

# Architecture and the Abrahamic: Making Space Sacred



fig. 1  
Jerusalem in the  
15th Century



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# Abstract

The universal connection between differing religions is that they all originate from a human urge to place oneself within a wider universe; the word place implies both the metaphysical and the physical in this context, so it is natural that architecture can facilitate this urge through symbolic representations of the celestial as a means of psychological transportation. As a consequence, the majority of religious architecture is guided by several unifying principles that are rooted in a shared history. Therefore, I am examining principally the early architecture of the primary Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and what unites and separates them, as well as what precedes them. When speaking about Islam, the late Mohammed Arkoun asked, ‘are the main components of the mosque- mihrab, minbar [etc] intrinsically Islamic [...] or are they arbitrary forms and signs made orthodox by theological definitions and made sacred by rituals established over centuries?’<sup>1</sup> It is this strand of thought that is not only relevant to Islam, but transfers to almost any religious architecture applied especially when concerned with the Abrahamic Faiths; that which traces its roots back to the ancient Israelites and particularly the patriarch Abraham to whom the monotheist God manifested for the first time. While all of these three religions are connected through Abraham and the Old Testament, they have inherent differences as to how their dogma is presented, especially in regards to their architecture, such as how they implement symbolism and representation of a spiritual plane to designate space as sacred.

1 Mohammed Arkoun, “Spirituality and Architecture,” in *Understanding Islamic Architecture*, ed. Attilio Petruccioli and Khalil K. Pirani (Oxon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2008), 4.

# Introduction

Architecture has played a vital role in the formation and propagation of religious and spiritual doctrine; in many examples, it provides a symbolic and physical representation of a set of ideas and beliefs, and for as long as the human race has been active in the formation of culture, Theistic principles have been the guiding motive for cultural creation. I seek to approach the subject matter from a secular standpoint, and examine how architecture became theology's vessel and vice versa. A shared experience through faith contributes massively to global religious and architectural history and development, so to see where paths diverge and reconnect is an efficient way of understanding both religion and architecture by their own means. Therefore, it is wise to study the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in regard to this question since they have all developed alongside each other with many similar and differing religious principles that have been implemented into architecture.

The topic is grounded in several different disciplines including Architectural History, Philosophy, Psychology and Religious Studies. As such, it will be important to examine both modern interpretations of these fields and historical contemporary records of their inception. To gain a complete understanding of a topic with many components, one must gain knowledge of each of its tenets, and then work on seeing how they combine to create the topic at hand.

There are clearly many aspects which define a space as sacred, but first one must analyse the concept of spirituality, and its connection to the physical or architectural. Once this is established, the essay will discuss a principally Abrahamic concept of Monotheism, and how God is manifested on a physical plane, whether through manifest presence or omnipresence. Manifest presence is clearly inferred when introduced to the 'hierarchy of place' that is visible in all Abrahamic religion, and so it is also important to mention how certain places are viewed as more holy than others, and for what reasons. To follow from a concept of the divine inhabiting the physical plane, the human replication of the realm of the divine on an architectural level as a means of symbolic connection will be discussed in the context of the Islamic 'paradise garden'. There is overt religious symbolism in the implementation of nature into architecture with the purpose of celestial mimicry, yet another act of religious symbolism has a different purpose and that is to create a physical connection to the cosmological with the use of a vertical hierarchy of symbolism; which is blatantly visible in both Islam and Christianity. The use of sacred geometry and colour are also prevalent in both of these religions for similar reasons, and will be discussed in their own right with references to Islamic mosaics and Christian rose windows. Once symbolism has been mentioned in several iterations, the essay will go on to discuss where many of these meanings have come from, and the evolution of architecture alongside faith, as well as the role that time plays in the function of religious architecture. Here one will see how architectural concepts from past religions inform those that we see today. Finally, after learning of the power of the sacred space, we will learn of its weakness, and how religious subjects can use holy space as a means of subjugation of rival faiths. To combine these different components of Abrahamic architecture will result in a clearer image of what makes a space sacred.

# Physical and Spiritual Place

One of the most profound contemporary accounts of medieval Christian architecture is Guillaume Durandus' 'Rationale Divinorum Officiorum', written between 1285 and 1291. Durandus spoke comprehensively on multiple symbolic meanings that are carried in the physical representation of a Church, and to understand the reasoning of a liturgist of the period is extremely relevant; especially since this work defined much of the ecclesiastical architecture that followed. According to Thibodeau,<sup>2</sup> the treatise is ranked with the Bible as one of the most frequently copied and disseminated texts in all of medieval Christianity<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps the most relevant passage in terms of the proposed argument is this: 'The word church hath two meanings: the one, a material building, wherein the divine offices are celebrated: the other, a spiritual fabric, which is the collection of the faithful. The Church, that is the people forming it, is assembled by its ministers, and collected together into one place by "Him who maketh men to be of one mind in an house". For as the material church is constructed from the joining together of various stones, so is the spiritual Church by that of various men'<sup>3</sup>. Here we can see a definite consideration of two planes of existence; the physical and the spiritual plane. These two planes act in tandem, with the physical plane acting as a catalyst for spiritual awareness. Spiritualism comes from within, but can be reached through physical stimulation.

