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## Early Islam—Monotheism or Henotheism? A View from the Court

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### Abstract

This article employs sources produced by people who worked at the Abbasid court in order to expose a tension in early Islamic society between two systems of sacriality. An emerging monotheism was promoted by pious elders (*mashāyikh*) and ascetics (*nussāk*), which gave power and authority to one absolute deity, Allāh. The court, and most members of society, favored an older system, henotheism, which championed the sacriality of leadership archetypes, the king, sultan, saint, and master-teacher, while tolerating the emerging new sacredness of the One. The latter system enjoyed familiarity since ancient times in the Near East and vested nearly all leadership roles in society with a measure of sacred power and authority, hence adding to the stability of Abbasid hierarchy. Here, I examine three major practices at the court for generating sacriality, including praise hymns (*madīḥ*) in honor of great men, palace space-usage and architecture, as well as bacchic culture, which all privileged the caliph and his subordinates. The implications of symbol usage extend far beyond the court since underlings appropriated it in seeking rank and status by emulating their superiors.

### Keywords

Apotheosis, Sacred Kinship, Praise Hymns, Hero-Worship, Cult of Kingship

The work of Jaroslav Stetkevych has exemplified for Arabists the contemporary concern with the ways that language, performance and rhetoric reflect *and* constitute individuals and societies, often dubbed “the linguistic turn.” This concern has been in large part a response either to the Marxist-Weberian impulse to limit analysis to material conditions and their consequences on literary production and consumption, or the structuralist penchant for disengaging form and style from societal categories such as race, class and

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gender.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Arabic studies, Jaroslav Stetkevych's work has responded to yet another paradigm, that of downgrading the most aesthetic, emotive and societally operative of Arabic literature to something banal and hackneyed, as he illustrates in his 1979 article on the ailments of the field of Arabic literature.<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav's emphasis on the power of words, rituals and myths to both reveal and influence self and community takes form in his work on the *nasīb* section of the Arabic ode and pre-Islamic Arabian mythology.<sup>3</sup> Here, I hope to drink and give drink from that cup by focusing on otherwise literary texts that reflected and impacted everyday theology for early Muslims.

Abbasid society (750-1258), to those who closely examine both political art and religion, can be characterized by two tendencies in theme and practice. The first champions the absolute glory and oneness of God (Allāh = *The Deity*) over all else, exacerbated by a daunting hierarchical divide between Divinity and Creation. The Qur'anic prayer calls out, "O God who possesses kingship; you give kingship to whomever You wish. You snatch kingship from whomever You wish. You empower whomever You wish and You debase whomever You wish. You control blessings. You are capable of everything."<sup>4</sup> The repetition of the pronoun of address as well as God's capacity to wish and act emphasizes God's distance and privilege as the sole source of human authority. The second tendency seems to be somewhat pagan, where charm and power emanates from within a multiplicity of beings (king, sultan, saint, master-teacher, etc.), for skill or charisma, and is validated by the supplication of devotees and often the authority figure's performance of miracles that are believed. Thus caliphs, masters, saints, teachers, and others patrons often generated a demand

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discussions there with Friederike Pannewick, Margaret Rausch, Angelika Neuwirth, Renate Jacobi, Hilary Kilpatrick and Dale Eickelman. Some evidence for this article has been adapted from Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages* (2008).

<sup>1</sup> The "linguistic turn" and its intellectual and social implications has been grounds for discussion since the early part of the twentieth century, but has been largely overlooked in Middle Eastern studies: Burke (1935, 1937), White (1978, 1987) Davis (1987), and Kreiswirth (1995). For a critique of formalist and structuralist approaches to narrative, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Stetkevych, "Arabic Poetry and Assorted Poetics," in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, ed. by Malcolm H. Kerr (Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1979), 103-123.

<sup>3</sup> "Name and Epithet: The Philology and Semiotics of Animal Nomenclature in Early Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (1986): 89-124; *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); "Toward an Arabic Elegiac Lexicon: The Seven Words of the *Nasīb*," in *Reorientations / Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 58-129; *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> *Qur'an* 3: 26.

for their leadership and thus claimed sacral powers.<sup>5</sup> At the Abbasid court, poetry was critical to the formation of this pagan power because it amplified the felt presence of the caliph's authority to harm and benefit, making it memorable and transmittable to a wide audience. Poets though had to guard their craft against the "corrupting" effect of piety. Note, for example, that al-Aṣma'ī (d. ca. 828), one of the early curators of pagan poetry, echoed a sentiment among littérateurs that the poetic tradition, rooted in the pre-Islamic Jāhiliyya (Age of Impetuousness), ought to be shielded from the moralizing influences of righteousness. Of poetry, "If goodness creeps in," he says, "it becomes soft [*lāna*]," and "soft" in his diction meant that the poet was "hoping for rewards in the Afterlife."<sup>6</sup> It would appear that fear of God's punishment or hope in his reward was fundamentally antithetical to the perceptiveness needed to produce "hard" poetry. Of course, if poets ought not take their inspiration from the ultimate patron in Heaven, then the harm and reward of patrons on earth matter most. In this piece, I will examine these two tendencies, the monotheistic and the pagan, that were particularly pronounced at the Abbasid court where both pious and profane sensibilities came face to face regularly.

To illustrate the problem at the court, consider a narrative that appears in al-Shābushtī's (d. 1000) *Kitāb al-Diyārāt* [The Book of Monasteries] pitting religious against secular authority over the issue of drinking wine. The two conflicting systems of authority face off, and in this particular case, the Caliph's sacral power overrides the will of a father and, implicitly, of Allāh. Once, according to al-Shābushtī, after a ceremonial event marking the Caliph al-Mutawakkil's (d. 861) order to circumcise his son (and potential heir) al-Mu'tazz (d. 869), the Caliph invited the pious elders (*mashāyikh*) to the palace for an assembly before him. Among the elders was Yaḥyā b. Khāqān, the father of al-Mutawakkil's vizier, 'Ubayd Allāh. The social setting is important to bear in mind: The father/elder and the son/vizier are put on stage in front of the Caliph and other elders; we are told as well as that Yaḥyā was known for never drinking in public. In this assembly, al-Mutawakkil asked his vizier, 'Ubayd Allāh, to take a cup of wine, while draping a saqī's towel over his shoulders, and put the glass in the hands of the pious father. The father lifted his eyes toward the son, probably in embarrassment or humiliation, and al-Mutawakkil sensed so much as to order him, "Do not refuse it!" The pious father/elder

<sup>5</sup> See the important article of L. E. Goodman, "The Sacred and the Secular: Rival Themes in Arabic Literature," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir with Jarl E. Fossum (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), where he discusses the productive tension between the pagan tradition and the emerging monotheism.

