

The Soul's Need to Connect with God through the Language of Art: Analysis from an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Human beings express their emotions through the language of art; it is therefore both the spirit of progress and one of the most important means of developing emotions. Consequently, those who cannot make use of this means are incomplete in their maturation. Ideas and other products of the imagination can be given tangible form with the magical key of art. By means of art, humanity can exceed the limits of the earth and reach feelings beyond time and space. Beauty in the realm of existence can be recognized through art. Moreover, the great abilities inherent in human nature can be understood and witnessed in works of art. However, from an Islamic point of view, there are some restrictions on certain fields such as sculpture and painting. It is therefore imperative to analyse the notion of art in Islam and its philosophy and then reflect upon the need of the spirit to connect to God through the language of art while meeting some religious obstacles on the way.

Keywords: Islamic art, art from Islamic perspective, connecting God through art, soul's language in art, expression of beauty in art

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Notion of Art from an Islamic Perspective*

Human beings express their emotions through the language of art; it is therefore both the spirit of progress and one of the most important means of developing emotions. Those who cannot make use of this means are incomplete in their maturation. Ideas and other products of the imagination can be given tangible form with the magical key of art. By means of art, humanity can exceed the limits of the earth and express spiritual feelings beyond time and space. Beauty in the realm of existence can be recognized with art. Moreover, the great abilities inherent in human nature can be understood and witnessed in works of art.

As a global phenomenon, art manifests the power and potential of the human soul. It is by means of art that the most profound emotions and thoughts, the most striking observations and discoveries, and the most heart-felt desires have been preserved as if recorded on a tape and gained eternity (Gülen, 2012. p. 66). The works of artists represent beauty in tangible form. For example, the mosques and minarets point to the metaphysical realm.

People manifest their knowledge through the language of art and one may argue that without art, a person may be considered a corpse. Even if one does not discover the universal in art he/she can still perceive the classical ideal of beauty (Necipoglu, 1995). Beauty receives its value from art and thereby through art, iron can become more valuable than gold. Humanity finds its real value in art and people attain to perfection by means of it. According to Islamic thought, all the fine arts are eternal gifts from blessed souls to humanity (Gülen, 2012. p. 67). Hence, the nature of the human spirit is complex and likewise so is its art. It is like the living image of what Plato has in mind for art in a theocratic state (Tate, 1932). Art symbolizes in physical form the transcending aspect of the soul.

The vision of Islamic art is unique and strongly related to the Islamic belief system just as Christian art is related to its own culture and religion (Graba, 1987. pp. 43-71). Nevertheless, it is illogical to claim that there are no commonalities between Islamic and other art traditions (Agaoglu, 1954). Islamic art is the expression of a whole culture, intimately intertwined with religious, theological, and legal commitments (Madden, 1975). The spiritual dimension of Islam is exhibited in the works of Muslim artists (Al Faruqi, 1984). Although three-dimensional sculpture or large-scale oil painting is not seen much in Islamic art one can see miniatures, vegetal ornaments, arabesque surface patterns, and complex geometrical designs (Gocer, 1999). Contemporary scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr states that whether in the great courtyard of the Delhi Mosque or the Qarawiyyin in Fez, one feels oneself within the same artistic and spiritual universe

despite all the local variations in material, structural techniques, and the like (Nasr, 1987).

1.2 How Islamic Art Reveals Itself

Islamic architecture reveals two types of building: first the memorial buildings, such as tombs, tomb towers, and minarets; second, the open-court buildings of the mosques and madrasas (Diez, 1938). The designs and intricate patterns carved in the marbles of mosques symbolize the complex nature of spirit. The interior designs in the mosques allude to the principle that God is beyond time and space but is also, on the contrary, simultaneously present everywhere and at all times (Kühnel, 1966. p. 25).

