

WM647

*Introduction to Islam*

Dr. Timothy Tennant

***The Scandal of Artistic Particularity:***  
**The Contrast of Islamic and Christian Art and Theology**

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by Dénes House

GCTS Box 180-B

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## SYNOPSIS/THESIS

*Islam's particular view of Incarnation leads Muslim artists away from figural representation and towards calligraphic and abstract imagery. In this paper, I argue that both of these phenomena are intimately connected with the distinction between Christianity's "scandal of particularity" and Islam's desire to be universal in scope, and with Islam's revulsion with the flesh. I believe further that this is linked to Islam's emphasis on the umma, in contradistinction with Christianity's emphasis on the individual. I further argue that like most questions worth asking, these issues are intimately connected with each religion's view of God.*

## INTRODUCTION

If the Islamic analogue to Jesus is not Muhammad, but the Qur'an - both serving as the Word of God made flesh - then one would expect to see this analogy play out in the artistic dimension of both religions. I have argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that art serves primarily as a vehicle for communication. In Christianity, God's primary medium of communication with humanity is the incarnate God-man, Jesus Christ. In Islam, God's primary medium of communication with humanity is the Book from Heaven, the Qur'an. I had intended to argue in this paper that Islam's denial of the Incarnation and its prohibition of representational art were linked concepts. In my research, I have come to modify that thesis somewhat. Islam does not deny Incarnation. Islam denies that Incarnation happened

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<sup>1</sup> In my paper "Image of the Invisible God", written for Systematic Theology I class at GCTS with Dr. David Wells, and available online at <http://www.crimsonlinestudios.com/mission/thousandtongues.pdf>

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in the form of a human being. My new thesis may thus be stated with a positive dimension, not just a negative:

*Islam's particular view of Incarnation leads Muslim artists away from figural representation and towards calligraphic and abstract imagery. I will argue that both of these phenomena are intimately connected with the distinction between Christianity's "scandal of particularity" and Islam's desire to be universal in scope. I believe further that this is linked to Islam's emphasis on the umma, in contradistinction with Christianity's emphasis on the individual. I will further argue that like most questions worth asking, these issues are intimately connected with each religion's view of God.*

I will explore this thesis using articles and essays, along with a look at the Qur'an and the Hadith. In looking at Christianity's perspective on art, I will rely heavily on a study I have previously done, which is referenced in footnote one. This research has greatly fueled my thinking, and I am grateful to have been able to do it.

### Islam and Art

Before undertaking this research, I had been under the impression that Islam forbids the making of any figural art - here defined as art that seeks to represent the figures of human beings or animals - while encouraging abstract and floral art. It turns out that this is certainly the usual practice of Muslims, but the jury is still out when it comes to actually supporting the claim from Islamic authority.

Clearly, Islam is against idolatry. Muhammad's respect for the Bible included the ten commandments, and he began his ministry with the smashing of idols in the Kaabah. The Qur'an is replete with passages denouncing idolatry and any suggestion of joining "partners" with Allah. As Oleg Grabar puts it, "... the Koran is totally silent on images except insofar as they were used as idols which are most forcefully condemned."<sup>2</sup> To list even a representational sampling of "partners" passages would take significant space, but here is a typical passage relating to idolatry that includes a "partnership" reference: "Lawful to you for food in Pilgrimage are cattle, except those mentioned to you as exceptions: but shun the abomination of idols, and shun the word that is false - being true in faith to Allah and never assigning partners to Him: if anyone assigns partners to Allah, he is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds, or the wind had swooped like a bird on its prey and thrown him into a far-distant place." (Surah 22:30-31)<sup>3</sup> Idolatry is an abomination, and Muhammad's first task in establishing Islam was to break his people from their idolatrous past.

Perhaps this explains the Prophet's antagonism to all sorts of images as found in the

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<sup>2</sup> Grabar, Oleg. "Islam and Iconoclasm" in *Iconoclasm*. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, eds. (Birmingham, England: John Goodman & Sons, 1977) p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> And for anyone who thinks Muslims have no sense of humor, read Surah 21:52-67 for a hilarious contest between Abraham and the idolaters. It is as funny of a passage as any of the humorous denunciations of idolatry in the Bible.

