

Faith is the Architect, Reflections on the Mosque

Gülzar Haider*

Gülzar Haider Design Group
Room 229, Architecture Building
Carleton University
Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6
Canada

To have faith is to accept certain ideas, attributes and causalities without demanding any strict evidence. The varying degrees of certainty in this acceptance are usually taken as an indicator of the quality of faith. The deeper the felt sense of certainty, the higher the quality of faith. It is in this sense that faith is a general prerequisite of most, if not all, religious views of the human condition.

For Muslims this "faith" is the very foundation of an Islamic schema. The Quranic word for it is *Iman* for which belief or even faith, (Murata & Chittick, 1994, 37-42; Smith, 1979) is not an accurate counterpart. This state of *Iman* is beyond the mere profession of the dogma and the submission¹ to the disciplined code of religious conduct. It is, instead, to arrive at a "heartfelt"² and "intellectually self-evident" certainty³: a direct and unclouded cognisance of God and His attributes, a cognisance no longer contingent upon sensory perceptions, disarming logical proofs or even "miracles". It is important to emphasise that this faith is a certitude about entities, ideas, and phenomena that are not present⁴ for the human being in a normative sensory and objective manner. God, angels, revelation, prophet-hood, return to the hereafter, and final justice are all concepts whose certainty a *Momin*, the one possessing *Iman*, will uphold with his very life and yet none of these are evident in the strict sense. It is the believer's heart that sees it clearly, though it is hidden from his eyes.⁵ It is precisely this "seeing of the unseen" that is of interest to us in establishing mutual reflections between faith and architecture.

* Department of Architecture, Carleton University

¹ Dogma is the Muslim *Shahadah*: "La Ilaha ilAllah Muhammad urRasulullah: There is no God but Allah and Muhammed is His Messenger" and Islam: in its literal meaning as submission to the code of conduct as laid down *Shariah*: the Law.

² *Qalb*: the word used for heart in the Quran. It is the receptacle of *Iman* as indicated in 58: 22.

³ Three levels of certainty are introduced in the Quran: 1. *Ain al yaqin*: certainty with sight; 2. *ilm al yaqin*: certainty with intellect (102: 5-7); 3. *haqq al yaqin*: certainty with Truth. (69: 51) We are referring to *ilm al yaqin*.

⁴ *Chaiib*: word use by the Quran to indicate "that which is not present" or "not seen". (2: 3). This is not to be confused with "that which is not existent".

⁵ Quran 58: 22 and 22: 46. Also the *hadith* (saying) of the Prophet Muhammad: Faith is a knowledge in the heart, a voicing with the tongue, and an activity with the limbs." Ibn Maja, *Muqaddima* 9.

The one most fundamental "unseen" and thus the singular focus of faith is God Himself. His aloneness, transcendence and incomparability (*Tanzih*) to any creature is *a priori*. This is the faith in the Being of God (*Dhat*) independent of His attributes (*Sifat*) and signs (*Ayat*).¹ It anchors us to our soul that has already made a covenant of cognisance with his Creator at the scene of genesis.²

On a cognitive plane we know of Him exclusively through His own words³ that He has revealed to us through His prophets. These are His "names", the attributes (*Sifat*) that, taken simultaneously and without exclusion, establish the protocol and suggest the substance of our knowledge (*Marifah*) of Him. And because God has also used His own words to speak of His creations and these words are woven with the ones He has used for Himself we may, because of the miraculous versatility of words and our created faculty of imagination, tolerate an occasional symbolism or comparability (*Tashbih*) between an attribute of His and that of His creation but only with the aim of knowing Him and fulfilling His purpose of our creation.

It is now possible for us to put forth some ideas on how Islamic faith, which in our present discussion is synonymous with the certitude about Quran being the Word of God, becomes operative in artistic production.

