

## *Interview*

# Islam and Life - Islamic Art Inspiring Western Art, Artists Part 2

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### **A Note from the Editor:**

The second part of the “Islam and Life - Islamic Art Inspiring Western Art, Artists” an interview between two Islamic scholars published as audio visuals by the Press TV, warrants transcription here and re-focussing with respect to the continuing debate on the relationship between Islam’s monotheistic credence and its pluralistic settings because the interview’s position on the particularities of the Western Muslims makes the distinctive point that Islam is not an Eastern or “Middle Eastern” religion, but a universal one that absorbs the characteristics of whichever locale its adherents flourish in.

As a counter-weight to the overt demonization of Islam by the Western media hegemony’s futile attempt at redefining and subsuming the Islamic way of life negatively within the narrative of terror, radicalisation and a global cultural clash of civilisations; the interview presents a positive appraisal of the contributions Islam is making to Western culture and civilisation. Professor Ramadan of the Oxford University and Professor Bleher do not indulge the Western corporate media extremist reportage in which Islam is presented in tandem with every major conflict the West is involved with, in any way whatsoever.

(<https://www.google.com.tr/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Islam+in+major+news+outlets+2014+-+2015>) Rather, the interview engages serious and uncomfortable issues such as the multiple and sometimes fragmented identities of Muslims in the West and the role of Islam in the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims.

I have insisted on providing further bibliographies for both the interviewer and the interviewee to avail readers the opportunity to evaluate the depth of the discussion and discussants beyond the confines of the broadcast interview and this edited transcript.

I am in gratitude to both scholars and to the Press TV for undertaking the Islam and Life series to promote Peace and Understanding and for making the interview available for public use.



Professor Tariq Ramadan

Dr Tariq Ramadan is Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the Oxford University (Oriental Institute, St Antony's College) and also teaches at the Oxford Faculty of Theology. He is Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, (Qatar) and the University of Malaysia Perlis; Senior Research Fellow at Doshisha University (Kyoto, Japan) and Director of the Research Centre of Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) (Doha, Qatar). Recent key publications include: *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the Arab Awakening* OUP USA (2012); *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* Penguin (April 2012); *The Quest for Meaning, Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* Penguin (2010); *What I believe* OUP USA (2009); *Radical Reform, Islamic Ethics and Liberation* OUP USA (2008). He holds an MA in Philosophy and French literature and PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Geneva. <http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/people/tariq-ramadan>

In Cairo, Egypt he received one-on-one intensive training in classic Islamic scholarship from Al-Azhar University scholars (ijazat in seven disciplines). Through his writings and lectures Tariq has contributed to the debate on the issues of Muslims in the West and Islamic revival in the Muslim world. He is active at academic and grassroots levels lecturing extensively throughout the world on theology, ethics, social justice, ecology and interfaith as well intercultural dialogue.

He is President of the European think tank: European Muslim Network (EMN) in Brussels. <http://tariqramadan.com/blog/2004/08/22/biography/?lang=fr>

Between February 2004 and January 20, 2010, Professor Tariq Ramadan was denied entry to the US to take up the tenured position of Henry R. Luce Professor of Religion, Conflict and Peace building at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, United States; a position he had accepted. However, after more than five years of waiting, the American State Department has decided, in a document signed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to lift the ban that prohibited Ramadan (as well as Professor Adam Habib from South Africa) from entering the United States.



Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher

Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher, Islamic Scholar and Professor of Linguistics, Member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, UK, and Chartered Institute of Journalists, UK; Co-founder and General Secretary of the Islamic Party of Britain. He has written many books on and about Islam with a recent complete translation of the Our'an from Arabic to English amongst his other writings on the Media and Education. Professor Bleher is a linguist specialising in the translation of the English, Arabic, and German languages.

For more on Professor Bleher's biography, see:  
<http://www.mustaqim.co.uk/profile.htm>



Qusayr Amra, exterior. (Fowden, G. (2004). *Art and The Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria: Qusayr Amra*)

**TR:** Prof. Dr. Tariq Ramadan **SMB:** Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher

**TR:** As-salamu alaykum, peace be with you, and welcome to Islam and Life; with me Tariq Ramadan broadcasting from London. In today's show we ask the question: What influence has Islamic Art had on Western countries?

