# Abrahamic Religions: The Necessity of a New Perspective
Shadieh Mirmobiny, Assistant Professor of Art History, Folsom Lake College

**Abstract**
The conflicts and crises the world is currently struggling with necessitate a new approach inspired by a different perspective. As an art historian, I have always been intrigued by the power of visual imagery particularly by the role art has played in the implementation of power by religion. This compelled me to embark on a critical investigation of the issue of power within the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The results of this study to date will be the subject of this paper that focuses on the significance of an understanding inspired by the very three Abrahamic religions, and it emphasizes a direct relationship between religion, art, power and secularism. Given the important role each of these three religions are presently playing in the formation of policies that affect the lives of millions of people in the Middle East, I believe there is urgency in considering an alternative view that can contribute to a potential solution for the current crises experienced by many in the world.

**Introduction**
On August 31, 2009, "Ayatollah" Khamenei, the "Supreme Leader" of Islamic Republic of Iran, in a speech he delivered to a group of university professors expressed his unhappiness with the fact that two-third of university students in Iran were seeking degrees in humanities and liberal arts. Khamenei stated "many of the humanities and liberal arts [subjects] are based on philosophies whose foundations are materialism and disbelief in godly and Islamic teachings. Instructing those sciences lead to the loss of belief in godly and Islamic knowledge. Teaching those disciplines lead to propagation of skepticism and doubt about the religious principles and beliefs."[1]

This revealing statement is noteworthy in many respects. What the "Supreme Leader" of Iran calls "propagation of skepticism," in the higher education system is known by another name that is critical thinking. Subsequently, there is a direct link between tyranny and lack of critical thinkers. Furthermore, this statement attests that humanities promote a free thinking and educated public that can decide for itself when they are being misled or deceived.

What is most peculiar here however, is that the "Supreme Leader" seems to have forgotten it was due to the works of Medieval Muslim scholars that the arts, philosophy and sciences of the antiquity were delivered to the eager hands of the European artists and humanists and as argued by many, brought about the age of Renaissance.[2] Here lies a contradiction that deserves our attention.

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[1] Rasool Nafisi. *Another Cultural Revolution?* Frontline: Tehran Bureau. September 6, 2009. www.pbs.org.
[2] Scholars have acknowledged that Islamic Scholarly centers in Baghdad and Spain were influential in collecting, translating, commentating, and ultimately shaping the arts and sciences during Renaissance. See Dick Teresi. *Lost Discoveries* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). It is clear that these Muslim scholars had a different attitude toward the knowledge of the past civilizations.

**The Problem and the "Cult of the Expertise"[3]**

For centuries, the religious "experts" in all three Abrahamic religions have maintained a tight grip on what should and should not be disseminated among the public; it has been their undisputed perspective and interpretations alone that have informed and shaped people's faith and destiny. Policies inspired by such self-serving interpretations have been divisive and corrupting to say the least; more importantly they have interfered with the congregations' achieving their intrinsic rights. Consequently, one can argue these "experts" have been the greatest obstacle on the path of every man and woman in reaching their true potentials, and all is done in the name of God.

What has enabled the religious "experts" to successfully implement such policies has been imparting delusion in place of real under the guise of this "expertise." Art has particularly been a significant ally to the religious establishments in achieving this goal. In this paper, by drawing parallels from the field of art history and its applicable methodologies, I aim to initiate an open dialogue that actively engages the core principles of the three Abrahamic religions in order to discern the perceived from the real. I will argue the original Monotheism attributed to Abraham and inherently found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is not mutually exclusive of the ideas of equality, freedom, democracy and civil rights contrary to what the present state of cultures or regions affected by these religions exemplify.

While religion has proven to be most contributory to the development of large scale conflicts throughout history, there is a particular sense of critical urgency in the fragile state in which our world finds itself today, specifically in connection to these three religions. There is reasonable cause for concern that the global community, should the current conflicts not be resolved in an equitable manner, might fall prey to irrationality, despair and mass hysteria, consequently leading to the annihilation of much of humanity and humanity's most valuable achievements. Things we are all too familiar with from our own historical past,[4] except this time, because of the presence of weapons of mass destruction, the devastation will surely be of apocalyptic proportions.

Humans have been creating since prehistoric times; however, as human race, perhaps one of our highest achievements has been the development of the fields that study Arts and Humanities, which records and evaluates, across time and place, what people have been creating, whether in thoughts, or in arts. The field of Humanity's most valuable gift to us however, has been the instrument of critical thinking, whose role and significance, should neither be underestimated, nor taken for granted, particularly in reaching and sustaining equity and freedom. Today, critical thinking helps us analyze our own deeds, and acknowledges diversity without prejudice, but it is not a tool that has been made available to everyone globally.

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[3] Edward Said. "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies," *The Anti Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. ed. by Hal Foster. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983): 136.

[4] A very tangible example of this would be Roman engineering of bringing fresh water into town through their aqueducts. This knowledge was somehow lost after the fall of the Romans, for the entire Middle Ages did not have this technology.

Populations that have been, and still are, under oppressive regimes, have not been able to freely and actively become engaged in such discussions. Optimistically speaking, it is through arts and humanities that we have been able to learn from each other and our past, and it is through the critical studying of that knowledge that we have learned to make changes for the better. But in reality, it is the compulsory nature of events that has forced us to face the truth and to make such changes. In either case, arts and humanities play a key role.

**New Perspective: Methodology Offered by Art History**

The "rethinking of canon" in the field of art history began with the question of studying the cast models of original sculptural pieces. As crucial as it is to study primary sources in any field, art historians found themselves embarrassed by having to gaze upon, study and write about these plaster models.[5] Studying these second or third hand replicas has brought about issues such as the "stripping away" of "their contingency, their…place in space and time," the superficial understanding, and admiration of their status as "works of art."[6] The "opening up" of canon was then sought by feminist art historians by challenging the "male dominated, Eurocentric power relations implicit in canon formation."[7] This was followed by the concept of canon itself being brought under scrutiny; it was likened to a societal caste system that necessitates an inequitable place for members in a hierarchy of classes.[8] The dialogue then continued with the discourse of "others," and the theory of "Orientalism" developed and introduced by Edward Said in 1979, which was applied by art historians as it related to the nineteenth century visual imagery filled with colonial overtones.[9]

There lies a great deal of similarities between the developments leading to this change in perspective in the field of art history and the crisis we are currently experiencing with respect to religious ideals, ideas and their global impact. By removing the artifacts from their original context, the "experts" had constructed the canon in art history to represent a narrow spectrum that was arbitrarily formed and artificially imbued with one culture's aesthetic values; this perspective that served as the paradigm for artistic values and quality for everyone else enduring over a long period of time, required the non-canonic works of "others" to stand out against in order to highlight its own superiority or "purity."

