

# Incarnation in Christian and Hinduism Arts Manifestation in Islamic Arts (A Comparative Study)

Hasan Bolkhari Ghehi

Associate Professor of University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

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**Abstract** Incarnation theory is one of the most important Christian and Hinduism theological teachings. According to this theory, God as the most Supreme Being incarnate in human appearance. In chapter 11 of Bhagavad Gita (as a part of Mahabharata which is the greatest poem book of wisdom among Hindus), Arjuna asks Krishna (as the 8<sup>th</sup> avatar of Vishnu) to show him his real and divinity face and Krishna who is serving him as a charioteer (in a human form), reveals his real face to him. In Christianity as well, God incarnate on Jesus based on the first verses of Gospel of John. For this reason, visual arts like iconography, architecture and sculpture are sacred in these religions but in Islam and according to the verses of holy Quran, "You can never see me" is what God reply once Moses asks Him the same request of Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita. In this paper, incarnation means appearance of God in a human form. In other words, God manifest through human form. But manifestation just stays opposite to incarnation and stands for appearance of God in signs. For this reason, various parts of Quran are named "verse" (Aieh) or actually signs. Therefore, in comparative study of Christianity and Hinduism to Islam we realize that in Islam, Absolute Quality (God) never manifest in any form and no incarnation takes place. In return, God speak of manifestation in The Heights Surah of Quran. This paper believes that the two different replies to the same request of humans to see God have been the reason for visual arts becoming sacred in some religions like Hinduism and Christianity and iconography remaining in shadow in Islam. While dealing with this issue in the present paper, we try to shed light on differences between Islamic arts in one side and Christian and Hinduism art on the other side. The main concept of this paper is to put forward theory of manifestation instead of theory of incarnation. The present paper is based on a historical-analytical methodology in which the attitudes of three great religions on art are comparatively discussed. This paper is aiming to explain that theology of a variety of religions has a great effect on the form and nature of such religions.

**Keywords** Christian art, Hindu art, Islamic art, Theory of manifestation, Theory of incarnation

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## 1. Introduction

As an introduction, two issues should be clarified beforehand:

- a) In historical terms, Islamic art is an art with almost a thirteen century-background yet facing severe problems in the field of art theories, an area that may explain the nature of this art and inform thinkers of its beauties and subtleties.

Of course in the past hundred years ago, some scientists known as traditionalists (such as Titus Burckhardt, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Seyed Hosain Nasr, etc.) have kept trying to explain the basic and nature of Islamic art and architecture but some scientists such as Gulru Nacipoglu, lecturer of Harvard University, opposed their comments and rejected their comments because according to them, their

comments on Islamic art and architecture were not in conformity with historical realities and they were also chimerical. Of course the same is true about some comments of Gulru Nacipoglu and she ignores some reasoning of the traditionalists, however, Islamic art is confronted with existence and nature challenges. There are some thinkers who completely deny an art concept named Islamic art or in other words they make doubt about such a concept. This paper makes efforts to provide a theory for shedding light on the nature of Islamic art by referring to Quran and based on vast studies and researches on Islamic art.

- b) This paper is entitled "Incarnation in Christian and Hinduism Visual arts and manifestation in Islamic art". Therefore, the paper moves around the relation between religion and art. In a general and acceptable definition, religion is a set of theoretical beliefs that make formation of belief in human soul a set of practical obligations that lead human to prosperity and salvation. According to the followers of a religion, religious rules and instructions have a divine origin transferred to human through revelation. Therefore, God is the origin of religion and it has two theoretical and practical

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\* Corresponding author:

Hasan.bolkhari@ut.ac.ir (Hasan Bolkhari Ghehi)

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aspects both with the same goal of leading human to prosperity and perfection.

But art does not enjoy such a plain definition as religion enjoys, let alone those like Wittgenstein and his followers who believe that art is an open concept and for the very reason it cannot be defined and some sociologists who believe that art is a result of social evolutions and such evolutions are constantly changing and as a result their outcomes do not have a fixed nature to be defined.

However, from Plato up to now, there has been a constant try to define art. Theories such as expression, mimesis, form and aesthetic are the outcomes of such try and it should be admitted that they have mostly succeeded. All art theories are in common in terms of believing that there are two aspects of formal and pictorial in art. Here, the philosophical meaning of art as idea and meaning are meant and pictorial means nominal and visual aspects of an artistic work. Therefore, like religion, art has two aspects as well, a theoretical aspect that carries idea of art and a practical aspect that manifests the idea in the form of an artistic work.

