

## Part VII

### Islamic Culture and History

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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

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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.

## Islamic History

ISLAM was born in Arabia. In a sense it had to. Being the crystallization of ancient Mesopotamian (Semitic) religion and wisdom, it could be reborn only in Arabia for two reasons. First, Arabia was the only corner of the ancient world which continued the legacy without falling under the influence of Egyptian, Greek and Zoroastrian culture. Whatever influence of this kind had reached Arabia was slight and in the periphery only, in Petra and Palmyra in the north, in Yemen in the south. The center remained unaffected.

Secondly, whatever was left of the Mesopotamian legacy in Arabia was assisted, bolstered and preserved not so much in the religious practices of the Pre-Islamic Arabs, but in their language and poetry. Here, their consciousness of transcendence was mirrored unconsciously. Their language was itself an Arabesque in its lexicography, syntax, grammar and literary esthetics. Their poetry was the *non plus ultra* of symmetry, repetition, non-development and momentum long before Islam. Nothing could have fitted the Islamic message better than the Arabic literary medium. Perfect correspondence between them is the inevitable conclusion of any student with the minimum perceptiveness. Nowhere else was any such consciousness mirrored in any language. When Islam came, it built its whole case on the literary sublime character of its revelations – the medium which the Arabs (and

only the Arabs) could readily and perfectly appreciate. They knew what is and what is not miraculous or sublime in that medium. Even the enemies of Islam among the Makkans immediately recognized the *mysterium* in the revelation of Muhammad. Their vested interests and shock delayed them, but only for a very short while, in acclaiming it as divine.

Before the death of Muhammad, the whole of Arabia had acknowledged the new crystallization of its innermost, even unconscious, wisdom. It saw in Islam what Islam proclaimed itself to be, namely, that it is the quintessence of all ancient Semitic history, of all previous revelations and prophecies; that it is the thesis of transcendence, of a reality which Arab consciousness recognized as alone ultimate and truly transcendent. Arabia stood poised, now that Islam revealed to it its identity and destiny as the message-carrier of divine transcendence to the world.

Arabness, or this consciousness of transcendence mirrored in the Arabic language and poetry, had already penetrated to some degree the Fertile Crescent, its northern land bridge with Asia and Africa, before Islam. Indeed, the Fertile Crescent was Arabized in this sense by repeated migrations going back to Akkad in 3,000 BC or earlier. The later influences of the invading Philistines and "men of the mountains," of Hittites, Egyptians, Greeks and Persians, helped to confuse and veil, but not to extirpate or fundamentally alter, that consciousness. Arab transcendentalist consciousness resisted the onslaught of Egyptianization, Persianization and Hellenization. They did so heroically in all that has come to us from the Pre-Islamic Fertile Crescent, whether it be language, works of art, law-codes, or literature. Scarred, their consciousness of transcendence certainly was, be they Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian; but it was undaunted.

No sooner had Islam presented itself to them than they shed the confusion and dilution of ethnocentric Rabbinic Judaism, of trinitarian immanentist Christianity, of caste non-egalitarianism, and dualistic naturalism of Manichaean Zoroastrianism. They readily acknowledged Islam as their own, not as something foreign but as something they had always held but were somewhat unable to express so clearly as the Qur'an had done.

Within a generation, the ranks of Islam swelled to include the majorities of people in the temperate belt from the Atlantic to India. Thereafter, the conquests had come to a halt and the millions began the task of transforming the new vision of divine transcendence into visible civilization. The next four centuries saw the blossoming of Islamic culture and civilization throughout the lands. Every ethnic entity contributed its best, but under the transforming principles of Islam. Diversity there certainly were; but the overall unity was unmistakable.

First to develop were the sciences of language and *belles lettres*, the media of revelation. Determined by Islam, consciousness now demanded to be informed how Arabic language and letters acted as vehicles of transcendence. This was at the same time necessary for understanding the Qur'an, the word of God, by people who had not mastered the Arabic language as well as its people of the desert. Grammars, lexicographic and etymological dictionaries, syntactical analyses of all sorts, literary criticism and analysis of the Qur'an, of every poem, common saying or piece of oratory carried by memory, were written by the thousands, off for the first time in the history of human culture and learning.

The religious vision of Islam was complete in the revelation, the Qur'an. That is why Islam does not have a religious history, that is a history of its formation as a religion. Such "history" is limited to the biography of the Prophet, the last 22 or so years of his life during which the revelation of the Qur'an was completed. Caught by this vision of Islam, the Muslims plunged themselves into implementation and concretization, into translating the normative principles of Islam into prescriptive directions for human conduct, in developing and establishing a viable methodology for such translation. It is here on this front that Islamic genius poured itself forth. In the realms of personal status, procedure, torts and contracts, international relations, crime and punishment, the Shari'ah, or Islamic law, remains to this day absolutely without parallel, and its bases in juristic thought unmatched.

Being avidly anxious to discover the will of God in nature, the Muslims quickly learned and assimilated the legacy of antiquity and moved far beyond it. Al-Bayrūnī measured the earth's perimeter within inches of the most exact measurements of our day; Ibn Sīnā's *Canon of*

*Medicine* and al-Rāzī's *Ad Almansorem* and *On Small Pox and Measles* remained the standard textbooks of the medical profession until the eighteenth century; Ibn al-Bayṭār's pharmacopia, *Simplicia*, was being printed in the main European languages as late as 1866. Arabic numerals moved arithmetic, and *al-Jabr* (Algebra) moved formal mathematics, to new realms of advance and achievement.

