

## THE ISLAMIC CITY, CIVILIZATION and THE POLITICS of NOSTALGIA\*

Oliver LEAMAN\*\*

### Abstract

The city in the Islamic world has held a significant place both in political life and in religious imagination. Dating the Islamic calendar from the time of the establishment of the first Muslim city is by no means arbitrary and is evidence of the crucial role of the city in the life of the religion. It has sometimes been argued that there is something very different about the Islamic city, and it is certainly true that the discourse of nostalgia for the “real” Islamic city has played an important role in modern political life. To a degree the fondness for the past as it is imagined to have been could have been formed around the countryside, and sometimes it is, yet given the formidable status of the city in Islam it is generally directed at the city. It is not by chance that the term in Turkish for civilization, medeniyet, should be linked with the notion of the city. This might be seen as a factor in the success of Islam and its self-confidence that it sees itself firmly ensconced in the environment of the city, with all its distractions and different lifestyles.

How does a nostalgia which points to an imagined past manage to coexist with life in the present city, where it becomes increasingly difficult to carve out a religious space? This will be explored looking at both majority Muslim cities and those in other parts of the world where Muslims also live. It will be argued that trying to restrict urban life for religious reasons is a reflection of a defensiveness ill-suited to a religion such as Islam and is based on a view of the past that is misleading. In any case the city will emerge as the site for a protracted debate on how to live as a Muslim today, as it always has, and the parameters of this debate will be defined.

**Key words:** Islamic city, civilization, politics and nostalgia

---

\* Presented as an oral presentation at the **International Symposium City and Islam Perceptions of Hikmat and Civilisation** (September 28-29 2012, Isparta, Türkiye).

Bu makale "Uluslararası Hikmet ve Medeniyet Algıları Bağlamında Şehir ve İslam Sempozyumu"nda (28-29 Eylül, 2012 Isparta) sunulan tebliğdir.

\*\* Prof Dr., University of Kentucky, USA.

## İSLAMİ ŞEHİR, MEDENİYET VE NOSTALJİNİN SİYASETİ

### Özet

Şehir İslam dünyasında siyasi hayatta ve dini hayal gücünde önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. İslami takvimin ilk Müslüman şehrin kurulmasına dayanması boşuna değildir ve şehrin dini hayattaki yerini göstermesinin bir delilidir. İslami şehirde oldukça farklı bir durum olduğu tartışılır ve “gerçek” islami şehrin siyasi hayatında önemli bir rol oynadığı doğrudur. Eskilere ait özlem kırlara ait olduğu düşünülebilir, yine de İslam’da şehre dair özlem genellikle şehrin kendine aittir. Türkçede medeniyetle ilgili kavram şehirle bağlantılıdır. Bu İslam’ın başarısında önemli bir etken ve şehir etrafında oluşan bütün engel ve farklı hayat tarzlarıyla oluşan sağlam yapının meydana getirdiği özgüveni beraberinde getirmektedir.

Nostalji, nasıl hayal edilen geçmişle günümüzde birlikte yaşamı gerçekleştirmeye işaret edebilir ki dini bir alan ortaya çıkarmak giderek güçleşmektedir. Bu çoğunluğu müslüman ve müslümanların yaşadığı diğer şehirlere bakılarak incelenebilir. Şehir hayatını dini sebeplerle sınırlama uygun olmayan savunmacı bir durum İslam gibi bir dine uygun değildir ki, bu geçmişe dayalı kalma yanlış yönlendirebilir. Her halükarda her zaman olduğu gibi, şehir Müslümanın bugün nasıl yaşayacağıyla ilgili bir tartışma oluşturacak ve bu tartışmanın ölçüleri belirlenecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İslami şehir, siyaset ve nostalji

### What makes a building Islamic?

The most obvious building to consider under this heading is the mosque, a building whose sole function is religious. Muslims can pray almost anywhere of course but the mosque is a building especially built for that purpose, and a variety of designs of such buildings have been tried over the years. Different cultures favour different types of mosques, and often allegiance to a region of the world is indicated by the sort of mosque that is constructed. The Ottoman Empire had a wonderful architect, Sinan, who designed and supervised the construction of many mosques and similar buildings, and it is very difficult to get away from the influence of someone like that. In recent decades there has been a plethora of mosque construction in Turkey, during a period when religion became fashionable again and when it became cool to pray and be seen to be attached to a place of worship. The styles of most of these mosques has been pedestrian at best, many of them seek to follow some of the general patterns of Turkish mosques, sometimes looking back to the Seljuk period, sometimes to Sinan himself, and sometimes to a more Arab character, often depending on who the patron of the building is and the doctrinal allegiance of the local community.