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[5] Michael Camille. "Rethinking the Canon: Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters," *Art Bulletin.*, vol. LXXVII No. 2. (June 1996): 198-209.

[6] Michael Camille. "Rethinking the Canon: Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters," *Art Bulletin.*, vol. LXXVII No. 2. (June 1996): 198-209. Perhaps the Romans were the first to start the practice of copying Bronze Greek sculptures in marble since they admired, valued and collected them as works of "art."

[7] Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature.* Translated by Randal Johnson. (New York: 1993): 272. Quoted by Christopher B. Steiner. "Can Canon Burst?" *Art Bulletin..* vol. LXXVII, No. 2. (June 1996): 213-217.

[8] Christopher B. Steiner. "Can Canon Burst?" *Art Bulletin.* vol. LXXVII, No. 2. (June 1996): 213-217.

[9] Linda Nochlin. "The Politics of Vision." *Imaginary Orient* (1989). Nochlin applies Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to works of art produced in the 19th century that depicts the inhabitants of the Middle East as exotic, strange, barbaric, engaging in questionable activities that make them different than the Europeans, thus criticizing Eurocentricism not just in policies, but in art as a visual tool of propaganda to reinforce colonialism.

The "cult of the expertise and professionalism," to use Edward Said's term, has acted in the same manner in the realm of politics, corporate and state power, as well as military forces. To be sure, Said does not exclude the world of scholars from his theory either. He criticizes the inner workings of such autonomous and non-interfering institutions by stating that the "doctrine of non-interference among fields…has it that the general public is best left ignorant, and the most policy questions affecting human existence are best left to the experts, [those] who are . . . . . close to power."[10] Confirmed by Said, this approach is clearly at odds with democracy.

In the same manner, the religious "experts" have extracted certain ideas as canons from religious teachings, stripped away their original context, built in their own interpretations and value systems and implemented them into policies that have affected the lives of millions of people to this day. As with the canon makers in art history, they too require the "other" to stand out against. By accentuating the differences, and a strong sense of self righteousness, they have thrived in the crises they create by justifying extreme and irrational causes in order to persuade their followers to act against this "other." These subjective and self-centric canons are in competition and conflict with one another in the three Abrahamic religions where, there ought to be harmony and peace. Our greatest challenge lies in recognizing the human hand (which I will refer to as the perceptions) in our sources and distinguishing it from what has been presented as the divine (which I shall call the Real). I argue that by identifying what is manufactured, even though we may not be able to verify what is divine, we can still establish the theory that no man-made interpretation of a principle or idea, even a religious one, should be above questioning and critical examination; because, even if we start out with an idea that is descended from the divine, it becomes human as soon as anyone attempts to explain it or elaborate on it.

Following the developments leading up to the First World War, the "real" that western civilization had to face, as reflected in the "art of the moment"[11] produced in early twentieth century, was how to sustain centuries of a civilization based on a constructed illusory ideal. It was that ideal that had brought on the ambitions of supremacy and competition among the rivaling western political powers culminating in a world war whose cost in human lives was in the millions. Albeit, consequently the movement prompted by the conflict, at least in the visible artists' community, turned inward toward another illusion, that of the human psyche; the findings however have become most illuminating in pinpointing the location of the human phenomenon called creativity rooted in human subconscious.[12]

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[10] Edward Said. "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies," *The Anti Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. ed. by Hal Foster. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983): 136.

[11] T.J. Clark is quoted in Michael Camille's article in which he agrees with Clark on the representation in art at certain points in history to be reflective of the historical moment. T.J. Clark, "Freud's Cezanne," *Representations*. No. 32, (Fall 1995): 115-116.

[12] The publishing of the book "Interpretation of Dreams" by Sigmund Freud in 1900 introduced his theory of conscious and subconscious mind that could reveal the suppressed desires through the analysis of an individual's dream and other techniques. What Freud started was continued and developed further by Karl Gustav Jung by including the element of spirituality; Jung extended the theory to explore other fields such as art, mythology, religion, and philosophy. Artists of the early 20th century implemented practical exercises to tap into the unconscious in order to produce original work, out of which came Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.

To be sure human perceptions have played an important part in the formation of beliefs with the help of visual arts. What we create, may it be physical (as it can tangibly be seen in the visual arts), or it be intellectual (as seen in our thoughts and theories), is impacted by events, our environments and personal experiences. Such impacts make us who we are and what we will become; it is what makes us unique and different, but not unequal in our human rights. For this reason, one person's or one group's perspective should not indisputably dominate the belief and fate of everyone else's, or serve as basis for policies that affect the lives of a majority, without an opportunity for a critical re-evaluation.

In the articulation of religious tenets, rituals or texts, or interpretation of the words of God and his prophets, human interpretation has been, and still remains a significant source of reference crucially shaping fundamental aspects of people's faith. These articulations have taken different forms; from verbal to literal, to visual, there are many examples of art works relevant to the three religions, that have been directly linked to and influenced by literary works from philosophers, theoreticians, mystics and theologians both within or without the Abrahamic religions, as substantiated by art historical scholarship. These interpretations come from varied perspectives and concerns, but are mostly preoccupied with power. While no one disputes the interpretability of works of art, and almost everyone is tolerant of critical examination of art works, specific religious perspectives, whether in literal or visual form, produced by humans have been rarely open to question, and more likely accepted as divine.

But, if human interpretation in the realm of religion has had such a significant impact on people's beliefs, and has been a critical source of policy, it seems problematic and inequitable to exempt it from critical reevaluation. These interpretations, now more than ever, due to globalization, are impacting the world community, in competition with one another and in contradiction with democracy. It is for this reason that I would argue the timeliness of taking on this issue in search of a new perspective.

Perhaps more tangible than any other form of expression, works of visual art can reflect what I referred to as human interpretations. In my analysis, I shall take a non-chronological approach and begin with examples from Christianity, for by being the heir to the Greco-Roman visual artistic traditions, it has had the most enduring impression across time and place. While there are no shortage of examples in Judaism and Islam, the dynamics and vehicles of deception appear somewhat different in them.[13] Even though all three religions have had their full share of falling prey to the evils of power, it is within Christianity, more than Judaism and Islam, that the connection between art and power is most discernible and revealing. Thus, for the purpose of establishing a clear theory, I shall tackle examples from Christianity first; I will then return to apply the methodology to the other two.

