

# Introduction: Encompassing the Sacred in Islamic Art

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Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars of Islamic Studies have increasingly understood Islam not just as a religion, but also as a cultural entity that comprises or permeates all aspects of societies termed ‘Islamic’. This view of Islam, epitomised by Carl Heinrich Becker in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> can also be paralleled with Émile Durkheim’s theories stating that pre-modern societies were fundamentally shaped by religion.<sup>2</sup> While the History of Islamic Art is not primarily concerned with this relationship, it does implicitly build on a broad notion of Islam as a cultural phenomenon. This can already be understood from the pragmatic way in which historians of Islamic Art and Archaeologists of the Islamic periods have termed their academic fields, as covering art and material culture that originated from regions and historical periods dominated by Islam, without necessarily questioning to what degree religious elements have been crucial factors in the cultural history of ‘Islamic’ societies. This attitude enables conceptually wide approaches. It has made it possible for Islamic Art and Archaeology to be a part of Global Art History, and to form a specialisation of Archaeology with regional and chronological delineations.<sup>3</sup>

By choosing the ‘sacred’ as a focus, in turn, the 11<sup>th</sup> colloquy of the Ernst Herzfeld Society emphasised one of the crucial aspects of religion. The experience of the sacred and the opposition of sacred and profane, as highlighted by both Mircea Eliade and Émile Durkheim as fundamentals of religion in general,<sup>4</sup> are likewise manifest in Islamic religion throughout its history. The wide-spread twinning of *dunyā wa-dīn* (“worldly matters and the religious realm”) is indicative in this respect, and so are the different terms that are used to denote the sacred, such as *qaddūs* and *ḥaram*. There may be a lack of scholarly clarity about the equation between the different Arabic-Islamic terms; the nuances between *qaddūs* and *ḥaram* (“hal-lowed” and “sacred”), as well as their relations with *mubārak*, *mahrūs*, *mukarram*, *munawwar* and *mutahhar* (“blessed”, “well-guarded”, “honoured”, “illuminated”, “pure”) need to be determined further. However, it appears obvious that the concept of holiness and sanctity is worth to be looked for in Islamic art and material culture, as a factor of primary importance in Islamic societies.

In this context, it seems important not to conceptualise cultural history as a unidirectional process in which ideas, preferably religious ideas, are first developed in thought and then emanate in forms of art and other materialisations. Instead, it appears promising to adopt the concept of a multilateral process, in which works of art, objects, and their material setting

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1 Carl Heinrich Becker: “Der Islam als Problem”, *Der Islam* 1 (1920), 1–32; cf. also Josef van Ess: “From Wellhausen to Becker. The Emergence of ‘Kulturgeschichte’ in Islamic Studies”, in *Levi della Vida Conferences VII: Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, ed by Malcom H. Kerr, Los Angeles 1979, 27–51; Alexander Haridi: *Das Paradigma der “islamischen Zivilisation” – oder die Begründung der deutschen Islamwissenschaft durch Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933), eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Würzburg 2005.

2 Émile Durkheim: *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, Paris 1912.

3 Cf. the various relevant articles in Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves (eds.): *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6 (June 2012): special issue *Islamic Art Historiography*.

4 Mircea Eliade: *Das Heilige und das Profane. Vom Wesen des Religiösen*, Hamburg 1957.

are considered as factors that substantiate or enable religion.<sup>5</sup> In this understanding, Islam was not only shaped by Prophetic revelation and by the writings of religious authors but also through the allocation of values in art and material culture, e.g. in the way in which Qurʾans were illuminated, mosques and *khānaqāhs* were built, and calligraphic verses put up in private homes. A historical understanding of Islamic religion must consider the mutuality of the material and the spiritual, from which art arises. This is not, of course, to mean that religious ideas were derivatives of the material world in which they originated. However, it seems reasonable to highlight that religious thought was also informed by works of art and other formally structured cultural phenomena (“symbolic forms”),<sup>6</sup> with notable continuities from antiquity to the present. For example, it can be said that the Qurʾanic notion of the ‘Book’ as an emanation of the divine would not have made sense without the previous development of religious text, and codices as its material condensation, in Late Antiquity.

