Review Essay

RELIGION, THE ARTS, AND ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

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Not so long ago, mosques were a rarity in American cities. Now virtually every major urban area, and many a smaller city and town as well, is home to one or more places where Muslims gather. Often occupying storefronts or former churches, some are associated with the so-called Black Muslims or with the organization now known as the Nation of Islam that still carries on the legacy of Elijah Muhammad. Some are called simply mosques, some retain the Arabic term masjid (literally “place of prostration”) in their titles, and some suggest a larger purpose by calling themselves Islamic centers or foundations. Yet whatever their title or affiliation, as local communities of Muslims have grown and taken on an important role in their respective social and economic scenes, so the use of distinctive architecture has also made them increasingly visible.

It seems fair to conclude from this steady change in the religious landscape of our cities and towns that Islam is gradually becoming as “American” as Episcopalianism or Catholicism or Judaism. As a result, college courses on “religion in America” can no longer relegate Islam to those two or three lectures dedicated to the religious fringe or “new” religious movements. Students of architecture and the arts in the United States will likewise be challenged to expand their categories. For just as the various historic architectural styles (Romanesque, Gothic, or neo-classical) on which so many churches and synagogues are based provide a highly visible link to tradition, so America’s new mosques serve as emblems of historical identity by quoting visually from the rich vocabulary of monumental styles associated with Mamluk Egypt, Ottoman Turkey, or Safavid Iran, to mention only a few possible antecedents. Fortunately, over the last twenty years or so, a wealth of readable scholarship on both the religious and artistic heritages of America’s Muslims has become increasingly available. In particular, several recent studies of Islamic architecture and related ornamental themes seem to open the door to a better understanding of this inheritance by the general reader.

**GENERAL WORKS**

Andrew Petersen’s reference work, A Dictionary of Islamic Architecture covers the length and breadth of the Muslim world from classical to modern times, offering a wealth of information keyed especially to geographical and political setting and specific architectural works-with pre-modern examples predominating-across much of the globe. Architectural drawings, photographs, and maps are superbly produced and well chosen.