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The Language of Sacred Architecture in Islam and Christianity: The Example of Sultan Hasan Mosque and Chartres Cathedral

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a comparative lens to analyze the architectural choices of the Sultan Hasan Mosque (Cairo) built in the 14th century and Chartres Cathedral (France) built in the 13th century, arguing that these choices stem from their respective theological principles. It asserts that the Islamic tawhid (divine transcendence and unity) produces a centripetal architecture of immersive submission, with space configured as a directional void oriented to the qibla and employing aniconic decoration for evocation. Christian incarnational theology, by contrast, constructs an axial architecture of narrative manifestation. It frames space as a linear processional path and uses figural imagery for revelation. The study applies a methodology that combines spatial analysis, ritual studies and iconographical interpretation to investigate how these opposing paradigms affect the ritual experience of the worshipper. It also situates each structure within its historical setting of Mamluk patronage and Marian pilgrimage, respectively, and acknowledges the relationship between doctrine and worldly conditions. The comparison demonstrates that sacred architecture is not only a symbolic container but also an active instrument that structures the conditions for encountering the divine, offering a model for interdisciplinary, comparative study in religious architecture.

INTRODUCTION

The first and most embracing form of sacred art is sacred architecture, the origin of which is as old as civilization itself, transitioning from humanity's early primordial existence as nomads within nature to a sedentary life within constructed cities (Schuon, 1965). In this new urban environment, the sanctuary or the temple came to replace virgin nature, as the most central symbol of the presence of the sacred. From its ancient birth to this day, sacred architecture has remained the most central and all-embracing form of sacred art. Collectively, these structures provide a unified stage where the arts, theology, and community engage. This forum enables the expression and celebration of all forms of sacred art, guiding a society's spiritual and cosmological vision (Burckhardt, 1967). It positions sacred architecture not merely as a place of shelter but as a structure whose design symbolizes mediation between humans and the divine.

In the monotheistic tradition, where revelation acts as the central symbol of the sacred, the case of the nomadic Israelites offers an especially accessible illustration of the emergence of sacred architecture, evolving from the portable Ark of the Covenant to Solomon's permanent Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:4–7). As monotheism became the sole doctrine of the unseen, and Christianity and Islam began to develop, sacred architecture began to be used to serve the One God in the Church, Mosque, and Synagogue. Although Islam and Christianity share a common doctrinal center, the two architectural languages are based on different ones. Nevertheless, they remain aligned in purpose: these sacred precincts offer people an experience of the Divine Presence, both individually and collectively. As Kieckhefer articulates, "entering into a religious building is a metaphor for entering into a spiritual relationship" (Kieckhefer, 2004, p. XX). This concept of spatial experience as formative of spiritual consciousness is pivotal to understanding how architecture operates beyond symbolism.

To explore how theology concretely shapes this experience, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of two monuments. In this comparison of the sacred architecture of Islam and Christianity, the two buildings are treated as having parallel importance for the Muslim and Christian worlds: the madrasa-mosque of Sultan Hasan in Cairo and the cathedral of Chartres in France. They were constructed in the 13th and 14th centuries, a period regarded as a golden age of renewed flowering and maturation of art and architecture in both religious traditions. Chartres Cathedral (c. 1194–1250) symbolizes the High Gothic synthesis of scholastic theology, structural innovation, and luminous iconography. Similarly, the Sultan Hasan complex (c. 1356–1363) represents the apex of Mamluk architectural ambition, integrating a congregational mosque, a madrasa for four legal schools, and a royal mausoleum into a formidable unified statement. Their status as supreme, contemporaneous achievements make them ideal subjects for a focused comparative analysis.

The literature discusses both structures extensively in terms of their design and symbolic historical importance; however, this discussion is confined to individual aspects such as cultural or disciplinary context. Existing scholarship focuses either on accounts of sacred geometry

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or on descriptions of their forms and ornaments. This highlights the need for an analysis that connects the spatial divergence and aesthetic principles of these buildings to the formative theologies of their respective faiths and to the ritual practices they were designed to facilitate. Based on its theological principles, this article suggests that the Sultan Hasan Mosque and Chartres Cathedral have two basic models of the mediation of the divine. It shows how Islamic tawhid (the divinity of unity and transcendence) gives rise to a centripetal architecture of immersive submission; and how Christian incarnational theology gives rise to an axial architecture of narrative procession. The doctrinal-spatial relationship is evidenced by these monuments as instruments not only symbolic but also operative ones that condition the way in which ritual encounter takes place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The Perennialist School

The Perennialist (or Traditionalist) School of sacred art was developed by scholars like Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy who all basically state that the art itself is sacred if it has a formal language that "reflects the spiritual vision characteristic of a particular religion" (Burckhardt, 1967, p. XX), not just the subjects or stories of that religion. This vision stems from a total cosmology in which formal integrity reflects metaphysical integrity, making sacred art a proof of the divine source of religion. This is the attitude that 'the function of sacred art... is in reality only that of reinstating natural phenomena [as] vehicles of divine messages to which men have become insensible' (Schuon, 1965, p. 143).