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[13] The art of the Greco-Roman heritage is known for its highly technical and illusionistic properties. I am comparing these properties with those produced through words in Judaism and Islam.

One of the highly praised artists of the Middle Ages, whose carvings on the tympanum of the Saint Lazare in Autun, France is emblematic of the importance of fear, which is prevalent in the belief of people during the Romanesque period, is Gislebertus. The "Last Judgment" scene on the tympanum displays the figure of Jesus at the center of the composition as the separator of the "saved" from the "damned." Significantly, it is the treatment of the damned that has attracted the attention of the experts and the non-experts alike. Imaginatively and expressively,



Gislebertus. *Last Judgment.* Tympanum on the West Portal of the Cathedral of Saint Lazare, Autun, France. 1120-30 or 1130-45. carved stone.

Gislebertus has visualized the misfortune of those who were never saved (by not following the suggested path, as indicated for example in John 3:16-18) and are going to eternally remain in Hell. To adequately emphasize the terrifying fate awaiting the damned souls, he reinforces the idea by the inscription "May this terror frightens those who are bound by worldly errors. It will be true just as the horror of these images indicates."[14] Where did the idea of salvation and understanding it in this way come from? Who articulated it in this way for the faithful? And finally, who made it part of the culture and accessible to all? Regardless of what the names are, we know they were all human and their works, to be sure, are subject to critical re-examination.[15]



Detail of the "Damned." Gislebertus. *Last Judgment.* Tympanum on the West Portal of the Cathedral of Saint Lazare, Autun, France. 1120-30 or 1130-45. carved stone.

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[14] Marilyn Stokstad. *Art History*. (New Jersey: Pearson, 2009): 498. Translation made by Petzold.

[15] It is significant that at this time portrayal of Jesus as a judge in Heaven becomes the appropriate subject in such a location above the entrance to the church. Because Jesus on Earth would not have abandoned the sinners or alienate them. This perspective however at this time, was not part of the campaign of persuading people to come to church.

Michelangelo. *Creation of Adam*. 16th century. Detail of painting on the ceiling in Sistine Chapel. Rome, Italy.
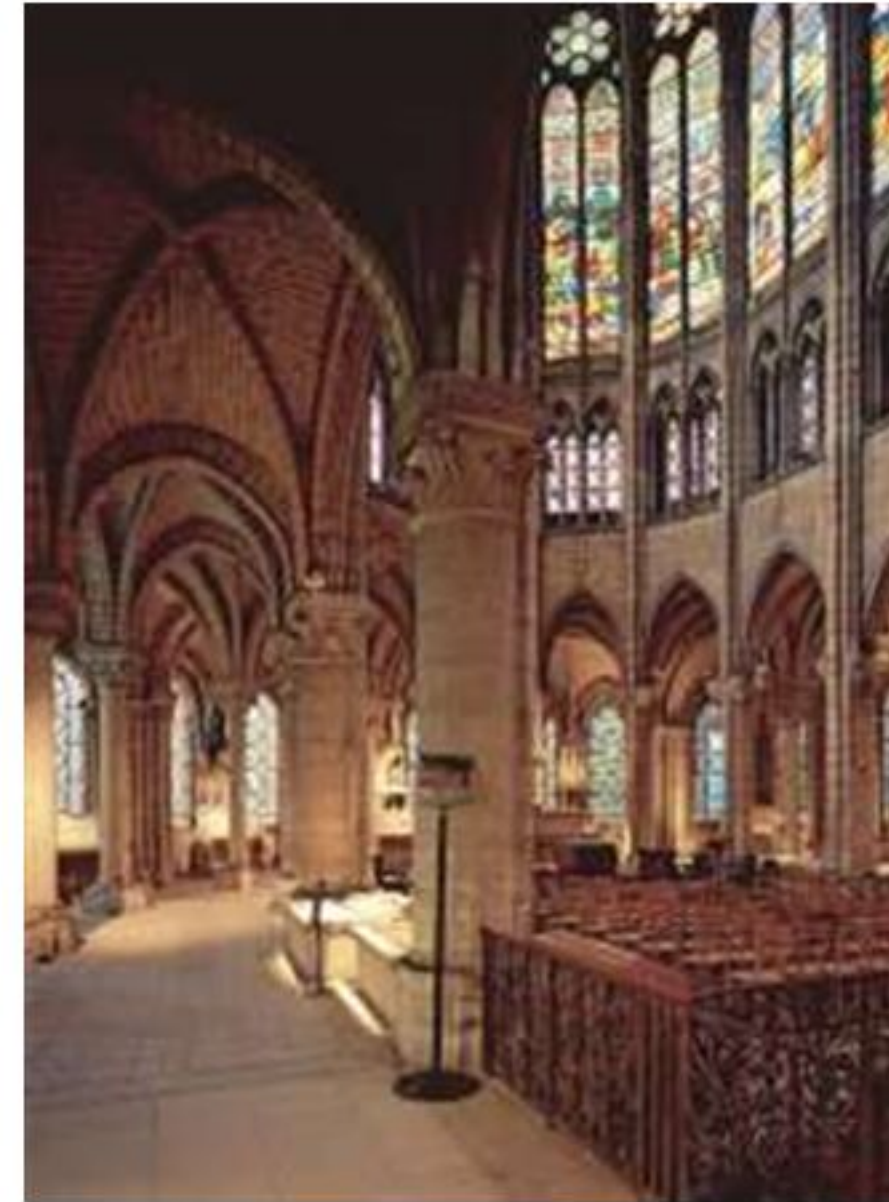


Interior, the Abby Church of Saint Denis. Choir. 1140-44, 1231-81. Paris, France.

Where fear ceased to effectively bring the flocks to church, another creative idea arrived just in time. The next example demonstrates how ideas possibly from antiquity were integrated into the matters of Christian faith and to be sure, became inspirational for the production of works of art under the supervision of another influential figure. The development of the use of colored glass in the stained glass windows synonymous with Gothic Cathedrals has been credited to Abbot Suger (1081-1151) of Saint Denis. In search of inspiration for rebuilding the church he was placed in charge of, he came across the writings of a fifth century Greek philosopher known as Pseudo-Dionysius, who had associated the presence of the Divinity with radiant light.[16] Thinking he was reading the works of an early Christian saint with a similar name, and by employing such device, Abbot Suger invented a tool to visually enhance the interior atmosphere of Saint Denis, which was a royal cathedral, based on how he perceived light was going to be understood, and forever changed the dark and intimidating interior of the place of Christian worship.

