

The Chador of God on Earth: the Metaphysics of the Muslim Veil

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Franz Fanon, the first Western theorist of Muslim veils, adverts regularly to their ironic ambiguity as markers of presence that defy the gaze. Frequently he interprets the conspicuous invisibility of colonial Algerian women as the sign of Arab otherness which is most often noticed by the tourist. Commenting on this irony, the Turkish feminist author Meyda Yegenoglu invokes Lacan's 'triumph of the gaze over the eye'. The eye cannot see, but the gaze can. The blankness of the normally expressive visage becomes a site of inscription for the colonist's fantasies. The woman, negating her body in order to preserve herself, loses a simulacrum of herself to the outsider's visual theft. The strength of invisibility, the power to see and not be seen, thus turns against her. With the veil, she is naked, for her reality has been made unreal.¹

Yegenoglu does not, in fact, like Lacan's reading. The eye is not always an evil eye. The Koran speaks of the *kha'inat al-a'yun*, the glance that betrays and that God knows; yet it is not simply an inscriber, a coloniser of the Other's integrity. In its very reflexivity, as it considers itself in the mirror of an abolished face, it learns caution about its own capacity for self-knowledge and the appropriation of the Other. As Lacan also says: 'This lack is beyond anything that can represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil.'²

The double empowerment entailed by the veil, reinforcing the status of the female body as appurtenance to be constructed by an omnipotent male gaze, and concurrently insisting that the woman eludes the eye, suggests that the Islamicate veil is more of a membrane than a mask. It allows the wearer to remain as she is, and the male regard to appropriate her as it needs. Simultaneously affirming classical definitions of woman as spectacle rather than as autonomous self, and man's self-definition as possessor of women, it covers the man's eyes more than the woman's. The slave-woman, in many Islamic laws, is deprived of autonomy by her *exemption* from wearing the veil.³

¹ Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 39–67.

² Cited in Yegenoglu, 47.

³ Ahmad ibn al-Naqib al-Misri (tr. Nuh Keller), *Reliance of the Traveller*, revised edition Beltsville, MD, 1994, 512. (Arabic text.)

This is not the veil commended by an earlier North African: the great Tertullian. For this mortified Church Father, modest female attire announces appurtenance, and also, in its negation of the flesh, a sign of her liberation from what she derives from Eve.⁴ Tertullian would have been intelligible to the modern Algerian woman in his confidence that a public adornment that graces women in fact disgraces them. The Koran itself (24:31) perceives conspicuous female adornment or denudation as *fitna*, as a public sedition. Yet there is, amid its guiding assumptions, a valorising of sexuality and hence of the body. Tertullian is destined for a heaven in which sexuality, as a sign of unregeneracy, can have no place. The virginal state is a proleptic anticipation. The Islamic paradise, by contrast, is eroticised, its maidens both 'hidden in tents', and also so exposed that their bones can be perceived beneath their skin. No prolepsis here; or rather, a patristic peccatism has been inverted completely: sexuality, and its site the privacies of the body, have become, for the Koranic faithful, a proleptic anticipation of the joys of the elect.

The specifically Islamicate veil, then, seeks to privatise woman's allure, but may also be construed as a membrane consensually instituted as a mutual empowerment and affirmation. This ambiguity came to furnish one of the richest tropological genres in Islamic culture. The beloved, inaccessible but desirous of being approached, is not negated by the veil, but is the subject of emphasis and enchantment. The first Muslim devotional poetry quickly elided the quest for God with the ancient bedouin preoccupation with penetrating the tent and raising the veil. Providing a substantial counterpoint to exoteric patriarchy, this evolved until it reached a climax in the mysticism of the Andalusian Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240), who could announce, 'God is seen more perfectly in the human materia than in any other; and more perfectly in woman than in man.'⁵

Erotic metaphors are present in Islamic pious literature even more abundantly than in that of Christianity. Higher beings thronging the Great Sanctuary in Mecca are often depicted as veiled women:

As I kissed the Black Stone, friendly women thronged around me; they came to perform the circumambulation with veiled faces.

They uncovered (faces like) sunbeams and said to me, 'Beware, for the death of the soul is in thy looking at us'...

When they are afraid they let fall their hair, so that they are hidden by their tresses as it were by robes of darkness.

