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Lessons in Decoration from the Qurʾanic Sūrah al-Zukhruf (Gold Adornments)

Spahic Omer *

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses three lessons in decoration from the Qurʾanic chapter, or *sūrah*, al-Zukhruf (gold adornments). The lessons recognise and deal with decoration as an intrinsic human pursuit, a means of deception, and a means for enhancing and promoting the truth. Each lesson is discussed in separate sections, which are titled in the manner of the essence of the lessons. The paper concludes that the realm of decoration is inborn and instinctive. Its potential impact on human emotions and psyche is such that it can influence man's behavioural pattern. As a weak and wavering creation, it will be burdensome if too much of worldly beauty, splendour and prosperity is placed at his disposal. Thus blinded, most persons would lose sight of all moral and spiritual considerations and become egocentric, insatiable, and cruel. The meaning of inherent beauty, splendour and wealth will then be lost forever in the process. The three lessons are entwined with the nucleus and main emphasis of the *sūrah*, that is, the exposition of the contrasts between the beauty and glory of the truth and revelation and the false glitter of other counterfeit alternatives. The contents of the lessons represent the gist of the Islamic *tawhīdic* (God's Oneness) worldview.

Keywords & Phrases: *Decoration; Sūrah al-Zukhruf; Deceptions; Signs; the Truth.*

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Introduction

Islam and art enjoy an uneasy relationship. However, that is neither Islam's nor art's fault. Art is generally understood as the conscious expression or application of skill and imagination in the production of objects and experiences to be contemplated and appreciated for their beauty or emotional power. Art is intrinsic to the human physical presence and cultural operation on earth, for enjoying and appreciating beauty and creating beautiful objects and experiences are deeply embedded in people's consciousness and emotional configurations. The presence of art is thus normally assumed for all cultures, even though in each place that art has been affected by ideological, social, religious, historical, or geographical constraints. This explains why individual civilizations have artistic traditions which differ from each other (Grabar, 2000, p. 35).

In principle, art is innocent and pure. It is a powerful medium for exploring the truth and expressing it. It rises from the fetters of the superficial and one-dimensional physical life and resides in a world of metaphysical realities and experiences. It subscribes to and follows a higher order of existence and meaning. It is thus rightly said that religion, morality, and art are inseparable. They commenced to coexist since the divine act of creation. To Alija Izetbegovic (1988, p. 94), art is the daughter of religion, just as modern science to Henri Bergson (2002, p. 28) is the daughter of astronomy. Art is the truth, and the truth, in so many ways, is art. They strengthen and render each other more understandable and more appreciable. For art to prosper and reinvigorate itself, it always must go back to the roots of its innate being and authenticity, i.e., faith and spirituality.

Islam, on the other hand, is not against artistic creativity, nor is it against the enjoyment of beauty. Conversely, it blesses the beautiful and advocates it at all levels of Islam's and Muslims' religious and civilizational presence. It sees ultimate and absolute beauty only in Almighty God and His Attributes and beautiful Names (al-Fārūqi, 1995, p. 201; Lāmyā', 1985, p. 12; Naṣr, 1987, pp. 10-16). Prophet Muḥammad PBUH is reported to have said in an authentic *ḥadīth* (tradition): "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (Muslim, *ḥadīth* no. 164). This means that God's Holy Self, Attributes and Names are all beautiful in ways consistent with the absolute heavenly standards which are incomprehensible to man. It also means that everything God does and creates is perfectly beautiful and in accordance with the aesthetic benchmark of the Supreme. Last but not least, not only that God and everything connected with His Holy Being are beautiful, but He also loves beauty and loves, as well as wants, man -- His vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth -- to create beautiful objects and generate beautiful feelings and experiences. However, man's artistic involvements and productivity must be in full conformity with the divine standards and criteria of beauty, and with the implications of the creation mandate and designation of vicegerency (*khilāfah*).

In other words, life is all about affirming and appreciating beauty, culminating in the divine Beauty of God, while art is all about asserting and celebrating life and the ultimate truth. Indeed, art makes people human, setting them apart from other creatures. It enlightens the soul, elevates the mind and develops thought. Through art, man should

glorify and deify his Creator and Master alone, not his self or anything else from the created world.

According to Burckhardt (1976, p. 1), the most outward manifestation of Islam and its civilization should reflect in their own fashion and art-styles what is most inward in them. This is to say that the study of Islamic art can lead, when it is undertaken with a certain open-mindedness, to a more or less profound understanding of the spiritual realities that lie at the root of a whole cosmic and human world. Similarly, Seyyed Ḥossein Naṣr -- as quoted by Khawaja Muḥammad Saeed (2011, p. 228) -- emphasizes that for finding the origins of the ubiquitous Islamic art, one must turn to the inner or spiritual dimension of Islam. At the same source, one can also find the power which has generated different artistic styles and forms and has sustained them over the ages.

