

THE DOME OF THE ROCK

Roger Garaudy

The Dome of the Rock, the first Muslim masterpiece, was built in 687 A.C. by Caliph Abd al-Malik, half a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (s). The rock marks the site from where Prophet Muhammad (s) made his *Miraaj* or *Night Journey* into the heavens and back to Makkah (Qur'an 17:1). The Dome of the Rock presents the first example of the Islamic world-view and is the symbol of the oneness and continuity of the Abrahamic, i.e. Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith.

Travelers and pilgrims have compared the cupola to a mountain made up of supernatural light, or else to a sun when its gold glitters in the dazzling light of Palestinian mornings, noons, and dusks, with endless variations in the intensity of shades. The atmosphere of beauty that prevails in the Dome of the Rock is like a distant announcement of the destiny of paradise.

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Introduction

Under the rule of the Arabian caliphs, Palestine enjoyed four centuries of peace and prosperity.

Jerusalem (Al-Quds) was the holy city of the Muslims, Jews, and the Christians. After the death of Caliph 'Ali (ra), husband of Fatimah (ra), and son-in-law of the Prophet (s), it was in Jerusalem that the Arab leaders met in 660 to elect as their king, Mu'awiyah, the founder of the dynasty of the Umayyads. The Arab chroniclers report that his first act upon becoming king was to go and pray at Golgotha and then at Gethsemane. After the death of Mu'awiyah's son, Yazid (680-693), *Caliph Abd al Malik* had the mosque known as the Dome of the Rock built at Jerusalem as a symbol of the unity of the three Abrahamic religions: Jewish, Christian and Islamic.

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First Muslim Masterpiece

The Dome of the Rock, the first Muslim masterpiece, was built in 687 A.C., half a century after the death of the Prophet [Muhammad, pbuh]. A careful "reading" of the monument to grasp its inner spiritual meaning reveals that it contains the germ of the major themes in "Islamic art," whose fundamental purpose is to express the faith revealed in the Qur'an. This "art" is decipherable only if one recalls the tenets of the Islamic faith.

The Dome of the Rock presents the first example, and a very striking one, of the Islamic world-view. The very site where it was established, the structure of the building, its dimensions and proportions, the forms to be found within it, the colors that enliven it, its external outline, and the symphony of its internal space, are all representative of the faith that inspired its construction.

It would be fruitless, though easy, to start out by searching in Byzantine, Syrian, Persian, Hellenic, or Roman art for similar elements of architectural techniques, for a specific motif or for this or that mathematical harmony in the arrangement. These influences exist, of course, and historians, archaeologists, art critics, and architects have often carried out this work of analysis. They have done a fine and useful job of demonstrating how the builders, the craftsmen, and the mosaic artists who took part in the creation of the building in question came from all regions of the new "Arab empire" and brought to the task their own technique and their own styles or work.

If we are to stop short of this "objective" analysis, however, without making our point of departure the "subjective" central impulse from which the newly realized synthesis was effected, we would miss what is essential, namely, the organizing principle of the whole, which transfigures the borrowings and expresses a single faith through the diversity of the cultures that have been given a new lease on life by the re-emergence of the universal, and eternal Islamic faith.

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The Site

Let us consider first the choice of the site and the importance of the resources committed to the work. The Caliph had resolved to consecrate to this building all the tribute levied in Egypt over a period of seven years.

It would be fruitless to dwell upon the anecdotal explanation or even the conjectural history of this decision, based on suggestions that the Caliph wished to "challenge the World" by building an Islamic monument finer than any built by rival religions, or that he was attempting to divert the stream of pilgrims from Makkah, where a rebel, Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr (ra), had seized power. Undoubtedly, such considerations and calculations were not absent from Abd-al-Malik's decision. But the creation, on the first attempt, of a new form of beauty, which would serve as a model for the architecture and artistic creations of all Muslims on three continents for a thousand years, cannot be "explained" by the trivial vanity, ambition, or stratagems of an ephemeral sovereign.

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History

The Prophet Muhammad (s) never claimed to be creating a new religion, but rather to be recalling all men to the priniordial religion, contemporary with the awakening of the first man, the religion of which Abraham's sacrifice in responding unconditionally to God's call offered the finest model and

example. Therefore it is not by an accident of history or through the whims of a despot that the starting point of Islamic art coincides with the starting point of the spiritual life of the Abrahamic tradition, including the lives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, namely, Jerusalem. This is the place of the life and *ascension* of **Jesus** (pbuh), and, according to the Qur'an [Surah 17, Ayah 1, 'The Children of Israel'], of the rock from which the Prophet (s) rose from Earth to Heaven to contemplate the Ordinance of God six centuries before Dante's Divine Comedy.

