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Interfaith Dialogue through Architecture

First reflections might suggest that using architecture to initiate dialogue between the three great monotheistic religions has little prospect of success simply because the architectural traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam just seem so different. After all, it may be said, what could there possibly be in common between the elaborate theatricality of a Christian Baroque church and Islam's sole requirement for a mosque that it allow worshippers to be correctly orientated towards Mecca?¹ On the latter rule, strictly speaking, not even walls are required; a simple marking in the sand would suffice.² Even with walls accepted, all the imagery in Catholic churches could easily be presented as a further insurmountable barrier given Islam's stark iconoclastic stance. Again, it would not prove difficult to generate similar antipathies for Judaism.

What, however, I would like to suggest is that these first thoughts are in fact quite wrong, and in at least three respects. First, however simply each of the three religions may have begun, all three experienced pressures towards symbolic elements in their architecture with, as is now being increasingly acknowledged, such pressures existing even from a very early stage. Secondly, part of the explanation for this phenomenon lies in influences (usually implicit) from one to the other in each of the three cases. So dialogue has in fact been taking place through architecture for a very long time. Finally, these movements do rather more than just reflect changing architectural tastes in the wider culture. In effect, they embody various theological ideas that, if handled carefully, could actually encourage dialogue to continue today and at a deeper and much more explicit level. Let me, therefore, now consider each of these points in turn.

¹ For modern application in the grounds of a hotel in Pakistan, M. FRISHMAN-H.-U. KHAN, *The Mosque*, Thames & Hudson, London 1994, p. 33.

² *Masjid* literally means "a place for bowing down". For an example of the continuing requirement for simplicity, M. M. ALI, *The Religion of Islam*, Lahore Institute, Columbus Ohio 1990 (6th ed.), pp. 281, 286-287.

1. Architecture as religious impetus

It is still quite common to find the early history of all three religions presented in large part as a deliberate revolt against any notion of sacred space, with temples seen as being replaced by the ability to worship God anywhere. Islam's mark in the sand thus replaced pagan shrines. Christianity rejected pagan and Jewish temple alike in moving to the home and eventually, when larger structures were required, to the adaption of a purely secular building, the imperial law-court or basilica. Again, whatever account is given of early Israel, even before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed Judaism had already started to move to a purely functional building: the synagogue, a word which literally means no more than a community gathering place. But, I would suggest, these simple stories in fact belie a much more complex reality.

Consider early Christianity first. Despite still common accounts to the contrary, it would seem to me a mistake to think of the home in the ancient world, as most of us now understand the term, as purely secular.³ For pagan and Jew alike it remained a sacred sphere, and so it is likely that, without any evidence to the contrary, such an assumption was carried over also into early Christianity's use of the home for worship. To see the difference from attitudes today, one need only recall for the moment how at the time of Christ entry to a large Roman villa would have been experienced. Passing through a narrow passage (the *fauces* or jaws), one moved through an open courtyard to enter the main room (the *tablinum*) where the head of the house would already be waiting (in the distance). This intervening courtyard was the usual place of religious observance. It was here that the household gods (the *penates*) were honoured and key ceremonies performed, such as the giving of the *toga virilis* to a boy on reaching adulthood or the abandonment of her dolls on marriage for a girl.⁴ Nor were matters essentially different among the poor. Each apartment in the *insulae* or tenements of imperial Rome would have had its little cupboard or shrine for the household gods at which daily worship would have been offered. In fact, the situation in the ancient world was closer to modern Hinduism than it is to most of contemporary Christianity – in Hinduism the practice of a separate room or cupboard, depending on the family's relative wealth, is maintained to this day.⁵

Nor is the next stage in the adaptation of the basilica rightly understood, if it is interpreted as a move towards secularity. The point is that Christianity had initially no alternative but to turn to models other than temples for its worship because it required the community to gather within its buildings whereas ancient temples were specifically designed to function only as dwelling places for the gods, with sacrificial

³ Even L. M. WHITE's classic account seems to me to put the emphasis in the wrong place: *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore 1990.

