

# Chapter 1

## *Discursive Order*

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### **Cosmology: An Overview**

A study of cosmology and architecture from a premodern Sufi perspective presupposes some knowledge of the trends in Islamic cosmological thinking, of the sense in which cosmology can be related to architecture and of the terrains of mystical thoughts in which the relationship is grounded. This chapter presents a brief overview of cosmology in premodern Islam, a critical review of symbolism, being the prevailing method of reading cosmological ideas into architectural forms, and a reconstruction of a Sufi perspective on symbolism.

Cosmology is the science of the cosmos—its origin, structure, components, order, and governing laws. Its complex and multifaceted inquiry unfolds at the intersection of philosophy, theology, and natural sciences and is sustained by the human curiosity to know how we have come to exist and what happens to us when we die. Until the triumph of modern physics, cosmology was the prerogative of theologians, mystics, and philosophers, forming the core of religious sciences. All world religions provide their followers with a “logical” explanation of the creation, with a description of the cosmic landscape and order, and, most important, with a projection of what is awaiting them in the hereafter. Cosmological doctrines were thus significant not just for their scientific validity but also for the enforcement of moral and religious codes of conduct. Reward and punishment, the potent instruments of religious law and authority, can only work within a current cosmological system of popular appeal; hence the sensitive and volatile relationship religion has often had with science.

In Islam, the main sources of cosmological ideas were naturally the Quran and the *ḥadīth* (prophetic sayings). The Quran presents many references to cosmic elements—the Throne, the Footstool, the Pen, the Tablet, heaven, and earth—to the creation and resurrection, to paradise and hell, and so on, but

mostly in an abstract way without weaving a complete and coherent cosmic picture. It is the *ḥadīth* that provide much of the information needed to piece the Quranic elements together into a coherent architecture.<sup>1</sup> In broad terms, two distinct modes of cosmological thinking can be traced in the Islamic tradition: theorized and untheorized. The untheorized mode was concerned with a collected body of statements made by the Prophet and his immediate companions, which provided, as it were, the nonnegotiable Islamic *truths*, the foundations necessary for cosmological reflections and speculations. The theorized mode was concerned with making sense of the Quranic and prophetic material and was cultivated in three different intellectual spheres: theology and polemics, philosophy and science, and hermeneutics and mysticism.

Related though they may be, the two modes of cosmological thinking developed, rather curiously, independent of each other. The untheorized mode, which appealed to mainstream religious authorities, formed part of the *ḥadīth* reporting science that was concerned with the authenticity of the statements and the credibility of the reporters. In this context, cosmological statements were transmitted and perpetuated in the *ḥadīth* books alongside statements concerned with daily matters, such as, prayer, ablution, marriage, divorce, pilgrimage, and so on. Early *ḥadīth* scholarship must have provided an effective way of appropriating and authenticating pre-Islamic cosmological conceptions and popular narratives that seemed to be in harmony with the new religion. Over the history of Islamic cosmological thinking, the *ḥadīth* corpus proved to be a powerful tool in the hands of clerics, who grew more and more suspicious and intolerant of “foreign sciences,” until they prevailed in the sixteenth century when a *ḥadīth*-based genre of cosmological writing dominated over scientific and philosophic curiosity. Al-Suyūṭī’s popular treatise *al-Hay’ā al-Saniyya fī al-Hay’ā al-Sunniyya*, which deals with what would have been perceived and presented as religiously “factual” and “authoritative” cosmological data, is a key text that represents this mode of cosmological thinking.<sup>2</sup>

The theorized modes flourished in the early periods, producing a rich spectrum of trends and ideas. With the *kalām* movement, described as Arabic scholasticism, which emerged in the ninth century, we have the early rationalists and polemicists who developed sophisticated cosmological arguments concerning such difficult issues as the existence of God, anthropomorphism, creation, nature of existence, free will, and determinism. This was led by the Mu‘tazilites who were challenged and later succeeded by the Ḥanbalites and Ash‘arites. The *kalām* practitioners were theologians concerned with the understanding and interpretation of the divine revelation within rigorous linguistic context, taking the Islamic truths as the basis of their polemical engagements.<sup>3</sup> In this they differed from early philosopher-scientists, such as al-Kindī (d. c. 866), al-Rāzī (d. c. 925/935), and al-Bīrūnī (d. c. 1051), who were more inclined to start from observational knowledge and human reason in

their cosmological thinking. And Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. c. 910), who attempted to forsake the religious truths altogether, points to the breadth of ideas that emerged in early Islam.

Within the intellectual sphere of philosophy and science Muslims made remarkable achievements in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, geometry, optics, geography, medicine, and alchemy. The new findings contributed significantly to the development and sophistication of their cosmological thinking. Persian, Indian, and other Near Eastern influences were absorbed into the Muslim worldview; however, it was Greek knowledge—a combination of Ptolemaic astronomy and Aristotelian philosophy and physics—that ultimately prevailed in the Islamic world. Philosophers and scientists maintained a rather precarious relationship with mainstream religious authorities, who were ready to attack whenever the Islamic dogma was being challenged. Al-Ghazālī's forceful attack on philosophy and Ibn Taymiyya's on Sufism and other schools are but two eminent examples.<sup>4</sup>

Motivated by spiritual fulfillment rather than scientific curiosity, the mystics cultivated a hermeneutical mode of cosmological thinking that wove together all aspects of available knowledge into a comprehensive whole. Mystics included Gnostics such as Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', al-Sijistānī, and al-ʿĀmilī and Sufis such as al-Ḥallāj, Rūmī, and al-Ghazālī. Islamic mysticism reached its zenith in the work of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), whose multilayered and complex cosmology has since dominated the Islamic world. Unlike the philosopher-scientists who did not engage the *ḥadīth* literature, the Sufis elaborated the Quranic-prophetic model and integrated its terminology into their cosmological doctrines. In doing so, they provided a sophisticated, yet popular, framework for the *ḥadīth*-based cosmology, grounded in interwoven layers of hermeneutical interpretations that extended to every aspect of daily life. This, in a way and despite the tenuous relationship the Sufis had with mainstream Islam, assisted in the triumph of the al-Suyūfī's unspeculative version of orthodox cosmology once the scientific thrust had abated. It is this trend of cosmological thinking that is explored in this study.

