The Mosque

In the light of these reflections, the mihrab is the heart of or key to the religious entity that is the mosque. The mosque is the semiotic sum of what is in heaven and earth or between to remind us of all that is in the self and so assist in realization in Unity. The mihrab is the sum or reflection, source and refuge of the teachings, rite and art of the mosque and so of all the signs in heaven and on earth as the expanse of divine discourse. And the self is the sum of all of this.

If Peace is our goal, it is to be achieved only in plenitude, when all differences and deficiencies vanish. As long as we strive for our goal, nothing is enough. Any condition is only partly bliss, always overshadowed by misfortune. What we want is plenitude but we are perpetually on the battlefield, constantly in the mihrab, facing Peace. Only Peace can satisfy us and only our bliss satisfy Peace.

We have no conscious relationship with God on the basis of our debt to Him, unless confirmed by generosity and humility. Where there is no generosity or humility, there is no sacred teaching or art. The crucial expressions of generosity and humility as virtues are good people and sacred art.

Sacred teachings and sacred art are united in near countless expressions by the mosque. Within this, four sacred arts are of crucial importance: listening, speaking, writing and reading. To speak, we must receive what to say; to receive, we must be open to listening. Whom to listen to? Countless utterances come to us from the world: how can we know if they are from reliable sources? This question leads to Unity, which is the same for all things. Unity can be ours only as our heart and centre. This is why it is vital to listen and discern the voice of the perennial wisdom at the centre of every human self. Everything else is just a reminder.

We received our knowledge in our original condition, on the height, but then fell to the depths, where that knowledge was obscured, concealed and forgotten. The expectation is that we shall once again expose it to the light, reveal and rediscover it. This means that we will once again receive meanings from the height: “Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising Thee. Selah. Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them. Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Sion appeareth before God.”

1 Psalm 84:5–8.
As the Psalmist tells us, the ascent is from Becca to Sion. Two great signs speak of this link between the uttermost depths and our authentic uprightness – the Inviolable Mosque in the Vale of Tears and the Further Mosque on Sion. In the Night Journey, the Praised brought them together as a shining lamp, a mighty morality and the best example: “Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Inviolable Mosque to the Further Mosque the precincts of which We have blessed.”

The journey encompasses both descent and ascent. In it are all the prophets and all of humankind, without rupture. The Inviolable Mosque is the house in the Vale of Tears, as sign of the baseness we ascend from to God; the Further Mosque is Sion, sign of the height, union, and return.

When the knowledge we receive reveals itself as speech, it can be written down. What is written can be read and restored to speech. Only remaining silent is greater than speech.

None of these possibilities is sacred if it remains beyond the heart as source and confluence and does not flow from and back to human perfection. Flux and passage always include duality as the confirmation or manifestation of Unity. Wherever there is influx, there is outflow; wherever entry, leaving. The mosque as a whole is a discourse on God as the One and the Flux. This discourse is concentrated to its utmost point of tension in the mihrab, as the door of crucial passage.

Entering the mihrab means leaving one world to pass into another. Existence is the multitude of worlds through which the All-praised discloses Himself, from Unity to multiplicity. The connection between Him and revelation is praise. “Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, the All-merciful, the Ever-merciful, the Master of the Day of Doom.”

Though the mihrab, as the central concentration of teachings and rite, has almost countless forms, the symbolism of the door is undeniable. Two pillars and an arch are its simplest image. Passing through the many doors of the world, we seek the door that denotes crucial difference, the unbridgeable difference between participants in the world’s divisions, which leads from one world into another on ascent towards the self’s uncreated centre, from war to Peace. On this ascending path we return to the house of Peace, our entire

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2 Qur’an, 17:1.
3 Ibid., 1:2–4.
4 The earliest representations of the mihrāb as two pillars and an arch are to be found on 7th century coins. See Miles, “Mihrāb and ‘Anazah: A Study in Early Islamic Iconography,” 159 ff; Melikian-Chirvani, “The Light of Heaven and Earth: From the Chahār-tāq to the Mihrāb”; Khoury, The Mihrab Concept, 113–114 ff.