

# Islamic Art and Spirituality

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### III

## *The Principle of Unity and the Sacred Architecture of Islam*

«جعلت لي الأرض مسجداً وطهوراً»

*The earth was placed for me as a mosque and purifier.*

(ḥadīth)

«المؤمن في المسجد كالشمس في الماء.»

*A person of faith in a mosque is like the sun reflecting  
in the water.*

(ḥadīth)

GOD DESIGNATED the whole of virgin nature, that inexhaustible masterpiece of His creative act, as the place of worship for Muslims and distinguished His final messenger by allowing Islam, the primordial religion, to return to primordial nature as its temple. The sacred architecture of Islam *par excellence* is the mosque which is itself but the 're-creation' and 'recapitulation' of the harmony, order, and peace of nature which God chose as the Muslims' enduring house of worship. In praying in a traditional mosque the Muslim in a sense returns to the bosom of nature, not externally but through the inner nexus which relates the mosque to the principles and rhythms of nature and integrates its space into that sacred space of primordial creation which dilated and still dilates, to the extent that virgin nature has survived the onslaughts of Promethean man,<sup>1</sup> in the Divine Presence that at once calms and unifies the soul. Through the Divine Command which placed nature as the Muslim's temple of worship, the sacred architecture of Islam becomes an extension of nature as created by God within the environment constructed by man. It becomes encompassed by and participates in the unity, inter-relatedness, harmony, and serenity of nature even within the

environment of the city and town. It becomes in fact a centre from which these qualities emanate to the whole of the urban environment. 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 Quran and the call to prayers (*al-adhān*) issuing from the precinct of the mosque. In making the mosque an extension of primordial nature, Islam emphasizes the primordial nature of man himself. This nature it seeks to revive and reaffirm by awakening man from the dream of forgetfulness, arousing within him the consciousness of the reality of the One or the Absolute, a consciousness which constitutes the very substance of primordial man and the *raison d'être* of human existence.<sup>2</sup>

The very word 'mosque' derives from the Arabic *masjid* which means literally the place of *sujūd* or prostration, that is, the third position in the Islamic ritual prayers (*ṣalāt* or *namāz*) in which the forehead of the worshipper touches the ground in the supreme act of submission and surrender to God before Whom, at the beginning of these prayers, the Muslim stands directly as the primordial man, himself his own priest,<sup>3</sup> facing God without an intermediary. The space of the mosque, as the recapitulation and extension of the space of virgin nature, is thus created in accordance with the nature of the most important rite performed in the mosque, namely, the ritual prayers. These prayers are performed by man, not as a fallen being but as God's vicegerent on earth, aware of his theomorphic substance, standing on the vertical axis of cosmic existence and capable of praying to and calling directly upon God.

It is not, however, only the space of the mosque within which the faithful pray to the One that is important. It is also the floor upon which they prostrate themselves that is of crucial significance. The first mosque of Islam was the house of the Blessed Prophet, and it was the house of which the first official mosque, that of the Blessed Prophet in Medina, was in a sense an extension. It was the forehead of the most perfect of God's creatures,

of the Perfect Man<sup>4</sup> himself about whom God has said, 'Were it not for thee I would not have created the heavens',<sup>5</sup> that touched in prayer the floor of the humble room within which he prayed, thereby sanctifying the floor of the mosque and returning this floor to its inviolable purity as the original earth at the dawn of creation. The Blessed Prophet had first prayed before the Divine Throne (*al-'Arsh*) before he prayed upon the ground (which in Arabic and Persian as *farsh* is often contrasted to '*Arsh*') and, by sanctifying the *farsh* over again as the reflection of '*Arsh*', returned the earth to its primordial condition as the mirror and reflection of Heaven. It was this sanctification of the ground by the very act of the *sujūd* of the Blessed Prophet that bestowed a new meaning upon the ground and the carpet covering it. The carpet, whether of simple white colour or full of geometric and arabesque patterns and ornaments, reflects Heaven and enables the traditional Muslim who spends most of his time at home on the carpet to experience the ground upon which he sits as purified and participating in the sacred character of the ground of the mosque upon which he prays.

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.

The Quranic revelation brought back to man the awareness of the cosmos as God's revelation and the complement of the 'written Quran' revealed in the Arabic language.<sup>6</sup> This awareness is abetted by the rite of ritual prayer which brings out the primordial nature of man to whom God addresses Himself in Islam while it accentuates the significance of primordial nature as the temple of worship. Furthermore, the Blessed Prophet asserted the reality of the *farsh* as the image of the '*arsh*'. He prayed in deserts and mountains, in nature which was still pure and unviolated. He also prayed in his house in Mecca and

later in Medina and finally in the Medina mosque which is the prototype of all later sacred architecture of Islam. In this manner God, through his last prophet, re-established nature as the primary temple of worship and made possible through the founder of Islam the consecration of the space and ground of his domicile as the sacred place within which and upon which the most perfect of men stood directly before God and performed the rites which are central to Islam. If in the Islamic city the home is an extension of the mosque and the floor of the traditional home which is kept ritually clean an extension of the floor of the mosque upon which one stands and prays, it is because the floor of the mosque itself is an extension, through the prototypical Medina mosque, of the floor of the house of the Blessed Prophet wherein the forehead of the Perfect Man touched the earth as a result of a new dispensation from Heaven. This act of touching the earth, among its many functions, stood for the return of both man and nature to the state of primordial purity (*al-fīrah*) when Unity manifested itself directly in the hearts of man and was echoed in an unending symphony in that harmony which constitutes virgin nature. The root of the sacred architecture of Islam is to be found in this re-sanctification of nature in relation to man seen as the primordial being who remains aware of his inner nexus both to the One and to His creation,<sup>7</sup> as well as subsequent relationships between architecture and the Islamic cosmos with its cosmological laws and principles described so majestically in the Qur'an and elucidated and elaborated by generations of sages throughout the history of Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Islamic cosmology, as based on the cosmological verses of the Qur'an such as the *āyat al-Kursī* (11:255) and *āyat al-nūr* (xxiv; 35)<sup>9</sup> and many prophetic *ḥadīths*, envisages the Spirit or *al-rūḥ* at the apex and centre of cosmic existence and belonging to the world of Divine Command.<sup>10</sup> Below it stand the archangelic substances identified with the 'perimeter' of the Divine Throne which they uphold, then the Divine Pedestal (*al-Kursī*) and the lower angelic orders descending in a hierarchy to the invisible world. 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 out-

