Reflections of Unity: The Social, Political, and Cosmological Dimensions of Mosque Architecture in Early Islam and Persia

BY

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(Under the Direction of Kenneth L. Honerkamp)

The multi-faced dimensions of Islamic architecture have been contested by numerous scholars from a variety of backgrounds, namely, Historians of Art, Architecture, Religion, and Politics. In a manner similar to the tradition of the "Blind Men and the Elephant", these scholars have conducted their studies within their periphery of their respective fields, dividing the scholastic approach to Islamic art and architecture severely. Weaving these different interpretations together provides a contextual fabric with which to view Islamic architecture in political, social, as well as esoteric dimensions.

The mosque architecture of early Islam reflects the modest approach of the Prophet to Islam in contrast to the lavish décor of the later mosque architecture of Persia. Mosque architecture has the ability to express not only historical and social implications of the Islamic community, and when understood as a symbolic language, reflects certain ideas of Islamic cosmology.

INDEX WORDS: Cosmology, Mosque Architecture, Persian Mosque, Early Islamic Mosques

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# INTRODUCTION

The polymorphic nature of the definition and interpretation of Islamic architecture can be attributed to four main groups of scholars in the field: Historians, Orientalists, Aestheticians, and the Traditionalist Scholars. My research on the significance of mosque architecture has tried to find a middle ground by weaving together these threads into a context that illuminates varying degrees of historical, political, social, and cosmological significance of mosque architecture.

The term, Islamic Architecture, implies a spectrum of architectural forms that span from the seventh century of the Common Era up to the present, found in all regions of the Islamic world. The field is vast, and it is for this reason that specificity and focus are necessary to achieve an accurate representation. This paper, a small contribution to the field, will focus on mosque architecture in the early Islamic period and in Persia from the time of the Arab Conquest to the period of the Safavid Dynasty.

This inquiry will examine the significance of the mosque in the early Islamic communities at Mecca, Quba, and Medina, and include selected mosques in Persia from after the death of the Prophet Muhammad into the time of Safavid rule. Certain mosques have been chosen over others because of my individual experience of them while traveling throughout Iran. The content of this paper views the significance of the mosque in the light of a socio-historical context, as well as considering the possible

esoteric nature of architectural expression. Following the example of Samer Akkach[1] in his work, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*, the objective of this paper is to approach cosmological doctrines[2] with contemplation of an architectural nature in mind. In this manner, the social and historical significance of the mosque is illustrated but also considered in the context of a more extensive dimension of inner cosmological symbolism.

My approach to the subject at hand will be in the following manner; the first chapter will review recent scholarship in the field, followed by a second chapter which will provide a brief overview of metaphysical order in Islamic thought and lead into the third chapter, which will attempt to summarize Islamic cosmology. The fourth chapter will consider the mosque in early Islam, followed by the fifth chapter that will highlight mosque architecture in Persia after the time of the Arab conquest.

[1] Samer Akkach is a scholar of the theory and history of architecture and lectures at the University of Adelaide in Australia. Some of his publications include: *Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment (Makers of the Muslim World)* (OneWorld Publications, 2007); *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005).

[2] The focus of this paper will not be an exegesis of cosmological doctrines and their relevance to architectural nature, but rather an examination of architectural nature and its relevance to cosmological doctrines.

# CHAPTER ONE

## RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarly discourse dealing with the significance and meaning of Islamic architecture has given rise to multiple interpretations of what exactly constitutes Islamic architecture. Does the architectural form of the mosque have cosmological significance? Is there esoteric meaning in spatial ordering? Do the geometric patterns in the tiling reflect the unity and multiplicity of God? Is there something inherently Islamic about certain modes of architecture?

Positions taken by historians of art, architecture, and archaeology tend to stand in stark contrast to positions upheld by scholars of the Traditionalist School,[3] whose interpretations, in turn, differ greatly from those of Aestheticians and Orientalists. In contrast to other religions, Islam has not produced a body of literary evidence directly concerned with the nature of architecture and its possible role as an expression of the faith, which leaves much to be deciphered from the buildings themselves. The paucity of such textual documentation has left scholarly opinions within the field of Islamic art and architecture divided.

[3] The Traditionalist School consisted mainly of 20th century authors that included, but was not limited to, Rene Guenon; Fritjof Schoun; Titus Burckhardt; Seyyed H. Nasr; and Martin Lings. The school sought esoteric wisdom, or *philosophia perennis*, and investigated topics such as metaphysics, cosmology, art, and architecture amongst other subjects.

Archaeological and Islamic art historians such as K.A.C. Creswell,[4] Arthur Upham Pope,[5] Richard Ettinghausen,[6] Oleg Grabar,[7] and Robert Hillenbrand,[8] tend to interpret these architectural forms in a technical manner, and provide thorough comparative analyses of architectural styles within a chronologically historical context. In the light of a more socio-political sphere, Yasser Tabbaa presents some plausible arguments concerning the ties between political influence and agenda in his work, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival,*[9] which discusses ulterior motives for the styles of calligraphy, art, and architecture due to the patronage of these arts during certain periods.

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[4] Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell (1889-1974), a British archaeological historian who wrote extensively on Islamic architecture. Some his more well-known works include: *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); *Early Muslim Architecture* (New York: Harper Art Books, 1979); *A Bibliography of the Arts, Architecture, and Crafts of Islam* (Cairo: American University Press, 1973); *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958).

[5] Arthur Upham Pope (1881-1969), an American archaeologist and art historian, who taught at Amherst College and the University of California and established the Institute of Persian Art and Architecture at New York City in 1925. Pope wrote volumes on Persian art and architecture, perhaps most famously, *Persian Architecture: A Triumph of Form and Color* (New York: G. Braziller, 1965); *Masterpieces of Persian Art* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970); *Introducing Persian Architecture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); *An Introduction to Persian Art since the Seventh Century A.D.* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972).

[6] Richard Ettinghausen (1906-1979), a German Islamic art historian worked with Arthur Upham Pope at the Institute of Persian Art and Architecture in New York, Ettinghausen has over 240 publications but his main works include, *Islamic Art and Archaeology: Collected Papers* Ed. Myriam Rosen-Avalon. (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1984) and *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002) which was published posthumously and compiled by Oleg Grabar and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina.

[7] Oleg Grabar (1929 -) is an art historian whose books include, but are certainly not limited to *Early Islamic Art: 650-*1110 (Ashgate Publications, 2005); *Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture* (New York: Brill, 1987) and *The Great Mosque of Isfahan* (New York: New York University Press, 1990)

[8] Robert Hillenbrand is an Islamic art historian who currently teaches at the University of Edinburgh. His works include *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998); *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995) and over 120 articles on the subject of Islamic art and architecture.

[9] *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival* (London: University of Washington Press, 2001.)

The empirical authenticity of historical fact is not the only element of concern in the field of Islamic art and architecture. Scholars such as Valerie Gonzalez,[10] an Islamic architectural historian and aesthetician, acknowledge another aspect of this textual dearth in the realm that encompasses Islamic aesthetic theory. Gonzalez argues in *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*[11] that until the scholarship of José Miguel Puerta Vílchez in *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe, al-Andalus y la estética árabe clásica(History of the Arabic Aesthetic Thought, Andalus and the Classical Arabic Aesthetics),*[12] it was generally accepted that Islamic aesthetic theory did not exist due to a lack of literary evidence. Gonzalez traces the roots of Islamic aesthetics back to Ibn Sina,[13] Ibn Rushd,[14] and Al-Ghazali.[15]

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[10] Valerie Gonzalez was formerly a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and she is currently a Research Associate at l'Ecole d'Architecture de Marselle–Luminy where she lectures on the history of architecture and Islamic town planning.

[11] *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: IB Tauris Publishers, 2001.)

[12] *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe, al-Andalus y la estética árabe clásica* (Madrid, 1997.)

[13] Ibn Sina (980-1037) born in was is now the far south of Russia, in a village near Bukhara, is one of the great intellectuals of Islamic thought. Known in the West as Avicenna, his contributions to medicine, philosophy, natural science, Euclidian geometry, and Muslim jurisprudence are monumental. One of his most famous works being *the Qanon*.

[14] Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) born in Cordoba, Spain and known to the West as Averroes, an Andalusian-Arab philosopher, physician, and polymath who contributed to subjects ranging from philosophy, theology, astronomy, geography, mathematics, medicine, physics, psychology and science. He wrote many commentaries on the works of Aristotle and Plato. His most famous texts being: *Tahafut al-tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence),* where he defended Aristotle against Al-Ghazali's, *The Incoherence of Philosophers;* the *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid wa Nihāyat al-Muqtasid* a commentary on Maliki law and doctrine; and *Kulliyat (Generalities)*, a medical encyclopedia.

[15] Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) born in Tus, Persia and known in the West as Algazel. An influential Sufi scholar who wrote over seventy books on the subjects of theology, philosophy, psychology, and mysticism. His most famous work remains to be the *The Incoherence of Philosophers.*

The scarcity of textual documents, however, has not dampened the enthusiasm of Traditionalist scholars such as Titus Burckhardt,[16] Frithjof Schuon,[17] Rene Guenon,[18] Martin Lings,[19] Seyyed Hossein Nasr,[20] and Henry Corbin,[21] who view Islamic

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[16] Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) a German-Swiss connoisseur of Islamic art and architecture and member of the Traditionalist School, who wrote extensively on the idea of a universal or eternal truth, as seen in metaphysics, cosmology, architecture and art. Some works include: *Sacred Art in East and West: Principles and Methods* (London: Perennial Books, 1967); *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (World of Islam Festival Publishing Co, 1976); *The Essential Titus Burckhardt* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc, 2003).

[17] Frithjof Schoun (1907-1998) was a German-Swiss philosopher and a member of the Traditionalist School who wrote extensively on philosophia perennis, the idea of a universal set of principles common to all people and cultures. Schuon published works such as *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Publications, 1998); *Transcendent Unity of Religions* (California: Quest Publications, 1987); *Logic and Transcendence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

[18] Rene Guenon (1886-1951), a French thinker of the Traditionalist School who contributed significantly to the field of metaphysics and the research of traditional knowledge and arts. Some published works include: *Fundamental Symbols: the Universal Language of Sacred Science.* (Northampton: Alden Press, 1995); *The Symbolism of the Cross* (England: Lucan Ltd, 1957.)

[19] Martin Lings (1909-2005), a British scholar of the Traditionalist School and disciple of Frithjof Schuon. Two of his most famous works include *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2006) and *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and* Illumination (World of Islam Festival Publishing Co, 1976.)

[20] Seyyed. H. Nasr (1933 –) is a Persian scholar of the Traditionalist School and currently University Professor of the Islamic Studies Department at George Washington University. Nast has written a numerous volumes dealing with philosophy, literature, poetry, music, art, science, metaphysics and cosmology including: *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983); *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1987); *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.)

[21] Henry Corbin (1903-1978), a French philosopher whose works include: *Temple and Contemplation* (London: KPI Limited, 1986); *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (Routledge, 1983). *Swendenbourg and Esoteric Islam*. Trans. Leonard Fox (France: Swedenbourg Publications, 1995.)

