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Rite, spirit and art in Islam

Text by Dr. Feras Q. Hamza

In considering ‘the artistic’ in an Islamic context, the observer must bear two things in mind. First, the geographical broadness within which that cultural singularity ‘Islam’ endured meant that its artistic refractions were as diverse as the peoples who participated in its venture. Were it not for its unfamiliarity, a better way of referring to artistic production in this context would be to call it ‘Islamicate’, a term coined by the late historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson, to denote all artistic creation conceived and produced in lands where Islam was culturally dominant, but not necessarily by Muslims alone. Whatever term we use, though, that diversity was more often than not aggregated by a unifying aesthetic sensibility, an impulse to represent and to celebrate the very source of artistic inspiration. At their birth, the earliest forms of Islamic artistic production, calligraphy and architecture, employed simplicity to evoke sublimity, attempting in a kind of hierophantic manner to interpret the esoteric that sat at the other end of, and gave ultimate meaning and substance to, human reality. Such articulations should also be read as explorations of possible ‘pathways’ back to divine origins, a quest to understand the interface between the human and the divine.

The second thing to be borne in mind is the, unfortunately, ever lingering misconception of the relationship between Islam and the artistic, on the one hand, and the relationship between the religious law (*shari‘a*) and spirituality, on the other. In neither case is the relationship one of polarity, but of intrinsic harmony, these dualities being binaries of complementarity and not of contrariety. In its search for ‘truth’, art looks as much to the sacred as it does to the profane, engaging with the physical as it seeks to tap into the metaphysical, so much so that in great works of art the categories are delicately and subtly collapsed. It is not in frivolity that in the vernacular of artistic appreciation, a person may be heard to deem such and such a work as ‘divine’, even as the work itself is clearly ‘mundane’ in its genesis and the observer intends no pious remark.

Analogously, in devotional terms, Islamic religiosity marries the legal-ritual with the spiritual, demanding that religious practice entail body and spirit, rite and reflection.

The earliest individual and communal rite in Islam, the ritual prayer (*salat*) demonstrates precisely this symbiotic relationship between spirituality and embodiment. Punctuated as it is with acts of submission (*islam*) in the form of genuflections and prostrations, the ritual prayer epitomises the orientation of the soul to its source of being: the body moves to orient the soul. Indeed, the very fact that—according to Muslim tradition—the ritual prayer was ordained during the Prophet’s miraculous ascension (*mi‘raj*) through the heavens meant that these physical

movements were invested with spiritual moment from the outset, serving as the symbolic yet practical means by which every Muslim worshipper forever thereafter could seek to reorient their body-soul towards its spiritual origins. The same spiritual consciousness can be said to accompany all of the other central Muslim devotions (the fast, the alms and the pilgrimage), as has been succinctly captured by Michael Sells in his anthology, *Early Islamic Mysticism*.

All of this spiritual content was grounded first and foremost in the Qur'an: a text, which, while stipulating a set of religious precepts (*shari'a*) to define the communal rhythm of social life, is in fact mostly concerned with instilling in its reader consciousness of a higher reality (*haqiqa*). It would have been inconceivable that this sacred text should have inspired so much intellectual, mystical and even artistic creativity had it merely been a legalistic text. A principal reason that the Qur'an continues to hold the attention of its devotees and to inspire them intellectually, spiritually, and artistically is the effect that it achieves through an extraordinary phonetic and syntactical structure, employing unique rhetorical devices, cadence and metaphor, amongst other things, to produce enduring sounds and images that have resonated across time and geographies. It is these evocations of the sacred text that have nourished individual reflection, pious remembrance, and spiritual contemplation; it is these very configurations of sound and meaning that continue to constitute the immense auditory impact of Qur'anic recitation. The text is replete with examples of such moments, but we limit ourselves to one. A striking example comes in a well-known passage called 'the light verse' (Qur'an 24:35):

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as though it were a glittering star lit from a blessed tree, an olive (tree) that is neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if no fire touched it; light upon light; God guides to His light whom He will and God strikes similitudes for humankind, and God has knowledge of everything (author's translation)

