

Religious Art and the Nature of Perception In an Islami Context

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It is somewhat of a truism to claim that Muslims do not have icons, idols or pictures of religious heroes. There is undoubtedly a widespread cultural taboo in modern times, based on longstanding precedents, against depicting human religious figures as well as God in visual form. One need only think of the publicity surrounding the making and release of the 1976 film *The Message* (aka, Mohammed Messenger of God), about the birth of Islam – a strange film in which none of the primary characters appears on screen – we only see their shadows because the film maker, Moustapha Akkad was committed to not showing them. And though I would never suggest that the Taliban represent any sort of Islami ideal, their destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001 was religiously motivated in some degree, and religiously justified in every extent. After destroying the Buddhas (which had serenely stood there for a millenium of Muslim rule in the region), they sacrificed 100 cows to atone for the collective Muslim sin of not having destroyed these idols sooner. And, at the very same time as loud condemnations of this act of destruction issued forth from many corners of the Islami world (the Iranian government, for example, offered to disassemble the statues and move them to Iran), very prominent Pakistani religious figures associated with the Jami'at-i Ulama'yi Islam, a religious party of individuals of the Deobandis school of thought, applauded the destruction of the Buddhas.

Even the most cursory glance in the direction of Muslim attitudes toward religious images and objects makes one realize that there are layers of complexity to this issue. On the one hand, we have a widespread (though not comprehensive) taboo on religious depictions, and a narrower but still widespread distrust of treating material objects as supernatural or divine. On the other, we have a religion spatially focused around a place, a building (the Ka'ba), and in some ways more specifically focused around a stone built into one wall of that building. (Staying with this theme), one should be struck by the fact that the majority of Muslims have a negative attitude toward the ritual use of a stone pillar in the form of a Linga to physically represent the Hindu God Shiva, and would view that practice as idolatry, but the same Muslims would have absolutely no problem, as a major ritual during the performance of the Hajj Pilgrimage, of throwing pebbles at stone pillars that represent Satan.

Clearly, these Muslims have a complex relationship to physical objects and visual representation. It is my purpose here to explore this relationship. I am not concerned with a description of Islamic art per se (so you may be disappointed if you came for that). Instead I hope to suggest some ways of thinking about the nature of perception and the various ways in which one might understand how objects might have been and continue to be understood in a number of Islamic contexts.

I won't be talking about the development of art at all. Instead, I am concerned with what people see (and perceive) when they are confronted with a visual religious object, and with how they respond to it. This is all to try and come up with some suggestions of how one might look at the phenomenology of

perception within a Muslim context where people consciously believe that they have no representational religious art.

My use of the term response here is similar to that of David Freedberg:

“I use the term 'response' [to] refer ... to the symptoms of the relationship between image and beholder... We must consider not only beholders' symptoms and behavior, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do; not only what people do as a result of their relationship with imaged form, but also what they expect imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all (Freedberg, xii)”.

My Thesis

I'd like to give you my thesis right at the beginning, and spend the rest of my time elaborating on it:

There is a common understanding that the only acceptable forms of Islami visual religious art are architecture and calligraphy. With the notable exceptions of some illustrated books on the life of Muhammad, the tradition of pictorial representation of religious personages and events in Iran and its periphery, and the decoration of a few well known mosques, there is little pictorial religious art in the Islami world. Nevertheless, even though Muslims would deny that the divine inheres in objects of human manufacture, visual religious arts (of which pictorial arts are a subset) remain widespread in Islami society.

Modern scholarship has recognized this phenomenon, but it has failed to explore adequately the historical and philosophical reasons underlying it.