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Hadith, as represented by the following passages:

Narrated Said bin Abu Al-Hasan: While I was with Ibn 'Abbas a man came and said, "O father of 'Abbas! My sustenance is from my manual profession and I make these pictures." Ibn 'Abbas said, "I will tell you only what I heard from Allah's Apostle . I heard him saying, 'Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it.' " Hearing this, that man heaved a sigh and his face turned pale. Ibn 'Abbas said to him, "What a pity! If you insist on making pictures I advise you to make pictures of trees and any other unanimated objects."<sup>4</sup>

Narrated Busr bin Said: That Zaid bin Khalid Al-Juhani narrated to him something in the presence of Said bin 'Ubaidullah Al-Khawlani who was brought up in the house of Maimuna the wife of the Prophet. Zaid narrated to them that Abu Talha said that the Prophet said, "The Angels (of Mercy) do not enter a house wherein there is a picture." Busr said, "Later on Zaid bin Khalid fell ill and we called on him. To our surprise we saw a curtain decorated with pictures in his house. I said to Ubaidullah Al-Khawlani, "Didn't he (i.e. Zaid) tell us about the prohibition of pictures?" He said, "But he excepted the embroidery on garments. Didn't you hear him?" I said, "No." He said, "Yes, he did."<sup>5</sup>

Narrated by Muslim: We were with Masruq at the house of Yasar bin Numair. Masruq saw pictures on his terrace and said, "I heard 'Abdullah saying that he heard the Prophet saying, "The people who will receive the severest punishment from Allah will be the picture makers."<sup>6</sup>

Narrated by Ibn Abbas: I heard Muhammad saying, "Whoever makes a picture in this world will be asked to put life into it on the Day of Resurrection, but he will not be able to do so."<sup>6</sup>

Based on these and other similar Hadiths, some Muslim scholars and clerics have forbidden the creation of any figural images. At the same time other scholars, noting the huge exception for embroidered images, have maintained that the prohibition is only against the making of images for purposes of worship - idolatry - or self-glorification - artistic pride. Asli Gocer writes, "... figurative representations are to be avoided, because for both Plato the Muslim [sic] they run the risk of engendering in the artist the false pride of having created something real and, in the observer, the false admiration for human

<sup>4</sup>Volume 3, Book 34, Number 428; found at:

<http://www.islamicaweb.com/forums/showthread.php?s=&postid=212826> (post by yusef)

<sup>5</sup> Sahih Bukhari 004.054.449, 007.072.841; found at:

<http://www.islamicaweb.com/forums/showthread.php?s=&postid=212826> (post by muftmufti)

<sup>6</sup> Hadith 7.838 (Al-Bukhari Hadith) found at:

<http://www.islamicaweb.com/forums/showthread.php?s=&postid=212826> (post by Baraah)

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creativity.”<sup>7</sup> This false pride issue can be clearly seen in the final Hadith quoted above - Allah challenges image-makers as to whether they are creative in the true sense of the word.

A related vice to be avoided is on the part of the art consumer - the sin of greed: “The rejection is not of art per se, nor even of representations, but, as Ibn Miskawayh, a typical honnete homme of the tenth century, put it, of becoming attached to something beautiful and expensive. The cardinal sin is not one of artistic creativity but of greed and of temptation away from divine truth.”<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that in the world of Islam (as well as in the pre-museum world of the West) art was not made to be put in a museum, but to be used, in homes and palaces and workplaces. The fine line that had to be walked was between the joy of celebrating Allah’s creation and the pride of owning fine things.