There is always a tension in aesthetics between forging a new path and respecting the past, a tension which becomes even more interesting in the design of religious buildings, since precisely the same tension exists in religion, and especially in Islam. Although people often link Islam with tradition, when it first developed the monotheistic idea this was quite revolutionary, and when the Prophet came to deliver the last message it was revolutionary again in going against many of the beliefs and customs of the local Arabs who received the original message. On the other hand, the ways in which art and architecture developed in the early Islamic world owed a great deal to existing techniques and styles, hardly surprising given that most of the artists and craftsmen themselves were not in fact Muslims. Once certain styles developed it was easy to see them as specifically Islamic and traditional, and difficult to get away from in new buildings. So in Turkey when Vedat Dalokay designed a new type of mosque for Kocatepe which sought to move away from the sorts of principles that had been well established by Sinan and his school, it did not proceed but was changed into something much more familiar. On the other hand, the Sancaklar mosque in Büyükcemece breaks genuinely new ground, in that it looks at how the building interacts with the natural environment and its situation in the city, rather than the sorts of fixed and transcendental values that many Turkish mosques seek to emulate, often resulting in pastiche; a problem with those buildings is that they seek to answer the question, what makes a building Islamic or what makes a building Turkish and so they look to the past for an answer to such a question. Only the past would have an answer since both Islam and Turkishness come from the past.

Here we need to distinguish between two Turkish words *medeniyet* and *uygarlık*. They both can mean civilized, but the former points more to a city and a culture, while the later to a form of being Turkish, being part of what was originally a tribe. They reflect the same sort of tension we noted originally dealing with the nature of religion and art, and is a part of what is meant by civilization itself. In recent architectural designs in Muslim majority countries a sort of nostalgia for the past, a past which of course never really existed, has come to dominate design even for nonreligious buildings, where a kind of exoticism has come to the fore, as though orientalism has come to be seen as an accurate account of what the East ought to be, rather than a crude form of objectification by those ignorant of its real character. On the other hand, it is worth trying to define a style which is not merely a copy of what goes on elsewhere, as though the best that could be done is to imitate the achievements and ideas of those from outside of the region. This was an excellent point made by the architect Cansever in criticizing the Kocatepe mosque design which had the dome much closer to the floor than is traditional in mosque design, as though the dome could be anywhere at all and did not have to tower over the worshippers, representing as it does in so many mosques the sky and the heavens, and ultimately of course what is even higher than they are, their creator. Yet Dalotay was right in thinking that the notion of a dome could be developed and transformed, and his image of how the mosque ought to be is definitely a far more

exciting and dramatic idea than what in the end was approved for construction. In some ways he was undone by the fact that in his design so much of what was traditional was included and reinterpreted (excellently discussed in Bozdoğan, S. & Akcan, E. 2012). A genuinely different sort of mosque like the Büyükçekmece building or indeed even the mosque in the Parliament complex succeeded because they made very few concessions to the past, and demanded to be assessed in their own terms. These buildings rejected the nostalgia that so often pervades issues of how to build today in ways that respect the past without being dominated by it.

### **What makes a city Islamic?**

Before we can make much progress with trying to understand what makes a building Islamic, we need to examine the context within which that building operates, in most cases now the city. The obvious first issue that arises with respect to the Islamic city, and the most prominent, is whether there is an essence to the Islamic city. Is there something which they all have to have and which differentiates them from other kinds of city? There are many problems with this approach, especially as there is such a huge variety of cities that can be called Islamic, and quite naturally old and existing cities tended to maintain the structure of the city that the new rulers found when, as in the early years of expansion, they captured it. Within the first century of Islam such a wide variety of different countries were occupied and gradually transformed in religious terms that it is very difficult to extract something they all had in common. The sorts of cities in Persia, for instance, were very different from those in North Africa, so the arrival of Islam did not totally transform those cities and make them into something similar to each other, apart from the building of some specifically Islamic institutions such as mosques and madrasas. This brings us to another issue of some significance and that is the expression "the Islamic city", which suggests a contrast with the non-Islamic city. Here we arrive at a very real contrast with the modern city and its earlier predecessors, since today there are Muslims everywhere and virtually no city is without at least some Islamic institutions. This is a real difference from the past, when Muslims were largely restricted to certain parts of the world, those areas which they dominated, and were rare and exotic creatures elsewhere. It raises an interesting aesthetic issue, which is how different Islamic architecture in the city ought to be from what is around it, and how similar it ought to be to what is taken to be original Islamic cities such as those in the Arab peninsula.

### **Religion and the city**

An intriguing question about the Islamic city, which I am taking here to mean a city with a substantial Muslim presence, is how far faith structures the city.