That is the very reason that religion and art find a mutual relation. Based on religious theories, religion creates belief and then to reinforce that, it teaches some practical instructions to human or belief is manifested in practice. For instance, Muslims believe that according to Islam, the one who says his/her prayers he/she would not commit wrong acts. In other words, a theoretical idea that is manifested in a religious act, promotes purity in society. In philosophy of religious art, art is something like religion and it indicates the beliefs of an artist as act of a religious man, reveals his beliefs. Based on this, it can be concluded that religious art reflect main principles and teachings governing that religion. It means if in religions like Hinduism and Christianity, incarnation is a governing principle, visual arts are respected in such religions but in a religion in which absolute Unity is the fundamental principle and there is no manifestation of God, visual arts are not deemed sacred at least. It requires further discussion that goes on in continuation.

## 2. Incarnation in Hinduism

As one of the old Asian religions with followers around eight hundred people, Hinduism enjoys a three thousand-year background. This religion officially began with the presence of Aryans in the Indian subcontinent and compilation of Vedas sacred book. Among the four Vedas, Rigveda is the most sacred one and the rest are Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. A variety of commentaries such as Brahmanas Aranyakas and Upanishads are written on Vedas during Hinduism history. The truths brought up in Upanishads, which is wisdom and philosophical interpretation of Vedas, appeared in the form of versified story in the epical period of India (from 400 BC to 200 BC) and then the great book of Mahābhārata was created. A part of this book is published apart from Mahabharata due to its importance and elegance under the title of Bhagavad Gita.

In terms of deep and rich wisdom of Hinduism, this book is so popular with a high rank among Hindus.

Bhagavad Gita is allocated to the 8<sup>th</sup> Avatar of Vishnu, as one of the great Hindu gods that makes Hindu triangle next to two other gods of Brahma and Shiva. The 8<sup>th</sup> Avatar of Vishnu appears in the imaginal form of Krishna as a so popular god. In the war between Kaurava and Pandava, Krishna is in the good side and for this reason; he is incarnated in the form of a charioteer old man driving the chariot of Arjuna, the good Indian hero. His particular job indicates that gods are guiding and helping people.

After a while, Arjuna begins to doubt about the reality of the charioteer so he tries to find out about his real identity. Then Krishna reveals his true identity to him and speaks of the eternity secrets.

The interesting point about this article is that once the truth is revealed to Arjuna, he asks god to show him his real form. Krishna accepts his request and shows him his real form. In fact, it indicates that in Hinduism, God is revealed in his real form while he was already incarnated in human form.

According to Bhagavad Gita, the verses for such wonderful event are as follows:

"Arjuna said: I have heard your instruction on confidential spiritual matters which you have so kindly delivered unto me, and my illusion is now dispelled.

O lotus-eyed one, I have heard from you in detail about the appearance and disappearance of every living entity, as realized through your inexhaustible glories.

O greatest of all personalities, O supreme form, though I see here before me your actual position, I wish to see how you have entered into this cosmic manifestation. I want to see that form of you.

If you think that I am able to behold your cosmic form, O my Lord, O master of all mystic power, and then kindly show me that universal Self.

The Blessed Lord said: My dear Arjuna, O son of Prtha, behold now my opulences, hundreds of thousands of varied divine forms, multicolored like the sea.

O best of the Bharatas, see here the different manifestations of Adityas, Rudras, and all the demigods. Behold the many things which no one has ever seen or heard before." (Bhagavad Gita – Chapter 11, 1-6).

As we see, this kind of incarnation is one of the most important reasons for considering illustrating gods and saints as a sacred and accepted art in Hinduism. Naturally, such an act by god makes way for vast appearance of visual arts such as sculpture, architecture and iconography. The very important result in this issue is that for the reason of sacredness, image is sacred as well. In fact in Hinduism, image of Vishnu is actually him and bears the same holiness.

On explaining this issue, Rene Guenon in *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu doctrines* says: So far as India is concerned, the symbolical image representing one or other of the Divine Attributes, and which is called pratika, is most certainly not an "idol," for it has never been taken for anything other than what it really is, namely a support for

meditation and an auxiliary means of realization” (Guenon, 1993, 226).



