THE GEOMETRY OF THE SOUL: A SUFI VIEW OF ISLAMIC SACRED ARCHITECTURE

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The sense of place in Islam is based on an apparent paradox: that of the placelessness of the Divine Centre and, at the same time, of its omnipresence: Divine uniqueness and singleness weaved in the multiplicity of creation as an eternal arabesque. As a sacred tradition says: "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God."

It is regrettable that the inner meaning of Islamic art has not been given sufficient attention by Western scholars. As Titus Burckhardt observes in the foreword to his seminal *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (1976):

> despite the vast amount of documentation and descriptive studies carried out by Western scholars, Islamic art has remained... a singularly neglected field as far as the study in depth of its inner meanings is concerned... [it] continued to be a closed book as far as its symbolic meaning was concerned.[1]

In this paper I intend to explore some aspects of Muslim sacred architecture using the framework of the mystic to supplement that of the scholar. Seyyed Hossein Nasr quotes Burckhardt's view on Islamic art as being the product of the "wedding of wisdom and craftsmanship."[2] Any approach to this art must necessarily come from within a perspective of "wisdom" rather than mere knowledge, if it is to achieve any penetration of meanings beyond the mere exploration of external forms.

As a form of art, sacred architecture is regarded in Islam as second only to calligraphy, its purpose being to lead the soul to the Divine through the skilled manipulation of space, light and sound. It is the interplay between the inner space of the soul, its geometry, its forms, and the space of the mosque that allows the development of the arabesque of inner

meanings and perceptions in the contemplative (literally *cum templum*, the person who has or creates his temple within).

In Islam the term for architect is *muhandis*, the geometer. His aim is to create a spiritual space. According to

> The interaction of shape and surface must create a space which is totally at rest, devoid of tensions and conducive to contemplation. Such a solidified shape is to be found in the cube, a perfect form whose symbolic essence is stability, man and the earthly paradise...[3]

Alexandre Papadopoulo in his major work *Islam and Muslim Art* (1976) points out that the basis of Muslim architectural geometry is the rotation of the square in the circle: two geometrical figures with an esoteric meaning found also in Gnostic theosophy and neoplatonic philosophy.

Before we analyse the features of Muslim sacred architecture, we must mention the principle of spatial orientation. As it is well known, the focal point of Muslim orientation is the direction of the ritual prayer (*qiblah*) pointing to the holy city of Mecca. The Ka'aba, a shrine in the form of a cube (that is the literal meaning of *ka'aba*) whose original structure predates historical Islam, is the destination of the pilgrimage that every Muslim aims to perform at least once in his/her lifetime, as well as being "the liturgical centre of the Muslim world".[4] According to Henri Corbin in *Temple and Contemplation* (1986), it contains "the whole secret of the spiritual life, because it figures the stages of the mystical journey".[5]

On this point I would like to offer some considerations of my own. The prescribed sevenfold circumambulation is the main rite of the pilgrimage to which corresponds an inner meaning. For the Sufi the real Ka'aba is the subtle psychic centre of the heart, the organ of apprehension of spiritual meanings, while the sevenfold circumambulation may refer at the same time to the seven different aspects of the human soul (called *nafs*) and its subtle centres, the seven different degrees of spiritual knowledge, and the

seven stages of the Sufi inner journey (in Attar's famous poetical allegory *The Parliament of the Birds*, they are called the "seven valleys").

The geometry of the soul is placed in the context of a spiral which generates spiritual energy. The ideal centre of this circle is not really the structure of the Ka'aba, but its symbolic meaning. The real centre is the invisible, spaceless, formless Divine Essence in the process of unfolding creation.

For Burckhardt, the cube of the Ka'aba is linked to the idea of the centre. Like a crystal, he says, it synthesises space, "each face of the cube corresponding to one of the primary directions, namely, the zenith, the nadir and the four cardinal points".[6] The cardinal points are the corner pillars of the universe, while the centre of the terrestrial world is intersected by the axis of heaven.

Liturgical space in Islam is defined by the orientation and manipulation of space in the two primary modes of ritual prayer (*salat*) and circumambulation (*tawaf*). Orientation is not to the East, but to the ideal point indicating the physical location of the Ka'aba. Muslims therefore have an essentially central orientation, with the axes of all mosques converging on Mecca to signify joining the "religion of the centre".[7] Ritual orientation corresponds to spiritual orientation: the act of turning to a single ungraspable point symbolises spiritual orientation to Divine uniqueness.

Muslim liturgy has also two complementary spatial modalities, one static – orientation and alignment – the other dynamic. The latter is, horizontally, the movement of circumambulation of the Ka'aba; and vertically, the sequence of the four main positions of ritual prayer: standing, bowing, prostrating, and sitting. These four positions in their turn relate to the fourfold partition of spiritual space and the four interpenetrated levels of the inner journey: *sharia* (the Law), *tariqa* (the sufi path), *haqiqat* (the truth) and *marifa* (gnosis).