We should see a city not just as empty space which has things in it, but as an environment which produces and reproduces social relationships, including attitudes to the past and future. The buildings and shape of the city reflect those who live in it, their ideas and aspirations, and the legal structure within which they live and work. Some of this will be based on local custom and some of it on religion, in the case here Islam. So for example O'Meara (2007) argues in his analysis of Fez that the positioning, height and rationale for the walls in the city are Islam, local custom and the need to protect the rules of privacy and modesty within that cultural environment. Hakim (1986) makes a similar point, arguing that Maliki thought played a crucial role in the design of Tunis. On the other hand, Faroqhi and Marcus do not detect much of what are taken to be features of the traditional Islamic city in the cities they studied, and all the generalizations about the separation of people into distinct quarters, a diminished public role for women, special arrangements in the construction of houses to preserve their modesty are not found in at least some Islamic cities.

One of the relevant factors is whether in a climate like that of the Maghreb walls would (also) be helpful in protecting inhabitants from the sun and keeping them relatively protected from the cold at night. It is certainly true that one should not treat architecture as though it were only a matter of dealing with nature, since it is far more than that, and yet there are ways in which buildings fit their natural environments which has little if anything to do with culture, but much to do with the facts of nature. After the defeat of the Iraqis in 1993 they left Kuwait and returning Kuwaitis were often in two minds about how to build or rebuild their houses. Some were in favor of modern buildings which went along with traditional architectural styles, while others wanted to import modern architecture which made no references at all to the region in which it found itself. Presumably both would be equally good or bad at fitting in with the local environment. In a country with cheap sources of power issues like how much it would cost to cool a house built in a particular way do not become that relevant. This is also a significant feature that has no direct religious roots either. It is worth pointing out that religious buildings often have a political rather than a religious function. Wolper points out that dervish lodges and madrasas were used in Turkish cities to oppose the existing Seljuk organization of urban space. Some rulers supported the building of Sufi lodges to project their power at a distance and engage and energize supporters in strategic locations.

### **Islamic cities and tradition**

There are accounts of Islamic city design that emphasize the religious need to fit in with the local environment, since the Qur'an makes it clear that we are

obliged to look after nature responsibly, and that means not exploiting the environment or treating it as though it were there entirely for our purposes. This approach seeks to develop the idea of an objective aesthetics of design, whereby certain principles of design are mandated from heaven, as it were, since they embody the appropriate way in which things should be built given our nature as living in a world created by God where we have divinely-specified aims and natures. An important school of Muslim thinkers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr and René Guénon, and their followers, who argue interestingly in this way, and for them the Islamic city should be an environment in which people care for each other, take responsibility for the state of common spaces, build in a "traditional " manner since that represents deep metaphysical truths in the design, very much in the same way that the Prince of Wales argues in Britain that tradition is more than just a style based on the past, but rather is a style based on some deep truth which needs to be replicated constantly into the future. He has even created a college in London, the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, to encourage craftsmen and women to display and develop their traditional crafts. Many of these are Muslim and the theory on which this approach is based is that behind all these traditional styles there is a basic truth, albeit they have each developed in different directions along the way. More relevant to our purposes here, the Prince of Wales thinks that architecture needs to be holistic, and that generally means for him classical or neoclassical, since in that style is embodied the traditional values of elegance, control and harmony on which society ought to be based, while modern or postmodern architectural design is negative and ugly in its approach and represents social forces that we ought to try to discourage rather than foster. This remains a popular view, especially within Islam, that something very different is required of the Islamic city as compared with other cities, and the principles of design should reflect a unique lifestyle, one that is aligned with our real nature as human beings created by God. God told us how to live in the Qur'an, and those instructions constitute principles from which the planning of the city should follow, and indeed has followed at least for periods of the past. Not only cities but individual buildings and their design should reflect these transcendental principles of how things ought to be, which were after all established by God, and anything that deviates does not deserve a place in any building that can be called Islamic. This was precisely the point that Cansever made in opposing the original design of the Kocatepe mosque.

Janet Abu-Lughod makes an interesting point, which could be taken to be a challenge. She argues that "The Middle Eastern city is not all of one piece; it is not simply a special "urban type" which differs from western cities by virtue of its unique Islamic heritage or by virtue of the particular culture in which it grows" (Lapidus, 1969: 180). But why not? If Islam is a significant religion, which it is, then being a Muslim makes a difference to people's lives, and presumably not only to the spiritual aspects of those lives but to their material conditions also? One of the claims that Muslims often make to differentiate their religion from others is to