Figure 1. Incarnation of Krishna in a charioteer



Figure 2. Arjun and Krishn

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, as well believes that image is a face of sense of God:

“We meet with all kinds of stories about images that speak, or bow, or weep; images receive material offerings and services, which they are said to "enjoy"; we know that the real presence of the deity is invited in them for the purpose of receiving worship; on the completion of an image, its eyes are "opened" by a special and elaborate ceremony. Thus, it is clearly indicated that the image is to be regarded as if animated by the deity.”(Coomaraswamy, 1996, 156)

Such commentary indicates that providing image of gods in an understandable form for humans (human form), is a sacred and widely accepted issue in Hinduism and they believe that since god incarnated in the form of human (like Krishna as a charioteer), so illustrating him in the form of a sculpture or icon cannot be contrary to religious beliefs.

### 3. Incarnation in Christianity

Christianity has completely an oriental origin and somehow, it has appeared in a complete Jewish territory. According to verses 15-18 of *Deuteronomy 4* Jews were opposing the images and icons representing God:

“Take therefore good heed unto yourselves, for ye saw no image in the day that the LORD spoke to you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 15

That ye corrupt not yourselves, and make you a graven image, or representation of any figure, whether it be the likeness of male or female, 16

The likeness of any beast that is on earth, or the likeness of any feathered fowl that flies in the air, 17

Or the likeness of anything that creep on the earth or the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth, 18” (*Deuteronomy 4*).

The verses are so clear: God Has not provided any form of Him, so no form of Him can be made as a symbol of Him.

These two predicates indicate that sculptures and icons are created just represent or not to represent god, so in terms of sacred icons and sculptures, visual arts are directly related to providing or not providing a form of god. For this paper, such clarity in the Old Testament could be an important document.

Providing no form representing God in the Old Testament has an explicit similarity to Quran that we will refer to that then.

However, the Old Testament had banned any kind of sculpture or iconography but it did not apply to architecture because God in *Book of Exodus*, even the details of construction of a sacred temple were provided.

“Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim worked into them by a skilled craftsman.” (*Book of Exodus*: Chapter 26).

The interesting point is that in this part Jehovah permits illustration of angles on sacred curtains: “... with cherubim worked into them by a skilled craftsman.” (*Book of Exodus 26:5*). Or in chapter 25: And make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover.18. Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover, at the two ends.19. The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover.20. (*Book of Exodus 25:18-20*).

In that case, a question rises that how painters can find the faces of angles? Should they use their imagination or a form of them was revealed to them? This issue is clear in Hinduism and Buddhism. An artist may reach a form of angles or Devas by meditation and he draws what is revealed in his heart. But regarding the verse of *Book of Exodus* the question is that where this form comes from. While the first verse on portraiture forbiddance indicates that in Jewish religion God portraiture is forbidden but it does not apply to portraying angles.

There is another point here. There are some verses in *THE BOOK OF GENESIS* like the verses on Formation where Jacob wrestles with God that in still doubts about incarnation: “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.24. When the man saw that he did not prevail

against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.<sup>25</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."<sup>26</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."<sup>27</sup> Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."<sup>28</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.<sup>29</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."<sup>30</sup> (*THE BOOK OF GENESIS 32:24-30*)

If we make such verses as a basis, we may express that Judaism has had a role in formation of Christian incarnation especially when considering this fact that Christian theology was formed in a geographical field where incarnation of Greek and then Roman gods was a plain issue.

However, in the beginning of Gospel of John, Christian incarnation has an explicit manifestation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.<sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning.<sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.<sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.<sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[a] it.<sup>6</sup> ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.<sup>14</sup>" (*Gospel of John. 1-14*)

The aforesaid meaning in verses of Gospel of John was emphasized in First Council of Nicene (Nicene Creed) in 325 B.C as follows:

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God begotten of the Father [the only begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;."