The dynamics of spatial movement must also be seen in relation to the pattern of repeated cycles (seven in the pilgrimage, four in the prayer). All this evokes the dynamics and endless repetition of the arabesque which always enriches the outer and inner walls of mosques and their domes. Symbolically, the dynamic aspect of ritual pilgrimage and ritual prayer relates to spiritual search and effort, the spiritual journey and the spiritual state of "expansion". On the other hand, the static aspect of the liturgical prayer expressed in the pauses of prolonged prostration is related to the mystic experience of inner silence and "concentration" (or contraction). In architecture this finds its correspondence in the central point of the dome, the Divine Point, from which the arabesque of the manifested world unfolds.

We shall now look in particular at some of the key architectural features of the mosque and their meaning in the sufi symbolic language of correspondences. The mosque – literally "a place of prostration', *masjid*, or *al-jami*, meaning in Arabic "what brings together" – finds its prototype in the simple living quarters of the prophet Mohammed in Medina. Though not prescriptive (a Muslim can pray anywhere so far as the chosen place is correctly aligned and ritually clean), the mosque is the ideal place for canonical prayer. It is the place where the actualisation of the different dimensions of the body-mind-soul of the believer achieves its perfect equilibrium through bodily movement, sound and inner concentration. The space defined by the mosque is specially devised to emphasise integration and equilibrium between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of worship, and between the human and the Divine, the cube and the sphere. This integration is achieved through the use of special architectural elements.

The first element of great symbolic significance is the door, or gateway. In Egyptian and Syrian typology the rectangular portals have greater breadth than height, and their proportion is based on the Golden Section, but in Persia the *pishtaq* is a huge rectangular portal framing a recessed porch. The shape is based on the most characteristic form of Persian architecture, the *iwan*, or semicircular vault assimilated to the keel-arch. This high gateway, embellished by glazed polychrome tiles, gives access to the inner courtyard. According to Burckhardt, the passage from the high elevation of the external gateway to the progressive modulation of space through the courtyard, and finally to the deep vault of the inner *iwan* crowned by a dome, represents a progress towards increasingly interiorised forms of space.[8] The gateway is generally flanked by two tall minarets. In Islamic esotericism (Sufi and Shi'ite), the gateway refers to the notion of Divine Majesty and to Divine Mercy. Connected to the former is the function of spiritual authority and of intercessors: hence the title of *Bab* , gateway, often given in Persia to people of great moral and spiritual authority. The two synergic and complementary aspects of the pillars of Divine Majesty and Power (*Jelal*) and Divine Beauty (*Jemal*) are encompassed and brought to fruition in the harmonising Divine Energy of Mercy (*Rahman* and *Rahim*), which corresponds to the vault and the niche within the gateway.

The minaret has the liturgical function of summoning the community to prayer, signifying the initiatory function of the Divine Word and of prayer. The position, number and shape of the minarets vary in different cultural contexts. The minaret has both the function of periodically reminding the Muslim of the vertical dimension of spirituality (the prayer is called five times a day), and of unifying space in the aural experience of the Word permeating the consciousness of believers. Its shape obviously has an acoustic function, but poetically can be seen as an image of the divine finger pointing to heaven.

Through the gateway we gain access to the inner open courtyard, which usually contains a fountain for ritual ablutions. This emphasises its role as a place of passage, a space for the preparation of the unit of body-mind-soul to activate the sacrament (literally "making sacred and holy") of the Divine Word, embodied in the ritual prayer. The main architectural feature of this unroofed space is its openness and receptivity to light, a symbol of divine knowledge, modulated through the surrounding arcades. The prayer hall, a rectangular space, contains no distracting elements and emphasises the sharing of communal space by the praying community set in parallel lines in the longer axis, without distinction of rank: according to the instructions of Mohammed, the believers at prayer should be "like the teeth of a comb". This fundamental equality is in no way compromised by the presence of the *imam* leading the prayer and giving the Friday address from the pulpit of the *minbar*. He is not a priest, but only a conductor chosen by the community for the purpose of achieving co-ordination of the different movements of the prayer.

One of the great achievements of Islam is the harmonisation of communities from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic backgrounds and the levelling of all individuals as servants of the Divine Lord. These two dimensions of absolute equality and total dependence are symbolised in the mosque by the parallel, perfectly synchronised lines of worshippers and by the act of humble submission to God in the act of prostration.