Underneath these different modes of cosmological thinking, there lay basic consistencies. The Platonic-Aristotelian duality of the *sensible* and the *intelligible*, the physical and metaphysical, along with the Ptolemaic geocentric model were uncontested. For over a millennium, from Mujāhid b. Jabr's (d. 722) very basic cosmography to Ḥaqqī's (d. 1780) most elaborate *Maʿrifat-nāme*, a remarkable consistency can be traced in the cosmic form and structure.<sup>5</sup> The Islamic cosmos consisted of the seen and unseen, the divine and human domains, with each having its own inhabitants, landscape, and order. The seen world was constructed of nine concentric spheres, seven planetary ones encompassed by the sphere of the fixed stars (the divine Footstool) and the utmost encircling sphere without stars (the divine Throne). The seven heavens rest on seven earths in the form of domed structures decreasing in size and positioned one within the other. As for the workings of the cosmos, it was seen to be regulated by a quaternary

natural order of the four elements, mediated by many sets of four—four seasons, four natures, four humors, four directions, and so forth. Another consistency can be traced in the popular narrative of the creation that formed the starting point of many Islamic chronicles, integrated into many literary sources, and appeared in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ottoman genre of architectural writings. *Risāle-i Mi'māriyye*, the treatise on architecture, opens with a cosmological recount of the creation and structure of the world, followed by poetic reflections, whereas the *Selimiyye Risālesi* includes many references to the correspondence between a building and the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> Yet neither text provides theoretical articulation of the relationship between cosmology and architecture, nor indeed do other premodern Islamic sources. The discursive relationship was mainly the work of modern theorists working with the notion of symbolism.

## Symbolism: A Critical Review

Symbolism is a current topic in many disciplines; its discourse is multifaceted. Psychologists, anthropologists, cultural theorists, social scientists, historians of religion, historians of art and architecture, philosophers and architectural theorists, have all developed viable dimensions of the discourse. The wide interest in the topic in the humanities and social science disciplines points to its significance in understanding humankind and its situations in the world. It is beyond the scope of this study to review all of these approaches, valuable though they may be. The perspective is narrowed down to one particular approach developed and promoted by a group of contemporary scholars, focusing mainly on medieval metaphysics and mystical sciences. The founder of this approach was the French metaphysician René Guénon (1887–1951), who devoted his life to the study and revival of traditional sciences, first through Hinduism and later through Islam. His ideas influenced two eminent scholars: Sri Lankan metaphysician and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and Swiss metaphysician Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998). The distinct approach to the study of symbolism and metaphysics these scholars developed attracted many followers, who contributed to their compelling theoretical analyses and shared their passion for tradition.

Driven by a great passion for medieval metaphysics, these “traditionalists” or “perennialists” (from “perennial philosophy”), if I may so describe them, sought to reintroduce into the life of modern Western society the badly needed “spiritual essence” and long forgotten “traditional wisdom.” Spirituality and traditional wisdom, seen as direct manifestations of a collective preoccupation with divine revelations, were seen as the indispensable, priceless possessions of the East the industrialized West had lost. It might have advanced in natural sciences, however, since the European Renaissance, they argue, Western civilization has

witnessed but a steady decline in the intellectual, spiritual, and artistic aspects of life, culminating in the “dark age” of modernism. Such a decline would not have been a matter of great concern, they add, had it not infectiously spread fast and wide, mindlessly destroying the Eastern traditions in the name of modernity and progress. “Cain who killed his brother Abel, the herdsman, and built himself a city,” Coomaraswamy writes, “prefigures modern civilization, one that has been described from within as ‘a murderous machine, with no conscience and no ideals,’ ‘neither human nor normal nor Christian,’ and in fact ‘an anomaly, not to say a monstrosity.’”<sup>7</sup>

Among the first circle of scholars who followed and contributed to the founding of the perennialist approach were Titus Burckhardt, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Martin Lings. These are of a special significance to this study, for they have extended the perennialist approach to the study of premodern Islam and its rich artistic and architectural heritage. Their works have opened up a new horizon of understanding and provided new intellectual tools for rethinking the field’s long-established art history paradigms. Driven by a keen interest in Sufi spirituality, they sought to show how in premodern Islam the mystical experience was inextricably linked to most aspects of life, including the creative acts of making. Sufi spirituality, they argued, can be traced in various modes of expression, the most conspicuous of which are art and architecture. In the perennialist project, Sufism becomes more than an object of academic interest: it becomes a way of life and a pursuit for knowledge, hence, the great passion and conviction with which they write.

The perennialist approach has inspired several studies on traditional art and architecture by figures such as Ardalan, Bakhtiar, Critchlow, and Snodgrass.<sup>8</sup> Along with the studies of the founding figures, these sources have articulated “symbolism” as a distinct approach to the study of traditional built environment. Their efforts were complemented by the writings of such insightful and prolific scholars as Annemarie Schimmel, Henry Corbin, Louis Massignon, Toshihiko Izutsu, and Hellmut Ritter, who made significant contributions to the interpretation and understanding of medieval mystical sciences in general and that of Sufism in particular. The approach of symbolism has also benefited extensively from the work of the eminent Romanian anthropologist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade. Eliade wrote from outside the perennialists circle; however, his studies were instrumental in refining the methodological tools of symbolism. Apart from expounding the methodological grounds of religious symbolism, Eliade articulated a theoretical framework for interpreting traditional mythology and understanding its social and religious functions. This has strengthened the method of symbolism by enabling “myth” to play an effective mediatory role between abstract scriptural principles and concrete human experiences. Eliade wrote very little on Islam and Islamic mythology; however, his comparative method and ecumenical perspective underpin the pertinence and usefulness of his analyses.