⁴ Christoph Stücklin, *Tertullian, De virginibus velandis: Übersetzung, Einleitung, Kommentar: ein Beitrag zur altkirchlichen Frauenfrage*, Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1974; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 80–1.

⁵ Cited in Anne Marie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: the Feminine in Islam*, New York and London: Continuum, 1997, 103.

Commenting on his own poem, Ibn 'Arabi notes that these angelic beings veil themselves out of pity for mankind, for fear that their beauty might distract the pilgrims from God. Out of their mercy, too, they let down their hair, to remind us that even they are to be disregarded as nothing but veils.⁶ The Prophet himself, his face blazing with the light of revelation, is 'wrapped in his mantle' (Koran, 74:1); while the phenomenon of the 'Mosaic' saint who veils himself for fear that the light of his face will slay his disciples is widespread in Islamic hagiography.⁷

At the supreme level, the Divine Reality, frequently figured by the mystical theologians as Layla, an Arabic word which signifies night, also veils Herself with Her own hair: 'She let down her plaited lock as a black serpent, that she might frighten with it those who were following her.' Ibn 'Arabi explains that the 'plaited lock' here denotes 'a chain of evidences and proofs.'⁸ The Beloved's hair leads to her Face, and is of Her; but it remains a veil. It appears 'as a black serpent', which refers to 'the science of the Divine majesty and awe': the formal theology which leads to the terror of realising the utter transcendence and omnipotence of God, Otto's *mysterium tremendum*.

The recurrent Sufi trope of romantic trysts with heavenly beings, or with God Herself, at the black-veiled Ka'ba which may itself represent the Divine,⁹ forms part of a lexicon of erotic metaphor that became conventional in Muslim mysticism. Intriguing parallels with the luxuriant monastic commentaries on the Song of Songs immediately suggest themselves; but the differences should not be neglected. Denys Turner is doubtful about Fergus Kerr's reproach to Christians who allowed platonic notions of annihilation in the Beloved to compromise the proper Thomist ideal of friendship with God.¹⁰ Islam, while using the term 'friendship' (*wilaya*) where Christendom habitually used 'sainthood', seems less troubled by such a tension. Ibn 'Arabi and the pseudo-Denys both delight in viewing the creative act in terms of *eros*; but in the world of Islam the person gifted with *wilaya* 'comes to' the Other through annihilation (*fana'*), and then returns, Bodhisattva-like, to creation in the state known as subsistence (*baqa'*). Such a person has passed beyond the veil, but then comes back, in a state of unconditional friendship with the Beloved, and thus with humanity. The model is the Prophet's

⁶ Muhyi'l-Din ibn 'Arabi, ed. and tr. Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Tarjamán al-Ashwáq: a collection of mystical odes*, London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911, 61–2.

⁷ Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: prophethood and sainthood in the doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993, 84.

⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, 93.

⁹ Charles-André Gilis, *La Doctrine initiatique du pèlerinage à la Maison d'Allâh*, Paris: L'Oeuvre, 1982, p. 44.

¹⁰ Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo and Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1995, 27.

ascension: he rose to God, but then returned to his suffering people, who were told of his supreme experience only in some of the most allusive and difficult language of the Koran.¹¹

The two sanctuaries involved in the Prophet's ascension, in Mecca and Jerusalem, themselves trigger a rich tradition of symbolic reading. The Ka'ba's status as a veiled structure has frequently been remarked upon by students of Islamic esoterism; Fritz Meier, for instance, offered an important meditation on this theme to the Eranos group.¹² The Ka'ba, symbol of antiquity, of a time out of mind, becomes the symbol of the pre-existence of God; and the *kiswa*, the black veil which always shrouds it, is the veil which we must lift if we are to come to *al-Haqq*, the Real. The blackness of this veil is an apophatic mystery to the theologian who walks methodically around the structure from afar; but its impenetrable appearance turns out to be ambiguous: the mystic lifts it, to kiss God's right hand. Ibn 'Arabi and his school held that God's mercy ensures that the images His servants project upon the Ka'ba, while not adequate, are valid insofar as they save, and the Ka'ba's God is merciful enough to accept a wide range of imaginal representations.¹³ Only soteriological truths may be predicated of God's being; and again, we recall Lacan's triumph of the gaze over the eye. But the true Muslim, lifting the veil, by doing so becomes the eye by which God contemplates Himself. Majnun, the infatuated desert wanderer of Arab myth, is that eye, he is 'the love by which God loves Himself in the object of this love', as Corbin expresses it. In the veil of this Temple, an earthly representation is enacted of the hadith in which God proclaims: 'I was a hidden treasure, and I longed to be known, so I created creation that I might be known.'¹⁴ Some know of the treasure by report, and remain outside the sanctuary while affirming its holiness through the formalities of the cult: these are the ordinary faithful. Others enter the sanctuary, and their gaze reaches only to the *kiswa*: these are the theologians, who with their *via negativa* speak of the divine