While Durandus is referring to Christianity in this passage, the concept of a spiritual space makes its way into many other religions, none more so than in Judaism. After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Judaism was forced to abandon all physical congregational space and as such, Judaism later came to be practised wherever ten Jews assemble, a 'minyan'. Rabbinic Judaism circumvented the loss of a physical sacred place with the use of the 'Shabbat', a spiritual place in time. 'By celebrating and keeping Shabbat, one carries sacred space to wherever one is.'<sup>4</sup> A.J. Herschel elaborated on this concept, stating, 'The Shabbat is a palace in time.'<sup>5</sup> While this concept is most visible in Judaism, the concept of faith inhabiting a separate plane to the physical is not exclusive to this religion. In all Abrahamic religion, it is seen that the most important sacred space is that within oneself, and architecture acts merely to help the faithful recognise this fact. Even early Christianity evolved alongside Judaism in this regard, as Beckwith states, 'The Eucharist, the central act of the Christian religion, was first done in an upper room of a private house [...] The early Christians had no public place of worship. [...] The synagogue was in the first century A.D. a comparatively modern institution and had no hereditary claim on the reverence and affection of either Jews or Christians.'<sup>6</sup> From this standpoint, one can see that the practise of faith was an intrinsically personal ritual which came to be represented in religious architecture after its emancipation. Durandus himself speaks of the

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2 Timothy M. Thibodeau, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum of William Durand of Mende* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2007), 3.

3 Guillaume Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1893), 13.

4 Seth Kunin, "Judaism," in *Sacred Place*, ed. Jean Holm and John Bowker (London: Pinter, 1994), 136.

5 A.J. Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 34

6 John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 13.

symbolism of a Church that carries this message: ‘the arrangement of a material church resembleth that of a human body: the chancel, or place where the altar is, representeth the head: the transepts, the hands and arms, and the remainder- towards the west - the rest of the body.’<sup>7</sup> For him, the Church acts as an extension of the inhabitant’s internal desire to commune with the spiritual. In this case, God is within the individual, and architecture simply reflects this personal connection to faith. The same concept applies in Islam; where the prayer mat is seen as a portable sacred space.

## Omnipresence and Manifest Presence

There are two ways in which God presents himself within Abraham-ic religion, through ‘manifest presence’, and ‘omnipresence’. Omnipresence is the concept of God’s attribute of being within everything, everyone and everywhere; while manifest presence is his holy spirit making an appearance on the physical plane. In Islam, no sect subscribes to the notion of omnipresence more than the Sufi, and their architecture reflects this, ‘the physical structure of Sufi shrines reflects the metaphysical system that undergirds the Sufi’s quest for union with the divine reality.’<sup>8</sup> The Sufi mystic, Rumi, recites this ideology throughout his work, in one of his writings entitled, ‘The Place of Honour’, he states ‘From your head right down to your feet is Him, entirely Him’. According to his reasoning, the most sacred place is within oneself, and can only be replicated through symbolism. Here manifest presence and omnipresence overlap, as God manifests himself within everything, but on a subliminal level. Within all strands of Islam is ‘qutb’, a vertical axis that manifests itself within a certain place or person; Medina and Muhammad are two such examples. However, there is no clearer example of a manifest presence than in Mecca itself (fig. 2.). The great theologian Mircea Eliade spoke of why Mecca was the most powerful example of God’s presence in this way; Mecca ‘is not merely the central point of the earth; directly above it, in the centre of the heavens, was the “gate of heaven” [...] the ka’bah, in falling from the sky made a hole in it, and it was through this hole that a communication could be effected between earth and heaven’<sup>9</sup>. According to this principle, there is no finer example of ‘qutb’ anywhere else in the world, as the ka’bah is directly linked to the vertical axis of heaven. Indeed, a Surah of the Qu’ran furthers this claim, and gives reason to the Hajj in which over two million Muslims take part in every year. ‘We imposed a duty upon Abraham and Ishmael, saying: purify my house for those who go around and those who meditate therein’<sup>10</sup>, in reference to Mecca. Islam puts more importance upon divine physical place than either Christianity or Judaism, through the devotion of the faith towards Mecca as a paradigm of the sacred.

Judaism neglects the notion of material presence of holiness largely, but Christianity places a little more attention on it, although the means of a place attaining the status of holiness are different. In Christianity, it is either with miracle or ritual that a place becomes holy; every Church is holy but only enters this state through ritual or association. This ritual is consecration,

7 Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 19.

8 Clinton Bennett, “Islam,” in *Sacred Place*, ed. Jean Holm and John Bowker (London: Pinter, 1994), 98.

9 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns In Comparative Religion*, (London; Sheen and Ward, 1979), 231.

10 Mohammad M. Pickthall, *The Glorious Qur’an*, (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1992), 2:125.



fig. 2. A 16th Century tile depicting Mecca with the Ka’bah in the center. The tile may have been created to remind Muslims of Hajj.



and can take the form of the Eucharist, where bread and wine are eaten to symbolise the body of Christ, or anointment, where a religious official blesses the altar of the church with holy oil. Often Christian holy sites become such due to their association with Martyrs and Saints that are buried on their location, and mark the end of pilgrimages, seen in places like the Vatican, where St Peter is buried (fig. 3.), or Santiago de Compostela (fig. 5.), where St James is buried. The idea of pilgrimage really defines the importance of place for religion as for many believers, it combines an earthly purpose with a spiritual sentiment. Architecture's role in this case is to provide an enhancement of the pilgrim's spirituality upon completion of their pilgrimage, the final image of their journey.

