

# The Void in Islamic Art

by

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Strictly speaking, the forbidding of images in Islam refers only to images of the Divinity; it is thus situated in the perspective of the Decalogue, or more exactly of Abrahamic monotheism, which Islam renews: in its last as in its first manifestation, this monotheism is directly opposed to idolatrous polytheism;<sup>1</sup> the plastic image of the Divinity—according to a “dialectic” both historical and divine—is seen as the mark of the error of “associating” (*shirk*) the relative with the absolute, or the created with the uncreated, the latter, in each case, being reduced to the former. The denial of idols, and even more so their destruction, is a translation into concrete terms of the fundamental testimony of Islam, the formula *lā ilaha illā 'Llāh* (“there is no divinity apart from God”), and just as this testimony in Islam dominates and consumes everything, after the fashion of a purifying fire, so the denial of the idols, be it effective or merely virtual, tends to become generalized: thus the portraying of divine envoys (*rusul*), prophets (*anbiyā'*) and saints (*awliyā'*) is avoided, not only because such images could become the object of an idolatrous cult, but also out of respect for what is inimitable in them; they are the vicegerents of God on earth; it is through them that the theomorphic nature of man becomes manifest; but this theomorphism is a secret whose appearance in the corporeal world remains ungraspable; the inanimate and congealed image of the man-god would be merely a shell, an error, an idol. In an Arab Sunni context, there is even a reluctance to represent any living being whatsoever, out of respect for the divine secret contained in creation.<sup>2</sup> And if the prohibition of the image is not quite so far-reaching in other ethnic environments, it is none the less observed in the case of everything forming part of the liturgical framework of Islam: aniconism<sup>3</sup> to some extent becomes co-

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1. It is not a pleonasm to speak of “idolatrous polytheism”, as is shown by the example of Hinduism which is polytheist but in no wise idolatrous, since it recognizes both the provisional and symbolic nature of the idols and the relativity of the “gods” (*devas*) as “aspects” of the Absolute. The Moslem esoterists, the Sufis, sometimes compare idols to Divine Names, whose meaning the pagans have forgotten.

2. According to a saying of the Prophet, artists who seek to imitate the work of the Creator will be condemned in the hereafter, to give life to their works, and their inability to do so will throw them into the worst of torments. This saying can obviously be understood in various ways; in fact it has not prevented the flowering, in certain Moslem environments, of a figurative art entirely free from naturalistic pretensions.

3. “Aniconism” can have a spiritually positive character, whereas “iconoclasm” has only a negative sense.

extensive with the sacred; it is even one of the bases, if not the basis, of the sacred art of Islam.

This may seem paradoxical, for the normal basis of a sacred art is symbolism; in a religion which elsewhere expresses itself in anthropomorphic symbols, the rejection of images seems to undermine the roots of any visual art of a sacred character. But it is necessary to take account of a complex play of subtle compensations and especially of the following: a sacred art is not necessarily composed of images, even in the widest sense of this term; it may simply be the exteriorization of a contemplative state and in this case it will not reflect particular ideas, but will qualitatively transform the ambiance, with a view to its integration in a spiritual equilibrium whose center of gravity is the invisible. It is easy to recognize that such is the nature of Islamic art: its object is above all the ambiance of man—whence the dominant role of architecture—and its quality is essentially contemplative. Aniconism does not lessen this quality; on the contrary, by excluding every image that could invite man to fix his mind on something outside himself and to project his soul in an “individualizing” form, it creates a void. In this respect the function of Islamic art is analogous to that of virgin nature, of the desert especially, which likewise favors contemplation, although from another point of view the order created by art is opposed to the chaos inherent in the nature of the desert.

Let it be said at once that ornamentation with abstract forms, so richly developed in the art of Islam, does not exist to fill this void, as some seem to think; in reality it corroborates it by its continuous rhythm and its character of an endless piece of weaving: instead of ensnaring the mind and dragging it into some imaginary world, it dissolves mental “coagulations”, just as the contemplation of a stream of water, of a flame or of leaves trembling in the wind can detach the consciousness from its inward “idols”.

Islamic ornamentation knows two principal modes, that of the arabesque in the strict sense of the term, made up of sinuous and spiral forms more or less related to vegetable motifs, and that of geometrical interlacing. The first is all rhythm and fluidity and continuous melody, whereas the second is crystalline in nature: the radiating of lines from multiple geometrical foci recalls snowflakes or ice; it gives the impression of calm and freshness. It is in Maghribi art in particular that these two ornamental modes appear in all their purity.

