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Art and Religion as Existential Response

Art and religion serve a similar purpose – the universal human desire for spiritual connection with other people and with the greater universe. This explains why many artists take religion as the theme for their works and why all religions have used art to express their theology. Both art and religion strive to answer the basic existential questions that drive humanity to despair: Where did the universe come from? How did human beings evolve? What is the purpose of my life? Every artist and religious prophet shows his or her own answers to these questions of the world. The universal appeal of art and religion suggests a universal human religious and aesthetic sense. I was first introduced to the religious experience while praying with my father in a large mosque in Chicago, and later to the spiritual quality of Islamic recitation when I heard the first surah of the Q'uran recited in Bangladesh.

Music, the art of sound through time, has been used in the service of religion since the very beginning of human social groups. Even before the evolution of language, proto-humans probably used music to help organize their social tribes, establish power hierarchies, create group cohesion, and establish procreative relationships. Most conservative theological thinkers would probably strongly object to the comparison of their religion with art or music, even more so in a traditional religion like Islam. Nevertheless, both the recitation of the Q'uran and Islamic prayer has artistic and musical elements. When an outsider is first introduced to Q'uranic recitation, he or she cannot help to notice the poetic, even lyrical and musical, elements. And when he or she first

partakes in Islamic prayer, he or she cannot help to draw the comparison to the dance-like, physical recitation of poetry of several stanzas.

In order for one to appreciate the musical aspects of Q'uranic recitation, one only needs to listen to the first *Surah, Al-Fatiha (The Opening)*. When I first heard this surah recited in a mosque in Bangladesh during my first visit to an Islamic country, I was moved to the depths of my soul. Normally during prayer, after the adzan¹ is called, the first surah begins with the standard phrase that declares that everything that the Muslim does is in Allah's name. The first line sets the tone, pitch, and theme for the rest of the surah, and in fact, for the rest of the Q'uran. It establishes the reciting voice, which has a spiritually soothing quality, and makes clear the intention of the Muslim to follow Allah in all his or her dealings. The translation of the first surah is printed below:

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.	(1)
Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds;	(2)
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;	(3)
Master of the Day of Judgment.	(4)
Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek.	(5)
Show us the straight way,	(6)
The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray. ²	(7)

The rest of the text is read similarly, in a crisp monophonic voice, with a slightly elevated pitch, and occasional departures from monotone. The original text is written in a traditional, highly lyrical, Arabic. This language is ideal for the preservation of musical style because it includes elaborate signs for how each letter is to be pronounced – its pitch, duration, and even dynamics.

¹ Islamic call to prayer.

² For a mosque recitation of *Surah Al Fatiha*, along with transliteration and translation into several languages, see <http://www.al-nasir.com/DivineIslam/Quran/iqra.php>.

The poetry of the surah is obvious in the rhyme of the lines in the Arabic tongue. All seven lines have assonance on the long vowel sound “e,” and consonance on the constant “m” in lines 1, 3, and 6, and on the constant “n” on lines 2, 4, 5, and 7. The rhyme pattern is “m N m N N m N.” The recitation begins on a slightly higher than average pitch in line 1, and maintains that pitch in lines 2, 3, and 4, which essentially name and describe the Creator. The pitch is elevated for line 5, which shows reverence for the One God, and is lowered significantly below normal pitch for line 6 to convey a serious request for God to show Muslims the straight path. In line 7, the pitch returns to the higher than average level, and slowly returns to normal. The pitch pattern is “a a a a B c Ba,” where *a* refers to average Q’uranic pitch, *B* refers to elevated pitch, and *c* to depressed pitch. The recitation is very similar to traditional Medieval Gregorian chant in its monophonic, and largely monotonic, qualities. This is not surprising, considering the fact that Islam originated in the same part of the world as Christianity (the Middle East), and that the Prophet Mohammad considered Islam a continuation of Christianity, and that he considered Christ as a prophet of Allah.

The prayer of Islam, called *lamaz*, also follows an artistic pattern. It lies somewhere between religious dance and mass poetic recitation. Its division into several parts or stages is reminiscent of the division of a poem into several stanzas or music into several themes. Normally, Friday prayer consists of two sections or stanzas that are read out loud by the imam³ and performed collectively, followed by another two to three sections read and performed privately by each worshipper. In many ways, this is symbolic of Islam being both a cultural and social tradition, and at the same time being a private religious experience between each human being and God. A first-time visitor to a

³ Islamic religious leader.

large mosque cannot help to notice the similarity and tension in this juxtaposition. The sections done collectively appear like a sea of people moving in unison, giving the illusion of a collective human race acting as one being. The sections done individually appear as many thousands of individual worshippers, who like ascetic Buddhist monks, seem oblivious to their surroundings as they engage the Creator in a personal dialogue.

When I first partook in a praying ceremony in a large mosque in Chicago, the feeling of being part of an ocean of souls overwhelmed me at first. It was not until much later that I realized its significance. The purpose of all popular religious gatherings, be they the Christian Mass, the Native American traditional dance, or the Islamic prayer, serve the social function of demonstrating the indivisibility of the human race and the unity with the rest of universe. The break up of the mass into individual worshippers, praying the next two sections individually and unsynchronized, had an equally powerful effect on my young soul. Once again, this tradition is universal among many religions, whether one considers the personal prayer during church service, the lonely meditation of the Buddhist, or the individual prayer of the Muslim. It serves the important function of demonstrating the individuality of each human being, and his or her personal and private relationship with the Lord, the Creator of the universe.

Traditional religious scholars will no doubt protest both my musical analysis of the sacred Islamic text, and my interpretation of artistic elements within the Islamic prayer. Many secular artists may also feel uncomfortable with my perception of religious inspiration in all art and music. Nevertheless, I believe my interpretation is likely to be correct from the psychological perspective: it is probable that both religion and art serve the same psychosocial purpose. Religion and art demonstrate the simultaneously beauty

and frailty of human life. I was overwhelmed with a sense of insignificance in the face of the vastness of the universe during prayer. Nevertheless, I was simultaneously soothed and felt solidarity in the human tragedy.