Wijdan Ali (2006, pp. 299-306) confirms that for a Muslim, Islamic art is one of the means by which he can attain the highest form of knowledge and truth. She continues: "From the spiritual and ethical point of view, Islamic art originates essentially from the Qurʾānic message, whose values it aims to translate into the plane of physical shapes... Islamic art and architecture traditionally place the highest importance on the achievement of beauty. This construes a natural outgrowth of the Qurʾān which emphasizes goodness, truth, and knowledge, while placing the principal emphasis upon beautiful deeds" (Ali, 2006, pp. 299-306).

However, not long after the institution and nascent rise of Islamic civilization, the relationship between Islam and art started to degenerate gradually. Eventually, it became perverted, muddled, and rendered vague by many people. Some did so in the name of Islam, due to their misunderstanding and misapplication of it, while others did the same in the name of art, also due to their misunderstanding and misapplication of it. Ever since, the relationship between the two poles was one of mistrust and unease. It arguably hit the nadir with the fall of Islamic civilization and the rapid rise of Western culture and civilization, which treated art from an entirely different -- yet, contradictory -- worldview and a set of ontological values and goals.

Such is the current state of Islamic art that most people -- Muslims and non-Muslims -- fail to come to terms with some of its basic concepts and meanings, let alone civilizational mission and purpose. Creswell (1981, pp. 69-82) clearly displayed that tendency and trend especially in his article "*The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam*"; as did Grabar (2005, pp. 87-102) in his book "*Early Islamic Art, 650-1100*", Annette Hagedorn (2000, pp. 592-599) in her article "*Architecture and Art*", and Aḥmad Muḥammad ʿĪsā (1981, pp. 41-68) in his article "*Muslims and Taswīr* (making pictures or depicting living creatures)". Avinoam Shalem (2012, pp. 1-18) even calls for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam, using the same expression in the title of his article published by the *Journal of Art Historiography*. In the same vein, Marina Alin (2014) asks if there exists -- or could exist -- modern Islamic art. She writes that an understanding of the nature of Islamic art does not exist today. "Islamic art and Islamic thought stayed silent for such a long time that the art community does not know how to approach Islamic art and uses the same vocabulary as it does for Western art" (Alin, 2014). So convoluted is the matter

that Grabar (2000, p. 38) wrote: “Over the centuries, many different attitudes toward the arts came to light within the vast Islamic world and it is, altogether, impossible to talk of a single set of principles which determined the course of artistic development.”

This paper discusses the lessons in decoration from Qurʾān’s *sūrah al-Zukhruf*, which means “gold adornments”. It could also be translated as “ornaments of gold”, “artful adornments” or simply “gold (beyond count)” (Asad, 1980, p. 1024). Three lessons are deliberated. They revolve around the thrusts of decoration, or ornamentation, as an intrinsic and innocent human activity, decoration as an instrument of deception and misguidance, and decoration as a means for ascertaining and buttressing the truth. After addressing the main themes of the *sūrah*, showing how interconnected they are and support one another in establishing greater existential meanings and truths, each lesson is discussed separately in independent sections. The sections are titled after the kernels of the lessons.

The research method adopted is a blend of descriptive and analytical qualitative research modes. It involves accurate and complete description, critical and comparative thinking, and systematic evaluation of facts and information relative to the theme at hand. Moreover, the research method could likewise be described as interdisciplinary. As such, it helps create a unique perspective for dealing with the subject by thinking and researching across traditional boundaries that define established academic disciplines.

The paper aims to correct some perennial misconceptions and misinterpretations of the Islamic concepts of decoration, beauty, art and aesthetics, and to contribute to the prospect of reviving the authentic Islamic theories of fine and decorative arts and architecture. The word “decoration” in the title of the paper is generic and implies the art, craft and hobby of decoration and beautification. It could be associated with fine arts, decorative arts, applied arts and fashion. It encompasses not only buildings and objects, but also people. It is almost synonymous with the concept of ornamentation, in that they both imply the activities of rendering objects, places and phenomena more beautiful and appealing by adding extra ornamental items, details or images.

1. Main Themes of *Sūrah al-Zukhruf*

Sūrah al-Zukhruf is the 43rd *sūrah* in the Qurʾān. It has 89 verses (*āyāt*) which are divided into seven sections. It was revealed in the later Meccan period. The *sūrah* is named after the keyword “*zukhruf*” (adornments of gold) in verse 35. There are several other terms that are directly related to that keyword in terms of both the meaning and context. They are “*al-ḥilyah*” in verse 18, which means “ornament, embellishment, outward show or trinkets”; “*suquf min fiḍḍah*”, “*maʿārij*”, “*abwāb*” and “*surur*” in verses 33 and 34, which respectively mean “silver roofs”, “(silver) stairways”, “(silver) doors” and “couches (of silver)”; “*aswirah min dhahab*” in verse 53, which means “gold bracelets or armlets”; “*siḥāf min dhahab wa akwāb*” in verse 71, which means “dishes and goblets of gold”.