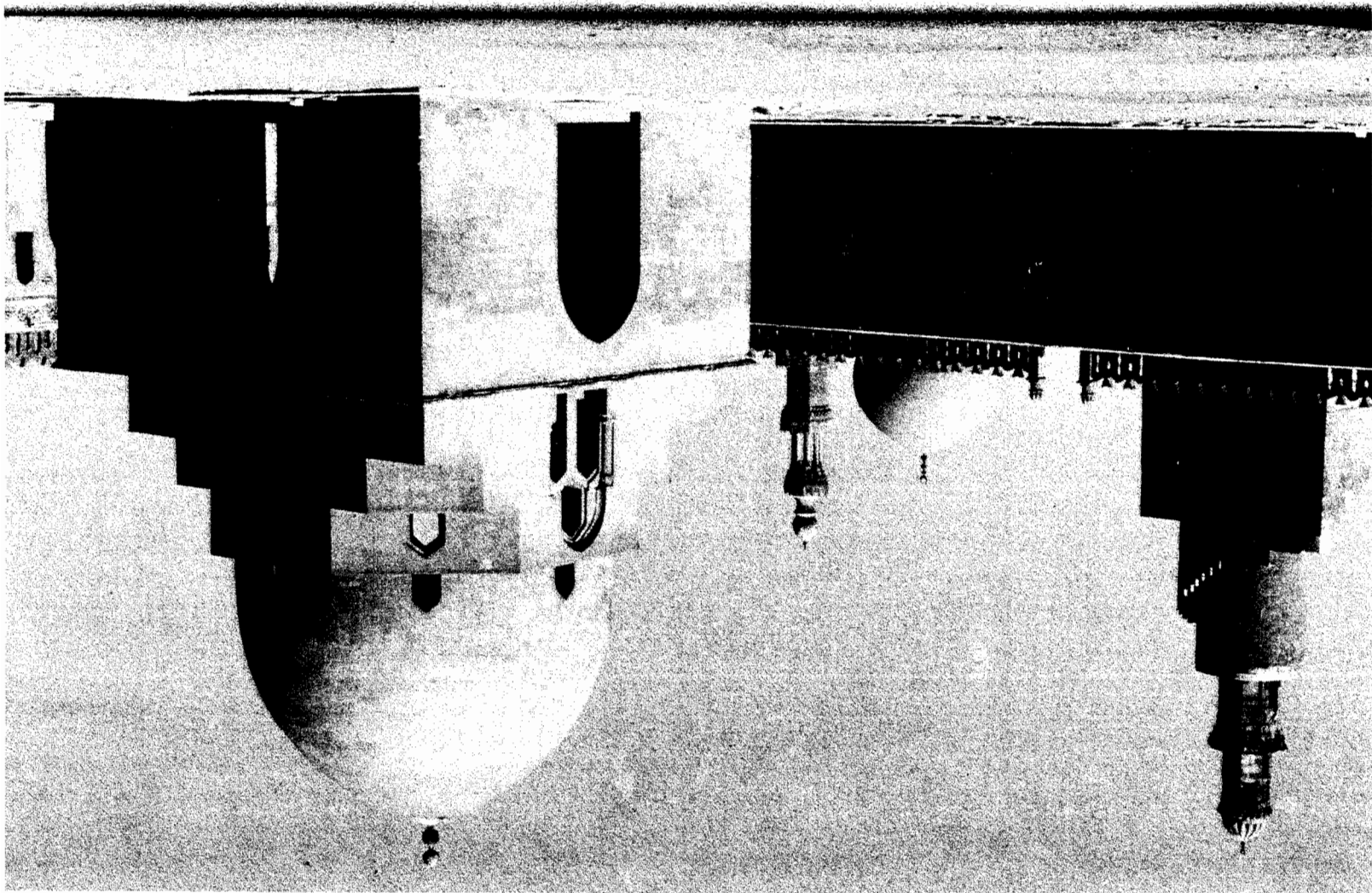
growth of historical accidents. But whether in the classical domed mosque in which the centre of the dome symbolizes the One, and on a lower level the *rūḥ*, while the octagonal belt, upon which the dome usually rests, symbolizes the angelic order and the four-sided base the earth or the material world, 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. The Islamic cosmos is based on the emphasis upon God as the Unique Origin of all beings, on the hierarchy of existence which relies upon the One and is ordered by His Command, on the levels of existence which relate matter to the subtle world, the subtle world to the angelic, the angelic to the archangelic, the archangelic to the Spirit or *al-rūḥ* and the Spirit to God's primordial creative act. This cosmos is based on order and harmony which is more than the result of the direct manifestation of the One in the many. It displays a peace and tranquility which dominate its obviously dynamic character because the patterns of change within nature reflect nevertheless the immutable archetypes which belong to the higher states of universal existence and are ultimately possibilities in the Divine Nature. These and many other features of Islamic cosmology are reflected in Islamic architecture, especially in the sacred architecture of the mosque which is based on a science that cannot but issue from the inner dimension of the Islamic revelation and other forms of wisdom which Islamic esotericism integrated into its world-view in accordance with its own nature and the integrating power of Islam.

The Islamic cosmos is replete with the signs and portents (*āyāt*) of God in accordance with the Quranic verse, 'We shall show them our signs (*āyāt*) upon the horizons and within their souls until it becomes manifest to them that it is the Truth'. (xli:53) The true Muslim sees every aspect of nature not as phenomena divorced from the noumenal world but as signs of God, the *vestigia Dei*.<sup>11</sup> The mosque also displays the same reality. Its patterns appear to the Muslim eye as *vestigia Dei* while its emptiness, simplicity, and in many cases lack of any designs or patterns also reflect to the Muslim mind the 'signs'



The most primordial sacred architecture of Islam is the Ka'bah, the point where the Heavenly axis pierces the earth. This primordial temple built according to the Islamic tradition by Adam himself and then rebuilt by Abraham is the earthly reflection of that celestial temple which is also reflected in the heart of man. 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.

LEFT Among the most perfect of grand mosques of Egypt, the Ibn Tūlūn Mosque in Cairo reveals in a particularly striking manner the tranquility and peace that characterize Islamic sacred architecture.



of God which in this case refer to the ontological status of the world as needy and poor (*al-faqir*) while God is the self-sufficient and the Rich (*al-Ghaniy*). As for the space, its stillness reflects the pacifying presence of the Divine Word which echoes through it while the rhythmic division of the space by means of arches and columns is the counterpart to the rhythms of cosmic existence which punctuate the phases of the life of man as well as the cosmos both of which come from Him and return to Him in accordance with the Quranic verse, 'Verily we belong to God and to Him we shall return'. (11:156)

The sacred architecture of Islam reflects the reality of God's creation through the science upon which the structure of both architecture and creation are based, this architecture depending upon the grace or *barakah* issuing from the Quranic revelation which has made the correspondence in Islam between sacred architecture and nature possible. Moreover, the nexus between Islamic architecture and virgin nature must be sought in the spiritual reality of the Blessed Prophet who, as the Perfect Man, *par excellence*, brought to earth that rite which sanctified and continues to sanctify the earth and brought into focus the spiritual reality of that primordial substance and state which both man and nature bear within themselves. The spiritual significance of Islamic architecture must be sought at once in the nature of the Quranic revelation which brought out the 'supernatural' character of both the natural order and of man as well as in the inner nature of the Blessed Prophet, who not only 'sanctified' the earth upon which man stands and prostrates himself, but sanctified the space within which also man lives and orients himself with the goal of reaching that Reality that lies beyond all extension and becoming.