[22] Oliver Leaman is a scholar of Judaic and Islamic studies and teaches philosophy at the University of Kentucky. Some of his publications include: *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, (Polity Press, 1999); *An introduction to medieval Islamic philosophy*, (England: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *Evil and suffering in Jewish philosophy*, (England: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. S. H. Nasr & O. Leaman, (Routledge, 1999.)

architecture as an esoteric expression of an inner dimension of Islam, and tend to frame their understanding with mystical interpretations of a Sufi nature. Their hermeneutical evidence draws on various Sufi doctrines of cosmology and entails an intuitive understanding of the nature of Islam based on traditional sources. It is positions such as these Oliver Leaman[22] criticizes and challenges in his book, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction,*[23] and conclusively dismisses as generally misleading regarding both the nature of Islam and artistic expression.

It is the view of some scholars such as Oliver Leaman that Islamic art and architecture is adequately appreciated through the value of its aesthetic pleasure without the attachment of underlying systems of symbolism. Other scholars view Islamic decoration and form as speaking for itself. Gülru Neçipoglu[24] argues in her work, *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture,* that the

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[23]*Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.)

[24] Gülru Necipoglu, is a Turkish scholar and Professor of Islamic art and architectural history at Harvard University. Some of her most recent publications include: *History and Ideology : Architectural Heritage of the "Lands of Rum"*(Brill, 2007); *The Age Of Sinan : Architectural Culture In The Ottoman Empire* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005); *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power : The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (London: MIT Press, 1999); *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (England: Oxford University Press, 1996.)

[25] Keith Critchlow is a scholar of sacred architecture and Professor Emeritus at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts and a former professor of Islamic Art at the Royal College of Art in England. Some other publications include: *Time Stands Still: New Light on Megalithic Science* (Gordan Fraser, 1979); *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1999.)

geometric patterns that often drape architectural forms are not irrelevant, but rather compose a "sign system" reflecting religious and ideological notions of an Islamic nature as well as a sense of mathematical advancement. This argument is strengthened by Keith Crithclow[25] in *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* and Peter Lu in his article, "Decagonal and Quasi-crystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture," [26] which proposed that medieval[27] tile work of Islamic mosques, mausoleums, and shrine complexes from the sixteenth century produced quasi-crystalline patterns that were unknown in the West until the "Penrose Tilings" [28] in 1973.

The social and political significance of mosque architecture has been contested among a number of scholars and historians. The element that remains to be captured is the possible esoteric dimension of mosque architecture. Architecture when perceived in a mystical sense, has the ability to express esoteric meaning in its dimension. The "traditional" mindset was instinctively attuned to the acknowledgement and awareness

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[26] Peter J. Lu and Paul J. Steinhardt. "Decagonal and Quasi-crystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Science, 315* (2007): 1106-1110.

[27] The term "medieval" is a euro-centric term that is commonly associated with the Middle Ages that occurred in Europe. It is necessary to note that the medieval period of Islamic world is usually understood to have begun in 656 C.E. with the Umayyad Caliphs of Damascus coming to power and extending into the 18th century. It should also be noted that while the European medieval period experienced a dark age, the opposite is true of the Islamic world during this time.

[28] Penrose Tilings were named after Robert Penrose, an English mathematical physicist who studied periodic sets of prototiles which produce a non-periodic tiling pattern that possesses five-fold rotational symmetry as well as mirror symmetry.

of a divine entity and their ideas of science involved the notion of the divine hand in all existent things:

> Throughout history, traditional civilizations have thought of the tent, house, tomb, or sanctuary as a symbol of the universe. The idea of the "cosmic house" evolved from associating the domelike ceilings of these structures with the heavens.[29]

Scholars Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bahktiar write:

> In Iran, the Achaemenid kings, who introduced into the classical world the conception of a divine and universal ruler, often held their ceremonies in vast cosmic tents which, according to Hesychius, were called "heavens." The pre-Islamic Arabs were known to have used the *gobba*, which was to serve as the tent form that the Prophet and his followers carried into battle. The Mongol tent-dwellers of central Asia brought this tradition to its culmination with the splendid dome-shaped tents of the Khans, each of which was fabled to hold more than one thousand people.[30]

The element of Sufi mysticism in Islamic thought produced cosmological theories and contemplation of nature and existence. It is possible that accepted ideologies of a reigning dynasty influenced the artistic expression of that period, naturally certain aesthetic qualities and ideals would be encouraged while others discouraged as to promote a sense of unity within the regime.

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[29] Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar. *Sense of Unity: Sufism in Persian Architecture*. (London: Abjad Book Designers & Builders, 2000), 74.

[30] Ibid, 74.

## CHAPTER TWO

## AN OVERVIEW OF METAPHYSICAL ORDER IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

The traditional science of the Islamic community, based on the reception and revelation of the Qur'an, conceived of a visible material world (*'ālam as-shahāda*), as well as an unseen world (*'ālm al-ghayb*). This dichotomy in Islam represents the ontological difference between the Creator and the created as expressed in terms of *tanzih* and *tashbih. Tanzih* is the transcendence of God as Creator, and his incomparability with his creatures; while *tashbih* is the similarity of God with his creatures and his immanence within all creation.[31] A central consequence of the affirmation that "There is no god but God," is that only God is "real," and that through God "reality" manifests in a number of degrees that designate a nearness or distance from God. This cosmological approach to the ontology of being has been overshadowed in recent times by modern theories that have a tendency to omit any aspect of attribution of the structural order of the cosmos as designed by God. From the perspective of Islamic cosmology, the relationship of *tanzih* and *tashbih* represent two complementary aspects of Divine Unity, and demonstrate that all opposites as such are contained within the manifest projection of that Unity. This is a recurrent theme seen in all aspects of existence and creation.

[31] William C. Chittick & Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul : Paragon House: 1994), 345.

The recognition of God as the origin of all creatures and being is an immovable truth in Islamic thought. Acknowledging that, "There is no god but God" accordingly necessitates that it is through God that all things come into being and to God all things return. The principle Unity projects manifestation that is captured in the multiplicity of form and is always reducible to that Unity. This idea is often compared to the rays of the Sun, which, although they are not the Sun itself, are without doubt spawned from that very same Sun. Understanding this multiplicity as a symbolic medium of Unity helps to illuminate the multiple states of being sandwiched between the divine and human realms. Such awareness then encourages the emergence of prominent patterns that are bound to these states of being and reveal what may described as a "structural resonance" inherent in all levels of existence, manifest or non-manifest.[32] Rene Guenon asserts that there is a natural sense of distrust towards the use of symbolism as a language because we have become so inclined to read things as they appear in the physical.[33] The notion of symbolism as representing the unseen has become an alien concept to the modern mind in the same manner that the idea of God as inherent and represented in all things has also become passé idealism.

[32] "Symbolism", can be understood to provide the main conceptual tools that enable one's mind to journey between the divine and human domains and to maneuver through the multiple states of being they involve" (Akkach, xxi).

[33] Rene Guenon, *Fundamental Symbols: the Universal Language of Sacred Science* (Northampton: Alden Press: 1995), 6: "Why is there so much more or less avowed hostility towards symbolism? Because it is a mode of expression that has become entirely foreign to the modern mentality, and because man is naturally prone to distrust what he does not understand."

Before any Islamic cosmological doctrine can be fully appreciated, it must first be accepted that symbolism is the cornerstone in the foundation of reality as constructed by the Divine:

> That it is in perfect conformity with the laws of nature--and that these laws are an exteriorization of the divine Will--which affirms that symbolism is of 'non-human' origin.[34]

Only then can the nature and order of things be explored to a degree that investigates interior dimensions of thought. The aim is not to change your reality, rather to change your perception of reality, "Symbolic forms, which are sensible aspects of the metaphysical reality of things, exist whether or not man is aware of them."[35]

One of the fundamental "revealed" symbols in the Islamic tradition is the word itself. From the word come sounds, letters, and corresponding letters which are assumed to be the language of the intellect.[36] The Qur'an invokes the language of symbolism, as its verses are called, *ayāt,* or signs, preordained through the Divine, and demonstrate our proximity to the Divine through our "human situation." Symbolism reflects the correspondence between the two domains of reality, "the inferior reflecting the superior, the visible materializing the invisible, the physical representing the spiritual."[37] This language then becomes employed as a conceptual tool for understanding the nature of this reality. Islamic architecture, especially noticeable in

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[34] Guenon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 14.
[35] Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 5.
[36] Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 6.
[37] Samer Akkach. *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas.* (Albany: SUNY Press: 2005), 11.

the construction of the mosque and shrine complex, is an earthly representation of the structure of the cosmos and is an extension of this symbolic language as it mirrors the celestial hierarchy in the same manner as a pool reflects the sky, "God transcends human deficiencies and limitations and it is this transcendence that makes the language of symbolism a necessity."[38]

This understanding of our human situation in relation to that of the Divine encourages symbolic language to act as an expression of our acknowledgement of the Divine in the world. It is not merely a matter of the sacred in relation to the profane; this distinction is not as prominent in the Islamic faith as in other religions. There is rather, a general understanding of the Divine Presence in all aspects of the world, without becoming pantheistic in nature:

> By refusing to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, by integrating religion into all facets of life and life itself into the rhythms of rites and patterns of values determined by religion, Islam creates a wholeness which is reflected in its architecture.[39]

The idea of a unity that manifests itself in multiplicity necessarily designates that all of reality is just as sacred as it may appear to be profane. Therefore it may not be so surprising that there are no long treatises on the sacredity of certain sites or architectural forms, as these places are understood to be participating in the sacred with or without human acknowledgement:

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[38] Akkach, 32.
[39] Seyyed H. Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality.* Albany, (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 57.

> There are no sources which describe "sacred sites" but this does not mean the concept doesn't exist, only that there is a unique "spacio-temporal understanding that constitutes the condition of the sacred's *modus operandi*".[40]

Mosques, regardless of regional décor, unify the whole of the Muslim populace by their orientation towards Mecca. Mecca as the spiritual center of Islam provides physical and spiritual direction for the Muslim community. A prophetic tradition describes the Ka'ba as a cosmic axis which penetrates the seven heavens and the seven earths,[41] therefore, emphasis resides not only with the physical centrality of the Ka'ba, but also with the metaphysical extension into Islamic cosmology, and all mosques reflect this principle in their construction. The mosque is a place which contains within it a *qibla*, which in turn serves as a gateway to the center, which ultimately unites the devoted with the Divine and transports their reality into a reflection of the Islamic cosmogony of the universe.

[40] Akkach, 165.
[41] For further discussion see the chapter on "Architectural Order" in Samer Akkach's *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*.