Here it was that **Solomon**(pbuh) built the Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the temple that Herod built and that the Romam razed to the ground. When he entered Jerusalem in 637 A.C., [Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab](#) (ra) ordered the erection of an austere wooden mosque on a deserted platform strewn with debris. The Umayyed, Abd-al-Malik, had the Dome built on this site, close to the dome of the Christian *Church of the Holy Sepulchre* and resembling it in many ways. The Dome of the Rock was thus the symbol of the oneness and continuity of the Abrahamic, i.e. Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith. [[More](#)]

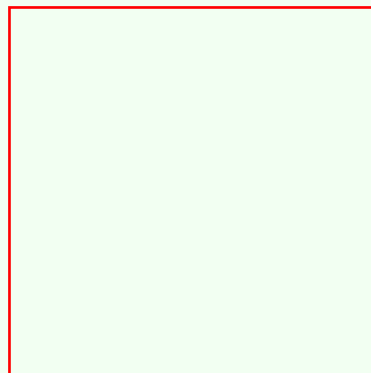
The external appearance of the monument expresses the essential message of this faith. The transition from the double square that forms the basic octagon to the spherical cupola symbolizes the transition from Earth to Heaven as it does in the most ancient cosmogonies of the Middle East and, in particular, of Mesopotamia.

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Architecture

The cupola, with a diameter and a height that are much the same (a little under 25 meters), stands out more strikingly than the cupolas of Byzantine churches, for, being made of wood, its weight does not necessitate, as in the case of vaults made of stone, those buttresses or side cupolas that weight down the external outlines of *Hagia Sophia* and the monuments inspired by it.

This cupola has been covered with gold ever since it was built, due to the piety of the master-builders, *Rija ibn Haya* and *Yazid ibn Salim*, who spent upon this luminous covering all that remained of the wealth that had been entrusted to them for the purpose of erecting the monument. Travelers and pilgrims have compared the cupola to a mountain made up of supernatural light, or else to a sun when its gold glitters in the dazzling light of Palestinian mornings, noons, and dusks, with endless variations in the intensity of shades.



At the outset, before the successive restorations, the curve of the cupola was slightly horseshoe-shaped, something that must have accentuated its apparent upward movement, recalling the

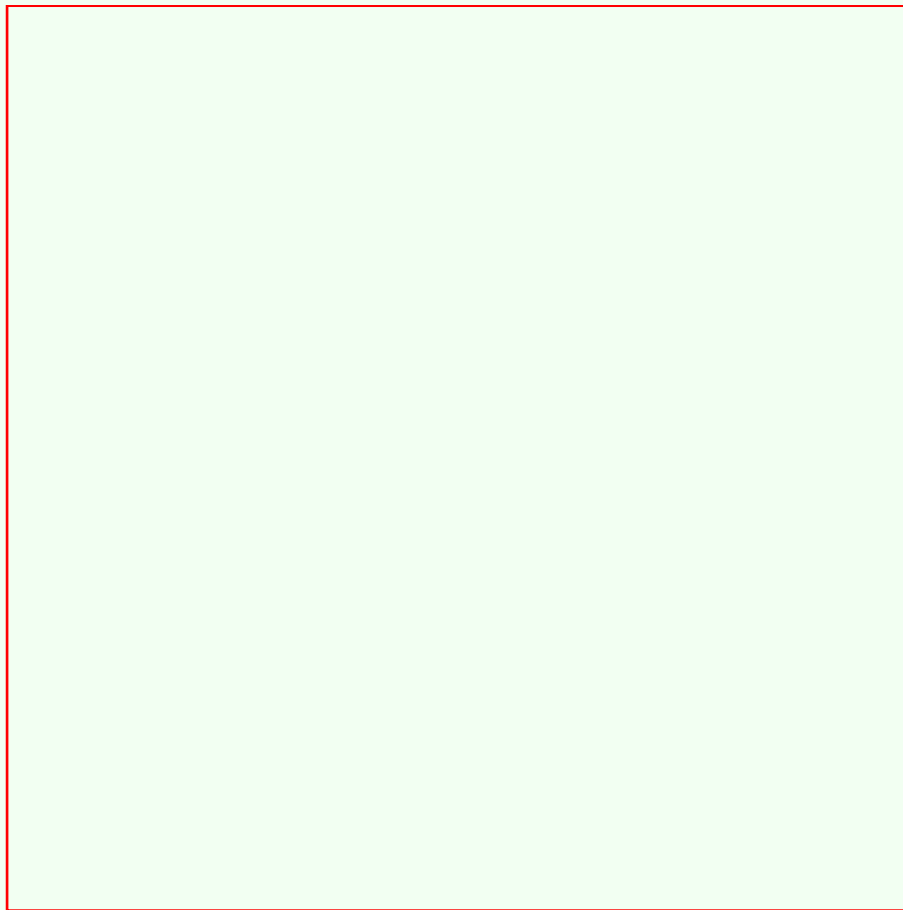
"night journey" or [Miraaj of the Prophet \(s\)](#) into the heavenly spheres.