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. In the case of Islamic architecture this sacralization is achieved most of all by means of the polarization of space through the presence of the Ka'bah which is the centre of the earth around which Muslim pilgrims circumambulate and towards which all Muslims turn in their

daily prayers. But this effect is also achieved by means of the creation of a qualified space in a sense defined by the reverberations of the Divine Word upon the surface and planes within the volumes of the corporeal world which comprises the Islamic edifices and cities. The space of Islamic architecture is not the quantified space of Cartesian geometry but the qualified space related to sacred geometry and given order through the presence of the sacred.<sup>12</sup> The Ka'bah chosen by God as the direction of prayer or *qiblah* of Muslims is in a sense ubiquitous in that it determines and polarizes direction and creates an invisible set of 'lines of force' which attract all points in the periphery toward the Centre. It is not only the direction of the mosque or a whole city that is determined by the *qiblah* but the experience of space itself.

Space is, moreover, sanctified in an esoteric manner through the cosmic amplitude and expansion of the inner reality of the Blessed Prophet, or what the Sufis call *al-haqiqat al-muhammadiyah*. As the Universal or Perfect Man, the Blessed Prophet 'fills' the breadth ('*ard*') and depth or length ('*tūl*'), of cosmic existence;<sup>13</sup> he 'fills' the space within which the Islamic cosmos functions and in which the Muslim breathes and lives. The Muhammadan Reality reaches the zenith and the nadir and the four cardinal directions which are thereby qualified and sanctified. The stations of wisdom in Islamic spirituality are related to this aspect of the Muhammadan Reality<sup>14</sup> who in thus sanctifying space also bestowed upon it once again its primordial spiritual significance.<sup>15</sup> The same being who in praying before the Divine Throne or '*Arsh*' and then upon the earth, hallowed the earth by bringing something of the '*Arsh*' to the ground or to the '*farsh*' of human habitation, also sanctified space in an invisible and esoteric manner which is nonetheless decisive in the genesis of the sacred architecture of Islam and in fact all Islamic architecture. In the same way that the soul of the Blessed Prophet is an invisible spring for all Islamic spirituality, something of his soul is also to be found in the sobriety, calm, harmony, outward austerity and inner richness and generosity of the traditional Islamic city and the authentic manifestations of Islamic architecture. The experience of the space of Islamic architecture by a traditional Muslim and there-

fore the discovery of the principles of that architecture which make the Islamic experience of space possible cannot be achieved without paying full attention to the manner whereby, through the Prophet and the rites brought to this world by him as a result of the Divine Command, the earth and nature as a whole were once again made to reflect Heaven and regain their primordial character as the temple created for the worship of the One. Also space was qualified in such a manner as to enable the integration of all points of the periphery within the Centre and to enable experience of the ubiquitous presence of the Divine throughout that space which points to the Centre wherever one happens to be located on the wheel of terrestrial existence.

Although the significance of the void will be dealt with separately in a later chapter, it is necessary to point out here, while discussing the sacralization of space, the central importance of the void in Islamic architecture and art in general. The emptiness of the mosque, even the most richly decorated, is related both to the idea of spiritual poverty (*faqr*) of which the Blessed Prophet said, 'Spiritual poverty is my glory' (*al-faqr*<sup>16</sup>) and the identification of the invisible and unmanifest with the spiritual in the Muslim mind. The Quran refers often to the invisible and visible worlds, '*ālam al-ghayb wa'l-shahādah*, identifying the first with the spiritual and the second with the corporeal or material world. The emptiness in the mosque, related at once to spiritual poverty and the sense of the presence of the Spirit, is of course also a result of the emphasis of the Islamic revelation upon the doctrine of Divine Unity and hence the aniconic nature of the sacred art of Islam.<sup>16</sup> Together these factors bestow upon emptiness within the space of Islamic architecture a spiritual significance of the greatest importance.

This is to be seen also in interior decoration of not only the mosque but also the home which is its extension. Uncluttered by furniture, with emphasis upon the floor which is kept ritually clean, the interior space of the traditional Muslim house, like that of the mosque, evokes the sense of the sacred through the very emptiness which although non-existent from one point of view, nevertheless manifests the presence of the Spirit in the same manner that the ether, although not visible in itself,

serves as the substratum for the gross elements of traditional cosmology. Air serves as the vehicle for the transmission of the Word of God which resonates periodically throughout the spaces of the Islamic habitat. When one enters a traditional mosque or home the very emptiness of the space draws attention to the Invisible as does the experience of the ground upon which one can only walk after taking off one's shoes. This touching of the ground with one's hands and face in prayer creates the awareness of the hallowedness of the earth by virtue of the act of that most perfect of creatures who, in touching the earth with his forehead in total submission to God, sacralized it for all subsequent generations of Muslims.

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. It is not that Islam borrowed the spiritual significance of mathematics from Pythagoras, Plato or Nicomachus. These ancient sages provided providentially a sacred science which Islam could easily assimilate into its world view. The truth is that there was already in the Islamic world view before its encounter with Greek science what one might call an 'Abrahamic Pythagoreanism'.<sup>17</sup> Pythagoras was already a Muslim sage in Muslim eyes and therefore could be assimilated easily into the Islamic universe.<sup>18</sup> The mathematical nature of Islamic art and architecture does not derive from external historical influences, Greek or otherwise. It derives from the Quran whose own mathematical structure is bewildering and reveals an amazing rapport between Islamic intellectual and spiritual concerns and mathematics. The mathematical nature of Islamic art is in a sense the externalization of the mathematics hidden in the very structure of the Quran and the numerical symbolism of its letters and words.<sup>19</sup> The Pythagorean philosophy of mathematics provided the language and presented an already elaborated science, itself of a esoteric nature and going back to Egypt and Babylon, for the 'spiritual mathematics' which is so central to Islamic architecture and even the so-called decorative arts. It did not create this art. The use of rigorously defined geometric spaces, precise

mathematical proportions, clearly defined lines and volumes relating to exact mathematical laws<sup>20</sup> were means whereby the space of Islamic architecture, as well as its surfaces, were integrated. The principle of Unity was thereby made more manifest and the Islamic space within which Muslims carried out their ordinary lives as well as moments of worship were sacralized. The question of how mathematics as a sacred science is related to Islamic architecture is the subject of a separate treatise which we cannot go into here in any detail. But what does need to be emphasized is the significance of this traditional mathematics, much of it drawn from ancient and Pythagorean sources and integrated into Islamic esotericism as a means of creating a sense of the sacred in Islamic art and architecture. This mathematical character of Islamic art, moreover, derives directly from the nature of Islamic spirituality which remains always closely wedded to the experience of harmony and an archetypal reality which is the reflection of the One and which remains immutable beyond the ever changing patterns of the transient world. There is present something of both the lucidity and perfection of the snowflake and the beauty of a geometrically formed flower in the Islamic paradise which when manifest in Islamic art and architecture re-captures an echo of that paradise and prepares the soul for the experience of that *firdaws* promised in the Quran to the faithful.