## CHAPTER THREE

## ISLAMIC IDEAS OF COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY

It is not uncommon to find in many different cultures, the Islamic community included the idea of the sky as representing the Divine, in that it is at once limitless and all encompassing as it stretches from horizon to horizon and upwards into the unknown depths of the heavens, "As a link between God and man, the cosmos comprises the formal, the imaginable and communicable vocabularies, which constitute the alphabet of the language of symbolism."[42] Transforming the structure of the cosmos into a symbolic language of the divine and highlighting the similarities between the heavenly bodies and the bodies of humankind, placed the cosmos within the immediacy of everyday life. This reminiscent ubiquity of the Divine Essence is especially evident through Islamic architecture:

> The *zāhir* is the sensible form, which emphasizes the quantitative aspect which is most readily comprehensible, such as the shape of a building…the art form as container (*jism* or *zāhir*) is created through objective laws. The contained (*rūh* or *bātin*) is a symbolic recapitulation of its Archetype.[43]

Rene Guenon in *Symbolism of the Cross* notes that once astronomical phenomena are accepted as symbols, it must be perfectly clear that they are not the thing symbolized;

[42] Akkach, 115.
[43] Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 5.

the consequence of confusing the two results in a reversal of normal relationships between two orders of reality.[44] The idea that symbolism, far from being artificially invented by man, is found in nature herself, the whole of nature amounting to no more than a symbol of the transcendent realities.[45]

Cosmological discourse leads us to reconsider our comprehension of the structural order of the universe within which we subsist, and ultimately of our subsistence within the Unity of our origination. Cosmology is a traditional science of the cosmos and the study of its order, structure, origin, and governing laws. Cosmology investigates the analogous relationship drawn between the body of man as a symbolic microcosm to the macrocosm that is the Universe, a relationship which is also applicable to the soul as an inward dimension and to the universe as an outward dimension.[46] The main source of Islamic cosmological doctrine resides in Qur'anic verse and hadith which serve as the basis for the Islamic worldview. The universal order illustrates the stages of the birth of multiplicity from Unity and the passage of being from non-Being.

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[44] Namely the Divine and human realms, which will come to introduced later as what is before and what proceeds after the Throne, which serves to symbolize the transitory domain between the known physical and the unknown metaphysical, or rather, the seen and the unseen realms.

[45] Rene Guenon, *Symbolism and the Cross,* Trans. Angus Macnab. (Middlesex: Lucac & Co. 1958) 14.

[46] "Cosmology is the science of the cosmos—its origin, structure, components and governing laws, its complex and multifaceted inquiry unfolds at the intersection of philosophy, theology and natural sciences" *Cosmology and Architecture*, 1.

"Cosmology…a psychology which has a cosmic application and psychology which, by analogy, applies to the soul as an inward constitution of man." *Essential Titus*, 16.

"Cosmology is the logic or study of laws and intelligence inherent in this ordered universe"

Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (Vermont: Inner Traditions: 1999) 57.

One of the primary characteristics of the Universe as viewed by, but not limited to, Muslim thinkers is the understanding of the Universe as bound and finite. There is an absolute rejection of the idea of the cosmos as eternal and infinite, as these are attributes belonging to the Divine alone. All is created by God, and therefore all is temporal and limited that is not God: "This approach makes the entirety of the cosmos graspable by means of geometry, numbers, and the alphabet."[47] As the cosmos by definition presupposes an order,[48] in Islamic cosmology the universal structure is thought to be constructed of nine concentric spheres (seven of which are encompassed by spheres of fixed stars and two that are not) and entirely regulated by the number four (as in four seasons, cardinal directions, humors, natures, etc.)[49] The principle domains are three: the metacosm (God), the macrocosm (cosmos), and the microcosm (man). In the centermost sphere, humans dwell on earth, which along with the other six spheres constitutes the divine Footstool (*al-Kursī*), and at the two outermost spheres stands the divine Throne (*al-Arsh*). It is important to remember that although iconography is useful in illustrating cosmic order and structure, not to accept it as being accurate in the literal sense.

Symbolically, the divine Throne symbolizes the threshold between the physical and the metaphysical, or the metacosm and the macrocosm. Here, space and time, as known to man, end. Beyond the Throne, different modalities of space and time prevail, transcendent of our knowledge, much like the eternal divinity that is the preeminent

[47] Akkach, xxii
[48] The etymology of the word is the Greek *kosmos*, which meant world or order.
[49] Akkach, 3

Islamic concept of God. The Throne and the Footstool occupy a transitory domain, which is not considered "spatial" in the sense of our own known world. Space is a condition of physical existence and the seen world (*'alam al-sha hāda*) and this realm extends beyond the physical into the unseen (*al-ghayb*). Placed upon the Footstool are the divine Feet, "one Foot signifying absolute compassion and the other compassion mixed with wrath, together they signify the first polarization of Unity, the model for all binary opposites."[50] These binaries govern the physical world, as any object naturally requires opposition in order to have definition: male to female, good to evil, light to darkness. They are reflective of the facets of the Divine Attributes and are found everywhere in Nature.

Architecture is symbolic in nature as a construction by man that materializes the human perception of our situation in the world as we stand in relation to the Divine. Islamic architecture mirrors the Muslim understanding of universal hierarchy and order. It is especially evident in the mosque and its replication of the cosmic structure of the Throne on earth. The architectural construction of the mosque embodies the idea of the Throne in that, the Throne stands as a spiritual model for every building with a dome, the dome symbolizing the Heaven that encloses the whole of the created order:[51] "In the classical domed mosque in which the center of the dome symbolizes the One, and on a lower level the spirit (*rūh)*, while the octagonal belt, upon which the dome

[50] Akkach, 129
[51] Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, (London: Perennial Books Ltd: 1967) 112.

usually rests, symbolizes the angelic order and the four-sided base of the earth or the material world." [52]

The structure of the mosque transforms into an extension of the primordial nature of the cosmos and of man himself. The emptiness of the mosque, along the ordering of acoustic space, serves as a reminder of our ontological status in relation to God, our dependency upon the Divine that makes us poor (*al-faqīr*). The use of space as a "void" in Islamic architecture is another symbolic representation of the nature of our existence. The emphasis of a void illustrates the principle that nothing other than God is real: "Emptiness becomes synonymous with the manifestation of the sacred." [53] Simplistic themes in Islamic architecture and art instinctively draw the eye not to any particular point, but are meant to throw the mind into a state of inward contemplation.

> There are many forms of mosque architecture, a fact which has been paraded by many scholars of Islamic art as proof that Islamic architecture is simply an outgrowth of historical accidents. But whether in the classical domed mosque in which the centre of the dome symbolizes the One and on a lower level the *rūh,* while the octagonal belt, upon which the dome usually rests, symbolizes the angelic order and the four-sided base the earth or the material world, or in the earliest mosques in which all the elements of the spiritual universe of Islam are not visually symbolized, there is an inner nexus between Islamic architecture and Islamic cosmology and angelology.

[52] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 41.
[53] Ibid, 187.

This is concept can also be applied to the design of an Islamic village or community:

> The spaces and forms of the traditional Muslim town and city are in a sense extensions of the mosque, organically related to it and participating in its sanctifying and unifying character in the same way that the whole city or town participates in the blessedness that emanates from the chanting of the Qur'an and the call to prayer (*al-adhān*) issuing from the precinct of the mosque.[54]

On many different levels the mosques emanates a sense of centralized unity. It is the center of the community around which Muslim society revolves, much like the Earth orbits the Sun. Cosmologically, all mosques focus the mind's eye on Mecca, the spiritual center of Islam. The mosque can be understood to unify the focus of the Islamic community to one point, a point which leads to the Divine which is at the center of all things.

[54] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 38.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE MOSQUE IN EARLY ISLAM

The word mosque derives from the Arabic word, *masjid,* which literally means "place of prostration" or "place of worship." The word *masjid* however predates its common use and association with Islam, and is documented as early as the fifth century B.C.E. in Aramaic.[55] The spiritual center of Islam today, is the sanctuary of the Ka'ba (Cube) of Mecca, which was the destination of pilgrimage and trade long before the time of the Prophet Muhammad. It is here, situated between the two hills, *Safa* and *Marwa*, that according to the Qur'an[56] Abraham brought Hagar and their son Ishmael, and entrusted their well-being to God.

According to Islamic tradition, the Ka'ba was built originally by Adam, and was then rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael. It is a simple cubical structure, whose four corners are towards the four points of the compass, and contains a stone within its eastern corner, known as the "Black Stone," that is said to have been brought from mysterious origins by Adam and passed on to Abraham. According to legend, the stone was once white, but made black with the sins of the sons of Adam.[57]

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[55] The word *Msgd'* is used in the Jewish Elephantine Papyri of the 5th Century B.C.E, see MASDJID article of the Encyclopedia of Islam, or A. Jeffrey's work, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, Leiden: Brill Publications, 2007, in which Jeffery focuses on the etymological examination of languages such as Greek, Persian, Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic and Nabataean.

[56] Qur'an XIV:37.

[57] Martin Lings. *Muhammad: His Life based on the earliest Sources,* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2006) 9.

Before the time of the Prophet, the sanctuary of the Ka'ba was called the *Bayt Allāh* (House of God) or *Al-Bayt al-Haram* (the Sacred House), and is also referred to as such in the Qur'an.[58] Although polytheists frequented the Ka'ba with their individual deities before Islam as part of their annual pilgrimage, the Ka'ba was always the Sacred House of Allah.

It is recorded by Ibn Hisham,[59] an early Muslim historian, that when the Quraysh[60] were rebuilding the Ka'ba they found in a corner a Syriac writing, which they could not read, so a Jew translated it for them and it read:

> I am Allah the Lord of Bakka,[61] I created it on the day that I created heaven and earth and formed the sun and moon, and I surrounded it with seven pious angels. It will stand while the two mountains[62] stand, a blessing to its people with milk and water[63].

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[58] Qur'an V:2, V:97, XIV:37, XXII:26.

[59] Ibn Hisham died in 833 C.E. and is known for editing one of the earliest biographies of the Prophet originally written by Ibn Ishaq. The original work of Ibn Ishaq is now lost to us, and the only recensions remain in the work of Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari, a famous Persian historian who died in 923 C.E.

[60] *Quraysh* is the tribe known as the Keeper of the Keys, they alone had authority over Mecca and held the keys to the inner sanctuary of the Ka'ba, the right to water and feed pilgrims, to preside at assemblies and hand out war banners, see Ibn Hisham's *The Life of Muhammad* pp 52-61 or Ira Lapidus' *The History of Islamic Societies.*

[61] In most traditions, *Bakka* is assumed to mean the same as Mecca. There is scholarly dispute as to whether there is something lost in the translation to English, as it is common for "m" and "b" to become indistinguishable in such a transition. Others think that *Bakka* is the name of the mosque of Mecca, for further discussion see Maulana Muhammad Ali's commentary of the Qur'an, Sura II:125 and III:96.

[62] A reference to the hills of *Marwa* and *Safa* between which lies the well of *Zamzam*.

[63] Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad*, N.P, N.D, 86.

In the Prophet's lifetime, the precinct surrounding the Ka'ba held more than three hundred and sixty idols. [64] Some historians attribute this number to cosmological significance of the celestial spheres or days of the year, and others to the clever business shrewdness of the tribe of the Quraysh, who by inviting all tribes to keep their fetishes and idols near the Ka'ba, encouraged the opportunity for booming commerce. Most likely, there is a bit of truth in both assertions.

The pilgrimage to Mecca was an annual event. Upon arrival, one of the traditional rites the pilgrims would perform was *tawaf*, the act of circumambulating counter-clockwise around the sanctuary seven times. The pilgrims walk the first course, then move a jogging pace for the second, and continue to alternate between these two speeds for the duration of the *tawaf:*

> In addition to its spatial symbolism, the Ka'ba and the rites associated with it have temporal significance. A popular imagery depicts the Ka'ba with the circumambulatory pilgrims as an earthly miniature of the divine Throne and its encircling angels.[65]

Ibn Arabi,[66] on the topic of the significance of the *tawaf,* compares the alternation in speeds to the speed of the perception of knowledge of the divine command, "Be!", and

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[64] Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad*, 552.