There is, however, some contention in Abrahamic religion that suggests that the inhabitant of such a holy space is merely a receptacle of the spirituality that the place holds, and that religion is imparted unto those who accept it- religious architecture in this case acts to make the visitor aware of their role in a theological context. As such, some liturgical thought proposes that God inhabits only those who are familiar and accepting of his concept, as opposed to the idea that He is within every member of the human race through omnipresence. Omnipresence would suggest that all life on Earth equally receives the grace of God without hierarchy, yet according to religious doctrine there are some anomalies within subsets of most forms of Abrahamic religion. While one could mention the various perceptions of animals within these faiths, there is a more pertinent architectural example in regards to our own species. Within the conduct of the human race there is perhaps no distinction more obvious than the relationship of the genders and particularly in the prevalent use of gendered segregation that is visible in many present, and all initial iterations of Abrahamic religion. Under the concept of omnipresence, one would assume that all genders be treated equally, yet this has not historically been the case. Architecture gave a means of facilitating this segregation by dividing space into gendered enclosures designed for separate worship. Durandus refers to ancient traditions that dictated this rule, 'men and women sit apart: which, according to Bede, we have received from the custom of the ancients'<sup>11</sup>. While this tradition has been eroded in most forms of Christianity, it is still common in both Judaism and much of Islam, with a wall or curtain that separates the genders in Judaism called a 'mechitza' (fig. 5.) and separate prayer rooms in Islam. Architecture provides a means of facilitating this kind of orthodox religious principle, and is therefore partially responsible for the cultural and political implications that it carries. Furthermore, omnipresence would also suggest unity between religions, particularly those under the Abrahamic umbrella, yet the concept of omnipresence is historically neglected under these terms too. For this reason, it is important to mention the architecture of the crusades, and in particular, the fortress of Krak des Chevaliers in Syria. In this context, religion was used as a rationalisation for exacting tribute or blackmail from the surrounding area, with architecture as the Knights Hospitaller's leverage of colonial power over subjects of a different faith and with religious supremacy as justification.

## Hierarchy of Place

Initially, the most holy place within institutional Judaism was the 'Holy of Holies'; a small enclosure within the tabernacle, which Yahweh was



fig. 3.  
The interior of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City



fig. 4.  
The Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, where St James' reliquary is housed.



fig. 5.  
Men and Women separated at the mechitza of the Western Wall of Jerusalem

<sup>11</sup> Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 30.



said to inhabit. In this case, the physical and spiritual place were intertwined, for it was God's earthly residence. The influence of this early Jewish spatial hierarchy left its impression upon Abrahamic religion, even influencing liturgists like Durand in their symbolic philosophy: 'The outer part of the tabernacle, where the people sacrificed, is the active life, wherein men give themselves up to the love of their neighbour: the interior, wherein the Levites [of the Hebrew tribe of Levi] ministered, is the contemplative life, where a band of religious men devote themselves to the love and contemplation of God. The tabernacle gave place to the temple...'<sup>12</sup> and the temple gave place to the Church, Mosque, Synagogue, etc. Abrahamic religions all comprise of a hierarchy of physical space, that is led by Jerusalem in Christianity (where most Churches face East with the exception of most Orthodox branches) and Judaism (where the Torah Ark points towards Jerusalem), and Mecca in Islam (where the qiblah indicates the direction of prayer). While Jerusalem and Mecca are the most important religious sites for their respective religions, there are many built sites all around the world which have become sacred for the divine events that have been recorded to have occurred there. Religious sites are often built as a reminder of divine feats on their earthly plane and act not as a continuation of such feats but as a place of contemplation for their past religious significance. The Vatican City (fig. 6.) in Rome happens to achieve both; it houses the tomb of St Peter, whom the Catholic Church continues to venerate, and acts as the administrative and spiritual centre of the Catholic Church. There are similar scenarios with the varied Orthodox churches of the world.

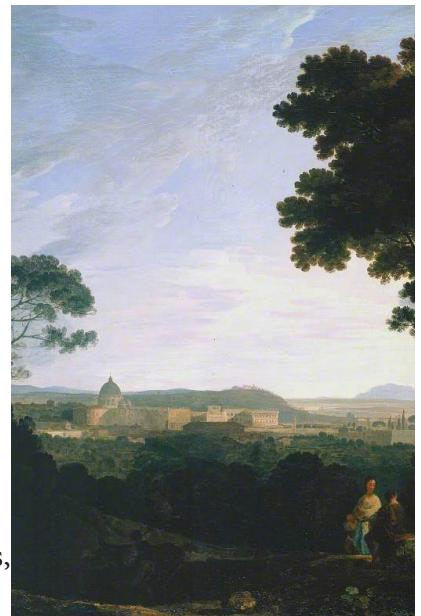


fig. 6.  
An 18th century oil painting of the Vatican City and St Peter's Basilica

Protestantism approaches this in a different way, instead of having a centralised power akin to the Vatican, it has multiple different schools of thought and subsects, and acts as an 'invisible church.' Indeed, it was the concept of the 'invisible church' that played a large role in the Protestant reformation's separation from Catholicism, with the term coined by Saint Augustine of Hippo, who applied Platonic philosophy to a Christian context; 'Augustine was steeped in neo-platonic ways of thought. Platonists believed that true reality is not what is visible. [...] The true church, according to Augustine, is always invisible. The visible church on earth is a real but imperfect reflection or representation of the true and invisible church [...] We see the visible church, but we must believe that the invisible church exists in, but also above and beyond, its earthly form.'<sup>13</sup> This means that in this regard, Protestantism is therefore in some senses more similar to Judaism than Catholicism in that outside of Jerusalem, there is no set earthly place of religious power and authority, that lies with God and the celestial; but this does not diminish the importance of architecture within Protestantism, it is simply approached in a different manner. Instead of embellishment and grandeur, the Protestant church is much more conservative, inspiring the visitor to look inwards. Their presence is their motivation, and they avoid using imagery to inspire their faith.