In this perspective, the principle of correspondence, where the sacred architecture connects human consciousness with the universal, is at the heart of the view. It is a symbol of macrocosm (the universe) and microcosm (inner space, the human being) and thus establishes a correlation between the heavenly and the earthly. If art is to be called sacred, says Burckhardt, "its formal language must be as well as its subject" (p. XX, 1967). Every design decision, whether in the geometric plan or the decorative program, is purposive: "Throughout the world, in the diverse traditions and theologies, sacred architecture continually strives to reproduce the patterns, structures and alignments of the universe" (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 2003, p. XX). It creates a dynamic setting in which a worshipper's soul is inclined toward cosmic order.

The construction of a sacred building involves a great deal of spiritual training; it requires an inward depth, such as contemplation and meditation. Apart from the process of design and construction, the whole monument reveals a spirit of work, dedication, and love that only faith, not worldly fame, can inspire. Hence, these works of art are impersonal and objective, which further strengthens them as evidence of divine presence: "Art to the Muslim is a proof of the divine existence only to the extent that it is beautiful without showing the marks of a subjective individualistic inspiration; its beauty must be impersonal, like that of the starry sky" (Burckhardt, 1967, p. XX).

Although the Perennialist school of sacred art is an indispensable tool for exploring the transcendental intent and symbolic coherence of marvels such as the Sultan Hasan Mosque and Chartres Cathedral, and highlights them as embodiments of cosmological truth and spiritual pedagogy, it privileges universal principles and ideal typologies that may overlook the historical importance, ritual functions, or spatial experiences of these monuments in their individual capacities. This underscores the need to view it in relation to other scholarly approaches.

Critical and Contextual Approaches

As opposed to the universalistic perspective of the Perennialist school, critical and contextual approaches study sacred architecture in historical, patronage and utilitarian terms. These methods focus on the time and culture in which the monuments exist, thereby revealing the monuments as symbols of social power, economic production, and communal ritual as well as religious aspects.

Historical Analysis and Patronage Studies. The historical and political motivations behind the creation of these sacred structures are often investigated. As Coldrake argued, "architecture can serve as a potent tool for political and social engineering or for profoundly affecting religious beliefs" (Coldrake, as cited in Barrie, 2012, p. XX). Similarly, architecture is considered in terms of its patrons' identity, authority, and piety. The construction of the Sultan Hasan complex is a classic example, where scholars such as Rabbat have demonstrated the role of the Mamluk Sultanate's political ideology, which involved building structures that testify to the social history of that period (Rabbat, 2010; Steenbergen, n.d.), while legitimizing Sultan Hasan's authority and wealth, as the complex is one of the most expensive medieval mosques in Cairo (Madain Project, 2022), and securing his legacy through waqf (endowment) which may strategically be used for personal or public benefit (Igarashi, 2019). Chartres Cathedral and the architecture of its time are argued to be a definitive model for High Gothic cathedrals (Bony, 2023), where, in addition to expressing piety, they were considered sites of civic prestige and episcopal campaigning, supported by civic patronage, to attract pilgrims. These findings suggest that the theological importance of these monuments was shaped by worldly factors such as power, resources, and ambition.