**Voice over:** Islamic art has often transcended the immediate confines of the Muslim World with many saying Europe's architectural landscape has been influenced by this art in countless ways. The BBC web site notes (Press TV) that the Muslim world's art reflects its cultural values and reveals the way Muslims view the spiritual realm and the universe. Brighton's Royal Pavilion built between 1787 and 1823 for George the IV is one such example with its oriental style domes and arches. Interest in Islamic Art has renewed recently. In 2012 The Louvre Museum opened up a new wing devoted to Islamic Art. This week on Islam and Life, we ask what influence has Islamic art had on Western countries.

**TR:** Art is not only about entertainment, it is deeper than that; it has to do with a concept of life even a concept of death. It has to do with imagination, it has to do with culture, it has to do with the universality of the Islamic message from the oneness of God to the oneness of humanity and the diversity of cultures and when we come back to the History of Islam and Islamic Art or arts in Islam as some artists are putting it. We can see here many influences in something which is deep as to the relationship between art and universe, art and human beings, art and co-existence and even art and poetry and the way people are expressing themselves as we find in the Qur'an: "allamahu-l-bayan" (He taught him speech, Qur'an 55:4), meaning that God taught human beings expression the way they can understand the Qur'an, but the way also they are expressing themselves. So there is something which is very deep here when it comes to art and we have to try to understand what is the very essence of art in Islam and then in which way the past was full of this imagination and why today we have the feeling that it is less; the Muslim majority countries and the Muslims are less creative and in which way this art has influenced the West and could also contribute to the future of the world, the future of the western countries to put it in a simple way. These are essential questions and to answer all these questions, I am joined by my guest, Dr Sahib Mustaqim Bleher; imam and author. Thank you so much for being with us today. Let me start with this first question - Because many people are saying is there something that we can call Islamic Art? Or do we have to call it Art in Islam as Islam is a civilisation and also a religion. How would you put it because we are talking about Islamic Art and how would you define Islamic Art?

**SMB:** Most people, of course, know Islamic art just as calligraphy or as floral ornamental pattern, illustrating a book or found in mosque decoration etc. but the philosophy of Islamic Art, and that is what is missing when you say there is no more imagination today, because we have started to imitate rather than to continue the tradition, the philosophy of Islamic Art, of course, separates art from the way it is viewed in the Western context like you mentioned as an entertainment. To what in Islam is an expression of or of reflection very much of the Hadith

that we have that God is beautiful and loves beauty (Allah is beautiful and loves beauty, Sahih Muslim no. 131) so, rather than art being the prerogative of the eccentric art collector or the rich, beauty is there to adorn common everyday objects and should be found in every home. Now in addition to that, of course, there is a concept that as there is a shared space and that centres around the mosque, or in some cases around the libraries or other spaces that are used by people and particularly used for worship and for the glory of God, these spaces have to elevate the people who are there unto a different level of experience. They have to give them something that their normal life experience does not provide. They have to give them tranquillity. They have to reflect the gardens of paradise, let's say, so you have water features, you have garden arrangements, you have those also reflected in the tile work in the woodwork... and I am talking about architecture because architecture of course is more lasting than other items of art and we know more about it because it is built in stone; the woodcarvings, delicate work, plaster work, the carpets. Everything reflects this attitude that we are here to celebrate the beauty of God.

**TR:** Yes, and this is a very important point that you are making and I want to compare what you are saying to things that we are hearing in the West, but before that what you are saying is very much ELEVATION this is the word that you were using, and elevation is to come again close to the essential meaning of life which is why we are here. So, beauty and worship is something which is very essential, very often lost in the contemporary Islamic discourses as if worship is to follow rules and not to understand the very essence of beauty is worshipping in itself. It's the essence. Even if you look at the world and you get the beauty you get the very understanding of the oneness of God and his presence. This is what you are saying now very often ... and what you are saying which is also very important is art is about that. What we got from the West is look there is a problem here! We might not agree on something because yes art is not entertainment we heard about many artists in the West saying no it is not entertainment, but still it's not about duty it's not about disconnection based on duty, and I want you to explain this because it is a very deep discussion here if we connect art with religion; the perception in the West is...Oh, it's about truths.