The conference in Bamberg 2015 was an attempt to contribute to this discussion about Islamic art in relation to Islamic religion. The eighteen papers delivered gave a rich impression of relevant topics in Islamic Art and Archaeology that have been subject of research during the past years. They range from the way in which relics of the Prophet Muḥammad were venerated in Mamluk Egypt to the problem of the *qibla* orientation of mosques in al-Andalus, from the way in which sacred places are staged in texts to the network of religious buildings and places of veneration on the island of Djerba. New material from archaeological explorations was introduced: This concerns religious buildings such as the early mosques at Tiberias and Jerash, and wider contexts like the mountain fort in which the Almohad community of believers constituted itself in the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century in the Anti-Atlas. While the papers just named as examples were not converted into articles for the present volume, as most of these studies are published elsewhere, the nine papers that are gathered here do represent a wide array of topics and approaches encompassing the sacred in Islamic Art.

Elizabeth Fowden deals with the transfer of practices and ideas from pre-Islamic to Islamic culture in Arabia and analyses the way in which the material world and sensual impressions constitutive of early Islam were shaped by pre-Islamic rituals and customs. Before the monumental expressions of state-Islam that are preserved from the period of ʿAbd al-Malik, these elements were not only rudiments of a pagan past but considerably served to build Islamic religion and culture. In the article by Theodore Van Loan, the focus is on a motif of architectural decoration in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and on the particular gaze that must have been a corollary of the visual perception of such elements. Katharina Meinecke’s article explores the borders between the religious and the profane, which can be permeable at times and for certain purposes: The various ways of representing the Umayyad caliph indicate traditions of sacralising the ruler as a ‘king of kings’ or as invested with divine power that can be understood as continuations from Roman and Persian Antiquity.

Mattia Guidetti investigates an Islamic place of worship in Bethlehem and the question of its origins. From the sparse and contradicting pieces of information in written sources, he arrives at a reconstruction of the specific arrangement at this particularly ‘Christian’ site.

5 David Morgan: “Introduction. The Matter of Belief”, in: *Religion and Material Culture. The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan, London/New York 2010, pp. 1–12; idem: “The Material Culture of Lived Religion. Visuality and Embodiment”, in *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of the Nordik 2009 Conference for Art Historians*, ed. Johanna Vakkari (Studies in Art History, 41). Helsinki 2010, pp. 14–31; Birgit Meyer et al.: “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion”, *Religion* 40 (2010), pp. 207–211, esp. p. 209.

6 Ernst Cassirer: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols., Berlin, 1923–1929.

Susana Calvo Capilla deals with the mosque of Tinmal in Morocco, known as the ‘dynastic mosque’ of the Almohads. In particular its enigmatic minaret is examined in the context of the Almohad dogma and rituals. The results of this examination on the one hand underline the special place that Tinmal holds among the mosques of the Islamic West, but also serve to explain some features of other mosques and their minarets in the same region.

Qur’anic calligraphy and illumination are well-nigh classical topics of Islamic religious art, however their history presents numerous problems. Frantz Chaigne’s study discusses important examples from the 14<sup>th</sup> century with a focus on the *shamsa* (“sunburst”) as a particular form of opening design, touching upon questions of workshop organisation and copying between different media. Bilal Badat in his article on Ottoman calligraphy gives an overview of attitudes towards calligraphic writing from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, analysing the terms in which this form of art was ‘sacralised’. Thereby, aspects of mediality and practice come into view.

The articles by Francine Giese and Iván Szántó are in some way related, as both are dealing with the inter-religious handling of religious places. While the cathedral-mezquita of Córdoba, discussed by Giese, is one of the best-known examples of a converted religious building, a close examination reveals the complex interference of religious and political agendas through centuries – including more recent aspects of heritage conservation. Similar conversions, of places much less famous, happened in Hungary after the Habsburg victories over the Turks and in the course of re-Christianisation of the country. Szántó demonstrates that the exploitation of possible landmarks did, however, not only serve to commemorate the conquest, but was also used to convey other, new agendas.

The conference gave a lively impression of the importance of the Ernst Herzfeld Society at its tenth anniversary, with its colloquia as an established forum of discussion much needed for the scholarly debate in the field of Islamic Art and Archaeology. I am gratefully indebted to Martina Müller-Wiener for sharing the organisation of this conference, and to Çiğdem İvren for participating in the editing of the papers. I express my warmest thanks to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for funding the conference most generously. I extend my thanks to the University of Bamberg for hosting the conference, to its Centre for Medieval Studies and to the Bumiller Art Foundation for their financial support, to all of those who helped during the conference, to the Reichert Verlag for adopting the volume for publication, and finally to the authors of the papers for their patience during the process of editing. Without their commitments, it would not have been possible to produce the present volume.