## Physical Replication of the Spiritual Realm

In some cases, religious architecture acts to replicate or represent a spiritual realm, most usually that of Heaven or the garden of Eden. The

<sup>12</sup> Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace M. Alston, *The Church of the Living God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 53.

incorporation of green spaces into holy sites provides an oasis, where the visitor can feel a connection to the metaphysical under power of imagination. When speaking in reference to Islam, Nader Ardalan speaks of this idea as ‘transcendant knowledge’, a key proponent of Islamic spirituality and design. ‘Tanzih (transcendant knowledge) is comprehensible through the faculty of man’s creative imagination (khayal) whose principal instrument is intuition.’<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the role of the architect in this context is to elucidate what is held in Paradise, providing an earthly replication of the divine on a material plane. Indeed, the English word ‘paradise’, stems from the Persian word, ‘pairi-daeza’, which means ‘walled garden’. The garden and the courtyard are equally important to the Islamic faith, with similar functions as representations of a separate plane. Ardalan speaks of these two components of a Paradise garden in this exact context. ‘The bagh (garden), a manifestation of the centrifugally oriented form of the microcosm, symbolising the manifest (al-zahir) and tazbih dimensions of the Absolute. The hayat (courtyard), a manifestation of centripetally oriented form of the microcosm symbolising the hidden (al-batin) and tanzih dimension.’<sup>15</sup> These gardens act as a means of provoking the imagination to accept a metaphysical plane wherein the divine dwells, the material plane simply acting as a hint to a higher power. However, both the courtyard and garden could both be argued to be a simple enclosure that represents nature as a whole, and God’s omnipresent relationship with the natural world. In speaking of traditional Islam, Nasr writes that constructed holy space acts as ‘an extension into a man-made environment of the space of virgin nature which, because it is created by God, is sacred in itself and still echoes its original paradisiacal perfection’<sup>16</sup>. While this concept may seem inherently Islamic, it is also greatly present in Christianity, with the use of the cloister; Durandus himself mentions the cloister in a closely parallel manner to that of Islamic doctrine, ‘as the church signifieth the Church Triumphant, so the cloister signifieth the celestial Paradise’<sup>17</sup>. The church symbolises the Institution, the garden symbolises the Intuition. As such, nature’s role in religion has been present far before the introduction of Abrahamic faith, on an international scale. The Masjid Al-Haram (fig.7) at Mecca in its earliest stages was nothing more than a roofless courtyard. The 13th Century Persian poet, Rumi puts it aptly; ‘Every low-souled person who confines himself to contemplating the garden remains deprived of the vision of the Gardener.’<sup>18</sup> The mosque and its accoutrements are simply a superficial way of reaching God.



fig. 7. The Masjid Al-Haram as depicted in an Ottoman manuscript.

## Verticality and its Spiritual Meaning

The vertical axis, or qutb, is not only prevalent within Islam; height and connection to the heavens seem to be a dominant theme throughout religious iconography: the minaret of Islam, the steeple of Christianity, the pagoda of Buddhism. The aspect of height was perfected in Lincoln Cathedral (fig. 8), which surpassed the height of the Great Pyramids at Giza in 1311 to become the tallest building in the world, emphasised by its lofty position



fig. 8. The Western front of Lincoln Cathedral, once the tallest building in the world.

14 Nader Ardalan, “The Paradise Garden as the Quintessential Visual Paradigm of Islamic Architecture and Beyond,” in *Understanding Islamic Architecture*, ed. Attilio Petruccioli and Khalil K. Pirani (Oxon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2008), 10.

15 Ardalan, “The Paradise Garden as the Quintessential Visual Paradigm of Islamic Architecture and Beyond”, 10.

16 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam In The Modern World*, (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995), 245.

17 Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 29.

18 Andrew Harvey, *Teachings Of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 71.



on top of the city's Steep Hill. In Durandus' 'Rationale Divinorum Officiorum', he alludes to height as a defining aspect of religious architecture in a number of ways, from the blatant connotations of the spire: 'The pinnacles of the towers signify the life or the mind of a prelate which aspireth heavenwards.'<sup>19</sup> to the more subtle symbolisms of the spiral staircase, 'The circular staircases, which are imitated from Solomon's temple, are passages which wind among the walls, and point out the hidden knowledge which they only have who ascend to celestial things'<sup>20</sup>. There is a direct reference here to the precursor of all Abrahamic religion, the cult of Yahweh, in the mention of Solomon's Temple; the first holy temple of Jerusalem, it is crucial to examine the First and Second Temple as forebearers for later religious Abrahamic architecture due to the loss of Jewish architecture following their destruction. This theme of height is perhaps most noticeably visible in Islam, with its distinctive use of the minaret; a tall and slender tower that acts as both a visual focal point and in its use for the 'adhan', the call to prayer. While Islam borrows greatly from its Abrahamic precursors, in some cases, it also retains aspects of Mesopotamian architecture, none more so than the minaret at the Great Mosque of Samarra (fig. 9.), 'derived from the Babylonian zikkurat'<sup>21</sup>. Christian architecture carries a close parallel to the minaret, with the use of the campanile, an architectural feature that features heavily in Southern Europe, and maintains the exact same purpose as the minaret, replacing the human call to prayer with a bell; the most famous being the leaning campanile at Pisa.



fig. 9. The minaret at the Great Mosque of Samarra. Its stepped construction is reminiscent of Babylonian Ziggurats.

Verticality can also be noted to be important on the interior of many religious buildings, as a place for the preacher to address the congregation. In Judaism, this is the Bimah and in Christianity the pulpit. Durandus speaks in regard to both religions, 'Solomon made a brazen scaffold, and set it in the midst of the temple, and stood upon it, and stretching forth his hands spake to the people of God.' Esdras also made a wooden scaffold for speaking: in which when he stood, he was higher than the rest of the people'<sup>22</sup>. One can see that height acts both as functional and symbolic in almost every case of religious architecture; connection to the sky is vital in architecture, 'Fundamentally, the only place humans have to build is the surface of the earth- a middle ground between earth and sky.'<sup>23</sup> Abrahamic religion relies on this dichotomy of spatial and symbolic hierarchy to carry its meaning and purpose with the perception of heavens as being above, and hell below.

