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## Islamic Culture

WE have seen in the foregoing chapter that it is upon the Ummah that the tasks of acculturating and Islamizing the members fall, as well as the preservation of their Islamicity. The system within the Ummah is quite monolithic, but with built-in mechanisms for creative self-renewal and reform. Islam is a comprehensive way of life. It is relevant for every aspect of life, for every deed. It is no wonder then that the Ummah would make itself felt in all walks of personal and public (corporate) life. Islam seeks to put itself in evidence in the style of life, at home, in the public building, on the street, in the institutions, the city – everywhere.

Islam teaches that God is indeed our Lord and Master. Consciousness of Him is the first and last requisite. For to know Him as God, i.e., as Creator, Lord and Master, as end of everything, is more than half the battle of existence and well being. To know God as God is to love and honor Him; it is to lay oneself open to determination by His will. For only that is *Islam* or submission. It is natural therefore that awareness of God be the objective of every endeavor; that the Muslim surround himself with all that reminds him of God; that within the Ummah, everything be theocentric, God-oriented.

Naturalism, or the perception of ultimate reality in nature, the assumption that nature is its own norm and measure, that the good, the

true and the beautiful are in and of nature, is the antithesis of Islam. Islam resists taking nature for God and thus reducing His transcendence. Nature is the strongest contender for the place of God. Its position has been ever rising in the consciousness of western man since the Renaissance which in this sense, may be said to have dethroned God. Instead of God being the end and measure of all things, it installed man, as crown of nature; for he, it deemed, was the one destined to play the role of “measure unto all things.”

This starting point gave the western and Islamic cultures their sense of beauty. For the Western Christian affected by the Renaissance, the beautiful is man. In man is exhausted the meaning of the sublime. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation through its idea of a God immanent in the flesh and hence in nature, eased the transfer from the Semitic notion of a transcendent God who is the absolute standard of beauty, truth and morality, to man as absolute standard. Henceforth the whole of Christian culture was to be transformed by this principle; just as Islamic culture remained true to the original Semitic vision that only God is God and hence, that only God is absolute norm, standard and measure of all things.

Beginning with the Renaissance, western man began to paint, carve and design in a way expressive of this naturalism. The Church fathers, custodians of the Christian vision, were shocked at first especially so by the representation of naked bodies; but they quickly acquiesced to this invasion of Western consciousness by pagan and naturalist Greece and Rome. This invasion was pervasive; not only in the visible arts but equally in all other aspects of culture. However, the various areas of culture were not all invaded at the same time. One could argue that in philosophy, it had to await the arrival of Descartes; in literature, the arrival of Erasmus; in music, that of Joseph Haydn.

The Muslims, on the other hand, developed the Arabesque, a design applicable to decoration as well as to architecture, to painting as well as to calligraphy, to town planning as well as to literature, to horticulture and aquaculture as to philosophy. The design is built on the laws of non-development, repetition, symmetry and momentum. The first means denial of nature whose law is certainly development, or movement from a state of genesis through successive states of growth

and development ending in maturation, climax or consummation beyond which everything seems to be irrelevant to the natural process in question. Just as the Islamic view begins with a denial “No God but God,” so does the universal patterns of Islamic art, language, thought and style begin with the negation of nature as measure and norm, as embodiment, locus, or carrier of the sublime.

The second principle on which the Arabesque is built is repetition and the third is symmetry. Nature is neither repetitious nor symmetrical. The leaves of the same tree may look alike; but each one is different from all the others. Likewise, the case with symmetry. The Arabesque denies naturalism through these principles, but that is not their only function. They are the elements out of which the Arabesque creates momentum or motion from one repeated pattern to another, *ad infinitum*. This is the fourth principle of the Arabesque. A row of bricks or a basket weave of threads or straws is both repetitious and symmetrical. The Arabesque arranges the symmetrically repeated elements or patterns in such a way as to generate motion, to pull the spectator from one unit in the design to the other and set him on a course which, from the very nature of the case, can never come to a natural conclusion. The work of art itself, the tableau, the facade, the story or the poem does come to an end, as it must. But the Arabesque or design in it never does. In graphic representation in a wall, a carpet, a miniature or a panel of wood or masonry, the Arabesque seems to continue beyond the natural limits of the object *ad infinitum*. The same is true of a composition of music or of poetry, where the elements and patterns differ, but not the design which never terminates when the performer or reciter stops, but creates a need to continue what has been experienced *ad infinitum*.

The purpose of developmental art is to arrest attention on the object developed which is directly or indirectly a human state or condition, and therein to contemplate its ultimacy or normativeness. This is true even in the still life or landscapes which are given not for themselves but for the human character or personality standing, as it were, behind them. The non-developmental character of the Arabesque aims at the opposite purpose. Not to arrest attention but, rather, to keep the pattern going in the imagination of the beholder, and, as it

were, to carry the spectator by the momentum the rhythm of pattern has generated, outside the work of art presented, is to set consciousness on an infinite march which can never fulfill its end precisely because it has none. Here, an intuition is gained of the negative aspect of transcendent reality, namely, that it is infinite, never given to human sense perception, never graspable immanently in nature, and hence, never expressible. The Arabesque does not express God; but it does express sensibly and beautifully, the inexpressibility of God.

It is therefore not by accident that the Muslim surrounds himself with objects of art which all tell the same theme: "There is no God but God," whether discursively through calligraphy, or esthetically (i.e., as given to sense) through the Arabesque. His house, its facade, location, skyline, floor plan, interior and exterior decoration, all emphatically deny nature saying, as it were, nothing in nature is God or even a vehicle for God. Where they have been invested with Islamic beauty and hence, with Arabesque designs generating a momentum toward infinity, their expressiveness becomes all the more eloquent. What the Muslim loves to hear, likewise, be it instrumental or vocal music, the chanting of the Qur'an or the recitation of poetry, embody the same principles and express the same vision of the one transcendent God. Calligraphy, the supreme art of Islam, doubles its effect by adding to the sensory expression of infinity and inexpressibility of transcendent reality, by its Arabesque undulating patterns of lines and decoration, the direct discursive expression of God, His will and deeds, and man's place in the divine order of creation.

That is why the mosque, the supreme public expression of Islam, is an empty building, whose walls deny mass, weight, opaqueness and hence enclosure of space. Instead of enclosure, the mosque walls give the airy feeling of transparent screens of floating patterns which join the mosque to infinite space. The carpet which covers its floor, the capital which heads its pillar, the decorated panel into which all its surfaces are covered whether in wood, masonry, stucco or carved marble, the crenellated skyline – everything expresses the same theme of infinity and transcendence with one voice. Lastly, the bands, panels and rosettes of Arabic calligraphy reproducing verses from the Qur'an, as

the chanting of the Qur'an usually reverberating between its walls, repeat the same theme explicitly and immediately.

Transcendence, or ultimate reality, namely Allah, touches every aspect of the Muslims life, as it pervades every product of his culture, as it dominates every corner of his consciousness. Both he and the modern western Christian are obsessed with great obsessions: the latter is obsessed with God-in-man, the Muslim is obsessed with God-in-God alone.