

Islamic Philosophy and the Fine Arts

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In going over the readings prepared for this seminar, I was pleased to notice in them the absence of ethnically and racially based views on Islamic art and architecture. These views should be guarded against, and not allowed to re-enter through the back door via ambiguous expressions like "culture" and "religion," terms that mean all things to all people, especially when lumped together. Take an expression like "Islamic culture": one difficulty is that it tends to be seen in terms of so-called primitive cultures, as it sometimes is in anthropology, or of some particular, real or presumed "religious culture," such as Christianity. The attempt to look at Islam through Christian eyes and to search for symbols that parallel those of Christianity is a dubious enterprise, regardless of protestations that one is looking for specifically Islamic symbols or symbols that distinguish Islamic culture from other cultures. Christianity absorbed and transformed, and in this way preserved, pagan or gnostic symbols; Islam rebelled against these symbols and tried to remove them from the consciousness and experience of the Muslim community. We should also remember that symbols, and the symbolic functions of art and architecture as we understand them today, are predominantly nineteenth-century romantic European notions. Their relevance to the self-understanding of artistic creation and expression in other times and places cannot be taken for granted (the critical side of A. H. el-Zein's "Beyond Ideology and

Theology" is rather instructive in this respect).¹

Even if we accept the notion of "culture" or "Islamic culture" as a useful point of departure, the relationship between crafts in general and what we call the "fine arts" in particular and other "aspects" of such a culture remains highly problematic. Yet in this seminar we are dealing with the possible relationship between the fine arts in Islam and certain other things called "written sources." Here I think it is prudent not to be too ambitious or too hasty, and Oleg Grabar's suggestion that "the importance of written sources lies in the parallelism they provide for visual phenomena" is a sound starting point. The only indication in the readings that such a parallelism existed between the fine arts and philosophy is the passage from the *Alchemy of Happiness* by al-Ghazālī, which is cited by Richard Ettinghausen and referred to by Oleg Grabar:

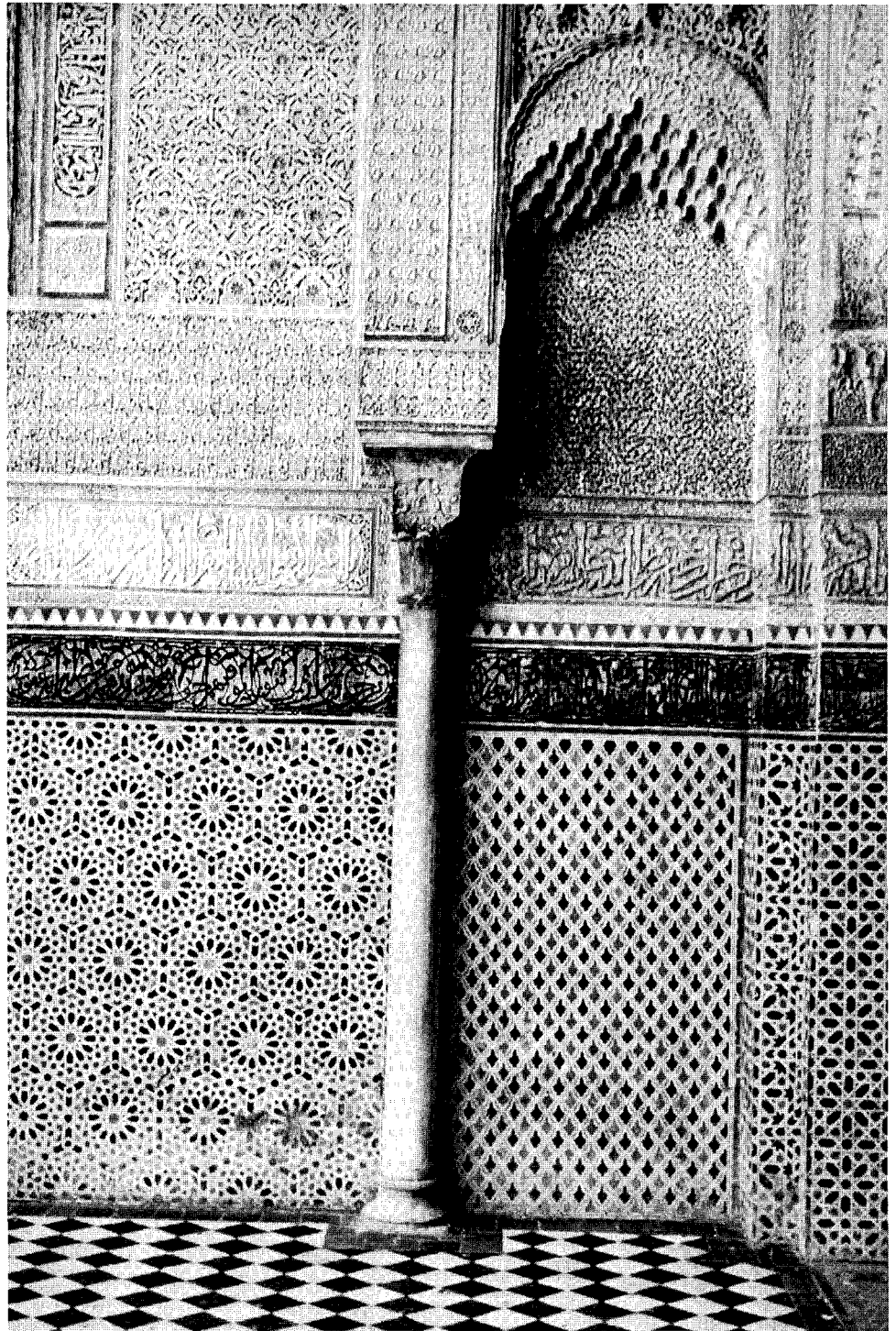
The beauty of a thing lies in the appearance of that perfection which is realizable and in accord with its nature . . . [For example] beautiful writing combines everything that is characteristic of writing, such as harmony of letters, their correct relations to each other, right sequence, and beautiful arrangement.²