**SMB:** Well, we no longer have sacred art, I mean the most beautified buildings now are bank buildings. So we know what we worship, but sacred art of course wants to portray meaning. You had the iconoclastic art in the Catholic Church for example because those images tell a story. In the Islamic art of course we do not have the images. You have something else. You have a facility to meditate. Art is not just there to decorate. It is not just there to make it look pretty and it is not how much gold and silver you lavish on a building that makes the building stand out. It is the depths; also the attitude of the artist because the artist produces for the glory of God. Not for his own name to be celebrated. So very often you will find that the best artist would reserve their best masterpiece for a hidden corner where it doesn't stand out. You also find this concept of the eternal. You will find that when you look at the geometric patterns in the tile work for example the geometric art that Islam is so famous for. It is never in a frame it always extends the frame. It continues ad infinitum. You can think it goes on and on. There is a repetition but it goes beyond. So here is an opportunity to reflect on a great number of things. For example if you go... And you still see that in Morocco in the mosques, in Fes or in

other places, where now a lot of it is mass produced tiles but the original tile work is made up of little mosaic tiles, and when you look close they look rough. They look almost dirty. You see the plaster you see the grout. When you step back it makes up the most beautiful pattern of perfection and likewise with life, because each of us makes a contribution and it's not quite perfect and we have our shortcomings and there is the roughness and it comes together as something beautiful. This is an example for society, so we are encouraged to reflect and thereby improve on our own performance of what we give rather than what we take.

**TR:** An artist while visiting places in Spain was saying when you come close you can see humanity. When you look at it from far you can remember divinity. This is exactly what you are saying which is very deep. Now if you come to this would you say that there is something that we can call Islamic art which is specific?

**SMB:** Well, yes. Islamic art, as I said, firstly it is the celebration of beauty in everything that God has created.

**TR:** You wouldn't say for example, art in Islam?

**SMB:** No, I would say Islamic Art because Islamic art is a whole concept. And it goes wider than just the ornamentation. It also talks about what is important and what is not important. What is focal and what is peripheral. Take the building style of not mosques now, but ordinary houses, you will find a plain facade, to the outside it would look like not much and inside it would be a palace. So it would guard against showing off, it would guard against jealousy, it would guard against intrusion. Yet on the inside you have gardens, you have a reflection of this idea of paradise. And there is more that also Islamic Art has in a way shown the way for modern sustainable living because if you look at...

**TR:** Yes, yes, before coming to this let me come to the second part of our discussion I would say which has to do with if you look at the West today, when you look at our history in the West, which type of contribution did we have in the past coming from the Islamic Art? Coming, because very often when we talk about this contemporary Muslims, they talk about the past they talk about you know, Spain and other places. What are the main contributions when it comes to art we can refer to as Muslim's or as the Muslim presence in your opinion?

**SMB:** A lot of people, of course, look at the nineteenth century when orientalist and others in the West rediscovered Islamic Art design and were interested in [its] imported tiles, for example, the colours of the tiles [...] Islam excelled in that field... the patterns on the tiles... also Islamic architecture - the mosque. And the pavilion in Brighton was mentioned as kind of modelled on a Mosque and many other buildings but the influence goes a lot earlier. For example Gothic architecture owes a lot to the arch design. The design of arches in Islam [...] Muslims after inheriting the Byzantine architecture developed this to a much greater art form than it was then known where you have spaces that didn't require constant pillars to keep them up, but because of these supportive arches and developing that

technology you actually had spaces that were much wider and more open and allowed for more facilities for people to meet and to listen and to learn. [...] So there is also a technical contribution to the architecture of the West. Likewise when you look at churches and the way they decorate [them] you can look at Venice at the palaces in Venice and the way they decorate [them] they again borrowed a lot from the pioneering work of Muslims, but what Islamic Art was particularly good at was to adapt. If you look around the world the mosques don't all look the same. A mosque in China looks very different from a mosque in Africa where it's all square. Whereas in Malaysia it's all rounded. The mosque in Persia looks different from the mosque in Turkey because Islam adapts to the customs of the people, to the preferences of the people.