say that it is not just a system of belief but affects the whole of life, which actually is not much of a principle of differentiation since virtually all religions say something similar. Few religions if any produce a set of principles in which one is supposed to believe and then says that behavior can take any form whatsoever. So if Muslims are going to live different lives from non-Muslims, it would seem to follow that this would change the urban landscape accordingly. There have been many attempts to distinguish between the Islamic city and the Western city, and these fall into the familiar orientalist patterns of trying to lean on an essence which distinguishes the East and the West. Muslims visiting the West for the first time will often be shocked by the lifestyles of the inhabitants but impressed by their material wealth, or if they come from a wealthy background, by the highly developed culture that pervades much of the West. Non-Muslims visiting the Islamic world will often be shocked by the poverty, either material or intellectual, and disorganization which they perceive to exist there but are impressed by the high levels of religiosity among many of the inhabitants, and the easy way in which religion pervades everyday life. Visiting cities emphasizes these points, cities act to amplify the characteristics of a country. Abu-Lughod broadens the point to stress not necessarily Islam but perhaps instead the local culture, and we might add in general some combination of the two. It would be entirely reasonable to think that religion and culture must make a difference, since if they do not, one is tempted to say, what is the point of them? We note differences between cities and we quite reasonably conclude that there is some reason for that difference, and the reason is to be found, we assume, in some difference perhaps between the inhabitants, a cultural or religious difference, or something of that nature.

### **How unique is the Islamic city?**

Abdulaziz Saqqaf pursues this point and suggests: "The Islamic city requires social cohesion and compulsory cooperation among its inhabitants. Residents have an obligation, in concrete economic and social terms, towards their neighbors in a radius encompassing as a minimum, 40 houses. Therefore, neighborly cooperation, and full knowledge of the members of the neighborhood is necessary... The togetherness of Islamic city inhabitants compares markedly with the loneliness of modern city people" (Saqqaf, 1987: 43). He goes on to construct a list of important aspects of life in the Islamic city which makes it pleasant, beautiful, clean and also private, which one might think would rather get in the way of knowing the neighbors. In the same volume Cyrus Mechkat argues (in a section called "The Eastern traditional city has nothing in common with the Western town" suggests: "The city invested by Islam reflects the religious purpose to permanently maintain and safeguard its values. The industrial town is the product of an enterprising society..... Within the two urban entities, human relationships differ fundamentally (Saqqaf, 1987: 27)." In the West everything changes and there is a premium on invention and enterprise, while the reverse is the case in the Islamic

city. However, one of the distinctive features of Islam perhaps is that its leading figure, the Prophet Muhammad, was himself a trader initially and came from a thoroughly commercial background, as did his first wife. Much of the opposition to him from his own community may well have been motivated by their concerns that a new form of worship would interfere with their monopolization of the pilgrimage trade to Mecca. It is perhaps not coincidental that Islam very quickly came to institutionalize that trade as part of its core beliefs, and presumably that form of commercial life as a consequence continued to the mutual profit of all involved. There are a number of significant direct references to commerce in the Qur'an, but as always in religion these are merely the initial comments on which a vast amount of legislation is constructed, with reliance on other often more explicit religious sources.

It is stated in the Qur'an, "Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just [balance] between those [extremes]" (25:67). Islam sees itself very much as a religion in the middle, between the asceticism of Christianity and the materialism of Judaism. Muslims are to divert resources to charity, zakat, and pray of course, but they are certainly encouraged to play a committed commercial role also. The Qur'an links businessmen, and in particular those who travel for the purpose of trade, alongside the *mujahidun* (73:20). Islam does not oppose activities aimed at promoting business and industry. This is to be done with great sensitivity to the ethical rules specified by the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the prophet. The emphasis on moderation might be thought to suggest that people should not live in huge houses, or tiny houses, but in medium sized houses, but suppose that you have a lot of children or an extended family, or a lot of money which you would like to spend on a large house? Is there anything wrong with that, if you have also given money to charity and taken care of your other financial obligations? Is there anything wrong with building huge structures that project the success of the institution behind it, as often takes place? Some of the most magnificent buildings in the Islamic world are enormous, and it is their scale that we often admire as much as their other features, and to criticize them for their extravagance seems rather a miserable thing to do.

It is difficult to argue that relationships in the Islamic city and elsewhere would be very different. Muslims are also in competition with each other, and no doubt with non-Muslims also, and have to deal with financial success and failure. That is not to say that the Islamic economic system is the same as other economic systems, and this is not the place to get into that topic, but the suggestion that the Islamic city progresses through everyone loving everyone else and helping each other is far from the picture we get in the Qur'an and the rest of the exegetical literature.



### **The significance of size**

One of the problems of Islamic cities today is that they have become so large it is difficult for the old habits of neighborliness to flourish or even survive. Initially people come into the cities from the countryside and often live close to others from the same region or tribe or clan, yet in a big city individuals will often have to travel long distances to work, and many family members may need to work also to keep up with the cost of living. A premium on space may make people come closer to each other than they would really like, and this may encourage distance rather than the reverse. As some succeed in the city they leave their former neighborhoods and establish new relationships with similar families, violating the ideal of closeness to a specific group of people with whom one remains in close contact for much of the time. In particular, success means that neighbors are no longer required in practical terms, and may then well be discarded. Like many other religions Islam praises hospitality, high moral standards, fraternity and other social requirements, and yet in practice many Muslim societies are bereft of these virtues. *Al-amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al munkar* is excellent as a general principle of behavior, but within Islamic communities it has often been lacking in practice. Rape, violence, theft, fraud and so on are surely just as common within Islamic groups as elsewhere, and this is worth bearing in mind when radical distinctions are drawn between Islamic and other kinds of cities. Some cultures are much better at concealing things, keeping them within the range of the community and private, while other cultures perhaps amplify social and moral problems in such a way as to give an entirely unrepresentative picture of that society. As commentators on the Islamic city have often pointed out, the demand for privacy is often significant, especially when women are concerned. That often means that crimes and cruelty that takes place in private never see the light of day. Religion sets us the challenge to behave better, but so far there is not a lot of evidence that the challenge has really been taken up, and since in Islam paradise is reserved for the afterlife, this is not surprising.

