Review Essay

Islamic Architecture: Creativity and Pluralism in the Religious Cultures of Islamdom

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**V**ariety, diversity, and creativity are, unfortunately, qualities non-Muslim Euro-Americans seem generally reticent to associate with Muslims and the cultures in which Islam is a dominant influence. They are, however, attributes that apply as much to Islamic societies as to any other major contributors to world culture and history. Given the enormous evidence of this state of affairs, one wonders why countering the entrenched and persistent misperception that Islam and Muslims (all 1.6 billion of them) are globally homogeneous and monolithic is so difficult. Such, perhaps, is the perduring identification of Muslims and predominantly Muslim societies as irreducibly "other" that fear of the unknown trumps readily available information as to their full participation in the human condition. Here, I propose to draw on a range of recent studies of architecture as evidence of cultural and religious pluralism and creativity across the breadth of Islamdom and through much of its long history. A subordinate theme will be that of architecture as a mode of “exegesis.” Muslim patrons and architects have “interpreted” their world and the multiple connotations of “space” through highly imaginative built environments, even as they have also contributed to the larger phenomenon of “scriptural interpretation” by their use of the Qur’an and Hadith texts in architectural epigraphy.

Scores of major religio-political entities have governed predominantly Muslim societies over the last nearly millennium and a half. These range from the once far-flung but relatively short-lived “universal” caliphal rules of Damascus and Baghdad, through the dozens of independent regimes that divvied up the spoils of that realm beginning in the early ninth century, through the many post-caliphal governments that ruled lands Islamized in late medieval times, to the colonial and post-colonial enclaves of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We begin here with a complex and intriguing argument for interpreting Islamic architecture of the earliest dynastic regimes, the Umayyad (capital Damascus) and the Abbasid (founders of the capital city of Baghdad).