I would argue that, in fact, Muslim thinkers have developed systematic and advanced theories of representation and signification, and that many of these theories have been internalized by Islamic society at large and continue to inform cultural attitudes toward the visual arts. These discussions are not found in the same contexts as they are in Christendom because of the different evolution of the two religious civilizations. My contention is that Islamic theories regarding representation and perception should not be explored in theological writings or in those directly concerned with (literary) aesthetics. On the contrary, preliminary answers to these questions are found in scientific works on optics (addressing questions of vision and how the perception of an object affects the perceiver) and alchemy (how one thing can be made to appear as another), and perhaps psychology (particular writings on dreaming). Primarily, though, the issue of representation is addressed in Sufi philosophical writings. From the 11th century onward, Sufi thinkers have been vitally concerned with the connected questions of how God relates to the physical world, and how the physical world relates to the spiritual or metaphysical one. The dominant theories have suggested variously that the physical world is either a mirror or microcosm of the metaphysical world, or that it is a manifestation of God and therefore not separate from him. The common thread in these ontological theories is a concern with the representational relationship between the visible, physical world and something that lies beyond it; this concern is at the center of general philosophical discussions of representational religious art -- what has sometimes

been called “iconology.” As is apparent from popular poetry as well as spiritual romances (among many other things), Sufi philosophical ideas have come to pervade Islamic society. I would argue, therefore, that one is as justified in looking for answers to questions of art perception in Sufi writings as anywhere else in Islamic thought.

Religious Art

There are several different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between visual art and religion. Paul Tilling distinguished four categories of this relationship, all of which help us conceptualize art in the context of our discussion. First is art that doesn’t demonstrate any connection with the religious in style or message, nor is its content religious subject matter. At the other extreme is the category that has both a religious style and message as well as a religious subject. The third is religious in style and message but nonreligious in subject (e.g. Picasso’s *Guernica*). Fourth is a nonreligious style with religious subject matter (e.g., Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* or Chris Ofili’s *Virgin*).

These distinctions are often difficult to maintain, because the notion of what constitutes a religious subject as well as a style is open to much interpretation. It has been suggested that in the case of Islam, one should make a distinction between art that is religious in subject and art for ritual use.

According to this view, it is only art for ritual use that is not representational (as a simple example, there would be no murals depicting religious narratives inside mosques). The problem with this theory is that it relies on a very old-fashioned notion of what religious ritual really is, limiting it to the basic Muslim ritual

obligations of prayer, fasting et ., and even then it fails to account for the actual use of objects, as illustrated by my reference to the Hajj and the stoning of pillars.

Ani onism

I don't have the time to go into a detailed discussion of the origins and details of the opposition to icons and religious images in Islam. In very general terms, suffice it to say that Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity a two-faceted distrust of visual and physical representation. On the one hand, there is the the Platonic preference for the non-physical over the physical, thought over matter, that pervades the philosophy of late antiquity and to which Islami philosophical thinking is a direct heir. On the other hand, there is the scriptural prohibition against figural imagery (graven images). It is worth noting, nonetheless, that there is no clear Islami condemnation paralleling the Biblical ban (2nd Commandment, Ex. 20:4, Deut. 5:8, 4-9-20). Qur'anic condemnations are nowhere that explicit, perhaps the least being (6:74):

“And Ibrahim said to his father Azar: Do you take idols (*aṣnāman*) as Gods? Indeed I see you and your people in a manifest error (**a'tattakhidhu asnāman ilāhatan, innī arāka wa-qawmaka fī ḍalālin mubīnin**)”

Such references are all justifications after the fact, as are the examples from *hadith* that go to supporting such a ban, the most famous being that of God and the sculptors [**explain**]. As a matter of fact, there are several *hadith* accounts (as well as references from earlier historical sources such as al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd) that suggest a more ambivalent attitude toward imagery. There is a famous *hadith* in several variants which says that A'isha had a curtain with images on it

to which the Prophet objected, so she cut it up and made pillows out of it, and he was fine with that (some accounts suggest that there were winged animals on the fabric). A fascinating early account of the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims relates that when Muhammad entered the Ka'ba and ordered that all the idols and pictures in it be removed and destroyed, he placed his hand over a painting of the Virgin and Child to make sure it was spared.