<sup>6</sup> Iḥsān 'Abbās, *Tārīkh al-Naqd al-Adabī 'ind al-'Arab: Naqd al-Shīr min al-Qarn al-Thāni ḥattā al-Qarn al-Thāmin al-Hijrī*, rev. ed. (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 1997), 38-39.

demurred, saying, “Of course not, O Commander of the Faithful,” and drank. Swallowing his pride in front of his peers, the pious elder added, “Your blessings are great in our view, O Commander of the Faithful.”<sup>7</sup> It is conspicuous how the Caliph of God on earth not only rejects divine authority here (the prohibition of wine-drinking believed by the *mashāyikh* to be the will of God), but in fact *gains* a competing sacral authority by *opposing* it, as well as the divinely-given authority of the parent. The story in many ways illustrates an *accrual* of the Caliph’s power, for this story was certainly not told to discredit al-Mutawakkil—al-Shābushtī had no such agenda—but to vividly and shockingly register his awesome power as a heroic leader who constantly competes for greatness. The grandeur of the moment is compounded because he acts regardless of the double bind it might engender for Yahyā, his son, or the elders who must witness this scene.

This paper will examine these two systems of manufacturing authority, the one monotheistic and the other pagan. It will become evident that the Abbasid court favored and promoted not monotheism, but henotheism, which elegantly suited a state hierarchy where patrons rewarded the praise, supplication and allegiance of subordinates in order for patrons to build reputation in life and legacy in death. Because these systems co-existed, the later being favored by the court, I will argue that there were two competing grand visions of religion in early Islamic society, one absolutely monotheistic promoted by pious men (*mashāyikh*)<sup>8</sup> and the other henotheistic, that is, a system that enables the

<sup>7</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. Kūrkiš ‘Awwāḍ (Beirut: Dār al-Rā’id al-‘Arabi, 1986), 154-155.

<sup>8</sup> I have opted, instead of Ulema (i.e. savants or scholars), to use the courtly term *mashāyikh* since the Ulema, as a professional class trained in set core disciplines, had not formed in the ninth and tenth century, before the spread of state madrasas. The term *mashāyikh* (sg. *shaykh*) was preferred in court sources, referring to an assortment of loosely defined pious “elders” (Sunni, Shī’ī or Khārijī) who were other-worldly and piety-minded, devoting their allegiance to Allāh, not kings. They were concerned in common about God’s punishments and rewards in the after-life, but differed in their varying emphases on communion with God, asceticism, and public morality. For a useful discussion of the various forms of piety (mystical, austere, Sharī’a-minded in relation to Hadith-minded), see Christopher Melchert, “The Piety of the Hadith Folk,” *International Journal of Middle East Stud* 34 (2002), 425-439. One can note that many of the identifiers that marked the Hadith-folk (unbreachedable solemnity, not reclining, relative egalitarianism, avoiding idle curiosity or wonder, wanting to know only what is necessary) were in direct contrast to those of courtly life: a premium on laughter and joking at the right occasion, reclining during banquets and drinking sessions, respecting power and hierarchy, delving into subjects for sheer pleasure or wonderment and indulging in the unnecessary (style, form, rhythm, playfulness, symmetry, décor, and the stuff of art). Famous example of pious men were the Qadis Muḥammad b. Nūḥ (d. 9th century) and Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855) who refused to concede to al-Ma’mūn’s (d. 833) doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’an at great personal expense. See J. A. Nawas, “A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Ma’mūn’s Introduction of

worship of one God, while tolerating the supplication of other deities as well. Pious scholars, needless to say, were forced to respond in order to protect the dignity and oneness of God, which was their primary source of authority in society. I call these two tendencies “voices,” in order to emphasize how each camp’s verbal moves are saturated with ideological symbolism and coded diction, which inter-activates the other camp to respond.<sup>9</sup> In the end, my aim is to show that, far from being ill and dysfunctional, these two voices created cultural and psychological tensions for individuals that by and large inspired civilizational production and creativity.

In order to make this argument, I examine a variety of court sources produced by people who worked at the court daily. I will show that there was a palpable tension in practice between one’s obligations to Allāh on High (*allāhu ta’ālā*) and to the Caliph and patrons here on earth. It will be shown more specifically that the Caliph, promoting henotheism, placed courtiers in a position where they had to prove their devotion to him at subtle implicit expense to their loyalty to Allāh. More importantly, by doing so, courtiers conceded the caliphate’s henotheistic vision, since the monotheism of piety-minded scholars could brook no divided allegiance to Allāh. Three types of court sources will be used that are considered traditional heritage: praise poetry directed to Caliphs and other patrons, architecture of caliphal palaces and bacchic ceremonies that were drunken and sexual. The most underappreciated of these sources is praise poetry, so let me begin by discussing the need for engaging and using odes in praise of patrons.

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the *Mihna*,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 26 (1994), 4: 622. Note that Nawas argues that the primary reason for the *mihna* (test of allegiance to a superior) concerning the createdness of the Qur’an was the Caliph al-Ma’mun’s (d. 833) apprehensions that the *mashāyikh* were exercising far too much influence in forming doctrine, creed and law (all perceived to be under the purview of the caliph as God’s agent). He states, “In al-Ma’mun’s times, men of religious learning, then a heterogeneous group . . . had succeeded in carving out for themselves a broad territory of influence and popularity among all strata of society, and they were a formidable force to reckon with. Had this authority continued unchecked, it would have led to a “house divided” and the caliphal institution adrift.” It is worthy to note that Nawas deems the threat of the *mashāyikh* more imminent than the threat of Shi’i imams, who had claims to the caliphate widely considered legitimate.

<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin’s usage of the term “voices” stems from what he perceives to be a fruitless divide between form and content in language, that is, formal features and ideological messages. To him the choice of, say, font, word, sound image, style, cadence, or accent all contribute to the ideological goals of a text and thus suggest a demographic, sociological constituency behind the utterance, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 259, 272. Most important, however, for our purposes here, just as words are oriented toward the objects to which they refer, they are oriented toward a perceived response from audiences, that is, a rejoinder to the word in a dialogue. Thus one voice inspires, provokes, incites or inter-activates other voices in ongoing exchange, Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 274, 280.

## The Place of the Qasida

The Arabic court ode, the qasīda, persisted in the Middle East as the prestige genre for fourteen centuries. It has remained however an orphan genre underappreciated by modern scholars in the west and the Arab world. Krenkow labels the ode “artificial,” “monotonous,” “nauseous,” and Tritton deems it “untranslatable,” “dull,” and “grotesque or even repulsive”.<sup>10</sup> In the Arab world, likewise, one finds greater familiarity with the tradition, but if authors love it, they also love to hate it. Shawqī Ḍayf, who is considered the doyen of classical poetry in Egypt, alternates between adoration and disgust. In his survey work, *al-ʿAṣr al-ʿAbbāsī al-Thānī* [*The Second Abbasid Period*], written in Nasserist-socialist Egypt, he attacks Abbasid poets for courting power to make a living, referring, for example, to al-Buḥturī (d. 897) as “greedy” and “opportunistic,” following the lead of his orientalist colleagues.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, some modern poets such as Nāzīk al-Malāʾika have deemed the poetic norms of the courtly tradition stifling and stale.<sup>12</sup> If controversy is a marker of importance, then perhaps we can count the court ode as important, but there is a critical need to questions of meaning drawn from the literary methods of wider humanities.