In Islamic art, literature is important (Arkoun, 1961) and with it, people express their ideas, worldviews and cultures. Understanding a nation is heavily related to understanding its literature. The power of a nation is directly proportional to the power and richness of its language and thought (Gülen, 2010. p. 17). With the magical effect of words, poets and writers attain immortality. Literature transforms language into a lovable form through the dimensions of eloquence and clarity. Experts in literature can recognize the beauty in verbal expressions. With their expertise, they easily convey their thoughts to people and excite their hearts with effective speech. Although they use fewer words their meaning is very rich for they explain their thoughts with similes, metaphors and allusions.

God gave human beings the ability to speak regarding the human essence, the entire cosmos, and the truth beyond material existence before sending them to the dimension of external existence. This is reflected in the Qur'an: The All-Merciful. He has taught the Qur'an. He has created the human. He has taught him speech (Qur'an, 55:1-4 interpreted by Unal, 2007). God taught Adam the names, all of them (Qur'an, 2:31 interpreted by Unal, 2007). According to these verses, speech was the first drop of ink that flowed from the pen of Divine Power to give life to non-existence (Gülen, 2010. p. 1). In the magical realm of words, a spirit discovers the mysterious relation between God and itself. Humankind is elevated to the rank of vicegerency and the addressee of God with the power of language in spite of the fact that they are created from a clay mixture of the dust and water of the earth (Qur'an, 2:31 interpreted by Unal, 2007).

Poetry is another venue through which the human spirit connects itself to the metaphysical dimension of this world and God. Poetry is the artistic expression of the universe's hidden beauty and symmetry, and the heart-ravishing, joyous view of existence by sensitive, inspired souls (Gülen, 2012. p. 68). In Islamic art, whether the case may be poetry or any other medium, the mind is directed toward the divine (Eaton, 1987. pp. 358-377). So, poetry is another field in which the artist is in contact with the transcendent. For contemporary scholar Fethullah Gülen, poetry is the voice, wording, and expression of the truth and essence of humankind, their love, excitement, trouble, grief, and joys, the expression of their sensing and evaluation of existence and the beyond, through the tongue of feelings and emotions in an open or hidden way (Gülen, 2012. p. 39).

From the Islamic approach, poets use their hearts as inkpots and spirit as ink, and write the meaning of the connection between the human soul and God. It can be argued that the aniconism of Islamic art is most likely due to the fact that the spiritual world is best reflected in the sensible world through geometry and rhythm (Critchlow, 1976). The inner dimensions of the spirit are manifested in the lines of poems. The soul explains its anger, lust, tranquility and other spiritual states with the language of poetry. Although poetry is shaped according to specific beliefs, cultures, and styles of thought it is also an expression of the transcendence of the human spirit. When thoughts growing in the heart put on the wings of imagination, they begin to force open the doors of infinity (Gülen, 2012. p. 69). According to the notion of Islamic art, if poetry has no connection with God, it is considered barren while with divine inspirations it attains infinite beauty.

Calligraphy—the only universally agreed upon Islamic artistic genre—is another field of Islamic art in which talented artists find the presence of God in their artistic writings. It is a commonly employed decoration in all Islamic art (Hill & Grabar, 1964. p. 80). Islamic calligraphers adorn books, the walls and domes of mosques, the sides of minbars etc. with their stylized and often repetitive writings. Islamic calligraphy combines verticality and horizontality in a proportionate mixture of static and flowing figures, and by means of rotation and repetition the calligrapher connects him/herself to God, because geometrical shapes invite the human soul to the pure reality behind this physical world. Calligraphy derives its prestige from the Qur'an and the Arabic script is used to symbolize the contemplation of divine beauty (Carl, 2003. p. 186).

1.3 Expression of the Divine

In Islamic art, geometry and exact proportion are a direct expression of the divine and mathematics is the key to understand the structure of the cosmos (Al Faqih, 1970). For Muslim artists, repetitive patterns, exactness of proportion, and symmetry are representations of God's perfect beauty (Michon, 1985). The motifs in decoration are geometrical patterns where the interlaced line is continuous, having been given no beginning or end by the artist. The line symbolizes God's infinity, oneness and transcendence. The infinite pattern was introduced into Islamic art by the Fatimid dynasty in

Egypt (Grube, 1967. pp. 68-69).