Moving from the negative to the positive, while Muslim tradition (at least) has frowned on figural imagery, it has encouraged the development of the calligraphic and design arts. Kenneth Cragg writes, “calligraphy [is] the ultimate dimension of a disciplined artistry celebrating sacred diction.”<sup>9</sup> For Muslims, the ultimate revelation of God is the Qur’an. It is as close to a divine incarnation as Islam gets. In the words of Sayyid Nasr, perhaps the most important Muslim scholar to read on these questions, “the sacred art of Islam is related in both form and spirit to the divine Word as revealed in the Holy Qur’an. The word having been revealed as a Book, rather than as a human being ... the sacred art concerns the manifestation of the letters and sounds of the Book, rather than the iconography of the man who is himself the Logos.”<sup>10</sup> This quote beautifully encapsulates the first part of my thesis, and anticipates much of what is to come. As Cragg pithily phrases it, “the divine in the didactic is the meaning of calligraphy.”<sup>11</sup>

As for abstract art and floral designs, these serve as positive outlets for artistic creativity, as meditational aids, and as pointers to the divine. Asli Gocer writes, “the Muslim believes that geometrical patterns draw attention away from the physical world to one of pure forms, and they point to the purity of essential relationships which lie beneath the visual surface.”<sup>12</sup> Cragg comments, “here [in abstract floral imagery] is a beauty of form, as in calligraphy, detached from any immediate object, a symmetry in which the eye and the mind can delight disencumbered of the compromise which particulars must involve. Some

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<sup>7</sup> Gocer, Asli. “A Hypothesis Concerning the Character of Islamic Art” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 60, October 1999, p. 690-691.

<sup>8</sup> Grabar, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Cragg, Kenneth. “The Art of Theology: Islamic and Christian Reflections” in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979) p. 280. It is hard to overstate my gratitude for this essay. It helped to shape my thinking at a time when I despaired of writing anything meaningful in this paper at all.

<sup>10</sup> Nasr, Sayyid Husain, in *Studies in the Art and Literature of the Near East: In honor of Richard Ettinghausen*, ed. P. J. Chelkowski (New York 1974) 173-5. Quoted in Cragg, p. 283.

<sup>11</sup> Cragg, p. 281.

<sup>12</sup> Gocer, p. 691.

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commentators see it as a celebration of the rational, a will away from mystification in religion and into clarity, lucidity and order.”<sup>13</sup> Beauty that does not distract the worshipper from the formlessness and invisibility of Allah. Detached beauty. Abstracted forms. These ideas are strikingly Platonic in nature<sup>14</sup>, which is to be expected from the religion that caused a revitalized interest in Plato’s works. Note Cragg’s mention of the “compromise which particulars must involve” - we will be returning to that theme later.

Both in what it prohibits and in what it affirms, the Muslim artistic tradition is a powerful lens through which to see Islamic theology as a whole.

Before leaving this shockingly brief glance at Islam’s view of art, it is worth noting that modern Muslims struggle with these questions mightily, despite the fact that many believe the Qur’an forbids image-making.<sup>15</sup> What struck me in my research is how similar the concerns of devout Muslim artists are to the concerns of devout Evangelical artists!<sup>16</sup> Perhaps there is some truth in what Kenneth Cragg states too broadly: “There is an uncanny feeling when religions meet, that the debate is not so much between them as within them.”<sup>17</sup> While I would not go that far, I would say that as both Islam and Christianity confront the modern Western culture, they find themselves in similar worldview conflicts. I found the Muslim dialogue on the role of the arts in their religion fruitful and encouraging.

### Christianity and Art

In Christianity, the debate over the role of images was long and fierce, and it cannot truly be said to have been decided. The iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries was among the church’s bloodiest internal conflicts, with as many as 100,000 people having been killed on the iconodulic side alone!<sup>18</sup> Ecumenical councils and papal statements did not settle the issue forever, even though by the mid-ninth century the pro-icon side had proclaimed victory. In the Protestant Reformation, the issues were re-fought, with Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli all coming down in different places.

The basic questions involved swirl around the second commandment - is the commandment against the making of all images, or just against the making of images to worship? - and the incarnation of Jesus Christ - does the fact that God Himself made a representational image of the Deity in bodily form change the way the second

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<sup>13</sup> Cragg, p. 281.

<sup>14</sup> This is Gocer’s thesis in his article.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the discussion thread at <http://www.islamicaweb.com/forums/showthread.php?s=&postid=212826> which I referenced earlier - it is a lively debate between contemporary Muslims.