⁴ For more detail, J. R. CLARKE, *The Houses of Roman Italy 100BC – AD250*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif. 1991, esp. pp. 1-29. The homes of present-day Russian believers are perhaps the nearest contemporary Christian parallel.

⁵ See further D. BROWN, *God and Enchantment of Place*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, pp. 170-89.

offerings being reserved as an activity for outside the building. In this respect even the Jerusalem Temple was no exception. So, although an adapted secular building, symbolic features soon began to emerge in basilicas also, such as the altar, bishop's chair and ambo. Nor were matters any different in the earlier use of houses. The oldest surviving house adapted for Christian worship corroborates this claim. Thus while the building at Dura Europos in Syria may not have external architectural features as such that would have distinguished it from any other house, internally there is extensive use of iconography on its walls.

Again, our understanding of early Judaism has been transformed in recent years by archaeological discoveries in the Holy Land. Quite a lot of synagogues, several dating like Dura Europos from the third century, have been exposed to view, and turn out to be very far from plain edifices. Allusions to the Jerusalem Temple are frequent, as are references to key elements in Israel's history such as the *Akedah* or offering of Isaac. More surprisingly perhaps, astrological symbolism is also to be found, as in the common depiction of the signs of the Zodiac.⁶

The history of Islam may seem quite different, but here again there are a number of reasons for doubting this. First, there is the question of attitudes to the Ka'ba or sacred cube at the heart of Mecca.⁷ According to Islamic tradition not only was it a house of prayer for Adam and Abraham it is also now to be seen as the special locus for the divine presence in the way the Ark and Jerusalem Temple once were, which is why Muslims orientate themselves in prayer towards it.⁸ Although the divine presence is conceived more as emanating out from it rather than being contained by it, the Ka'ba is nonetheless treated with great reverence, as in the annual renewal of its embroidered cover or *kiswa*. Such sacralisation of space is of course reinforced by the elaborate rituals that take place each year in the same area with the annual *hajj* or pilgrimage, all of which are intended to enable the pilgrim to identify closely with key events in the Muslim's history of salvation, including actions by Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael.

It is against such a background that I suggest we interpret the basic rule for the creation of a mosque. It is not so much that anywhere will do as that sacralisation is still a necessary preliminary, as in the requirement for appropriate orientation towards Mecca and the need for ritual ablutions before such prayer. To any who object that the absence of walls means that we are still not in the territory of architecture, it may be pointed out that not only do some architectural theorists declare the creation of boundaries to be the more basic feature of architecture but also, arguably, this is

⁶ For illustrations from Dura Europos and Hamas, D. JARRASSÉ, *Synagogues*, Vilo International, Paris 2001, pp. 39, 42; for illustrations from sixth century Beth Alpha, H. A. MEEK, *The Synagogue*, Phaidon, London 1995, p. 81.

⁷ For illustration, G. MITCHELL (ed.), *Architecture of the Islamic World*, Thames & Hudson, London 1978, p. 17.

⁸ Thus it can even be described as "the main temple of the Muslim religion" because it "embodies the divine presence and inspiration", with its alternative names as House of God (*Bayt Allah al-Haram*) and Sacred House (*Bayt al-Haram*): M. CHEBEL, *Symbols of Islam*, Assouline, New York 2000, p. 60.

what lies at the root also of any explicitly religious architecture.⁹ Thus the origin of the Latin term *templum* in fact lies not in what we would understand by a building but simply as a term for a bounded space, in particular one in which religious auguries could be taken. Similarly, a number of books in the Hebrew Bible present the Temple less as a building in its own right and more as the culmination of a series of bounded spaces (the created world as a whole, the earth, the Holy Land, Jerusalem, the Temple Mount, the Holy of Holies).¹⁰ In fact, ancient cultures generally presupposed that the divine creation of the world was itself something like the construction of a building; so in the process the Creator had assigned different land areas for different forms of human activity, with some seen as most appropriate for human dwelling and cultivation, and others (such as forest groves or mountains) as places for divine encounter where heaven and earth might be more easily bridged. So, just as the Garden of Eden is presented as a defined area for Adam and Eve to dwell in (Gen 2.8; 3.24), townships continued to be marked out formally by religious ceremonies, as in the Roman ceremony of the *pomerium* or boundary.¹¹