**TR:** Yes, you are right but at the same time what you said just before is also important to adapt but also to come with new methodology and to remain creative. So creativity and adaptation are two facets of this contribution because even if they were adapting to the surrounding culture and this is why Islam is universal [...], is that you take from the culture but that this creativity was there. There is something specific coming from the Muslim artists for example that was very important in history. Able to take and able to add.

**SMB:** Well again there is this hadith that knowledge is the lost sheep of the Muslims. It takes it where he finds it. So, yes this desire to go to explore to discover [...] Muslims strive for science. I wouldn't say it's entirely lost but the golden era of course is a little bit in the past.

**TR:** Yes, this was my next question why is it that when we talk about art when we talk about this [...] what we are talking about now, creativity for example in all the fields, once again Islamic art is not only calligraphy it's architecture it's poetry it's everything that we can talk about when it comes to arts [...] was there in the Islamic tradition. Why is it that [that was] in the past, we are talking about this. Now even in Western countries it's as if we are not there. There is no real contribution or not as it was?

**SMB:** Well there is a contribution and it's on-going and there is a rediscovery as well, I mean, the Victorian Albert Museum recently did a large exhibition on Islamic art. The Prince's Trust, Prince Charles has been influenced by the work of, for example, my friend Abdel Wahed el-Wakil who pioneered [modern] mosque architecture, bringing those concepts back as I said earlier of sustainable living where you create houses not from concrete, which is very expensive to produce, but from natural materials that are prevalent in the region; the idea of natural air-conditioning that you have in a court yard; the cooling, natural cooling capacity for example of the coral buildings in Yemen. All this is gradually being rediscovered by people who look for sustainable alternatives but we have in a way been disconnected from our past that is the real problem. The tradition of Islam has not continued without interruption and we require rediscovery because in this disconnection we have ended up observing the Islam that is over-emphasising the rule book. You need the rules but where there is not much room for the heart to express its love for the creator which has to be there before the rules come into play and where the artistic expression is at its best - of course, people over emphasized the kind of rule-based Islam are the same people who liked to almost do away with artistic

expression, with poetry with folkloristic expression, with the arts as such and that is a great loss and mustn't be permitted. So, yes, we need a rediscovery of real Islam that people can commit to, that people can identify with.

**TR:** So, it's not only the rediscovery of the past, it's the rediscovering of the very essence of Islamic message when it comes to the heart and when it comes to the relationship between heart and rules. This is why we can find the artistic field in all its expressions.

**SMB:** One of the key concepts of Islam is that of the balance and that things are in a certain equilibrium in their ideal created state and that this balance gets always upset in one way or the other, and the task of the believer is to restore the balance through reforming those digressions and bringing things back to the core, so this concept of the balance [is] finding the middle way [so] that [the] Muslim community [can be] described as being a balance, the community of the middle way.

**TR:** As it is said in Surah ar-Rahman (55:9) "don't lose the balance ... (Arabic)..." You have to come back to this which is the reconciliation between Muslims and the very essence of Islam. Having said that this is what we need within. Now we were talking about Western Muslims and we are talking about this contribution and you know a lot about, you know, Western art and the way it could be perceived. Sometimes connected or confused with entertainment and sometimes expressing something else. What could be the contribution of Muslim artists or artists that [have] understanding, because sometimes you can get this understanding that some artists who are not Muslims are getting the message of Islam sometimes better than some Muslim artists. What could be the contribution of artists understanding the very essence of the message that we're talking about to the West in that field?

**SMB:** Artists can play an important role [...] Muslim artists can play a very important role. Muslim architects and calligraphers, Muslim painters [...] because the soul has a natural yearning for beauty, because beauty is one of the expressions of what is good, what is right, what is true. Beauty and truth have a very close relationship [...]

**TR:** Yes, which is part of the *fitra* (Arabic term for the way we were created, the natural state or condition), which is [...]

**SMB:** So [...] the soul has a yearning for that and people, when they see something beautiful, they recognise it. They stand there adoring it. They stand there really appreciating it. Now if we as Muslims, when we build a new mosque, just imitate, you know, put there some kind of oriental hotchpotch of stuff together because we think that's what it is about - no, it has to integrate with the environment in which this mosque is to function, it has to be part, and if we get it right people will be inspired by it. If we don't get it right we continue that disconnect; so Muslim artists have a really important role to play.