<sup>16</sup> I will include some quotes on this in Appendix A, as I found it fascinating but it does not fit the overall movement of my argument.

<sup>17</sup> Cragg, p. 287.

<sup>18</sup> Iconodule = icon-loving. See “Image Is Everything: A quick overview of iconoclasm, from the early church to the Taliban” by Elesha Coffman in Christian History Magazine, Found at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2001/apr06.html>

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commandment is interpreted? For what it's worth, my basic conclusion is that the second commandment prohibits worshipping any image, and prohibits the making of images intended to represent God. Any such attempt will by its very impossibility prove blasphemous. But because in the incarnation of Christ God revealed Himself in the flesh, images representing Jesus are not categorically blasphemous, though they should be crafted and used carefully.<sup>19</sup>

Central to any of these discussions within Christianity must be the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, because the Incarnation changes everything. In the Incarnation, the impossible happened - God took on flesh, the invisible took on visible, the eternal took on mortality. The world turned upside down, and it is difficult to see that anything in this mortal realm could ever be the same. Certainly the prohibition against image-making must be one of these. One of God's arguments against making images of God is that Yahweh is invisible (e.g. Isaiah 40:18, Deuteronomy 4:15-19). He has no form, and He must not be circumscribed by an imaginary form. But in the Incarnation, God took on a human form. It is hard to overstate the importance of this! Jesus is described as "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15; also see 2 Corinthians 4:4) - an image made by God Himself - God's self-revelation. Because Jesus is God's self-revelation in human form, to depict Jesus is not to impose a humanly-conceived restriction or circumscription on God, but rather to take seriously the revelation that God Himself has given.

It should be noted that this is not necessarily a majority opinion in Christianity. No less a luminary than Dr. J.I. Packer, in his most famous book, *Knowing God*, wrote, "Images dishonor God, for they obscure His Glory...they inevitably conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and character of the divine Being whom they represent...[and] images mislead men. They convey false ideas about God. The very inadequacy with which they represent Him perverts our thoughts about Him, and plants in our minds errors of all sorts about His character and will."<sup>20</sup> Iconoclastic arguments are still strong in the church, as well as a sighing indifference to and ignorance of art, which is almost as deadly.

I would argue that the place of art in the life of the church is an ideal lens through which to view almost every major theological conflict that plagued the church's early centuries. I would also argue that the iconoclastic arguments verged very closely on many Christian heresies - heresies which were influential in the shaping of Islam. Robert Haddad, in his essay on the Muslim iconoclastic movement known as Mu'tazili, notes that "Nestorian christology, in deemphasizing the divinity of Jesus, tends toward the same anti-anthropomorphism at which the Monophysites arrive by deemphasizing the humanity of Jesus. At the doctrinal heart of the christological controversies, as of iconoclasm and the

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<sup>19</sup> I address these conclusions at length in my 30-page paper, referenced in footnote 1.

<sup>20</sup> Packer, J. I. *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973) pages 40-41.

Interestingly, Packer does not apply the same test to WORDS about God - a test which, while extremely interesting, would call into question his entire project.

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Mu'tazili movement, lay the insistent crucial issue of anthropomorphism: to what extent is it possible to speak of or graphically to depict divinity in human terms?"<sup>21</sup> My argument from within Christianity is that it is possible to speak of and graphically depict divinity precisely to the extent that is consistent with God's pre-existent self-revelation. To go outside the bounds of God's self-revelation is blasphemy or idolatry, but to reject God's self-revelation is folly and heresy.

### The Scandal of Particularity

I believe that the disparate ways that Islam and Christianity handle questions of art and anthropomorphism are bound up very closely with what many writers have called "the scandal of particularity."<sup>22</sup> That is, "that God has acted in a particular way, in a particular time and place, with a particular people, yet in a way that has universal consequences."

