholarship; the extent to which I have succeeded in being an 'honest broker' is left for the reader to decide. However, though I have both transmitted and offered critique of various positions throughout the text, I have made very few counter-suggestions.

In this final chapter, then, I will provide my own thoughts and reflections on the issues that have been raised in this work. Whether such conclusions are accepted or not is equally left to the reader: the focus of this work was always to present the evidence and then allow those given responsibility for determining prayer times to make a fully informed decision about how they fulfil that onerous task. I will start with the major questions raised at the outset of this work, at the beginning of the executive summary.

8.1 The Observation of Dawn and Dusk

As prayer time determination is based primarily on observation, and conditions in high latitude countries warrant the development of a bank of new data, the general principle is: the more observations, the better. However, as has been shown in chapters 6 and 7, not all observations are equal. Furthermore, obtaining good quality observations in the highly-industrialised, highly-populated and cloudy, high-precipitation regions that are high latitude countries is particularly difficult.

A healthy balance between the need for local observations and the importance of reliable ones would be an agreed-upon quality rating scale by which a sighting might be graded. In this way, higher quality observations could be easily distinguished from others, but all data would be available to interested parties. This would hopefully also have the effect of 'teaching' good observation through the answer-options provided. One such suggestion has been proffered in Appendix E, which could take the form of an online submission system.

In brief, the critical factors are: awareness of *what* the observer should be looking for, *where* on the horizon they should be observing, *when* during the lunar month they should be observing, *who* is best placed to carry out such observations, and *how* to determine confounders such as horizontal and ambient light pollution, cloud cover and obstructions. Of these, the most important from an observational perspective is light pollution [4.5, 7.2.1], and from a legal perspective is ignorance of what the actual legal boundaries are in terms of the spectrum of twilight [3.1]. I have encountered Muslim scientists who are well aware of the observational issues, but unaware of how the legal definitions of the prayer times square with these.

8.1.1 The Use of Cameras to Determine Dawn

The other important question is that of the validity of camera observation [6.7.5] or light-meter [6.7.4] measurement of twilight. These have started to find favour in more recent observations, and are potentially very useful tools to assist in the validation (or evidencing) of an observation and expansion of the data bank.