The writings of the perennialists provided a fertile ground for theoretical reflections on premodern art and architecture across cultural boundaries and outside the conventional bounds of art history. Central to their approaches is the notion of symbolism, viewed as the core of spiritual engagement and the language of premodern artistic expressions. The perennialists' project, however, involves other foundational themes, which are introduced briefly here.

### *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*

The perennialists viewed religion and tradition to be the main elements characterizing premodern society, be it Islamic, Christian, Hebrew, Buddhist, or Hindu. It is religion, they argue, that provides a community with the immutable divine principles that govern the worldview of its members, and it is tradition that weaves these principles into peoples' modes of living, thinking, and making, while being handed down from one generation to another. Religion, the source of heavenly truths without an awareness of which humanity would eventually bring about its own destruction, is presented as having two related aspects: exoteric and esoteric. The exoteric aspect *reveals* the diverse, the different, whereas the esoteric *contains* the same, the essential. It is the unifying core, the summit to which all paths lead and at which they all converge. "In the spiritual world and, still more, the universal order," Guénon writes, "it is unity that presides at the summit of the hierarchy."<sup>9</sup> The mountain metaphor is frequently used to illustrate the shared conviction that all religions are but so many roads that lead to one and the same summit. In "Paths That Lead to the Same Summit," Coomaraswamy takes an ethical stance to argue that all great religions of the world have valid claims to truth, which must be respected and understood in a comparative mode and not just tolerated.<sup>10</sup> Doctrinal differences, conspicuous at the mountain's wide base, should not prevent us from recognizing the inner meanings or seeing the *peak* where all differences vanish. Such recognition does not necessarily demand a change in the path that one finds oneself on naturally, for "he who goes round about the mountain looking for another is not climbing."<sup>11</sup> Asserting the necessity of this approach for cross-religious understanding, Coomaraswamy writes: "The greatest of modern Indian saints actually practiced Christian and Islamic disciplines, that is, worshiped Christ and Allah, and found that all lead to the same goal: he could speak from experience of the equal validity of all these 'ways,' and feel the same respect for each, while still preferring for himself the one to which his whole being was naturally attuned by nativity, temperament and training."<sup>12</sup>

*The Transcendent Unity of Religions* was the title of Schuon's first book, in which he articulated the theme from a metaphysical perspective.<sup>13</sup> From the out-

set, Schuon was careful to clarify the differences among metaphysics, theology, and philosophy, in order to assert that the doctrine of the unity of religions expresses a metaphysical reality, hence its transcendence, and not just a philosophical or theological argument. To illustrate the difference between metaphysical and theological knowledge, and indirectly to emphasize the unity of religions, Schuon uses the metaphor of light. He compares metaphysical knowledge to the awareness of the “colorless essence of light and its character of pure luminosity” and theological knowledge to the assertion of light’s particular colors. Although both modes overlap in their distinction between light and darkness, they differ in the level of reality they disclose. Metaphysics discloses universal truths, whereas theology discloses divine revelations, which are but particular expressions of the universal truths. Philosophy is further removed from theology in that it deals with rational concepts. Religions, thus viewed, translate universal truths into dogmatic languages that are accessible by the wider public through faith. But the colorful variations of the dogmatic beliefs fade at the level of universal truths where all religious differences disappear. In brief, the reality of the transcendent unity of religions is shown to reside in the oneness of the Truth that governs all modes of manifestation and existence, and in the oneness of the human race that alone has the capacity of tracing the process of differentiation back to its transcendental source.<sup>14</sup>

### *Perennial Philosophy*

If religions are so many expressions of one and the same primordial Truth, it is then only natural for them to share a universal focus and a mode of expression whereby aspects of the Truth can be accessed, comprehended, and communicated. This focus forms the subject of what in the Latin tradition is called “*philosophia perennis*,” “perennial philosophy,” whose primary mode of expression is shown to be traditional symbolism. Perennial philosophy, also referred to as “universal” and “eternal” philosophy, differs from modern philosophy in that it is not a system of thought or theories about the nature of the world, but as Coomaraswamy puts it, “a consistent doctrine.” As such, perennial philosophy is not concerned with historicized realities, that is, “with conditioned and quantitative experience, but with universal possibility.”<sup>15</sup> It is described as “perennial,” “eternal,” and “universal” because of the immutability of its focus, eloquently defined by St. Augustine as “Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was, and the same to be for evermore.”<sup>16</sup> Thus understood, perennial philosophy is the vehicle that reveals “the concordances between all traditional forms,” which may be seen as projecting “genuine synonymies.”<sup>17</sup> In his preface to Schuon’s *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, Nasr captures the crux of this doctrine in saying: “The *philosophia perennis* has come to

signify for those devoted to traditional studies an eternal truth at the heart of all traditions.”<sup>18</sup>

By definition, perennial philosophy presupposes a universal perspective, one that demands cross-religious understanding even if one’s concern is restricted to a particular tradition. For the ultimate aim is to allow the particular to be seen and understood in light of the universal and not only in its own sociohistorical context. Where the particular bears no relation to the universal it is considered to be insignificant, since it does not signify anything beyond its particularity. Moving across religious and doctrinal boundaries, however, requires insight into the universal principles that legitimate such movement, without which one runs the risk of syncretism. Guénon sees syncretism as symptomatic of a condition where universal truths are no longer in perspective and “can be recognized whenever one finds elements borrowed from different traditional forms and assembled together without any awareness that there is only one single doctrine, of which these forms are so many different expressions, or so many adaptations to particular conditions related to given circumstances of time and place.”<sup>19</sup>

The universal perspective of perennial philosophy naturally deplores today’s wide emphasis on relativity and the historicity of human experience and runs counter to the prevailing views that all truths, including the religious ones, are simply the outcome of certain modes of representation and cultural construction. In *Logic and Transcendence* Schuon argues against relativism on the basis that such views hinge on an implicit assertion that is negated by the concept of ‘relativism’ itself.