While dealing with mathematics, it is noteworthy to mention a point neglected by most students of Islamic architecture. The surfaces of many buildings which can be characterized as sacred architecture, such as mosques and mausoleums of saints, are often covered by very elaborate mathematical patterns. This characteristic is to be seen especially in later Islamic architecture in such buildings as the Shaykh Lutfallāh and the Shāh Mosques of Isfahan<sup>21</sup> and the tomb of Shāh Ni'matallāh Walī in Mahan. What can be the significance of such complicated geometric patterns on the surface of walls of mosques and mausoleums? Besides directing attention to the Centre which is everywhere and nowhere, untying the knots of the soul and preventing subjectivism, these patterns also have another significance of a remarkable nature. Although 'on the

surface' of things, they represent the interior structure of corporeal existence or matter as this term is understood in its general sense. Recent research by several scientists has revealed extraordinary similarities between these geometric figures and configurations and the 'inner' structure of material objects both animate and inanimate discovered through the electronic microscope and other modern techniques.<sup>21</sup>

It seems as if these patterns serve as a key for the understanding of the material with which the architect deals while unravelling also the structure of the cosmos before the eyes of the beholder. But these patterns do not originate from an analysis of matter in the manner of modern physics. They are the results of the vision of the archetypal world by seers and contemplatives who then taught craftsmen to draw them upon the surfaces of tiles or alabaster. These patterns do not prove that physics leads naturally to metaphysics, 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'. They also illustrate an important aspect of the Islamic revelation, which is to bring out the reality of the cosmos itself as God's primordial revelation. If in the sacred architecture of Islam built to celebrate God, mathematical patterns, which correspond to the inner structure of the natural world, serve as ornaments upon the various façades, it is because nature herself participated in the Quranic revelation and was re-sacralized by it in the eyes of that segment of humanity which came to accept the revelation brought by the Blessed Prophet. The role of mathematics in the sacralization of architecture in Islam is inseparable from the nature of the Quranic revelation and its emphasis on the one hand upon the supernatural character of the intellect within man and, on the other, the sacredness of virgin nature whose laws and structures are related to the mathematical world.

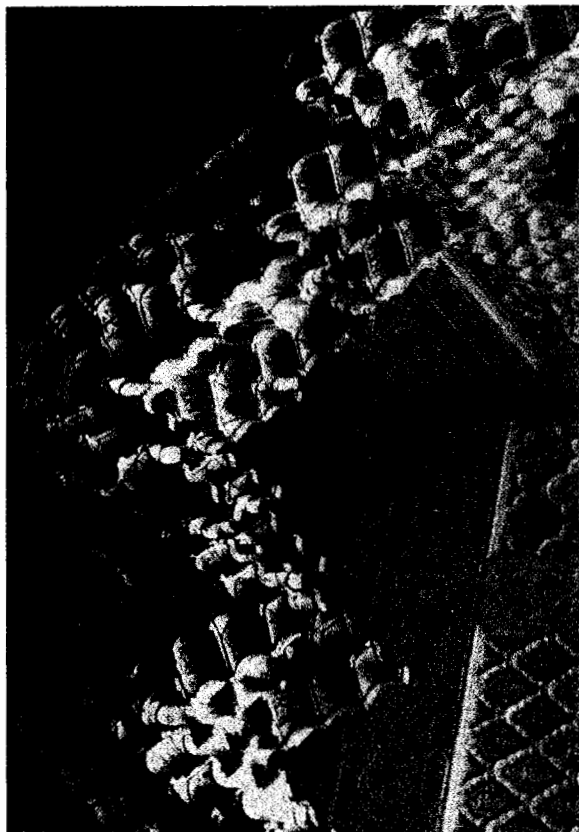
One must also of course consider the specific symbolism of various geometric forms associated with Islamic architecture which relates outward forms to inner meaning and architectural utility to spiritual significance. The dome, while creating a ceiling which protects from both heat and cold, is also the symbol of the heavenly vault and its centre the *axis mundi*

which relates all levels of cosmic existence to the One.<sup>22</sup> The octagonal base of the dome symbolizes the Throne and Pedestal and also the angelic world, the square or rectangular base the corporeal world on the earth. The stalactite or *muqarnas* structures represent reflection here below of the supernal archetypes, the descent of the heavenly abode towards the earth and the crystallization of the celestial substance or ether in terrestrial forms. The external form of the dome symbolizes the aspect of Divine Beauty or *jaml* and the vertical minaret Divine Majesty or *jālāl*. The Persian arch moves upward like a flame towards Heaven and the Transcendent and the Maghribi arch inwardly toward the heart which symbolizes the same Principle in its aspect of immanence.<sup>23</sup> Consideration of the symbolic aspect of these forms, not all of which are necessarily employed in all types of traditional Islamic architecture, is of course essential for an understanding of the spiritual significance of this architecture, for they are the means whereby Unity penetrates into the world of architectural forms to create a sacred quality whereby earthly forms come to signify realities beyond the earthly realm.

