



**A Conceptual Framework  
for Islamic Architecture**

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**A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK  
FOR ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE**

SPAHIC OMER



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**Alhassanain (p) Network for Islamic Heritage and Thought**

# **A Conceptual Framework for Islamic Architecture**

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## Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss a conceptual framework for Islamic architecture which renders Islamic architecture such a unique subject and much different from other architectural expressions. The issues that form the cornerstones of the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture are dealt with in the paper. The issues discussed are: *tawhid* (the idea of God's Oneness), man as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth and his relationship with environment, comprehensive excellence (*ihsan*), and Islam as the final and universal revelation. The method adopted in the paper is that the mentioned themes are firstly briefly discussed. That is then followed by exploring the implications of each theme for shaping the identity of Islamic architecture.

Studying a conceptual framework for Islamic architecture, which due to its anchoring on some of the most important Islamic principles constitutes a major portion of the Islamic worldview, is vital. This is so for two chief reasons.

Firstly, by knowing and absorbing the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture, Muslim architects, and practitioners in built environment in general, will possess a solid base on which restoring and advancing the phenomenon of Islamic architecture will be easily and confidently established. If the tenets on which the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture rests, permeates an architect's or an engineer's thinking and behaving paradigms, the total behavior that originates from such a mentality is bound to be in agreement with Islamic values and belief system. An architecture that stems from such a mentality is bound to be genuinely Islamic too. And when it comes into existence, it does so spontaneously, unassumingly and sincerely, fitting perfectly into the matrix of Muslim life activities. It does so without any ado during the process of its conceiving and execution, without any ambiguities or confusion in its substance and function, and without any superficialities, peculiarities and showiness in its style and appearance.

Secondly, if Muslim architects, builders, engineers and even users are unfamiliar with and do not adhere to the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture, another alternatives will be sought instead. Such alternatives, surely, will be alien to and thus incompatible with the Islamic ethos and teachings. Some alternatives will be more incompatible and others less, but seldom will there be an alternative that will be fully harmonious with Islam and its worldview. This is so because no human action, let alone a living system, that is completely devoid of a philosophy or an ideology which clearly delineates one's view of the world and all its constituents: life and its purpose, death, natural environment, man and his mission, time, space, history, and of course God and His relationship with man and the whole of universe. So therefore, if Muslim architects do not possess the Islamic worldview or ideology, another one will inevitably creep in, knowingly or unknowingly, and will hold sway over their thoughts and deeds. At the end, and in one of better scenarios, this will result in failed attempts towards reconciling the adopted worldviews and ideologies with Islam and its own philosophy and value system to which those architects will still be subscribing. However, an exercise of synthesizing Islam and some foreign

and in most cases man-made worldviews and philosophies of life is a doomed task because such a synthesis is impossible in both theory and practice. That, as a result, might lead to as far as confusion, lack of confidence, dangerous compromises, laxity in religion, repulsion and even irreverence in Muslim architects' mind which, in turn, will be extended onto the realm of built environment and will thus perilously affect both the mind and behavioral patterns of its users. The worst and most painful scenario that may result from this circumstance will be that Islam is discarded completely in favor of, or that it is made clearly inferior to, the adopted man-generated worldviews and ideologies. Unfortunately, many of today's Muslim professionals in built environment suffer from the both maladies.

## **Tawhid (God's Oneness)**

The notion of *tawhid* is the most important cornerstone in the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture. *Tawhid* means asserting the unity or oneness of Allah. *Tawhid* is the Islamic concept of monotheism. The word *tawhid* is derived from the words *wahid* and *ahad* that mean “one”, “unique” and “peerless”. Based on the concept of *tawhid*, Muslims believe that God cannot be held equal in any way or degree to any other being or concept. Maintaining that there is no God except Allah and that there is nothing comparable to Him constitutes the essence of *tawhid* and the essence of Islam. Thus, declaring God's oneness, *tawhid*, together with Prophet Muhammad's prophet hood (*shahadah*), is the first requirement for one who wishes to embrace the Islamic religion. *Shirk*, or associating anybody or anything with God making it comparable to Him, is the opposite of *tawhid*. It is the gravest sin which God vowed never to forgive.

*Tawhid* has three aspects: (1) Oneness of the Lordship of God (*Tawhid al-Rububiyyah*) (2) Oneness of the Worship of God (*Tawhid al-Uluhiyyah* or *Tawhid al-'Ibadah*) (3) Oneness of the Names and Qualities of God (*Tawhid al-Asma' wa al-Sifat*).

According to these three aspects, there is only one Lord for the entire universe, Who is its Creator, Organizer, Planner, Sustainer and Giver of security. He is the only Creator, the rest is His creation. He is the only Master, the rest are His servants. Nothing from His World can be a quality of the created world, and nothing from the created world can be ascribed to His World. Similarities that exist between the two realms, the divine and earthly, do not exceed the level of sheer names. Beyond that nothing is the same. There can never be an exchange in the arrangement of designations between the two dominions: that of the Creator and that of His creation.

Since the Lord and Master of the world remains as such forever, the servants too remain what they are forever. Since the Creator and Sustainer remains as such forever providing the everlasting source of all that exist, the creatures too remain forever mortal, recipients of and completely dependent on divine material and spiritual provisions. In all their undertakings, it stands to reason, people's primary mission should always be to acknowledge this undeniable truth, unselfishly exhibit its effects and try to integrate it into each and every aspect of their cultural and civilizational accomplishments. People are never to get carried away by their ostensible earthly achievements and, as a result, rebel against the established spiritual paradigms in life and then attempt to modify or manipulate them. People's earthly achievements ought always to reflect God's greatness as opposed to man's smallness, God's self-sufficiency as opposed to man's lack of it, God's infinity and permanence as opposed to man's wavering and insecurity, God's supremacy as opposed to man's fragility. Any other approach would signify a sheer falsehood, deception and fictitious optimism.

Only God deserves to be worshipped. He is the ultimate object of all the spiritual cravings and desires. No other being or idea can be elevated above its intrinsic status and be accorded some divine power or attributes. God needs no partners or associates in executing His divine tasks. He is omnipotent, omnipresent and self-sufficient. “He is the final end, that is, the end at which



all finalistic nexuses aim and come to rest...He is an end for all other ends.”<sup>1</sup> God is perfect, but not in the sense of perfection as we humans are able to perceive, for we are short of perceiving His divine perfection, but in the sense of the divine perfection as suggested again and again through His revealed words. God’s divine Being cannot be represented, personified or in any way expressed by any creature.

*Tawhid* also means “that one may not name or qualify God except with what He or (Prophet) Muhammad had named or qualified Him, and that nobody else can be named or qualified with those names and qualities. Also, it is a Muslim belief that those names and qualities must be followed verbatim, without changing their meaning or ignoring them completely or twisting the meanings or likening them (giving resemblance) to anything that isn't God.”<sup>2</sup>

Due to the significance of *tawhid*, the holy Qur’an overflows with assertions and descriptions of it. The following verses will be a sufficient summery of a vast corpus of verses:

“Allah is He besides Whom there is no god, the Everliving, the Self-subsisting by Whom all subsist; slumber does not overtake Him nor sleep; whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His; who is he that can intercede with Him but by His permission? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, and they cannot comprehend anything out of His knowledge except what He pleases, His knowledge extends over the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of them both tires Him not, and He is the Most High, the Great.” (Al-Baqarah, 255)

“Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten. And none is like Him.” (Al-Ikhlās, 1-4)

“He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things.” (Al-Hadid, 3)

“They say: Allah has taken a son (to Himself)! Glory be to Him: He is the Self-sufficient: His is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth; you have no authority for this; do you say against Allah what you do not know?” (Yunus, 68)

“There is nothing like Him, and He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer.” (Al-Shura 11)

“If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides Allah, there would have been confusion in both! but glory to Allah, the Lord of the Throne: (High is He) above what they attribute to Him!” (Al-Anbiya’, 22)

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<sup>1</sup> Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: its Implications for Thought and Life*, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Tawhid*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tawhid>.

## The implications of tawhid for architecture

The implications of *tawhid* for Islamic architecture are rather ideological. Isma'il al-Faruqi said that the influence the concept of *tawhid* exerts on Islamic civilization is such that it gives the latter its identity impressing it by its own mould. The same is true as far as Islamic architecture is concerned because it is an integral part of Islamic civilization. What is more, Islamic architecture is a container of Islamic civilization, one needing the other for its identification and continued existence. Al-Faruqi observed: “*Al-tawhid* is that which gives Islamic civilization its identity, which binds all its constituents together and thus makes of them an integral, organic body which we call civilization. In binding disparate elements together, the essence of civilization in this case, *al tawhid* - impresses them by its own mould. It recasts them so as to harmonize with and mutually support other elements. Without necessarily changing their natures, the essence transforms the elements making up a civilization, giving them their new character as constitutive of that civilization. The degree of transformation may vary from slight to radical. It is slight when it affects their form, and radical when it affects their function; for it is the latter that constitutes their relevance to the essence.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea of *tawhid* gives Islamic architecture its conspicuous identity. It also creates in Muslims an unprecedented *tawhidic* outlook on building activities so that there exists the highest level of compatibility between buildings and their users. *Tawhid* ensures that Islamic architecture and Muslims forge a productive and peaceful alliance. They all originated from the same source and serve the same ontological purpose. The character of Islamic architecture is such that it tries its best to disguise its mundane naturalistic factors and features that may hinder a beholder's focus pointing in turn to a higher order of expression and meaning. The beholder's attention is directed towards the desired end by various ingenious artistic and structural ways and methods that are meant to yield an intuition of the real essence of the Transcendent and its divine infinity and perfection.

Since God is the Creator and Lord of everything, including man, He too is the actual Owner of everything. To God belongs everything in the universe. As far as man is concerned, though being elevated to the degree of God's vicegerent on earth and to whom all things have been subjected, he still possesses nothing. Everything around him has been loaned to him so that he in a responsible and unhindered manner can carry out his duties of vicegerency, no more than that. Even his very self, i.e., his life, man does not own. It belongs to his Creator, and if needed he is to sacrifice it for Him and His cause.