¹¹ Koran, 53:13–8. One could add, as a further contrast, the willingness of Islam to link the erotic mutuality between seeker and Sought with human sexual expression. Ibn 'Arabi perceived the sex act as a kind of sacrament; see Mensia Arfa Mokdad, 'Ibn 'Arabi et sa métaphysique du sexe,' *Cahiers de Tunisie* 48, 1995, 11–47.

¹² F. Meier, 'The Mystery of the Ka'ba: Symbol and Reality in Islamic Mysticism', in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, pp. 149–168.

¹³ The proof-text being the word of God in the hadith: 'I am as My servant thinks I am', which the exoteric commentators gloss as follows: 'forgiveness and acceptance of repentance by the Almighty is subject to His servant truly believing that He is forgiving and merciful.' Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (eds. and tr.), *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, Beirut and Damascus, Dar Al-Koran Al-Kareem, 1400/1980, 78.

¹⁴ Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi, *al-Maqasid al-Hasana fi bayan kathirin min al-ahadith al-mushtahira 'ala al-alsina*, Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1405/1985, 521.

incomparability (*tanzih*). The elite are those who are joined to the beloved, the Ka'ba of Comeliness, and kiss her.

The veil, as membrane, is hence fundamental to Sufi tropology precisely because of what Yegenoglu describes as its super-repleteness. In this sense it is not different from the *zulf*, the tress, the black lock of hair which veils the face of the Beloved, a trope favoured particularly by the Persian poet Rumi (d.1273). He writes, for instance:

God is present with you – *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*
(Koran, 50:16) – but you are in His tresses and unaware, like a comb.

Within the veils of musky hair behold the Face! Ah, what a Face! God
Herself has washed it, far from all face-washers.

Nothing veils Her cheek but the ends of Her tresses – sometimes they are
mallets, sometimes polo-balls.

Her Face is so radiant that lovers err and see Her Form at the end of
those hairs.¹⁵

Rumi's metaphysical conceits allow the tresses, which veil the Essence of God, to be mallets, that is, sometimes they are the instruments of the trials the Beloved inflicts upon Her lovers; but at other times they are polo-balls, which the lovers can smite. They are, and the veil is, nothing but the world, *dunya*, which is bewailed when it veils us from God, but cannot be condemned, because, like the tresses, it is of God. Again, it is membrane. It obstructs the gaze, and hence is part of the divine rigour, but we can project upon it our images of what lies beyond, and it is hence merciful. All the world, for medieval Sufism, is a veil, *hijab*, according to this positive construction; it is in this sense that the Koran says, 'Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God.' (2:115)

Here, no doubt, we find the key to Islam's aniconism, an attitude which it famously shares with Judaism, whose Holy of Holies is analogously veiled. In Buddhism, a work of art, beautiful insofar as it reflects intelligible beauty, is a gateway (*avatarana*), while simultaneously being a veil (*avarana*), and the image of the Buddha is the supreme reflection of the intelligible beauty that leads to stillness and contemplation – to borrow the Semitic term, the *sakina*. For the Semitic religions, the veil is not an image, but is blank. The proximate brahman is indicated by an image or a word, the ultimate brahman, or *dharmakaya*, is silence.¹⁶

This link between the veil and aniconism is insufficiently noted in recent studies of Semitic dispensing with images. Alain Besançon, for example, devotes some fertile pages to the divergences and

¹⁵ *Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz*, cited in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, 301.