The most original Islamic contribution to art, geometrical design, arabesque, and patterned surface art often consist in the complex design of an interlocking system of rotating polygons and stars within circles (Gocer, 1999). The circle is the basis of all geometrical shapes and with the sense of rhythm these shapes symbolize the divine presence. In the Muslim view of life, everything is seen symmetrically, linearly, and cyclically; therefore, the art of theatre or drama did not take place in Islamic art (Al Faruqi, 1970).

In Islamic architecture, the traditional hemispheric mosque domes and cylindrical minarets indicate the importance of the geometrical approach. Similarly, in decorative art the repeated geometrical, floral, and vegetal patterns form the famous arabesques which are closely associated with the Islamic culture. Every part of an arabesque is subordinated to the pattern which exhibits the universal character of the God; everything in the universe worships Him.

Islamic art does not make any distinction between fine arts and crafts and art is thus the talent for making things beautiful whether the work of art is a poem, a painting, a rug, a mihrab (a place which imam stays while leading the prayers), or a mosque (Madden, 1975). In Islamic art there is no distinction between fine arts and decorative arts for decoration is fundamental to all art (Coomaraswamy, 1956. p. 19).

Islamic art opposes the notion of the museum for the works of art because artworks are not separated from everyday affairs but rather are part of everyday life in Muslim communities (Burckhardt, 1954). For example, the Blue Mosque, one of the best works of Islamic art is a place where Muslims connect themselves to God five times in a day. The works of art are not made to be exhibited in museums but instead to be used in the daily lives of Muslims. Although Muslims might be interested to see historical art works, however they do not confuse knowledge about art, with what art is about (Coomaraswamy, 1956. p. 79).

2. Beauty and Its Expression with Art

Beauty is a phenomenon which is hard to describe but easy to recognize. The human soul is excited when witnessing beauty because every beautiful object is a reflection of Divine Beauty. Anything that incites appreciation, love, and astonishment is a reflection of Divine Beauty (Gülen, 2010. p. 23). According to Plato, beauty and goodness are divine and all human endeavor (including artistic creation) must imitate the divine (Gocer, 1999). It can be argued that the Platonic influence on Islamic thought is not limited only to political philosophy but also the notion of art (Nasr, 1964. pp. 7-19).

In Islamic thought, everything is surrounded by infinite beauty. The source of beauty is faith and with this perspective Muslims conceive of everything beautiful. For them, the soul connects itself to God through the beauty in faith and attains worldly and heavenly happiness by being released from all worries. By breathing the air of beauty in their hearts, they strive to do righteous deeds in the hope that they will fulfil their spiritual desires. The universe, events, objects, and the human intellect are all manifestations of divine beauty according to the philosophy of Islamic art. All righteous acts and progress in the spiritual ranks of love is the desire of the spirit to connect with the divine.

According to Islam, beauty is a divine attribute of God and all created things in the universe are mirrors of God, reflecting His beauty as much as their potential allows. The sun spreads its mercy on each and every thing without distinction and moonlight touches hearts with its softness and beauty (Gülen, 2010, p. 24). The deeply complex relationship between cosmology and theology effected the notion of art in Islam.

From ancient times, sages in every culture and civilization expressed their vision of the sacred through art and Muslim artists did not hesitate to benefit from such richness (Nasr, 1964. p. 47). Therefore, Islamic art includes nonreligious elements with the participation of non-Muslims. It is necessary to make a distinction between religious art and Islamic art. Religious art is used for sacred purposes which contain religious themes such as religious books with miniature illustrations, finely calligraphed Qur'ans, ornate lamps, carpets in the mosque and the architecture of the mosque itself while Islamic art refers all the works of art that have been produced by anyone in Islamic culture. For example, paintings cannot be considered as sacred art for they have no function in religious practice.