Islamic creativity thrives on the incipient consciousness of "gap" between *Tanzih* and *Tashbih* and the desire to bridge this. There is the transcendence (*Dhat*) and incomparability (*Tanzih*) of God on one hand and His attributes (*Asma and Sifat*), similitudes, allegorical constructs (*Tashbih, Tamthil*) and manifest signs (*Ayat*) on the other. There is the striving to "see the Unseeable", to "imagine the Unimaginable", to be "closer to the One Who has no Location". This journey, *via negativa*,⁴ is in fact the faith in pursuit of its own countenance. This desire for the Hidden Beautiful (*Batin, Jameel*), Whose presence cannot be constructed because His absence cannot be imagined, is the faithful's "aesthetic angst". This thirst for the cognisance of God, as a consequence of the faith and not as a sceptic's pursuit of evidence, is actually the energy behind Islam's artistic expression. It appears as the love-lorn longing of a Rumi⁵ seeking union with the Beloved, as the disciplined swaying of an al-Bawwab's⁶ pen in search of the befitting form for the Word, and as the ascending

¹ For elucidation of terms like *Tanzih* and *Tashbih* see Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1978, 9-10). For other terms like *Dhat, Sifat* see Haider (1988, 73-85).

² Quran 7: 172 When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam, from their loins their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): "Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Yea! we do testify".....

³ The revelations in general and the Quran in specific. God has introduced His "*Asma al Husna: the Beautiful Names*" which are His attributes; and similes, parables constructed by Him about Him. One such parable is the Verse of Light: 24: 35.

⁴ For an excellent example of discourses on God, *via negativa*, see Ali Ibn Abi Talib's quotations in William C. Chittick (1980, 27-40).

⁵ Jalalu'ddin Rumi. See Chittick (1983).

⁶ Ali ibn Hilal Ibn al-Bawwab, Arabic calligrapher, d. 1032. See Schimmel (1984).

passion of a Sinan's¹ minaret daring to touch the heavenly threshold. Faith in its ebullient, light-seeking state spurs art. Faith in its stagnant, blinded state suffocates art.

There are recurrent formative ideas in the Quranic imagery of creation. One such idea is the splitting of the amorphous, pre-existent "unity" into mutually essential, simultaneously existent opposites or pairs.² These oppositional but non-belligerent pairs, be they heaven and earth, day and night, or male and female have then a created necessity for one another, a necessity so basic and strong that either is incomplete without the other. In their "separateness" they both testify to the "unity" that they were. This separateness is, in fact, the very reason for their being recognised as manifest constituents of a pre-manifest, non-differentiated unity. In their separateness lies the secret of their individuality. In their temporary union lies the promise of procreation and continuity.

It is my opinion that the faith, seasoned through recitation³ and reflection,⁴ imprints itself on the "heart" of the faithful. Mapped on the intellect and the imagination of the faithful are many formative ideas of the Quranic text. Among these the idea of splitting the unity in order to affirm the unity can be seen operating in a wide range of Islamic artistic expression.

The archetypal house of the classical Muslim lands results from the splitting of "earth" mass on cardinal axes to form a courtyard into which is welcomed the "heaven" that is the divinely split (see fn. 14) other of the earth. At a higher, more complex level the labyrinth known as Muslim *medina* expresses the formative idea of splitting an amorphous plateau into mutually essential tessellations of spaces and enclosures. The morphogenesis of *medina* as the "manifest unity", from an amorphous plateau is achieved through the discriminating intentions and partitioning acts of dwelling, journeying, gathering, transacting, praying. *Medina*,⁵ this inseparable weave of space and matter, behaviour and architecture, is thus both a prerequisite as well as an expression of the community of the faithful.

It is the same formative idea of splitting the unity to make it manifest that is so eloquently apparent in the making of *rahle*, the folding stand for the manuscripts of the Quran,⁶ so balanced are the intricacies of the script and non-script in calligraphic

¹ Sinan ibn Abdulmennan, *Chief Court Architect of Ottoman Sultans: Suleyman the Magnificent, Selim II, and Murad III during 16th century*. No known architect in Islamic history has become synonymous like him with the silhouettes of great mosques like Suleymanieh in Istanbul and Selimiye in Edirne. See Kuran (1987).

² Quran 21: 30 " Do not the deniers see that the heavens and the earth were together and then we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then have faith?"