In another part of this memorandum, Jesus incarnation is explicitly emphasized:

"through Whom all things came into being ,things in heaven and things on earth ,Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and became incarnate and became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day,." (*The Nicene Creed at the council in 325*)

And also: "He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change - these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes." (ibid)

Absolutely, this belief fully affected generation of visual arts and more important than them, holiness of illustrating

God and saints in Christianity as it did in Hinduism. It was even concluded in the second Nicene Creed in year 787 that "we decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honored and life-giving cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or of other suitable material, are to be exposed in the holy churches of God, on sacred instruments and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and by public ways, these are the images of our Lord, God and savior, Jesus Christ, and of our Lady without blemish, the holy God-bearer, and of the revered angels and of any of the saintly holy men..... Indeed, the honor paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model, and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image." (*Second Council of Nicaea - 787 A.D*)

This concept was actually provided against those opposing icons and making doubts in minds about a tendency toward icons and it was an absolute confirmation of legality of illustration in Christianity.

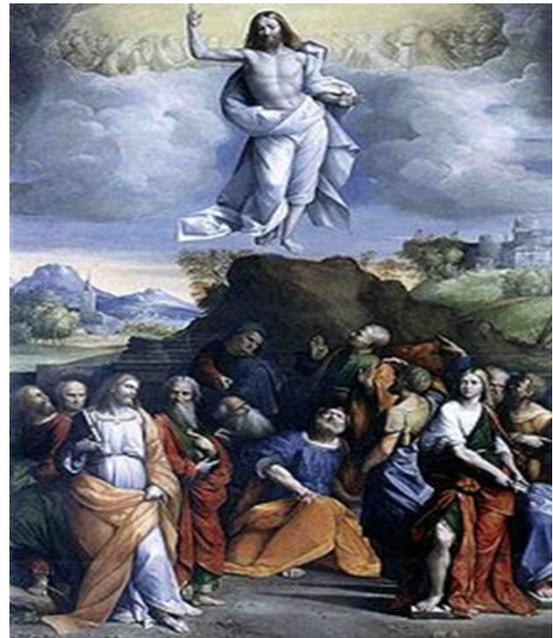


Figure 3. Jesus Christ

#### 4. Manifestation in Quran

But Quran chose another attitude on incarnation. The same request of Arjuna from Krishna on incarnation of the Divinity was expressed in Quran. Upon appearing in Miqat and once God spoke to Moses through a veil, he felt a strong desire in his heart to see God in His real form but God's reply was so different from incarnation of Krishna in Hinduism and incarnation of word in Christianity.

By uttering "You will not see Me", God provided no form of Him and it turned out to become a principle for denying illustration in Islamic thoughts. But by manifestation a mountain, God established a principle that formed the generation of symbolic figuration and symbolism in Islamic

art and culture: "And when Moses came to Our appointment, and his Lord spoke to him, he said, "My Lord, allow me to look and see You." He said, "You will not see Me, but look at the mountain; if it stays in its place, you will see Me." But when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He turned it into dust, and Moses fell down unconscious. Then, when he recovered, he said, "Glory be to you, I repent to you, and I am the first of the believers." (Quran, 7: (AL-ARAF) 143).

On the surface, it seems that this verse completely denies the principle of God incarnation (in a way enabling human to see Him, even that human is a great prophet like Moses). Therefore, in Islam in which Quran is the measurement and criterion text, image is forbidden and illegal if it is intending to provide a form of Absolute Quality of God through visualizing or incarnating that. It should be repeated that that

is exactly for the very reason that according to the revealed verses of Quran, God did not Show Him upon the request of Moses.

The second and important point is manifestation principle. Instead of incarnation of Him (in a way to enable Moses to observe Him), God directed his attention to a mountain: "But look at the mountain;" and subjected seeing Him to establishment of that mountain after manifestation: "But when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain," and since God manifested, the mountain could not at all bear the manifestation and it was smashed into pieces. "He turned it into dust," and Moses fainted and it made his soul awoke, helping him to come back to God and be among the first true believers: "and Moses fell down unconscious. Then, when he recovered, he said, "Glory be to you, I repent to you, and I am the first of the believers."