2.1 Art is a Universal Language

Art is a universal language and human beings express themselves through it. Muslim scholars benefitted from other cultures in music, literature and architecture (Peters, 1979. pp. 29-31). Beauty has both ethical and aesthetic connotations in Greek philosophy as it does in Islamic art. From the Islamic viewpoint, all the voices of the birds, sheep, forests, and mountains make up a harmonious song, feeding human souls with the most peaceful of rhythms (Gülen, 2010, p. 24). For Ibn 'Arabi, humankind is a replica of the universe in microcosmic form and the human spirit is therefore a key to solve the riddle of creation (Ibn Arabi, 1992. 2/121).

Beauty is a form of intelligence which interprets the real meaning of existence. The beauty in the human spirit reflects

everything as a mirror, revealing the beauty of the most beautiful (God). Sometimes, a good poem, a legend, a well-told story, or music that is meant to touch our human sensibilities, that wafts harmony into our soul, can draw us to spiritual beauty and make us hear the beauty of some other abode (Gülen, 2010. p. 25). For Plato beauty and goodness are manifest in the visible realm precisely because the world is fashioned by God, who created it beautifully like himself (Grube, 1980. pp. 150-178).

In Islamic thought, every beauty of this world fades away. In order that the human soul should not succumb to despair and to be able to enjoy infinite beauty, it is necessary for it to connect itself to eternal Beauty. Although the eyes can see physical beauties the soul can sense the abstract beauty that fills hearts with the love of God.

Islamic arts incorporate various techniques in order to describe the mortality of everything other than God. Solid walls are made to appear ephemeral by the use of plaster and tile decoration, while vaults and arches have their functions masked by floral and calligraphic ornament (Madden, 1975). Parallel to this understanding, Plato disapproves of certain forms of art, being worried that such art forms may be morally useless because they delight in feeding and drawing on the baser part of human beings, specifically the part that lacks in reason and is fond of crude emotions (Plato, 1997).

When beauty and love become intertwined, the soul, with its unique ability to see, feel, and hear, senses the Real Source in everything that it meets (Gülen, 2010. p. 26). Through His art, God presents His Beauty to humanity in order to make Himself known and be loved by them. The art of God in the universe is a perfect example for human beings to imitate. However, only those who are aware of their spirit can appreciate such beauty in the universe. If the spirit is connected to God, it will see His beauty reflected in the Moon, the sunset, the twinkling stars and the colorful forms of nature. For Plato, divine beauty is revealed especially in the shapes of the circle and triangle; therefore, the world, celestial stars, and human heads are all round (Gocer, 1999).

2.2 The Universe is an Exhibition of the Divine

The universe is an exhibition of the divine art and all things in their enchanting harmony, fascinating order and dazzling beauty invite human souls to connect with God. The aesthetic dimension has a deep significance in Islamic art for God is the source of all kinds of beauty. The Prophet said, God is Beautiful, He loves beauty (Muslim, 1996. The Book of Miscellany 1). For the souls that connect themselves through art, the universe becomes a poem to be composed with the most immense sensations. Those who perceive the universe as an exhibition of divine art can never grow tired of it, nor can the world ever become exhausted as a perpetual source of wonder, remarks and stories (Gülen, 2010. p. 29).

God stated in the Qur'an; Say: If all the sea were ink to write my Lord's words (the acts, decrees, and manifestations of all His Names and Attributes), the sea would indeed be exhausted before my Lord's words would be exhausted, even if We were to bring the like of it in addition to it (Qur'an, 18:109. Interpreted by Unal, 2007).

The beauty in the exhibition of divine art from the macrocosm to the inner dimension of human nature awakens artistic spirits to beautiful melodies originating in the love of Truth. They use the language of art to appreciate divine beauty while also trying to imitate its qualities as far as their capacity permits. They try to sense the presence of God in their humble works and utilize all their artistic capacity to feel the immense blessings of the One who is most merciful. While making their own art, they recognize the deepness of beauty in the divine art. They use their limited capacity as a key to unlock the inexhaustible treasury of God. Through reflection on divine art, they try to improve their artistic capacity and take an active role in the maturation process of this world. According to the Andalusian Sufi mystic and philosopher Ibn 'Arābī (d. 1240), the divine art can be reflected best in mankind, for God designed the universe artistically with all His names and attributes, and these also worked on humankind and therefore God presented His divine art both in the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of humanity (Ibn Arabi, 1997. p. 472).