Let me, therefore, begin here and point out what the patrons as well as the practitioners of these arts could have learned from philosophy, either directly or indirectly, through popularized versions of

philosophy spread among educated circles by mystics like al-Ghazālī.

The Task of Islamic Philosophy

If I were asked by a student of Islamic art and architecture where one could look in Islamic philosophy for further enlightenment on these questions of a thing's perfection, harmony, the correct relationships among its parts and on their implications for man and man-made works of art, my answer would be quite simple. This is what Islamic philosophy is all about: it is the search for order and harmony in the natural world, the intelligible world, the human soul, and the city. It is an account of such order and harmony where it exists, and an account of how to restore it in man and in the city. It looks at works of art as being in the service of this objective. If the student were then to ask whether he could expect to find in this literature an account of Islamic architectural symbols and their meanings, the answer would again be simple: the overarching concern of Islamic philosophy is to find out what is true always and everywhere, and to discover the principles that govern temporal and local variations and change insofar as these are rhythmic or cyclical or the products of the interaction of permanent factors. It is not a religious or cultural or national philosophy in the sense that it is the product of, or bound up or concerned primarily with, the ideas and ideals of a particular human community, not even one as large and significant as its own religious community. Yet it is equally true that Islamic philosophy is very much concerned with understanding the particular character of the Islamic community, and architectural forms and decorations are temporally and locally bound with specific nations, cities, and tribes, and with their particular environments and traditions. In this sense, Islamic philosophy, like Islam itself, is concerned with man's deeds and way of life as determined by his views of the world, of the human soul, and of the civic



Fez, Morocco: a corner in the madrasa al-'Atṭārīn

Photo: H-U Khan/Aga Khan Awards

order. What a builder does, on the other hand, is largely determined by the needs and purposes of the particular human community for which he builds, which may be a family or a business, a civic establishment or a whole nation; and he must know and take into account those needs and purposes.