[65] Akkach, 187.

[66] Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) born in Andalusa, Ibn Arabi is another of the greatest Muslim intellectuals in history. A famous mystic, poet, philosopher, and sage he is one of the greatest known spiritual teachers and has composed over 300 works, one of the most famous being the *Meccan Revelations*.

the form of configuration and manifestation of the cosmos.[67] In the Qur'an it states that "Our command is but once, as the twinkling of an eye,"[68] which Ibn Arabi understands as meaning there is nothing speedier than the connection made, regardless of distance, between an eye and the object of it's sight. The eye has the ability to perceive (material substance) through eyesight, and can provide an insight to a dimension of reality that exists but remains to be unseen:

> You judge, in respect of your looking with your eyesight, your insight, and your reflection, that is a creation; but through your knowledge and unveiling, you judge that it is a Real Through Which Creation Occurs. Nothing becomes manifest to the eye that is not He. So this is an existence within the *wujūd* (that which finds and is found, and cannot be either without a sense of consciousness and being)…this is why the Lawgiver set down as a sunnah trotting three times—no more no less. The first is for Him, the third for what becomes manifest, and the second—between the first and the third—is the occasion of the manifestation of what becomes manifest from Him.[69]

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[67] See W.Chittick's *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 89.

[68] 54:50.

[69] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Arabi's Cosmology,* 90.

Henry Corbin invokes the theories of a Persian Platonist, Qādī Sa'īd Qummī,[70] who envisioned the Throne of God existing on a higher level of reality and as being the center of Intelligence and Light. Qummī believed that the Ka'ba was the material pillar for the immaterial Throne of God.[71] The principles of Qummī's cosmology involve the Twelve Imams, who as human beings of light, function in the configuration of the relationship between the center or Throne, and the peripheral whole of all objects of its intellection.[72] Qummī justifies his theory geometrically: the Ka'ba being a cubic structure, and a cubic structure necessarily having six surfaces, and the Twelve Imams being of only six names[73] configure the material pillar of the Throne. Al-Ghazali writes:

> The Ka'ba is an outward symbol in this material world of that Presence not seen by the eye, which dwells within the Divine world. Just as the body is an outward symbol of this visible phenomena of the heart, which cannot be seen by the eye, for it belongs to the world of the Unseen, and this material, visible world is a

[70] Qādī Sa'īd Qummī (1639-1691) was born in Qumm, Persia and was one of the great Shiite philosophers of the Safavid period. As of now, only fifteen of his works are known, of which only a few have been edited, and none of which have been translated into English. A commentary which he devoted to the *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, by Ibn Bābūyah; commentary on *Sifat al-shī'ah* also by Ibn Bābūyah; and the *Asrār al-'ibādāt wa haqīqat al-Salāt*.

[71] For a more detailed exegesis of Qādī Sa'īd Qummī's, *Kitāb asrār al-Hajj*, see Henry Corbin's chapter on "The Configuration of the Temple of the Ka'bah" in *Temple and Contemplation.*

[72] Ibid., 211.

[73] The first, fourth, eighth and tenth Imams were named 'Alī: Imam 'Alī ibn Abī Talīb, Imam 'Alī ibn Zayn al-'Abidīn, Imam 'Alī Rida, and Imam 'Alī Naqī; the second and eleventh Imams: Imam Hasan al-Mujtabā and Imam Hasan al-'Askarī; the fifth, ninth, and twelfth Imams: Imam Muhammad al-Bāqir, Imam Muhammad al-Jawād, and Imam Muhammad al-Mahdī; the third Imam, Husayn Sayyid al-Shuhadā', the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq, and the seventh Imam, Mūsā al-Kāzim were the only ones of their name.

means of ascent to the invisible, spiritual world for him to whom God has opened the door.[74]

All that is required is the activation of the imagination to see the structure transfigured.

The sanctuary at Mecca was a religious and political center for desert society. Historian Ira Lapidus writes that the Meccan pilgrimage entailed, "a period of truce, which served not only for religious worship, but also for the arbitration of disputes, the settlements of claims and debts, and of course, trade."[75] The Quraysh had arranged it so that the region of Mecca was a place of peace, so that all tribes could come to worship their fetishes and idols without fear of persecution or other warring tribes; this opportunity to place differences aside between tribes allowed for prosperous trade.

The fundamental principles of Islam threatened this thriving mercantile economy. The declaration and acceptance of one God nullified the validity of the hundreds of other pagan idols surrounding the sanctuary, and simply put, was not good for business. Therefore, in the early days of Islam, performing the *salat* (prayer) in the surrounding precinct of the sanctuary of the Ka'ba, could at times invite persecution and torment from the Quraysh and other polytheists. To avoid this, the *salat* was often performed in secret at *Dār al-Arqam*[76] (House of Arqam). Ibn Hisham also reports that the performing of the *salat* would sometimes take place in isolated, dry washes, and that

[74] Margaret Smith. *Al-Ghazali: The Mystic*. (London: Kazi Publications, 1944) 112.
[75] Ira M. Lapidus. *The History of Islamic Societies*. (California: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 14.
[76] The House of Arqam bin Abi al-Arqam was noted for meeting a foremost meeting place for Muslim prayer during the early years of Islam.

sometimes 'Umar ibn Khattab,[77] a Companion of the Prophet and of considerable status among of the Qurayshi tribe, was one of the few to openly defy the Quraysh and lead the prayer publicly by the Ka'ba.

The *Hijra* (migration) to Yathrib, later known as Medina, resulted in the construction of the first mosques. According to some traditions, before entering Medina the Prophet stayed at Quba, a small village that belonged to the territory of Medina. This was the location of the first mosque. There is dispute between traditions[78] as to whether the mosque was built by Muhammad himself or by the *Ansar*[79] (Helpers) and first emigrants to Medina. There is also dispute as to the length of time[80] Muhammad spent in Quba before proceeding to Medina. Once he did leave the village, Ibn Hisham writes that he then halted at the bottom of the Wādī Rānūnā (Valley Rānūnā), where he performed the first Friday prayer with his Companions, [81] and this became the site of the second mosque in Islam.

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[77] 'Umar ibn Khattab was an early convert to Islam and would later become a Caliph following the death of the Prophet. Before 'Umar converted to Islam, he is recorded by Ibn Ishaq, an early Muslim historian in his *Sīrah*, as being of the most adamant opposition to Muhammad and even threatening to assassinate him. It is recorded that he discovered his sister and her husband reciting verses of the Qur'an, and this enraged him so that he began to beat her husband. In an attempt to defend her husband, 'Umar's sister was injured by him in the scuffle and when he saw her bleeding, he regretted what he had done. He then asked her what she was reading and began to read from the Qur'an. So struck was he by the sūrah's verses, that he immediately converted to Islam.

[78] For further discussion on the debate between traditions, see "Masjid", *Encyclopedia of Islam.*

[79] Ansar literally means "helper", and was used to refer to the people of Medina who helped the Muslim emigrants and welcomed them to their village.

[80] The amount of days varies from 3, 5, 11, to 22.

[81] Ibn Hisham, 228.

Upon his arrival at Medina, a popular account[82] of the Prophet states, that the he refused individual invitations of lodging as not to show favor with any particular tribe and, instead, allowed his camel, Qaswa, to choose the location where he would dwell. She knelt at a place that belonged to two orphans, Sahl and Suhayl, which was commonly used for drying dates and had once been a burial ground.[83] Muhammad bought the property from the orphans and stayed with Abū Ayyūb al-Ashāri until the Prophet's house[84] was constructed. During the interim of construction, he conducted prayers in courtyards and other open spaces:

> In revealing the central rite of daily prayers to the Prophet, God allowed not only nature to become once again the temple of worship, as it had been for primordial man, without any danger of naturalism or idolatry, but also permitted the sanctification of the earth itself through the *sujūd* of the Perfect Man. By touching the ground with his forehead the Prophet bestowed a special significance upon the floor of his house, through it upon the first mosque, and through the Medina mosque upon the whole of Islamic architecture as far as the floor and the experience of space from the floor is concerned.[85]

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[82]Refer to "Masjid" article in *Encyclopedia of Islam* and Martin Lings chapter on "The Entry to Medina" in his work, *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources*, (Bloomington: Inner Traditions, 2006).

[83] Ibn Hisham, 228.

[84] It has been argued by scholars such as K.A.C. Creswell, H. Lammens, and L. Caetani that this edifice in fact had no characteristics of a spiritual building, and therefore was not built with the intention of serving as a mosque, but rather solely as the house of Muhammad. See *Annali dell' Islām* and *Mo'awia* for further discussion.

[85] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality,* 31.

The building in order to serve its purpose adequately was necessarily substantial in size.[86] It was a simple design, a spacious courtyard surrounded by three mud-baked brick walls on a stone foundation with three entrances. One side was open, and a double row of palm tree trunks served as columns, which supported a roof made of palm leaves plastered together with mud and clay. This was the *zulla*, or shaded place where the Companions and others would seek shelter from the scorching rays of the sun during prayer. In time, nine small rooms were built on an adjoining wall for Muhammad and his wives.

Upon receiving revelation from God,[87] the Prophet changed the direction of the *qibla* (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem towards the Ka'ba. This spatial orientation drew the direction of prayer to the divinely appointed center of the Islamic community:

> A *niche* on the wall of a mosque turns that space toward the earthly center, Mecca, the meeting place of heaven and earth and hence the place that leads ultimately, in a symbolic sense, towards the *logos*.[88]

Scholars such as Henry Corbin argue this shift occurred on a metaphysical as well as a physical plane. Corbin in *Temple and Contemplation* urges the reader to appreciate the difference in types of space in that:

> Spaces, which are measured by inner states, presuppose, essentially, qualitative or discontinuous space of which each inner state is itself the measure, as opposed

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[86] Hillenbrand, Robert. *Islamic Architecture.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 39. "It was a largely open square of some fifty-six metres per side. These dimensions speak for themselves. They were probably exceptional for that time and place." 39.

[87] 2:125

[88] Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 15.

> to space, which is quantitative, continuous, homogenous, and measurable in constant measures. Such a space is an existential space, whose relationship to physico-mathematical space is analogous to the relationship of exitential (sic) time to the historical time of chronology…and the space of this world is, precisely, the qualitative dimension of an inner state.[89]

Therefore, while in a contemplative state of prayer, one has the ability to meditate on the space and form of the Ka'ba in a manner that will transform the state of the structure to correspond with other states of the Ka'ba in higher dimensions of reality. Samer Akkach writes that:

> Orientation, in this sense, is an act of integration that establishes a way of return from the fragmented to the unified, from the complex to the simple, from the accidental to the essential, and from the many to the one.[90]

This modest dwelling would become the center for the political, religious, and social activity of the community. In Mecca, political discourse and matters of justice took place at the *Dār al-Nadwa*[91] beside the Ka'ba; now, at Medina such activities took place in the courtyard of the Prophet's mosque. Ibn Hisham records occasions such as envoys from Tamīm coming to speak with the Prophet about political matters, the

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[89] Corbin, Henry. *Temple and Contemplation* (London: KPI Limited, 1986), 187-189.

[90] *Cosmology and Archiecture in Premodern Islam*, 171.