¹⁶ Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'The Nature of Buddhist Art', in Roger Lipsey (ed.), *Coomaraswamy: I, Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 153.

convergences between Muslim and Jewish art, but misses the significance of the veil. For Besançon, the negative theology of Maimonides, deriving, he thinks, from the vanishing of the already remote tetragrammaton following the destruction of the Second Temple, and reinforced by the example of Islam, meant that, as he claims, 'there was not so much a Jewish art as there were Jewish artists.'¹⁷ Only the Kabbala, he insists, with its schematic theanthropism, could provide a basis for Jewish art in the middle ages. But while 'there was not so much a Jewish art as there were Jewish artists,' 'conversely, there were not so much Muslim artists as there was a Muslim art.' Islamic art, despite regional pluriformity, is unified by an insistence that the divine cannot be represented, not because He is too transcendent – and here perhaps the Levinassian *excedence* is nearer the mark – but because He is already indicated, in His 'most beautiful' names, in our only superficially fallen world. The naturalism of God's garden is portrayed with a kind of rhetorical intensification, ensuring that while our world is reliably indicative, it points to a paradisial state of proximity whose description in scripture must be itself a veil as well as a window.

These hyperbolic elaborations of the Koranic garden distance the next world from this one. The wondrous analogies to this world and to the human body make the hereafter more, rather than less, remote. . . . there is nothing in the garden that is on earth except the names of things. . . . What appears at first to be unsophisticated literalism is in fact an attempt to demonstrate the ineffability of the world to come.¹⁸

The forms of Islamic art – again for all their multiplicity – return again and again to the evocation of nature at its roots: geometry, and vegetal arabesques. Yet inscribed above these sacramental signs there stands always the revealed text, the specific revelation of the Koran.

To quote Besançon again:

In Judaism, there is a low upper limit to art, because Israel is in waiting, and the 'face-to-face' vision that art might procure would be an illusion, in other words, idolatry. That is not the case for Islam. There is no waiting but an eternal present, under the dazzling light of revelation.¹⁹

There is support for this thesis in the most famous painting of Kasimir Malevich. He called his 'Black Square', his 'absolute symbol of modernity': meaning, among other things, the end of all stories.

¹⁷ Alain Besançon, tr. Jane Marie Todd, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 76.

¹⁸ A. Kevin Reinhart, 'The Here and the Hereafter in Islamic Religious Thought,' in Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Dartmouth: Hood Museum of Art, 1991), 18. The 'except the names of things' trope is derived from a hadith (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *al-Matalib al-'Aliya bi-zawa'id al-Masanid al-Thamaniya*, Kuwait, 1393/1973), IV, 404.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

Russian academicism, he tells us, has come to an end amid the fury of socialist remaking.

The Black Square is the total inversion of the Western tradition of recording, revering and dramatising the diversity of the manifest world, a tradition with roots in Christianity's iconodule revolution. Malevich wrote that when painting it he had felt 'black nights within', and 'a timidity bordering on fear', but when he neared completion he experienced a 'blissful sensation of being drawn into a desert where nothing is real but feeling, and feeling became the substance of my life.'

Interpreting this dark night of Malevich's soul, Bruce Chatwin offers the following insight:

This is not the language of a good Marxist, but of Meister Eckhart – or, for that matter, of Mohammed. Malevich's Black Square, his 'absolute symbol of modernity', is the equivalent in painting of the black-draped Ka'aba at Mecca, the shrine in a valley of sterile soil where all men are equal before God.²⁰

Semitic apophaticism thus appears as an anticipation of modernity, a modernity, however, that proves unstable, soon retreating from the meta-physical art of Malevich as it lurches towards evocations of the unknowability of the *human* self. The plenitude and constancy of the Ka'aba's God contrasts absolutely with the shifting incompleteness of being implied by modernity and its subsequent entailments. Postmodernity likes to represent the unknowable integrity of the Other through the trope of masks. As in primordial societies, and pre-socratic Greece, these are understood as the work of the onlooker, not of the divine principle behind them. For the Greeks, 'if anyone were to wear a mask permanently, he would have been a dead man or a monster'.²¹ For the Semites, the mask is a featureless veil, indicating constancy, proceeding from Being itself.

Returning to Besançon, we find a further contentious contrasting of the covenantal nature of Judaism, oriented towards the Ark concealed behind its veil, with what he takes to be the non-covenantal principle of Islam. It is true, of course, that the Koran is not interested in the Arab people; God's new covenant is to be with the transnational community of Islam. As the Prophet says: 'earlier prophets were sent only to their own peoples, but I am sent to all mankind.'²² The Ishmaelite, veiled temple in Mecca, becomes the sign of this covenant. Not only, as we saw earlier, does it denote the impossibility of God's representation as image, or mask, but it signals the mysterious place accorded the Muhammadan community in salvation history. One recalls, perhaps, the primordial black stone which

²⁰ Bruce Chatwin, *What am I doing here?*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1989, 163–4.