The main inner feature of the mosque is the *mirhab*. Literally, it means a place of refuge, but it has been translated in English as prayer-niche. It is mainly, but not exclusively, a directional device. The *mirhab* is also the resonance box collecting the collective utterance of the *imam*and the praying community, weaving in their prayer the *suras* of the Qur'an. Its form is based on the universal symbolism of the encounter between two

dimensions: the vault corresponding to heaven, the piedroit to the earth. It therefore suggests a "place of appearance" or epiphany of the Divinity.

For the Sufi, the niche finds its correspondence in the sacred cave of the heart, where the purified soul receives the nourishment of grace. It resonates with a famous Quranic passage (*sura* xxiv, 35), the so-called Verse of Light: "God is the light of the heaven and the earth. The symbol of His light is a niche) wherein is a lamp..."

According to Burckhardt, many of the oldest prayer-niches are adorned with a canopy in the form of a sea shell, a Hellenistic motif which has been incorporated in Islamic art because of its universal spiritual significance. A prophetic tradition reports how the world was created from a white pearl: a symbol for the Divine Word, and reminiscent of some gnostic texts: "the sea-shell enclosing the pearl is like the 'ear' of the heart receiving the Divine Utterance".[9]

Next to the *mirhab* and to its left, we find the element of the *minbar*, the pulpit or cathedra, which has the joined functions of the Christian bishop's chair and of the king's throne. It is a symbol of the spiritual and temporal dimensions of Islam, never separated, with the teaching function emanating from spiritual authority. Its prototype was the simple wooden three-levelled stepped stool of the Prophet in his mosque in Medina. The oldest surviving examples have from seven to eleven steps, both esoterically significant numbers. The uppermost level of the *minbar*, the throne sheltered by a canopy, remains always unoccupied, since it is the site of the unseen presence of the Divine Messenger as the political head of the community of the faithful. The coupling of the *mirhab*, locus for Divine Presence, and of the *minbar*, locus of the Divine Messenger, offers spatial configuration to the fundamental article of faith by which one becomes a Muslim, the formula of the *tawhid*: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet".

We now come to the dome, or cupola. Based on the geometrical shape of the circle in space – the sphere – it evokes in the viewer a qualitative and spiritual resonance in accordance with the association of the circle with the Divine dimension. The number and size of cupolas in a mosque can vary greatly, but each modulates the same fundamental truth, based on the conjunction of a rectangular (human) dimension with a circular (celestial) dimension. Another important feature within the decoration of the vaulted dome itself is the unfolding of a rhythmic pattern of diversity from the single central point signifying the unitary doctrine. The decoration in the internal face of the cupola often reveals an extraordinary complexity in the use of geometry to suggest doctrinal and spiritual meanings. For a detailed study of this in the light of Sufism we refer to Laleh Bakhtiar's precious book *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest*. Bakhtiar points out how, archetypally, the dome is the divine throne, and is also related to the Sufi notion of the circle, centre and sphere as an image of the Spirit encompassing the universe. Therefore, one can view the dome in two complementary modalities: one, upwards, contractive towards the unity represented by the apex of the vault; the other downwards, expansive from the central unity to the periphery.[10] These two modes represent the human and divine perspectives, and relate to the integration of transcendence and immanency.

In conclusion, the symbolism of space in Islamic sacred architecture finds a correspondence at both the psycho-spiritual and cosmic levels. The mosque can be seen as a replica of the universe and of universal Intelligence, the totality of the manifested outflow of God's creative energy. The "alchemy of light" is the expression used by Burckhardt to refer to the transformation of physical space into spiritual space, the *opus magnum* achieved by Islamic architecture. "Geometry, which translates unity into the spatial order, rhythm, which reveals it in the temporal order and also indirectly in space,

and light which is to visible forms what Being is to limited existences", are the means by which the artist expresses the idea of the "unity of reality".[11] The metaphor is appropriate, since alchemy in its pristine form was the endeavour of the Sufi to transform human sense-based awareness (lead) into consciousness (philosophical stone, alchemical mercury), and ultimately into the higher "substance" of spirit (alchemical gold). The achievement of the successful Muslim architect is precisely that of transforming stone into crystal, and crystal into light, a light refracting spiritual meanings. This parallels the transformation of space into the vibration of liturgical sound and, ultimately, into the inner silence of contemplation.

REFERENCES

[1] Burckhardt, 1976, p. xv.
[2] ibid.
[3] Ardalan and Bakhtiar,*The sense of Unity*, 1973, cited in Laleh Bakhtiar: *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, 1976, p.107.
[4] Burckhardt, p. 3.
[5] Corbin, p. 191.
[6] Burkhardt, p. 4.
[7] ibid., p. 3.
[8] ibid., p. 163.
[9] ibid., p. 91.
[10] Bakhtiar, 1976, p. 107.
[11] Burkhardt, pp. 76-77.