Every artist wants to present his/her art so the audiences can appreciate his/her talent. For example, a talented sculptor who gives meaning and life to hard marbles or bronze wants to show his talent through his art. Similarly, a person who is talented in painting wants to exhibit his/her art to show their artistic talent in this field. If artists do not express themselves through the language of art, their talents cannot be known and be appreciated. However, Plato argues that since art essentially fails to recreate the true condition of the real thing, it must be purified of all of its excess and vainglory (Peters, 1979. pp. 29-31).

Since the talents required to make art are given by God and artists represent God in their capacity, their works have received respect in Islamic thought. For example, when 'Umar, the second Caliph of Islam went to Jerusalem a priest invited him to perform the daily prayers in a historical church, but he refused the offer. This was because 'Umar thought that if he had prayed in the church, later generations of Muslims might attempt to change the church into mosque (Arnold, 2001. p. 94).

According to natural disposition, every talent possessed by an artist desires to manifest itself in the physical realm. Similarly, just as God wants to present His names, attributes and essential qualities through divine art, so His beauty can

be recognized. Through examining His divine art, the human spirit understands His beauty, mercy, knowledge, artistic skills and many more attributes. If God did not present His divine art in such tangible forms humankind would not know Him and consequently could not be connected to Him. In order to introduce Himself to His servants, God created the universe artistically and invited human beings to reflect on it.

God created human beings on the account of His divine love; therefore, the human spirit seeks the owner of this love and tries to connect itself to Him. Hence, love is an inner identity of mankind and human art is an exhibition of such love in tangible form. With the eye of love, they see everything as signs, messages, and lights of different frequencies of divine manifestations.

In order to connect with God, whirling Dervishes imitate the circular movements of divine objects in the universe. They assume white garments and dance according to rhythmic juxtapositions and circling of the participants. With their concentric circles, they aim to reproduce the movements of the stars, so they can join the universal harmony of the cosmos (Nasr, pp. 1987. 281-284). Raising one hand up and lowering the other, they symbolize the generosity of God and the altruism of humanity; whatever they receive from God they pour (share) upon others.

From an Islamic perspective, the best artwork in the universe is humankind, for God created human beings with His hand on the ground of love. Parallel to this, the human spirit that recognizes such love wants to express it through works of art. Love is the spirit of art for it is a heavenly light that transcends the earth and the sky, east and west, and is beyond time and space. Love is the most truthful witness of being spaceless within space, and timeless within time (Gülen, 2010. p. 35).

3. Pictures and Sculptures in Islamic Art

The notion of art in Islam is strongly related to its theological belief system, therefore there is an inclination to reject certain kinds of art. This attitude is also grounded in the understanding that God is the supreme creator and no one can share His divine attributes regarding creating. The central message of the Qur'an is that of the absolute creativity of God (Nasr, pp. 1987. 312-318). God alone created the universe and fashioned it in the most beautiful form. Accordingly, God is he who makes excellent everything that he creates (Qur'an 32:7. Interpreted by Unal, 2007). Again, God is The Originator of the heavens and the earth with nothing before Him to imitate (Qur'an 6:101. Interpreted by Unal, 2007). People are reminded to be mindful of God's supreme artistry: Glorify the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and fashions in due proportions, and who determines (a particular life, nature, and goal for each creature), and guides it toward the fulfilment of that goal (Qur'an 87:1-3. Interpreted by Unal, 2007).

Islamic art is less inclined to paintings and sculptures to avoid the risk of engendering in the artist the false pride of having created something real and, in the observer, the false admiration for human creativity (Ettinghausen, 1944). Islam's attitude towards paintings and sculpture is related to its theological perspective on paganism and idol-worshipping and this attitude has been discussed by both orientalists and Muslim scholars on many occasions.