A knowledge of the Power of Images

At the same time, there is clearly some knowledge of the power of images, since early historical works (some literary) such as Ibn al-Fakih's *Kitab al-buldan*, al-Dīnawarī, *Kitab al-akbār al-ṭiwāl*, and the *Kitāb al-aghānī* of al-Isbahani mention stories of Arab captives who were taken to churches with rich and dramatic visions as part of the attempt to make them convert. It is noteworthy that the accounts praise the captives for not converting to Christianity *despite being in the presence of these images*, a knowledge quite clearly of the power of the image.¹

Attitudes toward cultures with images

Such early, legendary accounts notwithstanding, there is little detailed discussion in Islamic sources of the use of icons and images by other cultures. Such information as does exist is normally found in travelogues or encyclopedic works on geography and sociology. This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of this literature. Suffice it to say that the dominant tone of such works is dismissive of the nature and use of icons. An example would be the

¹ Grabar, Umayyad Dome of the Rock, note 121.

Bayān al-adyān of **Faqīh- i Balkhī** (Abu'l-Maʿālī M. b. Niʿmat-i ʿAlawī) (written 1106 C.E.) better known as *Faqīh-i Balkhī*, a work which predates the better known *Kitāb al-milal wa'l-nihal* of Shahrastānī by 36 years. The chapter on Hinduism is one page in the 154 page long Persian edition of this book by a Central Asian author who would, no doubt, have greater familiarity with Indian religions than an encyclopedic writer from further west in the Islamic world. *Faqīh-i Balkhī*'s work declares that the Hindus are second to none in their command of astrology, medicine and pharmacology, mathematics and so on. But he expresses amazement that people this sophisticated could worship idols (*but-parast*) and kill themselves through immolation for the sake of these idols (p. 45). The remainder of his discussion is of the variety of beliefs and rituals that fall under the rubric of Hinduism (cf. B. Lawren's work on Shahrastani's work on Indian religions, and the implication that Muslim writers' descriptions of Indian religions went a long way toward defining Hinduism as a religious tradition).

Another example is the memoir of the Mughal Emperor, Nasiruddin Babur, the *Baburnama*. The illustration on the screen is from this work (**Babur picture** (Babur admiring rock-cut Hindu sculptures at the base of the fortress of Urwa near Gwalior, which he visited in September 1528 (*Baburnamem*, . 1590, British Library, Or 3714, f. 478a)).

The text to which it refers:

p. 415. "Urwah is surrounded on three sides by a single mountain, the stone of which is not so red as that of Bayana but somewhat paler. The solid rock outcroppings around Urwahi have been hewn into idols, large

and small. On the southern side is a large idol, approximately 20 yards tall. They are shown stark naked with all their private parts exposed. Around the two large reservoirs inside Urwahi have been dug twenty to twenty-five wells, from which water is drawn to irrigate the vegetation, flowers, and trees planted there. Urwahi is not a bad place. In fact, it is rather nice. Its one drawback was the idols, so I ordered them destroyed.”

In Reşit Rahmet Arat’s translation into Modern Turkish, it is “*but*” (*put*).

What is clear from these examples is that the writers are unaware of the significance that the object, the idol, holds for the worshipper of that idol. They have no conception of how it functions as an icon in the Hindu contexts. **Here I am using icon not in its narrow Christian definition but in a wider sense where an icon is defined as an object representing a divine or metaphysical prototype in which the honor paid to the representation passes to its prototype and the attention occupied by the representation passes to the prototype.**

It is worth remembering that people who have icons, do not understand themselves to be worshipping the object, but the prototype it represents. In this sense, there is a parallel between the stones being stoned as representative of Satan at the Hajj, and the Linga being the focus of worship as the locus in which Shiva descends at the moment of Darshan in Hinduism, or the the status of the Virgin Mary that is displayed publicly on particular holidays in Catholic societies. One wonders, then, if there are widespread uses of visual art or objects in the Islamic world that might be understood as functioning iconically, that is, as representing a metaphysical prototype in which one’s attitude toward the physical object passes to the prototype?

I think one can, and I would like to give three examples:

Architectural Calligraphy

Monumental epigraphy – the writing on buildings, raises a very interesting set of questions in the study of perception in an Islamic environment. One can argue that the writing on the insides of buildings, where the primary audience would be well-to-do, presumably educated individuals who commissioned the work or were guests or family members of the person who commissioned them. As such, perhaps the writing on the insides of buildings can be thought of in the same way as one thinks about images in books, miniature paintings, for example, which were undoubtedly intended for and circulated among very select audiences.

