

CREATIVE BLOG POSTS INTRODUCTORY ESSAY:
ACCESSING THE DIVINE THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

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Aesthetic & Interpretive Understanding 54
For the Love of God and His Prophet: Religion, Literature, and the Arts in Muslim Cultures
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God's Word as Sacred Sound

Qur'an recitation is a universally integral part of Islamic experience in Muslim communities across the world. Coming into this course with absolutely no background in Islam, I was intrigued by the importance given to the performance of the text as opposed to merely the content. The skillful manipulation of sound becomes of vital religious significance when approaching the Qur'an. By digitally manipulating my own variety of sounds, I hope to channel that aspect of Islam to attempt to experience what it means to be Muslim.

What interests me most about recitation is its musical quality and role as a spiritual medium. Music of all forms is an expressive vehicle, and divine music, or sound, expresses something we can only come to define as unfathomable. The track I created, "Sacred Sound," weaves together different types of audio, blurring the lines between noise, music, and the underlying continuous recitation. I made an effort to bring together sources that unite behind a common theme of the timelessness of divine sound. In the (Week 3) selection from *Approaching the Quran* (p.199-223), Sells speaks about time as a human construction. Time is a tool for understanding the world around us, a way to organize thoughts and memories. Time and music are obviously linked, but just as the Qur'an's verses were delivered to Muhammad in no perfectly discernible order, "Sacred Sounds" attempts to disorient the listener a bit by fusing elements of old and new.

I think Grace Nono's musical excerpt and prayer (toward the end of the track) are of particular interest because of the artistic context in which her music is created. Grace specializes in the contemporary performance of Philippine sung oral traditions, and especially of songs with sacred themes. Music Producer Michael Sutton writes that "her indigenous sound is completely

at odds with most of the [Philippines'] American-leaning pop music.”¹ Because of her adherence to a traditional Philippine style of music in a contemporary age, her musical contribution toward the end of “Sacred Sound” reinforces the theme of timelessness. Finally, the prayer she delivers is one of unity and peace, uniting old and young with the earth, returning to nature as the greatest evidence of God’s beauty.

Muslim Devotional Practices

Interpretations of the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet as passed down by hadith over time vary so immensely across Muslim communities. These diverse interpretations in conjunction with various cultural contexts in which Muslims live lead to differing social and religious customs. In my (unnamed) journal entry piece, I portray snapshots of the day-to-day lives of two Muslim men who might both consider themselves “good” Muslims, but carry out practices that are sometimes directly at odds with each other.

In this piece, I explore what it means to live on a righteous path, and critique the idea of a “true Islam.” Both men attempt to live “close to God;” both men perform the ritual of zakat; and both men attend Jumu’ah Friday prayer. But both men are flawed in different ways. The first man projects his own view of Islam onto others by judging the creation of graveyards as an indicator of idolatry. The second man fails to truly see the needs within his own community, isolating himself from his surroundings. Both men show compassion in different instances, and neither man is simply “good” or “bad.” Instead I show the complexity of character and reject a binary view of righteousness. The underlying message of this piece is to be thoughtful of the different contexts in which these rituals are performed and of the complexity of individual interpretation of daily practices.

¹ See “Media Sources”

Muslim Architecture

In Muslim art and architecture there is undoubtedly a great emphasis on beauty. An often-cited hadith, “Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty,”² can be interpreted as an inspiration for Islamic artwork and the cultivation of artistic endeavor as a religious duty. Even more specifically, the hadith, “He who builds a mosque for Allah, Allah will build a similar one for him in Paradise,”³ provides a specific application of art in mosque architecture. From the detailed patterns that decorate the inside of mosques to the art of calligraphy, striving for beauty in creation is a common theme in Muslim architecture.

When I came across the Mosque of Cristo de la Luz (Mezquita del Cristo de la Luz) in Toledo, Spain, I found it a complex example of beauty in mosque architecture. As explained in the blog post, the mosque was built around 999 CE as “Bab al-Mardum” and re-purposed as a place of Christian worship in the 12th century. I was interested in the simple square layout, the modest size, and brick patterning along the outer walls, and the lack of minarets. I began to imagine this mosque as a foil for the large, highly-decorated, and magnificent mosques that are most famous across the world, including the mosque of Córdoba.

By taking on the identity of the architect in the 10th century who designed Bab al-Mardum, I bring attention to not just the beauty of architectural design, but the function of the building’s elements, the archways, and the geometric sketching that goes into the actual planning. I wanted to add a hint of realism to the work by drawing the actual surviving features of the building. This architect had to balance beauty with function, and in this particular case, the prominent features of the inside are the columns (and ceiling tiles, not shown). By focusing on

² Sahīh Muslim (911)

³ Sahīh Bukhari 439, Sahīh Muslim 533

the structure and function I draw the focus away from the more commonly emphasized decorative aspects of Muslim architecture.

Finally, as mentioned in the blog post, I challenge the idea of “Islamic architecture” by portraying a building that was eventually adopted as a Christian place of worship. What does it mean for “Islamic” architecture to be “Catholicized?” Are this place and the Mosque of Córdoba still Islamic structures if they are used religiously by Christians? I feel that the essence of this building lives on in its structural and functional elements, and in their purpose in creating a space for Muslim prayer. If you strip away all the “decorative” and traditionally “Muslim” components of the building, at its core is still a Muslim architect seeking a “similar mosque in Paradise.”