³ *Zikr*: an often repeated word in the Quran meaning recitation, remembrance.

⁴ *Taffakur* and *Tadabbur* : Quranic words meaning reflective thought and conscious intellectual deliberation, respectively.

⁵ see my discussions on Muslim city (1984).

⁶ *Rahle* is made from a single plank of wood that is split from either side and then the cut is interwoven and the what used to be a single plank of wood opens up into an X formation that acts as the seat of the open Book. It is a humble but universally available object in the mosques.

panels especially the ones that ephemeralize the boundaries of matter and space in Islamic architecture.¹

Faith necessitates existence of the "one with faith" and the "One in Whom the faith is professed". This essential separateness is in fact the definition of faith (Iman). God created Adam and Eve and thus became "known" through the faith in the hearts of the faithful among their children.² At the elevated status of faith, the faithful in fact becomes the "argument of God".³ As a similitude in the context of the above discussions we can look at the faithful human as a corporeal sign of God.

Nothing expresses faith more succinctly yet symbolically, as *Salat*, the ritual prayer incumbent on every believer. It is a uniquely personal gesture where the body and all its constituents, mind and all its dimensions, and soul and all its harmonies participate. Looking at the body alone one cannot grasp the meaning of movements, listening to what is being recited one starts to relate the content and the expression, but only after acceptance of the potential inclinations and ecstasy of the soul, one realises that this *Salat* is the total embodiment of faith, spiritual, existential and phenomenal. While the "good deeds"⁴ that a believer is expected to perform are defined in terms of the others, ritual prayer is the personal enactment of faith, an affirmation of the utterly dependent status of the created one before the Creator, supplicating for His forgiveness, guidance and protection. That this ritual is resonant with rhythms of the solar light raining upon the spinning planet, that it is enacted five times during one cycle of the day and night, and that its protocol involves water and earth, links it to the terrestrial nature and celestial time. That it has strict demands on orientation to Kaaba, the Sacred House in Makka, and that the body must go through prescribed sequence of *Qiyam*, *Raku`* and *Sajud* makes it into an act of place making and space charting. *Salat*, in this sense is an architectural instrument disciplined by the protocol⁵ of faith. It sculpts the space of a mosque and lends form to its enclosure.

Qiyam is standing upright with shoulders forming a plane normal to the Kaaba orientation. This act translates into the *Qibla* wall,⁶ the plane that separates and veils the temporal domain between the faithful and the Kaaba. It also necessitates two

¹ Calligraphic panels, especially of the architectural scale, combined with arabesque and geometric pattern, where figure and ground play hide and seek, where colours are in a live play with the changing light, enliven the surface between mass and space and it transcends its apparent role as a boundary.

² It is a common expression among the Muslim spiritualists that "God created man so that He be known".

³ The faith of Abraham, his manner of deducing it, his readiness to suffer exile for it and his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son at the call of his Unseen God, have all become "arguments" for God. It is commonly held among Muslims that there is no period or place which is devoid of such "argument".

⁴ *Aimal as Salih*: a common term in the Quran. " Verily all mankind is in loss except those who have faith and do good deeds, and join together in mutual teaching of Truth and of patience and constancy." 103: 2-3.

⁵ All the details of Islamic law that formally homogenize the individual believers into the community that occupies the mosque as a single body.

⁶ *Qibla*: Though the specific meaning here is the "point" of Kaaba towards which all must face during the ritual prayer, the word *Qibla* also means "against whom they will have no power..", "what is ahead of them...", "what is before their eyes".. In this sense *Qibla* is a behavioral determinant that helps to achieve the feeling that one is praying to God as if one is "seeing Him". cf. the hadith of Gibraeel in Bukhari, Iman 37; Muslim, Iman 1 and Mishkat al-masabih, 5-6.

lateral planes that set local bounds to rows of believers, parallel to the Qibla wall, that spread across the equalizing and unifying terrestrial plane of the mosque. It has been suggested that in *qiyyam* the faithful joins, intentionally and willfully, all the upright creation like trees in the glorification of their Creator (Amuli, S. H., 1989, 220-241).