People living in a society and genuinely trying to base their lives on the directions of God and his Messenger would produce a harmonious and prosperous polity and city. After all, religion comes from God, who knows what sorts of creatures we are since he has created us, and he instructs us to live in certain ways that are in accordance with what he knows is best for us. If we do so we flourish, if we fail to do so we suffer. A society in which people really are interested in regulating their lives in accordance with God's will is going to be well prepared for life in a city that will not only produce wealth but also distribute it in a reasonable and just manner. This really is a theme of the Qur'an, and the fact that most Muslim societies, if not all of them, do not live up to their ideal is perhaps an indication that they are not really Muslim societies. People do not really think about what God wishes them to do before acting, and so give charity grudgingly and unwillingly,

and seek to hold onto as much of their earnings as they possibly can, perhaps by concealing them from the tax authorities. People do not always treat their employees with respect or even pay them their due, if they can get away with it, and working and living conditions are often grim and exploitative. The fact that on the whole there is mass emigration from Islamic-majority countries to the rest of the world suggests that the situation in those countries is far from ideal. It is not just that they are often poor, although they are, but also that the ways in which people live and treat each other are lacking in the sort of respect that all religions regard as significant. This is very much one of the themes of the recent unrest in the Arab world, and suggests that although countries often call themselves Muslim, they are not experienced as being so by many of their inhabitants if Islam is to be more than just formally interpreted in terms of rituals and prayers. In that case, the nature of the Islamic city will sadly be far from the standards that Islam sets itself as a religion with direct implications for how people live. The formal requirement of preserving privacy is significant but surely not as significant as many of the unpleasant features that often characterize cities with majority Muslim population.

### **The past and the present**

It might be said that an Islamic city is really only Islamic if it is run in accordance with Islamic law. After all, if the Muslims in the city come under some other sort of legal jurisdiction, they can hardly be said to be able to live really Muslim lives. But then we have another problem, which is the appropriate school of law for the location, and how that law is applied. The trouble with a lot of *shari'ah* law is that it does not proceed on the basis of case law, of considering earlier cases and what happened in the past, but through the fiat of the judge and the texts he thinks appropriate to use in adjudicating the case. The issue here is not the validity of such law, but how it is carried out, and the advantage of case law is that even if judges deviate from it, one can observe such deviation and control it, to a degree, and most importantly it provides a perspicuous grasp of the law, its interpretation and application. There is no reason why *shari'ah* law should not be developed within this hermeneutic framework, but as a matter of work in general it does not. The legal school which has the greatest scope for development in this direction is probably the Hanafi, which with its principle of *istihsan* is practiced in using a general principle, here of welfare, as a criterion of what is permissible legally. This principle plus the earlier decisions which have been taken on its basis and the cumulative experience of assessing different issues with reference to it and the corpus of Hanafi jurisprudence may provide a relatively objective system of law based on religion and not just in the individual fiat of particular judges.

It might be wondered what the relevance of law and the city is, but the connection between these two institutions is deep and longstanding. The city contains the major institutions of law such as courts and the lawyers, normally, and

is the place to go to settle legal disputes even if they occur in the countryside. Parts of the countryside may escape the power of the city and the state, and rebellions and lawlessness may flourish there. Outside the city the writ of authority is often weakened, and the traveler is responsible for his own welfare and protection, hence the strong customs of hospitality in the countryside which perhaps are constructed on the idea that were these not to exist, then life there would be very difficult indeed. One of the points that Ibn Khaldun made is that over time the city declines due to a love of luxury and a disinclination to cooperate within the group, and then the city is overcome by a new group who come from the countryside and who have relations with each other of solidarity which allows them to act as one body and take power. Whatever we think of the specifics of this idea there is certainly something in the idea that over time the links between people in the city, both in the past and today, weaken since cities are so big and the ways in which we can spend our time are so diverse and individual. The city authorities provide security and there are structures to preserve the law and the trappings of civilization. In the countryside, by contrast, this is all the responsibility of the group, and they have to organize things since otherwise there will be no organization. Necessarily people have to work together if anything is to be done and so people grow up expecting that cooperation and the close links they have with others to exist as part of the normal run of things. Such groups then acquire the ability to act together in ways that the city has lost, since cooperation is no longer really required in an urban setting for social life to flourish.