Relativism sets out to reduce every element of absoluteness to a relativity, while making a quite illogical exception in favor of this reduction itself. In effect, relativism consists in declaring it to be true that there is no such thing as truth, or in declaring it to be absolutely true that nothing but the relatively true exists; one might just as well say that language does not exist, or write that there is no such thing as writing . . . The assertion nullifies itself if it is true, and by nullifying itself logically proves thereby that it is false; its initial absurdity lies in the implicit claim to be unique in escaping, as if by enchantment, from a relativity that is declared alone to be possible.<sup>20</sup>

Schuon concludes this book with a discussion on certainty, showing the crucial function of perennial philosophy in a human life “studded with uncertainties” and not just as an academic pursuit. In everyday life, he argues, one is presented with numerous possibilities to choose from and is confronted with many events about which to make decisions. The universal divine truths that concern human existence in this world as well as in the hereafter, with which perennial philosophy is concerned, provide consistent criteria against which one’s choices and decisions

can be measured. Without the constant presence of such absolute criteria one would ultimately be lost in the world of uncertainties and be drowned in the ocean of possibility. Perennial philosophy thus calls for perpetual renewal of the understanding of universal truths so that they retain their relevance to people's lives. Although it has no history with regard to the realities it appeals to, perennial philosophy has maintained a historical presence through the spiritual authorities who have devoted their lives to expounding its principles in various times and places. This is viewed to have been the case throughout the world until the advent of European modernism.

### *Modernism and Spiritual Decline*

European modernism, founded on humanism and a preoccupation with aesthetics and profane sciences, the perennialists argue, has shifted the focus from God to man, thus breaking the continuity of tradition, eclipsing the spiritual pursuit, and consequently, marking the beginning of the decline of human civilization. This is a central theme in almost all of their writings, backed by a relentless attack on many aspects of modern ideals, sciences, and most important here, modes of artistic production. Guénon devoted much effort to initiate such a systematic attack, which he presented in *East and West*, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. Both Coomaraswamy and Schuon maintained in almost all of their works the intensity of Guénon's criticism, taking every opportunity to remind their readers of how psychologically corrupt, intellectually deranged, and spiritually bankrupt modern life has become.

This ideological position has led to a sharp distinction between modern and premodern modes of thinking and making, which has theoretical and methodological implications. The perennialists present the distinction between modern and premodern as synonymous with that of West and East and of antitraditional and traditional. Guénon passionately argues that the rift dividing East from West, as "one of the most noticeable features of the modern world," has emerged from the antitraditional sentiment and associated mentality promoted by the "modern West."<sup>21</sup> So long as there were "traditional civilizations," that is, peoples in tune with tradition as in premodern times, Guénon argues, "no ground for a radical opposition between East and West existed."<sup>22</sup> But when the West took the turn toward humanism and profane sciences it began to distance itself from the East, which remained steadfast on the traditional path. Thus, a multifaceted opposition between two geo-mentalities was constructed, forming the basis for a range of binaries, such as knowledge and action, sacred and profane, rational and intuitive, egocentric and anonymous, and so on. In *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, Schuon explains this opposition by reference to what preoccupies each of the modern and traditional sciences. He writes: "Modern science, which is rationalist as to its subject

and materialist as to its object, can describe our situation physically and approximately, but it can tell us nothing about extra-spatial situation in the total and real Universe . . . Profane science, in seeking to pierce to its depths the mystery of the things that contain—space, time, matter, energy—forgets the mystery of the things that are contained.”<sup>23</sup>

Traditional science, by contrast, is viewed to be preoccupied with metaphysical realities, with the *mysteries* that are contained. Preoccupation with metaphysical truths, the object of perennial philosophy, and the applicability of these truths across different religious contexts formed the basis of the perennialist discourse on “traditional” art and architecture. In this discourse the adjectives *traditional*, *medieval*, *oriental*, and even *true* were all used synonymously to define a condition that is distinct from that of the modern West. The sharp distinction between modernity and tradition was drawn on the basis of religious efficacy and the presence of spirituality. In medieval theocentric societies when religion was effective, the perennialists maintain, spirituality was intensely present in people’s lives and clearly visible in their modes of thinking and making. Modernism, ushered in by the so-called European Renaissance, has introduced new living conditions and modes of thinking that led to systematic erosion of religious values. Against the millennial presence of tradition, however, the brief history of modernity can only appear as a peculiar abnormality. “We are peculiar people,” Coomaraswamy writes, “I say this with reference to the fact that whereas almost all other peoples have called their theory of art or expression a ‘rhetoric’ and have thought of art as a kind of knowledge, we have invented an ‘aesthetic’ and think of art as a kind of feeling.”<sup>24</sup> In this context, studying medieval or traditional art and architecture requires not only an awareness of the changes modernity has introduced but also the use of an appropriate approach to uncover their spiritual content and to facilitate a proper understanding of their meanings. The approach is, of course, that of perennial philosophy mediated by traditional symbolism. In his forward to Ardalan and Bakhtiar’s *The Sense of Unity*, Nasr summed up the ultimate aim of the perennialist project: “There is nothing more timely today than that truth which is timeless, than the message that comes from tradition and is relevant at all times. Such a message belongs to a now which has been, is, and will ever be present. To speak of tradition is to speak of immutable principles of heavenly origin and of their application to different moments of time and space.”<sup>25</sup>

### *The Necessity of Symbolism*

Dealing with the language of the timeless Truth and the immutable principles of tradition requires an approach that is in tune with the traditional views. As the medium of traditional artistic expression and the language of *philosophia perennis*, symbolism, the perennialists argue, is the most appropriate approach for comprehending the inner meanings of traditional art and architecture and for

penetrating deep into their worlds of spirituality and metaphysics. Symbolism is presented as the “language” of religion that divinity “speaks,” using allegories and similitude. Being ontological in nature, the language of symbolism communicates the fundamental and universal conditions of existence. It is, as Martin Lings puts it, at once “the most important thing in existence” and “the sole explanation of existence.”<sup>26</sup>