The poetic tradition, in many ways, remains a source of inspiration even today. For example, Arabs still seek traditional lyrical images in naming their newborns. For girls, poetic names are common, such as *Dāliya* (hanging

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<sup>10</sup> Michael A. Sells, “The Qasīda and the West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter” *Al-ʿArabīyya* 20 (1987): 307-324. Note Krenkow’s unhappy assessment of the qasīda as a genre: “a very artificial composition; the same rhyme has to run through the whole of the verses, however long the poem may be. In addition the composition is bound by a metre which the poet has to guard most scrupulously through the whole course of the poem. The result is that we cannot expect much beautiful poetry; the description of the desert and its animals and terrors may have a certain charm at first, but when the same descriptions recur in endless poems expressed in the same manner, only with different words, the monotony becomes nauseous” (emphasis mine, *EI*, s.v., Qasīda in Sells, “The Qasīda and the West,” 308).

Tritton’s condemnation comes under another heading in the same general work: “Arab poetry is essentially atomic; a string of isolated statements which might be accumulated but could not be combined. Sustained narrative and speculation are both alien to it. It is descriptive but the description is a thumbnail sketch; is thoughtful but the result is aphoristic. The poet looks on the world through a microscope. Minute peculiarities of places and animals catch his attention and makes his poetry versified geology and anatomy; untranslatable and dull. Forceful speech is his aim and the result is—to Western minds—often grotesque or even repulsive (*EI*, s.v. *Shīʿr* in Sells, “The Qasīda and the West,” 308).

<sup>11</sup> Shawqī Ḍayf, *al-ʿAṣr al-ʿAbbāsī al-Thānī*, Tārīkh al-Adab al-ʿArabī, 4, 7th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʾārif, 1990) 278.

<sup>12</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), 1: 10.

grape-vine), *Rīm* (white antelope), *Samīra* (nightly storyteller), *Zabyun* (gazelle), *Ghādah* (young), *Ghīdah* (tender), *Fadwā* (ransom-offering), *Najwā* (confidant), *Lamyā'* (red-lipped), *Lamīs* (delicate), *Khulūd* (immortality), *Fātin* (femme fatale), *Nashwā* (wine-reverie), and there are archaic mythic names found in odes, such as *'Ablā*, *Su'ād*, *Salmā*, *Laylā*, and *Mayy*. For boys, names from poetry include *Husām* (sharp sword), *Khālid* (immortal), *Fādī* (ransom-offerer), *Samīr* (nightly storyteller), *Ṭāriq* (visiting lover) and mythic names such as *Qays* and *'Antar*. Whether these choices are selected directly from poetry or not, it is probable that idyllic images from the poetic tradition have bled into modern productions, such as novels, cinema, soap operas, political rhetoric and public ceremony that people today witness and consume.

This study employs specifically the panegyric ode (*madīḥ*): heroic poems in praise of patrons, sometimes caliphs, and often delivered live at Abbasid courts before an assembly of nobles. These odes valorized the virtue, might and lineage of patrons, who would sacrifice a hundred thousand dirhams or more (the cost of a small Abbasid home) to secure the honor. In subsequent generations, praise odes served as lyrical songs celebrating the memory of bygone heroes. Panegyric was in effect a form of supplication to a hero. Patrons were deified using the dense language of poetry, so as to serve as divine beings who respond to human supplication. Caliphs, in particular, sought to capitalize on such heroism by rewarding talented poets who promoted their fame and legacy. Praise poems, in promoting heroes, provided a persuasive means for fostering a cult in memory of the named hero.

Declarations of praise, however, must be put into a larger context that expressed and perpetuated the divinity of the caliph. This article examines two other supporting practices of Abbasid power: palace architecture and images of bacchic leisure. It will be shown that the triad were tightly-knit and interdependent strategies for projecting the divine glory of the caliph. Such glory elevated the caliph above the great divide of monotheism, which separates God from creation. Moreover, court odes promoted the material presence of the caliph relative to the physical absence of God, by the use of the title in panegyric, *khalīfat allāh*, the Agent of Allāh, or the Heir to Allāh, which presumes the absence of Allāh in everyday life. From the perspective of the caliphate, proximity to God in rank was not sufficient. Certainly the caliph drew authority and legitimacy from his superior, as all subordinates must, but his relationship to God also entailed a subtle struggle for preeminence. In praise poetry the caliph was not seldom portrayed as a "near deity," one who was more responsive to human supplication than God on High (*allāhu ta'ālā*), the supreme "remote deity."

### Three Practices of Sacral Power

#### *Panegyric*

The central strategy for manufacturing sacred power at the Abbasid court was panegyric ceremony. Within the privileged space of palaces in Baghdad and Samarra, poets would arrive usually invited or on a day of free audience, in order to woo the good graces of the king, and if the king so desired, the chamberlain would allow the poet access to the inner sanctum of the royal audience hall.<sup>13</sup> The poet would deliver his glorious praise of the king before an assembly of high-profile guests who stood in strict formation according to their status.<sup>14</sup> If the declamation of praise was a pre-scheduled event with a prestigious poet, full ceremony accompanied the panegyric celebration.<sup>15</sup> The panegyric might occur on a special day marking a joyful occasion for the patron such as his wedding, the birth or circumcision of a son, victory at battle,

<sup>13</sup> Muḥammad b. al-ʿImrānī, *al-ʿInbāʾ fi Tārīkh al-Khulafāʾ* (Leiden: Netherlands Institute [Cairo: ʿIsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī], 1973), 91; Abū ʿUthmān al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Tāj fi Akhlāq al-Mulūk*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī (Cairo: al-Maṭbʿa al-Amīriyya, 1914), 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *al-ʿInbāʾ*, 128, also 69, 76, 77, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-ʿImrānī reported a ceremony wherein al-Mutawakkil announced the succession of his three sons. I quote it in full to give an impression of how occasional poetry elicits public witness, and consequently, whenever this story is retold new audiences are made “witnesses” to a message:

And he declared covenants of allegiance for his three sons and rendered them heirs apparent. It was an auspicious day. It was Monday, the first of Muḥarram, 236. They are: Muḥammad, and his honorific is al-Muntaṣir [Made Victorious by God]; al-Zubayr, his honorific is al-Muʿtazz [Made Mighty by God]; and Ibrāhīm, his honorific is al-Muʿayyad [Supported by God]. He set up a banquet the length of four *farsakhs* [3 miles each] in the garden that he planted in Samarra, known as the Jaʿfarī which was seven *farsakhs* in length stretching along the banks of the Tigris and one *farsakh* wide. It was said that it was filled on that day with life. Statues of ambergris and camphor were set in the hands of people as well as diffusers for musk—in sum all aromatic goods and substances. They were transported from storage in baskets and sacks. Everyone who drank a bowl of wine got some of it, smelled it, tucked it in his sleeves or handed it over to his servant in waiting. Whenever a rod of scent burned out, it was replaced. It was so from sunrise to sunset.