It is worth noting that although Ibn Khaldun was thinking of Islamic cities when he wrote his great history of civilizations, there is nothing in his account of cities which is particularly limited to Islam. One might think that within the city the Islamic community would act together because after all they are Muslims and worship one God in the same way, and appreciate the principle of *tawhid* or unity which underlies the universe. This is something which many books and articles on the principles of Islamic urban planning start off by saying, as though this really gives us a clue as to what should happen in the city. Just because one sees God as the creator of the universe and everything in it does not really have direct implications for urban planning. You may appreciate this fact and yet still not wish to work together with your neighbor. You may for example not think that your neighbor is a good person or a good Muslim, and as we have already argued, there is no reason to think that free enterprise and Islam are incompatible. That means that one has to accept a degree of conflict within the city, since different skills at commerce will result in differing levels of income, there will be winners and losers even in a city consisting entirely of Muslims, and as Ibn Khaldun points out, this may well lead to a decline in social cohesion. An unsuccessful businessperson may just shrug her shoulders and say when her shop goes out of business that she nonetheless feels strong bonds of attachment to the person who takes over her space and her business, since we are all created by one God, but she may not. The unsuccessful tend to resent the successful, and the latter fear the former, whatever

their common religious background may be. Of course, if there are religious differences here then that is often amplified by commercial success and failure, and this all contributes to the city breaking down into disparate and independent units, within which a degree of *ʿasabiyya* survives, but does not extend far beyond the boundaries of the local neighborhood. One difference between the modern and earlier cities is that the groups that take over the city are likelier now to come from areas of the city where disadvantaged communities act in solidarity to achieve their political ends, as opposed to those coming in from the countryside. There are today just so many fewer people living in the countryside and so many more people living in the city, albeit often on the periphery and living very peripheral lives. The principle of *tawhid* which underlies the universe does not often seem to do much to bring Muslims together in the city. In many small American towns, for instance, there are several mosques catering for the Muslim inhabitants. One is frequented by those of Arab origin, one by those coming from the Indian subcontinent and one by black Muslims. In big European cities mosques often are distinguished as the Turkish mosque, the Somali, the Egyptian and so on, which suggests that the principle of *tawhid*, significant though it is as a principle of Islam, is often not taken closely to heart in the everyday lives of many Muslims. This again suggests that the idea that the Islamic city either today or in the past would be very different from cities in other cultures and religions is far-fetched.

### **The Islamic city and the state**

In his book *al-Madinah al-fadilah* al-Farabi outlines the principles of the perfect Islamic city, and although in many places he also talks about the ideal Islamic state it is worth noticing that the city seems to be the focus of his attention, and that of Muslim thinkers in general. Cities are the perfect places for *daʿwah* of course, since that is where people live in a way that relatively easy access to them is afforded, and also they have a status that elevates them over the countryside. Cities are centers of education and authority, law and power, and there is often a status involved in living in a city. The city in Islamic culture has always had a crucial status (Abu Lughod, 1987). Ibn Khaldun points out in his remarkable work on the dynamic nature of Muslim society that the city often represents a particular crystallization of social forces that defines a culture (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). Cities are important for him precisely because they establish a culture, and only a city is wealthy enough and sedate enough, in his terms, to allow for superfluous activities which are embodied in material objects like ceramics, lavish architecture and public works in general. Yet cities and the cultures they embody are merely temporary repositories of culture since they bear within themselves the seeds of their own destruction, and in a sense the bigger they are, the harder they fall, since they give rise to envy externally and corruption and softness internally, two forces that inevitably work in tandem to bring a city down.

Islam rapidly embedded itself in cities, the cities of Medina and Mecca. It is worth noting that the dating of the Islamic calendar starts with the year that Medina, the city of Medinah al-munawwah or the Enlightened City and previously Yathrib, offered shelter to the nascent Muslim community. It could have been regarded as having started earlier when the revelations commenced, for instance, or later when the community moved onto Mecca, but the initial emigration to Medina represented the first time the community lived in a city, and so was defined as a politically significant group. This brings out something of the significance of cities at the time, and it remains true today that it is only when events take place in cities that they are noticed and regarded as significant. In warfare it is usually the capture of cities, or their destruction, which brings the war to an end. Any amount of countryside can be under the control of the enemy and yet it is the fall of the city that marks a significant change in regime.