'God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth', the Quran asserts and a prophetic saying adds a cosmogonic and cosmological dimension to this verse by adding, 'The first being created by God was light'. This important reality of the Islamic universe manifests itself not only in the luminous skies and clear light which characterize most of the heartland of the Islamic world where classical Islamic architecture grew, but also in this architecture itself. The great masterpieces of Islamic architecture, such as the Alhambra, the *iwāns*, and the courtyards of so many Persian mosques and the Tāj Mahal, are like crystallizations of light, limpid and lucid, illuminating and illuminated,<sup>24</sup> where the space of Islamic architecture is defined by light. While the traditional architect seeks to protect the inner spaces of a building from the great heat of the outside; and while coolness and shade are associated in the Muslim mind with divine blessing, the soul of the Muslim, and in fact the primal man in every man, yearns for light which is ultimately a symbol of Divine Presence, the Light which shines

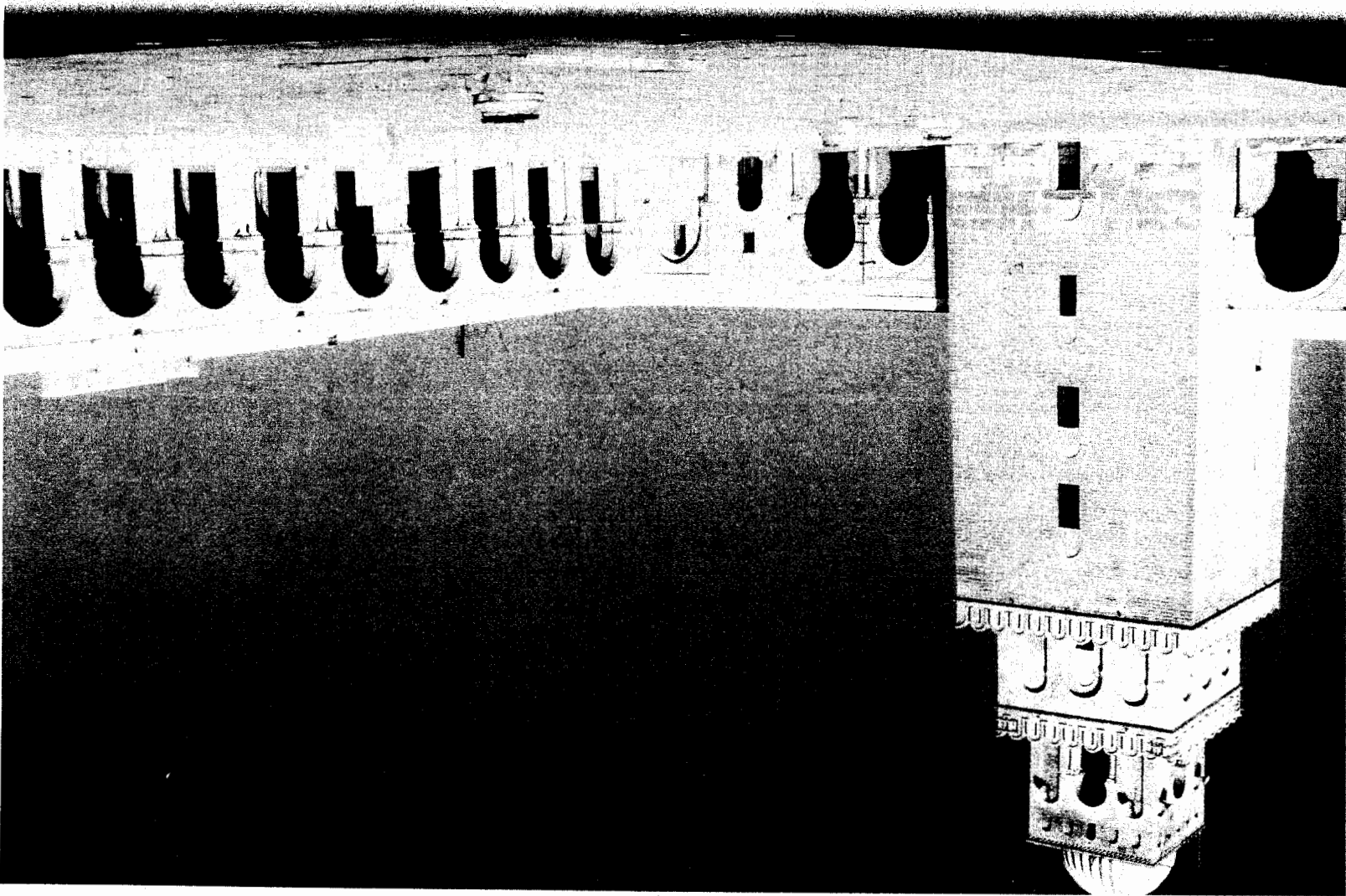
upon the whole cosmos from the central *axis mundi* that is neither of the East nor of the West.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the centuries Sufis have sung and written of the significance of light as a spiritual substance.<sup>26</sup> A special school of Islamic philosophy, the school of *ishrāq* or illumination, based specifically upon the symbolism of light was founded by the Persian theosopher and Sufi, Suhrawardī, and developed over the centuries by such later masters as Shams al-Din Shahrazūrī, Quṭb al-Din Shīrāzī, Ibn Turkah, and Mullā Ṣadrā.<sup>27</sup> Arabic and Persian literature, and even everyday language, are replete with expressions which identify light with joy of the soul and correct functioning of the intellect while even old tales told to small children are often based on the primal symbolism of light as truth and felicity, a symbolism which is so powerfully reconfirmed in the Islamic tradition and of course also asserted by many other older religions, especially Mazdaism.

This identification of light with the spiritual principle that at once creates, orders, and liberates is a determining factor in the sacralization of architecture in Islam, complementing the above-mentioned factors and principles. Moreover, this light is ultimately the same as the Word, for according to another *ḥadīth* the first being created by God was the Word (*al-kalimah*) hence the principal identity of Light and the Word (*al-nūr* and *al-kalimah*). It is certainly not accidental that the place in the mosque from which the Word of God in the form of the call to prayer reaches the community, namely the minaret, is called in Arabic *al-manārah*, literally the place of light. Even if, according to certain historians of architecture, the architectural features of a minaret are derived from a lighthouse (a point which is itself debatable since a raised platform was already in use as a minaret in the Medina Mosque), the very name of the minaret in Islamic language identifies the Light of God with His Word. This confirms the Quran's own description of itself as Guidance (*al-hudā*) upon the path to God, hence a light which shines upon the otherwise dark path of human existence in this world. The light which defines the spaces of Islamic architecture and brings out its geometric clarity and intellectual lucidity is inseparable from that Word which in the form of the Quran reverberates within those spaces and brings



These stalactites from the Court of Lions in Alhambra do not only serve the practical function of supporting the roof, but also symbolize the descent of light into the world of material forms. They are like rays of light cast from the world of the supernal Sun toward the abode of earthly opacity.

LEFT Among the earliest mosques built in the Islamic world, the great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia already possesses in fullness that inner peace and harmony that characterize the masterpieces of Islamic architecture.



those who harken to its echo before the Divine Presence. Both the reverberations of Word and Light sacralize the spaces and forms of Islamic architecture and create a sense of the presence of the One wherever man turns his face for as the Quran asserts, 'Whithersoever ye turn, there is the face of God'. (Arberry trans.)