No sooner does man come into this world than he sets out to display his inherent readiness to take from this world: to breath, to wear apparel, to drink, albeit without possessing anything, save his very self, to give away in return. Man is therefore born as an insolvent consumer. Not only does he own nothing, but he also remains forever short of enjoying a power of bringing into being anything without making use of the available raw materials and elements created for him in nature. Creating *ex nihilo* (from absolute

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<sup>3</sup> Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: its Implications for Thought and Life*, p. 17.

nothingness), as a sign of genuine richness, sovereignty and might, is the right and power of God alone. Indeed, everything that man invents, conceives, concocts and creates is possible only thanks to the unbounded bounties and munificence from God which man only discovers, manages, processes, uses and reuses in different ways most convenient and efficient for him. The upshots of man's myriad civilizational pursuits on earth are never really his own possession and, as such, by no means could be solely utilized for returning the debt of creation and existence to God. Hence, being prudent, modest and grateful when dealing with God's gifts that grace existence, as well as when dealing with one's own accomplishments, are some of the virtues most appreciated, and the opposite is some of the vices most detested, in man. God is thus to be acknowledged all the time and in every interest of man as the final end, as the ultimate object of all desire, as the ultimate source of all goodness, of all value. It is God Who makes every other good; He is the highest good for the sake of Whom every good thing is good.<sup>4</sup>

Allah says on this in the Qur'an: "They say: "Allah has begotten a son". Glory be to Him. Nay, to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him. To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a matter, He says to it: "Be," and it is." (Al-Baqarah, 116, 117)

"Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that besides Allah you have no guardian or helper?" (Al-Baqarah, 107)

"A revelation from Him Who created the earth and the high heavens. The Beneficent Allah is firm in power. His is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth and what is between them two and what is beneath the ground." (Ta Ha, 4-6)

Allah explicitly says that he is the Creator and thus the Owner of everything including people and whatever they are able to make. People's creations and possessions are in fact Allah's: "And Allah has created you and what you make." (Al-Saffat, 96) The Prophet (pbuh) also said in a tradition: "Indeed, it is Allah Who creates every other creator and his creation."<sup>5</sup> This tradition is recorded by al-Bukhari in his "*Sahih*" in a section entitled "The creation of people's deeds".

This philosophy is strikingly clear also in the field of architecture. Whenever an architect embarks on designing an edifice, he carves out the space needed for his project. The Muslim architect, worthy of his profession, will approach space with reverence, not arrogance, as it is God's physical realm: "If it (space) must be cut for man to have a dwelling, such would have to be done in humility and with ease, harboring no might, no self assertion and no defiance."<sup>6</sup> The Muslim architect will therefore always strive to exhibit through his creativity and skills that the buildings designed by him interact with space, to flow into and become part of general space, instead separating itself from it. Buildings remain connected with the outside space

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> See: *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1981), vol. 3 p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, in *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 105.

by the open inner courtyard and windows. Toward the same end, the edge of an Islamic building is often crenellated, the skyline sometimes multiplied, and the vertical edges recessed or protruded with broken surfaces designed to lessen the impact of the cut-off in space.<sup>7</sup>

The Muslim architect or the Muslim structural engineer will not regard his edifices as the space(s) appropriated exclusively for man, nor will their owners and users. Rather, the appropriated space will be viewed as something temporarily loaned to man, so as soon as he returns to his Creator nobody but himself alone will be held accountable for what he did to the loan, how he handled it, and what he managed to achieve with it. It stands to reason, therefore, that Islamic architecture, just like any other noble pursuit and craft taken up for the sake of pleasing God, the all-Powerful and all-Knowing Creator and Lord, is but a vehicle for accomplishing the mission of Islam, not a goal itself. It is therefore a form of *'ibadah* (worship) and he who practices it will be rewarded accordingly.

As a result of this powerful religious consciousness and zeal inspired and dominated by the concept of *tawhid*, Muslims developed in the field of architecture a culture of covering all surfaces with certain designs aimed at drawing the attention from the upshots of human endeavors to a higher order of expression and meaning. The Muslim architect, thus, intends to humbly demonstrate that he harbors no might, or defiance, or self assertion when it comes to appropriating and acting in space that does not belong to him; it belongs to Allah the Almighty, the rightful Owner of all creation. The Muslim architect, furthermore, tends to depict himself -- as do the users of buildings -- as a servant rather than a "master", as a trustee rather than an owner, and as a modest mortal rather than a pretentious "creator".

In Muslim buildings, therefore, mass is literally made invisible. This is achieved by covering it with stucco, tile, wood and other materials that transfigure the mass into something radically and totally new and different.<sup>8</sup> Buildings simply appear as though enveloped within dissimilar pleasing, dynamic and contemplation-provoking webs of colored decoration. Sometimes when no rich decoration with plentiful motifs and themes could be used on a building surfaces -- due to the lack of, say, materials, expertise, resources, or even interest -- other practical alternatives had to be then conceived instead, so as to satisfy the same Islamic aesthetic taste. Of such alternatives are: wide-ranging brick patterning when brick is a major building material, the clever use of marble and stone in bands of contrasting colors when stone is a major building material,<sup>9</sup> laying emphasis on ingenious symmetry in design as well as in organization of inner spaces and architectural motifs, etc. When Ibn Khaldun touched on the subject of decoration in Islamic architecture: its techniques, language and materials, he concluded: "Thus, the walls come to look like colorful flower beds."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 106-107.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 105-115.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 108, 146, 201.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, Translated from Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1967), vol. 2 p. 361.

Isma'il al-Faruqi concluded that "all the arts of Islam developed in fulfillment of divine transcendence acting as supreme principle of aesthetics. All Islamic arts developed stylization and denaturalization; all were nondevelopmental and nonfigurative; and all did their best to transubstantiate the natural forces of gravity and cohesion, the natural elements of mass, space and light, of water and color, of melody and rhythm, of physiognomy and perceptive - in short of everything natural and creaturely, into floating, air-suspended patterns suggestive of infinity."<sup>11</sup>

Hence, it follows that the substance of Islamic architecture aims at declaring a big "no" to the corporeality of existence and to its potentially hazardous attractions, and a big "yes" to that which refreshes and rejuvenates the soul which incessantly yearns for the spirit of divinity which the soul feeds on before finally returning to it. However, given that the components of the same corporeal reality have been employed for the production of architecture, than the ultimate appearance of the latter had to be delicately transfigured and denaturalized in order that the refined requirements of Islamic aesthetics are duly met. It is feared that without recourse to both transfiguration and denaturalization, the spiritual purpose of erecting buildings might be harder to attain. Thus, the role of Islamic decoration in Islamic architecture is a principal and essential one, not a secondary or an auxiliary one. Decoration stands at the heart of the identity of Islamic architecture.

Finally, Islamic architecture came into existence in order to meet the requirements of the Islamic notion of *tawhid*. Human personal ambitions and roles in fathoming and creating Islamic architecture are rather relative and limited, remaining forever inferior and subservient to the commanding influence of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* is at the core of God's holy Being, as well as at the core of His holy Attributes and Actions. It is likewise at the core of the whole of God's creation of which man is a constitutive part. Hence, it stands to reason that all the actions of man, including architecture, are expected to reflect and exude the same *tawhidic* spirit. Moreover, they are to serve as an extension of the existing paradigms of life. They are to exemplify, sustain and further advance the latter.

In the same vein, Islamic architecture is formed in order to answer the demands of the notion of *'ibadah* (worship) which man, God's vicegerent on earth, is required to actualize in all of his lifelong actions so that his relationship with his Creator and Lord is maintained perpetually strong and sound. To Muslims, Islamic architecture is a field for the implementation of the idea of universal worship in Islam. It is thus a kind of *masjid* or mosque, in the sense that it is a place for both direct and indirect worship activities.

It goes without saying that Islamic architecture is such a noble enterprise charged with the highest level of spirituality. There can be no distinction between the spiritual and secular realms in Islamic architecture, just as separation between the spiritual and secular spheres is foreign to Islam as an ideology and a comprehensive way of life. Islam is life and life, in turn, is worship. The only purpose for the creation of man, the main protagonist in life, is that he worships his Creator and Lord, i.e., that he submits to God's

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11 Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, in *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, p. 25.

will and word while on earth carrying out his honorable assignments. In Islam, everything is to be viewed against the backdrop of this code. The code applies to architecture certainly more than to many other life pursuits on account of architecture being a framework or container for human lives. Islamic architecture is both a means and sets of facilities to Muslims so that their earthly tasks are facilitated and made easier. Islamic architecture with its ideas, ethos, creators and users is the religion of Islam translated in a space and a moment of time.

Certainly, it is for this *tawhidic* dimension that Islamic architecture entails that Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, called architecture an “estimable calling” and then said that whosoever is engaged in it must be, first of all, righteous and pious.<sup>12</sup> This means that those who are intent on creating Islamic architecture must, first and foremost, embody the message of *tawhid* in their thoughts, words and actions. Only from such a mentality and lifestyle can Islamic architecture originate and survive. Islamic architecture cannot be formed in milieus and contexts alien to the concept of *tawhid*, and by men whose intentions, concerns and objectives are alien to, or at odds with, the same concept at either conceptual or technical planes.