So, in short, it is wrong in my view to suppose that these three religions only at some later point in their history take an interest in the religious value of architecture. That is a principle which is present in all three from their outset. Of course, once the interest becomes more explicit, their traditions then often vary. But even so once again I want to suggest some underlying points of comparison. However, before doing so, it will be worth noting the extent to which dialogue has been implicitly taking place already, through mutual borrowings and fertilisations.

2. Implicit dialogue

As one might expect, Christianity did eventually borrow much from the construction of the Temple as described in the Old Testament. So, for example, the internal division of the Temple between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies quickly came to be adopted in many churches with the nave constituting like the Holy Place two-thirds of the church and the quire or chancel like the Holy of Holies the remaining third. Individual pieces of symbolism were also copied, as, for example, a giant menorah in Romanesque Essen or the two mysterious pillars, Boaz and Jachin, that were reduplicated outside the Baroque Karlskirche in Vienna.¹² But more often than not the borrowings were rather muddled since until modern times no clear notion of what the Temple had once looked like had gained ascendancy. The result was claims to imitation from almost all the competing architectural styles that have characterised

⁹ E.g. C. ALEXANDER, *The Timeless Way of Building*, Oxford University Press, New York 1979.

¹⁰ Ezekiel is an obvious example.

¹¹ D. BROWN, *God and Enchantment of Place*, cit., pp. 172-173.

¹² Cf. I Kings 7.21.

the history of Christianity.¹³ A familiar example might be the Renaissance temple in Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* from 1504 but even Jews themselves are found assuming that the long departed Temple must have resembled its Muslim successor, the Dome of the Rock.¹⁴

But, if Christianity borrowed from Judaism, the same is also true in reverse. Surprising as it may seem, it is only since the Holocaust that synagogues in their external appearance can be seen to have developed their own distinctive form of symbolism.¹⁵ Prior to the modern period such buildings almost invariably reflect the architectural preoccupations of the dominant culture, and so in Christian lands there are also Classical, Baroque and other types of synagogues.¹⁶ The analogies, however, run much deeper than this, for, while there are some obvious differences in internal structure, for example in location of the pulpit (centrally rather than at one end), it is hard not to detect deeper parallels. Tradition requires a richly embroidered curtain and/or decorated door to be placed in front of the Ark that contains the Scrolls of the Law (*Sefer Torah*) which will be read in due course from a *bemah* or platform, their current location indicated by a perpetually burning light.¹⁷ In itself, this might suggest only some slight analogy with a Christian altar but explore what happens in practice, and in many cases one immediately recalls the reredos or screen behind so many Christian altars, or else some great tabernacle.¹⁸ So, whatever the origins of the practice, the various elements in fact combine to suggest the Ark as a particular locus of the divine presence, a source of grace for the practising Jew comparable to the altar in the Christian tradition.

Again, interactions between Islam and Christianity may be noted. One subject of continuing debate, for example, is the extent to which Christian Romanesque architecture developed under influence from the Muslim world.¹⁹ The point is especially pertinent in a place like Sicily where the Norman rulers seem to have employed Muslim craftsmen in some of their building operations.²⁰ Much earlier,

¹³ For discussion and illustrations, W. J. HAMBLIN-D. R. SEELY, *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History*, Thames & Hudson, London 2007.

¹⁴ The Raphael painting (now in the Brera Gallery in Milan) is one of a number of examples given in D. BAHAT-S. SABAR, *Jerusalem Stone and Spirit*, Rizzoli, New York 1998, p. 79. However, perhaps the most interesting example is of a 15th century Jewish manuscript of Maimonides which assumes the Dome of the Rock to be in continuity with the Jerusalem Temple (p. 101).