The "Scandal of Particularity" is whimsically expressed in a rhyme by William N. Ewer: "How odd of God, to choose the Jews." But He did. And the salvation of the world is bound up in this particular story of a particular people, the Jews, fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah, who lived, died and rose from the dead, so that we might share in the New Life of the resurrection.<sup>23</sup>

God, in focusing on one man - Abraham - then one family - Jacob and his kids - then one nation - Israel, did what scandalizes so many minds today. And the idea of it is anathema to Muslims.

Reading through the Qur'an, one can't help but be struck by the number of times it is said that every major people group (the people of Noah, the 'Ad, the Thamud, the Jews, the Christians, etc.) had a prophet come to them who spoke an identical message. It is a message broadcasted widely and thoroughly, so that men are without excuse. The Christian story is the opposite. It is incarnated in one people (a "kingdom of priests" - a whole nation in theory devoted to being intermediaries between God and humanity) and finally in one man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Incarnation - in human flesh - is central to Christian teaching, and it is repulsive to the Muslim mind. In fact, the opposite is celebrated. While reading the Qur'an, as a Christian I have been frustrated by its lack of specific detail. I am accustomed to the Bible's careful observation with regard to place, time, and character. But in the Qur'an, a knowledge of the details is assumed on the part of the reader, or even seen as of little importance. I was struck by note 286 in *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an*, the English translation (and commentary) of the Qur'an that is seen as most authoritative by many Muslims. In relating the Biblical story of David and Goliath, the

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<sup>21</sup> Haddad, Robert M. "Iconoclasts and *Mu'tazila*: The Politics of Anthropomorphism" in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. 27, Summer-Fall 1982, p. 301.

<sup>22</sup> I have no idea where I first heard this phrase, but I recall hearing Dr. Armand Niccoli refer to it in his PBS special "The Question of God". I have since run across it in Anne Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and online in many places.

<sup>23</sup> <http://titusononline.classicalanglican.net/index.php?s=christopher+brown>

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Qur'an merely says, "By Allah's will, they routed them [the Philistines, though the Qur'an doesn't mention which nation Israel is fighting]: and David slew Goliath..." (Surah 2:251) No mention of five stones. No mention of Goliath's challenges. No mention of Goliath's height! No details about who is the king in Israel, or David's brothers, or what David was doing before he slew Goliath, or a sling, or a sword, or anything! Just "David slew Goliath." For a Christian, that is frustrating. But listen to what the commentator says about this passage:

Note how the whole story is compressed into a few words as regards narration, but its spiritual lessons are dwelt upon from many points of view. The Old Testament is mainly interested in the narrative, which is full of detail, but says little about the universal truths of which every story is a parable. The Qur'an assumes the story, but tells the parable.<sup>24</sup>

This is a celebration of the lack of specific detail! A celebration of universality over particularity. It is interesting to note that the commentator then goes on to relate five lessons drawn from the story of David and Goliath. *But he has to tell the story as the Bible tells it in order to do so!*

If Islam is Platonic in its philosophical character (which Asli Gocer forcefully argues, using the issue of art as his starting point) this makes perfect sense. What is "real" is what lies behind the reality that we see. Thus particularity - in art or in any form - is a movement away from true reality. The Kenneth Cragg quote that appeared earlier in this paper is worth re-quoting here, with a different emphasis: "[in abstract floral imagery] is a beauty of form, as in calligraphy, *detached from any immediate object*, a symmetry in which the eye and the mind can delight *disencumbered of the compromise which particulars must involve*. Some commentators see it as a celebration of the rational, a will away from mystification in religion and into clarity, lucidity and order."<sup>25</sup>

Andre Issa stabs at the same thing in his article, when he argues that "the setting up of an image in a place of prayer would be reproved for drawing the attention away to a form instead of letting it seek the formless."<sup>26</sup> What is important is the invisible, the reality we cannot see. To focus on something earthly is at best a distraction. "Here is an explicit contrast to pictorial art," Kenneth Cragg continues, "in a movement from particulars to universals, in an escape from individuation."<sup>27</sup>

### The Scandal of Flesh

It should also be noted that a corollary to the scandal of particularity for Muslims is what I would call "the scandal of flesh." It is not just that God became Incarnate in a *particular*

<sup>24</sup> 'Ali, 'Abdullah Yusuf, *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an*, (Beltsville, Maryland: amana publications, 2001) note 286, page 103.