**TR:** Yes, I wanted to react [to] something, because this is what I was saying once; I was in Germany I was saying to Muslims, look, we should not when it comes to architecture, when it



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comes to art we should not import from the East because we are Western Muslims and we need to be creative within this culture [...]

**SMB:** If you look for example the mosque in Aachen.

**TR:** [...] let me just finish the question because I want you to [...] you can refer to this [...] and my reaction, the reaction I got from some Muslims is no, no; this is our contribution our creativity is coming from the East and this is where [the way] we can show our original and beautiful presence with this type of mosque - my take on this was no; you can do this from within the culture which is your culture as Muslims to the universal message of Islam is to culture; what is your take on that?

**SMB:** To Allah belongs the East and the West [Quotation from the Quran 2:115] Islam is not an Eastern religion and Islam is not confined to an Eastern style of expression. There are boundaries for example: we don't use images; there are boundaries in other respects that we don't use art to show off. We don't go over the top in spending resources that could be better spent elsewhere. [But no, art] Islamic art is not Eastern art. Islamic art has its own roots in the whole idea of the relationship between man and God. In this idea of the relationship between the community and the creator and so it must, just like in Fiqh, we adapt to the customs of the people in which the religion is to be practiced, the same goes, we should use local building material so if you live in a rocky place you use rock and if you live in a place with mostly sand you build in sand stone ... so it has to fit within the environment. The mosque in Aachen, when you mention Germany for example, it stands there on a hill and it has a kind of a design that doesn't look very oriental; it really fits. The mosque in Hamburg or Munich, for example doesn't. It's almost imposed. You can see that difference. I would argue that something that actually reflects the landscape [in which it sits] that's what they try to do in Oxford, [for instance]. Something that reflects the landscape is a lot more in keeping with the Islamic tradition than something that is simply taking from one place of the earth and put into another place and [saying] well, this is what we brought to you. We have to work with people. If we do it right they will recognised the benefit of it, because calling people to Islam is not calling people to change their whole nature. It's not calling people to be something they are not. It's calling them to accept that their purpose is to serve the creator, but to do that as the people he created them as, and he's created them all different, into different kinds of people, different nations, different tribes, and Islamic art in its multitude and yet uniform pattern reflects this excellently.

**TR:** Thank you so much I think that listening to you is quite interesting because you started by explaining something which is very important, very important for the Muslims to understand that Islamic art is not about calligraphy, it's wider than this. If we come back to the past, and we understand it was about architecture, painting. Even music, in a way, that was also part of what was the expression and poetry. And then what also is important is the meaning. That at the end of the day the universality of the Islamic art is to come back to this very essential relationship with the creator and to understand the meaning and this is the word that you are using, elevation with understanding beauty and rules. Not rules without beauty, and not beauty

without the rules which is the balance that you are mentioning, which is very important. And then the last point that you are making, and I think that I want to just bring to the fore what you've said, [that] we should not think that nothing is done [that] there is still a contribution in the West [...] artists are [...] doing things and they are [still] contributing and what we need to do is to contribute by knowing the culture, acknowledging the cultures that we are living in and then being creative within the culture.

Well, that's all we have time for, please let us know your thoughts and views on any of the shows you have seen and here is the way to contact us.

**Voice over:** We at Islam and Life would like to hear your views about the subject that we discuss. We would also love to hear your suggestions for our program. So get in touch with us. You can also share your thoughts with other Islam and Life fans, engage in debate and find out how to watch our previous shows. Follow us on Twitter at Islam and Life TV or join us on Facebook by liking our page – Islam and Life on Press TV.

**TR:** Finally I would like to thank my guest, Dr Sahib Mustaqim Bleher and thank you so much for your presence and your input.

**SMB:** Thank you.

**TR:** And I hope to see you next week, inshallah.



New Gurna Village is located in Luxor on the West Bank of the Nile River, within the World Heritage property of Ancient Thebes in Egypt. The Village was designed and built between 1946 and 1952 by the famous Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989). <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/637/>

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