The *sūrah* deals with the subject of the contrast between the genuine splendour and beauty of the truth and everything that is related to it, and the deceitful glitter and allure of what people like to adopt as substitutes for the truth and its ways (verses 33-35)

from different perspectives (Maudūdi, 1982; Ali, 1990, p. 1495). It shows how simple, straightforward, logical, natural, and close to man the ultimate truth is, and how perplexing, confusing, fraudulent, irrational and aberrant falsehood with all its protagonists and manifestations, on the other hand, is. Thus, the truth easily proves itself and its worth, and so does falsehood its insignificance and peril. Under normal circumstances, a few would repudiate the former, and yet fewer embrace and follow the latter.

However, many people end up doing exactly that because the opponents of the truth and proponents of falsehood adopt and employ myriads of misleading ornate schemes and strategies. Their aim is to pervert the truth beyond all recognition by resorting to false decorative and embellishing means and ways, projecting it then as difficult, obscure, unattractive, and unreasonable. Similarly, they also aim to misrepresent falsehood by making recourse to dishonest decorative and embellishing strategies and media, projecting it then as appealing, meaningful, sensible, and beneficial. In both instances, decoration helps revealing not what objects, events and life realities actually are, but what they are not. The power of decoration is not used thereby, but abused, and one of the greatest weaknesses of man taken advantage of.

The essence of this idea reverberates all through the *sūrah* (Ali, 1990, p. 1495). The stage is set by verses 2 and 3 where Almighty God swears by the “Book that makes things clear”, underscoring then that “We have made it a Qurʾān in Arabic, that you may be able to understand (and learn wisdom)”. Certainly, it is not by chance that at the outset of the *sūrah* such concepts as “Holy Book”, “clarity”, “understanding” and “wisdom” are articulated. The last words of the last verse also make a powerful and fitting conclusion: “But soon shall they know!” This means that the truth will soon emerge victorious. That will be a time when all masks will fall down and all ostensibly decorative and beautifying, but in reality, devious and counterfeit, words, deeds and productions will be exposed. Both the truth and falsehood will stand bare and self-evident for everyone to see and know. One of the ontological laws is that everything -- even though it may have its day -- will perish sooner or later, except the truth. It abides forever. The phenomenon of existence, as it was conceived and brought into being by the Creator and Lord, is not compatible with falsehood and faithlessness. They, therefore, can be given only a provisional and bogus endurance.

Against this backdrop one should view and appreciate the reference in the *sūrah* to the residents of Paradise (*Jannah*) and Hellfire (*Jahannam*) and their respective conditions (verses 68-78). The residents of Paradise will triumph and rejoice because they were righteous, believed in and followed (recognized and understood) God’s signs, and submitted to Him. The residents of Hellfire, in opposition, will be defeated and will suffer immensely because in this world they were unjust to themselves and after the truth had been brought to them, they rejected and hated it. They failed to recognize, read and understand it. Eventually, after they die and after their deafness and blindness are removed, enabling them to transcend the false (illusory and glittery) impediments and

perfectly see and understand the meaning and purpose of life, the sinners will bitterly regret and will ask for clemency, but it will be too little too late.

The examples of Prophets Ibrāhīm (Abraham) (verses 26-28), Mūsā (Moses) (verses 46-56) and ʿĪsā (Jesus) (verses 63-65) are given in order to demonstrate the consistency of how falsehood operates in every time and place, and how God's divine plans for humanity impeccably work. Those were the episodes replete with wisdom, lessons, and portents. They were meant to teach the whole of mankind, from the era of Prophet Muḥammad PBUH till the Day of Judgement, that although the ignorant and obdurate deride the truth and ignore its clear and all-pervading signs, it will last and be victorious. Its rejecters and the advocates of non-belief and cynicism will fail and forever perish.

The pomp, glitter and embellishments of this world are of little value and will not last, just as the arrogance, pomp and depravity of the enemies of Prophets Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and ʿĪsā did not last. The clear signs from the Holy Qurʾān, Prophet Muḥammad's exemplary life pattern, and from various historical periods and their leading protagonists are to be complemented by the countless signs that permeate every tier and aspect of God's creation (verses 9-15). Those signs are to be explored, read, and acted upon. They together with their clarity, certainty and rationality are life's best ornaments. Anything else is shallow and artificial, easily bordering on pretence and sham. That is why to Asad (1980, p. 405), the term "*al-zukhruf*" bears almost invariably a connotation of artificiality. Asad (1980, p. 1017) also concludes that this Qurʾanic *sūrah* is "almost entirely devoted to the principle that to attribute divinity, in whatever form, to anyone or anything but God is not only spiritually destructive but also logically inadmissible."

There is likewise a commanding reference in the *sūrah* to Satan (verses 36-39), who is the master of deception and false decorations. He does so to hinder people from the straight path and make them believe that they are being guided aright. Unquestionably, the substance of Satan's trickery and that of certain ungodly people is one and the same. They share the purpose of deluding the masses by means of advocating and spreading fake beauty, splendour, and allure at all levels of existence.

