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CHAPTER 12

Religious Art, Traditional Art, Sacred Art
Some reflections and definitions

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

It must never be forgotten that the understanding of the spiritual significance of traditional and sacred art, Islamic or otherwise, is of the utmost significance for the existence of authentic religious life since such an art is ultimately a gift from Heaven and a channel of grace which brings about recollection of the world of the Spirit and leads us back to the Divine.

Were this article to be addressed only to readers in Seljuq Rayy, or for that matter in medieval Paris or Sienna, there would be no need to define such terms as religious, traditional and sacred art, for all aspects of the life of the two civilizations in question, namely the Islamic and the Christian Western, were governed by spiritual principles and there was not any domain of artistic or intellectual activity which lay outside those principles and their applications. And even art was seen in a different light in the sense that it was not confined to a particular type of activity carried out by a special kind of human being but embraced the whole of life. Or to quote the famous Indian authority on traditional art A. K. Coomaraswamy, in traditional societies, "the artist was not a special kind of man, but every man was a special kind of artist." In fact in many languages of traditional civilizations there does not even exist a word for art in the modern sense of the term because there is nothing present in such civilizations that is not art. That is to some extent the reason why during this century certain guardians of traditional teachings in various societies, especially the Islamic, have opposed "art" in its current sense, and even the category of religious art as if art were an import from the West. In reality, however, while the modern concept of art may have been imported from modern civilization, the reality of art lies at the heart of all traditional civilizations including the Islamic where the *hadīth* "God is beautiful and loves beauty" defines the centrality of beauty as reflected in art in man's life within the Islamic perspective.

Be that as it may, we are not discussing these matters in Seljuq Iran or medieval France and Italy but at a time when the modern world,

which began during the Renaissance in Europe on the basis of the rebellion of man against Heaven and the existing traditional civilization of Europe, has now spread to much of the globe. Furthermore, what remains of the traditional civilizations must battle constantly to continue its life and not be completely marginalized or distorted in the name of modernism and now to some extent what is called post-modernism, and various slogans and ideologies which have guided and continue to guide the modern world. In such a context, it is necessary to define exactly the various salient concepts such as religious, traditional and sacred art in order to avoid confusion and seek to prevent the repetition of the errors which caused the traditional art of the West to become eclipsed to such an extent that what resulted became a major obstacle to the participation of many Westerners in their religion and deprived them of a means of grace, contributing directly to the secularization of the human environment in Europe.

Let us turn our attention more particularly to the domain of Persian art. In this domain to speak of religious art in the sense of *al-fann al-dīnī* or *hunar-i dīnī,* in Arabic and Persian respectively, is not to introduce an innovation in the domain of religion. It is true that the Persian term *hunar* began to be used more and more as corresponding to the Western term art since the last century, but the reality to which it corresponds lies imbedded in Islamic civilization in general and Persian culture in particular besides the fact that the word itself was used a thousand years ago by Firdawsi in the *Shāh-nāmah*[1] in the sense of culture and refinement. As for religious art, if it is understood in the traditional sense of *al-fann al-dīnī* or *hunar-i dīnī* and not in the modern Western sense to which we shall turn soon, then as far as Islam is concerned, it was there with the first psalmody of the Noble Quran during the life of the Blessed Prophet. When Bilāl called the *adhān* in the mosque of Madinah, his chanting was something which would today be called "religious art" in the English language as ordinarily used while traditionalists like myself who distinguish religious art from traditional and sacred art would call Quranic psalmody and the chanting of the *adhān* sacred art.

Those in Islamic countries who simply identify art with Western imports that are usually, on the popular level, impregnated often with the most negative influences and characterized by chaotic disorder, oppose the very category of "religious art." But they must realize that

[1] We have in mind the well- known verse "*hunar nad-i īrāniyān ast-u bas*" (art belongs to the Persians alone).

hunar or *fann* is not simply what Arabic, Turkish or Persian cabaret singers claim to be art but that these terms have an honorable use in traditional Islamic civilization. Rather, art as used in Western languages also refers to the highest level of creativity (corresponding to the traditional understanding of such terms as *sināʿah* and *fann* in Arabic) and even in the secularized world of today includes the building of traditional cathedrals as well as mosques, Gregorian chants as well as Quranic psalmody. It is in fact impossible to understand Islamic civilization and the message of Islam itself in their totality without speaking of Islamic art which in the ordinary usage of English in an anti-traditional world is called by most people religious art. In any case putting aside for the moment the basic distinction between religious and traditional art, as these terms are understood in English, it can be stated for the Islamic public at large that such terms as *al-fann al-dīnī* or *hunar-i dīnī*, far from being Western imports alien to the Islamic worldview, are concepts as well as realities of the greatest importance at a time when the principles of Islam and the various facets of the civilization which it created over the ages are so threatened and need to be preserved, defended and explained with the utmost intellectual acumen, sensibility and perspicacity.