The Divinity, whose presence was envisioned in the colorful rays of light brought into the grandiose space of Gothic Church, was given a very physical presence in Michelangelo's celebrated painting "Creation of Adam" on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel. The borrowed visual vocabulary from the Greco-Roman's long tradition of picture making took center stage in the production of this crucial moment in the myth of creation. In Michelangelo's painting, God appears as a clothed, mature and floating figure, all of which are visual conventions that signal

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[16] Abbot Suger on the Value of Art writes: "Bright is the noble work; but being nobly bright, the work should lighten the minds, so that they may travel through the true lights…the dull mind rises to truth through that which is material and, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former subversion." Quoted by Stokstad (516) from Erwin Panofsky in *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures*. 2nd ed. By Gerda Panofsky-Soergel. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979): 47-49.

his identity and status that would have been undoubtedly understood by the contemporary viewer as such.

In all these examples, it is the presence of human creation and the power of his creative imagination, influenced by political and cultural currents that gave birth to these visions; they undeniably dominated and overpowered the viewers, and persuaded them toward a particular point of view. We would be taking it for granted if we overlook the kind of reinforcement and power these visual emblems exerted over the population in order to strengthen the position of church.

In order to remove any possibilities of doubt about the realness of this scene as it was painted by Michelangelo, or the divine endorsement of it, aside from the aesthetic quality, masterful execution, and convincing appearance, the theory of artist-genius was aptly developed that lasted until the recent century to underscore the Divine endowment of such talents to certain artists in order to glorify Him.[17] Clearly, such art works place the viewers in a passive state of awe and self-alienation, and discourage them to question the "realness" of the content. Images like this are accomplished by the human hands with utmost technical virtuosity from top to bottom, and they reflect, figuratively and literally, only one perspective. For this reason such works of art are subject to critical re-evaluation, not just for the aesthetic values, but for their intellectual contents, if we wish to separate what is human from the essence and put it in its proper place.

Naturally, not all influential human endeavors have been in the realm of the visual arts. Noteworthy are also theories that were developed and entered into Christianity, which attempted to explain the discrepancies found in the scriptures, or to articulate issues that were difficult to understand for the believers, while maintaining the church's official position within the Christendom.[18] This position necessitated taking measures to maintain a unified Christian state, by officially adopting some of the information documented in four of the Gospels,[19] which meant some Gospels had to be excluded and some subjects would receive less attention than others.[20]

For every example that became a favorite subject in literary or visual arts, there are other subjects that have not received equal consideration for they were seen as too controversial or divisive. For instance, one of the stories one rarely hears any references to in public sermons (that is when it does not serve the church's view), is the story of the Greek woman and Jesus (Mark 7:25); in this story Jesus may come across not as infallible as he has been made out to be.

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[17] The evidence to this statement can be seen in the works of authors such as Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), who was also a painter and architect. Vasari's book entitled "The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects," covers the lives and works of artists that he deemed to be the brilliant stars in the sky of Renaissance, with an objective view. The book was of course shaped by the political climate of the time; the autocratic religious rule in Rome on the one side, and sensitive role Florence played on the other, determined the artists' roles and duty. Also, see E.H. Gombrich. *The Story of Art* ( London: Phaidon Press. 16th edition, 1995): 300, and 308.

[18] Works of scholars such as "Saint" Augustine, and Thomas of Aquinas are among the examples of added literary sources that are seen as references from which various aspects of people's belief are drawn. Through elevating the positions of these "experts'" status as "saints" by the decrees of other humans (religious leaders) the path toward critically reviewing them has been blocked.

[19] This of course started at the Council of Nicaea in 325 in Asia Minor.

[20] Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, a division of Random House, 1979):142-151.

His rejection of the Greek woman at first becomes puzzling and may bring about the question whether Jesus even momentarily forgot (which is a very human trait) his position by discriminating against a non-Jew.[21]

Without a doubt, such decisions, as those made by the Council at Nicaea that do not reflect inclusiveness and equity, are very human, self-serving and narrow; they were considered for the purpose of a unified Christian political state, and they indeed should be questioned, as they have been.[22] However, to be fair, such subjective acts did not begin with Imperial Christianity and can be traced back to the tumultuous history of Judaism. The best critic of hypocritical acts and discriminatory practices conducted by the Jewish clergy is Jesus himself. In numerous passages Jesus scolds the Scribes and the Pharisees, who were the interpreters and commentators of religious texts and issues (Matthew 23), for essentially turning the instructions of Moses around and modifying them to suit their own purpose.[23] In Mark 7:7-13, Jesus criticizes further the Pharisees and the Scribes for "… teaching …the commandments of men," while "…making the word of God of none-effect through…[their] traditions."[24]

The Jewish clergy must have also been busy restoring and refurbishing the tombs of their prophets— in other words utilizing the visual arts - and eliminating their critics, because Jesus admonishes them for decorating the tombs of the "righteous," but killing or persecuting the "wise" and the "prophets" that were sent to them (Matthew 23:29).

In making the distinction between the Commandments, and the commandments of men, there is justice, meaning things are then put in proper perspective. The Old Testament contains a number of books that have been integrated into the scriptures. One of these books is the Book of Ezra that contains particular interpretations of Mosaic teachings written to fulfill a particular purpose. The Ten Commandments as the covenant between God and Israelites encapsulates the principle laws that were meant to ensure peace and harmony among the Israelites and their neighbors. However, in this book it can clearly be seen how the emphasis has been placed not on the peace and harmony, but on another concern; in other words, principles of Mosaic teachings were essentially presented according to one person's interpretations. It is Ezra, with the support of the Persian King, Artaxerxes (ruled 464-424 BCE), who returns from Babylon to Jerusalem with a decree and the authority from the king to take the helm in rebuilding the temple and to harshly punish those who stand in his way.[25] Ezra, by focusing on his perception of "holy seed" (Ezra, 9:2) in reference to Jewish blood, expresses extreme dismay and astonishment that the

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[21] Mark 7:25. It is rather significant as one may even get the impression from the story that Jesus might have even snubbed the Greek woman by distinctly discriminating against the non-Jews, a very inequitable gesture. This contradicts John 3:16.