2. Decoration as an Intrinsic Human Pursuit

The first lesson derived from *sūrah al-Zukhruf* is that decoration is an intrinsic human pursuit. Beauty is divine and saturates every dimension of physical and metaphysical existence. It is the object of the constant cravings of man. However, that should come as no surprise because man is the crown of Almighty God's creation, and God created him (Ādam) in His own Image, as divulged by the Prophet PBUH (Muslim, *ḥadīth* no. 6809). The Qurʾān further reveals that God created and fashioned Ādam with His own Hands (Ṣād, 75), and that He created man in the best stature (mould) (al-Tīn, 4). Thus, the best and most honoured creation on earth, created by Almighty God -- who Himself is beautiful and loves beauty -- and then placed in a physical and spiritual context that evokes the infinite beauty of God to discharge his vicegerency (*khilāfah*) mission, knows and wants nothing but beauty: the beauty of deeds, creations, words, garments, overall outward appearance, and attitudes.

Accordingly, in verse 18, God describes woman as a being that is brought up essentially in adornments or among trinkets (*yunashshaʿu fī al-hilyah*), especially wearing silk and gold ornaments. This is the implanted disposition of woman. That is how God created her. However, the same character must be regulated and aligned with the prescribed guidance of the Creator Himself. In many ways, in principle, man shares with woman the same penchant for beauty, but his case is somewhat and in certain circumstances different. Therefore, some extra regulatory measures have been applied, such as the prohibition of wearing silk and gold for man, unless in cases of necessity (Muslim, *ḥadīth* no. 1644; Ibn Mājah, *ḥadīth* no. 1189).

All scholars agree that this verse proves the permissibility of ornaments for woman, for the Qurʾān has mentioned the ornaments as a natural thing for her (al-Rāzi, 1990; al-Qurṭubi, 1967; Ibn Kathīr, 2000; Maudūdi, 1982). By extension, permitted acts of decoration and beautification of man -- and generally in life -- are also implied thereby. This can be corroborated by additional traditions of the Prophet PBUH who normally spoke in general terms targeting both men and women, unless otherwise specified. He said, for example, that God loves the effects of His blessings to be exhibited on his servants (*al-Tirmidhi*, *ḥadīth* no. 2963). This applies to people's garments, foodstuff, and lifestyles in general. That is part of beauty that God loves. That is furthermore part of people's gratitude for God's generous blessings on them, which in turn is part of people's inner beauty, that is, the beauty of their character and attitude.

Ibn al-Qayyim said that Almighty God loves to see the external beauty of His servants (slaves) which reflects His blessings on them, and the inner beauty of their gratitude to Him for those blessings. Because He loves beauty, He sends down on His servants' clothes and adornments with which they may make their outward appearance beautiful and He gives them God-consciousness and piety (*taqwā*) which make their inner characters beautiful (al-Munajjid, 2018).

The Prophet PBUH also said that God is good and accepts only that which is good (Muslim, *ḥadīth* No.1686). He also said: "No one will enter Paradise (*Jannah*) who has an atom's weight of pride (arrogance) in his heart." A man said: "What if a person likes his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?" He said: "God is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on people" (Muslim, *ḥadīth* no. 131).

It follows that for both men and women, acts of decoration and beautification signify the striking of a delicate balance between the inborn natures, augmented temptations and acquired outlooks and practises. It is a double-edged sword and ought to be handled with utmost care. At times, some things may seem innocent and permissible, but at other times, they might be alarming and strictly forbidden. The Qurʾanic context, wherein woman's predilection for beautification is mentioned, is such that some of its potential negative connotations are also clearly suggested. Though in theory permitted, decoration and beautification with all of their modes are highly vulnerable to excessiveness, extravagance and showing off.

Moreover, as an aspect of the bliss of Paradise for its inhabitants, the Qur'ān says: "To them will be passed round golden dishes (trays) and golden goblets. There will be there all that the souls could desire and all that the eyes could delight in and you shall abide therein forever" (al-Zukhruf, 71).

The verse indicates that so innate in life are decoration and ornamentation that they will be indispensable in Paradise as well. No phase or dimension of existence is devoid of their compelling presence and influence. Nonetheless, people should utilize the beauties of this world only to attain a higher order of beauty, meaning and experience in the Hereafter. The former is the means, the latter the end. People cannot be deceived by the ostensible attraction and glamor of this world so as to compromise and barter the real beauty and splendour of Paradise. It goes without saying that life was meant to be beautiful, and people too. That could be the reason why the above verse is placed towards the end of *sūrah al-Zukhruf*. It is as though its message connotes one of the main conclusions of the *sūrah*.

The verse further shows that beauty and its appreciation could be physical, psychological, and spiritual. Similarly, ugliness and its disapproval could also be physical, psychological, and spiritual, translating itself into the realms of words, actions, creations, garments, overall outward appearance, and attitudes. The decoration and beauty of Paradise will be only for such to recognise what the actual beauty in this world is, and are able to appropriately enjoy, value and deal with it.