<sup>25</sup> Cragg, p. 281. (emphasis added)

<sup>26</sup> Issa, Andre. "Islamic Religious Painting and the Christian Icon" in *Sacred Art Journal*, 11.4, 1990. p. 146.

<sup>27</sup> Cragg, p. 282.

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man, but also that God became Incarnate in a particular *man*. Man is an animal. He eats, he breathes, he passes gas, he defecates. Isn't it blasphemous to say that God did those things, in the Person of Jesus Christ? As Yusuf 'Ali snorts in his commentary on Surah 19:35 - "Begetting a son is a physical act depending on the needs of man's animal nature. Allah Most High is independent of all needs, and it is derogatory to Him to attribute such an act to Him. It is merely a relic of pagan and anthropomorphic materialist superstitions."<sup>28</sup> Procreation is an animal act - it is lowering to God to even consider such a thing. Leaving aside the fact that Christian teaching also disavows the notion of the Incarnation as a procreative act, 'Ali's characteristic indignance at the idea of God in the *flesh* points again to a Platonic (and well-nigh Gnostic) rejection of the material in favor of the spiritual. 'Ali in his notes repeatedly defends sex for example as not being sinful for people, but his distaste for the animal nature of the subject is clear.

Robert Haddad argues that a hatred of anthropomorphism is at the root of Islamic hostility to images: "...the most revealing parallel in the religious life and thought of these contiguous cultures [Byzantium and Islam] in the eighth and ninth centuries is to be found not in iconoclasm per se but in hostility toward anthropomorphism - that is, hostility toward depiction of divinity in human terms."<sup>29</sup> And again, "like the iconoclasts, the Mu'tazila categorically disavowed any resemblance between man and the uncircumscribable God."<sup>30</sup> God cannot be circumscribed. But even more so, God cannot be lowered to an animal status. And that is what flesh seems to imply for Muslims.

Christians must agree with this to some extent - humans must never try to push God into any manmade mold. To do so is blasphemous and idolatrous, as I argued earlier in this paper. But as I also argued earlier, to reject God's self-revelation is folly of the first order. If God chooses to Incarnate Himself, who are we to say He cannot? If God does not find it humiliating (but rather self-humbling) to be found in the form of a man, then we must not argue against it. No less a Christian luminary than the Apostle Paul found Jesus' taking on of human flesh to be a cause for wonderment and worship (Philippians 2:1-11). Today's Christians must give the Incarnation just as close and reverent attention.

### The Umma and the Individual

A related issue to the two scandals, as illustrated in the realm of artistic expression, is the Muslim stress on the Umma (brotherhood of Muslims across the nations) to the expense of the individual. For Sunni Muslims especially<sup>31</sup> the umma is of primary importance. Corporate solidarity. The good of Muslims worldwide, as opposed to the good of individual Muslims.

This came out in my study as I looked at proposals for "The Islamization of Disciplines" in

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<sup>28</sup> 'Ali, note 2487, p. 751.

<sup>29</sup> Haddad, p. 288.

<sup>30</sup> Haddad, p. 290.

<sup>31</sup> Sufis are a different story, and it would be interesting to study Sufi views of art, and see if there is a correlating difference.

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a book that came out of an academic conference. In critiquing a Western approach to Art History, for instance, the authors object that Western scholars “are prone to losing themselves in the collection of historical minutiae and in finding satisfaction in the unearthing of data, regardless of their consequence or significance for the discipline or for the welfare of mankind and civilization.”<sup>32</sup> And in his suggestions for the discipline of Art Education, the author writes, “this development always be directed toward endeavors that are physically, morally, and spiritually beneficial to humanity.”<sup>33</sup> Another author, looking specifically at the Islamization of the Visual Arts, warns, “The artist must also be in close touch with the ummah in order to understand its true needs, both the general ones and those that are particular to his own community and his own time.”<sup>34</sup> The needs of the umma come first.

