

A LIVING ISLAMIC CITY: FEZ AND ITS PRESERVATION. By Titus Burckhardt. Jean-Louis Michon and Joseph A. Fitzgerald (Eds.). Translated by Jane Casewit. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2020, 104 pp.

The Moroccan city of Fez, founded in the ninth century, is an unparalleled treasure of Islamic culture and civilization. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) was an expert on Islam, Islamic arts and crafts, and its mystical dimension, Sufism. For more than forty years he worked to document and preserve the artistic and architectural heritage of Fez in particular and Morocco in general. He is the author of numerous works, his book *Fez: City of Islam* (Fez, Stadt des Islam) first published in German in 1960 is regarded as one of his masterpieces. Burckhardt lived for many years in Fez and was an integral part of the Moroccan government's successful preservation of the ancient medina of Fez as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. Moreover, in 1999 the Moroccan government sponsored an international symposium in Marrakesh in honor of Burckhardt's distinguished work.

This book consists of four distinct chapters that have been refashioned from newly translated lectures, delivered while Burckhardt was living and working in Fez: "Constants of Arabo-Islamic Urbanism"; "Saving the Medina"; "Permanent Values of Maghribi Art"; and "Traditional Craftsmanship: Its Nature and Destiny"; and also contains "Appendix I: Sanctuaries of the Medina" and "Appendix II: Key Thoughts". Throughout this work Burckhardt explores how the historic city of Fez can be preserved without changing it from a living organism into a dead museum-city, and how it can be adapted and updated using the sacred principles that gave birth to the city and its way of life. Supported through photographs and sketches made during the passage of Burckhardt's lifetime, he articulates what it means to be a living Islamic city.

Burckhardt explains the magnitude of this historical city in the context of the Islamic tradition as a whole, "Fez is not only the history of Morocco, it is also the history of the Arabo-Andalusian world and ultimately of all of Muslim civilization." (p. xvii) Fundamental to this is the recognition that that "Fez is not a museum-city: it is an intensely living organism, well fitted to the measure of man" (p. 14). In contrast to most cities of the highly technological and mechanized world, which are very much dehumanizing, the old town of Fez has an intrinsic rhythm which engages the fullness of the human experience. After all it is "the *sunnah* [that] provides above all the models for practical life." (p. 3) Burckhardt elaborates on this essential principle: "The *sunnah* is 'realistic' in the sense that it always envisages the integral nature of man, who is at once body, soul, and spirit—bodily gestures having their repercussion in the soul and spiritual convictions being reflected in outward behavior." (p. 3) In fact, Burckhardt, claimed that "No other city in the entire Arab world manifests so homogeneously what one could call Islamic urbanism." (p. 17)

To preserve the city of Fez's irreplaceable monuments and essential characteristics requires respect for the city's historical structure. As Burckhardt points out, "adaptation necessarily involves modernization but, at the same time, it must be inspired not by European [or other] models but by what we might describe as the urbanism inherent in the ancient structure of the city." (p. 14) Burckhardt's intention is not to deny that certain contemporary developments could be of benefit here but to emphasize the need to situate

any such developments within the traditional norms of the culture. Within the Islamic tradition, cultural norms are rooted in Divine Unity, as Burckhardt acknowledges when he insists “Everything, in the art of Islam, is attached to *tawhīd*.” (p. 46) This is exemplified by the symbolism of light as indicated in the Koran: “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth” (24:35). Within Sufism, this symbolism of the Divine Light is also employed to demonstrate the Divine Unity that encompasses all of the spiritual paths by which diverse human souls travel back to God. The Sufi sage and poet Rūmī (1207–1273) says, for example, “The Lamps are different, but the Light is the same,”¹ further specifying that “[all] religions are but one religion.”² This unity is palpable throughout the city as Burckhardt writes, “All in all, what strikes the visitor of the numerous sanctuaries in Fez is not so much the diversity of the architectural types as their unity throughout the centuries.” (p. 62)

The human being engages in the creative act of making art yet remains anonymous in this act for it is not actually he or she that produces the art but the Divine. “In its state of perfection, ‘each thing praises its creator,’ and this creator is not the artist, but God.” (p. 51) The function of the human being is to undergo a transfiguration through the creative process where he or she dissolves into the Divine Essence. The human being consists of a tripartite composite of Spirit/Intellect, soul and body, known in Islam as *Rūh* (*‘Aql*), *nafs* and *jism*. As Burckhardt explains, “man is still at once body, soul, and spirit. One cannot, therefore, neglect any one of these modalities without harming the entire human being.” (p. xix) Through this metaphysical rendering human diversity can be discerned to include both commonality and uniqueness in the Divine without contradiction: “On the one hand, all men are equal before God.... On the other hand, each man...is unique in his inner nature, and it is in this transcendent uniqueness that his liberty and dignity reside.” (p. 14)

As is the case with all traditional art, “there is no profane art in the framework of Islamic civilization, which admits of no scission between the domains of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’” (p. 34). This is to say that: “In all traditional civilizations, art is never disassociated from its practical goal, and craftsmanship is never limited to a production deprived of beauty.” (p. 34) The meaning of beauty and its spiritual dimension is illustrated in the Prophetic tradition: “Verily, God is beautiful and He loveth beauty.” The role of the outer world in traditional societies and civilizations is central as it is interconnected and an extension of the inner world, joining both the microcosm and the macrocosm. Burckhardt notes, “What our ancestors put into the forms of their environment, this acts anew upon us, their heirs; there is nothing that exercises a greater influence on a man’s soul than the environment which surrounds him.” (p. xviii) This metaphysical approach also facilitates an integral ecological vision, which is found across the distinct cultures, “Water is the foundation of all life” and adds, “Water is necessary for the body, soul, and spirit alike, and nothing could better illustrate the principle of traditional town-planning than this triple use of water.” (p. 7) According to the Koran: “From water We made every living thing” (21:30). The principle of unity in Islamic civilization maintains a balance between the practical and the beautiful, without diminishing either of these facets. Burckhardt warns about the harmful consequences of art, architecture and crafts when dissociated from the sacred, “When quantity dominates production, quality is killed – this is an inexorable law.” (p. 50)

The protection and preservation of all cultural treasures the world over is needed, not only the city of Fez, as once they are lost, they can never be recovered. Burckhardt writes,

“certain perfect creations of the human spirit cannot be repeated, and are never replaced; and yet, these works belong to man, to all of mankind—they are like aspects of our soul,” he continues, “They are ours to the extent that we grasp their beauty and perfection. Were they to disappear, something of our own soul would vanish; something of ourselves would be forgotten.” (p. xviii)

This book is far from a blind or superficial call for a “return to the Middle Ages,” but rather a call for a return to the sacred principles that underlie all sapiential traditions and arts, crafts, architecture and sacred lifeways to understand them in their integral nature. We are grateful that these important lectures have been made available as they make for a superb contribution to Burckhardt’s already published work on the city of Fez and Islamic art. Burckhardt concludes with a message conveying the transpersonal blessing crystalized within this sacred city, “let us not forget that there still exists in Fez what we would call a *genius loci*, or, more adequately, a *barakah* that will have the last word.” (p. 14) We end this review with the well-known verse of the Islamic tradition: “unto God all things are returned” (3:109).

Notes

¹ Rūmī, “The One True Light,” in *Rūmī: Poet and Mystic*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London, UK: George Allan and Unwin, 1950), p. 166.

² Rūmī, “2120 – Book III,” in *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’ddīn Rūmī, Vol. IV*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London, UK: Luzac and Company, 1930), p. 118.

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