The same man, Sinan, is also reported to have said, in all likelihood, lest he becomes carried away by his illustrious achievements and the status he acquired: “Thanks be to God! He made manifest (His) favor. When the universe was nonexistent, He caused it to exist. He built the earth upon water, and layered the seven heavenly spheres without columns. He caused these nine domes to stand, and hung suspended the solar sphere. He kneaded clay with (His) hand of power and constructed Adam’s body. Eyes and mouth, ear and tongue gave He. He made us noble human beings.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, it is not by a chance that Sinan began each of his autobiographical memoirs with the same *tawhidic* message as the one mentioned above. Before talking about his self, his life and accomplishments as the state’s chief architect, Sinan thus felt compelled to record his due appreciation, recognition, acknowledgment and gratitude to the only real Creator, Sustainer and Master. Sinan knew very well that it was due to Allah’s will, munificence and kindness that he was in a position to do what he did. Hence, in all his words he appeared to be duty bound to endorse his faith, modesty and humbleness, on the one hand, and Allah’s endless power, sovereignty and authority, on the other. Sinan thus wrote at the beginning of one of his memoirs using a plain and straightforward language: “Boundless thanks to that Architect (Allah) of the palace of nine vaults, who, without measure or plumb line, without rule or compass, by His hand of creation, made firm its arched canopy. And endless thanks to that Master of the seven-storied workshop, who, with His hand of power, kneaded the clay of Adam and in him displayed His art and novelty. And endless blessings upon that Self-Existent One, whose munificence, like the waves of the sea, brought forth

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<sup>12</sup> *Sinan’s Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, introductory notes, critical editions and translations by Howard Crane and Esra Akin, edited by Gulru Necipoglu, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2006), p. 66. John Freely and Augusto Romano Burelli, *Sinan*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Sinan’s Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, p. 88.



humankind into the plain of existence from the hidden world of nonbeing...”<sup>14</sup>

Powered by the *tawhidic* spirit, Sinan regarded his enormous talent as a gift from God, which he strove to perfect for no other reason except to serve God. He erected so many buildings of different types only that they be used for glorifying the Holy Being, and that they become a tangible proof of God’s *tawhid*, greatness, infinity and permanence, and of man’s and built environment’s inconsequentiality, impermanence and relativity. Sinan thus wrote: “Thanks be to God, to this humble servant it became an art to serve in so many a house of God... I looked upon all creation as a lesson, and completely understood it has no permanence. I laid the foundations of many buildings. (Doomed to) annihilation, man does not endure. The pavilion of my body began to crumble. I suffered pain in its fetters. The sorrows of fortune my beard turned gray. My body trembles from fear of God. Think not that my bended form is an arch. It is a bridge of passage to grief and sorrow. Brother, in order to pass to the next world, to this vault of fate’s pavilion I bowed my head. Thanks be to God that I am a righteous man! In my art, I am upright and firm.”<sup>15</sup>

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14 Ibid., p. 91.

15 Ibid., p. 89.

## Man as the vicegerent (khalifah) on earth

Man, according to Islam, is not a fallen being as the Christianity asserts,<sup>16</sup> and his existence on earth is not a sentence passed on him by God on account of what had transpired between Adam, the first man, and his wife Eve, the first woman, in the Garden of Eden. Rather, man is a vicegerent on earth entrusted with the honorable task of inhabiting it in accordance with the divine guidance given to him. This terrestrial life serves to man as a platform for either elevating his status over that of angels, should he abide by the divinely prescribed rules and regulations, or for debasing his self lower than the rank of animals, should he turn away from Truth and dazed and lost wander aimlessly amid the innumerable and awesome wonders of creation.

God created man with the primordial natural disposition (*fitrah*) to thirst for and worship his Creator. God, therefore, knowing best the character of man, his needs and weaknesses, on sending Adam and Eve to earth to assume the duty of vicegerency, revealed to them that He will never forsake them and their progeny. God promised that His guidance and signs will be coming to them, and “Whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” (Al-Baqarah, 38)

“...Whosoever follows My guidance, will not lose his way, nor fall in misery.” (Ta Ha, 123)

God’s guidance and signs mean the religion of Islam preached by every prophet from the dawn of mankind and Adam as the first messenger to Muhammad as the last and seal of all messengers. God’s divine guidance will enable man to remain strong, sensible, content and “healthy” while on earth, making him, in turn, capable of keeping up the focus of his undertakings on worshipping his Lord in every act, word and thought (*‘ibadah*). God says in the Qur’an that He has created both *Jinns* and men only that they may serve Him. (Al-Dharyat, 56)

On the other hand, in the event of man’s rejection of God’s message and guidance, the repercussions will be costly. The Qur’an says: “But those who reject Faith and belie Our Signs, they shall be Companions of the Fire; they shall abide therein.” (Al-Baqarah, 39)

“But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily for him is a life narrowed down, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Judgment.” (Ta Ha, 124)

Man is created as a social being endowed with free will, passion and emotions, which could either lead him to the highest or drug him to the lowest ebb of creation. Humanity is but a big family with the same origin, mission and purpose. People have been divided into nations and tribes only to know each other, learn from each other, and cooperate at various scales in righteousness and piety, not that they may loathe each other and conspire against each other. They are to explore the universe and within the framework rendered by revelation try to make their existence as convenient, comfortable and meaningful as possible, hence create virtuous cultures and civilizations. However, no sooner does this universal equilibrium become impaired and

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<sup>16</sup> Genesis 3:1-19 (Holy Bible, New International Version)



vitiating than man's relationship with God, his peers and the whole of the environment starts to degenerate.

Allah says about this: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)." (al-Hujurat, 13)

"And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are Signs for those who know." (al-Rum, 22)

Islam with its unique *tawhidic* worldview champions that Muslims are brothers to each other and their similitude is like walls whose bricks enforce and rely on each other. They are like a solid cemented structure held together in unity and strength, each part contributing strength in its own way, and the whole held together not like a mass, but like a living organism. Muslims are furthermore related to each other in such a way that if one of them (a part of an organic and formidable formation called the *Ummah, the Community*) is troubled by a problem of any kind, the rest of the body parts will remain disturbed and restless until the matter became fairly solved.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between the vicegerent (khalifah) and environment

This Islamic unique perception of man and his position on earth necessitated the formation of a compelling and comprehensive view of the natural environment as well. This is so because man totally depends on nature for his survival. Also, nature is a ground for man's realization of his spiritual purpose on earth. Simply put, man is an integral part of the total natural setting. Man is nature himself. Sustaining nature means sustaining his self, damaging nature means damaging his self and his prospects of a civilizational triumph. Owing to all this, Islam attaches so much importance to the subject of environment clearly expounding man's rights over it and his responsibilities towards it.

Islam teaches that environment is part of the universal web of creation. Its role is two-fold: to worship its Creator (in ways suitable to it), and to be subjected to serve the exigencies of man, so that God's vicegerent can smoothly and undeterred carry out his honorable task of managing earth.

Environment holds enormous potential and diversified resources meant only for the vicegerent of earth. They are to be seen as facilities that if rightly used facilitate each and every facet of man's fleeting stay on earth. Environment is further to be seen by man as an "ally" or a "partner", so to speak, in the execution of his earthly mission. After all, in order to create any piece of his built environment, which serves as a framework for his activities, man borrows diverse natural ingredients, such as space, water, clay, timber, stone and other substances, placing the newly created or built elements back into the existing natural contexts. In reality, built environment is in so many ways the natural environment that has been processed and manipulated.

According to a number of divine instructions, natural diversity and the forces of nature are to be the focus of man's exhaustive scientific and

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17 Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 032 Hadith No. 6205-6226.

contemplative attention. Diversity in humans: skin colors, languages, attitudes and cultures, are to preoccupy the cognitive faculties of men as well, thus trying to find a link between it and the former. In all natural phenomena a great deal of wisdom lies and waits to be unearthed.

In Islam, man's rights over environment are rights of sustainable use based on moderation, balance and conservation. The rights of environment over man, on the other hand, are that it be safe from every misuse, mistreatment and destruction. Greed, extravagance and waste are considered a tyranny against nature and a transgression of those rights.<sup>18</sup>

Islam teaches that all things have been created with purpose and in proportion and measure, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Nature's resources and forces are gifts granted by God to man. At the same time, however, the natural environment is a field for man's vicegerency mission. It is right there, while interacting with different aspects of environment, that people clearly demonstrate how strong, or how deficient, their relationship with God is. So significant is man's relationship with environment in Islam that in some instances such relationship is able to take precedence over other deeds of man, placing him then on the highest or dragging him to the lowest level.

Furthermore, environment stands for a source of man's spiritual enlightenment too, provided his treatment of it is apt and derived from divine teachings, in that environment in its totality is an expression of God's presence, oneness, mercy and supremacy. By the power of reason and insight that has been accorded to him to subdue the forces of nature, man at the same time will be able to penetrate through and grasp properly nature's countless mysteries and phenomena. Consequently, this will lead to a considerable enhancement of his physical well-being, as well as to expediting the process of his spiritual advancement.

Finally, environment, in a sense, participates in revealing Truth to man. It is in fact a revelation itself. Therefore, in addition to having the composed or written Qur'an (*al-Qur'an al-tadwini*) there is a cosmic or ontological "Qur'an" (*al-Qur'an al-takwini*) as well. Both revelations complement each other, as it were, in furnishing man with the necessary substance so as not to let him betray the trust of productively inhabiting the earth which he had wittingly accepted. It follows that those who fully submit to Divine Will and read, understand and apply the written Qur'an, they easily see upon the face of every creature "letters" and "words", or messages, from the "pages" of the cosmic Qur'an. For this reason are the phenomena of nature referred to in the Qur'an as signs or symbols (*ayat*), a term that is also used for the verses of the Qur'an.<sup>19</sup>

The following are some verses from the Qur'an on the addressed aspects of environment:

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18 Abd-al-Hamid, *Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics*, in *Islam and the Environment*, edited by A. R. Aqwan, (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997), p. 59.

19 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Environmental Crisis*, in *Islam and the Environment*, p. 17.

“Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth declares the glory of Allah; and He is the Mighty, the Wise.” (al-Saff, 1)

“Do you see the seed that you sow in the ground? Is it you that cause it to grow, or are We the Cause? Were it Our Will, We could make it broken orts. And you would be left in wonderment... Do you see the water that you drink? Do you bring it down (in rain) from the cloud or do We? Were it Our Will, We could make it saltish (and unpalatable): then why do you not give thanks?” (Al-Waqi’ah, 63-70)

“O you people! Worship your Guardian Lord, Who created you and those who came before you that you may become righteous; Who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto Allah when you know (the truth).” (Al-Baqarah, 21-22)

“And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold, in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect.” (Al-Jathiyah, 13)

## Environment as Allah's faithful servant

The holy Qur'an in numerous contexts explicitly declares that everything in the universe is in a state of continuous worship of Allah. Each and every aspect of creation is Allah's faithful servant constantly glorifying Him and celebrating His praise. The whole universe thus constitutes a mega mosque (*masjid*), a place of worship. Allah says, for example: "Do not you see that to Allah prostrate all things that are in the heavens and on earth, - the sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the trees, the animals, and a great number among mankind? But a great number are (also) such as unto whom the chastisement is justly due. And such as Allah shall disgrace, - none can raise to honor: for Allah carries out all that He wills." (al-Hajj, 18)

"Have they not observed all things that Allah has created, how their shadows incline to the right and to the left, making prostration unto Allah, and they are lowly?" (al-Nahl, 48)

"Not one of the beings in the heavens and the earth but must come to (Allah) Most Gracious as a servant." (Maryam, 93)

"The seven heavens declare His glory and the earth (too), and those who are in them; and there is not a single thing but glorifies Him with His praise, but you do not understand their glorification; surely He is Forbearing, Forgiving." (al-Isra' 44)

"Do you not see that Allah is He Whom do glorify all those who are in the heavens and the earth, and the (very) birds with expanded wings? He knows the prayer of each one and its glorification, and Allah is Cognizant of what they do." (al-Nur, 41)

The Prophet (PBUH) once condemned the using of animals which people normally ride as sitting platforms or pulpits (*manabir*) saying that those animals perhaps are better than the people who mistreat them. It may be that those animals praise and glorify Allah more than their abusers.<sup>20</sup>

The Prophet (PBUH) also said that the phrase "*subhanAllah*" which means "glory be to Allah" is the prayer of the created world and everything in it, its glorification and praise of Allah (*tasbih*), and with it the whole of the created world receives sustenance.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the contents of the Qur'an as well as the experiences of the Prophet (pbuh), some early authorities in the interpretation and commentary of the Qur'an concluded that there is absolutely nothing in the universe, natural or man-made, animate or inanimate, but worships and glorifies Allah, its Creator. Indeed, "He (Allah) knows the prayer of each one and its glorification..." (al-Nur, 41) "...but you (people) do not understand their glorification..." (al-Isra', 44). Hence, for instance, the squeaking of the door is its glorification of Allah; the murmuring of water is its glorification; the standing of a column is its worship; the waves of the sea are its glorification; the shadow of every being and its movement signify their prostration and worship, etc.<sup>22</sup>

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20 *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, vol. 2 p. 379.

21 *Ibid.*, vol. 2 p. 379.

22 *Ibid.*, vol. 2 p. 333, 379.

Indeed, as the vicegerent on earth endowed with free will, man while interacting with his surroundings, taking and giving, is in a position both to sustain and damage the existing natural equilibrium. It is up to what choice and life orientation and purpose man chooses. This is applicable not only to the physical aspects of the natural world, but also to the metaphysical or spiritual paradigms of whole existence. That is to say, Islam does not speak only about physical sustainability on earth, but also about a spiritual one throughout the realms of the vast universe, which God's vicegerents on earth must be fully aware of and must readily aim for. Such, it could be inferred, is the supreme goal of man's divine mission. Such, furthermore, is a clear measure of man's success or failure in his vicegerency undertaking.

About the negative impact that man is capable of incurring upon his surroundings through his bad schemes and pursuits, Allah says, for example: "Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea on account of what the hands of men have wrought, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, so that they may return." (al-Rum, 41)

It follows that the earth with everything thereon both rejoices and prospers due to the uprightness, piety and conformity of man. On the other hand, the earth and everything on it suffer and their benefits for man gradually fade - are being withheld -- due to the disobedience, corruption and evil perpetrated by man. Righteousness begets but harmony and prosperity on earth; evil begets the opposite, that is, chaos and misery. Allah thus says: "And if the people of the towns had believed and guarded (against evil) We would certainly have opened up for them blessings from the heaven and the earth, but they rejected, so We overtook them for what they had earned." (Al-A'raf, 96) The Prophet (PBUH) said that when people observe a religious standard or a restriction (*hadd*), such is dearer to the inhabitants of the earth than that rain is sent forty consecutive mornings upon them.<sup>23</sup>

Allah also says: "They say: "The Most Gracious has betaken a son!" Indeed you have put forth a thing most monstrous! At it the skies are about to burst, the earth to split asunder, and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin, that they attribute a son to the Most Gracious" (Maryam, 88-91).

A companion of the Prophet (pbuh), Abdullah b. Abbas, commented about the last set of the Qur'anic verses to the effect that the heavens, the earth, mountains and all the created things, except some humans and *jinn*s, are all terrified of *shirk* (polytheism or associating other gods with Allah). As a result, they are on the verge of perishing due to the incompatibility between the committed *shirk* that they witness and their supreme respect for Allah and His majesty and power.<sup>24</sup>

The Prophet (PBUH) said that when an infidel or a profligate servant of Allah passes away, human beings, land, animals and trees get a moment of respite from him and his bad actions.<sup>25</sup>

The Prophet (PBUH) also said that for every servant of God there are two doors in the heavens: a door from which his sustenance comes out and a door through which his deeds and words enter. When a (good and obedient) servant

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23 Ibid., vol. 3 p. 57.

24 Ibid., vol. 2 p. 466.

25 Al-Bukhâri, *Sahîh al-Bukhâri*, Kitâb al-Riqaq, Hadîth No. 6031.

of God dies, these two doors grieve for him and cry. However, in case of an infidel or a wicked servant of God, neither the heavens nor the earth sheds a tear over him when he dies, as no good deeds or words were coming from him. As such, no worthy traces or effects could he possibly leave behind on earth, and no good deeds were going through his personal gate in the heavens.<sup>26</sup>

The Prophet (PBUH) furthermore said that the heavens weep because of a person to whom God gave a healthy body, an ability and ample means to enjoy eating and drinking, as well as a comfortable life, but he behaves unjustly towards people. The Prophet (PBUH) described such a person as violent, cruel and wicked.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, vol. 3 p. 303.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3 p. 534.

## The implications of the concept of man as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth for architecture

The implications of the concept of man as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) and his interaction with nature for architecture are both ideological and practical. To begin with, humans are not the only creatures that build. Many a creature that we classify low down the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, such as bees and ants, build elaborate structures. However, it has been suggested that it is awareness and imagination that single out humans as superior to other animals in architectural output.<sup>28</sup> While the rest of creation act on environment instinctively with no reasoning or training, man does the same willingly and at his own discretion. Since his actions are preceded with thinking and rationalizing, man clearly demonstrates through acts of building -- and through every other engagement of his -- his philosophy of, and outlook on, life's realities.

Based on his free will, awareness and imagination, man builds edifices in various shapes and sizes and with various function patterns in order to facilitate, nurture and motivate his copious life activities. In fact, such is of the fundamental things that distinguish man from other animate creatures that share this earth with him. The existence of man cannot be imagined without the existence of a built environment. The relationship between the two is a fundamental and intimate one. Therefore, no phase of man's presence on earth could be imagined to be devoid of building activities, irrespective of their scale, simplicity and sophistication.

This principle applies to all including the very first man and prophet on earth, Adam, who is said to have built the first House of worship, i.e., the *al-Masjid al-Haram* or *Baytullah* (the House of God). Exactly forty years following the completion of the *al-Masjid al-Haram*, either Adam himself or some of his descendants were instructed to proceed to a designated location (later Jerusalem or *Bayt al-Maqdis*) and build there the *al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, the second mosque on earth.<sup>29</sup>

Ibn Khaldun rightly observed that building is a basis of civilization, and is of the most indispensable crafts which man ought to gain knowledge of: "This (architecture) is the first and oldest craft of sedentary civilization. It is the knowledge of how to go about using houses and mansions for cover and shelter. This is because man has the natural disposition to reflect upon the outcome of things. Thus, it is unavoidable that he must reflect upon how to avert the harm arising from heat and cold by using houses that have walls and roofs to intervene between him and those things on all sides. This natural disposition to think, which is the real meaning of humanity, exists among (men) in different degrees..."<sup>30</sup>

Le Corbusier also remarked: "Architecture is one of the most urgent needs of man, for the house has always been the indispensable and first tool that he

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<sup>28</sup>Parker Michael & Richards Colin, *Ordering the World: Perceptions of Architecture, Space and Time*, in: *Architecture & Order*, edited by Parker Michael & Richards Colin, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup>Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab Ahadith al-Anbiya', Hadith No. 3172.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 2 p. 357.



has forged for himself. Man's stock of tools marks out the stages of civilization, the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age. Tools are the result of successive improvement; the effort of all generations is embodied in them. The tool is the direct and immediate expression of progress; it gives man essential assistance and essential freedom also..."<sup>31</sup>

Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, said: "It is obvious and proven to men of intelligence and wisdom and persons of understanding and vision that building with water and clay being an auspicious art, the Children of Adam felt an aversion to mountains and caves and from the beginning were inclined to cities and villages. And because human beings are by nature civilized, they invented day-by-day many types of buildings, and refinement increased."<sup>32</sup>

While erecting buildings for himself, God's vicegerent on earth in fact creates a wide range of facilities that are aimed at smoothing the progress of the realization of his heavenly purpose on earth. Buildings are thus subjected to serve together with their occupants an elevated order of things and meanings. They are to be both the means and ground for worship, which is man's principal task. Though serving him and his wants, God's vicegerent on earth always sees his buildings in an additional light, not seen by those who are bogged down with and blinded by fervently pursuing some lowly material gains. He sees them as an extension of the existing universal setting, God's physical realm, where all components, irrespective of their sizes, functions or positions, incessantly worship God. Buildings are thus seen as serving God rather than man. Their services to man even though genuine and real are rather relative. Because the whole universe constitutes a mosque (*masjid*) with everything in it, save a group of men and *Jinns*, voluntarily singing in unison God's praises and celebrating His glory with neither fatigue nor boredom ever befalling them, Islamic architecture aspires to add to this exhilarating set-up. It aspires to endorse the divine spiritual standards and expands them to the spheres of human influences, thus making them more easily approachable and perceptible by more people with different interests and aptitudes. Hence, Islamic architecture apart from facilitating man's vicegerency mission also promotes as well as spawns people's interest in it.