This is something that a Christian can agree with, but Christianity has always placed a stronger stress on the individual than Islam has. I believe that this stems from the fact that the Christian picture of God is relational, as revealed (yet again) in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Thus, the questions that Christian artists ask usually run along more individualistic lines, and Christian artists are more concerned about censorship and restraints on their creativity than they are about the good of the community. Certainly the Western art world (veering from its Christian roots) has turned into a glorification of the individual that no Christian could support. Art in the secular West has become whatever an artist does, and the quality of a person’s art is validated by the oddness of the artist’s lifestyle. I constantly think back to a story related by an artist in the book *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*, where a fellow artist was advised by his agent that even though people liked his artwork, he would never make it big unless his lifestyle became weirder!<sup>35</sup> The idolization of the “tortured artist” and the idea that an artist somehow has a deeper sensitivity to the issues and needs of the world are all products of the West’s individualism run amok. So this tendency in Christianity towards a favoring of the individual can certainly go astray. But I believe that it is grounded in our theology, as I will explore next.

### Triunity or Bare Unity?

As with all questions worth asking, I believe that the differences between the Christian view of art - and specifically figural representation - and the Muslim view of art find their root in the Christian and Muslim pictures of who God is.

For the Christian, God (as revealed in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit he sends) is a

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<sup>32</sup> al Faruqi, Lamyā'. “Islamizing the Arts Disciplines” in *Toward Islamization of Disciplines*. (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989). p. 462.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 471.

<sup>34</sup> Muhammad, Animah Sayyid. “Islamization of the Visual Arts” in *Toward Islamization of Disciplines*. (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989). p. 489.

<sup>35</sup> I have been unable to track down the page citation - I ran out of time - but the book is Ned Bustard, ed. *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*. (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2000).

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relational triunity. One God, revealed in three persons or relations. Because of the Incarnation, Christians have a God who wears a human face. Because of the Incarnation, Christians have a God who bled and died. Because of the Incarnation, Christians have a God who is able to relate with human beings on a one-to-one level, revealing Himself, and not just His Will.

For the Muslim, God is a bare unity. God is One, and perfect in His unity. God admits of no partners, no equals to His greatness. There is no distinction, passions, nor change in God. God is Eternally One. This God does not reveal Himself to humanity, but only reveals His Will. This God judges and forgives, rewards and punishes, but does not ever relate. The Muslim God is a relationally distant God, even as He is judgmentally ever-present. He is supreme and in total control, delegating no sovereignty to any other being. He is the Calvinist supreme being to an extent that no Calvinist would long endure contemplating.

This Muslim God's character is stamped all over Muslim art, even though He may never be represented there. As Kenneth Cragg states, "it is not merely that the artist avoided representation for fear of idolatry. It is that he was consciously or unconsciously delineating a wholly different notion of the divine authority within the natural order. The *horror vacui*, too, in Muslim art, would seem to belong to the same logic. Spaces must be filled with mosaic, or pattern, or design, lest vacancy should accentuate a private feature or suggest a hiatus in the unfailing writ in the divine will, where nothing is left to chance or unrelated or troubled, as one Indian writer puts it, by 'the coarse and unkempt face of man.'"<sup>36</sup> For the Muslim, a private, human space - space to be an individual - is threatening to the supremacy of God. This God who reveals only His Will and never Himself is the pinnacle of Platonic formalism. He is the abstract principle to end all abstract principles. The trouble is, as Robert Haddad points out, "there was, however, little that the ordinary Muslim believer could do with divinity so unknowable, so ineffable, so utterly other. The anthropomorphic dimension is not easily replaced by abstract essence."<sup>37</sup> When the human soul longs for a God who is here, not just there<sup>38</sup>, how can abstract essences fit the bill?

### Conclusions

The Muslim view of figural art is more than just a prohibition. It is an expression of deeply-rooted features in Muslim culture and theology. Asli Gocer puts it well: "A philosophical explanation of the Islamic attitude toward art may therefore be derivable from the Platonic axiom that god is the paradigm of beauty, which is the cosmological principle of order and harmony; and as all created things, art, too, must reflect the divine paradigm."<sup>39</sup> Art is a slice of life - and a slice that includes bits of every other slice. And Muslim art reveals volumes about the Muslim approach to life, as embodied also in their theology. For

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<sup>36</sup> Cragg, p. 282.