[22] Since the discovering of the Nag Hamadi Gospels, controversial discourses have begun. See Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, a division of Random House, 1979): xiii-xxxvi.

[23] In these passionate passages Jesus calls the Scribes and the Pharisees hypocrites; those who make it difficult for the faithful to reach their potential, by constantly making up human rules and regulations based on tradition that steers the congregation away from the essential goal. See King James, Matthew- 23.

[24] King James. Mark, Chapter 7.

[25] Book of Ezra, 7:13-28.

Jews in Jerusalem had married people from other cultures.[26] It is evident that the Israelites in Jerusalem did not subscribe to the same ideas as Ezra; in other words, it seems prior to return of Ezra to Jerusalem, the intermarrying tradition of Solomon was still in effect in that region, which clearly contrasted to what Ezra was going to implement. Backed by the king's letter and to make Jerusalem an ally of the Persian Empire because of its strategic location in the region, Ezra returned to establish a political government for the Israelites in which he would be the religious as well as the political leader (Ezra, 7:13); through his interpretations, Ezra focuses on the idea of the "chosen people" and the "holy seed" to legitimize his actions.

Having lived in Babylon, Ezra was fully aware of the political power of the temple and organized religion, thus he aimed to lead the rebuilding of the seat of power for the Israelites in Jerusalem emulating the same model, even at the cost of death and destruction of the Jewish inhabitants of the region, who disagreed with his plans. This example is a case in point that demonstrates an inconsistency between the Principles of the Covenant and Ezra's point of view. The problem is not only because this one perspective was made into a policy and put to action, which resulted in the tragic elimination of the opposition, but having done so in the most unholy and systematic way at the financing of a foreign power.[27]

The purpose here should be to reevaluate Ezra's concern as it compares to the principles and goals of the Ten Commandments in order to acknowledge that what he did was based on human understanding and interpretation of the law he thought he was reinstating. More significantly is the endurance of Ezra's views to this day that has impacted decisions and policies in the region in a very similar way. Thus, it becomes evident that the policies cannot change without a change in perspective.

Many of the traditions established by Ezra, found long lasting impressions, not just among the Israelites, but also on another Abrahamic religion, which is Islam. The combination of the overlapping of religion and power, and the concept of "holy seed" has created another monster within the third and newest of the three Abrahamic religions, specifically among the Shi'ites,[28] to which I shall return. Following the rise of Islam, it can be argued with confidence, and upon the death of the Prophet, in order to hold the *Umah* of Islam together, the decision was

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[26] It is clear that here Ezra claims a high status for the Jewish race (in the interpretation of the chosen people) in comparison to those of other cultures such as the Egyptians, Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, etc. However, his interpretation of the "chosen people" is purely racist. The deadly combination of a racist based theory, supported by a superpower, was responsible for atrocities such as the execution (Ezra 6:11) and banishment of the non-complying Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem, and their neighbors, as well as separation of interracial families. In taking these directives from the Persian king (Ezra 8:25, 26), Ezra is clearly mixing religion with political power. These policies continued with the support of the Romans later, which brought about the criticism of John the Baptist followed by Jesus. John the Baptist's criticism, particularly with respect to the "holy seed" is noteworthy (Matthew 3:9, 10).

[27] The Israelite have twice experienced the harshest destruction of their political structure for mixing the peaceful message of Moses, with power by conjoining their interests with foreign powers, once in the hands of the Babylonians, and again in the hands of the Romans. Marilyn Stokstad. *Art History* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2009): 42, 201.

[28] It is critical to consider the Shi'ites in reference here in the context of their lineage to the Shi'ite *ulemas* (religious scholars) from Lebanon that systematically immigrated to Iran at the invitation of the Safavid king in 1524. For this reason, this particular branch has been called "Safavid Shi'ites."

made to form an organized government;[29] in doing so, naturally they followed the existing models, which led to the formation of Islamic dynastic and imperial rule in 661 CE. Whatever may have been developed and established in the realm of ruling under the banner of a religion, by Israelites, Christians, or other civilizations, whether in theory or practice, was picked up and adopted by the seventh century Muslims. In a way they became an heir to the heritage of the other two Monotheist religions as well as the ancient knowledge from Greece, Persia and India.[30]

The issue of the use of imagery, particularly with regards to the Divine has been directly addressed and instructed against in Judaism.[31] Muslims seems to have followed suit and are in agreement with this particular command. However, the elaborations, explanations and interpretations of this Commandment must have varied since the production of religious art and architecture did not cease in either religion. Significantly, in Islamic tradition, the creative and imaginative energies were channeled not so much in the same visual and figurative manner employed by Christianity, rather in both literal and visual appropriation and abstraction of the past Abrahamic traditions through the works of theoreticians, as Islam saw itself to be the continuation of Judaism and Christianity.

Islamic civilization was also influenced by and drew upon the art and knowledge of antiquity in Moorish Spain; at the intellectual centers of Cordoba and Seville during the middle ages Muslim scholars, while poring over the ancient texts, developed influential theories that inspired works of art in the name of God within the Islamic cultures. Therefore, when it comes to manufactured ideas, Islam has done no better the other two Abrahamic religions.



Under the dome. *Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque*. 17th century. Safavid period. Isfahan, Iran.

An extraordinary fact is revealed following the arrival of Islam in the 7th century in the region, when one finds no reference in the religious teachings to the production of the arts. As the third and final religion within the Abrahamic monotheism, Islam did not require any specific artifacts or even structures to conduct religious obligations.[32] This was peculiar to me since I knew there were many examples of art and architecture around under the label of "Islamic." I was intrigued to find out whereas there were no instructions necessitating the

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[29] The formation of administrative government, army, and reinforcement of religious laws has been attributed to the second caliph, Omar. It is during Omar that military campaigns outside of the Arabian Peninsula took place. He is also reportedly is the first who established public flogging for breaking religious rules such as drinking. Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub. *Bamdad e Islam* (Dawn of Islam) (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication, 1983CE [1362 Persian calendar]): 75 and 99.

[30] Dick Teresi. *Lost Discoveries* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

[31] Exodus, 20:4.