¹⁵ As, for example, in the repeated use of the Star of David on the façade of the Synagogue de la Paix in Strasbourg (1958): for illustration, D. JARRASSÉ, *Synagogues*, cit., p. 232.

¹⁶ A good example of the use of Classical architecture is the Scuola Grande Tedesca in Venice (1528-9), illustrated in D. JARRASSÉ, *Synagogues*, cit., p. 101.

¹⁷ The requirement for a curtain comes from Exodus 26.31-4; the light an allusion to the menorah: Exod 27.20-1; Num 8.1-4.

¹⁸ See the Baroque Ark from Vittorio Veneto and that from the main Roman synagogue in H. A. MEEK, *The Synagogue*, cit., pp. 135, 185.

¹⁹ E.g. G. ZARNECKI, *Romanesque*, Herbert Press, London 1989, p. 8; A. PETZOLD, *Romanesque Art*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 1995, pp. 13-14, 150-155.

²⁰ Note the influence from *murqanas*, for example, in the ceiling of the twelfth century Palatine Chapel or their presence in the Fountain Room.

though, almost certainly the relation was the other way round, with Christian craftsmen being employed in the early years of Islam, in the creation of major buildings such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus.²¹ Although the fine representational art of landscapes and dwellings found in the latter was in the history of Islam to be replicated in other contexts, it was never again repeated in such a sacred building. Even so, such cross fertilisation of ideas by no means ended at this point. Sinan, the great architect of the mosques of Istanbul, makes major use of domes to suggest the vault of heaven.²² While the symbolism already existed within Islam, especially for tombs of the saints, it can scarcely be denied that its development in a major building such as a mosque is derived from the precedent already set in the city by Justinian's great Christian church of Hagia Sophia.

Again, despite their present frequent hostility to one another, Judaism can certainly also be seen to have borrowed from Islam, in everything from the horseshoe arch to the use of prayer rugs in buildings for worship.²³

3. Underlying theological ideas

What I have said thus far could be interpreted as claiming no more than various shared practices in common. My contention, however, is that such common origins and mutual borrowings point to something very much deeper: elements of a shared theology. By this I certainly do not mean that the three religions are after all essentially the same. Rather, my point is one in natural theology: that, just as it is possible to see all three religions arguing to the existence of the same God from shared underlying assumptions about the nature of the world (its contingency, order and so on), so there are certain fundamental beliefs about the nature of the deity and of religion that make likely shared reflection of these ideas in each one of these religions' architecture. However, it is not their grounding in a common experience of the world as divinely crated that I want to pursue here but rather the result in their shared expression in sacred buildings.

Although in theory it might have been possible to offer an explanation in terms of a shared pursuit of beauty and in the history of Christianity various aesthetic theories have indeed been applied to architecture, the other two religions have proved much more reticent in developing any overarching theory.²⁴ In the case of Judaism

²¹ See O. GRABAR, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996, e.g. pp. 65-68 on an unusual inscription.

²² For a helpful discussion of Sinan, G. NECIPOGLU, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, Redaktion Books, London 2005.

²³ For Jewish use of horseshoe Moorish arches, see illustration from Toledo of former synagogue, Santa Maria la Blanca, H. A. MEEK, *The Synagogue*, cit., p. 106; for a 17th century prayer rug that once hung in a Turkish synagogue, p. 119; for a Moorish style synagogue, p. 187.