Since the highest form of decoration and beautification is that of the soul, it could be freely asserted that the beauties and decorations of Paradise will be only for the truly "beautiful ones". By the same token, since the most devastating ugliness is the ugliness of the soul, it could also be affirmed that the torment of Hellfire will be only for the truly "ugly ones". After the superior beauty and ugliness of the soul comes the beauty and ugliness of the mind, and then of the body. That morphs into the wide scopes of the spiritual, intellectual, and physical beauties and their integrated interconnection. Lastly, considering the ontological meaning and significance of beauty and decoration, it could likewise be stated that one of the best rewards in Paradise will be the unceasing and ubiquitous presence and enjoyment of beauty, including the absolute and infinite beauty of God. Whereas one of the biggest anguishes in Hellfire will be the absence of beauty and the people's inability to enjoy it.

3. Decoration as a Means of Deception

Decoration is inborn and instinctive. It can induce man's behavioural patterns. Its sway can be so powerful and impactful on man's emotions that his thinking could be rendered somewhat irrational. Therefore, decoration should always be used as a means only and in moderation. Its power should be controlled by subjecting it to the influence and authority of a greater purpose and goal. Only then will it become expedient and valuable and will be used aright. If turned into a goal itself, decoration could become uncontainable and even perilous. It becomes meaningless and useless.

This tenet is central to the philosophy and vicissitudes of life. Its exact meaning was meant to be conveyed by *sūrah al-Zukhruf*. By so naming the *sūrah*, the point was meant to be yet further emphasized and its significance brought home. Needless to say, that the purpose of the Qur'ān and Islam is to teach mankind the truth about every critical dimension of life. It is about imparting the true knowledge which pertains to discovering and grasping the true meaning and essence of things. On top of the hierarchy of such crucial things stand the concepts of life and man and how they are correlated and interdependent. And who knows the truths of things and events better than their Creator?

To that end, God says: “And were it not that (all) men might become of one (evil) way of life We would provide for everyone that blasphemes against (Allāh) Most Gracious silver roofs for their houses and (silver) stair-ways on which to go up. And (silver) doors to their houses and thrones (of silver) on which they could recline; and also, adornments of gold. But all this were nothing but conveniences of the present life: The Hereafter in the sight of your Lord is for the Righteous” (al-Zukhruf, 33-35).

The message of these verses is twofold. Firstly, the fallacious glitter and adornments of this fleeting world are worthless. As a liability, they more often impede than help. People use them for self-deception and for deceiving one another. Secondly, so worthless, and useless in the sight of God are the false beauty and adornments of this world that God would have given everyone who denies and blasphemes against Him silver roofs, silver stairways, silver doors, silver thrones and all types of adornments and ornaments of gold, were it not that in that case there would be too great temptation placed in the way of men, for they might all scramble to trade their spiritual and moral life for wealth and excessive beautification. “But Allāh does not allow too great a temptation to be placed in the path of men. He distributes these things differently, some to unjust men, and some to just men, in various degrees, so that the possession of these is no test either of an unjust or a just life. His wisdom searches out motives far more subtle and delicate than any are even aware of” (Ali, 1990, p. 1504).

That God does not burden a soul beyond its capacity is a divine precept spelled out clearly in the Qur'ān (al-Baqarah, 286). Only then does another spiritual principle makes sense and become fully functional: “It (every soul) receives what it earns (in this world and the Hereafter), and it suffers every ill that it earns (in this world and the Hereafter)” (al-Baqarah, 286).

As a weak and wavering creation, it will be too much for man to bear if too much of worldly beauty, splendour and prosperity is placed at his disposal. Thus blinded, most persons would lose sight of all moral and spiritual considerations and become egocentric, insatiable, and cruel. The meaning of inherent beauty, splendour and wealth will then be lost forever in the process. To Asad (1980, p. 1024), such process constitutes a fundamental “law of nature”.

Maudūdi (1982) explains the message of the quoted verses as follows: “This silver and gold whose possession by somebody is the highest blessing and the very climax of good fortune in your sight, is so base and contemptible a thing in the sight of Allāh that had

there been no danger of all human beings being inclined towards unbelief, He would have made every disbeliever's house of gold and silver. Since when has the abundance of this worthless commodity become proof of man's nobility and his piety and his spiritual purity? This kind of wealth is even found in the possession of those foul and wicked people whose filthy characters make the whole society stink. And this you have made the criterion of man's greatness of character."