But the writing on the outside of religious buildings must be viewed differently, since it would be unavoidable that the majority of the people who saw this writing would be unable to read it. Even if one argued that a substantial percentage of viewers in major urban centers of the Arab world (such as Cairo or Damascus) in medieval times would have had some form of contextual literacy through which they would be able to make out what sections of the Qur'an were on a mosque or a Madrasa (college), such an argument could never be made about India or Anatolia where the majority of the population was, for some centuries, non-Muslims, and the Muslim population itself had no knowledge of Arabic.

Under these circumstances, one wonders what importance the builders gave to the impact their epigraphy would have on this audience, and also what impact it, in fact, did have on them? Even if the unwashed and illiterate hordes were a tertiary audience for the writing on the outside of buildings, there can be

little doubt that the visual impact of the writing was of some concern to the builders. Undoubtedly, they considered other audiences and purposes of such ornamentation than the pleasure of their patrons, since writing frequently appears high up on buildings (on minarets for example), where it could never be easily read from the ground. One can speculate as to why it was there: to be read by God, perhaps, or (more likely) to function in some talismanic way to mark the building and to protect it and those people associated with it.

The hypothesis that the writing was frequently not meant to be read (in the literature sense of the word) is supported by the obvious fact that sometimes the calligraphy is too ornate to be readable, certainly by someone with a rudimentary knowledge of the script and no formal training in calligraphic styles. It is also supported by the observation that frequently the Qur'anic verses that appear on buildings are unrelated to the context of their appearance, and seem to have been chosen not for what they say but for whether or not they fit the space where they will be placed. This only applies to the Qur'an – not to poetry appearing on buildings, nor to dedication plaques or other such pieces of writing that could be viewed as informative in a mundane sense.

So why would the Qur'an be cut and pasted without context, and written in ways that were unreadable? There is an obvious answer to this: what the words said was not important, that they were the Qur'an was important. Walking past a building, such as the İnce Minareli Medrese in Konya (built in 1267 by the architect Kelük bin Abdullah for the famous Seljuk minister, Sahib Ata), what the average citizen of Konya would “see” would be the Qur'an. They would not **read** it for content, but would **see** it as some sort of marker defining the space as religious and, perhaps, grand. In all likelihood, they would assume that *all*

writing on the building was Qur'ani . This is reminiscent of how many people in Bangladesh assume that all writing in the Arabic script on scraps of paper is Qur'an (although it is likely to be Urdu) and treat the scraps with veneration; or the way in which tour guides in Turkey (who can't read a word of the Arabic script), tell people that the ornamental *basmallah* on their t-shirt is the tuğra of Süleyman the Magnificent.

What adds a much more intriguing dimension to the question of what, cognitively speaking, Qur'anic calligraphy on the wall of a building would represent to one who cannot read the words, is the status of the Qur'an in Muslim theological understanding. One of the most sustained and vital debates in the formulation of Islamic theology in the 9th and 10th centuries was the question of the nature of the Qur'an. Without going into the details of this very heated debate (it involved issues of caliphal sponsorship, purges and persecution of opponents etc), the end result was that, in the eyes of the majority of Muslims, the Qur'an (in its capacity as divine speech) was seen as inseparable from God's nature. It was also resolved that each written example of the Qur'an is created (vs. uncreated, that is, divine) in the material of its writing, but uncreated in its content. Therefore the Qur'an written on the wall of this Medrese is created in that the stone is created, but it is uncreated in that it is Qur'anic speech. And since Qur'anic speech is inseparable from God, that writing on the wall of the Medrese is a visual representation of God. This raises some very intriguing questions on the nature of likeness and similitude, on representation etc, on what God's speech being inseparable from him means to Muslims in an epistemic sense, but I don't have time to go into it here. All I really want to

emphasize is that the non-representational religious art of Muslims is not as non-representational as one first understands it to be.

Hilya

A form of verbal portraiture that became extremely popular, particularly in the Ottoman lands, in the 17th centuries. This one is by Mehmet Şevki (1314/1896), now in the Sevgi Gönül Collection (40X60 cm).

