

Spirituality in Islamic Architecture

A Study of Mosque Development

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Abstract

Islam has a Bedouin origin. Despite having maturity in administering the city and eloquence in language, the people of Makkah were characterized by simple living. The only piece of architecture was the building of Ka'bah having alternative courses of wood and brick in its walls but that was also an Abyssinian style. The first mosque constructed by the Prophet PBUH and his companions comprised of a boundary wall and a perforated roof. The practice continued until the Umayyads who constructed some monumental pieces of architecture. Therefore, the architecture of mosque was a later development. However, the phenomenon did not lack the invocation of religious discourse and the theorists justified this later innovation. Apart from touching the pure details of architecture this paper focuses on the spiritual and religious aspects of mosque building.

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Introduction:

All art forms are outward expressions of inner feelings. Therefore, it is difficult to ignore these feelings while discussing any genre of the art. Iqbal terms it as *naqsh he sab natamam khun-i-jigar ke bagair* (All impressions are incomplete without blood, sweat and tears). Architecture has been a hailed art form throughout the ages. Man always tries to accomplish his *naqsh* (impression) in order to memorialize himself. Allah Almighty Himself describes the buildings of the *thamud* as follows: "Ye choose castles in the plains and hew the mountains into dwellings" (7: 74).¹ The paper is a behavioral cum historical study of the Islamic architecture.

Review of the Literature

If we review the approaches regarding the topic; there are mainly two tendencies. The first one is secular which considers Islamic architecture as the outcome of the existing trends in architecture at the time the Islamic architecture began to take shape. The second one brands the designs of mosques as the direct outcome of the revelation. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is famous in bringing up this latter concept. In his major work entitled as *Islamic Art and Spirituality* he constructed this link in a metaphysical fashion which renders works of Islamic art somewhat revealed entities.² However, he does not develop the historicity in sacralization of Islamic arts. He hardly quotes from historical text to show what the motives behind building mosques and other artistic works were.³ We will take notice of different points of Nasr's thesis at different places.

The present study seeks to explore a discourse which introduces spirituality in the Islamic architecture instead of developing a metaphysical relation between the two. If we can construct a hypothesis in terms of the above mentioned link, it includes the following aspects. Firstly, it considers Islamic art not as a direct but indirect outcome of the revelation. Secondly, the sacred stance of the Islamic architecture is relative and not absolute. These are not the buildings which have the spirituality imbued in them but the response of the society towards these art forms makes the process complete. That is why the spirit of building mosques has undergone a metamorphosis with the changed outlook of the Muslim societies in the modern world. In terms of topic it is actually the development of Muslim conscience in the mosque building.

Central Position of the House of *ka'abah*: Religious Response of the Followers:

Let us start with the house of *ka'bah* which occupies the central position regarding the worship and the spirituality. It is the most attended sanctuary in the world having the simplest architecture. How simple it is, evident from the fact that it has an irregular shape such that no two sides are at right angle to each other.⁴ Furthermore the structure built by Ibrahim (Peace be upon him) had no analogy even in the archeological remains. Its existing oblong shape is a later construction and originally it was round from northern side.⁵ Interestingly the shape of *ka'bah* is also depicted in Hindu Scripture as house of skewed walls.⁶ The House of *ka'bah* is believed to be a reflection of a similar entity exactly above it in the heavens called *bait-ul-ma'mur*. It implies that *bait-ul-ma'mur* also

has an oblong shape.⁷ What this shape means or what visual effects it casts involve another debate. Here the point of conclusion is that the matchless sacred status of the House despite having so simple a structure is due to conscience of the followers which was developed through the course of time.