When Prophet Muhammad came with the divine message, idolatry was very common among the Arab tribes and they worshipped idols that were dedicated to luck, bravery and good fortune. Al-Lāt, al-'Uzza, and al-Manāt were the names of the greatest idols in Makkah. The idols had female names and were images or representations of some angels or angelic powers in the eyes of the polytheists. The polytheists regarded the angels as females or daughters of God. Hubal was the biggest idol and the most respected one by the Quraysh which was located around the Ka'ba (Dogan, 2014. pp. 3-4). Other than these idols there were many others as each tribe had their own idol to worship.

This pagan approach to religious art is expressed in the Qur'an:

They worship, apart from God, things or beings that can neither harm nor benefit them, and they say: 'These are our intercessors with God'. Say: 'Would you inform God of something in the heavens or the earth that He does not know? All-Glorified is He, and absolutely exalted above all that they associate with Him (Qur'an, 10:18. Interpreted by Unal, 2007).

3.1 Imitating the Divine Art

Although emulation of divine beauty is impossible, artists can imitate the divine art in order to give a message about God's beauty for those who can comprehend its meaning. In Islamic thought, art is more abstract for the reason that pictorial icons may in many cases be less able to lift the mind above the limited and the historical environment to the One who is transcendent, beyond time and space. Therefore, Muslims artists try to connect themselves to God through the abstract motifs in their works, hoping to symbolize God with them. For example, the infinite pattern in an arabesque should be interpreted as symbolizing God's infinity and transcendence in an absolute sense (Al-Faruqi, 1970. p. 90).

In order to avoid anthropomorphic approaches, Muslim artists prefer abstract patterns, because God's nature is beyond human beings' power to know or portray. Because of the danger of idolatry, Muslims avoided paintings and sculpture in their arts in the early formation of Islam. However, the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid caliphs, the Fatimid, the Saljuqs, the

Atabeg of Iraq and Syria, and the Safavid of Persia permitted paintings and statues (Goetz, 1963).

In the orientalist mind, richness and progress in a civilization is represented by paintings and sculptures, therefore they have misconceptions regarding early classical Islamic art (Grabar, 1987. pp. 43-71). For them, the East is primitive for they have fewer sculptures or paintings compared with civilized societies. Although, Muslim artists produced many unique works such as Kusayr Amra (711-715 CE) and Kasr Hayru'l Gharbu (728 CE) in the early dates of Islam the Western scholars are inclined to see them as exceptional (Creswell, 2002. pp. 101-109).

According to Thomas Arnold, paintings and beautifully decorated sculptures were not seen in pre-Islamic times in the Arabian Peninsula. He argues that although Arabs worshipped idols they did not use decorative motifs to make them more artistic (Arnold, 1965. p. 1). However, contradicting this argument is the fact that when the Prophet conquered Makkah he found pictures of Abraham, Marry and Jesus in the Ka'ba, the most holy place of Islam (Bukhari, 1997. Prophets 8).

3.2 Negative Position against Sculpture and Paintings

In its early formation, Islam naturally took a position against sculpture and paintings for its followers had just rejected polytheistic thought and so it would have been easy for them to fall once again into idol worshipping. For example, the following prophetic statements should be understood in this way:

Angels (of mercy) do not enter a house that has a picture in it (Bukhari, 1997. Beginning of Creation 17).

The people who will receive the severest punishment from God will be the picture makers (Bukhari, 1997. Dress 89).

Aisha had a thick curtain (having pictures on it) and she screened the side of her house with it. The Prophet said to her, 'remove it from my sight, for its pictures are still coming to my mind in my prayers (Bukhari, 1997. Dress 93).

The makers of pictures (of living beings) will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them, 'give life to what you have created (Bukhari, 1997. Marriage 76).

In all these prophetic traditions and sayings, we can see that the Prophet was worried that his followers might revert to idol worshipping, and therefore he used strong language in censuring anything that might remind them of the former pagan practices. It can be said that Islam never opposes any kind of art as long as people do not worship that artwork in itself.