How then, one may ask, can the student understand the relationship between Islamic philosophy (or the thought of the major Muslim philosophers) and Islamic architecture (or the work of the major Muslim architects)? Is the relationship "proved" to a significant degree by the fact that they were all Muslims. I should not think so; one can be a good Muslim without being a philosopher or an architect. One must therefore look for more concrete links. If they existed, it was probably because some architects were educated and intelligent men who read or heard about some of the writings of the philosophers. But the question still remains: what could they have learned from these writings?

Aspects of Divine and Human Creation

Before looking for answers, it is useful to recall some of the characteristic ways in which Islamic philosophy deals with the arts. Although it does occasionally set down the general rules that govern the production of works of art, it does not generally engage in an analysis of these rules as they apply to the production of particular works, except by way of giving examples; nor do we find a detailed analysis of aesthetic experience or of the problems arising from the contemplation of a work of art. The particular rules that govern the production of a particular work of art, as well as the analysis of the experience of particular works, are normally dealt with by the art critic. The philosopher may also be a poet or a musician, a literary critic or a critic of music. But these activities remain distinct from what we may call his "philosophy of art," which is concerned with such

questions as the relationship between art and knowledge (whether knowledge of the Creator or of the created world); the role of the powers and passions of the soul in the production and experience of art; and the civic functions of art.

The architect is a maker. If he is any good, we say he is a creative man, a creator. If he is a Muslim he knows already that the Supreme Creator is God, and one assumes that he would be interested in reflecting on His work and even in imitating His creation. There is, of course, quite a bit about God's creation in the Koran and the Hadith, but it is not difficult to distinguish between the way these sources speak about God's creation and the way philosophy investigates and presents it. Philosophy looks at it as a whole, and looks at its parts and the order of its parts as an object of human knowledge. There is an affinity between the way the philosopher looks at the world and the way the artisan conceives of his work, inasmuch as they both consider a whole, its parts, and the relationships among those parts. Both are engaged in a human enterprise: one looks at the natural whole with the aim of knowing it, the other conceives a whole with the aim of producing it. Both need to consider this whole-to-part relationship to the extent that human capacity permits. But more specific issues still have to be considered.

How is the Supreme Creator conceived? Does one give priority to His knowledge or to His will? In philosophy this question turns on whether He is conceived as the supreme intellect or as the mysterious One beyond the supreme intellect, beyond all knowledge and being. Muslim philosophers were divided on this fundamental issue, and their differences were not necessarily related to the part of the Muslim community to which they belonged. In Ismaili philosophy, for instance, the early Iranian philosophers such as Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī thought of God as beyond being and not being, and as the originator of the supreme intellect through His command, while the later Fatimid philosopher Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī thought of God as the first or

supreme intellect, and in this he was followed by the Ismaili thinkers in Yemen. The question may seem to deal with a subject that is too remote to have any relevance to human things. In fact it is not, for it determines the end of human thought and human action. Is the end of man (who is created in God's image) the perfection of his intellect that terminates in the intellectual intuition of the whole, or is it to contact that mysterious One through deeds? The answer to this question may determine the way one looks at artistic creation in its most sublime form—whether it is considered an imaginative representation of how things are and how man ought to act, both of which can also be articulated by intellectual understanding and intuition, or an imaginative revelation that transcends all created reality and anything that intellectual understanding and intuition can achieve on their own.

This issue has something to do with the next one, which is the nature and structure of the created world, intelligible as well as sensible, the heavenly bodies as well as the bodies here below. Do stars have intellects and souls? Are they ranked in an order ascending to that which is closest to God? Such questions are more philosophic than religious, even though a philosophic interpretation may be related to or have its origin in a Koranic or Hadith text. We all know of the numerous verses about light and darkness in the Koran, especially the famous "light verse" (XXIV, 35), that lend themselves to philosophic interpretations: light as the physical manifestation of intellectual or supra-intellectual light, and the different parts of creation as an orderly mixture of light and darkness, an analogy of being and not being, that terminates in God as pure or unmixed light. These philosophic interpretations were current in Sufi circles and among the Sufi orders to which many of the great architects belonged.