²⁴ There are very few books on aesthetics in Islam, but see O. LEAMAN, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2004 and V. GONZALEZ, *Beauty and Islam: Aes-*

interest in aesthetics is quite recent. Although in Islam its best known medieval philosophers adopt an Aristotelian theory of the *mimesis* or imitation of nature, this is done without specific reference to architecture, while it is hard to determine the extent of the influence of more mystical theories that talk of hidden inner meanings.²⁵ Modern interpreters of sacred buildings have on the whole, therefore, preferred to avoid general aesthetic theory and instead explore such symbolism as was used and the likely meanings it was intended to convey about the divine nature and purpose. In what follows I would like to carry that analysis a stage further and observe how quite different symbolic forms may nonetheless be used to convey essentially the same meaning. Because of their greater spread I shall base most of my comparisons on the different techniques employed by Christianity and Islam towards the same end.

Consider first the theme of transcendence. In the case of Christianity at its most basic this is provided through the height of the building, a height of course that runs counter to considerations of warmth and communal sociability. But with a style like Gothic many other features may also be noted, among them spires and the double use of light, not only in the scale and number of windows but also in the attempt to suggest a building so physically light that it could almost be blown heavenwards. It is a symbolism that is extensively discussed not only in the middle ages as in the writings of Abbot Suger, the style's founder as creator of the abbey of St-Denis, but also in nineteenth century writers such as Augustus Welby Pugin and John Ruskin.²⁶ It is, however, not the only way within Christianity in which the objective is achieved. Classicism prefers the dome with the vault symbolising the need to go beyond the building to heaven's vault and thus to the universe's source.

If, as I have already observed, Islam also uses the vault and also its own equivalent of the spire in the minaret, there are also less familiar methods.²⁷ Two in particular are worth noting. First, there is the use of texts from the Qur'an to cover some of the mosque's walls, both internally and externally. Given that they are quotations from Allah's communication to humankind, it might be thought that they point more towards the world rather than away from it but this would be ignore Islam's very high doctrine of the status of the Qur'an, much higher than the Bible bears within Christianity, perhaps equivalent in some ways to Christ in Christianity.

thetics in Islamic Art and Architecture, I, B, Tauris, London 2001. Judaism has only explicitly engaged with the issue relatively recently e.g. Z. BRAITERMAN, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007; M. RAPHAEL, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art*, Continuum, New York 2009.

²⁵ True of the philosophers Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Ghazzali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). For some mystical approaches, see H. CORBIN, *Temple and Contemplation*, Islamic Publications, London 1986.

²⁶ As Suger puts it, the new use of light in Gothic "illumines minds so that they go through the true lights to the True Light where Christ is the true door" and so can be "translated by divine grace from an inferior to a higher world": ed. E. PANOVSKY, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St-Denis and its Art Treasures*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979 (2nd ed.).

²⁷ Unlike the spire, the minaret has of course a practical function, in calling the faithful to prayer, but this should not be taken to preclude the existence also of a symbolic function.

It is essentially an other-worldly document, words straight from heaven, as it were, and so quite appropriately used in architecture to connote the otherness of God. The beauty of the calligraphy provided an obvious reminder of the Qur'an as divine speech and as such its primary intention may not necessarily have been even that it should be read.²⁸ So already even on the Dome of the Rock the writing proves difficult to read even for those with a good knowledge of Arabic. Not only is it often too high to be easily read but the stylised Kufic script with a minimum of diacritical points to distinguish the various letters adds to the difficulty.²⁹ So the issue in such cases seem to be less what the text says and much more what it represents: the wonderful and mysterious gift of divine speech in the Qur'an, in other words with transcendence as the dominant theme.

My second example is rather different, the *murqanas* or stalactites that are found hanging from the ceilings of some mosques.³⁰ Their lightness and delicacy seems to be used to convey the apparent insubstantiality of the building, and so with it the pull to something beyond. Intriguingly, in modern Jewish architecture, that pull is in fact frequently represented through reference to Judaism's central revelation on Mount Sinai, with the external shape of synagogues built since the Second World War often alluding to Moses' mysterious encounter on the holy mountain.³¹