Functional and Ritual-Use Analysis. Apart from political and patronage perspectives on sacred space, another dimension often emerges that highlights the role of architecture in facilitating particular rituals and fulfilling community-related needs. This functionality is often discussed in terms of how the layout promotes or limits movement within the structure (Liu *et al.*, 2025), as well as congregation and the associated sensory experience (Caseau, 2022). For Islamic mosque architecture, research

has tended to concentrate primarily on spatial needs for communal prayer (salah), the location of the pulpit (minbar) for the sermon and the availability of other educational facilities (such as the madrasa) (Hillenbrand, 2019; Kuran, 1968). The cathedral architecture of Chartres has been studied as an orchestration of liturgical procession (Wright, 2000) and as a facilitator of the huge flow of pilgrims which arrived at the cathedral for the most renowned relic – the Sancta Camisa (Murray, 2011). Although the monuments have an historical and functional significance these analytical frameworks are mainly focused on the questions of when, why and how they were established and exploited. They overlook the phenomenological impact of these monuments and pay less attention to the proximity of spaces, controlled light, and symbolic ornaments, which play a deeper role in facilitating the inner experience of individual worshippers within these sacred places.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used in this study is a comparative methodology of which the argument is developed from both spatial analysis and studies of rituals, as well as an iconographic study of the two monuments. It aims to break out of the theological frame of reference to grasp material expression, as well as experiential aspects. The paper begins with a statement of the doctrinal principles of both faiths (i.e., Tawhid and Incarnation) and their associated architectural languages. Secondly, it offers a comparative study on the spatial organization and the ritual movement between the centripetal courtyard of Sultan Hasan and the axial nave of Chartres. Third, it discusses the different types of semiotic decoration - aniconic geometry and calligraphy for the mosque, and figural sculpture and stained glass for the cathedral - as ways of witnessing to transcendence and as a way of witnessing to a narrative manifestation. Fourth, it examines the historical aspect of patronage and power, and explores the tension between the ideal theology and the real world. Finally, the results are summarized, demonstrating that sacred architecture is a place that conveys an embedded religion in a spatial experience and that a comparative approach is needed to grasp this process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Doctrinal Foundations and Spatial Logic

Tawhid and the Centripetal Ideal

Tawhid, the absolute oneness and transcendence of God (Allah) is the generative principle of the sacred architecture of Islam. It is important to remember that the Islamic religion teaches that God is present everywhere and a mosque is not a place where a deity is worshipped, but a place of prayer. So the emphasis in mosque is not mass or surface, but is space with an emphasis on void, which is oriented and sanctified by the act of worship. The central Islamic idea of tawhid (divine unity) is expressed in the interior of the prayer hall, which reflects unity and direction and avoids any figurative distraction. The mosque becomes an image of the cosmos and of the cosmic dimensions of the human being; this microcosm shifts the believer's attention toward the macrocosmic reality of divine unity.

The centripetal spatial character of mosques is defined by spaces used for gathering worshippers and directing them toward a unifying point. This is created by the qibla and its mihrab which points out to the ka'ba in Makkah and guides all Muslims towards it. In this context, the role of the architecture is important to bring together the worshippers in lines of prostration, they are seated in spatial equality in front of God symbolizing spiritual equality deeply rooted in Islam. Such centrality is represented architecturally by the domes symbolizing the canopy of heaven, and other architectural elements, such as the courtyard (sahn), create a space for gathering which is safe and protected.

One characteristic of this type of architecture is its aniconic nature: geometry, calligraphy, and the use of elements symbolism are used to impart the idea of transcendence rather than the depiction of the figurative. In Islamic cosmology the pointed arch symbolizes the blending of Earth and Heaven. The pointed vault thus symbolically bridges the gap between earth and sky, and serves as a metaphor for transcendence in these sacred places. This cosmological intent is further manifested in another area, namely the courtyard. When it comes to its geometric form, the image of God is not just a decorative element, but the geometry gives expression to the image of God; the positioning of the fountain is also a focus point for the whole space, bringing together all the elements and with a profound meaning. Water is the element of life and here it is the paradisiacal promise and the creation of God. The structures inside pass through a series of geometric transformations, including the eight-sided fountain and an octagonal dome supported by eight columns. This geometry represents Throne of God (al-'Arsh) which is mentioned in the Qur'an as being above the water (Qur'an 11/7) and carried by eight angels or eight rows of angels (Burckhardt, 1967). Their significance is that they represent God's presence and sovereignty. The results prove that the basic purpose of the mosque is to provide its users with an opportunity to meet the omnipresent and transcendent God in prayer (salah) by combining the elements of doctrine, direction and symbol.

Incarnation and the Axial Narrative

The fundamentals of Christian sacred architecture are based on a theological concept, the doctrine of the Incarnation, which stands in distinct contrast to the Islamic doctrine (i.e., tawhid) described earlier. The central revelation of Christianity is the Word "become flesh" or "God become man." Christianity, like every other religion, came to adopt a host of sacred symbols that distinguish its churches and cathedrals. It places no restrictions on human or animal representation in sacred

spaces. The architectural consequence is a space designed for manifestation and narrative.