Not only does light define the spaces of Islamic architecture, but it also plays a central role in making possible both the use of intensely white, structures which reflect the purity of the desert and the levelling of all multiplicity before the One according to *Lā ilāha illa 'Llāh*, and the use of intensely coloured edifices which appear as an earthly reflection of the paradisaal states. If white symbolizes the unity of undifferentiated reality, colours which result from the polarization of light symbolize the manifestation of the One in the many and dependence of the many upon the One. Each colour symbolizes a state and is itself light, without light being limited to that particular colour. If colours can be said to symbolize states and levels of cosmic existence, white is the symbol of Being which is the origin of all existence. As for black, which plays an eminent role in Islam in that, along with green, it is the colour of the family of the Blessed Prophet and is even important architecturally as the colour of the cloth (the *kiswah*) which covers the Ka'bah, it may be said to symbolize the supra-ontological Principle transcending even Being as usually understood. It symbolizes the Supreme Principle to which the Ka'bah is of course related in that it is in a sense the principle of all sacred architecture in Islam.<sup>28</sup>

If the white or earthen-coloured mosques remind man of his poverty before Divine Unity and correspond both to the spiritual poverty of the Blessed Prophet and to the aspect of his soul as related to submission, peace, serenity, and sepulchral beatitude, the intensely coloured mosques symbolize the richness of God's creation and the other aspect of the soul of the Blessed Prophet which is a theophany and reflection of the infinite richness of that Divine Treasury which creates at every moment without ever exhausting its infinite possibilities. As for individual colours employed in different edifices ranging from the green dome of the Medina Mosque, symbolizing the

colour of Islam<sup>29</sup> to the azure blue mosques of Timūrid and Safavid Persia as well as certain regions of Ottoman Turkey and Mogul India, they all possess a symbolic significance based both on *ḥadīth* literature and oral tradition and are far from being *ad hoc* and simply arbitrary.<sup>30</sup> But in any case, whether light shines upon a white surface, or polarizes into numerous colours, whether it penetrates directly into the spaces of a mosque from ceilings or indirectly through side portals, it is related to the Divine Presence and the cosmic intelligence which also shines within man and is the means by virtue of which man is able to realize the One. Through the ingenious use of light the Islamic architectural spaces are integrated with each other and into a unity which transcends the experience of ordinary and 'profane' space.

The *shahādah*, *Lā ilāha illa 'Llāh*, contains the principal knowledge about the nature of Reality and in accordance with its truth, which lies at the heart of the Islamic revelation, Islam itself is based on the nature of Reality. It is profoundly 'realist' in the traditional and not the modern sense of the word. It is realist in that it emphasizes that God is God and man is man, that the material world is the material world and the angelic world the angelic. It refuses to confuse one level or reality with another or to address itself to a would-be ideal that is not in the nature of the being in question.<sup>31</sup> This characteristic of Islam could not but manifest itself in architecture which always preserves its realism and refuses to create the illusion of an ideal which is not in the nature of the material and the space with which it is concerned. There are no created tensions, no upward pull to a heavenly ideal in Islamic architecture as one finds in Gothic cathedrals which are based on another spiritual perspective than that of Islam. The space of the sacred structures of Islam rests serenely and nobly in a stillness which conforms to the inner nature of things here and now rather than seeking to participate in an ideal which belongs to another level of existence and is contrary to the nature of the material at hand.

Likewise, Islamic architecture ennobles matter not by making stone appear to be light and flying upwards but, by means of geometric and arabesque patterns which make material

objects become transparent before their spiritual archetypes, reflecting these archetypes on the level of existence proper to those objects. In this way the nobility of material objects is brought out by remaining faithful to the nature of each object which, being created by God, reflects on its own level a particular spiritual quality. 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 a 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 and awareness of Islamic spirituality which enabled them to create unmistakably Islamic buildings whether using mud in Mali or wood in Malaysia. In contrast to many modern architects who have lost the sense of direct knowledge of the nature of materials, the traditional Muslim architect had direct experience of the reality of the materials he was using,<sup>32</sup> possessing at once an intuitive and empirical knowledge of things. This knowledge included many dimensions of the reality of material objects left out of the world-view of both classical and modern physics despite their claim to being based on empiricism.

This sense of realism and remaining faithful to the nature of things, which is of course inseparable from the resacralization of the cosmic order by the Quranic revelation, also manifests itself in the ecological equilibrium of the traditional Islamic building and of the whole urban environment. Islamic architecture makes full use of light and shade, and their heat and coolness, of wind and its aerodynamics, of water and its cooling effect, of the earth and its insulating features as well as its protective properties in face of the elements. Far from being an attempt to stand in opposition and defiance against nature and its rhythms, Islamic architecture remains always in harmony with the environment. It always uses the lightest

touch possible in creating a human ambience, avoiding that titanic rebellion against the created order that characterizes Promethean man and his artistic creations. The Islamic town rises gently from the earth, makes maximum use of nature's own resources and when abandoned usually returns again gently to the bosom of the earth. This architecture not only participates in the rhythms and forces of nature but also in her blinding harmony and unity. Moreover, this ecological harmony of traditional Islamic architecture is not simply the result of sane ecological and even economic thinking in the modern sense of these terms,<sup>33</sup> but is a consequence of the nature of Islamic spirituality. A small fountain in a traditional courtyard of a mosque or a private house, which cools the air as well as pleases the eye with very little waste of a precious natural resource, is seen by the Muslim in religious and not only 'practical' or economic terms. The very physical experience of the cooling effect of the wind tower on a hot summer afternoon in a traditional house in Kashan or Yazd possesses an unmistakable spiritual component. This intermingling with the qualities, forces, and flow of the elements, the movement of the heavens, and the ever repeating rhythms of light and darkness, all of which traditional Islamic architecture heightens and reveals rather than hides, serves only to remind the Muslim of that other revelation of God, that is, nature, which remains truly *muslim* or submitted to the Divine Will by obeying its own nature and the laws which each domain of the natural order was created to obey.

The unity of Islamic architecture is related of course not only to the unity of the cosmos and beyond that realm to the Unity of the Divine Principle Itself, but also to the unity of the life of the individual and the community which the Divine Law (*al-Shari'ah*) makes possible. By refusing to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, by intergrading 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.<sup>34</sup> The mosque in a traditional Islamic city is not only the centre of religious activity but of all community life, embracing the cultural, social and political as well as, to a certain extent, economic activities. It

is therefore related organically to the bazaar or centre of economic life, the palace or seat of political power, schools where intellectual activity takes place, etc. Private homes are always nearby and in the same way that work, leisure, prayer and care of the family are integrated and not totally separate in the traditional Islamic pattern of life, the architectural spaces related to these activities are also intertwined. Even within the home, a single room is often used for several functions including eating, sleeping, socializing and praying, while prayers can take place in shops in the bazaar, transactions in the mosque, and teaching in both the mosque and the home.