The most common description is that on the authority of ‘Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib:

“[Muhammad] was neither tall and lanky, nor short and stunted. He was of a middling height. His hair was neither short and curly, nor lank; but wavy and flowing. His face was neither thin nor plump, but rounded. His complexion was creamy white, and his eyes large and deeply black, with long lashes. He was big-boned, with wide shoulders. His body was hairless except for his chest, and his hands and feet were thick. When he walked, he would stride as if descending a slope; and when he turned to face someone, he would turn with his whole body and look him straight in the eye.”²

Creating a verbal portrait in the form of the *Hilye-yi Nebi* was clearly viewed as a labor unlike any other in the book arts: in the 19th century, composing a *Hilye* was the final graduation project of calligraphers in the Ottoman Empire. *Hilye*’s

² Cooperson, “Images without Illustrations: The Visual Imagination in Classical Arabic Biography” in O. Grabar and C. Robinson, *Islami Art and Literature* (2001), 10.

continue to be very popular and are readily available all across Turkey and are hung on the walls of mosques, other religious establishments, and in middle and lower-middle-class houses. These are all spaces where one would never hang a visual portrait of Muhammad on the wall.

Tru ks

As a third example, I'd like to example a modern art form that doesn't appear at first to be religious at all: the Pakistani tru k.

Show both and describe

Question: Can we theorize about what the message is based on the differences between these two?

So then, how is one to understand the phenomenology of perception in an Islamic context, if indeed one can speak of such a thing?

Critique of Discussions of Islamic Arts

The best scholarship on visuality in Islamic civilization focuses on traditional questions of aesthetics, and continues to explore the meaning and significance of visual religious art through questions of beauty and its relationship to goodness and virtue. This, I believe, is a consequence of two factors: **First**, the dominance of a particular art historical lens that is almost exclusively concerned with the production of elite, "high culture" works of art and not with objects that were intended, in some form or the other, to be appreciated by a

wider audience. **Second**, as I alluded to earlier, the analysis is shaped methodologically by the study of Christian religious art and therefore tries to find answers to philosophical and theological questions in the same places as they appear in the Christian context.

Christianity has had two major historical moments – the Iconoclast Controversy 724–843 of and the Protestant Reformation -- when it has been forced to articulate a theory of representation for the defence (and the condemnation) of religious images. In contrast Muslims never became sensitized to the use of visual representation, in part because they never adopted pictures for pedagogical and ritual purposes the way Christians did, and in part because (very importantly) because they were never forced to think about them in the context of a theological crisis. In support of my observation I would like to draw attention to the fact that Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which have extensive religious uses for visual objects, do not articulate theories of representation in the systematic theological and legal manner that Christianity does.

The assumption becomes that the Christian treatment of images and icons, and the subsequent discussions of art in the various contexts of western civilization is the

normative representation of the treatment of art and
visuality. Consequently, the observation that neither the
Qur'an nor the Hadith traditions of Muhammad have an
articulate view regarding the status of visual art, nor
were art or artists the subject of much concern among early
Islamic theologians and legal scholars, has led most modern
scholars to contend that the Islamic world did not have a
concern with questions of art, nor did it evolve
sophisticated theories of representation.

Ends up being a discussion of aesthetics

Inasmuch as modern scholars have tried to understand how Islamic
civilization has understood art, they have normally looked to writings on beauty.
The most commonly quoted thinker in this regard is al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and
rightly so, since his writings have been widely influential in shaping attitudes in
all sections of Islamic society. However, in this context issues of art aesthetics

Ghazali talks about various types of beauty and how they are perceived
by the senses. Sight/vision and visual imagination are important aspects of this
process. According to his *Ihya' ulūm al-din*, the eye is attracted to beauty and
takes pleasure from perceiving. The degree of the pleasure derived from the
contemplation of beauty is proportional to the love it arouses. Thus the more
attractive a face, the greater one's pleasure in contemplating it.

However, al-Ghazali, emphasizes that visible beauty is limited and that the
highest kind of beauty is one that can only be comprehended by an inner

perception (*al-baṣīra al-bāṭina*). This would be the beauty of important religious figures who are no longer alive or were not physically attractive.