Historically, the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine laid the foundation for a public architectural language. The idea of a public place of worship came from the Roman basilica, in which God was worshipped as the Emperor of Heaven. This led Christian architecture to exhibit imperial grandeur, as scholars have observed: "Christian architecture reflects the opposition between grandiosity and humility, between the wealth of the established Church and the humble private rooms of the early Christians" (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 2003, p. XX).

This form evolved into its supreme expression in the Gothic cathedral. The cathedral was a unique type of monument, and started to develop from the 12th century onwards. The Gothic style that was illustrated in Chartres emphasized the consistent use of ribbed vaults, pointed arches, rose windows, buttresses, geometric tracery and variegated stained glass. All these were incorporated into a very complex, rich and not only decorative design, but a theological program. Chartres was first associated with an intellectual movement known as the School of Chartres, whose main principle was that numbers carry meanings through which the Divine can be communicated to the mundane world. "Their axiom was that just as all numbers derive from One, so all things emanate from God" (Mann, 1996, p. XX). The design of the building itself was designed cosmologically and astronomically and it sought to render through the stone, glass, light and colour, the perfect proportions and dimensions of spirituality on earth. In form and structure the architecture of Chartres Cathedral is complex and in terms of symbolism, it employs a wide variety of symbolism which is well integrated into an overall Christian purpose; for instance, lunar and solar symbolism are found in the west front towers.

Thus, the cathedral can be said to be an axial path, which opens a way for the journey from the secular world towards the sacred altar. The architectural space, with its walls and windows, creates a luminous, figural scripture which brings the divinity within into the fore. This stands in contrast to the Islamic centripetal void and provides an understanding of the doctrinal differences expressed through architecture, which frames the comparative analysis that follows.

Comparative Synthesis

The two faiths have quite different doctrinal bases (tawhid, Incarnation) which create manifest differences in the architectural paradigms by which the divine is mediated in these sacred places. These differences have nothing to do with taste, but are more a question of spatial logic, stemming from the theological answers to the same question: Where is the divine?

In the Islamic conception of God as transcendent and united, the architecture must convey this sense of unity and an omnipresent yet "un-picturable" God. This creates a centripetal spatial model that includes an organised void that offers space for assembly and a direction through the qibla part of the building and through the courtyard, directing the believers towards a Mecca (central point). Hence, the void, geometry, and aniconic decoration constitute a system that evokes the divine order. Conversely, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation inspires architecture that enables the tangibility of narrative. It creates an axial spatial model in which the linearity of the building's organization reflects a path of progression. It is the intention of this model to build a 'hierarchical journey' which is represented by the Latin cross plan and elongated nave where by the believer is ushered from the secular world to a central focus, the altar. Comprehensive fullness, figuration and luminous iconography allow for divine mediation in cathedrals.

In sum, the two architectural types stand in opposition as expressions of their respective spatial theologies: one focuses on centrality and void for immersive submission, while the other forges a straight path for narrative revelation. This difference between centripetal geometry and axial narrative guides the further analysis of the ritual experiences and symbolic programs in the sacred spaces of the Sultan Hasan Mosque and Chartres Cathedral.

The Ritual Body in Centripetal vs. Axial Space

Sultan Hasan: Immersion and Submission

The Sultan Hasan complex is a good example of the centripetal paradigm of Islamic architecture which creates the impression of 'immersive submission'. The main entrance to the mosque is just set a little bit off-center from the face of the building as one gets closer to it. This was intentional – it drew the immediate attention. It's an overwhelming approach; the stalactites over the entrance in a semi-dome are spectacular. Inside one feels as though he's going into a cave, not a mosque, that leaves its inside in mystery. It's a very symbolic design. Firstly, the builders deliberately opened just one entrance as heaven has one entrance, to allow just one entrance. Secondly they left the doorway darkened, so that there is a transition, from darkness to light, from sinfulness to purification. It is a dramatic and intentional ritual passage, a leading of believers away from the secular city to an (almost) emptied-out space. It is a tangible expression of God's presence in the hearts of the faithful and in the promise that He guarantees in the Qur'ān: "God is near to those who have faith when they need His help with things great and small, and removes them from deep darkness into the light" (Qur'ān 2:257).