When one looks at the traditional Islamic city, one observes that this unity and inter-relatedness are reflected directly in the architecture. At the centre there is always the mosque or tomb of a saint with the city growing in an organic manner around it.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the city seems to be covered by a single roof emanating from the sacred centre. In a profound sense therefore, the sacred architecture of Islam casts its light and influences the whole of traditional Islamic architecture, bestowing upon it the character of reflecting sacred presence. It seems that in the same way that the floor of the mosque, sacralized by the Blessed Prophet, stretches into the floor of every home in which one prays, the roof of the traditional city emanates from and is an extension of the roof of the sacred structure at its heart. The space of the whole city is purified and sacralized by the presence of the Divine Word which fills it periodically every day through the chanting of the call to prayers and the text of the Quran recited from the minarets of the mosques in various parts of the city. The unity of the sacred architecture of Islam thereby spreads to the whole of traditional Islamic architecture and this architecture participates, albeit in a more peripheral manner, in that crystallization of Divine Presence which fills the spaces of the sacred architecture of Islam and places man as God's vice-gent directly before the Majesty of the One.

All the factors mentioned above, from the unitarian characteristic of the Islamic revelation, the cosmic dimension of this revelation and the nature of the 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 *ṣalāt*, 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 arts of Islam. This sacred art came into being as a result not of simple accretion of various elements but of a creation which is inseparable from the spirit and form of the Islamic revelation and is the direct effect of this revelation without which it could not exist.<sup>36</sup> The principles of this architecture and the manner of its relation to the Islamic revelation may not have been elucidated in old texts because there was no need for such an elucidation, not because such a relationship did not exist. It is only now, when much of the oral tradition is forgotten and many Muslims themselves have become oblivious to this relationship, that it is necessary to assert categorically the Islamic nature of Islamic architecture. In fact it needs to be underlined that the sacred architecture of Islam is a crystallization of Islamic spirituality and a key for the understanding of this spirituality. The spaces it has created provide a haven in which man can savour, by grace of this very spirituality, the peace and harmony of not only virgin nature but also paradise of which virgin nature herself is a reflection, this paradise which man carries at the depth and centre of his being where the Divine Presence reverberates, for the heart of the faithful is the Throne of the Compassionate.

## NOTES

1. By Promethean man we mean the anti-traditional man in rebellion against Heaven and in quest of playing the role of divinity on earth without submitting himself to the Will of Heaven. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Chapter 5.
2. On the Islamic conception of man and his primordial nature see F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 13ff; Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, pp. 16ff; and G. Eaton, *King of the Castle*, London 1977, Chapter v.
3. This truth holds as much true for women as it does for men since both men and women perform their ritual prayers in standing directly before God.
4. The Blessed Prophet is of course for Muslims the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) par excellence containing within himself the perfections of all horizontal and vertical dimensions of universal existence. On the doctrine of Universal Man see 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Universal Man*, trans. T. Burckhardt, Sherborne, 1983.
5. The famous 'sacred *ḥadīth*', *wa law lāka wa mā khalaqtu 'āfāk*.

6. Later Muslim metaphysicians and Quranic commentators distinguished between the 'written or composed Quran' (*al-Qur'ān al-taḥwīnī*) and the 'cosmic Quran' (*al-Qur'ān al-takwīnī*) which is the cosmos itself.

7. The *ḥadīth* about the man of faith (*mu'min*) in the mosque being like the reflection of the sun in the water quoted at the beginning of this chapter refers to the spiritual significance of the mosque as the reflection of the inner reality of primordial man who is the microcosmic counterpart of cosmic reality. Whether it be the exquisite and elaborate patterns of the Gawharshād mosque of Mashhad in Persia, where this *ḥadīth* is written on the wall, or the simple white walls of an Ibn Ṭūlūn mosque, the traditional mosque reflects the reality of both primordial nature and man. It reflects that 'sun' which is none other than that *ḥīrah* which Islam came to re-assert both within man and in the cosmic order.

8. All traditional architecture is in fact connected to the cosmology of the tradition in question and this relation is not unique to Islam. What is strange, however, is that in the case of Islam most modern scholars, including not only Westerners but also many Muslims, have failed to pay any attention and in many cases have even denied any relationship between Islamic architecture and Islamic cosmology. Unfortunately, not all the different forms of Islamic cosmology have been studied and made available in a contemporary language. Even if their details are not known, however, it can be said with certainty that they are all based on revealing the inter-relation of the many to the One and the manner by which, through the multiple states of being and the hierarchy of existence, the visible cosmos which surrounds us is manifested. See Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*.

9. The texts of the *āyat al-kursī* (The Throne Verse) and the *āyat al-nūr* (The Light Verse) are respectively as follows:

'Allah! There is not God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him. Unto him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedeth with Him save by His leave? He knoweth that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His throne includeth the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous.' (trans. M. Pickthall)

God is the light of the Heavens and the Earth;  
the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp,  
the lamp is a crystal,  
the crystal as it were a shining star;  
lighted it is from a blessed tree,  
an olive, neither of the East nor of the West,  
whose oil would well-nigh flare  
though fire touch it not;

Light upon Light:  
God guideth to His Light whom He will,  
for God coineth parables for men,  
and God is All-knowing of all things.

10. In accordance with the Quranic verse, *al-rūḥ min amrī rabbī*, 'The Spirit is from the command of my Lord'. (xviii: 85) (trans. P. Hobson)

11. We have dealt with this central theme of Islamic science in several previous works including *Man and Nature*, London, 1976, pp. 75ff.

12. On sacred geometry especially in its relation to Islamic architecture see the works of K. Critchlow such as *Islamic Patterns*, London, 1976.

13. It is significant to note that the terms *'arq* and *ṭīl* are used in both Islamic metaphysics and geometry and architecture. On their metaphysical significance see R. Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, trans. A. MacNab, London, 1975, and al-Jīlī, *op cit*.

14. 'Sérénité, recueillement, ferveur, certitude; cette quaternité, qui résume la substance mohammédienne ... se déploie, nous l'avons dit, entre deux pôles, la Vérité du Transcendant et le Cœur en tant que siège de l'immanent. C'est ainsi que dans l'espace les quatre points cardinaux se situent entre le Zénith et le Nadir; ce n'est pas, à rigoureusement parler, la substance du Logos humain qui retrace les linéaments de l'ordre cosmique, c'est celui-ci qui en réalité témoigne de la nature 'suréminente' et universelle de l'Homme-Logos.' F. Schuon, *Approches du Phénomène religieux*, Paris, 1984, p. 173.

15. It is of great significance to note that because of its primordial nature, Islam shares certain striking features with the primal religions of the North American Indians, especially those which have preserved best their primordial character. These features include not only emphasis upon geometric patterns in art but also the meta-physical and cosmological significance of the cardinal directions of space. See F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, Trans. M. Pallis and D. M. Matheson, Madras, 1959, pp. 209ff.