[32] While Muslims believe in the same commandment as the Jews with regards to creating an image of the Divine, there are no references in the Muslim Holy book, the Koran about art. Furthermore, on the subject of the place of prayers, it is not mandatory to perform the prayers in the Mosque; technically Muslims can perform their prayers anywhere, as long as it is not on stolen, or wrongfully obtained property.

creation of elaborate art, there were so many dazzling and beautiful artistic products that were called "Islamic," regardless of their religious or secular nature. This journey proved to be a turning point, and still continues to be decisive to this day, in my professional career, for what I learned was no short of an experience of profound enlightenment for me.

The art that is known as Islamic bears the name of a religion that is known for simplicity and directness[33], and has no prescription for any art, devotional or otherwise.[34] Yet, when we look at images such as the tile work from under the dome of *Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque* in Isfahan from 17th century, or the illustration from Khamsa Nizami called the *Ascension of the Prophet* from the 16th century, we do not hesitate to identify them as "Islamic." The question is then, how did the so called "Islamic" art come to existence? The short answer to this question is: the art and culture we call "Islamic" is in fact a synthesis of many cultures and traditions that have played an important role in what we identify as Islamic today.[35]

**The Influential Role of Ibn Arabi**

One of the most significant figures whose impact is seen to this day is the Andalusian sage and mystic Mohyoddin Mohammad Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), who is a profound example in contributing to the synthesis of pre-Islamic cultures into Islamic thoughts and even artistic activities. A critical study of the development of Islamic art reveals, while the physical properties of the visual arts were being forged out of the existing technical traditions already in place in the regions conquered by the political power of the "Islamic" rulers, philosophers such as Ibn Arabi, using the extant knowledge, were developing the language to articulate a doctrine that would justifiably elucidate and strengthen the cohesion of the culture they identified with.[36]

With the birth of Islam in the early 7th century, the scattered people of the Arabian Peninsula, entangled in their tribal laws and feuds on the one hand and being impacted by the on-going conflicts of the Byzantine and Sasanian on the other,[37] found a unifying identity that ultimately brought them political prominence that reached from the western border of China in the east, to Spain in the west.

Through Islam, the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula in a short period of time, found their individuality and independence from their imposing superpower neighbors. In order to maintain their newly achieved identity and eminence, the early Muslims, resorted to politicizing Islam with the vehicle of art as their ally, just as their neighbors and predecessors had done with their own ancient religions in the past. Therefore, inasmuch as it was difficult to completely forget the old ways, they created an amalgam of old traditions and the new idea, justified and

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[33] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 35.
[34] Oleg Grabar. *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987): 1-18.
[35] Oleg Grabar. *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987): 1-18.
[36] Shadieh Mirmobiny. *The Mystery of Islamic Art: Ibn Arabi and the Appropriation of the Gnostic Elements from Antiquity.* Paper presented at the Medieval and Renaissance Colloquium in Sacramento, California, October 2008.
[37] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 19-26. Both Sasanian and the Byzantine emperors had puppet regimes and claims in the Arabian Peninsula.

unified by a cohesive art, supported by-and in turn supporting- a strong and wealthy political system, constituting what we know as Islamic culture that is riddled with paradoxical ideas today.[38]

It is not by chance that the formation of "Islamic" art coincides with the formation of the first Islamic dynastic rule by the Umayyads (r. 661-750), who dictated the necessity of art, as an element of power and prestige, emulating it from Persian and Byzantine empires, and consequently from every other culture they encountered.[39] The construction of the Dome of the Rock as a political statement perhaps is one of the earliest examples of Islamic architecture supporting this claim. It is noteworthy that the Dome of the Rock is not a congregational Mosque due to its plan type, (so the practicality does not seem to be the primary function), and its significance to all three Abrahamic religions is highlighted in its structure. However, the fact that the Umayyad Caliph abd al Malik built it in on this site and in this style by importing the Byzantine artists and architects, underscores the intent to culminate these three religions in this one significant place under the Islamic rule. Therefore, its principal purpose, more than anything else might have been making a political statement.[40]

The political and cultural image of Islamic rule is further enhanced when in the 9th century, the Abbasid Caliph, al Ma'mun (ruled 813-833) formed the *Dar al Hikma*, (House of Knowledge), through which the knowledge from the texts of the antiquity became available to Muslim scholars, leading to its consequential disbursement in the translated form throughout the known world.[41]

Among the achievements of the philosophers of antiquity, the Gnostic knowledge had already permeated Christianity through the wisdom of the Greeks and power of the Romans[42]; it finally found its way into the Islamic culture by the medieval times through the translation of the ancient texts by Muslims. The Gnostic interpretation of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, perhaps is one of the more widely known mystic ideas from the antiquity. When studying the concepts of real and illusion argued by Medieval Muslim mystics as discussed in the "positive symbol," and

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[38] This is evident in the withdrawal of loyalty by some tribes following the death of the Prophet as well; they argued their allegiance was with Mohammad, not his successor. There is a major conflict in the form of government, which has gone from a form of voting (*bay'at*) at the time of the Prophet or his son in law Ali, to the formation of dynastic rule that has endured in the Middle East in one form or another for over fourteen centuries. Shadieh Mirmobiny. *Introduction to Islamic Art,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2010): 22.

[39] Oleg Grabar. *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987): 93. Grabar rightly points out that the formation of the Islamic art was not because of religious or intellectual directives, but rather it was the "result of the impact on the Arabs of the prevalent art."

[40] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 68.

[41] Robert Hillenbrand. *Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999): 38. See also Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 84 and 124.

[42] It is important to distinguish between Gnosticism and philosophy here. Plato and his true follower Plotinus tried to philosophize the Gnostic viewpoint. Plotinus often criticized Gnostics who pointed to God for example, but in reality had no plan or program to teach how to reach God. What Plotinus was trying to do was to use reasoning to establish the idea of human potential to reach divine status. Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels,*135 (New York: Random House, 1989)

the "negative illusion," we are reminded of Plato's Allegory of the Cave.[43] The negative and the positive appear in Persian poetry for instance, and referred to as the microcosmic (*alam –i asghar*) –the profane man-versus the macrocosmic (*alam i akbar*)-the spiritual man.[44] (There are enough examples in Persian literature alone just on this topic to support this claim that will require many volumes to fill on its own.) Jalal al Din Rumi (1207-1273) points to this notion in his poem to awake his own spiritual potential:

*Therefore in outer form thou art the microcosm,*
*While in inward meaning thou art the macrocosm*

Hence, the influential theory of *Wahdat al Wujud* (Unity of Existence) founded by Ibn Arabi espousing Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which is viewed as its origin, was the significant pivot that connected the western and eastern civilizations and earned Ibn Arabi the title "Ibn Aflatūn" (son of Plato)[45]; it fostered the formation of additional mystic traditions in the various regions including the Middle East, and as far as Indonesia.[46]

Ibn Arabi comes from a city in the south east region of Spain known as Murcia in the mid twelfth century, during the time that despite the constant conflicts between Christians and Muslims, there is a thriving environment in the field of literary and the visual arts nurtured by a multi-cultural atmosphere in Spain. His family moves to Seville for political reasons [47] when he was about eight during which time he begins to learn the literary knowledge available to him there. According to his own accounts, he became familiar with the mystic tradition when he was nearly twenty. He remains in Seville for another decade, but manages to travel around in Spain and meet contemporary scholars and mystics including a 95 year old woman in Seville, whom he mentions in his *(al Futuhat al Makkyya) Mekkan Revelations*.