This ritual passage way is the final purification on entering the courtyard (sahn) to the main architectural feature. One enters into the light of the courtyard, and is dazzled by the peaceful open air and its beauty. This is the setting of the Cosmic Order. The three cosmological concepts of center, unity and two directions - horizontal and vertical - are expressed in the sacred space. The courtyard has four large iwans (vaulted halls), each with a pointed top, all of which look towards a domed fountain in the middle of the courtyard. Beyond the architecture, each iwan was a

home to one of the four schools of Islamic law, and each discipline was taught in one. The iwans therefore played an additional role in the spiritual paradigm of Islamic culture: that of the teacher. The whole scheme is centered around the central fountain, representing a microcosmic environment for the Divine presence and the paradisiacal promise.

In this grand scheme of architectural forms, these individual elements combine to guide the act of worship (salah). The qibla wall features the mihrab, which is foundational in guiding worshippers toward a center. The mihrab is oriented toward the Ka'ba in Mecca, since Mecca is where heaven and earth meet. There is no doubt that if the worshipper cannot reach the Ka'ba in Mecca with his body, he can reach it with his soul, through the mihrab, as Al-Ghazali makes clear in his Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din (Al-Ghazali, 1982, p. XX). It is flanked by the minbar, from which the imam delivers the sermons and which allows the public to observe and hear the imam preaching, and it is a symbol of spiritual ascent—it's a stairway to heaven. Together, these make a place where one bows to God (sujud) the sacred space and the Arabic word masjid translates to the place of prostration.

Also playing a major role in the architectural journey of the space is the domed mausoleum, with its inside being a vertical ascent. The square chamber rises via an octagonal wooden frame supported on the square wall by eight wooden cantilevers, transitioning to a dome carried by seven rows of wooden stalactite pendentives. This geometry reflects a deeper cosmological narrative. As Gabr interprets this geometry:

the square corresponds to the four angels and the four pillars represent the celestial dome. This is followed by the inscription recalling the Throne of Allah Almighty. The seven rows of stalactites recall the seven heavens and the vastness of the Seat which encompasses the heavens and the earth. Finally, the dome is pointed thus leading to the vertical and culminating in a point representing Unity or the One. (Gabr, 1992, p. XX)

The dome embodies the universal Spirit, while its octagonal support symbolizes the eight angels (bearers of the Throne).

Chartres Cathedral: Procession and Pedagogy

Chartres Cathedral is the visual form of the axial narrative paradigm, which enables a physical and spiritual journey in which architecture plays a major role. The spatial experience is inward-moving and begins at a symbolic façade, often described as a "stone Bible." The cathedral has three portals: the royal portal, the north portal, and the south portal, each of which contributes to the story of salvation. The recesses are filled with elegant, elongated figures of kings, queens and Old Testament figures, all expressively formed and looking down at the viewer as if to welcome them, but as if to also stare them down as if to watch the visitor's every move. The portals are educational: the central relief shows the Last Judgment, the relief on the right the life of Virgin Mary and the relief on the left the Ascension of Christ. This context is seen as symbolic: The two niches are a reference to the heavenly and earthly nature of Christ, and the central door is a reference to Christ in His Divine Glory. These three gates symbolize the Gates of Heaven because they reflect the Divine Word of Christ, "I am the door: by me if any man enters in, he shall be saved" (Burckhardt, 1967, p. XX), framing the entire entry sequence.

Access to the axial passage is through the thresholds. The interior is a carefully composed booklet which has a long central arcaded or colonnaded nave flanked by aisles, a transept, a choir, an ambulatory, and an apse with radiating chapels. The "Latin cross" plan expresses not just a shape but a direction. Clustered columns rise dramatically from plain bases to the high pointed arches of the ceiling, directing the eye to the massive clerestory windows in the apse. This spatial effect symbolizes linear progression: the space unfolds in degrees, from the simple to the more complex. The choir and apse, which represent the altar and the Eucharistic sacrifice, follow, and the path then passes through the communal nave, on through the transept (the symbol of the cross of Christ). This axial narrative model is incomplete without the luminous iconography that lines this path. The walls, made skeletal by flying buttresses, are replaced by stained-glass windows that turn light into didactic color. The most potent symbols are the rose windows, which are geometrically constructed and serve as a preeminent Western symbol of enlightenment and human redemption (Mann, 1996). Their themes include the Last Judgment, the Glorification of the Virgin, and the Glorification of Christ, which are central to the stone narratives that follow.