[91] Built by Qusayy after he assumed sole leadership of the Quraysh, it was his place of residence and situated adjacent to the Ka'ba. It is thought that it was a meeting place for the collective leaders of the Qurayshi clan to deliberate political matters, as well as a place for marriage and other traditional ceremonies and rites.

Awsīs tending their wounded on the grounds and the chiefs of Medina spending the night in the courtyard after the Battle of Uhud.

The construction of the mosque was also the construction of the Prophet's house. As Muhammad was the center of the Islamic community during his lifetime, the mosque would remain to be the center of the Islamic community into modern times. The Hijra signified the birth of a new era in the nascent Islamic community (*ummah*). The Muslim's exile from Mecca was a trial of their faith and trust in Muhammad and his teachings. They abandoned their homes, their families, and their possessions to turn their hearts over to God and start anew in Medina. Muhammad's house served as a mosque thereby symbolizing a religious and social center of community and signifying that Muhammad in turn had opened his heart and home to those who heard his teachings in their hearts. According to Tariq Ramadan:

> Once built, the mosque becomes the axial space of the Muslim spiritual community in which it is situated, but it also expresses the reality of settlement, of acceptance of the hosting space, which is then turned into a space for oneself, a home. [92]

The mosque at Medina would be the archetype for the construction of later mosques. The simple design reflected the modesty of the Prophet and his approach to God. If architecture symbolizes the celestial heavens and the Throne of God, the austere

[92] Ramadan Tariq, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83.

mosque at Medina signified the ubiquitous presence of the Divine, and the glory of God in the heart of the Prophet and his followers.

The philosophy and practice of Islam during the lifetime of Muhammad emphasized the modesty and poverty of the human situation in relation to the God. The Prophet was so close to this sense of the Divine, that divinity was apparent in the nature of all things. With the Prophetic tradition that states, "All the earth is a sanctuary," it seems odd that the lavish complexity of later mosque architecture has little to do with the original function of the mosque.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## THE ARAB CONQUEST & THE MOSQUE IN PERSIA

The death of the Prophet in 632 C.E. shook the early Muslim community. The Prophet had not left clear instructions as to who should lead the community after his death, which caused conflict and inner struggle within the Islamic *ummah*. In addition, there were Muslims who felt their loyalty was to the Prophet alone, and had begun to break from the Islamic faith. Abu Bakr, a Companion of the Prophet, succeeded him and through a series of military campaigns against the dissenters was able to unify the Muslim community within two years. Following his death in 634 C.E. he was succeeded by Umar ibn al-Khattab. Umar decided to campaign against the Byzantine Empire, and prevailed, signifying the beginning of the Umayyad Dynasty.

The Umayyads envisioned the glory of God's Throne to be physical in actuality and attempted to pantomime that glory through architecture. They decorated the mosque at Medina with spoils of war so that it attested to their glory. They rebuilt the original mosque of the Prophet in a style reminiscent of Hellenistic architecture, so that it contained a *minbar*, from which *khutba* was evinced during the Friday sermon. During the sermon, the reign of the caliph was exalted, as well as government decrees proclaimed. Another addition to the Medina mosque was the *maqsura* (box) a type of box that secluded the caliph from his subjects. Lapidus writes that, "These architectural features identified the faith of Islam with the caliph and made the mosque itself a

symbol of prestige."[93] The separation between the caliph and his subjects established a social stratification within the Islamic faith that had not been there previously. During the lifetime of the Prophet, equality of men before God and strength in brotherhood was preached. This architectural addition to the mosque allowed the caliph to veil himself from the public the same manner as God is veiled from our sight.

## CONQUEST OF PERSIA

The Sasanids succumbed to the Arabs in 637 C.E. at the battle of Qasiniya; however it was not until 656 C.E. after a series of furious battles, that all of Persia surrendered to those Arabic governors loyal to the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus. With this power shift came a number of cultural changes. The state language changed from Middle Persian to Arabic, and the community was introduced to Islam. The idea of monotheistic worship was familiar to the Persians--their own prophet Zoroaster had preached that there was one God, their Byzantine rivals were Christian, and there was a small Jewish population in the region. The Muslim Arabs were tolerant of "People of the Book"[94] as well as Zoroastrians, and persecution if any, was minimal.

With the introduction of Islam came the mandates for mosques to be built. Considering the centrality of the mosque in the Islamic community, it is not surprising that one of the first actions taken by Muslim generals upon settling into a new

[93] *Early Islamic Society*, 71.
[94] An Islamic reference to those of Christian or Jewish faith, as is referenced in the Qu'ran.

community was to establish a mosque. The construction of the mosque and the presence it commanded changed the structure of medieval Persian society. The mosque signified an abrupt change in the visual centrality of the newly-established regime. Formerly, the palaces of the Sasanid kings were the places frequented by the social and military elite, and entrance to these palaces was strictly forbidden to the local peasantry. The mosque in contrast functioned as a central and public building.

This contrast similarly extends to one of the key differences between Islam and the former state religion of Zoroastrianism. In Islam, individuals stand as their own priest before God. Any Muslim can purify their self by making the ritual ablutions necessary for prayer. In Zoroastrianism, priests were necessary intermediaries between the people and God, hence their high position and status within the caste system. Mosques began to replace the extravagant palaces of Persian kings and, in effect, replaced the isolating effects of the royal caste system. No longer did the royal housing demand the attention of local populace but rather the mosque, representing religious values such as unity and equality before God.

The first mosques in Persia, due to immediate necessity, were constructed out of Zoroastrian *chahār tāqs* (fire temples). Zoroastrian fire temples were simple structures by design. They usually consisted of a square base with columns, and a small dome atop four squinches[95]:

[95] A "squinch" is an architectural term designating a small arch, usually positioned between the corners of a domed ceiling and it's support. The design is Sasanian in origin and was used to create what is known as a "transition zone" between the square base and the circular dome. The squinch designed was aesthetically pleasing as well as practical in its ability to strengthen and stabilize the structure.

> The cubical volume of its base, viewed as man, earth, as the earthly paradise, is the supreme symbol of immobility, and the most externalized manifestation of the Creator. By its four pillars it evokes the four elements, the four directions, the four winds, the four seasons, and the four colors…superimposed upon this rectangular space is the circular or spherical dome…its sole point of reference its center, through which develops the metaphysical axis that links it with the axis of the square resting below it.[96]

A fire was kept burning underneath the dome. Zoroastrian belief emphasized the worship of natural forces. Fire was believed to have burning purifying abilities and revered as sacred.

Two examples of such a conversion are the *Yazd-i Khast* at Yazd, and the oldest extant[97] Persian mosque, the *Tarik-Khana* in Damghan. The *Tarik-Khana* dates from the late eighth century during the Abbasid[98] period. The surviving remnant of the *Tarik-Khana* today amounts to some sturdy columns, shadows of early woodcarving and two crumbling minarets. The structural layout of the building itself is simple, strengthening the suggestion that this is a Zoroastrian fire-temple turned Islamic mosque. It consists

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[96] Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 75.

[97] *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity.* Ed. Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 146.

[98] The Abbasids (r. 750 C.E. to c. 10th Century) were successful after seven years of battle, and defeated the Umayyads in 750 C.E. The rise of Abbasid rule signified change. First, the central city of power shifted from Damascus in Syria, to the city of Levant in Iraq, and then to Baghdad in 762 C.E. There was also the employment of the *Mamlūk* system, which entailed the uprooting of young Turkish boys and their conversion to Islam, which allowed them opportunity to rise to the status of military elite within society. Most notably endorsed by certain Abbasid Caliphs was the Sunni theological school of the Mu'tazilites.

of a courtyard, porticoes,[99] and a hypostyle[100] prayer hall in front of the *mihrab*.[101] The style echoes what has been considered as Sasanian, but is novel in the pointed arches of the columns, which are the first recorded in Persian history.[102]

It is essential to note the paucity of architecture that dates before the eleventh century. During the initial Arab Conquest most buildings were destroyed unless the local inhabitants were clever enough to attribute them to biblical history as opposed to their own Persian dynasty, as is the case with the tomb of Cyrus the Great,[103] as well as a few fortunate others. From the time of the Arab Conquest until the sixteenth century, many structures were destroyed either by natural disaster or by the destructive havoc wreaked by the numerous military campaigns that swept through Persia. The decline of the Umayyad Dynasty caused dissent from the Abbasids as well as others, and, after a time, individual ruling families rose to power in different areas of the region. Other individual principalities such as the Samanids,[104] Tahirids,[105] Saffarids,[106] Buyids,[107]

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[99] A "portico" is an architectural term referring to an extended entrance of a building, usually supported by columns or enclosed by walls with a roof.

[100] "Hypostyle" architecture entails a square layout including a courtyard and covered prayer hall with a flat ceiling supported by columns.

[101] A *mihrab* is an ornately designed niche that indicates the *qibla*, or direction of prayer.

[102] *Persian Architecture*, 80.

[103] In the interest of protecting the remains of the founder of the Persian Empire, the local people lied to the Arab invaders and told them that the tomb was that of the mother of Solomon. Considering this biblical history, the Arab invaders could then not destroy the tomb, but did in fact destroy the surrounding palaces and gardens.

[104] The Samanid Dynasty (r. 819 – 1005 C.E.) arose in Khurāsān, a region that encompasses parts of modern day Afghanistan, Tajikstan, Uzbekistan, Turkministan, and Iran. The Samanid house are thought to the first of ethnic Persian decent to rule since the Sasanids, and were also adamant Sunni Muslims, who modeled their government after that of the Abbasid caliphate, and may have been the true convergence point of Arabo-Persian culture.

and Ghaznavids,[108] reigned until the Seljüqs defeated them in the early eleventh century.

## THE ABBASIDS

The political disputes which followed the death of the Prophet began to breed discord of a theological nature. Intellectual discourse concerning the nature and order of the cosmos, existence, and reality, resided in a domain of debate. The theological school of the Mu'tazila upheld God's unity and transcendence as a pure being and, therefore, an existence beyond anthropomorphic attributes. Assimilating Greek philosophical texts as their own, they posited that God was defined by His essence, which was reason. Opposition came from other Muslim theologians who argued for a literal interpretation of the Qur'an, stating that God's attributes existed as mentioned in the Qur'an, and that the Qur'an was eternal, not created. By the ninth century, two positions had emerged. One recognized order and rationality as governing forces in the

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[105] The Tahirid house (r. 820 – 872 C.E.) consisted of a family that had risen to considerable power during the time of the Abbasid revolution[105], they counted themselves loyal to the Abbasid Caliphate, and were overthrown by the Saffarids.

[106] The Saffarid house (r. 867 – 903 C.E.) was comprised of local Turkish tribes, quickly over thrown by the Samanids.

[107] The Buyids (r. 934 – 1055 C.E.) in the Pre-Islamic period had existed as independent mercenaries to the Sasanid house, and would become the last ethnic Persian dynasty to rule for the next seven centuries. They were Shi'ite, and after the fall of the Samanids, they ruled the western region of Persia. In the tenth century, they wielded considerable power over the Persian province.

[108] The Ghaznavids (r. 934 – 1055 C.E.) were Sunni, and ruled the eastern region of Persia after the fall of the Samanids. One of their rulers, Mahmūd, is notable for the pillaging of surrounding lands and the enslavement of an astonishing number of Indians, and also bore witness to the creation of one of the most famous Persian writings, the *Tarikh Bayhaqī*.

universe, and the other dismissed the centrality of reason and view all action as an expression of God's will.