Ibn Arabi's travels took him around many Islamic regions such as Alexandria, Mecca, Baghdad, Konya, all of which considered major cultural and intellectual centers, finally settling in Damascus; during his years in Damascus, he wrote prolifically until his death in 1240 there. His writings reflect appropriation of thoughts and ideas from Plato and Neo-Platonists, to Mutazilis, and Ismailiis, which tremendously influenced his thoughts and works, most prominent of which is the very theory of *Wahdat al Wujud* discussed in his book *Fussus al Hikam* (Bezels of Wisdom).[48]

The school of *Wahdat al Wujud* subscribes to the idea that all creation is connected to an intellectual Center. For the existence of every creation, it deems an aspect that is real and one which is an illusion and to put it visually, places them on concentric circles connected through

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[43] Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Science and Civilization in Islam* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1992): 338.

[44] Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987): 139.

[45] Titus Burkhardt mentions this title in the Preface of Ibn Arabi's *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translation and introduction by R.J.W. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980): xiii. Also, Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Science and Civilization in Islam* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1992): 338.

[46] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 228-29.

[47] Ibn Arabi: *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translation and introduction by R.J.W. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980): 1-41. Also *The Great Islamic Encyclopedia* vol.4 (Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 1991): 226-233.

[48] *The Great Islamic Encyclopedia* vol.4 (Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 1991): 226-271.

radii to the center.[49] It is noteworthy that inspired by this idea, the visual arts associated with Islam in many cases reflect radial compositions.

The theory of Unity of Existence argues for the manifestation of the macrocosm in the microcosm with an intrinsic connection to one another.[50] Thus, it sees the existence as one and interprets it as the Divine. Hatif Esfahani, an 18th century Persian poet emphasizes in his famous *Tarji band*: " . . .*and there is one and nothing else but Him . . .*"[51] This perspective interprets the *al Tawhid*, not as God is one and beyond all creation, but that God is unity, meaning "all is God," therefore contradicting with the Principle of Unity, or *al Tawhid*.[52] Grasping Hatif's view, another contradictory message in the work of the mystic and poet, Sheikh Mahmoud Shabistari (1288-1320) becomes evident who says: "*If a Muslim knew what idols were, he would surely know worshipping idols would be the right thing to do*".[53]

According to the mystic view, this perspective asserts the belief that humans have the potential to unify with or to become god, through the idea of *al Insan al Kamil*, or the Universal Man, just as the Prophet Mohammad was believed to have done. The Ascension of the Prophet is a key example as interpreted by Sufis in that it represents the unification of humans with the Devine.[54] This theory was first put forth by Plotinus who argues for the possibility of this unification through ecstatic or mystical vision.[55]



The Ascension of the Prophet, from the *Kamsa* Nizami. 16th century. Iran.

It is remarkable that Ibn Arabi's description of *Mi'raj* (the Prophet's Ascension to Heaven - Koran 17:1), in his book *Futuhat al Makkiya* (Mekkan Revelations) following the many details not included in the Koran, like the detailed description of the stages the Prophet ascended through, and his human headed horse, does acknowledge the Koranic account that the Prophet reached within "two bows' length" from God (Koran 53:9).[56] Nonetheless, Ibn Arabi highlights and elaborates on the imagined details of the Night Journey, failing to resolve the bit

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[49] Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Science and Civilization in Islam* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1992): 338.

[50] Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Science and Civilization in Islam* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1992): 339

[51] This repeated verse in Hatif's poem is often referred to in support of the union with Truth (God) (*wisal bi'l Haqq*) Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987): 167

[52] Seyyed Hossein Nasr has used the terms *al Tawhid* and Unity of Existence (Being) interchangeably in both *Science and Civilization* and *Islamic Art and Spirituality*.

[53] Sheikh Mahmoud Shabistari: *Golshan e Raz*, edited by Saber Kermani (Tehran: Tahoori Publication, 1982): 84.

[54] Ibn Arabi: *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translation and introduction by R.J.W. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980): 96-97.

[55] *The Great Islamic Encyclopedia* vol.9 (Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 1991): 605-6. Also, Janetta Rebold Benton and Robert Di Yanni: *Art and Culture, An Introduction to Humanities* (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005): 460.

[56] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 59.

of information on the still existing space between the Prophet (the created) and God (the creator). Ibn Arabi's description has given inspiration to many other popular stories of the Prophet's *Mi'raj* still in circulation today.[57]

The concept of Universal Man is in direct conflict with Koranic text that not only makes no reference to such an idea, but contradicts it in many places. The statements such as " . . . God is Greater[58] . . . (Koran, 29:45)," "He has no equal (Koran, 112:4)" or "there is no divinity but God (Koran, 2:163)," are a few examples among the many opposing statements that clearly distinguish between the Creator and the created. Furthermore, the elevation of humans to divine status is a concept that reaches back to ancient times in Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, and the time of Greek antiquity in which the kings, and heroes were declared gods or sons of gods. The Romans further continued this tradition by the process of apotheosis, declaring their favorite emperors as gods.[59]

Just as the Greco-Roman visual vocabulary entered Christianity, the whole notion of humans becoming interchangeable with god permeated Christianity from the antiquity as well and integrated into Christian doctrine represented by the established religion, while quintessentially there is more evidence in support of differences between the creator and the created in all of Abrahamic monotheist traditions.[60]

From another perspective, according to direct Koranic reference that makes it clear there are no inconsistencies in creation (Koran: 30:30), it would then be problematic if some were able to achieve divine status; this imposes a hierarchy that when translated into man-made laws, has proven to produce socially hierarchic and unjust systems that promote unfair social and political practices, which unfortunately we have seen happen too often, mostly implemented by religion.[61]

The close relationship between art and power in Islam seems not so different than other religious traditions that systematically produced art to serve political agendas. Ibn Arabi's

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[57] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 59, see footnote. The story of Prophet Mohammad's *Mi'raj* is also danced among the Baga of the Northern Guinea in West Africa. Monica Blackmun Visona, Robin Poynor, and Herbert M. Cole. *A History of Art in Africa*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008): 178.