Muslims, already from the time of the Prophet, came to realise that the Qur'an was a multi-layered and multi-dimensional text, and that within and beneath the letter of the text subsisted deeper truths and higher realities, which could be experienced through repeated recitation, reflection, and interiorisation. Such a realisation is recorded for us in sundry reports from prominent companions and relatives of the Prophet, such as Umar b. al-Khattab, Ali b. Abi Talib, Ibn Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud. In one version, to Ibn Mas'ud, every one of the seven letters (*ahruf*) of the Qur'an is said to have 'an exterior' (*zahr*) and an 'interior' (*batn*), a 'limit' (*hadd*) and a 'look-out point' (*muttala'*) (al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*). In yet another report, attributed to Ali b. Abi Talib, 'Every verse of the Qur'an has four kinds of meanings, an outward sense (*zahir*), an inner sense (*batin*), a limit (*hadd*) and a look-out point (*muttala'*) (al-Sulami, *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*). And while the later scholastic tradition offered varying interpretations of what these reports indicated, it was clear that there were levels to the sacred text that spoke to the level of its addressee. Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), whom Sufi tradition credits with some of the earliest mystical teachings, is reported to have said: 'The Book of God has four things: clear expression (*ibara*), allusion (*ishara*), subtleties (*lata'if*) and realities (*haqa'iq*). The clear expression is for the common man ('*awamm*), the allusion is for the elite (*khawass*), the subtleties for the friends [of God] (*awliya'*), and the realities are for the prophets (*anbiya'*)' (al-Sulami, *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*).

So powerful was this aspect of the Qur'an that spiritual praxis was enshrined as a fundamental and vital accompaniment to the ritual observances. The true consummation of the religious life for practitioners was to seek greater spiritual awareness; and this could only be done by the disciplining of the soul through the body. That is why we see that in the historical record the earliest Muslims, by the example of the Prophet, were engaging in all manner of supererogatory acts of worship. Spiritual praxis would ultimately be formalised and institutionalised, in what became known as Sufism. Indeed, spirituality became a modality of Islamic life. This spiritual, or mystical tradition in Islam was as vital as its intellectual and scholastic ones, indeed more often than not accompanying the latter across history: almost without exception the major figures of Islamic scholasticism were all in one way or another affiliated with spiritual paths (*tariqa*). The harmonisation of the legal-ritual and the spiritual is epitomised in the life and work of a renowned 12th century Muslim theologian by the name of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Al-Ghazali composed a celebrated treatise entitled *Mishkat al-Anwar (Niche of Lights)*, a mystical treatise that drew its inspiration from the very same Qur'anic light verse alluded to earlier. But al-Ghazali was also the author of a seminal work entitled *Ihya' ulum al-din (Revivifying Religious Knowledge)*, a practical guide to the believer that explained the necessity of harmonising religious observances with an ethical philosophy and a spiritual psychology. Both of these works by al-Ghazali were inspired, underpinned and driven by Qur'anic verses and themes. And so as the centrepiece of Islamic devotion, the Qur'an has always provided the spiritual impulse in and the substance of Muslim piety: its meanings are continuously 'transferred' through the various ways in which it has been, and continues to be, 'embodied' in rituals, recitational performances and the daily sacred referents of every Muslim devotee.

It is perhaps apt that in this brief historical note we should have mentioned 'light', fundamental as it is to the production of colour and the perception of physical reality. In effect what the Qur'an does in this similitude of divine light is to take a familiar phenomenon and use it to evoke an unfamiliar image in order to communicate a higher truth. In alluding to the reality of the higher truths, the Qur'an employs the very same language that it employs to express explicitly clearer images. Though qualitatively distinct, art aspires to the same communicative process: an artist can use the very same tools to produce extremely different expressions of an idea, one tangible and familiar, another abstract and unfamiliar, the former immediately perceptible, the latter requiring sustained contemplation. And yet the very object of discovery in both cases, the totality of that 'truth' remains ineffable; the ineffable cannot, ipso facto, be encompassed by 'expression' but can only be *intimated*. The spirit of artistic endeavour strives for this ineffable and seeks ways to translate it, to carry intimations of it into this human realm. And just as the cosmic spirit (*ruh*), a central Qur'anic theme, acts as the mediator between the divine and the human, the eternal and the temporal, the ineffable and the word, bridging two contiguous, perhaps overlapping spheres of existence, so the creative spirit that drives all art and artistic composition must necessarily act as such a 'pathway' (*tareeq*). We might usefully recall at this conclusion that in the theosophy of Sufism, imagination was a faculty by which humans could obtain knowledge, just as they could obtain knowledge from prophetic revelation and rational thought. The world of 'images' (*'alam al-mithal*), or the 'imaginal world', constituted an intermediate realm between the world of pure spirit and the world of pure bodies. Imagination drives art and is necessary to interpret it: it is what opens up that *tareeq*.