²¹ C. Kerényi, quoted in Donna J. Scott and Charles E. Scott, 'Eranos and the Eranos-Jahrbücher,' *Religious Studies Review* 8, 1982, 232.

²² Bukhari, *Sahih*, cited in Tim Winter, 'The Last Trump Card: Islam and the supersession of other faiths,' *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9, 1999, 144.

inaugurates the story of humanity in Kubrick's film *2001*, and which returns at the end of the story, having grown no less impenetrable and opaque in the process. The temple at the Great Sanctuary in Mecca signals a comparable parenthesis of salvation history, and the divine mystery's desire to intervene and to guide. According to an early Muslim account, transmitted by Ibn 'Abbas:

When God took the Covenant, He recorded it in writing and fed it to the Black Stone, and this is the meaning of the saying of those who touch the Black Stone during the circumambulation of the Ancient House: 'O God! This is believing in You, fulfilling our pledge to You, and declaring the truth of Your record.'²³

The Ka'ba therefore, while it is nothing of itself – a mere cube of stones and mortar – is believed to represent and remind its lovers of the primordial moment of our species. Allah – the Ka'ba's God – speaks of a time before the creation of the world. In the Koran's words:

when your Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, He said: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yea! We testify!' That was lest you should say on the Day of Arising: 'Of this we were unaware.' (7:172)

The building is hence the symbol of this Great Covenant: *mithaq*, sealed on that primordial day, the *ruz-i alast*, which the pilgrims re-enact.²⁴ The Jerusalem Temple signals God's covenant with the Jewish cycle of prophetic history; ending with the supersession of Judaism – this according to the normative Muslim historians – with the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. The Ishmaelite (and ultimately Adamic) temple represents the Muhammadan moment of reclaiming a universal covenant, taken from all mankind, and its institutionalising as a sacred response to God in the *Shari'a*, a law with no ethnic qualifications. Adam, worshipping in the primordial Ka'ba when it was still only a tent, that is to say, only a veil, introduces this theme of the sanctuary as a place beyond culture and hence a place of worship for all nations.²⁵

The veil of the Ka'ba is thus not only the metaphor of apophaticism, but also of innocence of culture. The black cube is primordial architecture, facing the four cardinal points of the compass which it seems to claim for itself; it does not belong to Islamic architecture, or to any other culture of structure. As they near this ultimate veil, dressed in garments that again deny cultural appurtenance, the pilgrims leave behind all specificity. For them, there can be no representation, because all representation is a saving ruse, what Buddhists would call *upaya*, and

²³ Cited in 'Abdallah al-Haddad, tr. M. al-Badawi, *The Lives of Man*, London: The Quilliam Press, 1411/1991, 7.

²⁴ For more on this Islamic concept of covenant, see Louis Massignon, 'Le "jour du covenant" (*yawm al-mithaq*)', *Oriens* 15, 1962, 86–92; for the Ka'ba's role, see p. 90.

²⁵ Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*. Ed. Rushdi Malhas, Madrid: Dar al-Andalus, n.d., 51.

because where there is presence, and a veil upon which the truth may be salvifically ‘projected’, representation is beside the point.

It may be helpful at this point to offer a few remarks on the link between the sanctuaries. I have already indicated the close parallels which exist between the two cuboid Holies of Holies, both veiled, and both – at least in the case of the Herodian temple – empty of all but the *sakina* itself. The parallels have inspired some to propose a historical or architectonic continuity, as in the case of Reinhart Dozy, who in the middle of the nineteenth century suggested, without real evidence, that the Ka‘ba and its surrounding sanctuary were built by Israelites who had migrated from Palestine.²⁶ The Koran is conscious of a connection, and uses the same word, *masjid*, to denote the two temples (2:144; 17:7). Both cities are regarded as root and origin, as *axis mundi*, as metaphors of the heart; and the sanctuaries lie directly beneath celestial counterparts. Both are believed to have been Adam’s dwelling place. Solomon’s Temple was built on the place where Isaac was bound,²⁷ and the Ka‘ba was, according to the historian al-Azraqi, adorned with the horns of Abraham’s ram, slaughtered in the neighbouring valley of Mina.²⁸ Solomon’s Temple was inaugurated on the Day of Atonement,²⁹ and the corresponding Muslim date was since the age of ‘Uthman the day on which the Ka‘ba would receive its annual gift of a new veil. The Prophet, too, is said to have performed the ‘*umra* pilgrimage on this day.³⁰