This emphasis on cities certainly did not stop with the two holy cities, but has continued ever since in the individual characters of the major Islamic cities, and not only those in the Arab and Persian world. Cairo, Beirut, Istanbul, Isfahan, Kuala Lumpur, Sarajevo and so on are all major cities with fascinating histories and dramatic changes of fortune, and these cities have often served as symbols of the contemporary state of Islamic culture. There is nothing like the destruction of a city, its rebirth, its prosperity or decline, to symbolize the culture as a whole. This is not the place to compare the Islamic city with those elsewhere, but it is worth just mentioning that cities outside of the Islamic world rarely take on such a large symbolic meaning. London is not Britain in the way that the Islamic city is often taken to represent its country. There is a reason for this, of course, and it rests on the extreme forces of centralization and authority that tended to operate in many Islamic countries, whether under colonial or independent government (Morony, 2005). This should not be overemphasized, though, since in the past as today the links between the city and the countryside are significant. People enter the city from the countryside and often they live in the city in communities which hark back to the countryside, even if they move to a city in a different country. The rate of urbanization is high right now, and accelerating, but it has been high also during the past, and really there is only a reverse of this process due to natural disasters or warfare that results in the destruction of cities. So we have here yet another important point of similarity between earlier and modern Islamic cities, the fact that they grow larger and gradually take over the adjacent countryside.

### **The Islamic city and style**

Another point of comparison lies in architecture. Those who see the Islamic city as relatively stable in style until at least colonialism ignore those cities which were part of the Ottoman Empire and which quickly imported Turkish models of how buildings should look, and what sorts of sites were worth marking with special

buildings. In many cases the styles involved were just as alien to the local forms of architecture as were those which came to be imported from Europe. Of course, the Ottomans were Muslims, and if one thinks that there is a common Islamic style which runs throughout the Islamic world then those Ottoman buildings would not interrupt what was already present in the parts of the Islamic world that they controlled. This is a difficult argument to make plausible since Ottoman style just is so different from much Maghrebi architecture, for example, and clearly was used to refer back to the center of the Empire. It disrupts the continuation over many centuries of what in many cities was a uniform style that must have produced very beautiful cities, since the individual buildings are attractive and en masse they would have been breathtaking, given the complex yet synchronized urban pattern that they would have constituted. But the influence of the West came to really disrupt the unity of the Islamic city, since the rush to import European forms of design imposed something quite alien to what had existed before. In many cases this resulted in a new and an old city, so the unity of the traditional buildings was not destroyed, yet once the status of living in the old city diminished, the upkeep of those buildings often suffered, many were neglected and had to be pulled down, and were not replaced either as they had been nor in a modern way that was pleasing. In a sense the new city became the city, yet this is a process that is not exactly new either, in that cities were constantly changing what they regarded as their core and ultimate seat of authority. One of architectural features of the Arab Spring worth noting is that it took place largely along the Hausmanian boulevards of the modern city, and Tahrir Square itself is a very Western environment. In the past new regimes would often change the center of authority in the city in order to undermine the old regime and promote the new state of affairs, sometimes using particular religious groups such as Sufis or *ulama'* to disseminate their message and oppose the previous line. A geographical change often accompanied an ideological change, and we often refer to parts of cities in terms of prominent buildings in this way (the White House, the Kremlin, Whitehall etc.) where a building represents an institution which in turn represents a government and the power that backs it up.

This is just as much true today as in the past. Although colonialism and its legacy is often blamed for the difficulties that Islamic cities have had in more recent times, it is worth pointing out that for a very long time many of these cities were sites of major conflict, often between different Muslim invaders, and were destroyed and reconstructed several times before they reached their present form. The idea of a golden age in which the city reigned supreme in peace, the very name of Baghdad, the *medinat al-salam*, is more of an evocative poetic ideal than reality. The present day difficulties and uncertainties that pervade many Islamic cities are no more than a continuation of a trend that has existed since these cities were created, and as Ibn Khaldun points out is not something that should surprise us. In political and economic life change happens all the time, and new actors come on the stage while those previously in power find themselves gradually losing their grip on

authority. Today as in the past it is often the city that forms the dramatic backdrop for such events.

### **The Islamic city as dystopia**

Much modern Arabic literature portrays the city by contrast in a very negative light, and the village quite the opposite. The earlier period of optimism has given way to a dystopia, almost to a reflection of the Orientalist take on the Islamic city, as Byron put it, "Here is the East in its pristine confusion" ('The Road to Oxiana'). This may be very much a reflection of trends in the West to be skeptical of the enlightenment and modernization project of which the city is such an outstanding example. The city now often represents a site of alienation, an environment in which the individual is crushed and exploited, and although no doubt this was often the case in the past also, this attitude to the city is far more current today than in the past. It is probably a problem not so much in the city but in the society in which the city figures. Unemployment, poor working conditions, substandard housing and the familiar ills of urban life occur in many Islamic cities today, and again no doubt always did, but the social acceptability of such problems has radically declined recently, and so the city is experienced in a much more negative way. Whether a more Islamic city will resolve the problems of existing Islamic cities is doubtful, since these problems have nothing at all to do with religion, and everything to do with longstanding social and economic problems. According to Burdett and Sujdic cities make up only 2% of the world's land surface but already are inhabited by 53% of its population. This is expected to reach 75% in 2050. We should not regard this as a negative fact, since for most people leaving the countryside for the city is immensely positive in terms of living standards and no doubt culture also. But the challenges this poses, especially for those who see the city as only flourishing if a general orientation towards religion pertains, is obvious.