Then there is the analogy that is drawn between the structure of the world, the structure of the soul, and the structure of the city. The structure of the soul and the activities of its various parts or powers and

their relationship and hierarchy are of interest to any artist whose art consists of creating a work that pleases or conveys a message or arouses a certain feeling in the human beings who look at it or work or worship in it. Sense perception, imagination, intellect, passion, and practical understanding are all parts of the soul that the architect addresses to some extent through what he creates. The power of imagination, its functions in waking and dreaming, the way it mediates between understanding and sense perception, its role as a receptacle of intellectual perception or revelation, and its creative role in representing this perception or revelation in sensible forms are all questions crucial to any discussion of symbols in architecture and any understanding of how a work of art works.

There is also a question of the passions and desires of the human soul: pleasure and pain, comfort, security, the desire for wealth, domination, honor, and so forth. How does a work of art provide for these, order them, exploit them, or control them? Do they have a natural order which the work of art is called upon to preserve or restore? Or is the work of art meant to satisfy human feelings, desires, and passions regardless of whether they are healthy or sick, good or evil, moderate or immoderate? What is meant by the aesthetic education of man? And what is the relationship between the experience of beauty and the experience of goodness? Can a human being who lacks the experience of beauty, order, and harmony through works of art be educated in goodness, and perceive the beauty of good actions and the beauty of God's creation?

The arts provide both living space for the families and citizens of a city, and symbols for a city or nation's power or purpose. These are the subjects of economics, ethics, and politics, or of the practical sciences. It is in this context that philosophy centres its attention on the "symbolic" character of these arts, and emphasizes their character as sensory apprehensions that aim at pleasure as an end in itself and as accidentally useful in practical things. Otherwise they would be

merely practical; that is, they would serve what is necessary in practical life or in human excellence in practical life, be it victory in war, wealth, pleasure, or virtue.

The Treatment of Language Arts in Islamic Philosophy

The arts that Islamic philosophy treats at some length are the arts of language: poetry and rhetoric. We have become sensitive to the fact that language and the arts of language are of capital importance for the study of all other human arts, and we speak of the "vocabulary," "grammar," "rhetoric," and "poetics" of this or that art, including the art of architecture. Such things as signs and symbols are thus discussed in Islamic philosophy with reference to certain forms of speech and sometimes music, i.e., generally to things heard rather than things seen. This is a paradoxical situation, since things seen have a higher rank in philosophy than things heard. The former are the objects of perceiving, speculating, or theorizing. Yet they are discussed with reference to natural rather than to man-made, to artful or artificial things. Philosophic literature considers poetry and rhetoric as part of or in the perspective of "logic"—that is, thought. In this respect, it articulates something that is present in nonphilosophic literary criticism (e.g., the "science of meanings," *'ilm al-mā'ani*), but which is discussed there in a less coherent manner and within a narrower perspective.

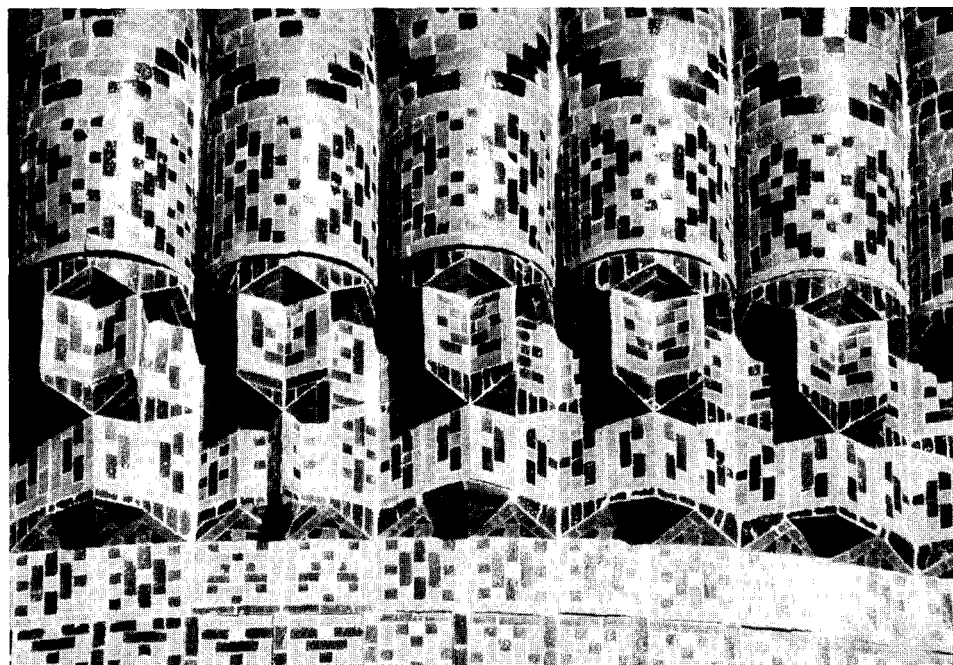
In philosophy the emphasis is on the formal structure of speech and its thought content, its purpose, its impact, what it generates in the listener, and how it does this. So the question is whether poetry and rhetoric have a thought content, and if so, what kind of content it might be; whether they aim at pleasure for its own sake; whether they are meant to generate certain notions or convictions or images; and whether these are ends in themselves or are meant to educate the audience morally—that is, to form their moral