When Mawlay Idris decided to build the city of *Fas* (Fez) in northern Africa (Morocco), having sketched the ground-plan of the city and before construction got underway, he recited the following prayer: "O my Lord! You know that I do not intend by building this city to gain pride or to show off; nor do I intend hypocrisy, or reputation, or arrogance. But I want You to be worshipped in it, Your laws, limits and the principles of Your Qur'an and the guidance of Your Prophet to be upheld in it, as long as this world exists. Almighty, help its dwellers to do righteousness and guide them to fulfill that. Almighty, prevent them from the evil of their enemies, bestow Your bounties

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31 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, translated from the thirteenth French edition with an introduction by Frederick Etchells, (Oxford: Reed Educational and Professional Publishing Ltd, 1989), p. 13.

32 *Sinan's Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, p. 65.



upon them and protect them from the sword of evil. You are able to do all things.”<sup>33</sup>

When building an edifice, the Muslim architect and structural engineer charged with the vicegerency spirit are first and foremost concerned about how the end result of their efforts will stand out when juxtaposed with the existing universal setting, a result of heavenly artistry, in terms of both function and outward appearance: will it complement or contrast with it; will it go well with it, or will it appear as if something of a misfit, oddity, or even offensiveness?

Concerning function, the Muslim architect always exerts himself to ensure that a new structure serves a noble purpose, regardless of whether it is a mosque, school, dwelling, caravanserai, hospital, fountain, mausoleum, etc., whereby God alone is meant to be worshipped and adored. In this way, every new structure even though man-made yet it signifies, as it were, a conformation and even enhancement of the aura generated by the character and role of the natural world. Instead of standing alone amidst the marvels of God’s creation, quite alien to them, a structure rather integrates itself with them as much as its plan, design and utility are able to suggest, identifying its status *vis-à-vis* the otherworldliness with that of the natural sensations around it.

Building materials and substances used in building processes are normally taken or “borrowed” from nature. The same materials heretofore belonged to the flawlessly executed universal web singing God’s praises and celebrating His glory. Although they have been removed from their original contexts, the building materials from nature are still utilized for some other perfectly fitting goals related to man, thereby causing their intrinsic “holy pursuit” to remain unaffected or perturbed. As a result of the restricted and controlled intervention of Muslims in nature, the original condition and context of natural building materials and substances change only, which is nevertheless expected, needed and in full accordance with God’s universal will and plan. The inherent functions of those building materials and substances remain the same.

Before they are used in buildings, building materials from nature worship God in unison with the rest of nature’s components. It is thus only fair that they are used in those buildings where God is worshipped as well, so that their unremitting acts are still performed in peace and without interruption. It sounds strange but it would be an act of injustice towards nature if some of its ingredients were used for erecting buildings wherein the authority of God will be disrespected and His words contravened. Besides, such a deed would also denote that a contribution toward upsetting the fine equilibrium in nature has been made. When the Prophet (pbuh) declared that “there is neither harming nor reciprocating of harm”<sup>34</sup>, he had in mind not only human beings but also the natural world with all its components. And surely, it is a form and

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33 See: Ahmad Farid Moustapha, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Urbanism*, (unpublished), paper presented at the First Australian International Islamic Conference organized by the Islamic Society of Melbourne, Eastern Region (ISOMER), 1986, p. 6. Titus Burckhardt, *Fez City of Islam*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Text Society, 1992), p. 64.

34 Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Kitâb al-Ahkâm, Hadîth No. 2331.

degree of harm when the spiritual paradigms of nature are perturbed, just as it is harmful to abuse the physical aspects of nature's kingdom.

Surely, it stands to reason that as man is very much capable of perturbing the physical laws of nature by his actions, so is he in a position to get in the way of the covert aspects of nature's existence, as much as God allows it. Therefore, while creating buildings, that is to say, while creating frameworks and fields for their activities, God's vicegerents wish not to contravene any of the universe's spiritual laws and patterns. On the contrary, they wish to enhance them forever remaining on friendly terms with them. Certainly, a building can be either a "friend" or an "antagonist" to its animate and inanimate neighbors.

As regards the form of erected structures, the Muslim builder, powered with the spirit of *tawhid* and a desire to fulfill the will of a higher order or cause, always tries his best to make his edifices come into sight adhering to the existing spiritual paradigms of the natural environment. Nature is the perceptible sign of the Creator's will and presence, which is as evident in the most trivial as in the most splendid. Thus, every new component of built environment ought to become, in a way, a "sign" itself, lest they become irreconcilable with both nature and the spiritual and psychological disposition of their users. Islamic architecture is to be seen as a man-made "sign" amid the signs of God in nature. The two sets of signs coexist peacefully with one another, supporting each other's mission and purpose of existence.

Humans must live on friendly terms with nature, as much as such an arrangement is possible, beneficial and needed. Under no circumstances can man in any endeavor of his declare a war on the natural environment, because, on account of many a physical, mental and emotional weakness of his and his actual total dependence on environment, man and nobody else is bound to emerge at all times as a dire loser. The natural environment is simultaneously an obstruction and help, and architects seek both to invite its aid and to drive back its attacks. If rightly conceived and seriously pondered, the placement and form of edifices in relation to their sites with arrangement of their axes and spaces may well be turned into a device for controlling natural light, ventilation, heating, cooling, insulation, acoustics, etc. The same philosophy is to be attached -- perhaps in a more forceful and compelling mode -- to the spiritual dimension of the relationship between the built and natural environment, as it concerns one's well-being in both this world and in the Hereafter. Because it goes along with the objectives of the Islamic *Shari'ah* (Law), peaceful, harmonious and sustainable coexistence with nature, in the spiritual sense of the term, was, furthermore, at the core of the Muslim religious existence.

In view of the fact that Islamic architecture bears a strong spiritual impression and is one of the means for espousing the cause of Islam, it did not really matter in the history of Islamic civilization who were the builders, planners and developers of many a project. What actually mattered was whether the ultimate roles and utility of such projects were justifying the time, effort and capital spent on them, as well as what their impact was on the existing state of the community and on its future progress. Although architecture as a profession was extremely important and honored, architects,

most of the time, have not been excessively venerated, neither by their patrons nor by the public. It was for this that on most of Islamic buildings no names of their builders were inscribed. If there was anything imprinted on them, then it was the date of their commencement or completion, or the name of the ruler or the patron. Except in cases of insincere undertakings, never were the architects, planners or developers concerned about promoting their name or status, about their position in history, about what some shortsighted people would say about their work, about how some members of the ruling elite would react during and after construction, and so forth.

This indicates that buildings in Islam are erected to serve together with their occupants the only Creator and Lord of the universe. As a result, buildings in Islamic architecture are heavily transfigured aiming to negate their mundane worldly ingredients and stand out as the man-made “signs” of God’s oneness and greatness. Also, Muslim architects and structural engineers turned down a prospect of drawing attention to themselves, their careers and their works of art. They feared that such an act would somewhat impinge on and, in the worst scenario, debilitate the promotion of the idea of total spirituality underlining the total identity of Islamic architecture. Nothing was to stand between God and a building’s users and observers. Through the planning and organization of spaces in buildings, through the handling of buildings’ forms, through the methods and styles of ornamentation and beautification in buildings, and through the envisioned functions of buildings -- through all these channels and means Muslim architects and structural engineers go all-out to put on view the signs of the Creator’s presence, infinite authority and greatness, on the one hand, and to display the signs of men’s fragility, dependence and smallness, on the other. This way, every building in Islamic architecture is transformed into a kind of a house of God, *baytullah*, so to speak, thus translating onto reality the implications of the Prophet’s tradition (*hadith*) that the earth has been made as pure and a place of worship (*masjid*) to the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Tayammum, Hadith No. 323.

## Comprehensive excellence (*ihsan*)

Comprehensive excellence (*ihsan*) is one of the most important Islamic values. It saturates every aspect of the Islamic message. Since Islam is a complete way of life, it follows that excellence is to be felt in all life's spheres. When the angel *Jibril* (Gabriel) asked Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) what excellence is, the Prophet's reply was: "Excellence is to worship God as if you see him, for if you do not see Him He sees you."

Excellence is prescribed (*kataba*) to Muslims as explicitly as the other fundamental obligations, such as praying (*salah*), fast (*siyam*) and struggle for the holy Islamic cause (*jihad*).

The Prophet (pbuh) once said: "Indeed, Allah loves when one of you does something that he does it to perfection." It is interesting to call to mind the context in which these words of the Prophet (PBUH) were uttered, thus drawing attention to the seriousness of the matter. When the Prophet's son Ibrahim died and was buried, some unevenness had been left in the earth on his grave. The unevenness must have been minor in that the people were able to overlook it. It was such a sad occasion, so it was unthinkable for anyone to say or do anything, no matter how trivial, that could aggravate the people's feeling, in general, and that of the Prophet (PBUH), in particular. Noticing the unevenness, the Prophet (PBUH) leveled the earth by his hand and made the above statement.<sup>36</sup>

During the process of building the Prophet's mosque in Madinah in which practically all Muslims participated, the Prophet (PBUH) also called people's attention to the significance of excellence. It is reported that a man in course of building the mosque was expertly treading clay for making bricks of which the mosque was built. On seeing him, the Prophet (pbuh) said: "May Allah have mercy upon him who excels in his profession." And to the man he said: "Keep doing this job for I see that you excel in it."<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, Islam is a religion of excellence. Muslims are to strive for excellence in all that they do: in both religious rituals and pure worldly affairs. All forms of deliberate mediocrity, which is the opposite of excellence, are deemed against the spirit of Islam and are thus disproved off. Human actions, if executed in the spirit of deliberate mediocrity, are likely to be repudiated by God. So important in Islam is integrating excellence into human actions that it represents a condition for such actions to be accepted by God.