Figure 4. Nasir al-mulk mosque. Iran

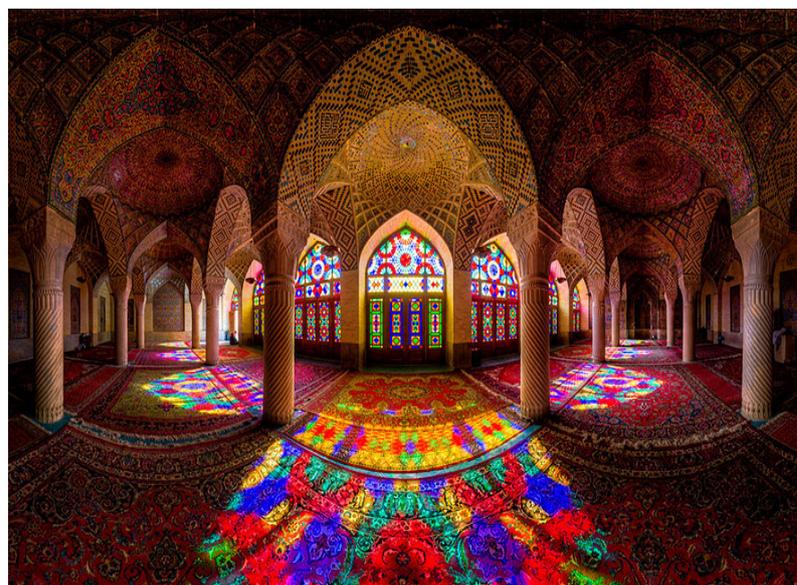


Figure 5. Nasir al-mulk mosque

Upon this verse, manifestation has turned out to be one of the most important principles of Islamic thoughts and widely used by Muslim wise men and philosophers when explaining the relation between God and creatures (or unity and multiplicity) as the only true principle.

Prominence of manifestation is reflected in some narrations of Shiite Imams. Imam Ali (PBUH), for instance, in speech 186 of his book named *Nahjolbalagheh*, which is indeed an amazing speech on absolute unification, speaks of manifestation of God on intelligences once praising Divine Magnificence in creating universe and relation of affairs in that: "It was for the very concepts that the creator of universe manifested on intelligences." (*Nahjolbalagheh*, speech 186)

Likewise, in speech 185 of the same book, Imam Ali, emphasized on such manifestation once more.

"Signs of creation testify God not physical presence. Thoughts cannot encompass His essence while He has manifested on them by the effects of His Magnificence indicating that He cannot be imagined and He left judging about such inability to thoughts."

Or in speech 108, he says:

"Praise deserves God who manifested on creations by creating creatures and by reason and evidence, revealed Him to their hearts."

But it should be noted that the manifestation expressed by Imam Ali in speeches 185 and 186 that deliberately and so eloquently describe Divine Unity, cannot be the same as the manifestation expressed by mystics but in both sources, manifestation is the very manifestation of Presence of Divinity in universe, and in this regard Imam Ali utters:

"Praise deserves God who by creating creatures guided them to their existence." (*Nahjolbalagheh*, speech 152)

Likewise, in *Arafah* prayer, Imam Hossein (PBUH) speaks on manifestation of God:

"O' you manifested in the utmost form of beauty." In other sacred books of Shiite, manifestation concept has a broad and clearer presentation. For instance, in *Al-Tohid* book, there is a narration from Imam Sadigh (PBUH) indicating that God was manifesting on Prophet Mohammad at the time of revelation. (*Al-Tohid*, page 115).

## 5. Conclusions

With no doubt, according to the principle of reflection of a religion in artistic and literary works and also the great role of manifestation in Muslim mystics and wise men, a kind of art was formed in the world of Islam in which a symbolic expression of universe was a basis instead of image and objective visualization. Special arabesque forms in Islamic civilization that are neither the same as reality nor away from it are rooted in manifestation principle.

We believe that manifestation of God on the mountain indicates necessity of paying attention to mediators in observing God. In Islamic art, symbols are the very

mediators functioning the way the verses of holy Quran do and it should not be overlooked that the word *verse* in Arabic language means sign. Islamic typology deems the entire universe full of evidences testifying a cause like God.

It can be concluded that manifestation principle in Islamic thoughts call us for observing a view of Divinity's views in which God Has a mirror-like presence. In addition to the hearts of mystics in their mystical experience, this kind of observation has been manifested in Islamic art and architecture leading to creation of an art indebted to world of imagination and its manifestations. In this way, Islamic art is manifestation of manifestation because it takes its essence from a universe that is itself a mirror of a farther universe. According to Henry Corbin, contrary to incarnation, manifestation expresses another rank of universe in which Divine Forms appear in mirror like images.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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