The motif of the dome is prevalent in all Abrahamic religion, symbolising an architectural connection to the heavens. It acts as a representation of the 'firmament', a cosmological concept visible in Judaism and Christianity, and in a rather more complex form in Islam. It is described explicitly in 'Genesis' 1:6-8 as a dome that arches above Earth, that divides heaven from Earth. 'And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven.'<sup>24</sup> This view stems from an earlier Hebrew view on the heavens, which followed a very similar idea; The Jewish Encyclopedia states that 'The Hebrews re-

19 Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 22.

20 Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 27.

21 K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Aldershot: Gower, 1989), 362.

22 Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 26.

23 Thomas Barrie, *The Sacred In-Between* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 81

24 *King James Bible*, Gn 1:6-8



garded the earth as a plain or a hill figured like a hemisphere, swimming on water. Over this is arched the solid vault of heaven.<sup>25</sup> This strand of cosmic philosophy will have undoubtedly have made its way into the religions that followed it, Christianity and Islam. In the second century, Theophilus of Antioch spoke distinctly of a 'dome' in reference to the firmament, 'The heaven, therefore, being like a dome-shaped covering, comprehended matter which was like a clod.'<sup>26</sup> As mentioned before, it is inevitable that in homage to their belief, believers would wish to reflect their belief on a wordly plane, and in no architectural motif is this clearer than within the dome. Christian architecture was born out of Roman basilicas; the most esteemed being the Hagia Sophia (fig. 10.), built under Justinian in 537. One of the most important features of this building is the 'floating dome', a dome that gives the illusion of weightlessness in reference to celestial connection. It 'demand[s] a completion never to be attained'<sup>27</sup>. Baldwin Smith mentions the 'celestial helmet' as a description of the dome's cosmological connotation, citing the sixth century Greek poet, Paul the Silentiary, who wrote a poem dedicated to the Hagia Sophia, 'rising into the immesasurable air, the great helmet, which bending over, like radiant heavens, embraces the church'<sup>28</sup>. Another vital example in regards to this example is the Pantheon, the largest concrete dome in the world; built by the Romans as a temple and appropriated by the Christians as a church. One the dome's defining features is its oculus at the apex of its height, which some scholars have speculated as a window to the heavens. Islam's relationship with the dome is rather more abstract, as there is little scripture outside of the Old Testament that elaborates on the spiritual meaning of the dome's architectural form. However, there is no coincidence that The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is built directly over the site of Muhammad's ascension to heaven.

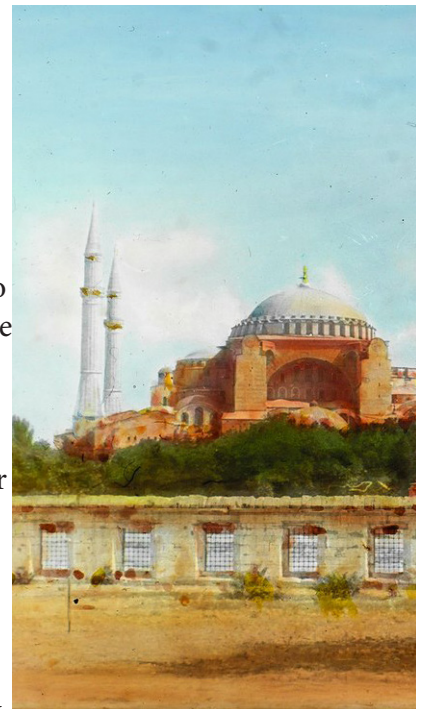


fig. 10.  
The great Hagia Sophia, in Istanbul, 1935.

## Geometry and Colour as Spiritual Symbolism

Furthermore, while there is no explicit condemnation of figurative decoration in the Qur'an's scripture, there is some criticism of it in the Hadiths, the sources of moral guidance in Islam. This has meant that the majority of Islamic architecture after the 9th century (fig. 11.) has the distinctive element of a complete veto on the figure and an abundance of pattern and colour with very little reference to the human being. Aniconism within Islam seems to have developed after the Umayyad dynasty however, and as a result, sacred geometry has come to represent the vast majority of Islamic spiritual architecture. Geometry is for Islam a representation of the natural world, from a natural scientific standpoint. It stands to capture the macrocosm of existence, making visible the geometry that is existant everywhere in the natural world. It is through this usage of empirical science that God's omnipresence was justified, and the places of Islamic worship were illustrated with this concept to convey this message. While sacred geometry is visible in almost all spiritual architecture as far back as the neolithic period; such as Stonehenge, which 'combines several geometries within one masterful scheme'<sup>29</sup>, geometry

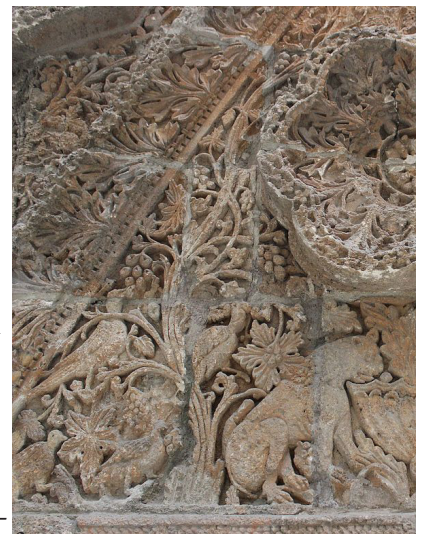


fig. 11.  
The facade of the Great 8th Century Mosque at Mshatta; one of the few surviving early Islamic pieces of architecture to portray figures.