One of the unique features representing this journey is the labyrinth, set into the nave floor; this 964-ft path is a microcosm of the axial journey itself. It symbolizes the idea of penetration, through an initiatory test of personal qualities, to the center. It came to be associated with spiritual progression and the discovery of the self. There is only one path to the center; its winding route symbolically duplicates the movement of the planets, offering a meditative, physical reenactment of the soul's difficult path to God.

Comparative Synthesis

Both monuments are analyzed through a spatial lens, demonstrating the influence they have on the different kinds of ritual experiences they evoke, based on the principles of centripetal immersion and axial procession on which they are based. This diversity, which is not coincidental, is carefully designed using architecture in terms of approach, movement and focus.

At the Sultan Hasan complex, this approach is marked by a transitional phase experienced in passing through a single, transformative threshold. The believer is directed from the city into a darkened portal, which symbolizes the stage of purification by moving from dark to light, before being guided into the united and central sacred space of the courtyard. Conversely, the approach at Chartres is a

multifaceted and didactic façade. There is no single point of entry but a theological program engineered across three portals, demanding to be "read" before one enters the sacred space and highlighting instruction before admission.

Inside, the two monuments have distinct primary spatial vectors. The most prominent movement at Sultan Hasan is gathering and central alignment: the courtyard and iwans initially focus the attention on the center, and then move it to the mihrab on the qibla wall. Here, it is important that everything is still and conveys a sense of harmonious submission. At Chartres, by contrast, the spatial experience is distributed across channels and progression. The elongation of the nave directs the visitor ahead to the distant altar. This movement is linear and sequential, paralleling an individual's path toward sacred history and instilling a sense of individual pilgrimage toward the divine.

The vertical awareness evoked by the architectural elements is also evidence of these opposite spatial experiences. The dome of the mosque represents the celestial canopy, guiding the vision upward toward a central void. The rose windows and towering clerestory of the cathedral show the axial path colored with narrative light, shedding light on the approaching horizontal journey.

The ritual body at Sultan Hasan emerges as a field for submission, while at Chartres it follows a path of revelation. This experiential divide further reinforces the doctrinal foundations of tawhid and Incarnation in worldly form.

Semiotics of Decoration: Evocation vs. Manifestation

Aniconic Evocation in Sultan Hasan

The aniconic logic of tawhid is vividly captured, and further amplified, in the decorative plan of the Sultan Hasan Mosque. The mosque's characteristic is that every figural representation is hidden from the view. Imagery is not allowed, and is instead replaced by abstraction, which can take the form of elaborate geometric ornamentation, floral patterns, arabesques or calligraphy. This is not a lack but a rich alternative: geometry is emblematic of Islamic architecture, since its patterns occur everywhere in it, expressing both macrocosmic and microcosmic ideas. Calligraphy is another primary component of mosque architecture, since the divine words, in addition to their didactic function, form a vocabulary of patterns that surrounds and penetrates the buildings. As far as the point of prostration is concerned, even the prayer carpets are considered an additional form of an archway of entry for the Divine One, thus continuing the sacred patterning. These aesthetic decisions are concerned with fundamental theological and experiential aspects. Light and patterns are employed to draw the attention to the God, which is always present, beyond imagination. Allah Himself is understood as light, and the perforated grill and pierced screens embedded in the walls of the mosques help to make the connection between light and substance more indistinct. The light is most concentrated at the visual point of the mihrab, making it the center point of prayer. The mihrab in Muslim architecture is described as follows: "the mihrab is often lavishly decorated and hung about with light and may also be surmounted by a dome – a symbol of paradise" (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 2003, p. XX). At Sultan Hasan, this becomes a tour de force: the rich polychrome decoration of the qibla wall of the large iwan culminates in the niche-head of its mihrab, which explodes in a riot of colored marble veneer that gives the impression of light emanating from the names of God. This is a visual evocation of the Qur'anic Light Verse, "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp" (Qur'an 24:35), transforming the niche into a metaphysical symbol of divine effulgence.