16. This anticonism derives at once from the emphasis upon the supreme transcendent Divinity before whose Majesty all manifested orders from the archangelic to the material are reduced to 'nothingness' ('All things perish save the Face of God' as the Quran asserts), and the nomadic and Semitic spirituality which it characterizes in its formal aspects. See T. Burckhardt, *The Art of Islam*, Chapter III.

17. This is an expression first used by F. Schuon.

18. See Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, pp. 47ff.

19. See J. Cantains, *La Voie des Lettres*.

20. This is of course not unique to Islam but exists in all sacred architecture which is always based on a cosmology derived from the roots of the tradition in question and a sacred geometry. But it is especially emphasized in Islam where all definitions of architectural space become much more mathematically precise and clearly defined.

21. K. Critchlow has carried out a series of studies in which this remarkable relationship has been brought out.

22. This effect is accentuated in many mosques such as those of Isfahan or the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem bringing all lines of complicated arabesques and geometric patterns back to the centre of the vault so that wherever the eye casts its glance it is ultimately led to the centre. There are also some domes such as that of the Friday mosque of Yazd in which stars are used as ornament so that when one looks up at the dome one sees a replica of the visible heavens and is strongly reminded of the heavenly symbolism of the dome which of course does not symbolize merely the visible heavens but the invisible, spiritual heavens of which the visible heavens themselves are a reflection. These star studded domes make one feel also as if the stars and the sky had descended to the earth with the stars cast about in this world like fire flies during a summer night glimmering in the dark woods as a terrestrial reflection of the heavenly stars.

23. The symbolism of various features of Islamic art and architecture have been dealt with in great depth by Burckhardt. See especially his *The Art of Islam*, Chapter IV.

24. Concerning the Alhambra, Burckhardt writes, 'Among the examples of Islamic architecture under the sway of the sovereignty of light, the Alhambra at Granada occupies the first rank. The Court of Lions in particular sets the example of stone transformed into a vibration of light; the lambrequins of the arcades, the friezes in *muqarnas*, the delicacy of the columns which seem to defy gravity, the scintillation of the roofs in green tilework and even the water-jets of the fountain, all contribute to this impression ... By analogy one can say of Muslim architecture that it transforms stone into light which, in its turn, is transformed into crystals'. *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

25. As stated in the *āyat al-nūr*, quoted already in note 9. In this verse it is the Blessed Olive Tree which symbolizes the world axis and which is therefore neither of the East nor of the West (*lā sharqiyah wa lā gharbiyyah*) because of its central position in the cosmic order.

26. See for example the treatise on illumination of Abu'l-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī, edited by E. J. Jurji, *Illumination in Islamic Mysticism*, Princeton, 1938.

27. On the school of *ishrāq* whose significance for the understanding of many facets of Islamic art has rarely been appreciated see H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 11, Paris, 1971; Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Albany, N.Y. 1975; and Nasr, 'Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, Maqtūl', in M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 1963, pp. 372–398.

28. The geometry, form and proportions of the Ka'bah all play a crucial role in the rise of Islamic architecture and need to be treated in any full study of the sacred architecture of Islam. See Burckhardt, *The Art of Islam* where he writes, 'If it [the Ka'ba] is not a work of art in the proper sense of the term—being no more than a simple cube of masonry—it belongs rather to what might be termed "proto-art", whose spiritual dimension corresponds to myth or revelation, depending on the point of view. This means that the inherent symbolism of the Ka'ba, in its shape and the rites associated with it, contains in embryo everything expressed by the sacred art of Islam'. p. 3. Concerning the harmonics of the proportions of the Ka'bah so central to the auditory revelation of the Quran on the one hand and later sacred architecture of Islam on the other, see E. McClain, 'The Ka'ba as Archetypal Ark', *Sophia Perennis*, vol. 1v, no. 1, Spring 1978, pp. 59–74; also his *Meditations Through The Quran*, New York, 1981, pp. 73ff.

29. According to tradition, the horizon would be covered by green light when revelation descended while during the Nocturnal Ascent (*al-mi'raj*) the Blessed Prophet was pulled up for the very last stage of the journey to the Divine Presence by a green cloth (*rafraf*) which descended from above. In his Quranic commentary Abu'l-Futūḥ Rāzī writes, 'They carried me from veil to veil until I had traversed seventy veils the width of each of which was five hundred years' journey. There, a green cloth (*rafraf*) descended whose light was stronger than that of the sun and dazzled my eyes. They placed me upon that *rafraf* and I reached the Divine Throne (*al-'arsh*)'. *Tafsīr* of Abu'l-Futūḥ Rāzī, Tehran, 1315 (A.H.), vol. 111, pp. 321–322.

As for prophetic *ḥadīth* Ibn Ḥatīm accounts, 'God created the throne (*al-'arsh*) of green emeralds and He created four columns for it made of red rubies'.

There are also many sayings of the Shi'ite Imams concerning the significance of the colour green as well as other colours. For example, the Tenth Imam 'Alī al-Naqī has said, 'God created this belt from emerald green. From this green the sky gains its green colour. It is the veil, but beyond this veil God possesses seventy thousand worlds with inhabitants more numerous than the number of men and genies'.

30. On the significance of colour schemes in Islamic architecture see N. Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity—The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, Chicago, 1973, pp. 47ff.

31. This theme is treated extensively in many writings of F. Schuon on Islam especially his *Understanding Islam*, London, 1963 Chapter 1.

32. This difference can be easily observed even today between traditional and modern architects in such countries as Egypt, Persia and Morocco where traditional master builders and craftsmen still survive.

33. The whole modern attempt to separate the ecological crisis from its spiritual causes by separating living in peace with nature from living in peace with God is certainly totally alien to the traditional Islamic perspective. In *Man and Nature*, based on the 1964 Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago, which was one of the first works to predict the ecological crisis and make the theme popular, We spoke of the spiritual roots of this crisis. Since then, despite the works of E. F. Schumacher and T. Roszak, there has been a constant attempt to sever the relation between the ecological crisis and the rebellion against Heaven by post-medieval Western man which constitutes the underlying cause of the crisis. There is certainly a 'forgotten dimension' to the ecological crisis which causes many modern students of Islamic urban design to neglect completely the spiritual significance of living in harmony with nature for Islam.

34. See 'Islamic Architecture and Contemporary Urban Problems', in my *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, London, 1986, where I have dealt fully with this subject.

35. This pattern is described in great detail and depth by T. Burckhardt in his *Fes, Stadt des Islam*, Olten, 1960.

36. By this assertion we do not mean that Islamic architecture did not make use of various techniques and methods of Sassanid and Byzantine architecture. The important question is not whether Islamic architecture did make use of previously existing materials and techniques or not but what it did with these materials and techniques.