



What is a Mosque?

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THE MAP OF Islam's presence in Europe is framed by two dazzling monuments: in the West, by the Umayyad Mosque in Cordova, and in the East by the Mosque of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, which defines the skyline of Istanbul. The two buildings seem strikingly different: the former is classically and austere Arab in form, echoing the seventh-century layout of the Prophet's sanctuary in Medina: its forest of arches and architraves, topped by courses of red brick and limestone voussoirs, unmistakably recalls the apostolic simplicity of the earliest Muslim age. The Süleymaniye, by contrast, soars with a dynamic verticality, through sweeping cupolas and apses which draw the eye upwards to a vast central dome, illuminated by great windows. Both mosques are Muslim structures, their Islamic ethos evident to every visitor from the moment he or she steps into their interior and leaves the profane world; yet they seem to celebrate radically different conceptions of how the heavy materials of the earth can be transformed into a serene and celestial symphony of light.

These two miracles in stone remind us that Islam, which is in our time the religion of perhaps twenty-three percent of the human race, spreads over a bewilderingly vast geography; as a Senegalese scholar once remarked, the religion is like pure water, which remains itself while taking on the colour of the rocks and soil over which it runs. The Qur'an is conspicuously a celebration of the diversity and splendour of God's creation, in which 'the difference of your languages and colours' (30:22) forms a sign which points to the generous Divine purpose in fashioning a world of difference. The sanctuary which the Prophet created in Medina was itself conceived as an oasis of diversity, a stunning alternative to a heathen culture preoccupied with tribal and racial affiliation: unlike the pagan



deserts which surrounded it, it provided a haven not only for every Arab clan but for converts from other races and nations, including some of the best-known Disciples, such as Salman the Persian and Sohaib the Greek, while to the horror of the old pagan aristocracy the Prophet ﷺ chose an Abyssinian for the signal honour of calling the believers to the five daily prayers. Hence a familiar Arabic name for ‘mosque’ is *jāmi’*, meaning, quite literally, ‘that which includes’. The two great European mosques seem to honour this intention: in Cordova the mosque embraced Arabs, Berbers, Goths, native Iberians, Slavs, Africans and other citizens of medieval Europe’s greatest city, while in Istanbul the mosque likewise filled with the diverse faces of the cosmopolitan Levantine and Balkan world of the Ottoman sultans, whose capital city was described by the 19th century traveller De Amicis as ‘a daily carnival.’

It is no coincidence that these ‘houses of difference’ were united by one great fact: for all their architectural homage to the lands in which they are embedded (the Visigothic horseshoe arch, the Byzantine cupola),

they all face the single Great Sanctuary in Mecca. The cubic ‘Ancient House’, the Holy Ka’ba which stands at the centre of that sanctuary, is the symbolic axis of the whole Muslim world, built up, as the Qur’an announces, by Abraham and his elder son Ishmael to be ‘a place of resort for mankind, and a place of safety’ (2:125). From their hundreds of ethnic and linguistic homes the Hajj pilgrims come to walk around the House, mirroring on earth the motions of the angels around God’s throne; and in that turning they recall the original ‘time before time’ when, as the Qur’an describes it, mankind in its entirety testified to the Divine unity and Lordship (7:172). The Black Stone, set into one corner of the House, is understood to be the earthly sign of ‘God’s right hand’, to which all humanity, without exception, once pledged its loving allegiance. Every mosque in the world, which in a sense forms an extension of that great Sanctuary, thus reminds its congregation of the radical and ultimate unity of humankind, as the Prophet said: ‘You are all from Adam, and Adam is from dust’. In a time such as ours, when nations and peoples are in the grip of a growing populism and nationalism, while extreme disparities in income and privilege encourage so many to live separate lives, places of worship provide uniquely precious spaces for the expression of human equality before God; and mosques represent this gift in a pure and absolute Abrahamic way.

The imam who leads each prayer is not a member of a sacerdotal brotherhood, but is an ordinary congregant known to be able to perform the rite accurately and devoutly. The non-hierarchical nature of Islam is well-known, and is sometimes compared to some of the Protestant sects in Christianity, where the minister is simply a *primus inter pares*, an elder or a presbyter. So a mosque may be large or small, or may even be a fenced-off patch of lawn in a Bosnian village: the Prophet said: ‘the whole earth has been made a mosque for me’, and thus the entire world is consecrated and seen as holy by the Muslim believer, who reveres every land because it is of God and is inherently pure. Nowadays, across



the world, public buildings and airports include Muslim prayer rooms, which bring a breath of the Absolute into hurried and profane spaces, offering a protection and a blessing for passers-by; and this is facilitated by the fact that these need neither a professional imam nor a rite of consecration.