Mutawakkil himself sat upon a throne of gold set with gems weighing a thousand *mann* [2 rothls each]. The heirs apparent stood before him, wearing jeweled crowns. Meanwhile, people were—according to their ranks [*ṭabaqātihim*]<sup>16</sup>—sitting and standing. Sunrise glimmered upon the golden vessels at each place setting, as well as upon belts, swords and shields adorned with gold—it was well-nigh blinding. On that day, Ibrāhīm b. al-ʿAbbās al-Ṣūlī, the Prince of Men, rose and recited among the ranks of men

return from Hajj, a holiday, recovery from illness or the building of a new palace.<sup>16</sup> The aim very often was to send a communiqué to the world beyond the palace, especially to rivals and foes.

A cadenced poem was infectious because it could easily be memorized and recited. Al-Buḥturī, for example, boasted of his poetry to his patron Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Qummī,

The recitation of [this] broadcast verse will repeat uninterrupted.  
For its charm, even rivals chant it.<sup>17</sup>

In response to heroic poems, the patron would confirm the poet’s words with deeds. He would bestow on the poet a material gift of some sort, be it money, domestic servants, horses, jewels, scented oils, or perhaps even fiefs. Nothing was secretive about the exchange of praise for goods; the praise ceremony was intended to be public.<sup>18</sup> Audiences of nobles at the court would witness and later recount the offer of praise, artfully presented, and behold the patron’s magnificent gifts on the poet.

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The lions of Islam—mixed with ‘Victory,’ ‘Might’  
and ‘Support’—have manifested  
A Hashimite Caliph and three heirs apparent  
who safeguard the caliphate  
Their forefathers have safeguarded them,  
and they safeguard their forefathers.  
Thus they proceed with the noblest  
of souls and grandfathers” (Ibn al-‘Imrānī, *al-‘Inbā’*, 117).

For more on ceremony in various Islamic courts and the indispensable function of the ode in validating power, see S. Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002); as well as Paula Saunders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994). See Adam Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam* (Beirut: United Publishers, 1973). In Arabic, a valuable resource for early Abbasid court etiquette and ceremony is a work attributed to al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Tāj*.

<sup>16</sup> Men of authority simulated in their own lives the tokens of authority exhibited by the king. We see the king’s subordinates enjoying “kingly” privileges in courts of their own that vary not in kind, but in degree. For example, when al-Mutawakkil’s vizier, al-Faḥ b. Khāqān, survived a drowning accident while fishing, he held audience, as his superior would, to receive well-wishers and visitors. Al-Buḥturī visited him in person and delivered a poem to declaim his relief. See Abū Bakr b. Yaḥyā Al-Ṣūlī, *Akhhār al-Buḥturī wa Dhayl al-Akhhār* ed. Ṣāliḥ al-Ashtar (Damascus: Al-Majma‘ al-‘Ilmī al-‘Arabī, 1958), 96-97.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 153.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Jāḥiẓ, for example, advises the king to bestow all honors to some extent publicly: “It is king’s etiquette that he bestow robes of honor on whomever brings him happiness privately, or publicly affirming his sovereignty. If the happiness is in and of himself, then he must claim the

It was precisely at such events that the poet venerated the king to the level of “near deity” with his supplications. He would do so by projecting two images of awesome power: the first presented the king as a cosmic hero who fights the vagaries of Fate, and the second portrayed him as a generous deity. In both images, the king exhibited the capacity to command life and death. In doing so, he provoked the visceral reactions that sustained sanctity, that is, fear (*hayba*) of punishment and hope (*raghba*) of benefit. In the ritual of panegyric, the poet offered his words of devotion and the king reciprocated with bounty. The king had to confirm the poet’s words with his generous deed. This exchange of devotion for generosity persisted as a ritual in the iconography of Islamic kingship.

In panegyric poetry, the king as cosmic hero must wage perpetual war not on infidels per se, but on evil, personified by Fate, Death, Days, Nights, or Time (*al-dahr*, *al-manāyā*, *al-ayyām*, *al-layālī*, *al-zamān*). In all cases, this force was hostile to innocent human life. Sperl observes that Fate was “master over life and death, generation and decay, but its rule is chaotic and arbitrary, amoral and hostile to human society”.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the king was the protagonist who protected human victims from the ravages of Fate. Sperl says, “the Caliph’s rule... is not arbitrary but in accordance with virtue, justice and divine will. His accession to the throne marks the defeat of fate”.<sup>20</sup> In brief, a caliph was obliged to protect humanity from the malice of Fate, which, in poetic idiom, included the intimate pains and disappointments of life. Fate inevitably struck with an iron will causing humans to suffer lost love, poverty, old age, the death of loved ones, and of course, the unkindness of lovers. Consider for example how Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809) received the supplication of Ishāq al-Mawṣilī and channeled his disaffection. Ishāq performed this heroic poem specifically in honor of al-Rashīd. Before an audience at the court, Ishāq complained of his lover:

I said to a lover who has a habit of not giving, “save it,”  
For that is something that goes nowhere.

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*privilege* of bestowing robes of honors on him within the comfort of his palace, in the *presence* of his nobles and entourage. If it affirms his sovereignty, then he must claim the *privilege* of honoring him in the *presence* of the masses, in order thus to spread his reputation and enhance story-telling-ability (*al-uḥdūtha*). Consequently, it will revitalize goodwill, and he will instill the desire to affirm his sovereignty and shore up its foundations” (al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Tāj*, 70).

<sup>19</sup> Sperl, “Islamic Kingship,” 32. On occasion court panegyric presents Fate as rightful, such as Abū Nuwās, *Diwān Abī Nuwās* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1962), 171—which is consistent with his professional reputation for overturning convention, confirming the overwhelming trope of Fate as humanity’s antagonist.

<sup>20</sup> Sperl, “Islamic Kingship,” 32.

.....

My gifts have been those of a generous man giving graciously.

Yet, I have received—as you well know—little!

But how, after all, can I fear poverty or be deprived of riches,  
when the wisdom of the Commander of the Faithful is well?

“How indeed?” cried the king, flattered to be seen as the *savoir* and ordered a reward of 100,000 dirhams.<sup>21</sup> The poet’s plea could not fall on deaf ears, the Caliph had to respond to mortal needs.

The ravages of Fate were constant, of course, and thus subjects had little recourse but to place their hope in the patron. Consider, for example, the supplication of Muḥammad b. Ṣālih al-‘Alawī, in the *Book of Songs* [*Kitāb al-Aghānī*]. Note particularly his rhapsodic diction addressed to the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861):

You have kindled the bonds of the caliphate with Guidance.

When you ascended to it, you calmed the eyes of the sleepless.