This is not the place to speculate on the reasons for these congruences. Some can, no doubt, be explained in terms of the influence of Jewish lore on the formation of the Muslim memory. Others can be attributed to shared ‘Semitic’ assumptions about the proper arrangement of a central sanctuary. One might also take seriously Eliade’s assurance of a limited vocabulary worldwide for the symbolic and architectonic definement of sacred space. In Hinduism, for instance, the sanctuary of a temple is frequently a perfect cube. What concerns us, however, is the way in which medieval Islam, and to a very large extent contemporary Islam as well, has understood the veiling metaphor in both places.

The Muslim conquerors were clearly aware of the sacred geography of Jerusalem. Al-Farazdaq, in the late seventh century, confirms this in a poem.³¹ The caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, builder of the Dome of the Rock,

²⁶ Heribert Busse, ‘Jerusalem and Mecca, the Temple and the Kaaba. An account of their interrelation in Islamic times,’ in Moshe Sharon (ed.), *The Holy Land in History and Thought*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988, 236.

²⁷ Busse, 238.

²⁸ Busse, *loc. cit.*

²⁹ Busse, 240.

³⁰ M. Godefroy-Demombynes, ‘Le Voile de la Ka‘ba,’ *Studia Islamica* II, 1954, 9.

³¹ M.J. Kister, ‘“You Shall only Set out for Three Mosques”. A Study of an Early Tradition,’ *Le Muséon* LXXXII, 1969, 182. Kister’s notion that Farazdaq is implying the equality of the sanctuaries seems doubtful.

is portrayed as a rebuilders of Solomon's temple, not the author of an unprecedented structure. According to Ka'b al-Ahbar (d. ca. 654), source of much early Islamic lore, an ancient Jewish scripture reads:

Rejoice, O Jerusalem (*abshiri urishalam*), for I shall send to thee my servant, 'Abd al-Malik who shall restore to you your first kingdom, and I shall adorn thee with gold, silver, pearls and precious stones, that is the Rock, and I shall put my throne on thee as it was before. For I am Allah, there is no god but Myself alone, without partner.³²

In another text, *wa'l-sakhra yuqalu laha al-haykal*: 'and the Rock is referred to as the Temple'.³³

Islam was therefore able to acknowledge the Aqsa Mosque complex as the Third Temple. As such it became the site for the construction of Muslim metaphors of unveiling which were hardly less fruitful than those of Mecca herself. Henry Corbin has devoted a detailed study to an epistle by Avicenna, the *Mir'aj-Nameh*, which explores the theme of the Prophet's ascension from Jerusalem as an archetype of mystical psychomachy and cosmology. Confirming that the Aqsa sanctuary is indeed the Temple, this platonising adornment of the original Islamic ascension narrative shows the Prophet, following his voyage from the Meccan Temple, offered three chalices, of wine, honey and milk. For Avicenna, these symbolise the 'three spirits or pneumas: the vital or animal pneuma, the physical pneuma, and the thinking pneuma.' The Prophet duly chooses the milk, representing the thinking pneuma, and he is admitted to the temple.³⁴ Here, in accordance with the original hadith narration, the Prophet receives the homage of the angels and the earlier prophets. For Corbin, this is 'a mental ascent of the microcosm.' The Jerusalem Temple is therefore a symbol for the human composite, populated by the angels which direct the inner psychic faculties.

Then the Prophet begins his ascent through the seven heavens, until, as Avicenna's text describes, 'the Angel took me by the hand; he made me enter and led me through so many veils of light that the universe I saw had nothing in common with what I had previously seen.' God calls, 'Come yet nearer', and he traverses an infinite series of veils of light, until he is in the presence, the *sakina* itself, the root denoting, like its Hebrew cognate, both dwelling and stillness.³⁵

³² Amikam Elad, 'Why did 'Abd al-Malik build the Dome of the Rock? A Re-Examination of the Muslim Sources,' in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds), *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, I. 38.