No wonder that Satan always tries to catch man wrong-footed and take advantage of this weakness of his. Similarly, he takes full advantage of and manipulates the inherent capacities of decoration. As a result, when speaking about Satan's strategies for deceiving and misguiding man, the Qurʾān often articulates the idiom: "*zayyana lahum al-shayṭān*", which means: "Satan decorated (the words, deeds, and attitudes of evil persons) and made (them) alluring, fair seeming and appear goodly to them". This message is often brought up in the passive voice "*zuyyina*", which means that the same "has been made decorated and made attractive and fair seeming" by Satan to the evil persons. Satan thus adorns and beautifies evil, projecting it as good. He does so to good too, projecting it as evil.

In *sūrah al-Zukhruf*, verses 36-38, the Qurʾān highlights that very actuality. It stresses that whoever turns away from and chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of God, Satan will be appointed for him as an intimate companion and comrade (verse 36). This is so because man is created to worship God, his Creator, alone and to have Him only and always on his side. However, if he chooses to turn away from God, Satan steps in and gradually takes over his life affairs as a natural consequence under a divine decree. It is either God or Satan in man's life, and it is all in man's hands and within his discretion.

When Satan seizes man and his life, he hinders him from the right path by myriads of deceptive and phony means. So overwhelmed does man become under the circumstances that he loses his judgmental powers and sometimes even common sense. He is unable to see through Satan's trickeries and decipher the falsely decorated and embellished canvases. He takes the truth as falsehood and falsehood as the truth. His misguidance he interprets as "being guided aright" (verse 37). In the same vein, someone else's guidance he sees and interprets as misguidance. It is only in the Hereafter when one "comes to Us" (verse 38), and when all forms, means and agents of falsehood and ugliness fade away, that man will be able to see and recognize the truth and the real meaning of beauty, magnificence, prosperity, and happiness, but it will be too little too late. Such a realization will arrive too late to salvage the situation.

God says: "At length when (such a one) comes to Us he says (to his evil companion): "Would that between me and you were the distance of East and West!" Ah! Evil is the companion (indeed)! When you have done wrong it will avail you nothing that day that you shall be partners in punishment!" (*al-Zukhruf*, 38-39).

It is perfectly appropriate that the subsequent verse, verse 40, accentuates that there is no hope for the deaf to hear, or for the blind to be given direction or to be guided. Such people allowed their faculties to be muddled and distorted, and their aptitudes incapacitated. They are described as being in manifest error not because of the weaknesses

of their selves or wills, or because of their inherent limitations and vulnerability, but because of their going headlong into sin by allowing themselves to be used and manipulated by the forces of evil. Subscribing themselves to fallacious norms and criteria, they were after false attractiveness and short-lived indulgences.

As a small digression, the same state of mind as well as soul stood between the disbelieving Quraysh of Makkah and their acceptance of the Prophet PBUH and his preaching. As an indicator of their uncompromising materialistic and sceptical tendencies which impaired their senses, they insisted on witnessing a series of farfetched phenomena and occurrences by dint of which they promised -- in jest, though -- they will believe. Among other things, they wanted to see the Prophet PBUH having “a house adorned with (or made of) gold (*bayt min zukhruf*)” (al-Isrā’, 93). The Prophet PBUH was instructed to reply: “My Lord be glorified! Am I anything but a mortal man, sent as a Messenger?” (al-Isrā’, 93). That means that a prophet or messenger of God is a man at the command of God, and not to satisfy the disingenuous whims and fancies of polytheists and sceptics. Miracles greater than any that their foolish fancies could devise were before them. The Qurʾān was such a miracle, and it is a standing miracle that lasts through the ages. Why did they not believe? The real reason was spite and jealousy like that of Satan (Ali, 1990, p. 807).

Six verses later, through the story of Prophet Mūsā and Pharaoh, the *sūrah* illustrates the nature and profundity of the conflict between the truth and falsehood. Demonstrating the extent of his disobedience, misguidance and folly, Pharaoh at one point exclaimed concerning Mūsā: “Then why are not gold bracelets (golden armlets) bestowed on him or (why) come (not) with him angels accompanying him in procession?” (*al-Zukhruf*, 53).

Pharaoh demonstrated thereby that he could not view things and events except through the prism of material splendour and wealth. He failed to rise above that shallow and superficial level and see things in light of higher spiritual and moral standards. His vision was impaired and his world one-dimensional. He could delight only in that which was making sense to him and was satisfying his only criterion and benchmark for beauty and grandeur. Gold armlets, gold chains and other gold adornments were perhaps among the insignias and emblems of royalty at the time (al-Rāzi, 1990; Ibn Kathīr, 2000). It was the ideal and only criterion and many people’s *raison d’etre*. Clearly, most prophets, including Prophet Muḥammad PBUH, were faced with the same challenge at the hands of their respective nations. The case of Pharaoh epitomized the enduring trend.

Lastly, only by means of decoration as a means of deception were the polytheists – especially the Quraysh of Makkah – able to concoct the idea that angels were females and were God’s daughters (verses 15-16 and 19). They used their wild imagination and insincere creativity to come up with their images and statues, which, as females, were excessively decorated and embellished (Maudūdi, 1982). As such, they were employed for decorating and beautifying particularly the houses of the polytheists and their places of worship.