.....

I have supplicated you (*da’awtuka*) and you answered (*fa-stajabta*)  
my supplications—death was but one hand-span away from me.

You pulled me out from the bottom of the trough of demise  
safely, and you did not give credence to the claims of my foes.

You released prisoners [...]

and you set the limbs of a man who had no bone-setter.

You took pity on your blood-kin by which you  
aspire to the *proximity* of the Sovereign the Mighty.

I seek refuge in the grace of your forgiveness (*a’ūdhu bi-fadli ‘afwika*)

if I’m caused to show wants at your door, the wants of a back-broken man.<sup>22</sup>

It was primarily through the expressive power of praise poetry that the king’s soteriological role was witnessed. Through him only, the poet and society was saved from destruction and redeemed. With this paradigm, the brute facts of submission were clothed in familial sentiments, such as loyalty, devotion and love. ‘Alī b. al-Jahm in his famed *Rūṣāfiyya* ode told al-Mutawakkil:

Faith alone is unacceptable without devotion to you.

Does God accept ritual prayer without ritual purity?<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> A standard amount; Ibn al-‘Imrānī, *al-Inbā’*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Ṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. al-Najdī Nāṣif (Cairo: al-Hay’ al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1992-1993), 16: 370-371.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Alī b. al-Jahm, *Diwān*, ed. Khalil Mardam (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1996), no. 80, line 48.

Indeed, both Sperl and Al-Azmeh have noted that loyalty to the caliph was a prerequisite of salvation in the eyes of the court.<sup>24</sup>

The second image of authority ritually depicted in praise poetry was that of caliphal generosity (*karam*). Generosity rewarded allegiance by responding to deprivation and was thus vital proof of legitimacy. When foiled by terror, generosity projected charisma, without which power could neither be legitimate nor self-perpetuating. Generosity was thus the material and ideological basis for the patron-client relationship, and thus virtually all relationships of dependency in society. As one adage warned, "Stinginess is the cancer of politics."<sup>25</sup> He who risked economizing with his subordinates risked rebellion and disgrace.<sup>26</sup> One maxim even mocked the would-be miser: "The most stingy man with his money is the most spendthrift with his honor."<sup>27</sup>

Though the importance of generosity was a matter of consensus in Arab Islamic culture, some authors have actually conceived of it as the mother of all virtues. A man who was generous, the reasoning went, knew how to give and sacrifice. All virtues of character were gifts to society, therefore a man who was generous was by nature virtuous. Ibn Hudhayl related, "Generosity (*karam*) is a term applied to every sort of virtue. It is a word that includes the ideas of forgiveness and munificence. Every trait that is good, every innate quality that is kind . . . falls under the name generosity."<sup>28</sup> Of course, the author played up the double meaning of *karam*, which can mean either generosity or nobility. In fact, well into the modern era, generosity was a means of acquiring and maintaining nobility, according to an ethic of noblesse oblige.

To be generous to subordinates was to play the role of deity, to take on characteristics of divine perfection.<sup>29</sup> Having and dispensing wealth was godly

<sup>24</sup> Sperl "Islamic Kingship," 32; Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Ms. Esc. 724, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio, San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid, Spain, f. 28b.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Abdellah Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 53, in reference to Moroccan kingship, where he says bluntly, "The monarch is definitely hated when he does not distribute favors." Interestingly, he observes that Islamic law and ethics (the instrument of the Ulema) sought to curtail court spending on gifts, thereby threatening the sultan's popularity (ibid.). Having interests and perspectives at variance with the court, the Ulema in Morocco realize that without gifts to his servants, "He loses their loyalty and takes the chance that his troops will choose to serve a more generous prince" (ibid.).

<sup>27</sup> Ms. Esc. 724, f. 28b.

<sup>28</sup> 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Hudhayl, *'Ayn al-Adab wal-Siyāsa wa Zayn al-Ḥasab wal-Riyāsa*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), 105.

<sup>29</sup> The oft-quoted Hadith stated, "Embody the characteristics of Allāh" (*takballaqū bi-khuluq illāh*). See, among others, Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-'Arabī, *al-Waṣāyā* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1990), 9.

according to proverb: "Wealth is better than poverty, because wealth is a trait of Allāh while poverty is a trait of creations."<sup>30</sup> Another author advised in unequivocal terms, "If you give, you will be happy . . . Allāh is generous, so you be generous."<sup>31</sup> Statements such as these rarefied the act of giving, and lent credibility to anagogic interpretations of authority and its techniques. Generosity was a proud self-conscious ethos in Arab Islamic culture, which underpinned relations of inequality. Men of authority (altruistic or not) could countenance sacrificing wealth because it vested them with the worthwhile returns of legitimate power. In effect, it cultivated a mutually convenient dependency. The lord could expect absolute loyalty and obedience in return for his favors. As one unnamed poet advised, "Be generous to people, you will enslave their hearts. O how often people are enslaved by generosity."<sup>32</sup> Of course, a slave in Islamic culture was conceived as the perfect devotee or worshipper (*abd*), and thus emotion and service overlap.

Just as there was honor in giving, there was honor in service. A particularly vivid example of such honor was a heroic poem by al-Mutanabbī saluting a state bureaucrat (*kātib*), Abū 'Alī Hārūn b. 'Abd al-'Azīz. The poem sacralizes the patron's generosity by setting him in proximity to Allāh, rendering service to him like worship. In return, the patron receives blessings from above, and channels them like merciful rain to those below. Of course, the poet raises expectations in this public document that Abū 'Alī will shower *him* with gifts as well!

The patron is portrayed as a mythic figure. The needy turn to him and he rejects no one, despite critics who disapprove of his softness.<sup>33</sup> He stands ready to give his soul for whomever should ask (l. 30). He needs little himself; only what the poor leave untaken does he consider a "gift" (l. 31). But of course, largesse in Arab Islamic society is not simply altruism, it confirms noblesse. The stature that al-Mutanabbī ascribes to his patron, however, is not human, but sacral. Al-Mutanabbī continues,

The dead are no greater than the living  
unless the living lose *you* (l. 32)

He may be mortal, but his death would rob the living of his cosmic greatness. The poet declares "your name is without equal (*ghayr mushārakin*)" (l. 35).

<sup>30</sup> Ms. Esc. 724, f. 93a.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Muḥassin b. 'Alī b. al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min Fī lāt al-Ajwād*, ed. Yūsuf al-Bustānī (Cairo: Dār al-'Arab, 1985), 201.

<sup>32</sup> Ms. Esc. 724, f. 70b, margins.

<sup>33</sup> Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī, *Diwān al-Mutanabbī bi-Sharḥ al-'Ukbarī*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1971), no. 3, line 29.