Given that immanence is commonly presented as at the opposite extreme to transcendence, it might be thought that these two aspects of the divine nature could not meaningfully occur in the same building but this is to ignore the way in which symbols, and metaphors for that matter, function. On the literal level something cannot of course both transcend ('go beyond') and be immanent ('remain within'). But since God does not have a physical location, the objection does not apply. He is at one and the same time both beyond our world and all our imaginings and active within it. So, even the Christian style that places the most emphasis on transcendence (Gothic) also has strong immanentist elements. Indeed, one way of reading Gothic churches is to see its immanent art as a deliberate counterpoise to its transcendent architecture, as seen not only in its Eucharistic symbolism (tabernacle lights and so forth) but also in the humanist character of its art. The typical long hieratic figures of Romanesque are replaced by a more human Jesus engaging with humanity whether as playful infant or suffering adult. Indeed, even angels now smile, as at Reims.

The light indicative of Eucharistic presence has its obvious parallel not only in the light burning before the *mirhab* but also in the common quotation of the so-called "Light verse" from the Qur'an either on the lamp itself or noted nearby.³² More im-

²⁸ So M. FRISHMAN-H.-U. KHAN, *The Mosque*, Thames & Hudson, London 1994, pp. 44-45.

²⁹ See the comments of R. ETTINGHAUSEN, *The Man-Made Setting*, in B. LEWIS (ed.), *The World of Islam*, Thames & Hudson, London 1976, pp. 57-88, esp. p. 61. For some illustrations, pp. 73-74.

³⁰ For examples from Isfahan and Samarqand, M. FRISHMAN-H.-U. KHAN, *The Mosque*, cit., p. 61.

³¹ Ironically, a trend set by a Christian architect, Frank Lloyd Wright; for illustrations of his 1955 Elkins Park Synagogue, A. MEEK, *The Synagogue*, cit., pp. 222-223.

³² Qur'an 24.35, with its central metaphor of God as like a lamp burning olive oil.

portantly, (as with the Jewish Ark) the *mirhab* does seem to function in some ways like the Christian altar, mediating the divine presence through that intimate link with the Ka'ba in Mecca. That is no doubt why the architecture at this particular point in the building, while giving clear direction signs for prayer, yet also adds an element of mystery in what precisely is being conveyed in the sheer beauty of the accompanying architecture.

Again, some symbols seem intended to attempt to speak of both transcendence and immanence at the same time. Thus the way in which the top step of the *minbar* or pulpit is reserved for Mohammad could be taken to refer to his transcendence of any particular place now that he is in heaven, but it could also be used to speak of his continuing influence here on earth in each and every mosque. Equally, the elaborate housing of the scrolls of the Law in a Jewish synagogue that we have already noted could be taken to refer to the immanence of such laws now within the Jewish community, nourishing it, or such reverence could be taken to imply the way in which the Law is never exhausted by human endeavour, given its transcendent origins on Mount Sinai.

A third form of symbolism (in addition to transcendence and immanence), particularly associated with the Classical architecture of the Renaissance and subsequent revivals, is that of order. Among the various Renaissance treatises on the subject, Alberti's is perhaps the best known. He spoke of an "absolute and fundamental rule in nature" in *concinnitas* by which he meant harmonic ratios that generated symmetry and proportion.³³ So, recurring themes of order, balance and proportion are used to emphasise a good God who has produced a harmonious world suitably designed for human habitation.

Similarly, then, in Islam there is extensive use of recurring patterns often drawn from the natural world that reinforce a sense of order and design in that world. Some scholars suggest a deliberate contrast with the barrenness of a surrounding desert landscape, and so the aim is to give reassurance of «a fearful and primitive world [...] tamed and cultivated».³⁴ If that is so, the parallel might be more with the Muslim tradition of Paradise gardens, reflecting the believer's ultimate destiny. But there is of course no reason why the symbol should not be multivalent, that is, carry more than one meaning. Much the same might be said about the quotations from the Qur'an. Earlier I noted their capacity to convey transcendence. But the way in which the text becomes a pattern could also be used to argue for a similar attempt, as in the floral and abstract patterns, to give a sense of a good divine purpose to the ordered world in which God has placed us.³⁵ Indeed, the practice of combining text and floral patterns is very common. Even so, still more common is the treatment of writing as itself an abstract form, and so order is in fact indicated less by a connection to nature

³³ L. B. ALBERTI, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, Dover, New York 1986, pp. 194-200.