Considering that man is a “religious being”, in the sense that he is predisposed to submit to and adulate someone or something -- consciously or otherwise – and that he is

intrinsically an art-lover and art-maker, the whole realm of art was seriously contaminated with elements of polytheism. When Islam came as the final revelation to mankind and as the religion of *tawḥīd* (God's Oneness) and the transcendent truth, it had to set things right without compromising any of its principles. For obvious reasons, the worlds of beauty and diverse artistic expressions had to be tackled head-on and unyieldingly. It was not easy to get rid of what was sedimenting itself since time immemorial in the people's minds, souls and the most critical sectors of their material culture. Hence, when looked at it superficially, some people might be tempted to misjudge the situation and infer that Islam is extremely harsh towards the orb of art and does not accord it the attention and consideration it deserves. For example, relating the concepts of aniconism and iconoclasm to the Islamic creed and *sharīʿah* (law) is more often than not muddled up and misconstrued; so is the notion of excessive decoration in the Islamic built environment in general and that of the places of worship in particular. Many Muslim and non-Muslim observers fell into the same academic pitfalls.

It was owing to all this that a pious supplication reads: "O God, show us the truth as truth and bestow adherence to it on us. Show us the evil as evil, and make us stay away from it, and do not confuse us regarding the reality of evil so that we will not be led astray by it" (al-Ṣābūnī, 1981, vol. 1 p. 188) Many scholars ascribe this supplication to the second rightly guided caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. Some -- by mistake though -- ascribe it to the Prophet PBUH. Another pious prayer by a sage read: "O God, show us all things as they are."

Indeed, seeing and grasping things as they truly are is the pinnacle of wisdom and devout life. Art and people's endless quest for, expression and appreciation of beauty ought to be perennially in service of such an ontological purpose. Staying indifferent, or doing the opposite, signifies a serious spiritual as well as ethical misdemeanour.

4. Decoration as a Means for Enhancing the Truth

Almighty God created and perfected all things. He explicitly says at several places in the Qurʾān that He created and made most excellent everything, such as in *sūrah al-Sajdah*, verse 7, and in *sūrah al-Naml*, verse 88. Since He is beautiful and loves beauty, God made everything according to the most splendid heavenly standards of beauty. Thus, one of His beautiful names is *al-Jamīl*, the Beautiful (al-Jawziyyah, 1999, p. 202). He challenges man to look around and explore the creation again and again. No faults, shortcomings or rifts of any kind and degree will ever be detected (*al-Mulk*, 3-5).

The world is a result of the divine artistry. God did not make things only beautiful, He also splendidly decorated them. There is nothing but beauty in life, even if man cannot comprehend it. Beauty is the rule, ugliness an anomaly. The only one who can generate ugliness – such as the ugliness of vice, immorality, and wrongdoing – is man who rebels against his Creator and Master and decides to operate on his own while on earth.

God's rendering of the world superbly decorated and beautified is trifurcated. Firstly, the world is created in a flawless and most excellent fashion. Its perfection, purity and flawlessness are its best adornments. Secondly, the world is created as perfectly subservient to man, God's vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth. Everything functions on the basis

of absolute wisdom, equilibrium, justice, value, and mercy. Those principles and their physical manifestations in life denote a vital dimension of the world's heavenly decoration paradigm. The world's inclusive function is its unmistakable adornment. Thirdly, everything in life accounts for a sign (*āyāh*) which the Creator appointed for the purpose of alluding to and attesting to Him: His presence, greatness, and benevolence, as well as to the ultimate truth (*Āl 'Imrān*, 190). The signs (*āyāt*) are "revealed" through created things, events, and phenomena, and are manifested as much in the smallest and most insignificant as in the grandest and most consequential matters. It follows that the followers of Islam are asked to read the Holy Qurʾān as the revealed book, *al-Qurʾān al-tadwīnī*, which contains thousands of *āyāt* or signs (the Qurʾānic *āyāt* apart from being understood as verses, are to be regarded and studied as signs as well) and the book of creation, or the ontological "Qurʾān", *al-Qurʾān al-takwīnī*, which is also overflowing with signs (*āyāt*) (Naṣr, 1997, p. 17). The two "books" or "Qurʾāns", so to speak, complement each other towards the same objective, which is the ascertaining and confirming of the truth.

Sūrah al-Zukhruf, whose main concern is the presentation of the contrasts between the glory of the truth and revelation and the false glitter of other counterfeit alternatives, frequently refers to various signs (*āyāt*) (verses 46, 48 and 69), clear proofs (*bayyināt*) (verse 63) and to the Qurʾān as the manifest Book that through its signs (*āyāt*) makes things clear (verse 2). This is all to make people understand and encompass the Qurʾānic message and the message of other signs with reason (verse 3).