25 Isidore Singer, *The Jewish Encyclopedia IV* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901), 280.

26 Robert M. Grant, "Theophilus of Antioch to Autolytus." *The Harvard Theological Review* 40, no. 4 (1947): 227-56

27 Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 158.

28 E. Baldwin Smith, *The Dome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 79.

29 Nigel Pennick, *Sacred Geometry* (Wellingborough: Weatherby Woolnough, 1980),



has never been employed to the extent that it has in Islam, which took the tradition of geometricism to clad entire buildings in mosaic kaleidoscopic patterns that represent their spiritualism (fig. 12.).

In Christianity, the tradition of geomtric pattern is much more muted, being employed sparsely to bring attention to bold components that illustrate a similar message, such as the fantastic rose windows that are present in many Gothic cathedrals. Lincoln Cathedral deserves to be mentioned again for its two great examples of geometry in rose windows; The Dean's window in the North of the Great Transept (fig. 13.), and the Bishop's window in the south. The Dean's window protects from the spirit of the devil in the north, and the Bishop's window invites the Holy Spirit in from the south. In reference to these two rose windows, Hendrix states, 'The soul of each individual becomes well-ordered, through the experience of the architecture, as it ascends from the multiple particulars of experience to the universal laws which govern experience. This is enacted in the architecture through the transition from the compositions of the elevations and vaulting, in geometrical and mathematical relations, to the purity of the light in the stained glass windows, the spiritual light, or lux spiritualis, which conveys the universal concept of the just or the good.'<sup>30</sup> In this case, geometry not only depicts natural perfection, but also inspires moral perfection.

Both in Islam and Christianity, geometry is crucial in expressing a message of universality, yet there is a dichotomy that has not yet been mentioned, and that is with its reliance on colour. Colour is crucial in invoking feelings of spirituality; Here, 'The colored glass in the stained glass window corresponds to the lumen spiritualis[spiritual light] in the oculus mentis[-mind's eye].'<sup>31</sup> Colour in Islamic architecture is just as important, and tiles typically bear the 'seven colours of heaven'<sup>32</sup>, ochre, turquoise, white, black, green, red and blue, which correspond to the holy number of seven that features prominently throughout Islam in the form of the seven beliefs, seven levels of Jannah, seven days of the week, etc. In this context colour, symbolism and geometry are intertwined to express the spiritual meaning of Islam and its connection to the natural world.

## Augmentation of Site

Much religious architecture was simply an evolution on what stood on its grounds before it, and is as such an amalgamation of theological themes. The City of Jerusalem as a whole is a visible example of this, due to its importance to all Abrahamic faith. In fact, many Abrahamic religious sites were built upon the sites of Pagan temples, San Clemente al Laterano in Rome is a particularly visible example, built in layers, starting upon a Mithraeum and ending as a Roman Catholic basilica, the Pantheon followed the same path. The permanence of architecture from a religious perspective also acts as a means of ensuring the survival of faith through physicality. Many of the oldest extant buildings are religious; and many of the oldest holy sites have been continuously built upon to ensure that knowledge of their location is not lost. The Kaaba, the holiest site in Islam, was originally dedicated to a Naba-

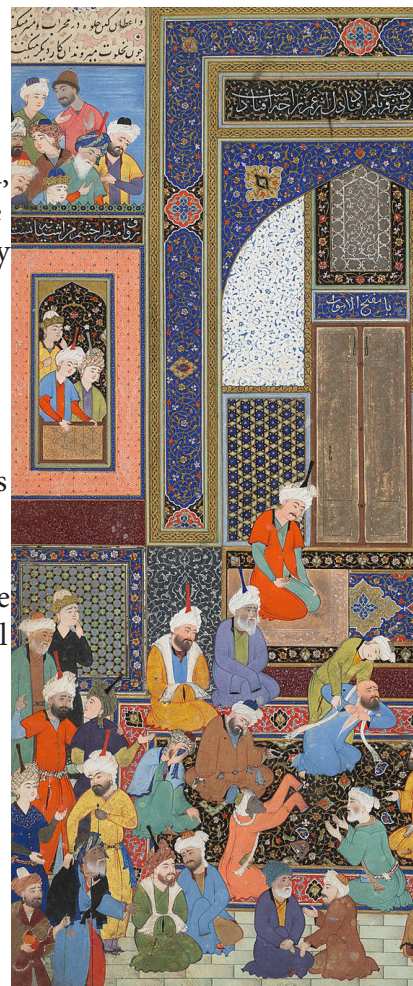


fig. 12.  
A Safavid era manuscript depicting an incident in a Persian mosque. Note the elaborate floral aniconic mosaic that clads the walls.



fig. 13.  
A close detail of the North Window at Lincoln Cathedral.

30 John S Hendrix, *The Architecture of Lincoln Cathedral and the Institution of Justice* (Bristol: Roger Williams University, 2009), 2.

31 Hendrix, *The Architecture of Lincoln Cathedral and the Institution of Justice*, 3.

32 Michael Barry, *Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 280.



tean deity<sup>33</sup> and bore much resemblance to Moses' tabernacle for Yahweh that was superseded by the Temple of Solomon on Temple Mount. In the earliest known piece of literature, 'The Epic of Gilgamesh,' King Gilgamesh strives for immortality, and while he did not manage to achieve this goal, he stamped his name in hard brick in recognition that his architectural legacy would far outlive him.<sup>34</sup> His work still exists in the ancient ruins of Uruk in Iraq. An early medieval example of the cult of political power influencing the cult of religious is with Charlemagne's construction of Aachen (fig. 14.), where Paul Williamson states, 'Roman materials were being employed as symbols of civic authority and, through their quality and richness, to link those using them with the power and tradition of Rome'<sup>35</sup>. While later movements such as the Neoclassical movement in 19th century Britain created homages to great classical architecture; Charlemagne went to great lengths to actually source Roman building materials, appropriating ancient spiritual architecture to express the power of the modern. It could be argued that he did this in his own image and not in God's, in a similar manner to Gilgamesh's construction of Uruk.