³⁴ R. ETTINGHAUSEN, *The Man-Made Setting*, cit., p. 70.

³⁵ For a similar argument, see K. CRITSCHLOW, *Islamic Patterns*, Thames & Hudson, London 1976.

and more through the quality of its geometry in both natural and in human patterns (such as writing).³⁶

I began this essay by contrasting the elaborate character of Christian Baroque churches with the simplicity of the basic rules for a mosque. I want, therefore, to end by suggesting that even Baroque might have its parallels in these other two religions. Admittedly, finding parallels for the theatricality and playfulness of Baroque in Jewish architecture is difficult, but its liturgy is quite another matter. Think, for instance, of the riotous behaviour in Jewish synagogues during the feast of Purim with its elaborate and detailed playacting in remembrance of deliverance from persecution from Haman under Esther. The element of theatre detected in divine action on behalf of the Jewish people clearly parallels Baroque perceptions of the mass as theatre, in consequence of which churches even came to be modelled on theatres as in the Assam brothers' church of St John Nepomuk at Munich or Bernini's treatment of St Teresa in ecstasy in Rome. Islam, though, does offer some direct architectural parallels. Occasionally we even find sunbursts to rival the typical Baroque monstrance.³⁷ But more commonly, as in Baroque's whirling curves and trompe l'oeil, so wild arabesques are used in some Muslim architecture to suggest that only a dazzling divine miracle keeps our world in place.³⁸

4. Conclusion

My aim here has been a strictly limited one: to demonstrate that, despite initial appearances to the contrary, the architecture of the three monotheistic religions draws on very similar themes. Although radically different symbols are sometimes used to make the same point, it seems clear that such symbols seek to explicate essentially the same God: one who, though totally beyond our adequate conceptualisation, is fully active in our world and in a way that suggests the goodness of a providential design. Of course, no doubt the relative weight put on any particular element will vary across the religions, but what I hope I have shown is the possibility of fruitful and creative dialogue between them through exploring further the symbolism embodied in their buildings. In sum, then, my hope is that I have given enough examples to suggest that it is not just formal arguments for God's existence that the three relig-

³⁶ See, for example, the quotation from the 14th century writer, Muhammad ibn Mahud al-Amuli in R. YEOMANS, *The Story of Islamic Architecture*, New York University Press, New York 2000, p. 19.

³⁷ For a couple of examples, colour plate B and J in E. BAER, *Islamic Ornament*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1998.

³⁸ For such an interpretation (though without reference to Baroque), D. CLÉVENOT, *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Decoration*, Thames & Hudson, London 2000. For good illustrations of arabesque with and without text, pp. 136-137 (nos. 190, 192). For set in relation to the text "only God endures", p. 152 (no. 212). Note too Dalu Jones' comment: «Islamic decoration covers buildings like a mantle; its purpose is to conceal the structure rather than reveal it» (G. MITCHELL [ed.], *Architecture of the Islamic World*, cit., p. 144).

ions might share in common. Equally, one could explore the lived character of the three faiths and find in their actual practice of architecture shared elements in their approach to worship of, at least in some respects, the same God. Elsewhere, I have suggested that, rather than comparing doctrinal and other claims directly, progress in inter-faith dialogue could be better achieved by taking seriously their different relational standing to wider traditions.³⁹ Surface conflict might thereby turn out not necessarily to be deep conflict. So then here, as we have seen, apparently competing symbols do not necessarily imply opposed religious claims.

³⁹ See for example, my attempt to reconcile the competing traditions in the three religions on the sacrifice of Isaac (or Ishmael in Islam), D. BROWN, *Tradition and Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 237-260.