Symbols and signs, be they verbal or visual, are commonly understood as means of communication. The lexical definitions refer to “sign” and “symbol,” in the general sense, as “something used or regarded as standing for or representing something else.”<sup>27</sup> The perennialists, however, distinguish between signs and symbols in terms of their referents. “The references of symbols,” Coomaraswamy says, “are to ideas and those of signs to things.”<sup>28</sup> Symbols refer to immaterial concepts—it is “the representation of reality on a certain level of reference by a corresponding reality on another”<sup>29</sup>—whereas signs refer to material objects that stand on the same level of reference. One object can be both a symbol and a sign according to its referent: “[T]he cross, for example, is a symbol when it represents the structure of the universe, but a sign when it stands for crossroads.”<sup>30</sup>

The main premise upon which hinges the notion of symbolism is that material objects, tectonic or otherwise, are capable of embodying abstract concepts that lie beyond the confines of their materiality. This basic understanding assumed in the Western tradition a decisive philosophical formality in the Platonic distinction between the *sensible* and the *intelligible*. Medieval Muslim scholars, who inherited and developed the intellectual tools of Greek philosophy, maintained this through the divide between *al-hissī* and *al-‘aqlī*. This was, in a sense, legitimized by the Quranic polarity of the *seen* and the *unseen*. Accordingly, symbolism is understood to be based on the correspondence between these two domains of reality: the inferior reflecting the superior, the visible materializing the invisible, and the physical representing to the spiritual. Predicated on the universal perspective of *philosophia perennis*, symbolism becomes an ontological inquiry, an inquest into the hierarchy of being, and an intellectual journey to the inner worlds of universal realities. Thus viewed, symbolism often becomes a pursuit of esoteric knowledge, reaching far beyond the mere visual objectification of religious or cultural values. In the perennialist project, architectural symbolism is developed on these conceptual grounds. Forming an integral part of the sensible world, architectural forms are considered as eminently appropriate to act as symbols.

Symbols, the perennialists explain, are of two fundamentally different kinds: universal or natural and particular or conventional. Universal symbols are those whose symbolic significance derives from their innate nature, such as geometrical or numerical symbols, whereas particular symbols are those whose symbolic significance relates to a particular tradition. By virtue of their very nature, universal

symbols are regarded as primordial and transcultural, whereas particular symbols, which include particular interpretations of universal symbols, vary in different traditions. Particular symbols, also described as arbitrary and accidental, may be sanctified by human or divine intervention that make them the loci of transcendental meanings, such as the cross as a symbol of resurrection in Christianity and alphabetical symbolism in Islam. They are empowered by a communal acceptance and participation in their spiritual significance.

Universal symbols are ontologically linked to, and determined by, their referents. Hence, symbols of the infinite and the timeless have the capacity of revealing aspects of the infinite and the timeless itself.<sup>31</sup> Symbols express the quality of the infinite with respect to their finitude, finding through such expression their transcendental dimensions, their opening beyond the finitude of their own realm. By mediating ultimate reality through things or actions, symbols receive the quality of the higher realities they mediate, enabling us to comprehend them with respect to the finitude of our own existence. In the experience of sacred places, for example, symbols of the sacred reveal something of the "Sacred-itself" and produce the experience of sacredness in those who are experiencing them. They are thus capable of revealing a modality of the real, the sacred, or the absolute and of unveiling the deep and profound structure of the universe. They form the "alphabet" of the universal language of religion whereby ultimate reality expresses itself, revealing a coherent picture of existence and of the world. In this sense, symbols require no justification; the only measure of their validity is their adequacy to the higher realities they express.

Symbolism adds meanings to objects and practices without affecting their proper and immediate value. Here meanings are not seen as being "read into" symbols or added to them as a conceptual garnish. On the contrary, they are deemed to inhere within the form of the symbol in a manner analogous to that in which natural law inheres within physical phenomena, or as mathematical principles reside in the very nature of numerical or geometrical phenomena.<sup>32</sup> In being so, the meanings of symbols are not intentionally constructed but rather discovered or revealed through reflections on transcendental realities, and consequently the efficacy of a symbol does not depend on its being understood. "A religious symbol," Eliade writes, "conveys its message even if it is no longer *consciously* understood in every part. For a symbol speaks to the whole human being and not only to the intelligence."<sup>33</sup>

Symbols are multivalent. They can simultaneously express a number of meanings "whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience."<sup>34</sup> One symbol may refer to a plurality of contexts, and its significance can be operative at a number of different levels. To fully explain the meanings of a symbol, Eliade argues, is not a simple task, and to exhaust the significations of those concerned with divinity is not possible. Confining a symbol to only one of its significations as the most important is therefore reductive. For

the significance of a symbol lies in revealing the unity and continuity between the different levels it reveals. Tracing the various expressions of a symbol reveals the density of meanings and resonance across multiple contexts. In becoming a symbol, a concrete object is thus enriched with layers upon layers of interrelated meanings, which are not necessarily evident through an immediate experience. "The interdependence of the valences of a symbol and the homology of its different contexts," Eliade explains, "ought not be understood as a monotonous repetition of the same message on different levels . . . Each context of a symbol reveals *something more* which was only unformed and allusive in the neighbouring contexts."<sup>35</sup> In this sense, symbols imbue human existence with significance by pointing to a more profound, more mysterious side of life, to the miraculous and "sacramental dimensions of human existence."<sup>36</sup> For this reason, symbols related to ultimate reality are viewed as a source of inspiration and revelation.