What I would like to emphasize here is that Ghazali's aesthetic of beauty is not placing at the center of discussion the issue of visuality, but that of virtue, where beauty is tied to goodness is tied to virtue. Second, for Ghazali, beauty is found in order. To quote a passage from his *Kīmiyā (Alchemy of Happiness)*: "The beauty of a thing lies in the appearance of that perfection which is realisable and in accord with its nature... [For example] beautiful writing combines everything that is characteristic of writing, such as harmony of letters, their correct relations to each other, right sequence, and beautiful arrangement."

This is not a place to be looking for clues as to how one should address questions of perception. In fact, in the *Iḥyā'* al-Ghazali says that it is weak-minded to focus on external appearances (on the visual) because the essential beauty of human creations such as poetry, painting (*al-naqsh*), and architecture reflect the inner qualities of the poet, painter (*al-naqqāsh*), and the architect, meaning they have no intrinsic value of themselves.

Critiques of Textual Bias

Two of the major problems with thinking of objects in this way is that one gets stuck in seeing them aesthetically as art objects and in thinking of them in textual, rather than visual terms. The first problem I've already dealt with. The second is a complicated one, because most theoretical frameworks available to us have a textual bias (the most prominent theorists of our time tend to think in textual rather than visual terms).

Discussion question of text vs. image

In order to circumvent this problem one needs to study the phenomenology of perception in scientific and philosophical contexts in addition to literary and artistic ones.

Issues of Perception

Optics

In brief terms, there were two basic models of optics in late antiquity which influenced the development of ideas regarding perception in Islamic circles. The first is the extramission theory, according to which the eye throws out a ray toward the object it is perceiving. The second is "intromission" according to which either a simulacrum of the object or a ray is emitted from the object and impacts the eye. According to both theories however, visual perception was understood to result from a direct contact between an object and the organ of vision, which would have a transformative impact on the perceiver.

It was the latter theory, "intromission" that came to dominate in Islamic circles. The writings on optics of the famous Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1038) represent a watershed in the understanding of perception largely because he established a distinction between the mental and physical aspects of perception. However, inasmuch as I understand his writings, his theory of optics did not contradict the notion that the fact of visual perception has a transformative impact on the perceiver.

Alhemy and Dreaming

One might also look at writings on alhemy and dreaming for clues to the nature of perception, though I think this would be less productive: dreams are

not seen as representative of entities / things but of events and attitudes, therefore ontological questions do not come up in any problematic way. "Seeing" the Prophet in a dream does not raise the same set of concerns as believing a material object to "be" or to "represent" the Prophet.³ Similarly, the questions raised in alchemy are not directly relevant to cognitive theories: if the base metal is transformed, it really is the new metal; if it is not transformed but only appears transformed, then the issue is of triking perception, not of the relationship between the thing that is being seen (fake precious metal) to what it represents (actual precious metal).

Sufi Philosophy and Literature

As I said at the beginning, a fruitful place to look for clues to the phenomenology of perception is in Sufi writings of the philosophical vein. I am not suggesting that one employs a mystical faculty to understand what objects "really are." Though I take seriously the assertions of all sorts of mystics, Sufis and others, that there are ideas and realities that are not rationally comprehensible, I don't believe talking about them is at all useful: their very nature of being inexpressible in language renders them unuseable in a

³ Manuals interpreting dreams have some bearing on this discussion because the content of dreams is seen as real and related in some way to current or future events. Dream interpretation manuals, such as the *Tafsīr al-Ihlām al-kabīr* of Ibn Sīrīn or the *al-Ishārāt fī ʿilm al-ʿibārāt* of Ibn Shāhīn (d. 873 / ?), were very popular books in pre-modern Muslim society.

presentation, such as this one, that is primarily philosophical and rational, relying heavily on concepts within language.

Fortunately, even when they have been talking about the inadequacy of language, Sufis throughout history have written extensively and have created a rich literary and philosophical tradition which is extremely valuable for my current purpose. The most obvious point of entry into this material is through the central Sufi concept of a complementarity between two realms, the outer, visible one (*zahir*, 'alam al-shahada et) and the inner, invisible one (*bāṭin*, 'alam al-ghayb et).