Raku` is bowing forward with two hands resting on the knees. The believer is now among the angels who have been in *raku`* ever since their creation.¹ The body's central plane of bilateral symmetry is now expressed as the triangle of torso, legs and the arms. This plane splits the earth into the right and left hemisphere. The split defines the great circle connecting the praying individual with Kaaba and marks the *Mihrab*² in the Qibla wall.

Sajud is the act of entire body going into prostration. Forehead, the seat of an individual's honour, lowers itself to touch the earth, and the body is crouched low and close to the terrestrial datum resting on two palms, two knees and two pairs of five toes. "Praise be to my Cherisher and Sustainer, the Lord Most High", repeatedly says the faithful. The upright axis between the children of Adam and Eve, the enlivened earth, and God Whose throne encompasses the heavens is finally established. This is an event of spiritual singularity, an ecstatic catastrophe which, at the risk of committing blasphemy, can be likened to an imploding journey through the layers of Light, enwrapped by the Niche, burning with the Olive, beholding His Countenance (see fn. 27). It is at this instant that the "distance" between the created and the Creator has disappeared and the unity has tasted its pre-creation state. All forms have dissolved, all shapes are irrelevant, materiality does not matter anymore. But this cannot continue. This annihilating *Sajud* has to end as the affairs of creation have to maintain themselves until God Himself rolls up the universe. The forehead is raised, the faith has risen from its consummation. This act of rising is now an exploding, formative force that splits asunder the dark heart of matter. *Sajud* of the faithful has caused a magnificent void (Burkhardt, 1970; Nasr): the consecrated architecture that is called *Masjid*.³ Here the *mihrab* leads and the *mimbar* enlightens.⁴ Here the light sweeps like the dervishes. Here the recitation quenches the silence. Here the weary rest and the needy supplicate. But the Real Dweller of this dwelling is beyond dwelling. That is why faith is the architect.

¹ There are angels who are in prayer since their creation and they supplicate for the forgiveness of all things on earth. see Quran 42: 5.

² The niche that signifies the position of the Imam, the one who leads and is a surrogate for *Mihrab's* original occupant: the Prophet. It is also a formal gesture in resonance with the Quranic parable of the alcove and the lamp (24: 35). Though no one has claimed to physically "construct" that parable, there is not much doubt that the imagery has shaped the *Mihrab* and its light, and its surface treatment.

³ *Masjid*: the place where *Sajud* is performed. It is the original arabic word from which Mosque has been derived.

⁴ The seat of knowledge. It vocalizes the "light" of the niche.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AMULI, S. H. (1989), "Inner Secrets of the Path" (Element Books, Longmead, UK).
- BURKHARDT, T. (1970), *The Void in Islamic Art*, Studies in Comparative Religion, (1970) 4.
- CHITTICK, W.C. (1980), (Ed., transl.) "A Shi'ite Anthology" (London: Muhammadi Trust, London).
- CHITTICK, W. C. (1983), "Sufi Path of Love : The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi"(State University of New York Press, Albany).
- HAIDER, G. (1984), *Habitat and Values in Islam: A Conceptual Formulation of an Islamic City*, The Touch of Midas (Ziauddin Sardar, Ed.), (Manchester), 170-208.
- HAIDER, G. (1988), *Islam, Cosmology and Architecture*", Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies (Cambridge: The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Cambridge), 73-85.
- KURAN A. (1987), "Sinan, the Grand Old Master of Ottoman Architecture" (Institute of Turkish Studies, Washington D.C.).
- MURATA, S. & CHITTICK, W.C. (1994), "The Vision of Islam" (Paragon House, New York).
- NASR S. H. (1978), "An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines" (Thames and Hudson, London).
- NASR, S. H. "The Significance of Void in Islamic Art," *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 185-94.
- SCHIMMEL, A. (1984), "Calligraphy and Islamic Culture"(New York University Press, New York).
- SMITH, W. C. (1979), "Faith and Belief" (Princeton University Press, Princeton).