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Let us then begin our definitions by distinguishing first of all between the traditional and the anti-traditional or modern point of view especially as it concerns art. Tradition, as used by those who are called traditionalists and beginning with René Guénon to whom we are all indebted for clarifying this fundamental concept, concerns principles of Divine Origin and their applications over time to various domains ranging from metaphysics to poetry and music to politics in those civilizations which by virtue of being based upon Divine principles are called traditional. In the historical period in fact it can be stated that all normal civilizations such as the Chinese, Indian, Islamic or medieval Western were traditional. It is the modern world, born during the Renaissance on the basis of the residues of Graeco-Roman civilizations mostly in their phase of decadence, that is anti-traditional and an anomaly if we consider human history on a global scale.[2]

[2] "Tradition is whatever joins all that is human to Divine Truth" (Frithjof Schuon, "René Guénon: Definitions," *Sophia*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 1995, p. 7); and S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989),

In a traditional civilization in which all activity is based on principles of an ultimately Divine Origin, the making of things or art in its vast sense is no exception. In such civilizations all art is traditional art related at once to the necessities of life and spiritual needs of the user of the art as well as the inner realization of the artist who is also an artisan. There is no distinction between the arts and the crafts or fine arts and industrial arts. Nor is there a tension or opposition between beauty and utility. Art is not for art's sake but for the sake of life itself. Art in fact is none other than life, integrated into the very rhythm of daily existence and not confined to the segregated space of museums or rare moments of the annual calendar.[3] In a traditional civilization, not only is all art traditional art but also what is called religious art in modern parlance shares the same principles with the art of making pots for cooking or weaving cloth to make a dress. There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane both of which are embraced by the unifying principles and share the symbols of the tradition in question.

In traditional civilizations, therefore, the category of religious art is really misleading if this term is understood in its modern sense as being opposed to non-religious art devoid of religious truths and principles. Such an art does not even exist in a traditional civilization where every art has a symbolic and spiritual significance which is thereby religious in the general understanding of this term as well as its etymological one, derived from the Latin *religat*, meaning that which binds us to God. All traditional art as a result of its principles, symbolism, techniques, forms, meta-individual inspiration and many other factors binds the particular work of art in question to spiritual principles and aids the beholder of art to become aware of the Presence of the Divine. Hence it is religious in the deepest sense. But the term religious art, as it is used today, is nevertheless an inappropriate category in the context of traditional art.

chapter 2, pp. 65ff. As for the works of Guénon, nearly all of them discuss tradition in one context or another. See especially his *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, trans. Marco Pallis (London: Luzac & Co., 1945), Part II, chapter 3, "What is Meant by Tradition?" pp. 87-91. Many other works of Schuon also deal in the greatest depth with the meaning of tradition.

[3] These principles have been fully elucidated in the numerous writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy such as *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover, 1956); idem, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover, 1956); and *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers 1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1977).