character and enable them or make it easy for them to learn something or to do (or not do) something. If they do this—and the philosophic literature assumes that, for good or ill, they do—then the next question is what do they make men think or imagine; what do they persuade them of; what do they arouse them to do; what do they discourage them from doing? The arts can be all these things: they can be useful, playful, fun, pleasant, restful, morally instructive or thought-provoking (in both directions—good or bad, true or false). All these aspects have to be considered. Such disciplines as the "sociology of literature" are modern efforts to recapture these dimensions of art.

Again, the arts (to a greater degree than the sciences) are relative to certain peoples, times, and places. They are popular or public in character. They express the human character, traditions, conventions, laws, and religious and cultural views that prevail in a certain region at a certain time. The best of them express the highest views or ideals of their audience, and lift that audience to the highest level of which it is capable whether in terms of pleasure, moral character, or deeds. This is one aspect of the discussion of these arts in Islamic philosophy. But there is also the supra-national, supra-regional, supra-temporal perspective of Islamic philosophy that provides for the possibility of comparing images, conventions, moral attitudes, and deeds of various nations, and for understanding their horizons and limitations.

A "Pragmatic" Aesthetic Critical Theory

Thus Islamic philosophy provides an aesthetic critical theory that is best characterized as "pragmatic."³ It deals with poetry and rhetoric (and occasionally arts such as painting and sculpture) as they exist outside the context of philosophy and as they are meant to be used by a new breed of teachers. It centres its attention



Samarqand, U.S.S.R.: detail of the Gūr-i Mir dome

Photo: R. Holod

on the crucial role of sensory perception and sense apprehension, and the pleasure felt by man in sensible knowledge for its own sake, for its utility, and for the way it beckons beyond itself to higher kinds of knowledge. It distinguishes between the prephilosophic experience of the arts (the experience that, among other things, led to the rise of philosophy) and the post-philosophic use of the arts by philosophers, lawgivers, and philosophically-minded rulers in their effort to educate the citizens, form their character, and teach them appropriate opinions. The philosophic contribution, then, consists of both the theory itself and the description of the new context within which these arts are to be employed, how, and for what purpose.

By and large, the philosophic tradition is interested not in the technical details of the art of composing poems and rhetorical speeches, but in the overall character of

these arts and in their use. In contrast, nonphilosophic critical theory in Arabic is largely devoted to such technical details. One of the models from which the two traditions work is the prophet-lawgiver. Thus the question of the use of the "art" of poetry and rhetoric (not poetry and rhetoric in the customary sense) by the founder of a religion is common to both traditions. The question is whether what is termed the "miraculous" character of the Koran consists in its unique excellence in the use of technical details (on which Arabic literary criticism tends to concentrate) or rather in its overall moral intention, educative purpose and achievement, and ability to determine the theoretical and practical opinions of the Muslim community and its way of life (on which the philosophic tradition concentrates).