In literature

If one is to give only one example from Sufi literature, it has to come from Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-73). Two anecdotes from the *Manāqib al-ʿārifīn*, his biography composed by his disciple Aflaki, give us some indication of how he felt about visual art, specifically about portraiture. The first is about a Byzantine icon, the second about the making of Mevlana's portrait. The principal character in both anecdotes is one of Mevlana's disciples named 'Ayn al-Dawla al-Rumi, who was both a painter and a Christian. In the first story, another painter and Christian named Kalayun tells 'Ayn al-Dawla about an extremely beautiful image of Mary and Jesus in an Istanbul monastery which no painter has ever been able to duplicate. 'Ayn al-Dawla goes to Istanbul and starts living in the monastery. After some time, he steals the image and takes it back to Konya with him. When he shows it to Mawlana, he admires the painting but declares that the Mary and Jesus in it are complaining that they have been mistreated by 'Ayn al-Dawla. The artist protests that paintings cannot talk, at which Mevlana scolds him saying that he fails to see the design of God's word and of all the

reatures God has animated within in on a count for his love for an inanimate object.⁴

In the second story, Gurji Khatun, wife of the Seljuk ruler of Anatolia, commissions 'Ayn al-Dawla to make a painting of Mawlana so that she can have it with her at all times. Mevlana agrees to have the painting made. 'Ayn al-Dawla completes an image which he thinks is excellent, but when he compares it to Mevlana, the latter's appearance seems to have changed and the picture doesn't resemble him at all. 'Ayn al-Dawla takes a second piece of paper and makes another picture, but the same thing happens. Finally, after making twenty sketches he gives up on trying to make an accurate likeness of Mevlana. (Gurji Khatun, however, accepts the paintings).⁵

Both these stories acknowledge the power of images and simultaneously stress their inherent limitations. Both stories, interestingly, seem to suggest lessons relevant to a Christian environment: first, an icon should never be the focus of the veneration in and of itself, and second, a portrait has value as a memento or object of contemplation, but the essence of an individual can never be captured in it.

There is actually a great deal of scholarship going on these days about the relationship between text and image in literature, but it is not directly illustrative of the topic I am addressing. Instead of talking about that I'll focus on Sufi philosophical writings.

⁴ Sourek, "Theory and Practice of Portraiture." 'Ayn al-Dawla then sees the error of his ways and converts to Islam. (note 34: Yazici edition, 1:552-53)"

⁵ Aflaki, 1:424-26).

Ibn 'Arabi

No sufi philosopher has influenced the development of Islamic philosophical thinking more than Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) who, from his birth in Andalusia to his death in Syria, left a staggering written legacy which transformed thinking in much of the Muslim world. Even though Ibn 'Arabi's own writings tend to be dense, both conceptually and linguistically, his influence on the wider society cannot be overestimated. In addition to the development and promotion of his ideas in intellectual circles by his disciples, his influence is readily apparent in the works of writers who enjoyed immense popularity in the Persian speaking world, such as Jamālī-yi Dihlawī (1483-1542), the court poet of the Indian Sultan Sikandar Lodi (r. 1489-1517) whose *Mir'at al-ma'ānī* (Mirror of Meanings) was one of the most widely read works on Sufi symbolism and philosophical terminology as it appears in Persian poetry. The most important individual in the dissemination of his ideas has to be 'Abd al-Rahman Jāmī (d. 1492), an encyclopedic thinker and writer whose commentary on Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus*, entitled *Naqd an-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ naqsh al-fuṣūṣ* (Selected texts commenting on the Imprint of the *Fusus*) is the most widely read commentary on Ibn 'Arabi's most popular work, and which was read, copied, taught and printed in Iran, Central Asia and South Asia.

Ibn 'Arabi on Perception

Ibn 'Arabi is most famous for having promoted a theory, entitled Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), according to which God is inseparable from world he created in an ontological sense. As part of this theory, Ibn 'Arabi lays out in great detail his ideas about correspondence between archetypal entities that exist in the celestial realm, the realm of ideals ('alam al-mithāl) and particular entities

that exist in the physical world ('alam al-wujūd). For our purposes, the important aspects of this theory deal with how an object in this physical world can be understood to relate to God, or to the archetypal entities in the non-physical realm.