³³ Elad, 49.

³⁴ In the original hadith account, the Prophet's refusal of the wine may have been intended as a refutation of Christian sacramentalism; wine is fermented and is hence at one remove from nature; while milk is from a world uncontaminated by an Augustinian fall.

³⁵ Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, 175–6.

For Avicenna, it is the intellect which allows this voyage through the veils; it is the *burraq*, the miraculous riding-beast. In Sufism proper, the *burraq* is most usually identified with love, not least because Islamic prophethood, on the basis of the hadith literature, confers the title 'God's Beloved', *habib Allah*, upon the Prophet. An entire chapter of Ibn 'Arabi's major work, the *Futuhat*, is consecrated to the Ascension. For Ibn 'Arabi, the Jerusalem Temple has no veil, but is surrounded by a wall which may only be penetrated by the pure of heart. The Prophet passes within, where he drinks the milk, which enables him to open a gate, which represents self-mortification, and which leads upwards to the celestial regions. On the way, he is given a vision of the bliss of the elect, and the torments of hell, until he reaches the Lote-tree – another Koranic feature – which here symbolises faith and virtue. He then penetrates the final veil, entering a place unreached by any other mortal, and sees God in His true form, a mystery of mysteries which he is forbidden to disclose.³⁶

Exactly why the Jerusalem Temple should have attracted interest when Islam centred its covenantal claims for itself on the Meccan sanctuary is a question deserving of careful consideration. For Avicenna, the Aqsa is the proper locus for this rending of the veils because of the name 'Bayt al-Maqdis' given to the Celestial City. The root *q.d.s.* denotes purity from any infusion in matter; it is the least appropriate of all places for incarnation (*hulul*), which is heresy. Hence Corbin identifies it with Avicenna's Orient, *al-Mashriq*, a land of purity figured in opposition to the Occident, 'which is the material world, and which is often figured symbolically as Egypt.'³⁷

Avicenna has a further reason. The Koran tells him that Solomon was taught the 'language of birds', *mantiq al-tayr*. This is not ordinary *mantiq*, or logic, which cannot reach the metaphysical East; it is the language of creatures that can fly. Here he is in step with a wider Sufi tradition: Rumi, Jami and 'Attar all use Solomon as the type of the perfected saint who can speak a celestial language.

This leads to a further distinction between the two linked houses of the Abrahamic and Solomonic sanctuaries. Solomon does not only have a Temple, he has a palace, and a kingdom; in fact, the Koran credits him with the greatest of all kingdoms. As such, he provides a metaphor for the saintly ruler which Mecca cannot furnish, although there is, of course, one between the two in Medina. It is not always clear in this poetry whether the palace is to be distinguished from the Temple. Rumi, for instance, has Solomon make the following claims:

³⁶ Miguel Asín Palacios, *La Escatología Musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, Granada: Escuelas de Estudios Arabes de Madrid y Granada, 1943, 78.

³⁷ Corbin, *Avicenna*, 292n.

I have built a house for the spirit's pigeons –
fly in this direction, oh bird of the spirit,
for I possess a hundred inaccessible towers!

I am a ray of the Sun, though I wander about all these chambers.
I am carnelian and gold and rubies, though I was born of water and
clay.³⁸

Less ambiguous is the metaphor, reminiscent of Avicenna's figuring of the body as the Temple, of the Temple as a skeleton, literally, *haykal*, into which the spirit must enter. Here is Rumi again:

Thy Image is a sultan, strolling into the heart,
Solomon coming to the Temple.

A thousand lamps are lit and the whole Temple is illumined –
it is paradise and the Fountain of Kawthar, thronging with angels
and houris.³⁹

Related to this is the use by the thirteenth-century Iranian thinker 'Aziz-i Nasafi of the image of Solomon as perfect man, *insan kamil*, who is pure intellect. Commenting on the Koranic description of the spirits which had been made subject to Solomon, which are 'every builder and every diver' (38:37), he writes:

Oh dervish, the angel and the devil are a single power. As long as this power is not obedient to Solomon, it is called the devil. Solomon puts one of them in chains. When it obeys Solomon it is called an 'angel'. Then Solomon puts it to work. Some build, some dive.⁴⁰

The temple, for Nasafi, is the body, which must be reformed by the intellect; but since the body of the perfect saint is a microcosm of God's creation, the Solomonic control of inferior psychic intelligences is also the distinguishing mark of all who act as God's vice-regent, *khalifa*, in the realm of manifestation.