In summary, the perennialists approach the question of artistic production from the viewpoint of creative imagination and religious inspiration. They focus primarily on the ideas, rituals, and cosmology within the matrices of which an artefact is produced, rather than the historico-cultural conditions that facilitate such production. Through symbolism they establish a continuity among the human, cosmic, and divine modes of being, providing a means to interpret the human conditions of existence in cosmological terms. In their perspective, "symbolic thought makes the immediate reality 'shine'" by enabling us to see human makings through a cosmological frame, wherein "everything holds together in a closed system of correspondences and assimilations."<sup>37</sup>

## History and Symbolism

The perennialist discourse is of course not without problems and critics. Historians of Islamic art and architecture have already discredited it for its essentialist tendency and lack of methodological rigor, yet their critique has largely been concerned with its perspective on art and architecture. The perennialists, as we have seen, have adopted a hermeneutical approach in their attempts to reinstate an appropriate interpretive context for understanding the metaphysical foundation of symbolism in traditional art and architecture. They also strove to uncover the mystical and cosmological contexts of human makings, the dimensions that are almost completely lost in contemporary discourses and practices. Their passion reveals a strong sense of conviction and genuine desire for spiritual fulfillment. Academic curiosity is clearly not their prime motivation: their endeavor is above all a search for truth. No critical stance has, therefore, been projected in regard to the approach of symbolism. In fairness, however, one

should not expect to encounter such criticality, for that would undermine the very certainty of the doctrine of symbolism itself and the *philosophia perennis* upon which it is predicated. A degree of anonymity is also emphasized, which reflects the sense of universality their discourse promotes. “It is not the personal view of anyone that I shall try to explain,” Coomaraswamy affirms, “but that doctrine of art which is intrinsic to the *Philosophia Perennis*.”<sup>38</sup> An anti-modern sentiment motivates the main line of criticality pursued, which, although insightful, seems more ideological than methodological in focus.

Reflecting on the modern approaches to the study of premodern art and architecture, the perennialists have criticized many aspects of modern sciences, which they dismiss for adopting predominantly a reductive historical perspective that is unsuitable for dealing with spirituality and metaphysics. “The history of art, being a modern science,” Burckhardt argues, “inevitably approaches Islamic art in the purely analytical way of all modern sciences, by dissection and reduction to historical circumstances. Whatever is timeless in an art—and sacred art like that of Islam always contains a timeless element—will be left out by such a method.”<sup>39</sup> The perennialists maintain that historically and culturally contextualized studies, valuable though they may be, remain incapable of engaging the mystical and metaphysical dimensions of the artistic production. “A form, though limited and consequently subject to time,” Burckhardt adds, “may convey something timeless and in this respect escapes historical conditions, not only in its genesis—which partly belongs to a spiritual dimension—but also in its preservation, to a certain extent at least.”<sup>40</sup>

The historians remain unconvinced, however. In *The Topkapi Scroll—Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*, Gülru Necipoğlu presents an insightful critique of the traditionalist discourse, focusing mainly on studies dealing with geometry and ornaments. Her main concerns center on the following points: the uncritical application of the theological concept of ‘*tawḥīd*’ (divine unity) to emphasize the unity of Islamic art and architecture; the lack of contextualized and historicized analyses; the dogmatic and essentialist approach to the subject; and the “sweeping generalizations unsubstantiated by concrete data.”<sup>41</sup> Necipoğlu also points out where the perennialists have continued to operate within the orientalist and nineteenth-century conceptual paradigms, despite their new antiorientalist, antimodernist guise. Earlier, W. K. Chorbachi in a lengthy article presented a similar critique.<sup>42</sup> Speaking from an empirical, scientific standpoint, Chorbachi sought to dispel the confusion that beset the field of Islamic geometric pattern because of the lack of a common language. Her main concern is the extension of the mystical doctrine of the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) to the field of geometry, by proposing that all geometric articulations in Islamic art and architecture can be reduced to the division and subdivision of a circle, conceived and presented as the symbol of divine unity. “On occasion,” Chorbachi writes, this view “is pushed to the point of scientific fallacy.”<sup>43</sup> She seems rather puzzled with how simple

geometric exercises in rotational symmetry or the interlocking eight-pointed star and cross pattern can become symbols of divine presence and absence or the Breath of the Compassionate. "I wonder," she wrote, "if the artisan who made this design thought of it as form, expansion, contraction and the Breath of the Compassionate God?"<sup>44</sup> Chorbachi points out that "to believe in mysticism and to follow in its practices and experience its positive effects" is one thing, but to promote new mystical interpretations "under the guise of historical truth," especially when no documented evidence is given, is quite another.<sup>45</sup>

Chorbachi's and Necipoğlu's critiques reflect the stance of the influential Islamic art and architecture historian Oleg Grabar, who initiated and sustained an insightful critique of symbolism and the perennialist approach. In "Symbols and Signs in Islamic Architecture," Grabar discusses the methodological problems of the current discourses on symbolism, identifying three inherent shortcomings. First is the "absence of scientific precision," that is, the lack of an explicit link between historical data and mystical interpretations of built forms. Second is the ambiguity of the Islamic character that is considered unique but "never described." And third is the absence of the contemporary context that grounds interpretations in existing literary documents, which "would prevent the unavoidable impression of modern constructs, perhaps valid to modern man, applied to traditional forms."<sup>46</sup> Grabar also points out that the universal views of the perennialists "owe little to broad symbolic theories" and warns against Eliade's approach through which "unique cultural experiences can much too easily be transformed into meaningless and obvious generalities."<sup>47</sup> While pointing to many pertinent areas requiring further development, Grabar provides valuable insights into how to approach and think about this complex topic. In a later series of lectures published as *The Mediation of Ornament*, however, Grabar seems more inclined to abandon the idea of inherent meaning altogether and, consequently, to dismiss the viability of the approach of symbolism in favor of a psychoanalytical approach grounded in the nature of visual perception. In his conclusive remarks, Grabar explains that "works of art and in general the visually perceived environment have an extraordinary power in shaping the lives and thoughts of men and women" and that "ornament is the ultimate mediator, paradoxically questioning the value of meanings by channelling them into pleasure."<sup>48</sup> This was the stance from which he later analyzed the Dome of the Rock in *The Shape of the Holy*. Grabar's views seem to have influenced Doris Behrens-Abouseif's approach in her *Beauty in the Arabic Culture*, wherein she argues that the norms of beauty in the Arab-Islamic culture were autonomous, pleasure-oriented, and independent of moral and religious criteria. Although her proposition is predicated on the lack of contrary evidence and loosely argued, her view contrasts that of the perennialists who would ardently disagree that meanings in Islamic art and architecture are a matter of aesthetics and psychology instead of symbolism and epistemology.