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<sup>36</sup>Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din), *Muhammad*, (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 1983), p. 325.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Samhudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1997), vol. 1 p. 333.

## The implications of comprehensive excellence for architecture

The Islamic notion of comprehensive excellence exerts much influence over the identity and chief characteristics of Islamic architecture. The implications of such a notion for Islamic architecture are both ideological and practical.

Sakar Datoos rightly observed that Islam molded the dominant character of its art and architecture in two respects, at least. “First, it taught man that he was the highest form of creation in all the world -- ‘*Ashraful Makhluqat*’. This meant that he was to aspire to lofty heights, and not to the conditions of lower objects: ‘Do you not see that Allah has made what is in the heavens and what is in the earth subservient to you, and made complete to you His favors outwardly and inwardly?’ (31:20)

Secondly, man was taught to avoid ‘exalting the physical fact above the spiritual.’ He was not to focus attention on his bodily aspect but to point to ‘some universal idea beyond himself,’ and to remember that this life after all was transitory. This philosophy translated into the works of the architects of Islam who could weave ‘such strange enchantment through domes and minars.’ They could ‘suggest the cool splendor of moonlight by means of columns and arcades,’ and over and above that, it was to ‘delight the heart with laughing water,...to keep the vision agog with racing surface lines, or to sober it with broad sweeps of gently graded masses.’ Indeed, Islamic architecture was a reflection of Islam: ‘the sacred message of Allah was inscribed upon its walls, in the very shape of the arch was the Peace prescribed by Islam.’<sup>38</sup> Although the concept of excellence is not explicitly stated here, its sway over the dominant character of Islamic art and architecture is clearly implied.

In Islam, creating buildings in principle is classified as a permissible act (*mubah*). It remains so as long as something does not come about and causes it to infringe some of the divinely-prescribed norms, hence renders it either objectionable (*makruh*) or prohibited (*haram*). However, if achieving the goals of Islam is meant to be realized through the pursuit of building, the whole matter then becomes highly praiseworthy and so correspondingly rewarding. In other words, making buildings becomes a segment of worship (*‘ibadah*). It becomes an excellent act meant for achieving the most excellent goal. It follows that while creating and using architecture, people can be elevated to the highest or dragged to the lowest level on account of architecture functioning as our third skin as well as the ground for achieving or betraying our life mission.

Islamic notion of excellence necessitated that Islamic architecture be known for its sophistication in relation to its delicate form-function relationship, profound decorative arts systems and its clear and focused spiritual orientation. Based on the implications of comprehensive excellence and its pertinence to the Islamic presence, buildings are to be perceived as

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38 Sakar Datoos, *Islamic Architecture – An Appreciation*, <http://www.amaana.org/tajik/sakarchit.htm>.

built for the sake of God alone, in that all the acts that are bound to be repeatedly executed therein stand for modes of worship ('*ibadah*). As such, buildings should contain as many and as diverse spiritual components as possible, so that whenever observed, or made use of, such buildings easily become redolent of their divine qualities. Of such components, for instance, are ornamentation strategies loaded with spiritual decorative themes and techniques, which play a prominent role towards the attainment of Islamic architecture's sophistication and class. Through them, experiencing the otherworldliness of buildings' qualities and purposes should become an easy task and should be able to eclipse the experiences redolent of the splendor of this world alone. In fact, the quintessence of all Islamic buildings should exhibit the neat compatibility between the spiritual and material aspects of life, that the former takes precedence over the latter yet needs it for its own realization, exactly in the same way as the Islamic ideology does at the theoretical level. Thus, failing to attend to the imperatives of this principle by means of reasonable and meaningful decoration and beautification pursuits while erecting buildings signifies to certain people that the notion of comprehensive excellence has not been pursued to the fullest. Disregarding the prospects of maximizing ornamentation in buildings would signify a disregarding of an important facility or a resource whose potentials for getting the most out of erected edifices appear to be as immense as those of a majority of buildings' constituents. Hence, such is not to be seen completely as a gain. Such are the benefits of ornamentation and beautification that overlooking them could at times even connote a shortcoming and an act of unprofessional conduct.

Of the reasons for this conviction, among other things, is the fact that a considerable medium for drawing attention to the actual moral fiber of the building enterprise in Islam, and of life in general, i.e., the decoration medium, has been readily left aside. Left aside also are the recurring opportunities that one could have in ornamentation, so that one could take pleasure in the artistic expressions inspired by the faith he treasures more than anything else on earth, occasionally taking those expressions as far as a spiritual refreshing and total transformation could take him.

Indeed, under certain circumstances the drawbacks of an approach towards creating austere buildings with no wholesome ornamentation and beautification may surpass the benefits intended thus to be achieved. Leaving buildings simple and austere, whereas people enjoy material capabilities to make buildings' form and serviceability reflect better the blessings that God has bestowed upon them, is to many people an unnecessary abstemious lifestyle. The idea of comprehensive excellence in Islam obliges people to get the most out of the opportunities that God has conferred on them, or they have generated them for themselves, so that the betterment of both worlds is ensured. It is true that certain ornamentation and beautification interests can be superfluous, luxurious, deceptive and morally wrong, yet, at the same time, many other interests in the same field can turn out to be extremely beneficial, moral, enlightening and economical, subject to people's intentions and goals. The interests of true believers will always sway towards the latter. It is owing to this, perhaps, that according to a majority of scholars of Islam,

extravagance is a less serious vice than miserliness because in the latter case the soul is much more attached to wealth and this world than in the former case.<sup>39</sup> Extravagance for the goals concerning the truth is not like extravagance for the goals of one's self-centeredness.

Comprehensive excellence calls for creating perfectly clean and safe buildings that use latest and most beneficial technological and engineering advancements. Such buildings must aim to create safe and conducive environments for people to live in. There must be a perfect match between what people need and want and what they get. Harmony between people's requirements and what their buildings offer is a sign of excellent architecture. A conflict between the two is a sign of mediocrity, incompetence and failure.

Buildings must be perfectly environment conscious and friendly. They must be energy efficient, especially today when people face more and more problems relating to energy generation, distribution and consumption. Failing to produce energy efficient buildings could be seen as a form of wasting which Islam abhors calling spendthrifts the brothers of Satan (*ikhwan ash-shayatin*). (Al-Isra, ' 27) Buildings must be sustainable too, because the core of the idea of sustainability and sustainable development, i.e., the preservation of the interests and well-being of the present and future generations, as well as the preservation of the personal, societal and natural wealth and resources, represents a major portion of the mission and objectives (*maqasid*) of Islam.

Comprehensive excellence also calls for establishing a delicate balance between sophistication in architecture and avoiding the major transgressions often associated with built environment. It is true that Islam not only regards architecture as an inevitable pursuit but also calls for the idea of excellence to pervade all its aspects, however, one must not be so obsessed with the matter of building that some of the serious transgressions such as squandering, exercising and promoting arrogance, mutual envy, corruption, rivalry in building and destroying nature, may possibly be committed, even moderately. People must observe moderation, their limitations, personal and societal needs, and of course the utility of whatever they erect. Via its status, function and maintenance, built environment is to be an asset to the community and not a liability.

Architecture is but one of the noble means by which the noblest goals are attained. It is an instrument, a carrier of the spiritual, not a goal itself. People are not to build more than what they really need for the reason that every building activity will be harmful to its executor on the Day of Judgment, unless carried out due to a real necessity, i.e., to meet a justifiable need, as proclaimed by the Prophet (pbuh).<sup>40</sup> The Prophet (pbuh) announced this on seeing a dome imposingly surmounting a house in Madinah.

If adulterated by *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) elements, the idea of making buildings may in the long run prove disastrous for the future of the Muslim community as a whole. The reason for this is that under some unfavorable circumstances not only will the issue of building and its splendid goals be

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39 Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazali*, (Kuala Lumpur: Central Printing Sendirian Berhad, 1975), p. 129.

40 Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Kitab al-Adab, Hadith No. 4559.



then garbled, but also will people start drifting away, little by little, from purposeful moderation in the end becoming liable to warp even the character and role of their very existence on earth. No sooner does this come about than breeding the causes, which the Prophet (PBUH) has singled out as responsible for every upcoming cultural and civilizational slump of Muslims, happens next. The causes highlighted by the Prophet (pbuh) are: exaggerated love of this world and having aversion to death.<sup>41</sup> Truly, the more people fritter away their time, energy and resources on buildings, the greater affection do they develop for the results of their work and this world in general, and the more they are attached to this world, the “farther” and more detested death and the Hereafter appear. “The dwellings in which you delight” has been referred to in the Qur’an (*Al-Tawbah*, 24) as one of the potential hindrances in Allah’s cause, in that man’s heart is prone to clinging to it in this world together with wealth and prosperity, commerce, and kith and kin. And if it be that any of these turns out to be a hindrance “...then wait until Allah brings about His decision: and Allah guides not the rebellious.” (*Al-Tawbah*, 24)

Against the background of these damaging vices often committed in the field of building -- sometimes unconsciously and under the influence of popular and widespread dissolute trends, though -- must we view every tradition of the Prophet (pbuh), as well as the sayings and practices of his nearest companions, wherein some aspects of building are at a first glance denounced.