In traditional civilizations in fact what concerns the religion of the civilization in question directly should be called sacred art rather than religious art, again remembering the limitations imposed on the meaning of religious art as a result of its being associated with the modern world where the whole notion of traditional art, supra-human inspiration, symbolism and even the traditional understanding of form have been eclipsed and forgotten, if not completely at least to a large extent. Sacred art is the heart of the traditional art of a particular traditional civilization, dealing as it does with the rites and spiritual practices associated with the religion and the Divine Message governing the tradition in question.[4] This art which should be called *hunar-i qudsī* in Persian to distinguish it from traditional art in general, is itself of course also traditional art but reflects the spiritual principles in question most directly and is the most accessible channel of grace (*barakah*) issuing from the source of revelation of the Truth. Sacred art is itself ultimately the result of divine inspiration. Not only is its subject religious but its forms, manner of execution and formal language have a sacred origin and issue from the source of the religion in question. It is not accidental that Christians consider the original icon, which is Christian sacred art *par excellence,* to be of angelic inspiration or the Hindus believe that their sacred music was brought from Heaven by Siva. In Islam, the supreme sacred art of psalmody of the Noble Quran is associated with the teachings of the Blessed Prophet and goes back ultimately to the chanting of the Psalms by the prophet David. Moreover, calligraphy, the complementary sacred art of Islam which makes manifest the Word of God as revealed in the Noble Quran, is believed by Muslims to have been originated by ʻAlī ibn Abī Tālib whose spiritual eminence in not only Shiʻite Islam but the whole of the Islamic tradition is too well known to need elaboration here.

To make clear the distinction between traditional art and sacred art, let us turn again to the Islamic tradition and Persia in particular. In this traditional civilization before the invasion of modernism in the 12th/18th and 13th/19th centuries—and in miniature paintings even a century earlier—everything that was made, from carpets to cloth to brass work to domestic architecture and including poetry and music, were works of traditional art and to the extent they have survived are still products of traditional art. Such objects do not have to do with religion in the narrow sense of the term as far as their subject or

[4] Concerning the principles of sacred art and how they have manifested themselves in various religious climates see the many works of Titus Burckhardt especially his *Sacred Art in East and West*, trans. Lord Northbourne (London: Perennial Books, 1967).

use are concerned. Yet, they all remind their users of the principles of Islam and in a most intimate manner were and remain wed to the inner meaning (*haqīqah*) of the Noble Quran. One can hardly forget God and the reality of Islam in walking through a street in the traditional quarters of a city such as Kashan or Fez any more than one could in a traditional mosque in those cities.

At the heart of this traditional art was to be found the sacred art of Islam as such, arts having to do with the Divine Word and rites which return man to his spiritual center. There was and continues to be the psalmody of the Noble Quran which in the deepest manner defines and fills the spaces of the traditional Islamic city and then calligraphy, that supreme ornament which beautifies things by imprinting upon them the letters and words of His final revelation. Then there is sacred architecture, especially that of the mosque, which is of course the center for the celebration of the Divine Word through the daily prayers, as well as that of *madrasahs*, *takiyahs*, *khānaqāhs*, *husayniyyahs* and other specifically religious edifices whose presence and *barakah* extend to the rest of the urban setting at large. It has been the genius of Islamic civilization to extend the presence of sacred architecture in such a manner that many a traditional palace, hostel or hospital looks just like a mosque and reminds those who have inhabited such edifices associated with ordinary functions of daily life of God's ubiquitous Presence.

In the context of Persia and the Persian language, it is necessary to add a note as far as the arts associated with mourning the death of Imam Husayn and Persian Sufi poetry are concerned. As for the arts associated with *ta'ziyah*, *rawdah-khānī*, *sīnah-zanī*, etc. all associated with the tragedy of Karbala and related events, they have been usually more of a "folkloric" art and although they certainly possessed and continue to possess the deepest religious significance must be considered more as traditional art verging upon sacred art than sacred art itself. This distinction is particularly important in light of the view of many traditional Shi'ite *'ulamā'* who have looked with certain suspicion on some of the arts associated with this very important manifestation of Shi'ite piety.

As for Sufi poetry, despite its almost miraculous qualities and incredible role it has played over the centuries in the spread of Islam in much of Asia, it cannot be strictly called sacred art although some of the poems of Hāfiz and Rūmī and certain sections of the *Mantiq al-tayr* of 'Attār as well as the *Gulshan-i rāz* of Shabistarī are of such celestial quality and inspiration that they could be almost qualified

as a special kind of sacred art as can a few Persian miniatures such as that of the *mi'rāj* of the Blessed Prophet from the *Khamsah* of Nizāmi now being kept at the British Museum. In this context we must also remember the special role played by the *Sawanih* of Ahmad Ghazzālī, who through this work breathed the spirit of Muhammadan poverty (*al-faqr al-muhammadī*) and the *barakah* of the Islamic revelation into Persian prose in such a manner as to make this language not only the language of Persian Muslims, but an Islamic language for those living far beyond the geographical boundaries of the Persian speaking world.