[58] Unfortunately this statement sometime is mistranslated as "God is great!" which is inaccurate; for example as appears in Bloom and Blair book: Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 99. 'Akbar' in 'Allahu Akbar' is a comparative adjective in Arabic meaning "greater." This makes a significant difference when explaining the first principle of Islamic belief and the difference between the Creator and the created.

[59] Marilyn Stokstad. *Art History* Revised Edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995): 73, 234-35, 248-49.

[60] I found many conflicting statements in the Bible quoted from Jesus for instance, that has the same problematic nature as the philosophy behind the Islamic art does, in that it adheres more to the Gnostic belief of unity than to monotheism. References to "son of God" and "son of man," are a couple of such examples. If we understand monotheism as the belief in one God, then here again the difference between the Creator and the created becomes muddled.

[61] I think a valid argument can be made here that the first principle of Islamic faith was meant to counter the old tradition of associating rulers (or even prophets) with God that prevented an equal access for all. The message of equality at the onset of Islam and the fact that Christianity had become an imperial religion (from first being on the side of the poor) which is confirmed by scholars, testifies to this. Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 2.0 It may be argued the fundamental problem in the Middle East today can be attributed to the overlapping of the involved religions (and their different branches and interpretations) and power competing with one another over dominance.

intention might have been to reinstate the glory of the past for Islam as a political power in the face of Christian re-conquests by drawing on the same formulas that were in use in the past. Therefore, the warps and the wefts of "Islamic" art inspired by his theory, appear more in harmony with the philosophical thoughts of antiquity and in the service of power. His contributions in the development of mystic language and rituals however, inspired the unorthodox religious undercurrents in favor of power, and became an impediment for people's reaching their goals of human rights and equity; such impact on current political views and movements in the region continues to this day.[62]

Like all great works of art, Ibn Arabi's works have inspired and generated a profusion of further works of visual and literary arts; nevertheless, it is problematic when his offerings are received as knowledge that is a mixture of self-proclaimed revelations and personal experience with the philosophical knowledge from the antiquity under the label of Islam. It is more startling, when we realize Ibn Arabi's enduring and direct influences on the contemporary social and political visions have been -and still are- shaping political movements in the Middle East.

The significance of the connection of the theory of the "Rule of Jurisprudence" incorporated into the Constitution of Iran's Islamic Republic and implemented as law today, to Ibn Arabi's theory - the concept of the Universal Man and the rule of the elite - is revealed when we realize, the founder of the Islamic Republic, "Ayatollah" Khomeini, was one the most reliable and respected authorities in teaching the mysticism of Ibn Arabi along with the philosophy of Mulla Sadra (ca. 1571–1636), who was a follower of Ibn Arabi at the Center of Seminary Studies in Qom in 17th century Iran.[63] This theory is founded on the idea of "holy seed" of the Imams, who are direct descendents of the Prophet and Plato's theory of the rule of the elites developed by the Safavid Shi'ite "experts," whose influence continued until the rise to political power of the clerics in Iran in the late seventies, and whose manufactured theories are now made into laws and policies that are undemocratic, oppressive, and anti-human rights and must be critically reexamined.

It is then most appropriate when I began this paper with "Ayatollah Khamenei's" criticism of humanities, for by now the significance of the field of humanities, the peril in Iran's "Supreme Leader's" desire to ban studying this particular field, and the direct relationship between this field and establishing democracy and individual freedoms should be clear.

## Conclusion

In my concluding remarks I shall leave the reader with these notes. As academicians or individuals we may not believe in any religions or even God; we may feel we have transcended

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[62] Ibn Arabi's letter to the new governor of Konya, Ezzeddin Kaykavous in ca 1212 advised him to be most harsh on the Christians. The reason might have been the atrocities committed by the Crusaders. *The Great Islamic Encyclopedia* vol.4 (Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 1991):229-230. Since the Ottoman Turks highly regarded Ibn Arabi's views and applied many of his influential writings into their policies, it will not be surprising to find traces of such influence in the tragic treatment of the Armenians by the Ottomans during and after the World War I.

[63] Interestingly," Ayatollah" Khomeini taught both subjects, while Ibn Arabi's views come from the Sunni perspective, Mulla Sadra's come from the Shi'a branch of Islam.

religion or that its ideals are no longer relevant for us. We may think it is outside of the scope of our responsibilities to get involved or become active in promoting the critical examination of issues such as those I addressed in this paper.

But, the truth is, if we are currently a member of the global community, we are already involved. The nuclear capabilities of current regimes, the military nature of many of the governments, the rise of violence and corruption in the Middle East, and the spread of terrorism in the world, whether we want it or not, has made these issues our problems as well. If we are concerned about the present state of individual freedoms, democracy, human rights, and peace, we have no choice but to consider the significance of the ongoing crises and no option other than working toward a possible solution. If seeking a solution means finding new perspectives on established influential thoughts and methods inspired by these three Abrahamic religions, then we must actively seek and pursue such perspectives. A solution cannot be made possible through the status quo. If we are not engaged in critical reevaluation of what has already been said and done, we will not be able find a solution to stop the inevitable escalation of violence, war and mass destruction.

It is a fact, regardless of our personal perspective that religions are still the most powerful and influential instruments in the lives of people all over the world. Therefore, it seems reasonable to retrace our steps in the long and violent history of these three religions to reexamine the evidence in order to distinguish the departure from the initial principles and covenant, in other words to separate the perceptions from the real.

In this light therefore, my paper should not be viewed as a negation of any religion; rather, it should be considered as an advocacy for the right and opportunity to look back and critically examine the sensitive issues, events and interpretations of the religious principles as they have found their way into policies. The findings in this paper may not be new, as I am confident, the experts and scholars may already be aware of them. However, the purpose of this paper is to open a dialogue on the subject and to make the information accessible in an open forum among the populations that are either affected by the crisis, or those whose decisions might bear an effect on the current events in the troubled region of the Middle East.

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