Everywhere the Qur'an was chanted in its original Arabic. Everywhere, its verses decorated every room and house and punctuated every conversation and every treatise. Everywhere, mosques, *madrasahs* (schools) and other public buildings were erected realizing the Arabesque in ever new forms, in marble, stucco, brick or paint. Everywhere, the aural Arabesque of the call of the *Mu'adhhdhin* on the minarets to the faithful to rise for the ritual prayers punctuated the day of millions. During the month of Ramadan (fasting) the whole tempo of life changed following the timing and practices of the fast. When either of the two 'Ids came, only the largest open field of the district could hold the multitudes who came in their best and new clothing to kneel and prostrate themselves together in worship of the one transcendent God, in the beautiful Arabic verses of the Qur'an.

Cities sprang under the influence of Islam which were the model of town planning, utility, cleanliness and integration. Colleges and schools, public libraries, public baths, recreation areas and gardens, running water and draining systems, to make even our modern cities poor, if not hopeless, comparisons. And all this in the 9th and 10th centuries when Europe's cities, the heirs of classical antiquity could hardly boast of one paved street, or of one public night light other than the moon.

In the eleventh century, Muslim spirituality began to take a different turn. Prodded by an over enthusiastic love of God as expressed in Arabic poetry by the famous mystical poetess Rābī'ah al-Adawīyyah, converts from Gnostic Christianity and Judaism, from Upanishadic Hindu mysticism and Buddhism, began to interpret Islam in mystical terms, shifting its emphasis from the actual where the divine will is to be concretized to the spiritual as such. The bridge which connected Islam to history, to space and time, and kept the Muslim's feet on the ground, snapped. Psychic and introspective analysis took the place of

legal and juristic study. Alchemy, astrology and numerology slowly replaced chemistry, astronomy and mathematics. Even the social health of the Islamic family gave way to the withdrawing, resigning surrender of the mystical brotherhood. Engagement in the affairs of society and state so expressive of the Muslim's consciousness of vicegerency was slowly abandoned for contemplative bliss and mystical experience of the individualist and personalist. The state was left to whosoever desired to grab it, and the caliphs became the puppets of powerful but fissiparous army generals. When the gathering storm arrived in the Mongol (Tatar) invasion of Genghis Khan, the Muslim World fell like a ripe plum. One after another, its jewel cities were put to the torch, and its people to death or devastation.

The fire that followed spread in many directions, China, India, Russia and South West Asia. In the latter the tide was arrested at 'Ayn Jālūd in Palestine where Ibn Taymiyyah, the first and greatest Muslim reformer, managed to check the Mongol advance with an Egyptian army. In vain did he try many times earlier to awaken the Muslims to this peril. The forces of mysticism always defeated him and connived with the authorities against him. Despite his military success at 'Ayn Jālūd, Ibn Taymiyyah fell again to the intrigues of the Sufis (mystics) and died in jail in Damascus.

Ibn Taymiyyah's hard work and death, however, were not in vain. He produced a whole library, over 300 works, in which he diagnosed the Muslim disease on every front of life. The major villain was of course mysticism which succeeded in reorienting the Muslim away from history, from the world, from reason and common sense, and delivered him to introspective meditation. Sufism dulled his realism, drew him away from society, from his business, even from his family. Instead of his pursuit of the will of God as law, Sufism taught the Muslim to run after the impossible dream of union with God in gnosis or "mystical experience."

Ibn Taymiyyah's words were not heeded. And yet, the miracle happened. The Tatar hordes which brought the holocaust were Shamanists. In a generation or two, they were all converted to Islam, the religion and culture of the very peoples they vanquished. The conquerors settled *en masse* in Asia minor and, a generation later, they were

ready to march again, this time under the banner of Islam. Still vibrant with the martial spirit with which they came from central Asia, the new converts to Islam now organized under the leadership of the house of 'Uthman (hence, the name "Ottoman"), pressed ever forward in the direction of Europe. The Byzantine and Russian Empires crumbled at their advance. Vienna was besieged by them until the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The Black and Caspian seas became Muslim lakes. Between Vienna and Constantinople (renamed Islampul, later corrupted to Istanbul) they planted many a Muslim community, many a Muslim city, and erected a new style of Islamic architecture on the foundations of the Byzantine.

It was only in the eighteenth century that their empire, the Ottoman Empire, began to decay from within for identically the same reasons which brought the downfall of the earlier Arab ('Abbāsī) Empire. It was also in the eighteenth century that the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah revived, again mysteriously, in the very heart of Arabia, as yet untouched either by Ottoman decay or the West's ascendancy. The reform movement was led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Sufism was its *bete noire* against which it hurled its fury. On the positive side, the movement called itself "salafiyyah," that is, traditional. It had no object other than reestablishing the original vision of the fathers, before that vision was affected by Mysticism. Simultaneously or shortly afterwards, similar movements swept over the whole Muslim World. Western colonialism was then launched and the Muslim World fell again under alien dominion, was mercilessly fragmented and exploited, parts of it were settled by alien colonizers and their populations dispersed or were to be systematically destroyed.

Today colonialism is at an end; but not its vestiges, and influences. However, the Muslim peoples of the world are racing the clock to catch up with the rest of the world in economic and military power as well as in political awareness, unity and coordination. Their Islam remains the strongest ideology they ever knew, ready to move them again, and the world with them, if they but open their minds to its wisdom and their hearts to its appeal.