Mosque Architecture: Transfer of Sanctity from Soul to Material:

Mosques built by the Prophet and his companions were along the same lines, the house of *ka'bah* was built. For instance, the *Nabvi* Mosque in Medina comprised of mud walls and perforated roof. The mosques built in Kufa and Basra, were also simply constructed i.e. without architectural works.⁸ The indifference to any kind of architecture was due to the task the Prophet PBUH was bestowed upon. That is to say the focus was on character building and not on structure building. For the *Nabvi* mosque the Quran has the following verdict:

لَمَسْجِدٍ أُسِّسَ عَلَى التَّقْوَىٰ مِنْ أَوَّلِ يَوْمٍ أَحَقُّ أَنْ تَقُومَ فِيهِ فَمِنْ رِجَالٍ مُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَتَطَهَّرُوا وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ
الْمُطَهَّرِينَ

Trans: A place of worship which was found upon duty (to Allah) from the first day is more worthy that thou shouldst stand (to pray) therein, wherein are men who love to purify themselves. Allah loveth the purifiers (9: 108).⁹

The mosque which was built on piety has a right to be the place of worship because patrons of this mosque seek purity though they pray upon mud. This implies that architectural patterns developed by the Muslims were not inherent in the religious text but these were based upon the invocation of the revelation which was brought up by the Muslims scholars and jurists to develop a

rich civilization. This process of invocation has great details; however, we will focus only the architecture in this regard.¹⁰ The earliest notable works were accomplished by the Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik. Abdul Malik constructed Dome of the Rock which had matchless architectural beauty. Such a rich architecture without any precedence catches the attention. The apparent reason of its construction was to offset the effect of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. However, despite having the element of grandeur and despite borrowing different aspects of architecture from the previous structures it cast an exclusive impression and the response of the believers rendered it a sacred status. Similarly other mosques followed the same process in being sacred. The architectural plan and origins of Dome of the Rock and other mosques are abundantly researched therefore there is no room for details. What has to be covered here is the invocation process which made architecture, especially the mosque building, imbibed in Islamic traditions.¹¹

In this regard the status of Abdul Malik is important to be discussed. Abdul Malik had been the student of Medina school of Hadith. Hence he was well versed in religion. Despite being involved in politics his say was considered authentic by the celebrated Imam Malik.¹² Abdul Malik could rebuild Al Aqsa Mosque which was later rebuilt by his son Walid. He could have built another magnificent mosque to offset the Church. But he chose to glorify the epic event of the Prophet's journey to the Heavens. To date the structure is considered a sacred entity by the Muslims unanimously. This is the invocation of religion in the later developments to form those developments religious and this has made the process of Islamic jurisprudence a dynamic one.

Under this process, building mosques stood an extension of seeking purity which made its way from character to material, from

khun-i-jigar to the accomplishment of the *naqsh*. Mosques built in hey days of Islamic civilization were not mere piles of bricks, decoration of marbles and adoration of calligraphy. Again in the words of Iqbal these are *haqiqat-i-muntazir libas-i-majaz me* (awaited reality in guise). Now this architecture with calligraphy has become an embodiment of that purity and piety which was advised to be the motive of praying in a mosque.

Shrines: Another Episode of Embodying Spirituality.

With the rise of Mysticism in Islam, the Islamic Architecture came across another episode of spirituality and that is the shrine building. Sufism and its legacy sought to shift the centre of spirituality from splendid mosques to mud monasteries (*khanqah*) in order to restore spirituality in the hearts. This was a reaction to the transfer of sanctity from soul to material which had created a process of expediency in justifying the rule of physical world. However, in the wake of the negation of volatile world Sufism developed a kingdom of nonphysical world in order to address the grievances of those who were being deprived in the rule of physical world. With this stance Sufis succeeded to move the Islamic societies with deep spiritual sentiments, however, they could not develop any discourse which could render this process of spirituality out of the mosques, as *shar'i* (lawful in the Islamic jurisprudence). Therefore the status of shrines could not develop a consensus among the Muslims and remained a controversial matter throughout the ages.¹³

Elimination of non-Islamic Signs from Mosque Building:

It implies that everything developed by the Muslims could not get the status of being Islamic unless it undergoes a proper discourse, like one which developed the Islamic architecture. This process is evident from early examples of mosque building in which existing structure was used in mosques. For this reason the remains show the existence of sculptures and pictures in mosques which were built immediately after some conquest. In many cases churches or old buildings were taken and made to serve as prayer places instead of building mosque afresh. In other cases material from other buildings was used in mosques. For instance, in Iraq at *Istakhar* (Persepolis) the Friday Mosque was constructed with round columns; on the top of each column was a cow.¹⁴ However, with the development of Islamic architecture these things stopped to continue in mosque building due to the very process of the Islamic discourse discussed above. In the developed world of the Islamic architecture there is no mosque which shows the remnants of non-Islamic structures of sculptures, pictures etc.

Mosque Building: Synthesis of the Islamic Civilization:

So far the discussion was about the conscience of the Muslims which they developed through interpretation of the scripture and derivation of discourses from the verdicts of revelation. Hence the medium was of spirituality and theology. If the issue is considered in pure academic and historical terms then spirituality in the Islamic architecture was a synthesis process of the Islamic civilization. The Islamic civilization had its roots in the

enrichment of the Arabic language in immediate pre-Islamic period, city state of Makkah, the confederation of the Medina state under Medina Pact and innovations of the Great Caliph Umar. Inevitably further step would be the progress of art and architecture. However, this synthesis of civilization was under careful check of the jurists and overall Muslim conscience. Only for this reason it is called Islamic civilization wherever it had its impacts.

Other aspect of this synthesis is the Civilizational interaction. Islamic civilization gained impetus by absorbing the characteristics of the other civilizations. We have mentioned the Dome of the Rock which was constructed in the wake of the grandeur of Spelchre and so on the matter with other examples of the Islamic architecture.

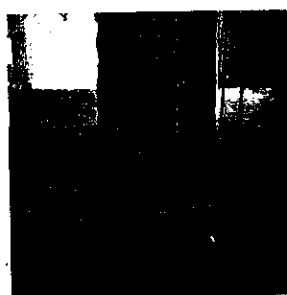
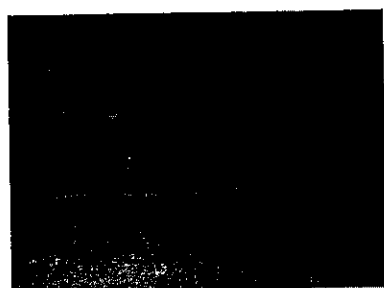
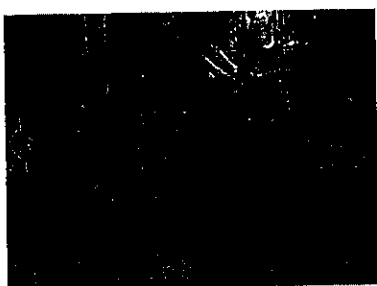
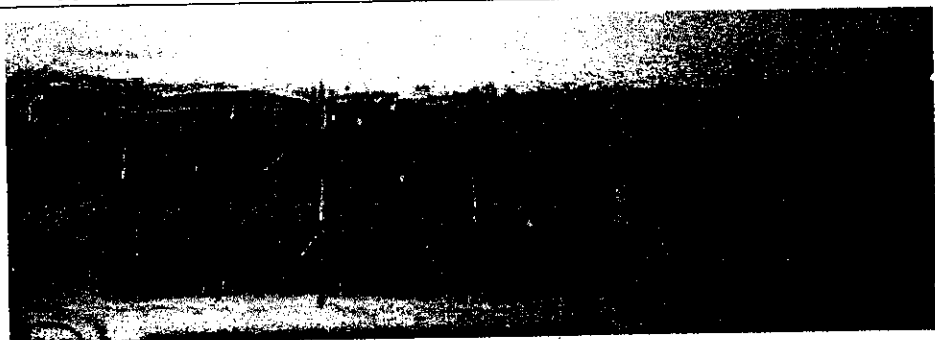
Religio-Political Aspect of Mosque Building:

The invocation of the religious text also made its way in developing the political system of Islam, so the mosque building can also be discussed in religio-political terms. From the very outset mosque had been the centre of all political and social activities. The Prophet and His Caliphs used to address the Friday's congregations. In Umayyad period newly appointed governors began their business by addressing the mobs in mosques. In mosques of Kufa and Basra the residence of the governor was adjacent to mosques owing to the latter importance.¹⁵ Therefore, when architecture began to take shape in the Islamic World, mosques were built with great attention. Damascus, Cordova, Samara, Istanbul, Delhi and Lahore are the instances where master pieces in mosque building are standing with the same grandeur today. In terms of architecture mosque building has been an exclusive activity attributed to rulers. These mosques are symbol of faith for their patrons. Their interest in building mosques shows their consciousness for the faith. They

created masterpieces in architecture by building these mosques. This passion made them the representative of Islam on other lands.

Mosque Architecture: Today's World Approach

Today's world is replete with beautiful mosques; however, most of the mosques which have a monumental status are related to the past era. Moreover present day architecture of mosques represents the climax of technology rather than the zenith of artisanship. In terms of above quoted verse of Iqbal, *khun-i-jigar* is missing in building these mosques. This attitude owes to the hustle and bustle of the modern life in which most of the people do not bother even to say the five times prayer. In such an environment people created mosques by allotting some corner of factory, shop or a market for prayer place. Moreover, mosques in small cities, towns and villages are constructed by the donations of the natives therefore any architectural effort remains out of the realm of builders. This backdrop of Islamic architecture is the reversal of what has been witnessed in its initiation. That is to say as the spirituality witnesses a downfall the attention to have an embodiment of this spirituality also descends. While in the traditional age mosques of small towns also exhibited the spirit of architecture. The author happened to visit a mosque dated back to the Emperor Aurangzeb's era in Southern Punjab (Town of Jallajim Tehsil Mailsi, Distt. Vehari). The Mosque is small according to the need of the population but reflects the taste of the age. Its wooden columns have beautiful designs engraved on them.



(Respectively from top to bottom, from left to right). 1. Inscription above the mehrab depicting the period of construction, 2. Roof, 3. Top of column, 4. Base of the column.

Conclusion:

In order to brand something Islamic or *shar'i* which can not find any verdict in the scripture of Islam, Islamic jurisprudence developed an informal discourse which is a careful and lengthy process. It has an analogy in the modern sciences where theory acquires the status of law, rule or a conceptual framework by the critique of scientists or the specialists of relevant subject. To acquire the status of being Islamic needs more than that. Just to quote a verse from the Quran or the Hadith does not render anything Islamic unless the link of the verdict to the latter is testified by the experts of *shar'iah* and subsequently adopted by the community as a conscience. This is the process of consensus in Islam. Therefore, consensus in Islam is not like hands raising in the parliament. Nowhere in the Quran is exists any verdict to have a mosque with such and such architecture; rather in Hadith it is mentioned that the whole earth is like mosque, hence it is allowed to pray everywhere. It was the gradual process of conception of the divine message which was revealed to the Muslim minds that the proper way of praying is inside a mosque with developed traditions of the Islamic architecture.

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¹ تَشْعُدُونَ مِنْ سُهُولِهَا فُصُورًا وَتَنْجُونَ الْجِبَالَ بَيَوتًا

² In order to develop this link he writes at one place, "Islamic art derived from Islamic spirituality while being also of course moulded by the particular characteristics of the container or vessel of the Quranic revelation, that is, the Semitic and nomadic world whose positive traits Islam universalized." See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1997), 7

to have the glimpse of his metaphysical interpretation, the concluding lines of the chapter are worth reading: "All factors mentioned above, from the Unitarian characteristic to the Islamic revelation, the cosmic dimension of this revelation and the nature of Quran as the Word of God addressed to what is primordial in man, the sacralization of the earth by the Blessed Prophet through the institutionalization of the rite of *salat*, an esoteric science of geometry and proportions related to architecture and many other elements, have made possible the creation of the sacred architecture which is one of the central art of Islam. Nasr, 59