The decoration is characterized by disciplined intensity. The mihrab area is a crescendo of artistry

The walls are bare except around the mihrab, where they are paneled in marble of various shades from ivory to cornelian red. The frieze of Kufi script which runs along the walls where they join the vault and which is extended towards the court; very probably, it used to extend round all four oratories. The letters, which are very large, is [sic] raised up against an unbroken surge of stylized scroll patterns, whose eddying motion emphasizes, by sheer contrast, the hieratic progress of the lettering. Nowhere, perhaps, is there a more perfect visual echo than this of the psalmody of the Qur'an. (Burckhardt, 1967, p. XX)

This isolated beauty is based on one of the fundamental tenets of mosque architecture: much of the decoration is unnecessary, as the size of the building makes the impression without it. The Mamluks were able to figure out how to place themselves in the cosmos: they knew how to make the static building alive and vibrant and fit the right elements in the right place. Had the entire courtyard been filled with elaborate ornament, it would have been difficult to observe or even to concentrate in prayer. As the saying goes, in aesthetics less is more. Ornament placement is a strategic placement to improve focus. Likewise, the Mamluks' use of light is significant, as it is one of the forms of God; thus, they strategically positioned lamps with symbolic meaning, giving emphasis to the overall theme of divine light. Every detail, from the geometric to the veining of the marbles for the mihrab, is carefully designed to remind, not to depict, for God's transcendence.

Figural Manifestation in Chartres

While the aniconic evocation of the Sultan Hasan complex is expressed in the decoration of Chartres Cathedral, the latter's decorative programme instead relies on figural manifestation. It is linked to Incarnational theology, that necessitates material representation: each surface is a place of sacred narrative, of visible and present. This program begins at the threshold. The cathedral's façade is a great portal covered with sculpture, where elegant, elongated statues of kings, queens, and figures from the

Old Testament gaze down upon the visitor. These are not just ornament but a visible transition into a didactic space. Chartres Cathedral is full of didactic content; the sculpted portals present a theological synopsis, with the central tympanum depicting the Last Judgment, the right showing the life of the Virgin Mary, and the left depicting the Ascension of Christ. This arrangement constitutes a "stone Bible," preparing the faithful for entry.

The stained-glass windows are at the apex of this manifestive logic and are accordingly called the treasures of the cathedral. Here, storytelling through imagery proves effective because it can stir emotion. The windows' vivid colors glow like jewels, as they depict scenes of the lives of Christ, the saints, and the Virgin Mary, along with vices and virtues, providing an account of Christ and Christianity. While light is central to both traditions, here it is modified into a colored, figural narrative. The most potent synthesis of geometry and figuration is found in the rose windows. Although geometrically constructed and bringing together ancient principles with Christian ideas, the rose windows function primarily as symbolic representation. The rose is a powerful symbol which stands for the soul, eternity, the wheel, the sun, the cosmos, the universe, alchemy and love, and is clearly defined as "the supreme western symbol of enlightenment and the redemption of humanity" (Mann, 1996, p. XX). There are rose-themed themes for each of the roses: The Last Judgment is portrayed in the West Rose, the Glorification of the Virgin in the North Rose, and the Glorification of Christ in the South Rose.

Hence, in the Sultan Hasan complex geometry and light evoke transcendence and an "unpicturable God," while the decoration program at Chartres is based on the use of sculpture and stained glass to represent a "God who entered into history." It illuminates the sacred forms at Chartres, making the divine story accessible and present along the axial path of the believer's journey.

Comparative Synthesis

Two very different and opposing semiotic systems govern the decorative programs of the two monuments, each a direct representation of its faith's foundational theology and spatial logic. A comparison of architectural forms and the handling of surface, image, and light shows that these are more than stylistic choices; they reflect core religious principles.

The Sultan Hasan complex is based on aniconic logic of evocation. It is based on the principle of Tawhid, which means that there is no figurative representation and it is replaced by geometric ornamentation, floral patterns, arabesques and calligraphy. This abstraction is deliberately selected and created: geometry stands for cosmic order; calligraphy for the word of God as a penetrating pattern. Light is used to soften the light/solid edge, particularly at the mihrab, where the polychrome use of marble aids the sense of divine effulgence. This decorative program is intended to allude, supporting the centripetal ritual of submission by drawing focus toward transcendent unity.

At Chartres Cathedral, decoration follows a figural logic of manifestation. Validated by the Incarnation, it employs sculpture and stained-glass windows to make material representation visible and present. The portals offer a sculpted "stone Bible," and the windows bear a luminous narrative in which storytelling through imagery proves effective. Light illuminates the sacred figures and stories, as in the rose windows, a preeminent Western symbol of enlightenment and human redemption (Mann, 1996). At the center of this decorative program lies the objective to instruct and to reveal, establishing a pedagogical environment that enables the axial ritual of procession.

Therefore, these semiotic choices are deliberate: the mosque's decoration evokes the divine through abstract, encompassing patterns that complement a space of gathering and void, while the cathedral's decoration manifests the divine through concrete, sequential images that complement a space of progression and narrative. These contrasting decorative programs embody the material expression of the two paradigms, in which theology informs not just the organization of space but also the treatment of surfaces.