It has been argued throughout that there are more similarities than dissimilarities between the Islamic city in the past and today. There is one important difference which is worth mentioning, and that is that today none of the major Islamic cities are what one would call international cities like New York, London, Singapore, Hong Kong or Tokyo. They are no longer centers of commerce, industry, science and culture as they were in the past. Some of the Gulf cities are trying to take on this sort of role but surely despite the money they have for building art museums, huge hotels, tourist resorts, they are just always going to be too small and culturally dependent on others for this to be feasible. They are never going to be centers of innovation and creativity. Yet in the past the major Islamic cities were just that, centers of innovation and creativity, repositories of the world's knowledge and replete with academic and technical expertise. Again, there seems to be nothing religious about this, it is not that Islam originally encouraged the development of science and technology, and it is not that Islam now stifles it. In that

case perhaps what we have identified as a difference between the present and the past should really be regarded as a similarity, in that it is not the "Islam" in the Islamic city which changes anything, the explanation lies elsewhere. Nostalgia for the past not only has a damaging effect on architecture and urban design but also betrays a lack of confidence in the ability of Islam to flourish in the modern world.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu-Lughod, J., "The Islamic City: Historic Myth, Islamic Essence and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, 1987: 155-176.
- Bozdoğan, S. & Akcan, E. *Turkey: Modern Architectures in History*, London: Reaktion Books, 2012.
- Brown, C. (ed.) *From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City*, Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1973
- Burdett, R. & Sujdic, D., *Living in the Endless City*, London: Phaidon, 2011.
- Çelik, Z. New Approaches to the "Non-Western" City, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 58, 3, 1999, 374-81.
- De Young, T. *Placing the Poet, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and post-colonial Iraq*, Albany, 1998.
- Besim S. *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1986.
- Elsheshtawy, Y., *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity & Urban Development*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008.
- Faroqhi, S., *Men of Modest Substance: House Owners and House Property in Seventeenth-Century Ankara and Kayseri*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. F. Rosenthal, Princeton, 1967
- Lassner, J. "The caliph's personal domain: the city plan of Bagdad re-examined", *The Islamic City*, ed. A. Hourani and S. Stern, Oxford: Cassirer, 1970, 103-17.
- Lapidus, Ira (ed.), *Middle Eastern Cities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- "Traditional Muslim Cities: Structure and Change, in L. Brown (ed.) *From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City*, 51-72, 1973.
- Leaman, O. "Islamic humanism in the fourth/tenth century" in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. S. Nasr & O. Leaman, London, 1996.



- "Secular friendship and religious devotion", in *Friendship East and West: Philosophical perspectives*, ed. O. Leaman, Surrey, 1996, pp. 251-62.
- *An introduction to classical Islamic philosophy*, Cambridge, 2002.
- "Mecca" in *Encyclopedia of Urban Cultures*, ed. M. & C. Ember, Danbury: Grolier, 2002, pp. 152-7.
- *Islamic Aesthetics: an introduction*, Oxford, 2008.
- "Islamic aesthetics", *Blackwell Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. D. Cooper et al. 2009, pp. 380-83.
- Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- Marcus, A. *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- Morony, M., *Iraq after the Muslim conquest*, Princeton, 2005.
- Nasr, S. *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- O'Meara, S., *Space and Muslim Urban Life: At the Limits of the Labyrinth of Fez* (Culture and Civilization in the Middle East). London: Routledge, 2007.
- Ohlander, E., *Sufism in an age of transition. 'Umar al-Suhrawardi and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Islamic History and Civilization vol. 71), Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Piacentini, V. "Madina/Shahr, Qarya/Deh, Nahiya/Rustaq. The city as political-administrative institution: the continuity of a Sasanian model," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17, (1994) pp.85-107.
- Raymond, A. *The Great Arab Cities in the 16th–18th Centuries: An Introduction*. Hagop Kevorkian Series on Near Eastern Art and Civilization, New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- 'Islamic City, Arab City: Orientalist Myths and Recent Views,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21 (1994): 3-18.
- Robinson, C. (ed.) *A Medieval Islamic City reconsidered*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art XIV, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Saqqaf, A. (ed.) *The Middle East City*, New York: Parago, 1987.
- Wild, S., "Paradise" in *The Qur'an: an encyclopedia*, ed. O. Leaman, London, 2006, 486-8.
- Wolper, E. *Citizens and Saints: Sufism and the transformation of urban space in medieval Anatolia*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003.