This question leads back to the question of imaginative representation or revelation:

of what, how, by what faculty? Does it represent the external world of nature, and the individual emotions and practical objectives of the poet and the rhetorician? Does it extend to common opinions, generally known or accepted notions, and the "ideals" of a particular community? Such things were, of course, known to be what rhetoricians and poets did, and Arabic literary criticism discussed the success or failure of the rhetorician and the poet on those bases. Or, does it involve Platonic "ideas"? Following Aristotle, these are consistently refuted in the philosophic tradition (the case is different in mysticism). They are replaced by "intelligibles" in the mind, hence, by things that become known or about which one can attain certainty in the theoretical sciences that deal with natural and voluntary things. This led to the philosophic distinction between the imaging in poetry and the persuasion in rhetoric that deal with theoretical things and those that deal with practical things. The former were criticized on the basis of relative proximity to the theoretical sciences (to the extent that these achieve certainty at any particular time), and on the basis of the skill of the poet and the rhetorician in convincing and moving the audience as closely as possible to the truth of things. The latter were criticized in terms of what virtue and vice were thought to be, as well as on the basis of the skill of the poet and the rhetorician in promoting the practical education of the audience.

Function and Experience

We have been trying in this seminar to isolate the various functions of public buildings and spaces in the Islamic world with particular attention to public buildings and spaces that have a religious use: mosques, madrasas, and Sufi *zāwiyas*. We have paid special attention to their religious symbolic function. Much of our discussion has centered on whether certain kinds of design (decorations, inscriptions, and so on) are symbolic, and if so,

whether any of them are indispensable to a building with a religious function. By posing the question in this way we are bound to reach an impasse, if not a negative answer; we are reminded that, historically, any public building that solved an immediate practical problem was considered satisfactory by men and women who were the very models of Islamic piety—in fact, by the Prophet himself and his companions.

My remarks are meant to suggest that we look at a work of art as something that performs a multiplicity of functions. What function a particular public religious building performs, and the means it employs for doing so, can be found only by considering that particular building. It seems to me that we have been trying to speculate in a general sort of way about what functions, if any, a public religious building performs above and beyond its solutions to immediate practical problems. By immediate practical problems, I assume we mean practical utility, or what is necessary if certain practical functions are to be served, as distinguished from what appears to be useless or arbitrary. What looks useless or arbitrary in a work of art may be just that, in which case it performs the function of merely confusing and disorienting the beholder or listener; but what appears useless or arbitrary may in fact aim at a higher utility and necessity and, depending on the onlooker or listener's taste and judgment, it may succeed in performing a higher function. For example, a public religious building may try to convey a sense of God's peace, glory, majesty, transcendence, or unity—in short, any one or a combination of God's beautiful names—and it may do this through sheer simplicity, some shape or void, colour, size, decoration, inscription, or a combination of these. Those aspects of a public religious building that go beyond solving an immediate practical problem in a narrow sense have to be looked at individually and together as symbolic in the larger sense of this term. One has to ask what the building is trying to convey and whether it succeeds or fails. Finally, what if one or more of these

aspects that characterize the artistic traditions (in the plural) of Muslim communities is not unique to Islamic architecture, but is in fact present in one or another of the artistic traditions of some other religion? This question does not bother me at all; on the contrary, I wish that all these aspects would be present in all the artistic traditions of other religions. The seminar has pointed to the roots of spiritual beliefs and artistic traditions in the Islamic countries. If the majority of contemporary examples we have seen indicate anything, it is that some architects are trying to attach dead branches to these roots with rubber bands. Our task is to find out whether others have succeeded in grafting living branches to these roots, and whether the result is a living tree that can grow and under which contemporary Muslims can take shade. We cannot perform this task if we continue to assume that architecture in the Islamic world must reproduce certain forms or symbols that we students of Islamic history or culture have identified as "Islamic," in order to help us distinguish "Islamic culture" from Western or other Oriental cultures. Whatever the use of this approach may be, it is not a substitute for a philosophy of art that considers the kind of issues I have raised, or for an art criticism that deals with the rules of artistic production and with the individual and collective experience of a work of art.