Context and the Limits of Doctrine

Sultan Hasan: Power, Piety, and Patronage

The Sultan Hasan complex must also be viewed beyond its theological and spatial logic. It should be explored as a monumental statement of Mamluk authority, piety, and patronage, in which the architectural form is not just a sacred place but a symbol of sovereign power. The complex of Sultan Hasan has been called "one of the masterpieces of Mamluk architecture in Cairo" (Williams, 2008, p. XX) and the largest complex of its kind in Cairo and throughout the Islamic world. It is intentional and majestic: both on the outside and inside the building resembles a fortress, imposing a sense of immense grandeur on the Cairo skyline not far from Mamluk power base, the Citadel. The face of its imposing exterior is matched by a well-crafted interior program, characteristic of the elaborate, fine and refined nature of Mamluk art. The style evolved in the Mamluk courts and was both rich in detail and aesthetic and rich in symbolic content.

The complex's function was comprehensive, designed to perpetuate the Sultan's legacy through religious and educational patronage. It was not only a mosque; it also included a madrasa and a mausoleum, the first complex in history to combine all three in one building. The inclusion of a madrasa where the four schools of Islamic law were taught established the complex as a central institution for Sunni orthodoxy. The most audacious element, however, was the placement of the Sultan's mausoleum directly behind the qibla wall. Placing a mausoleum behind the mihrab is unprecedented in Islam, and it raised considerable controversy. The norm is for a mausoleum to be shifted to one side of the qibla wall so that worshippers do not pray toward it, since "building a mausoleum for a founder is in itself unorthodox in Muslim religion" (Behrens-Abouseif, 1992, p. XX). This

unconventional location served a clear political purpose: it could have been a means of impressing the viewer from the Citadel, displaying the grand scale and exotic dome of the building. Thus, the mausoleum's prominent dome became a permanent, highly visible landmark of the Sultan's presence, intertwining his memory with the sacred axis of prayer in a theologically contentious but politically potent manner.

Chartres: Pilgrimage, Politics and Urban Identity

The form and function of Chartres Cathedral developed from the interaction of deep piety, civic pride and smart patronage. It was erected in honour of the Virgin Mary when Christianity was well established in France, and the people felt the need to show their devotion to Our Lady, and to Christ in more elaborately constructed buildings. This devotion was centered on the cathedral's prized relic, the Sancta Camisa (the Veil of the Virgin), which made Chartres a major pilgrimage destination. This ritual economy was facilitated by the cathedral's architecture: its ambulatory and apse with radiating chapels allowed easier pilgrim flow without disturbing the clergy's services.

The cathedral's construction was also a monumental civic enterprise that expressed the town's identity and sociopolitical standing. Situated on a hilltop overlooking the whole town of Chartres, the cathedral can be seen from anywhere in the town, and those who approach it are dwarfed by its height. It was unprecedented in its size and scope, and was the work of the diocese, the local guilds, and the faithful. It was done with the mind of the School of Chartres, for whom the numbers have meanings in which the Divine can be conveyed to the mundane world. This is why the cathedral was constructed in line with cosmological and astronomical laws, making it more than just a church, but a manifestation of divine order through rational thinking and workmanship.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis shows that the Sultan Hassan Mosque and Chartres Cathedral have two different architectural paradigms, which are directly linked to the fundamental tenets of each religion. Islamic tawhid is the emphasis on divine transcendence, which yields an architecture that is centripetal and immersive in submission. The mosque's space is a unified, directional void focused on the qibla, using aniconic geometry and abstract light to evoke an unpicturable God and facilitate collective prostration. Conversely, Christian incarnational theology produces an axial architecture of narrative manifestation. The cathedral's space is a linear, hierarchical path, using figural sculpture and stained glass to make the sacred story visibly present and guide individual procession toward the altar. While historical contexts of Mamluk power and Marian pilgrimage shaped their specific forms, the foundational contrast lies in this spatial-theological correlation. Hence, these monuments are not just symbolic, they are actionable objects, which are shaping the conditions of ritual encounter. The one that produces a centrifugal field of worship of a transcendent God; the other that builds a centripetal field of revelation of an incarnate God. Their comparison focuses on the point that the sacred architecture embodies the doctrine in tangible form and thus gives an essential framework to the interdisciplinary study of religion.

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