While recognizing the value and validity of the art historical critique, it is important to acknowledge the inherent dissimilarity between the perennialist and art historical approaches that cannot be adequately and fairly measured against one set of objective principles of academic research. A fundamental difference between the two approaches lies in the purpose and usefulness of each undertaking. Following the well-established methods of historical research, Islamic art and architecture historians have concerned themselves with the *accurate* and *objective* reconstruction of the historical reality. Their domain of influence and the usefulness of their discourse are confined mainly to specialized academic circles. The perennialists, by contrast, strive to *re-present* the historical reality in ways that serve the dogmatic belief of the Muslim community. In pursuit of truth, their research communicates matters of personal belief, and as such it tends to have a popular appeal. The perennialists approach the past for *useful renewal* of a perennial wisdom, seeking engagement, self-edification, and spiritual fulfillment, whereas art historians approach the past for *objective reconstruction* of the historical reality, seeking to satisfy an academic curiosity and a desire for knowledge. Clearly, this significant difference extends beyond methodology, making it difficult to measure the rigor of both approaches against the same criteria.

The art history critique, valuable as it may be, has remained largely confined to the broad methodological problems of the perennialist discourse, without tackling the approach of symbolism from within and on its own ground. From the art history perspective, it seems sufficient to point out the lack of rigor and of tangible evidence, textual and contextual, that supports the perennialists' claims to dismiss the validity and usefulness of their approach. Interestingly, this is exactly the same tactic used by the perennialists to dismiss the approach of art historians. Ironically however, the debate between the perennialists and art historians, despite the profound dissimilarity of their ideological and methodological positions, converges at one crucial point: the search for the "Islamic." The question that lies at the heart of both approaches seems to be: what is the legitimate mode of capturing this all-unifying adjective, history or symbolism, culture or spirituality? In their attempts to explain the *difference* that distinguishes art and architecture of premodern Islam, both the perennialists and the art historians reveal a continuous struggle with this deep-seated orientalist preoccupation. Both seem preoccupied with articulating, in one way or another, a coherent and consistent discourse to explain the *Islamic difference*. But whereas the perennialists passionately argue for the underlying *unity* of difference, art historians, who ironically were first to propose this unity in the nineteenth century, have recently been fervently arguing for its *diversity*.

Notwithstanding the methodological problems of the perennialist approach, the value of its discourse remains in the theoretical possibility it affords and the horizon of thinking it opens up, both of which are remote, if not alien, to the

sociocultural concerns of art history. Its merit still lies in enabling the study of art and architecture to become a cosmological inquiry, an intellectual inquest into the hierarchy of being, and a philosophical journey into the worlds of universal ideas. These are critically pursued, explored, and examined here within the premodern Islamic literary context but without engaging with the perennialists' ideological package or with their preoccupation with the Islamic. The main focus here is the reconstruction of the premodern spatial sensibility that locates the meanings of human making within a complex web of cosmological correspondences. The search for the Islamic is considered to be a different task that is made all the more problematic by the notion of spatial sensibility.

Spatial sensibility, as articulated here, is concerned more with the difference between modern and premodern modes of spatial ordering rather than with that between the Islamic and the non-Islamic, although the focus is on the Islamic perspective. While the analyses seek to illustrate the coherence and consistency of this spatial sensibility in premodern Islam as it discloses its workings in a variety of contexts, the study reveals, albeit indirectly, a fundamental discontinuity between the modern and premodern conceptions and practices. Architectural symbolism, as articulated in both the art historical and the perennialist discourses, disregards the spatial sensibility both of the interpreter and of those whose work is being interpreted. They are, in other words, indifferent to the *spatiality of difference*. In being so, the method of symbolism tends to free the interpreter from a crucial constraint while imbuing its own theoretical tools with a sense of universal applicability. It also establishes an implicit continuity between its retrospective and projective modes of analysis, allowing historical interpretations to easily slip into some forms of design theories. In revealing the cosmological "terrains" of the premodern Islamic sense of spatiality, this study argues that in our modern conditions we can only access the forms in which this sense manifest, but not the sense itself. The premodern spatial sensibility has been irreversibly changed: it can neither be revived nor repossessed.

### *Theoretical Distancing*

Whether the focus is historico-cultural or mythico-spiritual, my approach emphasizes, our understanding of premodern symbolism remains a modern engagement. Modern conditions have introduced a theoretical distance between the symbol and its referents that has irreversibly altered its efficacy. What in a premodern context used to be intuitively available has now become the object of discursive understanding. It is, therefore, important to stress that the barrier of consciousness that is commonly recognized today as separating modern subjects from their traditions must also be seen as distancing them from the immediacy of symbolism. The perennialists overlook the fact that constructing layers of

theoretical intermediaries between myth and architecture and between an object and its referents is a modern necessity. As David Kolb observes in *Postmodern Sophistications*, our ability to talk about tradition as a worldview with its own logic that is distinct from an objective world and from our subjective experience of this world, is the result of a new modern condition.<sup>49</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find no literature on architectural symbolism in medieval Islam. In fact, the whole discourse of symbolism, as constructed in modern sources, is alien to premodern Islamic literature, notwithstanding the presence of the mode of thinking that seems to support it. Yet the presence of a mode of thinking mediated by a unique spatial sensibility is one thing, whereas reconstructing the theoretical context within which this mode is supposed to have operated is quite another. It is in this theoretical reconstruction where the alienness emerges. It is our current intellectual conditions that demand such a theoretical construction to explain the association of the abstract meanings, already alienated, with concrete objects, an association that we have come to define as “symbolic.” The discourse of symbolism, one may argue, is no more alien to premodern Islam than that of art history: both can be described as fictitious reconstruction of the past driven by modern preoccupations.

Acknowledging the inevitability of Kolb’s three worlds scenario, this study engages tradition in a different way to that of the perennialists and art historians. Focusing on the specificity of the religious experience, the study accentuates the interpretive distance between the modern subject and the premodern object. It foregrounds the distinct spatial sensibility of the premodern in order to highlight the implicit discontinuity and disjunction between the retrospective (historical readings) and the projective (design theories) representations of difference. While exploring and revealing aspects of the Islamic difference, this approach highlights the impossibility of repossessing and recreating difference by careful manipulation of selected formal and spatial vocabulary.<sup>50</sup> The spatiality of difference is not reproducible by the appropriation and manipulation of architectural forms.