The Islamic concern regarding paintings and statues is related and limited to the possible practice of worshipping them besides God. It is not wise to say that all kind of paintings and statues are prohibited in Islam. For example, the famous Ottoman Sultan Fatih Sultan Mehmed (1432-1481 CE) invited famous painters to his Palace and asked them to draw his picture. If painting was absolutely prohibited in Islam he would never have done this, nor would the clergy have allowed it. Similarly, Ottoman vizier Ibrahim Pasha (1666-1730 CE) placed three sculptures in front of his palace (Banarli, 1987). However, if a society is primitive in thought and its people are therefore liable to worship statues, then the art of sculpture is not permitted.

The story of Prophet Moses in the Qur'an in which he smashed the golden calf can be understood in this way:

The people of Moses, after he (had left them to meet with his Lord), adopted for worship a calf (in effigy, made) of their ornaments, which gave out a lowing sound. Did they not see that it neither spoke to them nor guided them to a way? They adopted it for worship and so became wrongdoers... when Moses returned to his people, full of wrath and sorrow, he said: 'Evil is the course you have followed after me! Have you forsaken your Lord's commandment so hastily to hasten your destruction?' (Qur'an, 7:148-150. Interpreted by Unal, 2007)

The Hebrew Bible clearly rejects idols and idol worshipping as does the Qur'an. Stories of prophets reveal that people are inclined to idol worshipping and there are abundant examples in this regard. This is the main reason why Islam kept images and statues outside of its sacred places. This is also a reason why Islamic art is the individuation of its metaphysical basis (Diez, 1938).

When examining the relevant verses of the Qur'an and prophetic traditions which strongly oppose idols and paganism, many scholars are inclined to understand Islam as having banned portraits of living creatures and statues. They argue that statues and images of living beings encourage people to the practice of idolatry. It is therefore equated with associating partners with God in His creativity. Opposed to this scholarly cliché visual art—including paintings and statues—in Islamic history has a long and vigorous tradition. Although the Qur'an condemns idol worshippers it does not prohibit the visual arts.

Islamic art is a witness to the fact that Muslims often used images in a secular context. Such art includes paintings in royal palaces and book illustrations containing prophetic stories. However, places of worship are free from imitative imagery for their potential to distract souls from concentrating on worship and connecting with God. This is the main difference between Islamic, and Christian or more generally Western art. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions in which Muslims used images in the design of mosques. For example, the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, built in the eighth century, has

mosaic depictions of rivers and trees though it does not contain human or animal figures (Carl, 2003. p. 185).

The various aspects of Islamic art indicate the sense of beauty in Muslim societies which developed throughout the centuries. However, Wahhabi ideology—an extreme theological movement in Islam which emerged from Arabia in the nineteenth century—threatens this notion of art and sense of beauty. This movement wishes to prohibit all kinds of images, even going as far as to prohibit family albums. Although the advocates of this approach try to cover their extremism with an Islamic guise the majority of Muslims oppose their view. Such an extreme view yielded its bitter fruit in Afghanistan. The Taliban destroyed the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan that had stood in Afghanistan since the time of Alexander (Carl, 2003). The Wahhabi ideology destroyed Ottoman-era tombs in Arabia and Ottoman mosques in Bosnia. They desire to ban all forms of beautiful manifestations in Islamic art—including geometric ornament, vegetal arabesque and calligraphy. With this attitude, they aim to disconnect the human soul which is connected to God through the language of art.

4. Conclusion

Art is a universal language of love whether it is Islamic, Christian or Jewish. Art is an important source of power which can influence humanity positively. Art can connect people to each other regardless of their culture, nation and religious background as well as connecting the human spirit to God. In this regard, I humbly suggest that art should be used as part of interfaith dialogue activities as a major theme, so that participants can recognize their many commonalities among the world's different cultures and religions. In this way, humanity can experience real peace and love through the language of art.

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