Because of the appropriate functions of Islamic buildings, on the one hand, and because of their heavily transfigured outward appearances aimed to negate mundane worldly ingredients and stand out as the man-made “signs” of God’s oneness and greatness which try to amalgamate as much as possible with the array of surrounding natural signs, on the other, it is always difficult to describe an Islamic building, no matter how huge, complex and costly the same may be, as a “white elephant” or an extravagant endeavor that violates the truth and its ways. Seeing that their fundamental social and economic needs have been satisfied, and that Islamic civilization was on a steady upward surge conquering places, hearts and minds, because of this, the patrons, architects, structural engineers and the masses, saturated with the standards and ideals of the Islamic struggle, found it often inoffensive to embark on a series of costly building activities, for they knew that their undertakings followed a plan, were free of every type of iniquity, and via their utility and form were envisaged but to serve a higher order of truth and goodness. Without doubt, such an outlook on building and everything that goes with it, along with judiciously using up worldly goods for the purpose, ought not to be frowned upon. It should be viewed as a manner of glorifying God, as an avenue to making His universal word and plan rise above all other pretentious but transparently sham “words” and systems of living.

Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, perceived an excellent architecture as one that blends the strong Islamic spirituality and ethics with mastering the necessary building technology and engineering skills and techniques. The net result of this approach, it seems to be Sinan’s

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41 Ibid., Kitab al-Malahim, Hadith No. 4284.



suggestion, would always be a safe, functional, durable, sustainable, cost-effective and aesthetically gratifying architecture. It goes without saying, however, that all these traits of an excellent architecture are implied in just two of the many Prophet's traditions which contain some wide-ranging meanings and messages: firstly that Allah loves whenever His servants do something to do it excellently, and secondly that whatever they do to do it in such a way that no slightest harm is inflicted on people, flora and fauna. Sinan thus offered some of his advices to those engaged in architecture: "There is no art more difficult than architecture, and whosoever is engaged in this estimable calling must, to begin with, be righteous and pious. He should not begin to lay the foundations if the building site is not firm, and when he sets out to lay the foundations he should take great care that his work be free from defect and he reach the firm ground. And, in proportion to the abundance or paucity of piers, columns and buttresses, he should close up the domes and half domes that are on top of them, and bind the arches together in an agreeable manner, without carelessness. And he should not hurry in important matters but should endure in accord with the import of the saying "Patience brings one victory!" in order that, with God's help, he finds divine guidance for the immortality of his work. And in this there is no doubt."<sup>42</sup>

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42 *Sinan's Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, p. 66.

## **Islam as the final and universal revelation**

Since there is only one God, Allah, there must be only one Truth. There cannot be two or more Truths, just as cannot be two or more Gods. Moreover, as people came from the same origin, are subjected to the same laws of existence, and march towards the same destination, it is only logical that they should possess only one vision and mission when in this world and that they are subjected to the same spiritual and ethical doctrines, guidelines and rules. It is because of this verity that every prophet from Adam to Muhammad (peace be upon them all), and there were hundreds of thousands of them, was appointed to fulfill the same purpose. They had to convey the same message to their respective nations and communities, that is to say, the message of *tawhid*, bearing testimony that Allah is the only God, the Creator and the Lord of the universe, and who alone deserves to be glorified and worshipped. God declares in the Qur'an: "Not a messenger did We send before you without this inspiration sent by Us to him: that there is no god but I; therefore worship and serve me." (Al-Anbiya', 25)

The only religion before Allah is Islam (Alu 'Imran, 19). The rest is error and delusion, being either the distorted versions of Islam revealed at some points of history to some of God's messengers, or the belief systems and ideologies which men now and then have invented in full absence of the direct influences of revelation and prophets. In either of these two cases, people are false to their own nature and the reasoning strength of theirs, as they are false to Allah's will and plan. On this, the Qur'an says: "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah) never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost." (Alu 'Imran, 85)

Thus, Islam is the first and last revelation from God. All the prophets before Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them all) while preaching the same message operated in single historical episodes until the emergence of their successors, succeeding each other and reviving each other's teachings and complementing them, until Muhammad (PBUH) was sent as the seal of prophets whose message is meant to be valid for all times till the end of this terrestrial life. Likewise, all the prophets before Muhammad (peace be upon them all) were sent only to their respective nations and communities, operating in certain geographical regions, until Muhammad was sent to the whole of mankind, thus completing the heavenly cycle which commenced with the creation of the first man and prophet on earth, Adam.

By virtue of being the last prophet and the message revealed to him the final revelation, the mission of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is characterized by a number of unique features. Just like the messages of other prophets that even though the same in essence yet were characterized by certain features imposed by the conditions under which they were preached and implemented. Some of the prominent features of Prophet Muhammad's message are as follows.

Prophet Muhammad's message is a universal and permanent one not affected by the implications of the time and space factors. Besides, not only is it meant for all people till the end of time but also for *Jinns*. This necessitated that the Qur'an be meticulously guarded against being lost,

misunderstood, interpolated or distorted, which unfortunately was not the fate of previous revealed scriptures. The one in charge of preserving the Qur'an is God Himself, as He explicitly vowed in the Qur'an. Since the *Sunnah*, Prophet Muhammad's words and actions, constitutes the second source of Islam, whose primary task is to interpret, elucidate and complement the Qur'an, it is also a form of revelation. It too had to be preserved against misinterpretations, interpolations, distortions and loss, which unfortunately was not the fate of the life stories of previous prophets.

As the seal of prophets, Prophet Muhammad's task was not only to look at the present as well as the future and chart the courses for people's moral and spiritual fulfillment. It was also to look back at the past where the *tawhidic* schemes of other prophets have been corrupted and tampered with setting the things right and occasionally naming the culprits. That way, the struggle, achievements and legacy of prophets, their followers and whoever wished and contributed any good to the spiritual and civilizational enrichment of mankind have been duly recognized and endorsed. At the same time, the falsehood and deceptive plots of the opponents of prophets were unmistakably exposed and strongly refuted.

Thus, the direction and tone of the last God's revelation to man were clearly set. The chief objectives of the last Prophet's mission were also clearly spelled out. According to such objectives, the last Prophet (PBUH) was as much a reformer as an originator. He was concerned as much about the present and future as about the past. He came as much to initiate some new systems of living as to Islamize some existing but flawed ones. Even though he laid a foundation for a new divinely inspired and universal civilization, yet he never failed to acknowledge the righteous aspects of the existing cultures and civilizations that he came into contact with. Although he resolutely repudiated the immoral and corrupt aspects of the existing cultures and civilizations, yet whenever needed he never failed to avail himself of their positive contributions to the good of mankind. This was possible due to Islam's recognition that every community is capable of making a contribution to the well-being of human society. The basis for such contributions could be either some remnants of a past prophet's wisdom and experience, which the people may or may not be aware of, or the human reasoning power supported by the human unadulterated primordial nature that God has bestowed upon man as a gift. And finally, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was an Arab operating within an Arab context, but his teachings were meant for all people from whatever race or background they might be.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) thus stands for the microcosm of the prophethood phenomenon and all its protagonists. It is because of this that at the core of the Islamic faith is believing in all prophets and the holy books revealed to them. Rejecting a prophet or a revealed book renders a person a nonbeliever. It is because of this, furthermore, that fundamental to the Islamic message are the notions of Muslim brotherhood, the unity of mankind, mutual understanding and respect, dialogue, tolerance and learning.

The following are some verses from the Qur'an on the finality and universality of Islam as the final revelation given to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh):

“Muhammad is not the father of any man among you, but he is the messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets; and Allah is ever Aware of all things.” (Al-Ahzab, 40)

“To you We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the Scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that has come to you. To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute.” (Al-Ma'idah, 48)

“We sent you not, but as a mercy for all creatures.” (Al-Anbiya', 107)

“We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).” (Al-Hijr, 9)

“We have not sent you but as a (Messenger) to all mankind, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men know not.” (Saba', 28)

Prophet 'Isa (Jesus), the second last prophet, while prophesying the arrival of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), said: "O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad.' But when he came to them with Clear Signs they said, 'This is evident sorcery!'" (Al-Saff, 6)

According to an article posted on [www.berkati.net](http://www.berkati.net), “Islam is a religion for all people from whatever race or background they might be. That is why Islamic civilization is based on a unity that stands completely against any racial or ethnic discrimination. Such major racial and ethnic groups as the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Africans, Indians, Chinese and Malays in addition to numerous smaller units embraced Islam and contributed to the building of Islamic civilization. Moreover, Islam was not opposed to learning from the earlier civilizations and incorporating their science, learning, and culture into its own worldview, as long as they did not oppose the principles of Islam. Each ethnic and racial group that embraced Islam made its contribution to the one Islamic civilization to which everyone belonged. The sense of brotherhood and sisterhood was so much emphasized that it overcame all local attachments to a particular tribe, race, or language -- all of which became subservient to the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam.”<sup>43</sup>

Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote about how far Islam went in absorbing other people's civilizational achievements, particularly in science: “Islam came into contact with a number of sciences which it absorbed, to the extent that these sciences were compatible with its own spirit and were able to provide nourishment for its own characteristic cultural life. The primordial character of its revelation, and its confidence that it was expressing the Truth at the heart of all revelations, permitted Islam to absorb ideas from many sources, historically alien yet inwardly related to it...The revelation contained in the Qur'an, and expressed in the sacred language (Arabic), provided the unifying

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43 *World of Islam*, <http://www.barkati.net/english/#04>.

pattern into which many foreign elements became integrated and absorbed, in accordance with the universal spirit of Islam.”<sup>44</sup>

Isma’il al-Faruqi also said about the universality of Islam and its culture and civilization: “Only Islam acknowledged provincial culture as content of the ethos of Islam proper, and managed to maintain a universal adherence and loyalty to it amid the widest ethnic variety of the globe. Bushmen from equatorial Africa, Europeans and Chinese, Indians and Berbers, as well as the ethnic mixtures of the Near East, the world's crossroads of civilizations, all participated in Islamic culture just as they should, building their unity and hence their definition on the culture of Islam and, under its guidance, continued to keep, develop and promote their hundred ethnic sub-cultures.”<sup>45</sup>

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44 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, (Shah Alam: Dewan Pustaka Fajar, 1984), p. 30.

45 Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam as Culture and Civilization – Not Relativism*, <http://www.islamicity.com>.