The Islamic memory reveres Abraham and Ishmael as builders of the archetypal *Jāmi'* in Mecca, and Islam's sense of its inclusivity is reflected in this as well. Ishmael, for Muslims as for Bible readers, is Abraham's son by Hagar, a lady of Egypt, through whom a 'gentile' bloodline enters the Abrahamic family. Hagar the African becomes the symbolic matriarch of a community which will transcend ethnicity; and it is appropriate that Muslims believe that with her son Ishmael she lies buried beside the Ka'ba in the Meccan sanctuary which still recalls her identity, her struggle, and her contribution to some of its rituals and the layout of the sacred complex.



The Lady Hagar's role for mosque-goers does not stop here. Not only does she marry the Semitic to the African, thus proclaiming monotheism's belongingness to the whole human world, but she demonstrates the inclusion of the female principle within the sacred geography and the cardinal rites of Islam. The ritual of the sevenfold 'coursing' between the hills of Safa and Marwa in Mecca, which forms an indispensable part of the Hajj pilgrimage, may be the only obligatory ritual in any world religion which was instituted by a woman; and when her descendent, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, created his mosque in Medina he ensured that women would be included in the sacred place, saying: 'Do not prevent God's bondswomen from attending His mosques.' This inclusion of women, unusual or strange to some earlier religions, is extended to all the major obligations of the faith, the so-called Five Pillars, which are equally incumbent on both sexes. And because religious leadership and authority depend only on erudition and sanctity, the mosques of Islam have down the centuries often been the scene of instruction and preaching by female scholars, the Prophet's own widow Aisha having set the precedent, reviving Islam's distinctly Hagarene quality through the inclusion of 'God's bondswomen' at the very heart of religious belief and practice.

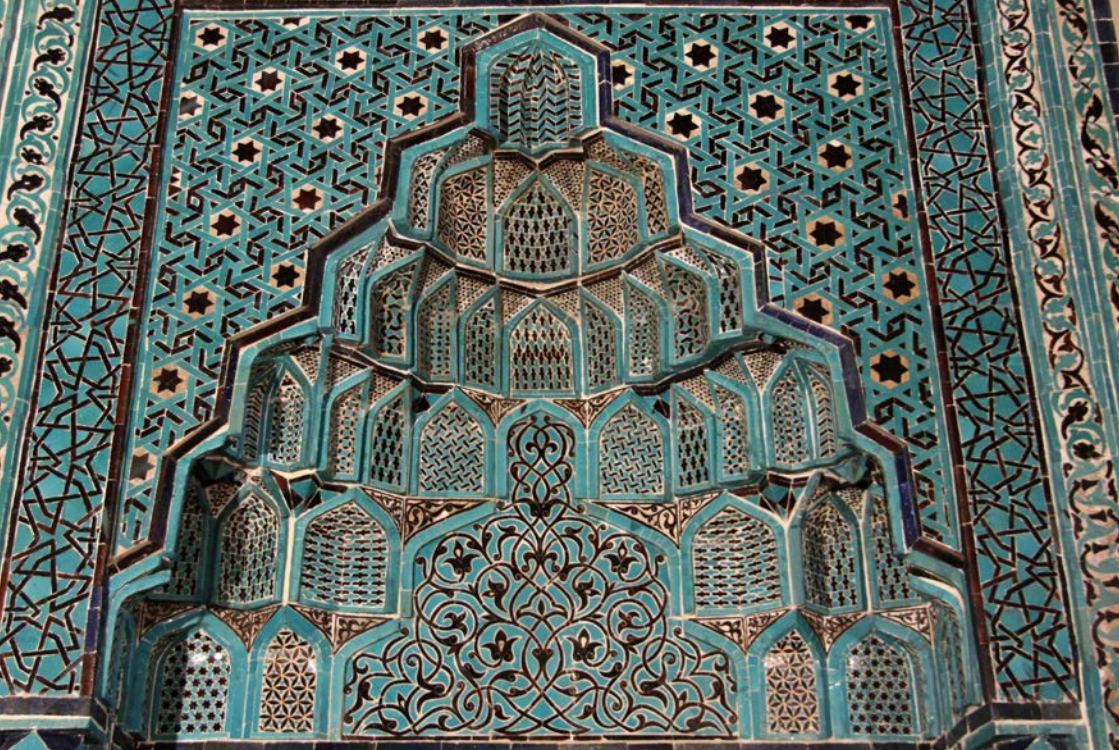
A place of worship in any religion must speak about the engagement of heaven and earth, of transcendence with immanence. Just as Islam's symbol of the crescent moon indicates this contact by invoking the point in the cosmic order at which the immutable spheres of heaven mysteriously touch the lower world of growth and decay, so the mosques of Islam, for all their immense and bewildering formal diversity, represent in physical materials the enigma of the presence of the holy on earth. While the Qur'an (2:144) tells mosque worshippers to face the qibla, the direction of the Ka'ba, which is the symbol of God's mystery and eternity, the Qur'an also states that 'East and West belong to God, so wheresoever you turn there is the Face of God' (2:115). This is not a pantheism, for