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To understand fully the distinction between traditional, sacred and religious art, it is necessary also to say a few words about non-traditional art and the meaning of art dealing with religious subjects in the context of modern civilization, that is, a civilization no longer governed by immutable spiritual principles. The very term religious art or its equivalent in other European languages is in fact appropriate as a category only in the context of modernism and especially modern European civilization, which began in the 15th century with the advent of the Renaissance but whose origins especially in the domain of art can be detected even in the 14th century after Giotto. As for other civilizations, such a term is appropriate only after the spread of modernism to other parts of the world during the past two centuries and especially in the last hundred years.

In modern European civilization one observes first of all the appearance of an art which is no longer based on supra-individual inspiration but which expresses more the individual rather than the universal order, an art which is anthropocentric rather than theocentric. Once such a humanistic art, tending toward psychologization of the human subject and naturalism became prevalent, especially in painting, the language of Western art rapidly lost its traditional character first in the Renaissance art of Italy, then Germany, France and Holland and somewhat later in England.[5] It is in the context of this non-traditional

[5] For the gradual secularization, humanization and naturalization of Western art leading finally to the breakdown of naturalistic forms with surrealism and the creation of an "art without center" see T. Burckhardt, op. cit., chapter 7, "The Decadence and the Revival of Christian Art," pp. 143ff; F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), chapter 4, "Concerning Forms in Art," pp. 61ff.; and Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte: die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit* (Salzburg: O. Miller, 1953).

world of artistic expression that religious art gains the meaning that it currently holds in English. In this context, religious art is that type of non-traditional art devoted to religious themes and functions even if its method of execution and language are no longer traditional.

By way of illustration one can point to the paintings of the Virgin by Renaissance painters, even the greatest ones such as Raphael. These images possess a quality of sweetness but they are not in the same category as the icons of the Virgin painted according to strict canons preserved over the centuries by tradition. The Renaissance and later paintings of the Virgin or Christ, even if they appear in altars of churches, are religious art and not sacred art. Even the Vatican is a religious edifice and not sacred architecture in contrast to the earlier building of the Vatican destroyed before the present one was constructed or the great Romanesque churches such as that of Moissac and cathedrals such as Chartres and Rheims that survive to this day as supreme examples of Christian sacred art. Some later European painters such as the 20th century French religious painter Rouault have been aware of this tragic loss in the West of traditional art with sacred art at its center and have lamented the fact that those in the mainstream of European art do not have access to the language of timeless sacred art as did medieval painters of icons.

And yet, the loss of traditional art and even sacred art has not been complete in the West. On the one hand the traditional arts have survived on the margin of European art especially in the domain that is usually called folkloric. On the other hand the grand styles of sacred architecture such as the Gothic continue to show signs of life here and there although they no longer dominate the scene as they did in the medieval period. Even icons continue to be painted by a few people but certainly have a very marginal role in the Western art of painting today taken as a whole. By and large, however, in the West, religious art during the past five centuries has dealt with religious themes without being traditional art. Occasionally, some artists such as Fra Angelico in his "Annunciation" have shown a directly heavenly inspiration but such exceptional events have not prevented Western religious art from being nothing more than a humanistic and to an even greater extent even sub-human art dealing with religious themes and functions. Some of the architectural monstrosities built in the name of religious buildings during this century are evident proof of the radical difference of nature between sacred art, with its supra-human inspiration and timeless character, and religious art of a purely human

and often sub-human character always time bound, dated and soon outdated.

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Lest one think that this situation is unique to the West, it must be added immediately that other civilizations, especially the Islamic, have not been completely spared from a similar plight during this century with the great difference that the traditional arts are much more alive in non-Western civilizations than in the West. Still, since the advent of the spread of modernism in other parts of the globe, there has gradually developed a "religious art" that is not sacred art in many non-Western religious climates. It is sufficient to travel to the bigger cities of India to see numerous paintings of Krishna, Rama and scenes from Hindu epics or Hindu temples which are religious but no longer traditional in character and have a character that is very distinct from the sacred arts of the Hindu world.