This seems to elevate him rhetorically above the realm of human conduct. It allows him to contend in greatness with Allāh, of whom the pious say, “he has no equal (*lā sharīka lahu*).” In fact, his greatness transcends the possibility of human praise, “all praise remains beneath you” (l. 36). Praise however is not without cause (or condition). The patron has received credit for munificence to the needy and helpless. Yet his aspirations leave him discontent with his achievements:

You have been generous to the farthest extreme and  
 pulled back as if almost “stinting” ... O tears of joy!  
 You have started precedents that are known by your initiative.  
 And you have outstripped them leaving your precedents disowned  
 (l. 37-38).

Generosity was the economic and emotional fluid that worked the hydraulics of power and charisma. Here al-Mutanabbī certainly describes an ideal patron, but that ideal pitches a myth that is as difficult to forgo as it is to dislike. One’s patron stood as one’s “protector” in a sense. A rapport of need and trust meant that one had an intercessor against the horrors of a competitive world: rivals, poverty and helplessness. A rapport of material need did not preclude an emotional bond or the rhetoric of loyalty that it entailed. Expressing the ideal of absolute adoration, al-Mutanabbī proclaims,

If you are praised you gain not height in rank.  
 The grateful must simply thank the deity (l. 41).

Throughout the praise section of the poem, there are philological and visual intimations to Abū ‘Alī’s divine status, but in last line (l. 41) it becomes undeniable. It is as if he is saying with you, as with Allāh, you do not need praise, yet your servants feel obligated to offer it in gratitude. Consistent with the man’s divine status, al-Mutanabbī accentuates his self-sufficiency, and his merit over nature:

If you receive rain, it’s not for dearth:  
 The Fertile Crescent is drenched, and the sea too enjoys rain.  
 Clouds cannot mimic your bounty. They’re in a fever of envy,  
 their droplets are mere sweat (l. 42-43).

These images of glory were self-perpetuating. A reputation for generosity circulated provokes more occasions to demonstrate nobility.

It is doubtless that the emerging scholarly profession took offense at these demonstrations of authority. We can see one voice inter-activating and

dialoging with another in a heated cultural discourse. Heroic poems were blatant bids to steal praise and glory from the one “true” God, Allāh. God’s displeasure was made known through circulated Hadith: “Nothing changes Fate except supplication [to God].”<sup>34</sup> That is to say, supplication to others is futile. In some cases, believers were warned that God becomes jealous when others are praised and glorified. Hadiths admonish: “There is no one more jealous than Allāh” and “No one likes praise (*madḥ*) more than Allāh.”<sup>35</sup> With monotheism, as with monogamy, the beloved should have no rivals or competitors.

We can also note that while the caliph drew authority from his superior, Allāh, there was nevertheless a bit of oedipal rivalry. The caliph was charged to fight the ravages of Fate, which bring death, destruction and sorrow to innocent human life. But in pious formulations, nothing befalls mankind but the will of God. God causes Fate. It seems that God took *offense* to the caliph’s fight against Fate, which is ultimately God’s will. A well-circulated Hadith said that God says, “The sons of Adam insult me. They say, ‘O how disappointing is Fate.’ But *I am Fate!* I turn its night and day.”<sup>36</sup> From a pious perspective, the believer should trust in Allāh’s goodwill (*ḥusn al-ẓann billāh*), however mysterious it may seem.

To ordinary people in this formative period of Islam, it may have been far too much to ask them to trust an unseen, remote deity, who was seemingly capricious, instead of a living, near deity, who terrified and nourished society. We should bear in mind that pious monotheistic Islam was still a fairly new idea in the second century, while paganism, hero worship and henotheistic tolerance were much older and better established. The standard Qur’anic argument against worshiping handmade idols (they can neither benefit you nor harm you) could hardly have been effective in the case of hero worship. The hero could destroy, build, deprive and nourish with cosmic grandeur. Moreover, heroic poetry and palace anecdotes could serve as a means of broadcasting news of his actions. Concerning Hellenistic kingship, McEwan notes, “one might believe vaguely in the power and glory of the Olympians, but he could see and feel the glory and the power of the Diadochs. The local god fed nobody in time of famine, but the king could and did.”<sup>37</sup> The emerging idea of Allāh on High (*Allāhu ta’ālā*) was at a disadvantage in the Abbasid period. The caliph could hear supplications and immediately respond, whereas the emerging

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Hudhayl, *‘Ayn al-Adab*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Al-Aḥādīth al-Qudsiyya*. 8th ed., 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A’lā lil-Shu’ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1991), 32. Another colorful version of the Hadith asserts that Allāh says, “The sons of Adam insult me! They curse *Fate*, yet I am *Fate*. I will it. I turn night and day” (*al-Aḥādīth al-Qudsiyya*, 31).

<sup>37</sup> Calvin McEwan, *The Oriental Origin of Hellenistic Kingship*. Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, no. 13. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1934), 26.

deity, Allāh, in early Abbasid society was considered mysterious, distant and unresponsive. In later centuries, scholars responded by dedicating thought and energy into improving God's public image by promoting his reputation for mercy and generosity.

*Palace Architecture: Entrapment by Design*

Architecture was also used to promote the cult of the king and disparage the pious establishment. In fact, palaces were designed and orientated to force greater abeyance to the caliph, in contrast to Allāh. Baghdad for instance was designed in the eighth century as a quadrilateral city with an uncommon radial shape. In an important article, Beckwith lucidly demonstrates the cultural influence of the Barmakids of Central Asia, who were Buddhist converts to Islam, helping to explain Baghdad's novel shape.<sup>38</sup> Beckwith illustrates that Khālid b. Barmak was echoing the design of a world-famous Buddhist monastery of Nawbahār at Balkh.<sup>39</sup> At the center of the monastery was a shrine, and likewise at the center of the imperial city of Baghdad was the Abbasid palace and mosque.<sup>40</sup> For Beckwith, the center of Baghdad was made sacred by its affinity with the shrine at the center of the Nawbahār monastery. It must be noted, however, that despite the sacredness of both the palace and mosque, Baghdad's designers marked the priority of the palace with sheer size. The palace was *four* times as large as the mosque.<sup>41</sup> In effect, the caliph's sacred space dwarfed that of Allāh on high.<sup>42</sup>

These symbols lent credence to the suspicion that the king's heroic claims dominated those of pious religion. Moreover, the orientation of the palace confirmed this. According to Herzfeld's reconstruction, the palace was orientated with its axis of precession pointing north-east.<sup>43</sup> The orientation of the palace was in perfect opposition to the direction of the Kaaba, the *qiblah*, south-west. The palace and the mosque abut one another, and thus to face the king was to give one's back to the Kaaba. Consequently, bowing or prostrating would desecrate a direction which was in itself holy to pious Muslims because of its significance for ritual prayer and burial.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Beckwith, "The Plan of the City of Peace: Central Asian Iranian Factors in the Early 'Abbāsīd Design" *Acta Orientalia* 38 (1984): 143-164.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-149.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1994), 395, 574.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 395, 574.