In verses 9-14, God furthermore refers to the flawless creation of the heavens and earth and how they function impeccably to serve and facilitate the noble vicegerency (*khilāfah*) mission of man. Their perfect creation and function serve both as their beauty and embellishment, as well as signs. Man is thus invited to enjoy the beauty of the creation and at the same time read, contemplate, and explore its countless signs – in addition to the signs of the Qurʾān -- for the sake of his material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual development.

The implicit message of the *sūrah* is that all forms of human-made beauty and decoration are likewise to serve an ontological purpose. They are to be transformed into human-made signs and be an extension of the created and revealed signs (*āyāt*) of God. They are to be seamlessly integrated into the latter. As such, they are to function as a means of enhancing and promoting the truth. They, in equal measure, are to endorse, communicate and further enrich it. Human life is to morph into a dynamic and refined interplay between the divine and human-generated signs, and the heavenly splendour and majesty and human-conceived and effected beauty. The mainstream genres of art in Islamic culture were developing only along the lines of these doctrines.

In addition to the revealed book of signs (*āyāt*), which is the Holy Qurʾān, and the created "book" of signs, which is the universe, the authentic forms of Islamic art and architecture in Islamic civilization function as a third "book" of signs. From the first book, the third "book" derives its meaning, significance, and purpose, and from the second its ethos, identity, and overall utility. This additionally means that inappropriate artistic and decorative styles conflict not only with the spiritual canons and values, but also the laws

of nature and human consciousness. They are at odds not only with the heavens, but also the earth.

Surely, the root cause of people's spiritual failures, as much in the arena of art as in the rest of life segments, is that they cannot recognize, read and appreciate the signs. Subsequently, they are not in a position to genuinely create them either. One of the main motives for creating signs is to enhance the prospect of grasping the truth, drawing near to and communicating effectively with God as the fountainhead of all grace, blessing and beauty. The signs in the form of decorative means and strategies are the facilitators of and catalysts for spiritual transformation and growth. If not, they will serve as impediments. They will obstruct, rather than help, and will repel, rather than attract. Instead of making one's life more meaningful and beautiful, they will make it more difficult and confounding. People's blindness and spiritual illiteracy, due to which they can neither see nor read, will be thus exacerbated and prolonged.

Perhaps for that reason is the content of the entire *sūrah al-Zukhruf* sandwiched between the words at the beginning that the Qurʾān is the manifest Book which makes things plain and clear (verses 2-3) and the words at the end: "But turn away from them (or bear with them) and say: "Peace!" But soon shall they come to know (the truth)!" (*al-Zukhruf*, 89). And the two verses right in the middle of the *sūrah* read: "So hold fast to the Revelation sent down to you. Verily you are on the Straight (Right) Way. The (Qurʾān) is indeed the Message for you and for your people; and soon shall you (all) be brought to account" (*al-Zukhruf*, 43-44).

Conclusion

The Qurʾānic chapter, or *sūrah, al-Zukhruf* is saturated with explicit and implicit lessons on decoration. Those lessons are interwoven with the main focus and direction of the *sūrah*, that is, the exposition of the contrasts between the glory of the truth and revelation and the false glitter of other counterfeit alternatives. The lessons dealt with signify a crucial segment of the Islamic worldview, underlining the meaning and importance of the concepts of God, man, life and religion and how they are interconnected into a series of relationships.

The first lesson discussed is about decoration as an intrinsic and innocent – yet at times even praiseworthy – human activity. It stands for acts of decoration and beautification that strike a delicate balance between the inborn natures, amplified temptations and acquired outlooks and practises of people. By and large, decoration is a double-edged sword and ought to be handled with utmost care. If miscomprehended and mismanaged, human innate predispositions and inclinations are easily influenced and tinted with the advances of numerous internal as well as external factors and features.

The second lesson discussed is concerning decoration as a means of deception. Owing to its capability to induce man's behavioural patterns, the sway of decoration can be so powerful and impactful on man's emotions that his thinking could be rendered somewhat irrational. Hence, decoration should always be used as a means only and in moderation, serving a higher purpose. If turned into a goal itself, decoration could become

uncontainable and even perilous. Instead of controlling it, man may become controlled by it. Thus, the idea of Satan and his advances as well as endless plotting against man are closely linked with the idea of decoration; and so are the notions of spiritual blindness and deafness.

The third lesson is about decoration as a means for ascertaining and enhancing the truth. It is also about affirming, creating and reading the signs. All forms of human-made beauty and decoration are to be transformed into human-made signs and be an extension of the created and revealed signs (*āyāt*) of God. Along with the revealed book of signs (*āyāt*), which is the Holy Qurʾān, and the created “book” of signs, which is the universe, the authentic forms of Islamic art and architecture function as a third “book” of signs. From the first book (the Qurʾān) the third “book” derives its meaning, significance and purpose, and from the second (the universe and its laws) its ethos, identity and overall utility. One of the main reasons for creating, writing and reading signs through decoration is to boost the prospect of comprehending the truth, drawing near to and communicating effectively with God as the fountainhead of all grace, blessing and beauty.

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