However rich it may be, ornamentation never destroys the simplicity, not to say the sobriety of the architectural whole; such at least is the rule that is observed in all ages and milieu that are not decadent. In a general manner the architectural whole manifests equilibrium, calmness and serenity.

Whereas the interior of a Romanesque basilica progresses towards the altar, and the apse of a Gothic church tends upwards, the interior of a mosque does not comprise any dynamic element; whatever be its type of construction, from the primitive mosques with a horizontal roof on pillars to the Turkish mosques with cupolas, space is ordered in such a way that it reposes entirely in itself; it is not an expanse which waits to be traversed; its void is like the mould or womb of a motionless and undifferentiated plenitude.

Turkish architects such as Sinan, who took up the theme of construction of the Hagia Sophia in order to develop it in a typically Islamic way, sought a perfectly static and fully intelligible synthesis of the two great complementary forms: the hemisphere of the cupola and the cube of the building itself. They achieved this in various ways, which would take too long to describe here; it will suffice to mention an architectural detail characteristic of their conception of space. It is known that Byzantine cupolas—like Roman cupolas, moreover—are supported on pendentives which vaguely prolong their curve and merge “surreptitiously” with the four corners of the supporting walls. This somewhat irrational passage from the circular base of the cupola to the square of the supports is something that Turkish architecture seeks to avoid; it replaces the pendentives by a clearly articulated element, which is called *muqarnas* in Arabic and which is often compared to stalactites, whereas it is really more in the nature of an alveola composed of niches which overlap into one another; by means of their geometrical play, the passage from the continuous and “fluid” form of the cupola to the rectangular and “solid” form of the supporting walls appears as a gradual crystallization: the cube of the building “coagulates” from out of the undifferentiated unity of the cupola, and since the latter always represents heaven, it is the continuous movement of the heavenly sphere which is suddenly immobilized in the plenitude of the pure present.

This architectural conception is typical of Islam; at the same time, it is very far removed from that of Greco-Roman architecture, which is always more or less anthropomorphic, in the sense that it invites the spectator to participate subjectively in the drama of the forces of construction; one may mention especially the classical column, made to the measure of man—and also the architrave, corbels and cornices—which make one feel the weights and forces which they support; in Romanesque and Gothic architecture this drama is transposed to the spiritual plane: the clustered columns of a Gothic cathedral are as if animated by an irresistible impulse to ascend. There is nothing of all this in Moslem architecture, which remains objective.

This void which Islamic art creates by its static, impersonal and anonymous quality enables man to be entirely himself, to repose in his ontological center where he is both the slave (*‘abd*) of God and His representative (*khalīfah*) on earth. Certainly, the sacred image in its turn is a support for contemplation, wherever its use is called for by the nature of the doctrine,<sup>4</sup> and on condition that its symbolism and formal language are guaranteed by the tradition. But the religious art whose forms are anthropomorphic is of an eminently precarious nature because of the psychic tendencies, both individual and collective, which may all too easily gain access to it, and drag it into a naturalistic “evolution”, with reactions that are well known. Islam deals with this problem at its very root by excluding from its liturgical framework any image of man. By this very fact it maintains in a certain fashion, and on a higher and spiritual plane, the position of the nomad who is not involved in the turbulent evolution of a world composed of the mental

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4. As in Christianity, in which “God became man so that man might become God”, according to the saying of St. Irenaeus.

projections of man and of his reactions towards these projections.

The aniconism of Islamic art comprises fundamentally two aspects; on the one hand, it preserves the primordial dignity of man, whose form, “made in the image of God”,<sup>5</sup> is neither imitated nor usurped by a work of art that is inevitably limited and one-sided; on the other hand, nothing that could possibly be an idol, even in a relative and wholly provisional manner, may interpose itself between man and the invisible presence of God. What comes before all, is the witnessing that there is “No divinity but God”: this dissolves every objectivization of the Divine even before it can occur.

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5. According to a saying of the Prophet, “God created Adam in His form” (*‘alā sūratihī*). From the Islamic point of view, the “divine form” of Adam is essentially constituted by the seven universal faculties, which are likewise attributed to God, namely: life, knowledge, will, power, hearing, vision and speech; they are limited in man, but not in God.