<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Hillenbrand notes, that the palace had four cruciform pavilions (sing. *īwān*)

These strategies were reused in constructing the gargantuan palaces of Samarra in the ninth century. The common theme of Samarran palaces was their colossal size. Jawsaq al-Khāqānī (836?) was the lead example, covering an area of 432 acres, an expanse that took researchers some twenty years to excavate.<sup>45</sup> Planners designed the palace campus with enormous spaces open to the sky, areas for wide gardens and parks, open air fountains, canals, game preserves and polo-grounds.

It should be noted, though, that the mythic proportions of the buildings were meant to reflect the mythic stature of the builder. The edifice confirmed the caliph's possession of the world. Story had it that al-Mutawakkil asked Abū al-ʿAynā—famous for his quick wit and sharp tongue—“What do you think of my residence here?” He replied, “I see people building homes in the world, but *you* build the world in your home.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the size of the Samarran palace ordered a cosmos which al-Mutawakkil possessed and controlled like bodily appendages. This Samarran notion would later crystallize in the legacy of Jaʿfar al-Mutawakkil. When he completed a new palace city just north of Samarra, he identified it with his persona. He named it al-Jaʿfariyya and called its chief palace al-Jaʿfarī. He also sought to be buried there.<sup>47</sup> According to Yaʿqūbī, he held audience and said, “Now I know that I am indeed a king, for I have built myself a city and live in it.”<sup>48</sup> In a double overlay of metaphor, the palace was simultaneously an extension of the caliph's person and a reduction of the cosmos.<sup>49</sup>

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that were perfectly aligned with the gates of the city, stretching out indefinitely in four directions midway between the cardinal points (Ibid., 393). The round shape and four axes combined the cosmological concepts of heaven's disc and the image of the four quarters of the earth (El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 1). No doubt, the middle of the circle was a domed throne chamber where the lines of the four axes converged (ibid., 395). In sum, this arrangement placed the caliph in opposition to the Kaaba, at the center of heaven's disc and at the precise intersection of earth's four quarters.

<sup>45</sup> Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 399.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Rabbih, *Al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*, ed. by Muḥammad al-ʿAryān, Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 5: 344.

<sup>48</sup> In K. A. C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*. rev. and supp. James W. Allan (Cairo: American Univ. Press, 1989), 367.

<sup>49</sup> The rhetoric of divinity was effected not just in size, but in design. Samarran architects contrasted vast open courtyards (very bright) with tightly-knit warrens (very dim), which enabled them to sufficiently awe visitors by physically and psychologically shocking them with the extremes of space-usage and lighting and, in the summer, temperature. Since in every palace the main axis was also processional, one might associate the discomfort of traversing long sun-baked courtyards with the rites of passage reflected in many ceremonial poems. In Bulkuwāra the processional corridor was some 575 meters (Ibid., 575), that of Iṣṭabulāt 1,000 meters (ibid.), and certainly the earliest and longest was Jawsaq al-Khāqānī with a processional corridor

The feeling of awe was also elicited with architectural symbolism. In Bulkuwāra (849-860?), Iṣṭabulāt (849-860?) and Jawsaq al-Khāqānī, the processional corridors lead to the seat of honor in the throne room, which was crowned with a small dome.<sup>50</sup> Bulkuwāra and Iṣṭabulāt also compounded the symbolism by extending the throne chamber into four pavilions (sing. *iwān*) in the shape of a cruciform.<sup>51</sup> Doubtless, the cruciform intersected above the throne. Qaṣr al-Jiṣṣ (877-882?) was in fact built as a square with the cruciform design dividing the entire structure into four quadrants, but intersecting at the center above the throne chamber. The cruciform, in addition to the circle and the ark, is one of the most common building designs for Near Eastern churches, and its conventional association with salvation reaffirms a belief in the caliph as a heroic savoir. His soteriological powers though stand in dialogic tension with other vehicles of salvation that were emerging in early Islam, namely divine law, prophetic example and direct union with God, promoted by pious and ascetic thinkers.

As in Baghdad, the orientation of palaces with respect to the *qiblah*-direction was sometimes used to create an opposition with pious religion: At least three Samarran palaces, Qaṣr al-Jiṣṣ (877-82), Iṣṭabulāt, and Qaṣr al-ʿAshiq (877-82), were strategically orientated with the processional axis pointing north-east, again designing a conflict of interest for anyone with pious inclinations. Facing the king invariably meant giving one's back to the Kaaba, and even worse if prostration is involved. It should be noted that giving the backside to the caliph constituted a gross breach of etiquette in the Abbasid court, and one can safely assume that it was an equal breach for the Kaaba and God on High. I view these symbolic strategies as interacting and competing voices in a cultural discourse. This view allows us to identify the extreme pressures placed on courtiers to surrender their loyalty to the caliph at the expense of God on High. No man can live under two masters, and here caliphs can be seen using architecture to entrap their courtiers.<sup>52</sup>

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1,400 meters, or nearly one mile. See *Ibid.*, Creswell, *Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, 337; Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts*, Art and Ideas Series (London: Phaidon), 52. The parataxis of staggering archways and vast courtyards offered the visitor a dramatic walk, sure to put his smallness in perspective as he pondered the majesty of his host and entered the proper frame of mind—that is, fear of his wrath and hope for his beneficence.

<sup>50</sup> One should note that the ninth-century dome was an architectural marvel used solely in palaces. Later it would be appropriated for mosque architecture.

<sup>51</sup> See plans in Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 575-577.

<sup>52</sup> cf. Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 123.

*Bacchic Leisure*

The caliph also served a mystogogic role as patron of carnal pleasures. He can be seen in contrast to God on High, who exercises authority over human desire by allowing a narrower range of pleasures and regulating them. In the privileged space of the palace, the caliph made bacchic pleasures customary at the court in defiance of pious stricture. The behavioral topoi of the court included the revelry of wine, wine-songs, ephebes (*ghilmān*) and the love of the ubiquitous libation bearer (*sāqī*), and the love and music of minstrels (*qiyān*). Whereas Muslim piety and asceticism censured such practices, the king allowed it. Indeed, he sponsored it and guided the initiation of his closest courtiers, so they too would know its mystic joys. These themes reminiscent of the Dionysian cult provide vivid examples of how the early Islamic culture inherited Hellenistic ideas and practices from antiquity.