The Abbasids did not share the same vision of God's glory in an earthly realm as their predecessors the Umayyads. The issue of the transcendence of the Divine was a matter hotly debated at court. The works of Plato, Euclid and other Greek philosophers were translated, and raised questions regarding God and the nature of existence:

> There is within Islamic spirituality a special link with qualitative mathematics in the Pythagorean sense, a link which results from the emphasis upon unity and the intellect (*al-'aql*) on the one hand and the primordial nature of Islamic spirituality on the other…the mathematical nature of Islamic art is in a sense the externalization of the mathematics hidden in the very structure of the Qur'an and the numerical symbolism of its letters and words. The Pythagorean philosophy of mathematics provided the language and presented an already elaborated science, itself of an esoteric nature and going back to Egypt and Babylon, for 'spiritual mathematics' which is so central to Islamic architecture and even the so-called decorative arts.[109]

The Geometrician, Al-'Abbās ibn Sa'id al-Jawharī, was so inspired by Pythagoras and Euclid that he wrote *Commentary on Euclid's Elements*, which then became a cornerstone in the foundation of the art form that was to become the *Arabesque*. *Arabesque* motifs are elaborative patterns of repetitive geometric forms that often echo the forms of plants

[109] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality,* 47.

and animals. The repeating interlocking patterns can be seen to constitute an infinite pattern that extends beyond the visible world and to symbolize the infinite nature of creation and the Divine. In a response to the restriction placed upon iconography in Islam, these geometric patterns can be seen to represent what cannot be re-presented through artistic expression and form. The Abbasids absorbed Sasanid design and transformed it into a lucid and abstract geometric imagery. Gülru Neçipoğlu writes of the "interpenetrating reciprocal shapes that dissolved traditional figure ground relations…contiguous amorphous shapes, capable of continual metamorphosis into one another, recalled the intermediate state of primordial matter." She continues:

> It may not be coincidence that this seemingly self-conscious change in visual representation came about at a time when the Abbasid court was intensely engaged in theological and philosophical debates about the unstable nature of matter in the physical world, related to much broader issues as God's absolute transcendence of matter and the status of the rational human soul as an incorporeal substance unconstrained by matter. These debates were triggered by the translation of Greek philosophical texts and culminated with the acceptance of Mu'tazilism as an official doctrine by the Abbasid Caliphs between 813 and 848, a doctrine that would continue to be influential until its adherents were systematically persecuted by the Great Seljüqs who occupied Baghdad in 1055.[110]

[110] Necipoglu, Gulru. *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture.* (New York: Getty Trust Publishing, 1996), 95.

The Mu'tazilites maintained that God was beyond anthropomorphic attributes and proceeded to develop a new cosmology based on the dualism of essence (atom) and existence (accident), in which the appearance of phenomena in the material world was explained as the result of an accident in atomical matter, and was temporally and accidentally bound to form. They also maintained that the Qur'an was created and not eternal:

> These patterns do not prove that physics leads naturally to the metaphysical, especially physics of the modern variety. Rather, they are an illustration of the Hermetic principle that 'that which is lowest symbolizes that which is highest'.[111]

An unfortunate result of this theological dispute was the *Minha* (Inquisition), instigated by Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun in 833 C.E. Al-Ma'mun supported Mu'tazili and Shi'ite doctrine of the created Qur'an. The *Minha* was meant aggressively to encourage others to support these theological beliefs. Measures were taken against those who rejected the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an, including dismissal from public office, imprisonment, and even flogging. The Mihna, which continued for roughly fifteen years and was carried out by Al-Ma'mun's successors, al-Mu'tasim and al-Wathiqand, was finally ended by al-Ma'mun's nephew, al-Mutawakkil.

The reign of the Abbasid caliph, Al-Mutakkil (r. 847 – 861), rejected the doctrines of Mu'tazilism and Shi'ism, and encouraged a Sunni orthodox consciousness. Al-

[111] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 55.

Mutawakkil was not known for being a great patron of the arts; however his clever use of the arts to express his power was exalted in the Great Mosque of Samarra. The mosque was commissioned in 848 and completed in 852. At one time, it was the largest mosque in the world. The *minaret* known as the Malwiya Tower, is unique in that it supports a spiral ramp that snakes its way around the cylindrical shape.

## INDEPENDENT PRINCIPALITIES

During the Ghanzavid period, ruler Mahmūd was known to be a passionate devotee of architecture, upon which he showered a significant amount of his wealth;l tragically, only two victory towers and the ruins of Lashkari Bazar attest to this.[112] The Lashkari Bazar in essence was a large palace with accoutrements. It is recorded as having a grand esplanade, a mosque, bazaar, and abundance of gardens with pavilions, canals, and fountains as well as numerous other private structures.[113] All that he accomplished in his time as ruler was unfortunately lost with his death and the reign of his son, Masūd I, who continued to build extravagantly. None of those structures remains today.

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[112] Pope, Arthur Upham. *Persian Architecture: The Triumph of Form and Color.* (New York: Braziller Publications, 1965), 99.

[113][1]Ibid., 99.

Around the same time Buyid rulers Fakhr al-Dawla and Adud al-Dawla, demonstrated a particular enthusiasm for architecture as well. The monuments that attested to the glory of their dynastic reign are recorded in a few remaining documents, but no physical traces are left. One mosque, the *Masjid-e Jami at Na'in* remains from this period, but is never mentioned in any records of Buyid architecture, which has led certain art historians to conclude that it may have been regarded as architecturally inferior.[114] In the tenth century, the mosque at Na'in was built and serves as a perfect example of "hypostyle architecture." Hypostyle architecture entails a square layout including an enclosed courtyard and covered prayer hall with a flat ceiling supported by columns. The columns at *Masjid-e Jami at Na'in* flank the *mihrab*, and special attention was paid to the detail of ornament which wraps itself around the columns. The ornament is stucco, and carved with exquisite detail. It is hard to tell which elements of the mosque are strictly from the Buyid period as many repairs and additions have been made over subsequent years. The courtyard facade probably dates to reconstruction work of the Seljuk period, although the most unusual feature - the angled piers flanking the central nave on the southwestern (*qibla*) side - is dated to the original period of construction.[115]

## THE SELJÜQS

[114] Ibid., 86.

[115] *ArchNet*, Digital Library.

The Seljüqs Turks were nomadic wanderers that had been attracted to the mystical side of Islam, and converted under missionary Sufis.[116] After the fall of the Ghaznavids, the Seljüqs settled in Khurāsān. After establishing their authority in the region the two ruling brothers, Toghril and Chaghri Beg, set out to unify what was left of the independent regimes under their rule. After the elimination of the Buyids, Abbasid Caliphate bestowed the title of Sultan upon Toghril.[117]

Early Islam attempted to reproduce the modest examples of the Prophet. It is arguable whether the first mosques constructed in the periods immediately following the conquest were modest in design in an attempt to follow early Islamic principles or simply out of necessity. As time marched on, mosques were built by grand standards; however in the earlier periods after the conquest, basic and simple structures sufficed as they once did in early Islam. Elaborate decoration in the mosque came later in history and was a statement of the wealth, power, or prestige of a particular governmental regime. Throughout the numerous military campaigns, many different political statements and theoretical agendas were expressed with the use of the mosque as a vehicle for proclamation. Seljüq rule signified a new era in architectural style:

[116] Morgan, David. *Medieval Persia: 1040-1797.* (England: Longman House, 1988), *26.*
[117] Ibid., 27.

> The (Seljüq) art of Islam was powerfully influenced by Sufism, which regarded the material world of appearance, with its thousand and one varying aspects, as a reflection of the divine will, recreated at every breath.[118]

A product of nearly one thousand years of evolution in Persian architecture, the *Masjid-i Jami* in Isfahan, is a perfect example of this. Literary sources from Abu Nu'aym support the theory that first mosque was originally built over a Nestorian Church in a small village that would later coalesce to form Isfahan.[119] The original foundation of the prayer hall is hypostyle in design and dates to the time of the Abbasids in 772 C.E. The columns of the prayer hall noticeably employ the Sasanid squinch, and the arrangement of the *ivāns* facing a central court arguably has its origins in Parthian and Sasanian palace architecture.[120] During the Būyid period, facades were resurfaced with fired brick that composed ornamental motifs in beautiful geometrical patterns.[121]

Although a considerable amount of construction predates Seljüq rule, the finest additions to the mosque were made during their reign:

> It was in this context of the Sunni revival during the hegemony of the Great Seljüqs that the *girih*[122] suddenly flourished…they are seen around the same time

[118] Semra Ogel, "The Seljuk Face of Anatolia: Aspects of the Social and Intellectual History of Seljuk Architecture," *Foundation for Science Technology and Civilization.* January 2008. 2-15.
[119] *The Mosque*, 140.
[120] Scarcia, Giaroberto and Giovanni Curatola. *The Art and Architecture of Persia.* (Milano: Abbeville Press, 2007), 143.
[121] Ibid., 142.
[122] An architectural term for a geometric pattern interlaced with stars and polygons ornaments.

at the Great Mosque in the Seljüq capital Isfahan, with its two stellate dome chambers featuring *muqarnas* zones of transition.[123]

Following the brothers' deaths, Toghril's nephews succeeded him and named Nizam al-Mulk the new Wazier. Nizam al- Mulk was a patron to the arts and is famously known as one of the first victims of the notorious Nizārī Ismā'līs, more commonly known as the Assassins.[124] In 1086, during the reign of Malik Shah,[125] Nizam al-Mulk commissioned a vaulted pavilion to be built in front of the *mihrab*. Two years later a rival of Nizam al-Mulk, Taj al-Mulk, commissioned another vaulted pavilion, known as the *Gunbadi-i Kharka*, to be built. Robert Byron, on his impression of these domes writes:

> From the eleventh century, architects and craftsman (sic) have recorded the fortunes of the town, and its changes of taste, government, and belief...The two-dome chambers of the Friday Mosque point this distinction by their difference. Both were built about the same time, at the end of the eleventh century. In the larger, which is the main sanctuary of the mosque, twelve massive piers engage in a Promethean struggle with the weight of the dome. The struggle in fact obscures the victory: the latter demands a previous interest in the mediaeval engineering or the character of the Seljuks. Contrast this with the smaller chamber…each element, like the muscles of a trained athlete, performs its

[123] Necipoglu, *The Topkapi Scrolls*, 99.
[124] Morgan, 34.
[125] Malik Shah (r. 1072-1092 C.E.)