As a last remark, I would like to point out a certain difficulty for which I see no easy resolution. When I try to "experience" a great monument of Christian architecture, such as the cathedral of Chartres, I am able to read about the history of its construction, the cultural history of the period, the techniques employed in its building, the meaning of the representations in its sculpture and stained-glass windows, and the stylistic features of the works of art that survive in it from different periods. I am also able to spend time looking at the monument, studying and enjoying its form and each of the works of art it contains, and attending the functions performed in it. However successful I may be, my experience is

quite different from that of a convinced Catholic who has been raised in the church and has participated in the mysteries of that faith from childhood, and who experiences the same monument as a living house of God. This would seem to indicate that there are certain limits to the effort some of us make to ascertain how religious public buildings function in the Islamic world and the way Muslims experience these buildings. Furthermore, at least some great religious public buildings are themselves "works of faith," which again indicates that there may be limits to an effort at understanding their spirit if we do not participate in the faith of the builders. There may be differences of opinion among us on how severe those limits are, and on the extent to which they can be overcome. But surely serious architects and their consultants, however creative or learned, need to confront these questions and constraints when called upon to design and build public buildings in the Islamic world that are meant to have religious functions.

Reference Notes

¹ Abdul Hamid el-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977), pp. 227–54.

² Al-Ghazālī, *Das Elixier der Glückseligkeit, übertragen von H. Ritter* (Jena, 1923), p. 148. Cited in Richard Ettinghausen, "Art and Architecture," *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. Joseph Schacht with C. E. Bosworth (Oxford, 1974), pp. 284–285.

³ Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), Chapter One.

Comments

Arkoun

Muhsin Mahdi said that philosophy, as it has developed in Islam, contains certain ideas of harmony, order and the aspiration for the absolute. All these ideas have aspects that interest the architect whom we can consider the mediator between philosophical concepts and a physical projection of these concepts in the construction of the city.

I think it might be fruitful to compare what occurred in Greek cities, for these ideas are more relevant to Greek architecture than to Islamic architecture. In other words, we have again the problem of selection. Is what we find Islamic or is it something else?

To clarify this point, I would like to indicate that it is an issue of historical research. I know that we have here something that is an ideal, but it is a historical problem to see the real relation which could or could not have developed between the work of the architect and philosophy. A vacuum prevents us from stating the impact of philosophy in this field, and it would be very interesting to know the real function of Islamic philosophy, its concrete function in shaping this way of life.

What has happened today? Not only have these cities of harmony disappeared, but this philosophy is no longer historical for us. Classical philosophical reflection has disappeared. The architect who wishes to know about the past on the level of philosophy and apply it in his work finds himself deprived. This is a problem that architects have to face today.

Mahdi

I should perhaps begin by saying that the question of the relation between philosophy and what is called the culture of a city is a very complex one. It is true

that Plato talked a lot about the city, but the Greek city and its architectural form represented prephilosophic ideals and parallel developments within the culture itself more than it did philosophy. We should not forget that it was the Greeks who put Socrates to death and who gave Plato a very hard time. That in itself is symbolic of the tension between philosophy and the city. This tension continues during Islamic times and today, partly because philosophy tries to understand things independently of the city, and to transcend temporal and local kinds of conventions. Because it engages in a form of criticism, either explicit or implicit, of its own culture, the tension between the two is inescapable. In fact, if there is any use of philosophy for the city, one may even say it is largely because of this tension. So I think it is a very complex question. One cannot just take it for granted that Islam was against philosophy while the Greeks were for philosophy.

The modern situation is somewhat different. On the one hand, we had an age of liberalism, which unfortunately came to an end. In its place there arose what one might call an age of ideology. Governments seem to be not only concerned with running the practical affairs of the state but claim to know the ultimate things, to have a philosophy, to know what the nature of society is and so on. That necessarily brings us back to the same situation that existed with the Greeks and in Islam. Basically, free thinking and philosophy is in trouble with this kind of situation, and philosophers have to make adjustments or remain silent or migrate.