Cultural Contexts

This digital art piece relates the adoption of the image and story of la Virgen de Guadalupe into the Catholic-Mexican cultural narrative to the adoption of Persian theatrical tradition into the Muslim-Iranian cultural narrative. The piece asks the audience to distinguish these cultural symbols and customs from the religious associations they carry today. The overarching theme connects to Islamic communities of interpretation, as well as the interplay between Islam as a religion and the cultural contexts in which it is expressed.

We learned in class that the origin of the “communities of interpretation” resulted from the dispute over succession after Muhammad’s death. This led to the eventual creation of today’s Shia and Sunni sects which are perhaps the most well-known groups within Islam today. Of course, a religion that claims over 1.6 billion people is infinitely more complex in its diversity of interpretations and cultural contexts. I wanted to portray not only the diversity of contexts in

which Islam is expressed, but also the interaction in time between a culture and a religion as it spreads to a new place.

This art piece uses the Virgen and Persian theater as examples of how the spread of religion into new communities incorporates pre-existing elements of the culture that then become linked to the religion itself. As explained in part by the blog post, the Virgen was a Spanish-Catholic re-imagining of the pre-Columbian Aztec mother goddess. The spread of Catholicism in México was facilitated by positing the Virgin Mary as a “reincarnation” of the mother goddess, the fusion of which became realized in the story of la Virgen de Guadalupe. Today her image is still a powerful symbol of indigenous-religious cultural identity in México. In a similar fashion, Persian theater pre-dates Islam, but is linked to the Islamic Ta’ziyeh performances in Iran during the month of Muharram. Husayn in the traditional green costume serves as a symbol for Persian theater.

The various symbols in the outlines of México and Iran are explained in the blog post, so I won’t repeat the explanation here because the last point I want to make is about *religion as a source of artistic inspiration*. We can treat the image and story of the Virgen as one artistic expression, just as we can consider Iranian theater as art. Instead of holding up the religion (Christianity or Islam) as the source of these artistic symbols, I hold up the symbols themselves as casting a shadow of religion. The idea is that Islam and Catholicism didn’t come into these communities and create “new” art, per se, but they reshaped and reimagined the already present artistic (i.e. cultural) expressions in the places they reached. This is why we cannot talk about “Islamic art” without engaging with the cultural contexts in which the art is expressed.

Islam in the West: Jazz & Race in the US

This audio track comments on the role Muslim identity played in black communities as a response to racial segregation in post-WWII America. By combining civil rights activist Malcolm X with jazz musician John Coltrane, we explore the connections between two Muslim men's expressions of religious identity during this period. For the former it came in the form of a consciousness for social justice expressed most famously through rallying speeches, and for the latter it came as jazz music with occasionally/ambiguously religious lyrics.

The audio excerpts from Malcolm X's "Ballot or the Bullet" speech included in this project emphasize the separation of religion from racial identity, yet, as I explain in the blog post, we can't discount the role conversion to Islam played in shaping his life and career in activism. One interpretation of why he emphasizes this separation so adamantly relates to the politicization of Islam. Does the idea of religious conversion as a response to discrimination reduce the essence of Islam to a socio-political tool to combat racism? Malcolm X was surely aware of the use of conversion for such means, but perhaps in order to avoid politicizing his Muslim identity in this way, he chose to distinguish his personal beliefs from his racial identity. In the track, I leave this question open for interpretation, suggested by the ambiguous "a love supreme" repeated into the fade.

Muslim Women Defining Identity

With this digital art/photography piece I raise the question of what is considered "progress" and modernity through the lens of social norms for women's dress. One of my favorite parts of the course was our discussion of women's empowerment and the condescending and incorrect "Western" view of women in Muslim nations in the Middle East as needing

liberation from the oppressive practices inherent in Islam. I chose to highlight what I believe to be an appropriate and powerful response to this view: women's empowerment is not about what *you* think women's empowerment looks like, it's about what each individual woman interprets for herself.

I wanted to end with this piece because I believe it ties back to the importance of recognizing diversity of interpretation. The message of this piece at its core is what I believe to be at the heart of this course. It is one of understanding and empathy. Just as we must recognize the diversity of interpretations of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet within the Muslim world, we must recognize and appreciate the diversity of interpretations of social justice issues, including, of course, women's rights.

Media Sources

Malcolm X

The Ballot or the Bullet Speech

- [Audio](#)
- [Transcription of Original Delivery](#) (April 3, 1964)

Grace Nono

- [Website](#)
- [AllMusic Biography](#) – Michael Sutton
- [Harvard University Morning Prayers](#) (December 7, 2015)

Jaggi Vasudev (Sadhguru)

- [Video on Rumi](#) (December 4, 2015)

AZ feat. Nas - [The Essence Lyrics Video](#)

Mezquita del Cristo de la Luz (Bab al-Mardum) – [website](#) (Spanish)

Appendix

Timeline of Guatemalan Leadership 1931 – 1958

| 1931 - 1944 | 1944 - 1945 | 1945 - 1951 | 1951 - 1954 | 1954 – 1958 |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|----------------------|---|
| <i>Jorge Ubico</i> | <i>Revolutionary Government Junta</i> | <i>Juan José Arévalo</i> | <i>Jacobo Árbenz</i> | <i>U.S.-backed military dictatorships</i> |