This dome is set upon a drum, which, in turn, rests upon the basic octagon that represents the earth, like a perfect crystal. The original facing consisted of glass mosaics, magnifying the beauty of the earth created by God, but the porcelain of the present-day dome, with its dominant blues, growing denser and darker as it descends from the drum to ground level, doubtless recalls the transition, almost dematerialized and transparent, from the crown in the sky formed by the drum to the walls of the basic octagon. The delicate lacework of the azure tiles in the gilded areas becomes less and less frequent as one descends from the drum to the ground, though the golden light of heaven and of the cupola which is its messenger never ceases to filter downwards. Even the flagstone of veined Marble that make up the lowermost foundation seem to shimmer with the last rays of this celestial light.

Upon the beehive framework of gilded porcelain where sunshine and shade play ceaselessly, the arcades, with identical curves but with designs that vary from one arch to the next, dance their round dance about the octagon, hardly interrupted by the doorways at the four cardinal points that mark out this place as the center of the world. Above the arches surrounding the mausoleum, the subtle inflections of the Nakshi calligraphy sing Earth's last song to the Glory of God, before we reach the crown into the City of God, or rather, into a world wherein beauty gives us its earthly metaphor.

It is another world of forms, wherein everything descends from above, like the Revelation itself. It is said in the *Mirhajnamah* of Mir Haydar that when the Prophet Muhammad arrived in the Seventh Heaven, he saw a celestial vault in the colors of light. That is what the roof of the Dome of the Rock endeavors to evoke with its foliated scrolls, interlacements, arabesques, and mosaics of purple and gold, enhanced by the black band with its cursive letters, inscribed in gold, recalling the Message.

Below are sixteen stained-glass windows through which God's light enters. This iridescent light descends towards man, its reliefs and shadows filtering through the arches, pillars, and columns that articulate the space, outlining the arabesques that intertwine men and their universe, drawing them into the Wake of God, who is always living, always creating.



The inner pillars encircle the Rock.

His written word reveals itself in the places to which one's gaze is first directed, especially in the border of the cupola, in the niche of the mihrab, and in the frame of the doorway, but also in the friezes on the wall, under the capitals of the columns. Everywhere a form offers to the eye a springboard to infinity, reminding it, as it leaves the Earth, of God's Challenge.

It is said in the Qur'an that men of faith will know paradise as their eternal home. The atmosphere of beauty that prevails in a place like the Dome of the Rock is like a distant announcement of that destiny.

Caught in the mysterious network of the arabesque, of the cadence of the arches and columns, of all the forms and colors of beauty that spiritualizes what is material without concealing the lines of force of its construction, man finds himself in his finite state at the very heart of the Beauty and the Life of God, of which this mausoleum is the parable. Everything here - from the structure to the light, integrates man in a life that is higher than everyday life. This stone parable tells us that another world, a world different from this one, is possible. It frees him from the pressure of things and invites him to listen to a different appeal, to another promise than desire.

It teaches him the Oneness and Infinity of God. When he looks down earth-ward once more, he can contemplate the rock where, according to the Jewish and Christian tradition, Abraham set out to accomplish his sacrifice, and where according to the Muslims, the Prophet (s) rose to Heaven. He can feel himself returning to the clay from which he was created, as though he were nothing more, in God's hand, than a living particle of the honey-colored rock, gold and amber in the infinitely soft, penetrating light of the God Who created it, just as he created this mountain, these stars, the crystal of the world and its vault, and this temple, made by men's hands at the call of God.

The unity expressed in the Dome of the Rock is not just a symbol. The historian Rappoport, stresses

the fact that the situation of the Jews greatly improved after the conquest of Palestine by the Muslims and that their intellectual activities flourished. A Jewish academy had been founded at *Tiberias* by the learned and pious rabbi, Jochanan ben Zakkai, soon after the Roman occupation. He had sufficient insight to see that, after the loss of a national existence of one's own, the unity and the purity of the faith were the new path that the Jewish community had to adopt. The work of exegesis on the Scriptures carried out by the rabbis at *Tiberias* made up the body of a new historical phenomenon: Judaism. [[Impressions of Michael the Elder, Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch](#), twelfth century C.E., after five centuries of Muslim rule].

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Allah: Allah is the proper name in Arabic for The One and Only God, The Creator and Sustainer of the universe. It is used by the Arab Christians and Jews for the God (Eloh-im in Hebrew; 'Allaha' in Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus, pbuh). The word [Allah](#) does not have a plural or gender. Allah does not have any associates or partners, and He does not beget nor was He begotten. SWT is an abbreviation of Arabic words that mean 'Glory Be To Him.'

s or pbuh: Peace Be Upon Him. This expression is used for all [Prophets of Allah](#).

ra: Radiallahu Anha (May Allah be pleased with her).

ra: Radiallahu Anhu (May Allah be pleased with him).

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Roger Garaudy was elected to the French National Assembly in 1945 and later served as Deputy Speaker and Senator. He was a leading European Marxist thinker and contributed substantially to ideas on the political theory and the philosophy of civilizations. His writings cover such topics as the Morality, Aesthetics, Marxism, and Religion. Roger Garaudy, 84, was born in Marseilles and was raised as a Roman Catholic. He reverted to Islam in 1982.

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