## Suppression of Architecture as Suppression of Faith

Charlemagne used these ancient pieces of architecture not just to pay homage to their classical origins, but also express a form of both religious and political supremacy of his Christian civilisation over the Roman Pantheistic civilisation. A contemporary of Charlemagne, Notker the Stammerer states, 'He conceived the idea of constructing on his native soil and according to his own plan a cathedral which should be finer than the ancient buildings of the Romans.'<sup>36</sup> There is undeniably some aspect of self-aggrandisement which inspires the commissioners of these great buildings in their construction, in some cases God is simply a proxy agent for their worldly leaders to assert power. Such can be seen in the finalisation of the Hagia Sophia, where Justinian I allegedly stated, 'Solomon, I have surpassed thee.' However, whether or not inspired by vanity, an omnipresent God will inhabit these buildings for as long as they survive, unlike the rulers who commissioned them. This idea of permanence through a built environment indubitably is relevant throughout religious architecture; many religions that have long since passed maintain a physical presence through their sacred places, whether in Hellenistic Cultism or the Mesoamerican Pantheon. It is for this reason, that architectural iconoclasm is often a simple resort of subjugating a rival faith, as seen most recently in radical Sunni movements that aim to destroy Shia and Sufi places of worship as a means of eradicating their sect of belief (fig. 15.). This can be seen in the destruction of Mosul by ISIS, and in the destruction of certain Sufi shrines in Timbuktu by Ansar Dine, or with Christians knocking heads off of statues and destroying monasteries during the reformation under Cardinal Wolsey having 'perfected a technique of destruction which might have well perished with its creator, but which was in fact inherited by an agent bound by no ties of education or of caste or of ambition to the law and tradition of a centralised church.'<sup>37</sup> Using architecture as a means of religious per-

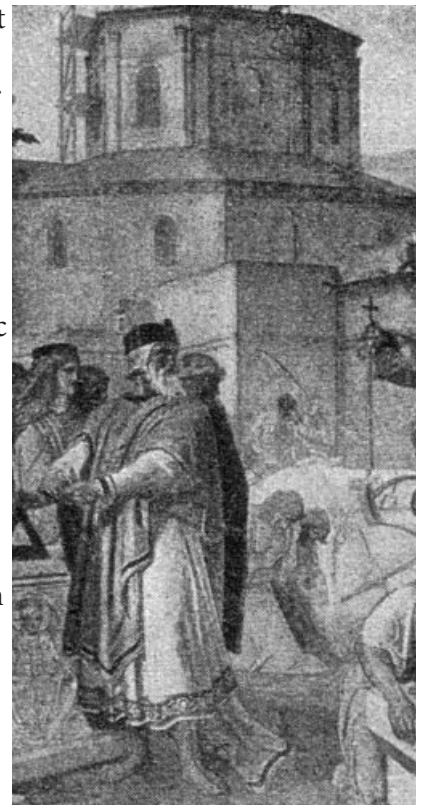


fig. 14.  
Charlemagne overseeing the construction of the Imperial Building in Aachen.

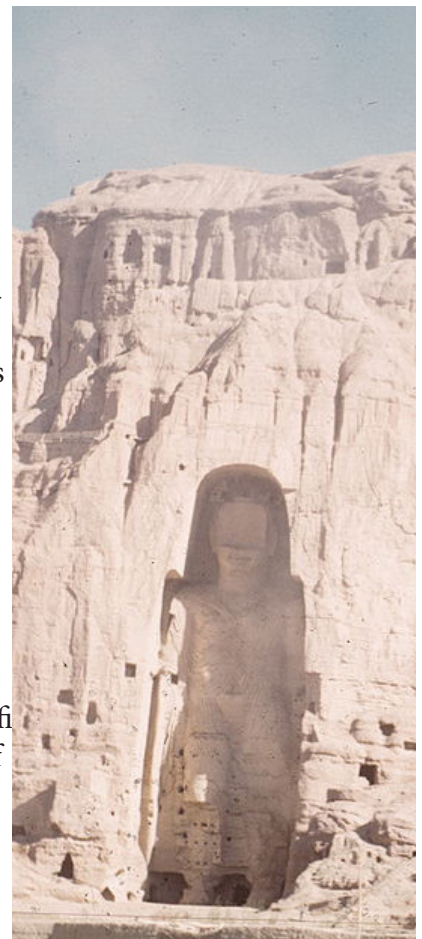


fig. 15.  
The Buddha of Bamiyan before destruction, perhaps the most famous example of iconoclasm in recent years- perpetrated by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

33 Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (Montreal: Russell Books, 2002), 11.

34 Dan Cruickshank, *Brick* (London: Phaidon, 2019), 13.

35 Paul Williamson, *Medieval and Renaissance Treasures* (London: V&A, 2007), 5.

36 Lewis Thorpe, *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London: Penguin, 1969), 125.

37 David Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,



secution is prevalent throughout recorded history; with numerous examples spanning countless contexts and religions. Indeed, in the Book of Exodus, it was the Pharaoh's refusal to supply straw for brickmaking that provoked the mass flight of the Israelites from Egypt.<sup>38</sup> Suppression of faith through architecture not only comes from destruction of places of worship but also from prevention of their inception.