<sup>37</sup> Haddad, p. 292.

<sup>38</sup> With apologies to Francis Schaeffer's excellent book.

<sup>39</sup> Gocer, p. 684-685.

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orthodox Muslims, God “is uncircumscribable, not depictable in human terms.”<sup>40</sup> And God, of course, did not reveal Himself in flesh - as in Christianity - but revealed His Will in His Word, in the Qur’an. This central principle led to the flourishing of the calligraphic and abstract arts in Islam, and the downplaying (at least) or prohibition (at most) of figural representation. All art - not just figural art - is at least a bit suspect, but “it is not proper to refer to it as iconoclasm. At best aniconism is perhaps acceptable, for its key point is that it saw images not as evil per se (only man can do evil with them) but as irrelevant since unable to capture reality, and at worst temptations away from the requirements of a good life.”<sup>41</sup> Art is prone to many of the vices that Islam seeks to stamp out.

Parallel to this view of the Incarnation, and feeding into it, is the Muslim rejection of the “scandal of particularity” and their cultural revulsion at the “scandal of flesh.” All of this finds similar expression in the Islamic emphasis on the Muslim community - the umma - over and above the individual Muslim. This deeply impacts the tenor of Islamic art. And finally, at the root of all Muslim (and Christian) views of art is Muslim (and Christian) views of God. If God is not known through Incarnation in human flesh, then the Second Commandment still hits with the same force as ever, and the making of figural images becomes less important or blasphemously idolatrous. I believe that this discussion serves as a useful warning to Christian iconoclasts. Islamic art - as in so many areas - serves Christians as a warning of what can happen when the doctrine of the Trinity is downplayed or rejected. And Christians with iconoclastic tendencies need to check themselves, whether in their arguments against images they have not thrown out the very ground on which they must stand.

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<sup>40</sup> Haddad, p. 292.

<sup>41</sup> Grabar, p. 51.

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### APPENDIX A

#### Modern Muslim Artists Reflect on Islam and the Arts

*I found these quotes and more very provocative in my reading. They sound a whole lot like what Christian artists say about the role of the arts in the modern Christian community!*

“[Aesthetics] has suffered from both Muslim neglect and Western monopoly. Many passages in the Islamic literary legacy await collection and systematic study while Muslim scholars continue to regard the aesthetic conquest of the minds and spirits of the *ummah* by alien arts as inconsequential.”<sup>42</sup>

“Some of our Muslim brothers and sisters would counter the ideas presented here, arguing that the arts are a superfluous aspects [sic] of culture meant only for base entertainment and pleasure. Thus, their argument, that, the arts have little or no value or consequence. Such a view fails to notice the powerful influences that the alien arts - whether those of literature, the visual arts, architecture, music, or the cinema - have on our fellow Muslims.”<sup>43</sup>

“It is our duty as Muslims, therefore, to call a halt to that head-in-the sand attitude that pretends the arts ... can only be viewed as a harmful element that Allah put in creation to tempt mankind.”<sup>44</sup>

*These above two quotes show clearly where some of the debate is in the modern Muslim community. The author is refuting arguments he hears regularly. In so doing, we get a glimpse at the “other side” in the debate.*

“Overdependence on ... religious teachers has also led to frequent overemphasis on black-and-white sorts of judgments - people want to know whether a certain action is allowable or not allowable ... such an attitude also leads toward negativism - avoiding the bad rather than constructing on the basis of the good, a cutting away instead of a building up.”<sup>45</sup>

“One of the basic spiritual needs of man is the need for beauty, which, in the Islamic view, can be equated with perfection or truth.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> al Faruqi, p. 461.

<sup>43</sup> al Faruqi, p. 474.

<sup>44</sup> al Faruqi, p. 475.

<sup>45</sup> Muhammad, p. 484.

<sup>46</sup> Muahammad, p. 488.

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