the world is certainly not God; but is a reminder that at an infinitesimal distance beneath the surface of things lie the mercy, truth, and presence of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). One of the ninety-nine names ascribed by Muslim tradition to God is *al-Qarīb*, the Near; and the Qur'an goes on to insist that God 'is nearer to man than his jugular vein' (50:16). Mysteriously, God is immanent (*tashbīḥ*) as well as transcendent (*tanzīḥ*), something which we know whenever we experience holiness in people, places or times; and it is this 'nearness' of God which makes prayer possible.

So amidst the diversity of the world's mosques there is usually a minaret and a *miḥrāb*: the former a high place or tower, indicating transcendence, while the latter is a niche let into the *qibla* wall, which signals 'interiority', God's 'witness' and approachability, His hearing of our prayers. Often the *miḥrāb* is surmounted by a Qur'anic verse (3:37) evoking the Virgin Mary's devotion in her own niche (*miḥrāb*): as 'the great lady of Paradise' the Qur'an treats her as a paradigm of Islam itself, in her self-surrender (*islām*) to the Divine will, her prayerful life with God, and the miracle of the fruit which was bestowed to her out of its natural season. The *miḥrāb* in Islam seems explicitly Marian.

Within the *miḥrāb* is echoed the chanting of the Qur'anic text; through which the worshipper is further connected to God's infinity. The scripture tells us that the world is a composition of God's 'signs' (*āyāt*), which point to and affirm His 'nearness'; and also that the individual verses of the scripture are *āyāt* as well. Muslim doctrine speaks of a Divine speech which is 'uncreated', so that something of God's presence as Speaker is directly experienced and witnessed by the sound of the Qur'anic text. A mosque is hence a sanctuary of the Qur'an, and as the imam chants, and the believers follow, or chant themselves, they intuit the presence of God's infinity as the majestic text resonates within them, and fills the expectant spaces of the building which surrounds them.

We must refer to a further aspect of the inclusivity of the *jāmi'*. The Qur'an speaks of human praise (*tasbīḥ*), which is a glorification of God



in His near holiness and His transcendent Otherness; but also tells us of the *tasbīḥ* of non-human creatures. ‘Everything in heaven and earth hymns His glory’ (57:1) is a phrase repeated several times in the Qur’anic text. ‘The thunder hymns His praise’ (13:13), and so do the mountains and birds (21:79); in fact, ‘there is nothing that does not praise and glorify Him; but you do not understand their praise’ (17:44). The supreme physical articulation of this praising and adoration is prostration, and the Qur’an goes on to insist that ‘all things on heaven and earth are prostrate before Him, willingly or unwillingly’ (13:15), and ‘the stars and the trees prostrate’ (55:5). This is one sense of the Prophet’s dictum that ‘the whole earth has been made a mosque for me’, the English word ‘mosque’ derives through the Spanish *mezquita* from this Qur’anic *masjid*, meaning simply, a ‘place of prostration’: and this is, in reality, the whole world, which is not only a place where the Ishmaelite monotheist can unfurl his prayer-rug to pray, but is a place where everything is already joyfully prostrating to its Maker.

The Muslim prayer (ṣalāt) is thus understood as the human form of this cosmic recitation of God's glory. A famous verse runs like this:

Do you not see that all that is in the heavens and the earth, and
the birds flying in ranks with wings spread wide, glorify God? Each
knows the way of its prayer (ṣalāt) and its glorification (tasbīḥ).

God has full knowledge of all that they do. (24:41)

This verse comes shortly after the famous 'Verse of Light', which tells us that 'God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.' (24:35) His Light is understood by readers as something which proceeds from His essence, the blessedness which inheres in creatures being the fragrance of their Divine source. And although creatures feel sundered from that source they still recall it and indicate it, and hence they praise and pray and worship, in a joyful and constant susurrations of adoring remembrance. Thus does Islam often call itself the 'religion of nature' (dīn al-ḥiṭā), the Qur'an constantly summoning us to see nature as āyāt, and to join its symphony of witness and praise.