## Sufism

Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is an Islamic phenomenon associated with piety, ascetic life, and spirituality that emerged in the early formative period. Some scholars trace it back to the Prophet and his immediate companions, such as Abū Dhurr al-Ghaffārī (d. 651), Abū al-Dardāʾ (d. 652), and al-Khuzāʿī (d. 672), however, the first commonly recognized Sufi personality is Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728).<sup>51</sup> Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), the celebrated Andalusian historian, regards *Sufism* and *Islam* as two synonymous terms. The piety and devotion of the first generation

of Muslims provided, in his view, the model for Sufism. It was only later, and because of the inevitable distancing from the spirit of the religion with the march of time that Sufis, who remained attached to the spirit of Islam, came to be known and distinguished from others.<sup>52</sup>

### *Foundation*

Most references on Sufism begin with a discussion of the name because it is shrouded with ambiguity with regard to its origin and meaning. Linguistically, it derives from *ṣūf*, “wool,” and hence *ṣūfī* literally means “woollen,” referring by extension to “one who wears wool.” This was the view of al-Sarrāj (d. 988), who associates the term with the Sufis because of the woollen garment they used to wear.<sup>53</sup> Al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) disagrees on the ground that the wearing of a woollen garment, though familiar among them, was not one of their consistent practices.<sup>54</sup> Some relate the name to *ṣafā*, “purity,” to *ṣafwa*, “elect” or “elite,” others to *suffa*, as in *ahl al-suffa*, the ascetics the Prophet used to shelter in a “shaded place” (*suffa*) in his house.<sup>55</sup> Al-Qushayrī argues that none of these terms bears linguistic affinity to the name. Martin Lings proposes that the name could have been “first aptly applied to a small group who did wear wool and that it was then indiscriminately extended to all the mystics of the community in order to fill a void; for they had as yet no name, and since they were becoming a more and more distinct class, it was becoming more and more necessary to be able to refer to them.”<sup>56</sup>

Since its emergence Sufism has continued to play a significant role in the intellectual, sociocultural, and political life of Muslim communities until its rapid decline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sufism might have started as isolated ascetic communities, but it rapidly gained popularity, spreading all over the Islamic world. Sufism is recognized to have been the main agency through which Islam spread into East and Southeast Asia and central Africa. In “The Mystic Path” Fritz Meier charts the historical development of Sufism in four stages: preclassical Sufism (eighth century), classical Sufism (ninth–tenth century), postclassical Sufism (eleventh–thirteenth century), and neoclassical tendencies (thirteenth–fourteenth century).<sup>57</sup> A classical phase may be considered with regards to the establishment of the phenomenon’s identity and basic religious techniques through such legendary personalities as Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 861) in Egypt; al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. c. 899), al-Junayd (d. 910) and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ (d. 922) in Mesopotamia; and Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 874/877–8), Abū Ḥafṣ al-Ḥaddād (d. c. 874), and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. c. 932) in Iran. However, as far as doctrinal development is concerned the period between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries is the golden age of Sufism.<sup>58</sup> It witnessed the maturity of the Sufi sciences after the systemiza-

tion of the tradition by figures such as al-Sarrāj (d. 988), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 998), al-Kalabādhī (d. 990/4), al-Sulamī (d. 1021), al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), and al-Hujwīrī (d. 1072–7).<sup>59</sup> The following generations included the most eminent and influential masters, such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Jīlānī (d. 1166), ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1190/c. 1220), al-Suhrawardī (d. 1234), Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), Rūmī (d. 1273), al-Shādhilī (d. 1258), al-Qāshānī (d. 1329), Naqshband (d. 1389), al-Jīlī (d. 1428), and Jāmī (d. 1492), through whom Sufism reached its zenith. While some of these great Sufi masters, such as al-Jīlānī, al-Shādhilī, and Naqshband, established mystical orders (*ṭarīqa*) that were to integrate Sufism into the society and to spread and perpetuate Sufi teachings throughout the Islamic world up to the present time, others, such as Ibn ‘Arabī, Rūmī, and al-Jīlī, produced a wealth of religious and mystical literature and profound poetry that were to shape the intellectual life of Muslim communities until the dawn of the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup>

The contributions of these and many other formidable Sufi thinkers to various aspects of the religious and intellectual sciences in premodern Islam have shaped the Muslim worldview and underpinned its modes of thinking. In the conclusive remarks to his recent book on the history of Islamic mysticism, Alex Knysh observes that Sufism “has been inextricably entwined with the overall development of Islamic devotional practices, theological ideas, aesthetics, and religious and social institutions,” making the study of Sufism as an isolated phenomenon rather distorting.<sup>61</sup> It follows that the study of the artistic life in premodern Islam without considering Sufism is equally distorting. Yet public perception of Sufism in the Islamic world has dramatically changed in modern times, and the current apathy and suspicion are not reflective of its influential social role in premodern times. Once a dominant feature of Muslim society with eminent and influential figures, Sufism is today a dubious phenomenon in many Islamic countries. Ironically, Western modernity, which was behind the sociopolitical reform that led to the rejection of Sufism as a perpetuation of medieval superstitions, backwardness, and ignorance, has itself provided a new home for its resurgence. In recent decades Sufism has gained noticeable popularity in the West and been the subject of a growing scholarly interest. Most illuminating studies are currently being published in the West, and a large body of literature is already available in English and other European languages on its history, doctrines, terminology, techniques, and practices. Due to the complex nature of their work, however, many key Sufi texts have remained unavailable in good editions, let alone good translations, and in this study I am using a number of texts that are still in manuscript form.

Existing studies on Sufism are numerous, adequately covering its history, doctrines, and practices in the eastern, middle, and western parts of the Islamic world. Alongside the writings of the perennialists, there are the works of