It is clear from reading Ibn 'Arabi's primary works the *Fuṣūṣ* and *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya*, that he believed in a correspondence between the physical world we perceive through our senses and another realm. In his writings everything in the cosmos can be traced back to divine attributes (which are the names of God). Ibn 'Arabi often refers to such a divine attribute as a "root" (*aṣl*) or "support" (*mustanad*) of things that exist in the physical world. "No property becomes manifest within existence without a root in the Divine Side (*al-janāb al-ilāhī*) by which it is supported."⁶

The chapter on Jesus (Chapter 15) in his *Fusus* provides much food for thought on how one might comprehend the relationship between physical existence and something beyond the physical world to which it relates. Ibn 'Arabi's reading of the conception of Jesus echoes many of the ideas concerning this event as they are commonly presented in Islamic texts: Jesus had no earthly father; rather he was conceived by Gabriel infusing Mary with a divine breath (*nafakh*) that he brought from God. However (and this is a crucial point), Ibn 'Arabi maintains that human beings cannot be created except in the normal biological way, therefore Gabriel had to appear to Mary in human form and Jesus had to be conceived biologically (in Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of biology), with both parents contributing fluid to his generation. Except in the case of Jesus

⁶ *Futuhāt*, II:508.5, Chittick, 39b.

he was formed from a tual fluid (*mā' muḥaqqaq*) from Mary and notional fluid (*mā' mutawahham*) from Gabriel.

One might ask why it was necessary for Gabriel to appear in a fully human form? Ibn 'Arabi argues that being part human and part was essential to his nature: when Jesus demonstrated human qualities (such as humility) it was because of the part of him inherited from his mother, while when he demonstrated divine qualities (such as raising the dead) it was the part of him from Gabriel. Had Gabriel not appeared in human form, but had infused the breath of God in Mary while remaining in his natural luminous form, Jesus would have to transform into a luminous form in order to act out his divine qualities. It was the fact that physical appearance and actual substance are linked that required Gabriel to appear as human in order to enable Jesus to keep a human form when he acted in both his natures.

Of course, Jesus is a unique case in light of his dual nature, but it is clear from Ibn 'Arabi's writing that the relationship between physical entities and their archetypal concepts or entities they represent is a real one. When discussing the well known story of Moses climbing Sinai to converse with God, he talks about how the Samaritan priest fashioned a bull out of gold, somehow snatched some of the breath of Gabriel and infused it in the bull-alf, causing it to bellow (or moo). Had he fashioned another animal, the statue would have made the sound of that animal. In other words, not only is physical appearance directly related to the archetypal nature of the thing it resembles, but the qualities characteristic of that archetypal thing are inseparable from the physical form itself as we perceive it in this world: an image of a cow, once animated, will moo; it will not bleat like a sheep or bray like a donkey, or speak like a human being.

Slides

1. **Babur picture** (Babur admiring rock-cut Hindu sculptures at the base of the fortress of Urwa near Gwalior, which he visited in September 1528 (Baburnama, c. 1590, British Library, Or 3714, f. 478a).
2. **Ulu Camii, Divriği** (1228, built by Ahmet Shah, descendant of Mengüjek, and Ahmet's wife Turan Melek. Mengüjek was the general of Alparslan)
3. **İnce Minareli Medrese** (built in 1267 by the architect Kelük bin Abdullah for the famous Seljuk minister, Sahib Ata)
4. **Hilye** (Mehmet Şevki (1314/1896), now in the Sevgi Gönül Collection (40X60 cm).
5. **Hilye Poster**
6. **Pakistani Trucks**

Babur Nama extra t

p. 415. "Urwah is surrounded on three sides by a single mountain, the stone of which is not so red as that of Bayana but somewhat paler. The sold rock outcroppings around Urwahi have been hewn into idols, large and small. On the southern side is a large idol, approximately 20 yards tall. They are shown stark naked with all their private parts exposed. Around the two large reservoirs inside Urwahi have been dug twenty to twenty-five wells, from which water is drawn to irrigate the vegetation, flowers, and trees planted there. Urwahi is not a bad place. In fact, it is rather nice. Its one drawback was the idols, so I ordered them destroyed."

In Reşit Rahmet Arat's translation into Modern Turkish, it is "*but*" (*put*).