Coming to the Islamic world in general, and Persia in particular, one begins to detect the effect of the non-traditional art of the modern West first of all in miniature paintings and textile designs as early as the 17th century, especially in the Ottoman world and India and somewhat later in Persia itself. As far as the sacred arts of architecture and calligraphy are concerned, however, they resisted anti-traditional influences until the present century. During the past decades, however, a religious but not sacred architecture has swept over many Muslim cities in the form of mosques which have little to do with the principles and norms of Islamic architecture no matter how many pieces of tile are stuck upon their outer surfaces. These buildings range from fairly innocuous buildings to the ugliest structures which stand at the antipode of the spirit and form of the sacred art of Islam. The phenomenon of the spread of religious rather than sacred architecture is far from being uniform in all Islamic countries. In some places such as Egypt and Morocco, nearly all the new mosques are traditional in style and character. In Persia, wonderful traditional structures continue to be built along with buildings which are Islamic only in appearance but not in reality. In some Islamic countries east of Persia even national mosques are anything but sacred architecture and some of them match the ugliest churches in the West and are completely cut off from the traditional principles of the art of the civilizations in question. It must never be forgotten that the difference between the modern styled mosques in a city such as Tehran and traditional edifices such as the

Jāmi‘ Mosques of Isfahan and Yazd is not on the level of accidents of time and place but concerns the very essence of these two types of architecture. The first type is religious art and the second sacred art and one need only contemplate the difference between these two types of edifices to understand the fundamental distinction between religious art as used currently in English and sacred art as defined here.

As for calligraphy, the traditional styles have been well preserved and even revived in recent years in certain Islamic countries. But even in this domain, there are now painters who use not only ordinary calligraphy but Quranic verses written in traditional calligraphic style but fitted into larger patterns or forms which themselves are not traditional at all. Such use of calligraphy, which is becoming even more prevalent in many Islamic countries including Persia, Pakistan and the Arab East, must not be confused with sacred art. It is really religious art with elements of the sacred art of calligraphy contained therein.

In Persia specifically, there is of course the whole art associated with the tragedy of Karbala as already mentioned. There also, since the last century, a more naturalistic style of painting depicting the scenes of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his entourage and other episodes of Islam's religious history as well as the sacred history accounted in the Noble Quran has made its appearance. This type of art, so conspicuous during the month of Muharram on canvasses, tents, utensils and the like must also be called religious rather than traditional or sacred art, but a religious art that is protected to a large extent by the intensity of the piety that surrounds the events of Muharram and the types of uses made of it and thus prevented perhaps from having an extensive negative effect upon the religious life of the community as does the misuse of the sacred arts of calligraphy and architecture and their replacement by a religious art in the sense already defined parading as sacred art.[6]

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Today in the Islamic world and especially in Persia which has always been one of the major centers of art in that world, one can observe still the survival of the traditional arts in general and sacred art in particular. But one also sees not only the spread of various types of modern art from architecture to painting, but also a religious art in

[6] As for Quranic psalmody, fortunately it has been preserved from any major changes which would compromise its character as sacred art.

the sense already defined which deals with Islamic themes but uses techniques and methods borrowed from alien schools of art with worldviews diametrically opposed to the Islamic and with differing philosophies and conceptions of art, the artist, the goal of art and its purpose in human society.

At this conjuncture, it is therefore of the utmost importance to understand the basic distinctions between religious art as currently understood in the West on the one hand and sacred and traditional art on the other. It is also essential to comprehend why such terms as *al-fann al-dīnī* and *hunar-i dīnī* in Arabic and Persian do not have the same meaning as religious art in English. Traditional art is a channel of grace, and the sacred art which lies at its heart in a sense complements the social and legal norms promulgated by the revelation. It reflects the beauty which guides us to the Source of all beauty, to the One who alone is beautiful in the ultimate sense. May renewed interest in the principles of Islamic art be a means of better understanding the precious nature of traditional and sacred art in rapport with religion and man's final end and by token of this understanding the way to gain greater insight into the meaning of religious art in a world which has turned its back upon the very principles that govern all existence, principles which are revealed by religion in the form of sacred law on the plane of human action and in the forms of traditional and sacred art in the domain of artistic creativity.

> I gaze upon forms with my optic eye,
> Because the traces of spiritual meaning are to be found in forms.
> This is the world of forms, and we reside in forms,
> The spiritual meaning cannot but be seen in forms.[7]

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[7] Awhad al-Dīn Kirmānī, *Heart's Witness* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), p. 166.