Where Jerusalem is most distinctive, however, is in Solomon's romantic episode with Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba. According to chapter 27 of the Koran, and its commentaries, Solomon paves the floor of his palace with glass, beneath which fishes and other creatures are visible. As Bilqis approaches the patriarch's throne, she thinks it is surrounded by water, and she raises her skirt and reveals her legs. Some commentators hold that this was an example of Solomonic wisdom, as the patriarch wished to deny the insinuation of the devils to the effect that her legs were hairy.⁴¹

³⁸ *Diwan*, in Chittick, 344.

³⁹ *Diwan*, in Chittick, 262. Kawthar is a fountain in Paradise.

⁴⁰ 'Aziz-i Nasafi, *Insan-i Kamil*, cited in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, 281.

⁴¹ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 65.

The medieval Islamic imagination thus invested Jerusalem with a dyadic significance. The Temple was a site of absolute purity, the launching-pad for voyages of celestial exploration. It was set around with barriers. Although the veil of the Temple as known among the ancient Israelites does not appear to figure in the Muslim sources,⁴² the Temple is nonetheless liminally apart, through walls, or gates. But Jerusalem is also the site of Solomon's other structure, his palace, containing his throne, and a woman who is unveiled. The Temple is filled with a pleroma of angels; the Palace with tamed jinn and devils. The Temple is the abode of a celestial beloved who, for many of the poets, was a woman waiting to be unveiled; the beloved ruler of the palace is a man, who unveils the women whom God and nature have subjected to him. The unifying agent is Solomon, who is pontifex, rightfully lord in his palace because he is slave in his Temple. His home is the locus of *farq*, of differentiation, of *mulk*, kingdom, which was the object of his prayer to God; and his role is to rule it with justice as God's deputy. However besides this structure there is the Temple, locus of *jam'*, the gathering of the theophanies into the pleroma, and ultimately to the undifferentiated being of God, who dwells beyond the veils of light. The two buildings cannot be one, although the tradition sometimes appears to elide them. For God, *farq* and *jam'* are concurrent; for Solomon, as pattern of human perfection, they alternate. After annihilation in the Presence that is beyond the Lote-tree, there is a return, *ruju' ila'l-khalq*, subsistence. Like the Boddhisatva, the Prophet is not lost in eternal absorption in bliss, but returns, out of compassion, to rule on earth and to guide others towards the Temple. Muhammad, as Solomonic ruler who also ascended to God from the Temple, is clearly anticipated and also vindicated by this pattern. For him, Medina equates to Solomon's palace; and the Ka'ba to his temple.

This returns us, I hope, to the idea of the veil as membrane. Solomon passes through it, and sees the Queen of Sheba, because of his patriarchal authority on earth; he also passes through God's veil, because of his submission, *islam*, to God's will. Both loci of sacred activity, palace and temple, are sanctified. In Islam's case, on its self-understanding, the palace is not just the Land of Israel, but Medina, and the world as a whole. 'The whole earth', the Prophet said, 'has been made a place of worship (*masjid*) for me'.⁴³ And this is why Ibn 'Arabi condemns those who underrate Solomon as a materialist.⁴⁴ He has mastered the veil of the world, *mulk*, only

⁴² Cf. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*, vol. 2, tr. William M. Brinner as *Prophets and Patriarchs*, Albany: State University of New York Press, c.1987, 162.

⁴³ Narrated by Bukhari, translated by James Robson in *Mishkat al-Masabih*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1970, II, 1231.

⁴⁴ 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani, *Sharh Fusus al-Hikam*, Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1386/1966, 244.

because for him it is a membrane, as it was to be for Muhammad, Seal of the Prophets.

By veiling God, Islam lets God be God. As with the free woman, the veil liberates both observer (from the burden of authentic claims to possession of an unknowable Other), and observed (from the burden of showing herself as she really is to those who are still unprepared). This is the paradox of representation in Semitic religion; without her veil, we cannot know the *puella abscondita*.