

ISLAMIC ART AND SPIRITUALITY

Syyed Hossein Nasr, Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 1987, pp.213,
£. 25.00

Ugliness is the most outstanding characteristic of the present computerized age: the hideous concrete monstrosities that are increasingly defacing our cities, the subjective meaninglessness of modern abstract art, literature that has degenerated into verbal modern abstract art, literature that has degenerated into verbal pornography and the nerve-shattering noise of pop-music. The root-cause of all this ugliness is rejection of God - for godless materialism cannot be anything but ugly. Worst of all, under the impact of westernization, most Muslims themselves have lost all aesthetic sense to the extent that they cannot distinguish beauty from ugliness or truth from falsehood. The modernists condemn Islamic art as ‘stagnant’ and ‘backward’ while the fundamentalists insist it is ‘‘un-godly’’ and ‘satanic.’ - a product of the decadent monarchies and foreign influences alien to Islam! Even the most sacred forms of Islamic art are at best regarded as a luxury and a waste of time and energy which they allege could far more be profitably spent in social, economic and political activism. All these fallacies used by the enemies of Islamic art and culture, are convincingly refuted in this book.

‘‘One of the most pertinent aspects of the spiritual message of Islamic art today is its ability to present the heart of Islam in a much more direct and intelligible manner than many a purportedly scholarly exposition. A piece of traditional calligraphy or an arabesque can speak much more eloquently of the intelligence and nobility which characterize the Islamic message than many an apologetic work of Islamic modernists or so-called activists. It is the serene, intelligible structured and highly spiritual character of Islamic art which more than any other element has helped to combat and off-set the very negative effect produced by that type of currently popular literature about Islam which would depict it as a violent, irrational and fanatical force.’’
(pp. 195-196)

(There are those fundamentalists and activists) who emphasize the Shari’ite dimension of Islam at the expense of everything else. Now no Muslim could oppose the thesis that an Islamic society is one in which the

Shar'iah is promulgated and practiced. But if the Shar'iah as law governing the external actions of human society as well as the rites man must perform as part of his duties towards God - were the only aspect of Islam, why was such care taken throughout Islamic history even going back to the very beginning in the psalmody of the Quran, in the building of beautiful "mosques and in beautifying all that concerns God and His religion? Why was so much effort spent in bringing Islamic values into the lives of men and women through all kinds of means from story-telling and literature to weaving all of which are concerned with art? The answer is clear enough Human beings have more hours in the day than directly religious injunctions of the Shari'ah can fill. These injunctions include prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and so on while other activities such as earning a living or caring for the family are also religious duties as long as they are performed in accordance with the Shar'iah. But human nature being What it is, man tends to forget God in those other activities, ranging from economic transactions to what is called "leisure." Islamic art was the means whereby the spirit of Islam penetrated into all these types and modes of activity, reminding him, wherever he was, of the Divine presence. To destroy this is to empty the soul and mind of the Muslim to a large extent of its Islamic content, leaving a vacuum which is then rapidly filled by the worst clutter, noise and banality of the modern world, as in the case of many a Muslim today. As a result of the loss of a part of their soul to the false and the ugly, there are those who have lost their faith altogether." (PP. 197-198)

Islamic art stems not from alien influences but directly from the inner dimensions of Islam itself, always emphasizing the absolute, the immutable and permanent. In contrast to Western art, Islamic art is not the subjective expression of the individual but the sacred and traditional legacy of an entire civilization. For this reason, many of the greatest works of Islamic art are anonymous. Because the author is Persian, much of the book describes various aspects of Persian Islamic art, always making clear that this is applicable to the rest of the Muslim world as well.

"There is, moreover, another function which traditional Islamic art can play today, one which is itself a great boon and blessing if fully understood. In a world replete with deception and counterfeit, this art, along with doctrinal truth, can play the role of determining the Islamicity of all that

claims to be Islamic. It can serve as a criterion for deciding what social, cultural or even political manifestation or movement is authentically Islamic and not just making use of Islamic symbols and images or means for the achievement of other ends. Islam throughout its history and within the depth and breadth of all its authentic manifestations from architecture to the art of dress has emphasized beauty and been inseparable from it. Have those (fundamentalists), who claim to speak in the name of Islam today, created any form of beauty? Can the qualities of serenity, peace, harmony and equilibrium, which characterize both the Islamic religion and the artistic and cultural manifestations of Islam, be seen in what (propaganda) these present-day groups in question create and produce?” (p. 200)

Before she embraced Islam during her youth in America, the reviewer used to be creative in the arts and crafts. When she migrated to Pakistan after embracing Islam, she was constantly reminded that all the so-called “fine arts” are prohibited by the Shar’iah, artists, poets and musicians being threatened by the. Hadith with dire punishments in the Hereafter. Consequently, she henceforth - abandoned all artistic efforts in exchange for writing polemics in the cause of Islam.

A quarter of a century later when she finally realized the fallacies of the fundamentalists and tried to resume her artistic endeavours, with dismay she found that whatever creative talents she may have been formerly endowed with, had been utterly killed off by decades of discouragement and lack of practice.

This book is essential reading for all those who value the preservation and survival of Islamic civilization.

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