> function with winged precision, not concealing its effort, as over-refinement will do, but adjusting it to the highest degree of intellectual meaning. This is the perfection of architecture, attained not so much by the form of the elements—for this is a matter of convention—but by their chivalry of balance and proportion.[126]

Arthur Upham Pope writes of the *Gunbad-i Kharka*, "This is perhaps the most perfect dome known…mechanically it matches the mathematical requirements of the ideal dome."[127]

The Seljüq's addition of a fourth *ivān* to the design of this mosque would set the standard for all later forms of Persian mosque architecture. Mosque architecture during the Seljüq period became a hybrid fusion of four basic features that had been applied independently or in some cases in a partial combination, but never as a conglomerate. The design consisted of four *ivāns*[128] whose open sides would face each other and enclose an inner courtyard, and would also include a *minaret,*[129] *mihrab*, and a *minbar.*[130]

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[126] Byron, Robert. *The Road to Oxiana.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 176.
[127] Pope, *Persian Architecture*, 107.
[128] An *ivān* is a vaulted three walled niche, with one side open; in the case of Selüq designs, these ivāns would face each other, with the open walls opening to a center courtyard. "The *ivān* is the transitional space between the temporal and terrestrial worlds. Metaphysically, the *ivān* can be viewed as the locus of the soul moving between the garden and the court, taken as spirit, and the room seens as body." Sense of Unity, 71.
[129] A *minaret* is a tall, cylindrical tower (much like a lighthouse) from which the *Mu'azzin* would issue the *Adhan* (Call to Prayer). *Sense of Unity*, 73. "The word itself comes from the term *manārah*, or *manār*. Based on its philological meanings, "place where fire burns", or "light shines", this term may indicate a relationship to Zoroastrian fire towers."
[130] A *minbar* is an ornately designed staircase usually made out of carved wood or stucco that serves a similar purpose to the Christian pulpit, and is most commonly used for Friday sermons.

This architectural layout is commonly referred to as the "Four Ivān Plan" and can be seen in other mosques of Seljüq design at Ardistan, Zaware, and Gulpayagan.

Sunni orthodoxy became established with the reign of the Seljüqs. The Seljüqs supported the Ash'ari school of thought:

> By implication the divinely created Ash'ari atomistic universe (shared by the Maturidi School) was permeated with a harmony that resonated with two- and three-dimensional patterns, generated by undecipherable grids that evoked a sense of wonder…geometricized non-figural arabesques apparently modeled on inanimate matter and vegetation, that is, on two of the three kingdoms of nature (mineral, vegetal, and animal) seemed to evoke a new sense of order missing from the unstable atomistic material world of the Mu'tazila.[131]

The Seljuq period also produced famous Orthodox theologians, such as Al-Ghazali.

## THE MONGOLS

The Seljüqs were defeated in 1219 by another group of warring Turkish nomads, the Khwarazmshahs, who later experienced a brutal defeat at the hands of the Mongols. The Mongols invaded from the east, and, at the end of their conquest, their empire ran from the Pacific to what is known today as Central Europe. For the four sons of Ghenghis Khan, the kingdom was divided into four parts, one of those being the

[131] Necipoglu, *The Topkapi Scrolls*, 103.

Ilkhanid regime in the region of Persia and Anatolia. Due to uncertain status and rules of succession, the four brothers warred and rivaled each other for the duration of their rule until the fifteenth century. The early times of Mongolian rule accomplished little aside from horrific violence and destruction. The conquest of the Mongols took Persia by storm, and many villages were exterminated in a manner similar to a holocaust. The rapid decrease in population left very few people to tax, and those left were taxed ruinously, to the point that the empire almost collapsed inwardly.

Only under the rule of Mahmūd Ghazanawi in 1295 did things begin to change. Ghazanawi managed to reconstruct what little was left of Persian society, and the vocation of architecture and the arts was renewed, along with the concept of monarchy. At this time the Mongols had not converted to Islam. The people of the Steppes were Shamanistic by nature, but in their travels had absorbed certain elements of Buddhism and Hinduism, which would later be reflected in the art and architecture of this period.

The major monuments that mark the Ilkhanid Empire are the *Masjid-i Jami* at Tabriz, the *Masjid-i Jami* at Veramin, and the Mosque at Kerman. The *Masjid-i Jami* at Tabriz, also known as the Mosque of Ali Shah, was commissioned to be built by Ghazanawi, but was designed by a well-known patron of the arts, Ali Shah, in 1312. and completed in 1322. Ali Shah was also said to have been the architect of the mausoleum of Öljeitu, brother and successor to Ghaznawi. The sheer size of the mosque[132] was commissioned to be intimidating, and the size marked it as an

[132] The *minarets* are said to have towered over 200 ft, the sanctuary *ivān* vault was 100 ft wide and 158 feet deep, and the distance between the portal and the *mihrab* measured a distance of 215 ft.

expression of the power and ferocity of Mongol rule. The mosque included a court paved with marble, accompanied by octagonal alabaster columns, a *mihrab* of "gold luster faience."

Bernard O'Kane writes:

> Unfortunately, as an expression of the power the mosque proved a poor advertisement, as the vault of the ivān partially collapsed soon after it was erected.[133]

The Mosque at Kerman was originally built in 1349, and rebuilt in 1559 by the Safavids. Arthur Pope especially notes the "outstanding decorative energy" of the mosaic faience.[134] After the Mongol invasion, the geometric arabesque became infused with an East Asian element. Lotus flowers, dragons, and cloud bands became a part of the style. The Mosque at Kerman was the first to begin using ceramic glazed tiling, an art form that would later come to full fruition in the time of the Timurid Dynasty:

> Scholars agree unanimously that during the second half of the fourteenth century a technique began to emerge involving the use of ceramic as a highly refined architectural surfacing material. True ceramic mosaic began to appear, replacing the simpler forms of partially glazed brick. [135]

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[133] *The Mosque*, 125.
[134] Pope, Arthur U. *Introducing Persian Architecture.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 69.
[135] Giaroberto Scarcia and Giovanni Curatola. *The Art and Architecture of Persia.* (Milano: Abbeville Press, 2007), 169.

The *Masjid-i Jami* at Veramin was built sometime between 1332 and 1336. The layout consists of a Four *Ivān* courtyard where a dome chamber encloses a *mihrab*, similar to that of the Mosque of Ali Shah. The tiling of the mosque in the opinion of Arthur Pope, has made the Mosque at Veramin, "one of the most attractive mosques in the country."[136] Richard Yeomans writes:

> The development of glazed tiles is one of the glories of the Ilkhanid period…plaster friezes of fluid arabesque and Nashki calligraphy complement the geometric designs of light and dark blue glazed terracotta.[137]

All of these mosques have the typical "Four-Ivān Plan" layout; however, what distinguishes these mosques as Ilkhanid in design is the colossal scale to which they were built, perhaps as an expression of the Ilkhanid Empire to other Mongolian provinces.

During the Il-khanid period, the Mongols also contributed to the construction of the Masjid-i Jami in Isfahan. The supportive piers of the dome of Nizam al-Mulk were reinforced, and in 1366, a *madrassa* (school) was built. In 1310 Öljeitu constructed a *mihrab* that would become famous for its dizzying wood carved detail. The *mihrab* contains no Qur'anic verses, only inscriptions exalting the Sultan's reign, and a prophetic hadith that states, "God builds a house in paradise for him who builds a mosque."[138]

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[136] Pope, *Persian Architecture*, 183.
[137] Giaroberto Scarcia and Giovanni Curatola, 184.
[138] *Sahih Muslim*, Book 42: 7110

> The selection of epigraphic texts may also represent a secretarian agenda. The inclusion of sayings by Ali in stucco on Öljeitu's mihrab in the Friday Mosque, Isfahan—not to mention the list of the Twelve Imams of the Shia also incorporated into the mihrab—marks the mosque as Shi'ite in sympathy if not in actual allegiance.[139]

Scarcia and Curatola writes that the structure:

> "…Suggests a self-celebratory motive: to leave his imprint on one of the most important monuments of Islamic architecture, during a time when he was fascinated by the Shi'ite faith."[140]

## THE TIMURIDS

In the early fifteenth century the Ilkhanids fell to Timur (known in the West as Tamerlane), signifying the beginning of the Timurid period. The Timurids are known for perfecting the art of ceramic glazed tiling, and for their preference for the color turquoise, as seen at the Mosques of Sultaniyya and Bibi Khanum. The construction of the Mosque of Bibi Khanum in Samarqand began in 1398 and was completed in 1404. The mosque consists of eight minarets and three domes covered in beautiful enameled tile:

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[139] *The Mosque*, 47.
[140] Giaroberto Scarcia and Giovanni Curatola, 143.

The Timurids shifted political axis toward the east, so from an architectural standpoint, cities located in this part of the empire reaped the greatest benefits.[141]

Their crowning achievement, the Blue Mosque of Tabrīz, was commissioned to be built by Saliha Khanun, daughter of Jahanshah, and was completed in 1465. The unusual layout of this mosque was a T-shaped design, reminiscent of Turkish architecture, and makes sense considering the close vicinity of Tabriz to Turkey. The design entailed a fully enclosed court due to the severe climate of the region. It is recorded as having once been covered in glazed blue tiling, but during a severe earthquake, nearly all the tiles were loosened, and presently only a natural colored base skeleton remains. It has not yet been fully renovated. At present, it stands a shadow of the glory it once was yet still manages to strike the heart with an overwhelming sense of emptiness in its spatial ordering. The unique quality of it being an enclosed structure resonates a sense of stillness and peace.

The Timurids for their part in this monumental tribute to Persian architecture, installed beautiful onyx tiling on the dome of Nizam al-Mulk and the southernmost ivān. In 1447, they also built an enclosed winter prayer hall.[142] The Safavids during their rule built two slender minarets that flank the dome of Nizam al-Mulk.

The *Masjid-i Jami* experienced architectural renovations by nearly every reigning dynasty that ruled from the eighth until the eighteenth century, making it one of the paramount examples of conglomerate Persian architecture. A spectrum of evolution in

[141] Giaroberto Scarcia and Giovanni Curatola, 176.
[142] Giaroberto Scarcia and Giovanni Curatola, 146.

Persian architectural style, the most significant reconstruction occurred it was during the reign of the Seljüqs. Arthur Pope writes, "With the Seljüqs, brickwork was carried to a perfection, both aesthetic and constructional, that has perhaps never been equaled since."[143]

With the discovery of the Topkapi Scroll, intention has been illuminated in Timurid geometric patterns. The Topkapi Scroll, is thought to have been compiled some time in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century, and was meant to perpetuate geometric patterns and design traditions from one generation of master builders to other artisans of the craft.

Geometry was a language of clarity, useful to the orthodox traditionalists as well as the Sufi mystics, a number of whom had assimilated Plato and his forms into their philosophy. Geometric star patterns reminded poets of starry skies. The point is a special significant in the geometrical representation of Unity and the degrees of manifestation. It denotes the created out of the uncreated, the being from non-Being; the first representative binary[144] of physical existence. Before the emergence of the point, space does not exist in distinction to anything. From this perspective, "the point is to space what the Divine Essence is to the known world: the un-manifest principle of

[143] Pope, *Persian Architecture*, 139.
[144] As is the case of a binary star, a system of two stars that revolve around each other under their mutual gravitation, the point once it becomes the center of a circle (one of the most common geometric symbols of the Unity) are seen to be mutually dependent on each other, much like the ontological case of the Divine to creation whereas the Divine created in order to be distinct, and creation is dependent upon the Divine and the domains which are created by the Divine, the point and origin of all creation.

manifestation"; and in its intelligible mode,[145] it encompasses the entirety of space, for potentially all is conceived within it.[146] The point then much like the rays of the Sun, is significant of the Unity although not the Unity itself; the rays of the Sun as analogous to geometrical lines, serve as the externalization and materialization of the Divine. As the point emerges from the non-manifest, it symbolizes the first of multiple forms of the manifest. As the Qur'an states, "*He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward*"[147] just as every line begins with a point and every line may be reduced to a single point.