Suppose there are architects and others who have the freedom to think, to read and to do something in their art; after all, it may be hard for a party or a ruler to tell an architect that this is against the ideology of the state, because it is very hard to tell what the ideology of a building is. But maybe it isn't. Maybe our architects will tell us they have the same problems. Suppose this is the case. We still face the situation which Dr. Arkoun described. Islamic philosophy like almost

everything else Islamic has become history. A few people, mostly outside the Muslim world, seek to reverse this situation—to think about Islamic philosophy philosophically rather than historically, rather than as a so-called aspect of a culture or whichever term we use to embalm and bury a thing in the past. I think they are just beginning. What they will achieve, what they can do in the future, I wouldn't know. The problem again is that philosophers have a peculiar knack of thinking, "I will be perfectly happy if someone should listen to what I am saying in two hundred years." This is the kind of range they normally have in mind which is not very practical, of course. On the other hand, I think there are shortcuts. We know who the Muslim philosophers were, we know what they wrote, and the texts are being edited in Arabic or Persian. They are being translated, so they are not inaccessible. People should just pick them up and read. They may have difficulties, but what is not difficult?

I. Serageldin

I frankly seem somewhat more comfortable in discussing self-identity, the second heading on the programme, than symbols, since I understand some of the difficulties which most of our colleagues have had. I would like to follow up what Prof. Arkoun has said about the difference between what existed in the past and the present situation.

Philosophy, if conceived in the broad sense of *fiqh*, contemporary thought, is what gives society a sense of identity. The society knows itself from the way it perceives itself, and that is reflected in its political system, its social goals and its semiotic system. This in turn governs the way in which its physical built environment is developed. With that I am saying that architecture is really the image or the reflection of the social, economic and cultural organization of society. I would

like to pose the question whether indeed philosophy in the broader sense of *fiqh* mentioned partly by Dr. Mahdi would not be essential at this stage?

In contemporary Muslim societies almost everywhere there are what are called “modernizing” influences. I put them in quotation marks to avoid getting into disputes whether they are modernizing or Westernizing or whatever. They are influences that impose a different way of life on people at the level of social praxis in terms of their economic interactions and the secular system of laws between people and nations. Accommodation is required of the individuals in contemporary Muslim societies. Invariably this leads to a sense of shaken identity and ambiguity, a lack of knowing who you really are. It is reflected in our architecture today and in our sense of the environment. I think that perhaps one of the fundamental tasks required of intellectuals in all of the Muslim world is to reverse the standard, to absorb these modernizing influences up to the level of practical ethics, and to discuss openly the questions which Prof. Arkoun has mentioned. In order to determine criteria that can help define what kind of contemporary architecture would be most meaningful in Islamic terms, we will have to rethink our political systems, our economic laws and our societal laws. We must consider, for example, the balance between private and public spaces, the orientation of forms, rights of privacy, the proper role and function of communal living, the type of family life prevalent in society and its impact on the plan of houses, the proper mixing of land uses and the separation of these uses between sacred and profane. We heard that recently the increased specialization of buildings has resulted in robbing the mosque of its great communal purpose and has turned it into a much more narrowly defined edifice. The presence of aesthetic sense, grace, decoration and so on is an overlay on all that.

I suspect that the heart of the problem of finding a harmoniously balanced urban environment comes from defining basic concepts which govern society and from which we can develop the criteria and feelings for articulating an architecture. I would like to ask Prof. Mahdi to comment a little on how he believes a rethinking of contemporary Islamic goals can be best achieved.

Mahdi

I think all of this has to be done, obviously, but what its impact will be only God knows. The idea of having some sort of a think tank where people can acquire a new understanding of Islamic law or Islamic theology or Islamic art is a good thing. And if one does learn something—we do that at a place like Harvard only accidentally and not in an organized fashion—then one might be able in a serious and organized fashion to begin to get out of this terrible environment. People need the time and the opportunity to sit down and discuss what can be done under the circumstances. That certainly would be an important contribution in a small way.