## **The implications of Islam as the final and universal revelation for architecture**

The implications of the notion that Islam is the final and universal revelation for Islamic architecture are rather practical. Due to the fact that the religion of Islam is universal, the architecture of its peoples, which functions as a framework for their Islamic lifestyles, is universal too. Indeed, universal is every segment of Islamic eclectic civilization of which Islamic architecture is an integral part.

Being what it is, once revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) the principal and most immediate concern of Islam was not building pursuits as such. Islam felt that the most pressing issue was to correct people's perception of life, the world, nature, civilization and man: his role and position on earth, for if these are perverted, people's perception of and approach to building would be perverted and corrupted as well. Similarly, if these issues are properly grasped and honored, people's perception of and approach to building would be apt and inspired as well. For this reason, for example, does the Qur'an speak not only about faith but also about building and development when referring to some of the ancient civilizations, such as that of the 'Ad, Thamud, Pharaohs and the children of Israel. The Qur'an thus wishes to explicate some of the detriments that human society is bound to put up with on the physical plane of civilization as soon as the divinely prescribed worldview is forsaken and other alternatives become sought instead.

The message meant to be thus communicated is that the major and most urgent task of the followers of Islam is to strive to understand, accept as true, apply and further advance the message of Islam by all the rightful means. However, as for the building systems, styles and techniques that they meanwhile may evolve, as part of life's essential affairs, it at the end of the day does not matter what they shall be as long as they stem from the body of Islamic teachings and norms, conform to the *tawhidic* worldview, and are subjected to the realization of the objectives that man is asked to accomplish on earth. By the same token, it does not matter whether such systems, styles and techniques are developed solely by Muslims or, after having been duly refined and corrected, are totally or partly imported from other cultures and civilizations. In other words, Muslims are advised to attend to the root cause, which is the actualization and translation of the word of God on life, which will gradually but inevitably lead to a desired goal, which is the creation of Islamic civilization with all its segments including architecture, for the latter is both the ground and container for the former's realization. At any rate, the whole exercise must be seen as aiming as much at the enriching and enhancing of the building technology and expertise of Muslims as at the constituting and intensifying of the all-inclusive Islamization process that Muslims had embarked on since the earliest days of revelation.

Just like the religion of Islam, Islamic architecture is not confined to an ethnic group, historic episode or a geographical region. It is not governed by a restricted perception or an outlook, nor is it locked up in a style and a set of rigid methods and techniques. Islamic architecture is open to all people to enrich and enhance it through their various styles, methods and techniques and to enjoy its many benefits. Islamic architecture is a global phenomenon

with an outlook that not only makes use of but also transcends the experiences and ideas of this world. It is a phenomenon with a universal appeal and meaning. It is a product of an interplay between the absolute or permanent and the relative or temporary realities, i.e., between the Islamic beliefs that give Islamic architecture its quintessence and those corporeal elements that give it its form. Islamic architecture is a symbiosis between a global religion and life in its totality. It is a union between the material and spiritual spheres, and between the heavens and the earth. Islamic architecture cherishes its perpetual heavenly spirit and identity never compromising them. At the same time, however, it is ever ready to welcome any contribution by anyone, even non-Muslims, so that the former is made even more conspicuous and its impact further enhanced.

That is why while spreading Islam to the world, Muslims never hesitated to avail themselves of the existing built environment. The only thing that needed their most immediate attention and so correction were those aspects of architecture that were closely associated with faithlessness and idol worship. With the processes of Islamizing people's minds, attitudes and systems of living, another process, that of Islamizing architecture, went concurrently on, albeit with less dynamism and less dramatic effects as the former. This was so because once the former in its capacity as a cause took place, the latter in its capacity as an effect spontaneously came about. In so doing, the existing indigenous building styles, technologies and engineering were not only fully respected but also adopted as the best way for conducting building activities now under the aegis of Islam and Muslims. As a result, local building materials, expertise and draftsmen were widely employed.

This was utterly a natural course of action and fully in line with the nature of Islam and its mission. By no means is it fair to accuse especially the first Muslims of blindly borrowing from or imitating others while embarking on building activities, in the sense that they failed or, at best, were embarrassingly slow in initiating some completely novel and unprecedented styles in architecture. In contrast, it would be strange, embarrassing and repressive if Muslims upon subjecting a territory to the authority of Islam set out to annul and eradicate those indigenous traditions and life systems that people evolved over centuries as most effective in their living conditions and which did not oppose any of the Islamic teachings. Thus, such traditions and life systems were kept in tact. In demonstrating this Islamic principle, while settling themselves in newly conquered territories, Muslims went so far as to convert a number of churches and temples into mosques with minimal or no significant structural alterations, and employ non-Muslims in their own building initiatives. Indeed, the whole thing of integrating other people's contributions while evolving the identity of Islamic architecture is rather to be understood as witnessing the Islamic concepts of universality, finality of Prophet Muhammad's message and unity in diversity, being at work and producing some tangible results, while fully conforming to the dictates of the normative Islamization code. As Titus Burckhardt remarks that "art never creates *ex nihilo* (from nothingness). Its originality lies in the synthesis of pre-existing elements. Thus, the sacred architecture of Islam was born on the day

when success was achieved in creating, not new forms of pillars and arches, but a new kind of space conformable to Islamic worship.”<sup>46</sup>

It is true that in terms of architecture Muslims were by far inferior to their Persian and Byzantine counterparts in the newly acquired territories. However, to compete with and eventually overshadow them in that regard was not on the list of the immediate priorities of Muslims. What was on the list was how to conquer the people’s hearts with the new Islamic spirit that, in turn, will trigger subjecting the existing architecture to the new living paradigm. Once injected with the new life force, the same architecture was bound to be elevated to new levels starting from where it already was. And that is exactly what soon came to pass. Other people’s indigenous architectural legacies, once purified if such was necessary, were seen as an asset and not a liability, as a help and not an obstruction. They were used as a vehicle for expressing Islamic architecture. Hence, apart from identifying the genuine architecture of Muslims as “Islamic”, it is also appropriate to add an indication of a geographical region or an ethnic group that added an extra flavor to what Islamic architecture actually is. Hence, it can rightly be said “Islamic Umayyad architecture”, “Islamic Abbasid architecture”, “Islamic Turkish architecture”, “Islamic Iranian architecture”, “Islamic Malay architecture”, etc. In this type of appellation, the notion of universalism in Islamic architecture is not meant to be downgraded or violated. On the contrary, however, it is duly acknowledged and highlighted. The Islamic idea of unity in diversity is clearly spelled out too. No architectural expression that is firstly indigenous and secondly Islamic. Islam is Islamic architecture’s soul. Indigenous components can have no more than some bearing on shaping the form of Islamic architecture, whereas its essence remains forever the same. Even though limited, the influence of indigenous components in Islamic architecture is still overseen by and is fully submissive to the Islamic ideology.

Finally, while dwelling on the theme of the birth of Islamic art and architecture, Robert Hillenbrand’s line of discussion is such that it somewhat excessively focuses on geographical, socio-political and cultural aspects,<sup>47</sup> to the point where one feels that the real character of Islamic art and architecture is being rather localized, privatized, downgraded and even de-spiritualized. In fact, such is the case with a majority of scholars who dealt with the subjects of Islamic art and architecture, especially with the subject of their history. When one reads those materials, one almost gets an impression that it was the Umayyads or the Abbasids, for example, who were in total charge of Islam and who independently and freely charted the growth of its art and architecture, and not the other way round, that is, Islam was in charge of its peoples: their mentality, traditions and aspirations. It was their point of reference, whereas the ruling Muslim dynasties and the leading socio-political protagonists were no more than the instruments and trustees entrusted with the spread and implementation of the Islamic message on the world scene.

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46 Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), p. 18.

47 Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, p. 11-60.



To Muslims, there is nothing bigger and more important than Islam. Islam is their greatest thing. It is the beginning and the end of every Muslim ambition and endeavor. Islam did not come to be inferior or subservient to any person, group or idea. It did not serve the interests of the Umayyads or Abbasids, for example, or any other dynasty or regime. Irrespective of how they became the rulers of the Muslim community, their sole task was to serve the goals and interests of Islam and Muslims. Against the backdrop of this precept alone are the legacies of the Umayyads, Abbasids and any other ruling elite to be viewed and judged. Surely, if there was no Islam, there would have been neither the Umayyad nor the Abbasid dynasty as we know them today. Nor would there have been Islamic art or architecture as we know them today and which both the Umayyads and Abbasids associated themselves with and so famously patronized.

Thus, Robert Hillenbrand, for example, while discoursing on the nature of early Islamic architecture, makes it appear as though the Umayyad or the Abbasid factor outweighs the Islamic one and thus sends some wrong messages to the readers, though the author does not seem to mean so. It appears as though the novel socio-political factors in the state administrated by the Umayyads and Abbasids come first and the Islamic spirituality factor comes second. Says Robert Hillenbrand about the Umayyads: “Similarly, the success of Umayyad solutions to many problems of religious and secular architecture ensured that the building types evolved during this period repeatedly recurred in one guise or another in subsequent centuries. This readiness of later generations to copy Umayyad prototypes was at least partly due to the unique glamour which invested this, the first and most powerful of Islamic dynasties.”<sup>48</sup>

In the same vein, K.A.C. Creswell wrote while comparing between the roles and influences of the Umayyads and Abbasids in early Islamic art and architecture: “But the influence of this imperial art of the Abbasid Empire, although widespread, did not extend over the whole of Islam. Umayyad art was still full of life in Syria, as is proved by the wooden panels of the Aqsa Mosque, and the style of that structure as rebuilt by al-Mahdi about AD 780. Moreover, Umayyad art had a new career in Spain, whither it was taken by ‘Abd ar-Rahman, the last Umayyad, and the ‘hordes of Syrians’ who immigrated to the country. This same Syrian Umayyad influence also manifested itself in Tunisia.”<sup>49</sup>

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48 Ibid., p. 16.

49 K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), p. 417.

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