According to Ibn Sina,[148] the point was the first Element in the world, which, acted upon by Nature, was extended to a line, plane, and finally a third dimensional body,[149] and once the line emerged it formed an arc and became a circle, the circle being one of the most common geometric symbols[150] of the Divine Unity. Another

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[145] Here a distinction needs to be made between the sensible or visible point, and the intelligible or imaginal point. The sensible point is enveloped within the physical, and although symbolizing Unity, is not Unity itself.

[146] "The sensible point is the smallest spatial entity in Euclidian geometry whose repetition produces a line, the repetition of which produces a volume, and furthermore the sensible point embodies the intelligible point which is a mental concept and without dimension." *Cosmology and Architecture*, 67.

[147] *Al-Qur'an* 57:3.

[148] Ibn Sina (b. 980 C.E. d. 1037 C.E.) born in was is now the far south of Russia, in a village near Bukhara, is one of the great intellectuals of Islamic thought. Known in the west as Avicenna, his contributions to medicine, philosophy, natural science, Euclidian geometry, and Muslim jurisprudence are monumental. One of his most famous works being *the Qanon*.

[149] *An Introduction to Cosmological Doctrine*, 203.

[150] The circle, in having no distinguishable end or beginning in many cultures represents the Divine and all creation and manifest potentiality embosomed within, while the outside of the circle symbolizes non-Being and also the circle symbolizes the journey of all temporal beings as the departure and return to the Divine.

great Muslim thinker, Ibn Arabi,[151] also known as *Shaykh al-Akbar,* maintains that the center and the circle are mutually dependent on each other's presence, in the sense that circularity demands a center point just as centrality demands a domain, the center, as a point, remains autonomous and self-sufficient on its own.[152] These characteristics of the point symbolize an attribute of the Divine in the terms of *al-Ghanīy* or Wealthy, in comparison to the "human situation" which leaves us poor and needy *al-faqīr.*

If we recall the ontological argument regarding the distance and proximity to God as symbolized through *tashbih* and *tanzih* and the nine concentric spheres that represent the structural order of the universe, all this extensive discourse over the significance of the point then makes sense. The cosmos is inherently ordered and designed by God, and constructed in such a manner that reflects the conformity of the Divine will within the laws of nature, can be visualized through geometric principles:[153]

> Architecture is of course the art *par excellence* of ordering space, and all sacred architecture achieves its basic goal of placing man in the presence of the Divine through the sacralization of the space which it forms, orders and orients by means of various architectural techniques…the space of Islamic architecture is

[151] Ibn Arabi (b. 1165 d. 1240) born in Andalusa, Ibn Arabi is another of the greatest Muslim intellectuals in history. A famous mystic, poet, philosopher, and sage he remains to be one of the greatest spiritual teachers and has composed over 300 works, one of the most famous being the Meccan Revelations.
[152] Akkach, 69.
[153] Guenon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 46. "Sometimes the point, surrounded by concentric circles, which seem to represent the different states or degrees of manifested existence, arranged hierarchically according to their greater or lesser distance from the primordial principle."

not the quantifiable space of Cartesian geometry but the qualified space related to sacred geometry and given order through the presence of the sacred.[154]

This sense of geometry as a language of God would come to full fruition with the reign of the Safavids. Painfully intricate surface tiling and complicated geometric patterns would encase the monuments that would pay tribute the dynasty long after their time had ended.

## The Safavid

The Safavid dynasty was founded by a Sufi mystic named Shaykh Safī al-Din in the middle part of the fifteenth century, but the dynasty was not established until 1501. The beginning of the Safavid dynasty experienced the distress of trying to right the wrongs of the former Timurid Empire. It was not until the reign of Shah Abbas that society was fully recovered and reconstructed. Shah Abbas built the capital at Isfahan and commissioned the construction of the famous Shaykh Lutfallah Mosque in honor of his father-in-law, and the Shah Mosque (presently the Imam Mosque). The Shaykh Lutfallah Mosque was completed in 1618 and was built as a private oratory directly across from the palace. Small, but enchanting this mosque held none of the

[154] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 45. For further discussion on the topic of sacred geometry and cosmological symbolism in Islamic art and architecture, see Keith Critchlow's, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach.*

architectural conventions of other mosques. It has no courtyard, *minaret*, or *minbar*, but its tilework contains some of the most complicated and beautiful geometric patterns to be found in mosque architecture anywhere. The dome sits on an octagonal base which leads into a sixteen point, then a thirty-two point star-like pattern which culminates at the center of the dome:

> In particular the ornamentation of Safavid mosques, sets out to combine these two qualities: the crystalline state is expressed in the purity of the architectural lines, the perfect geometry of the arched surfaces and the decoration in rectilinear forms, as for the celestial springtime, its blossoms in the stylized flowers and fresh, rich and subdued colours of ceramic tiles.[155]

The entrance to the Shaykh Lutfallah Mosque is through a small tunnel like corridor littered with niches and out coves decorated with detailed *muqarnas,* that then opens into the marvelous dome. The spiral vegetal patterns connect with other spirals to form an oversized "Fibonacci"[156]-like sequence. What is striking about the dome at Shaykh Lutfallah is how the geometric patterns fill the space of the dome without being crowded or too "busy." The use of space and patterns is impressive in its acute clarity.

Its sister mosque, the Shah Mosque was completed in 1629 after seventeen years of construction, and is the final and seemingly flawless culmination of all religious and political ideals, coalesced into a singular architectural masterpiece. The layout is a typical Four-*Ivān* design complete with *minbar* and, but without interruption. There is

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[155] Burckhardt, Titus. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning.* England: World of Islam Festival Publishing, 1976, 36.

[156] The famous mathematical sequence was not discovered by Leonardo Fibonacci after who it is named. Fibonacci came upon it as he was translating the works of a 12th century Arabian mathematician.

no break between the common ground floor by stairs, or balconies. The spatial ordering of this mosque reflects the inner universal nature of the Islamic faith:

> Both the ground plan and structure of the building reflect the doctrinal simplicity of Islam, proclaiming and demonstrating an essential precept: the equality and unity of the faithful, who are all assured of unmediated and clear access to the Divine Mercy.[157]

Communication is unimpeded; all worshippers are aware of each other's presence in the mosque. The intricate patterns of the glazed tiling are of typical Persian motif, vegetal in nature with vines, flowers, and vases that symbolize the prayer for fertility and vitality in life. The Shah and Shaykh Lutfallah Mosque are the culmination of centuries of influence and architectural innovation, and an expression on an inner esoteric dimension of Islam infused with the Persian appreciation for beauty in all forms. The Shah and Shaykh Lutfallah Mosques may the most perfect expression of mosque architecture representing the esoteric dimensions of Islamic thought. These constructions are awe-inspiring at first glance, and simply moving:

> Persian architecture is perfectly articulated, without even being 'functional' in the modern sense of the term. For the Persian, Unity manifests itself above all harmony. Moreover, Persians are by nature and by culture people who see things, but see with lyrical eyes; their artistic activity is as if animated by an

[157] Pope, *Persian Architecture,* 211.

inner melody. It is said proverbially in the East that 'Arabic is the language of God, but Persian is the language of paradise'.[158]

The mosque commanded attention within the community. The call to prayer five times a day ordered daily life in the same manner as a church bell, and requisitioned the same immediacy in the mind of the community. Furthermore, it became the central place for not only worship; mosques were commonly the primary places of education. *Madrassas* (schools) housed elementary learning through sophisticated theological studies, in addition to accommodating full libraries on the grounds.[159] The mission of the mosque, however, was not simply limited to prayer and education. Although the importance of these elements is undeniable, the functions of a working mosque extend into almost every corner and thread of societal fabric, much like the religion of Islam itself. Along with being a place of schooling and teaching, a mosque was a place of funerary rites, community meetings and gatherings, and public and political notices and the Friday Sermon. Even in modern Iran, numerous postings pertaining to deaths, tax assessments, theft, governmental decrees and other community concerns are found everywhere on the grounds.

The materials used in mosque architecture varies regionally, but the majority of buildings were constructed using a type of baked brick. Since mud was readily available in most places, it was shaped into rectangular bricks and left to bake in the sun. The second most common building material was rubble, or random rocks that

[158] Burckhardt, *Art of Islam,* 45.
[159] Pope, *Persian Architecture,* 77.

would sometimes be mixed into the mud bricks. Sometimes wood was used, most often for the construction of the *minbar* or interior ornament, and in later times cut stone and glazed tiles became more common.

## CONCLUSION

The meaning to be uncovered in Islamic architecture is a subject of which scholarly discourse has only begun to scratch the surface. The architectural form of the mosque as a symbolic language conveys cosmological significance when perceived in a traditional mindset. It seems evident that the element of Sufi mysticism in Islamic thought that produced these cosmological theories and encouraged contemplation of nature and existence would be expressed though architecture, as architecture when understood traditionally reflects of the construction of the roof of the Earth, the celestial heavens.

The various Islamic dynasties that reigned after the death of the Prophet began to interpret their Islamic faith as best they could without the steady guidance of Muhammad. It is therefore quite possible that the accepted ideologies influenced the artistic expression of a particular period which is noticeable in the detailed differences

between reigning dynasties. However, that all mosques originate from the prototype of the Medina mosque goes without question. And the ideologies of the traditional, early Islamic community have not been entirely lost to the function of the mosque as a vehicle of political propaganda. The mosque regardless of regionally variations represents the social, political, and spiritual center of the Islamic community. As the center of the community, it is the point that unites the community with the Divine Unity itself as it is oriented towards Mecca, which is closest to Heaven.[160] Mosque architecture re-present the concept of the Divine Throne and its surrounding heavens. Even contemporary Iranian architects make cosmological associations, "Names assigned to stellate girih by contemporary Iranian master builders are also suggestive: they refer to compositions with twelve- and six pointed stars as "twelve and six heavens".[161]

The dichotomy of the ontological difference between the Creator and the created expressed in terms of *tanzih* and *tashbih,* manifests a perception of nearness or distance from God. This relationship of *tanzih* and *tashbih* represent two complementary aspects of Divine Unity, and demonstrate that all opposites as such are contained within the manifest projection of that Unity, a projection which can be understood to be reflected in mosque architecture.

As all of mosque architecture in some way reflects the Unity that manifests the Multiplicity of the world, there is emphasis on the idea of the "void" in the spatial ordering of the mosque. Upon entering the mosque, an open space unobstructed by

[160] A prophetic tradition records Muhammad's wife, A'isha, as making this comment.
[161] Necipoglu, *The Topkapi Scrolls,* 123.

unnecessary furniture and clutter, a sense of serenity and peace fills the heart with the calming sense of the Divine Presence. With an understanding of the universe as finite and all being contained within the Divine, this "space" or "void" created by the spatial ordering of mosque architecture is nothing more than an illusion. This illusion serves as a reminder that there is no void because the Divine Presence in essence fills all spaces.

With all space being filled with Divine Presence and light, all space becomes sacred space for prayer. The spatiality of prayer that unites the Divine with the human self is unbound and ubiquitous, making all of the Earth a mosque. Mosque architecture by definition then does not serve functionally per se, but resonates this connection between the Divine and this world and our place within it.

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