The Muslim ṣalāt, which is the gem protected by the jewel-case of the mosque, is the human enactment of this universal celebration and recollection of the holy source of our being, our origin (mabda') and place of final return (ma'ād). Perhaps this is why many mosques in the traditional Islamic world made provision for animals as well as humans in their surroundings: some mosque endowments provide for the feeding of stray cats; while many of the great mosques of Istanbul, including the Süleymaniye itself, have apertures (kuş evi) let into the walls where birds may nest, finding sanctuary within the walls of the holy building, and adding their praise to the praise of the worshippers within. Many hadith depict the Prophet as communicating with animals; and the Islamic ethos as a whole sees humanity as part of the biological community of the natural world.

The Qur'an's distinctive inclusion of nature in the pattern of cosmic



worship has inevitably also shaped the preferences of Muslim architects and decorators. The famed Oriental rugs and kilims are distinctive for their graceful interweaving of geometrical and vegetal motifs; and the same can be said for Islamic ceramic arts, the stained-glass windows typical of mosques, and the stucco, timber and stone carvings present in walls and domes. In these patterns we sense that the world of nature outside the walls has been invited indoors to continue its work of praise, and to demonstrate its calming aesthetic power in pointing to its Divine author.

For all its diversity, Islamic decorative art again and again loves the juxtaposition of the strictly geometrical with the luxuriantly vegetal; and in this, too, we learn something distinctive about the theology of this mosque-religion. With its love of sacred geometry which yields the vibrant stars and polygonal tracery often known as the ‘arabesque’, Islamic art reminds us that behind the apparently rough surface of nature

and of matter there is order and symmetry: the snowflake, the flower, even the order of every molecule, bespeak the reality of a world which is not chaos but which in every part reveals the existence of an ordering Principle, which manifests itself in brilliant symmetries and consistent geometrical patterns, recalling the Divine freedom to create, and God's name the 'self-subsistent Upholder' (*al-Qayyūm*). Believers in the mosque, as their eyes follow the lines of these abstract reminders, recall the presence of this Divine Maker in the world, in which 'you will see no flaw in the creation of the All-merciful God' (67:3). Side by side with these solemn yet dynamic arabesques we find tessellations and vegetal spirals which, while maintaining the religion's rejection of the idea that images could do justice to God or to the nature of holy human beings, indicate the lush revelation of the divine name *al-Ḥayy*, the Alive. The contemplation of virgin nature purifies the heart and brings it peace, and evokes the Eden in which we originated, and the paradisal Garden to which we hope to be summoned at the end of our lives.

So the mosque often places the algebra of the arabesque side by side with florescent whorls of plant life, recalling the two Divine names *al-Ḥayy* and *al-Qayyūm*, which also indicate the governing principles of immanence and transcendence, of God's accessibility and inaccessibility, which are brought together by the Qur'anic narrative and are evoked in a particularly absolute way by the *Shahāda* itself, the brief and indispensable credo whose pronunciation forms the First Pillar of Islam: *no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God: He is enigmatically self-defined, the 'I am that I am' of Exodus; but is made accessible by prophecy, which gifts humanity with soul-techniques and contemplative practices by which God's immanence may be experienced.*

The mosque, then, is the workshop for the *ṣalāt*, the 'Second Pillar' which is the most important and indispensable Muslim rite, which five times each day, at dawn, noon, midafternoon, dusk and nightfall, brings the community together to enact in a very embodied way the cosmic



truth that all creation is indebted to God and is called to worship, love and remember Him. This ‘act of nature’ around which the pious Muslim life revolves and which shapes the entire pattern of life in traditional Muslim societies, is governed not by the artificial measures of mechanical clocks and paper calendars but by the heavenly spheres themselves, whose *tasbīḥ* the believer therefore joins. The passage of the seasons naturally affects the length of the days, and hence the natural and diurnal rhythms of the mosque’s life. The holy days and festivals are determined by a lunar calendar, so that once again the motions of the solar system shape the inner metabolism of the believer: this is understood as another aspect of Islam as *dīn al-fiṭra*, the religion of nature, or the ‘primordial, natural way’: like humanity in truly ancient times, Muslim worshippers respect the cycles of the sun and the moon, and through the movements of their spirits feel themselves mysteriously reintegrated into the natural world.

Such, very briefly, is the nature and function of a mosque. It is a summons to a way of joining the sacred symphony of nature; in the mosque the Ishmaelite congregation gathers in equal fellowship to hear the recitation of the Qur'an, and in the cycles of the prayers, which have remained unchanged since the time of the religion's founder, to enact the drama of the human submission to, and loving adoration of, the One God of Abraham and Ishmael, Who is Author of the world.

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