Within the aesthetics adopted at the Abbasid court, these Dionysian themes were mythopoeic. The volume of speech on bacchanalia in poetry, anecdotes and treatises makes it certain that the courtly elite wanted to be famed for adopting an aesthetic that was evocative of the Dionysian cult.<sup>53</sup> There was ample reason for their want. S. Stetkevych demonstrates that wine, as well as minstrels and libation bearers—along with their implicit sexual roles—were part of an old iconography that conferred immortality and evoked gardens of bliss.<sup>54</sup> Homoerotic poetry also enabled the poet to challenge the patron's veil of etiquette and the rigidity of decorum, forming a unique bond that permitted public satire.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Meisami notes that homoeroticism was the ideal of Persian love poetry (*ghazal*), and was seen as a means to courtly self-perfection. In idolizing the lover, the *ghazal* conditioned the audience to become the perfect lover, "and in so doing to transcend love's human limitations."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of homoeroticism in the Persian *ghazal*, see Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), ch. 6. Note Kai Kā'ūs b. Iskandar's advice in the *Qābūs Nāma* on the advantages and disadvantages of women and ephebes. Without reference to any opprobrium he advised that rulers should not limit themselves, and that each kind of love had a most appropriate season of the year, *A Mirror for Princes: the Qābūs Nāma*, trans. Reuben Levy (New York: Dutton, 1951), 77-78. See also homo- and heteroerotic poetry ostensibly from the perspective of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn, *Diwān al-Amin wal-Ma'mūn*, ed. Wādih al-Šamad (Lebanon: Dār Šādir, 1998), 54, 57, 62, 66, 70, 71, 77, 79, 81, and 111-112. See also al-Šābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*.

<sup>54</sup> S. Stetkevych, "Intoxication and Immortality," in *Critical Pilgrimages: The Arabic Literary Tradition*, edited by F. Malti-Douglas, special issue of *Literature East and West* 25:40-41.

<sup>55</sup> J. W. Wright, "Masculine Allusion and the Structure of Satire in Early 'Abbāsīd Poetry," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. by J. W. Wright and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 1-23 2, 16.

<sup>56</sup> Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 251-254. Robert Graves illustrates in his study of

Architecture complemented the aesthetics of leisure. Abbasid caliphs promoted both with the aim of giving the impression of divine power in a celestial realm. Hillenbrand acutely notes: “Immured within their colossal palaces . . . their lifestyle expressed in the most extreme form the ancient Near Eastern concept of the king as god, even though such a belief was utterly incompatible with [pious] Islam.”<sup>57</sup>

If taken in tandem, architectural design and symbolism, as well as bacchic leisure helped mythologize the court and its characters. In heroic poems and palace anecdotes, the king is no less than a mythic being. He is the patron of bacchic pleasures, initiating newcomers to a privileged realm and experience. There is a compounded relationship between this triad—pleasure, knowledge and power—according to Foucault.<sup>58</sup> The patron initiated his disciple into a mysterious pleasurable ritual which yielded new knowledge. Both the pleasure and the knowledge come about by virtue of a patronage relationship, which in effect redoubles the power of the patron.<sup>59</sup> According to Foucault, post-Victorian sexuality in the West was constrained to ensure confession. But by contrast, in many Islamic societies, carnal knowledge was to remain ideally a secret between confidants. To divulge the secret was to spoil the experience and the patronage relationship. There was a need, he argues, to hold the secret in “the greatest reserve, since . . . it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged.”<sup>60</sup> The king, as patron of bacchic rites, facilitated the attainment of carnal pleasure and mystical knowledge. In exchange for his patronage, he received power in the form of fame and divine glory.

## Conclusion

Lest we think that the tension between monotheism and the paganism preoccupies only the court, I am reminded of a post-conversion ode by Ka'b b. Zuhayr that illustrates the tension among the early audiences and performers

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Greek myth that many of the superhuman patriarchs of Hellenic myth were famed for their catamites. Zeus loved his libation bearer, Ganymedes, Apollo Hyacinthis, Laius Chrysippus, and so on, Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, comb. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1955), 116-117. The libation bearer possesses immortality and confers it, S. Stetkevych, “Intoxication and Immortality,” 29-48. He also provided the hope of homosexual romance that would “liberate” patriarchy from its sexual dependence on women (Graves, *Greek Myths*, 117). Like Greek philosophy itself, sexuality was a sport to be played without need of women (ibid.).

<sup>57</sup> Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 395.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books 1990), 57.

<sup>59</sup> cf. al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*.

<sup>60</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 57.

of the ode. After a terrifying ordeal through the desert, the poet finds himself in a quandary at nightfall, caught between fearful passage and his need for sleep and rest. He decides to be pious to the tradition of Muhammad and put trust not in his camel mares' nature, but in the One the Sleepless:

I halted my camel foal and I took her eyes as guard,  
 and I asked myself which of the two paths should I follow?  
 Should I give trust to her to watch over me in  
 fear of incident dangerous to humans or should I have Faith.  
 I swear by the Compassionate, and none other,  
 by the right palm of a guiltless man, never to be broken,  
 that I, knowing, don my humble rags surrendering to  
 the dignity of He Who Gives and Takes Creatures' Lives.  
 He is the keeper of the sleeper at night, mortal as he is,  
 be he chagrined to sleep, drowsy.

.....

So when the stars finally set at dawn, I rode on;  
*Arcturus* and *Spica Virginis* had vanished.<sup>61</sup>

Tradition holds that this initial ending elicited a well-received alternate ending that adds a glorious veneration of the camel mare, virtually subverting the initial version, and the idea of trusting God, or at least fundamentally dividing the poet's trust between heavenly and earthly resources.

This article sought to interpret the tension between the pious and the profane in early Islam, and my hope is to bring this matter into sharp relief. It would seem to me that these courtly sources indicate a period of hero worship. In the Abbasid era, kings were seemingly absolute authorities on earth vested with divine power and status. In courtly odes, subjects addressed kings like supplicants before a deity. Through palace architecture, kings expressed and perpetuated their divinity by the design and magnitude of their residences. The bacchic lifestyle of the palace evoked the myth of Dionysus as patron of earthy pleasures. From the perspective of the court, this imperial Islam was the only Islam. It would take centuries yet for pious and ascetic thinkers to respond and compete with formalized notions of law, madrasa-seminary learning and even mysticism. In time, pious ideals triumphed and endured in Islamic society, but court literature suggests that henotheistic ideals were promoted by the caliph in the early centuries of Islamic culture.

<sup>61</sup> Two of the brightest stars in the night sky: in folk astronomy, *al-simāk al-rāmīh* (*Arcturus*) is considered "armed" by surrounding stars, while the second, *al-simāk al-āzal* (*Spica Virginis*) is "alone" and "unarmed." Ka'b b. Zuhayr, *Diwān Ka'b b. Zuhayr*, commentary by Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥasan al-Sukkārī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, al-Qism al-Adabī, 1995), 55-57.

It is interesting to note that the sources that promote the cult of the king remained in a sense fully Muslim. Court odes and palace anecdotes celebrated the sacral authority of great men, and the submission of followers to them, yet there remained something appealing about them to Muslims through the generations. One must bear in mind that these texts are not “reclaimed” for a revisionist enterprise. To the contrary, they have been actively selected and transmitted so that generations would know about their heroic ancestors. Their persistence attests to the fact that they have beaten the odds against transmission. Court odes, in particular, were considered the greatest cultural achievement of the Arabs. Despite the challenge they pose to exclusive monotheism, they were copied, memorized and recited for centuries after their debut. If Muslims themselves were able—have been able—to accept this “impious” tradition as a foil for understanding pious culture, a question remains why western scholars are reluctant.

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