³ At one place he goes to point out the motives of architects, he writes, "The traditional Muslim architect and builder, like all traditional craftsmen, had a profound sense of the nature of the materials with which he dealt. Stone was always treated as stone and brick as brick. At no time did such a builder seek to make a particular object appear to be something other than itself. Whether dealing with stone, brick, mud, or wood in whatever region of the Islamic world and depending upon ecological and economic factors. Muslim architects were able to create masterpieces of Islamic architecture because they had mastery both of the science involved in building and of the materials they used thereby integrating them into a whole reflecting the ethos of Islamic art. They had a sense a awareness of Islamic spirituality which enabled them to create unmistakably Islamic buildings whether using mud in Mali or wood in Malaysia." Nasr, 56. Underlined statement needs argument with reference from history.

⁴ Nasr takes the plan of Ka'bah as follows, "The harmony of dimensions, stability and symmetry of the ka'bah, the centre of the Islamic cosmos, are to be found in the sacred architecture of the whole of the Islamic world.", Nasr, 43

⁵ Therefore *tawaf* is still performed according to the original boundaries and the missing part is pointed out by a rounded wall. The place between this wall and existing building is called *hateem*.

⁶ "Whether it is built high, its walls are in a straight line or not, but God is seen in every corner of it", Atharva Veda X, 2, 28

⁷ The reason behind this casual building which is ordained by God and which is believed to be exactly below a metaphysical structure invites a study to be conducted upon it.

⁸ K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, (Great Briton: Pelican Books, 1958), 9

⁹ Translation by M. Pickthall

¹⁰ The concept of invocation of the religious text is first presented by celebrated Muhammad Qasim Zaman in the wake of the politics of early Abbasids. Though the invocation process is presented in justifying the political interest; a disapproving sense, we spread this concept to the other domains of Islamic civilization. This is the extension of Zaman's thesis in actual. For details see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Making of*

Religious Discourse-An Essay in the history and historiography of the Abbasid Revolution, (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1995)

¹¹ Nasr concedes this in these lines: "Those who have created objects of Islamic art over the ages have done so either by being able to gain a vision of that archetypal world, thanks to the means made available by the Islamic revelation and specifically the Muhammadan *barakah* or have been instructed by those who have had such vision." However, he does not explain the development of this vision.

¹² Abdul Malik possessed a venerated status among early scholars of Hadith. Imam Malik used to brand an act Sunnah because Abdul Malik acted likewise. See Dr Mahmud Ahmed Ghazi, *Muhazrat-i-Sirat* [Lectures on Sirah], (Lahore: Al Faisal, 2007), 164. Moreover, Imam Malik was not a court theologian as later on he supported the insurrection of Nafs-i-Zakkiya against Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'afar Mansoor and faced the consequences.

¹³ However, it does not mean that classical Islamic religious discourse discards Sufism and its manifestations altogether. Again it is this careful discourse which endorses the healthy aspects of Sufism and allots it a place in *shariah* by the experiment of *wahdatu-shuhud* in the Sub-Continent.

¹⁴ Creswell, 7-8. It was according to the account of Muqaddasi.

¹⁵ In the account of mosque at Kufa Creswell described the following story from the sources: "on the qibla side, and only separated from the praying place by a narrow street, was built an official residence (Dar al-Imara) for Sa'd, the Commander in Chief. Included in it was the public treasury (Bayt al-Mal). One night some thieves made a hole in the wall and stole the money, whereupon Sa'd wrote to the Khalif 'Umar informing him of the fact and describing the topography of the spot. 'Umar replied ordering him to shift the mosque so that it was in contact with his residence." Creswell, 9

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