## Conclusion

After analysing the meanings of physical and spiritual space between Abrahamic architecture, one finds a remarkable similarity between all three faiths in their spiritual goal, yet where they differ seems to be within the implementation of this spiritual symbolism to their respective architecture or indeed lack of architecture in the case of Judaism. However, the concept of a physical and spiritual plane is seen in all religion. The extent to which it is implemented depends on the faiths reliance on manifest presence or omnipresence, suggesting that God is either selective in presence, or visible in everything and everyone. This concept is hugely influential in the marcation of sites that are sacred. However, another connection within the Abrahamic faiths is that they all maintain a spiritual hierarchy of holy space, and so we learnt that some spaces such as Jerusalem are deemed more holy to express the events that occurred there and to express their importance in the wider religious context. At the top of the hierarchy is obviously the celestial plane, and so many sites aim to replicate it on an earthly basis, as was discussed in reference to the 'paradise garden' as a means of replicating a celestial paradise on the physical plane. Following this examination we visited the use of verticality as a means of representing an attempt to symbolically reach the spiritual realm, and how by adhering to a hierarchy of height, some places were deemed as closer to God. However, some strands of religious thought veer closer to an omnipresent philosophy such as in the decorative use of geometry and colour, as a reference to the mathematical perfection of the natural world. It is clear that the Abrahamic faiths were not the first to address these concepts, and so we learnt of their precursors, and the advantage of building religious architecture that lasts as it carries its themes with it through time. After speaking of the symbolism that is so powerful to those that follow it, we finally spoke of the danger that this divine power holds for those who oppose it, and the lengths that differing religions and subsects will go to, to quench this power; despite their Abrahamic links.

While religion's monopoly on architectural symbolism has grown distant in recent years, it is impossible to deny their historic connection and the mutual role that they have played in the development of the human race. Without architecture, institutional religion could not have flourished in the way that it did through making the divine attainable on a physical basis. For many, the defining moment in their life would be seeing the splendour of religious architecture in contrast to the squalor of the architecture of the great masses. Religion provided a purpose beyond sustenance for the early architects, and as such many of the most remarkable feats of architecture were established upon a religious basis, and many of the most remarkable feats of religion were established on an architectural basis. Before secular architecture reached its full potential, religion and architecture relied on a duality of

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1976), 61.

38 Cruickshank, *Brick*, 14.

human expression and all of the Abrahamic faiths are testament to this. There are more similarities than differences between their architectural theory than one would initially expect, and the differences come in the theory's implementation, and not in its formulation. As such, it seems foolish that destruction of opposing architecture plays a part in Abrahamic religion, when there are many similarities in spiritual outlook between faiths- namely the urge to architecturally express the nature of a spiritual plane above the physical. One finds it clear that architecture and the built environment played an enormous role not only in the propagation of the Abrahamic faiths but also in doctrine, as in building the world around us, we replicated God's creation on a micro-cosmic scale.

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# Figures

## Fig. 1.

Konrad von Grünenberg. *Description of a pilgrimage from Konstanz to Jerusalem*. 1487. Manuscript. 32 x 21 cm. Baden State Library, Karlsruhe.  
[https://www.blb-karlsruhe.de/virt\\_bib/stpeter\\_pap32/](https://www.blb-karlsruhe.de/virt_bib/stpeter_pap32/)

## Fig. 2.

Anonymous. *Tile with the Great Mosque of Mecca*. 17th Century. Fritware with Underglaze Painting. 62.4 × 35.8 × 3.5 cm. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore  
<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/17197>

## Fig. 3.

Giovanni Paolo Panini. *The Interior of St Peter's at Rome*. 1730-1742. Oil on Canvas. 114.3 x 160 cm. London: National Gallery.  
<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-paolo-panini-rome-the-interior-of-st-peters>

## Fig. 4.

Vasco Roxo. *Church of Santiago*. 2005. Wikimedia Commons  
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## Fig. 5.

Juan Reyero. *Kotel Jerusalem*. 2005. Wikimedia Commons.  
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## Fig. 6.

Richard Wilson. *Rome: St Peter's and the Vatican from the Janiculum*. 1753. Oil on Canvas. 139.1 x 100.3 cm. London: Tate.  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wilson-rome-st-peters-and-the-vatican-from-the-janiculum-t01873>

## Fig. 7.

Anonymous. *The Ka'ba in Mecca*. 1709. Manuscript. 24 x 16.5 cm. Berlin: Staatsbibliothek  
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## Fig. 8.

James Collins. *View of the Western Facade of Lincoln Cathedral from Lincoln Castle*. 2007. Wikimedia Commons.  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LincolnCathedralWest01.jpg>

## Fig. 9.

Lionel Aubert. *Ruins of Abu Dulaf mosque in Samarra, Iraq, with its spiral minaret*. 2001. Wikimedia Commons.  
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## Fig. 10.

Leo Wehrli. *Sambul, Hagia Sophia*. 1935. Hand Coloured Lantern Slide. 8.5 x 10 cm. Zurich: ETH Bibliothek  
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## Fig. 11.

Miguel Hermoso Cuesta. *Mshatta Facade*. 2014. Berlin: Pergamon Museum.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fachada\\_Mshatta\\_09.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fachada_Mshatta_09.JPG)

## Fig. 12.

Shaykh Zada. *Incident in a Mosque*. 1530. Ink and water colour on paper. 29 x 18.2 cm. Cambridge: Harvard Art Museum.  
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Andy Scott. *Lincoln Cathedral, North Rose Window*. 2018. Wikimedia Commons.  
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## Fig. 14.

Emanuel Muller-Baden, *The Constitution of the Imperial Building in Aachen by Charlemagne*, 1904. Wikimedia Commons.  
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## Fig. 15.

František Riháček, *The Buddhas of Bamyan*, 1961. Wikimedia Commons.  
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