

The Clash of Cultures at Córdoba

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The purpose of this research is to examine the evidence that an existing architectural monument offers regarding the effect of the conflict during the Conquista, followed by the period of Arab rule in Spain, which was terminated by the Reconquista. The theme of the article is medieval violence and counter violence manifested in the stages of development of the Great Mosque at Córdoba and its transformation into the Church of Santa Maria. I will deal with the ethical issues at stake in the behaviour of the Arabs and Spaniards in Córdoba during the conquest and reconquest of a sacred site, which through several centuries became a theatre in which religious emotions were aroused and resulted in unresolved loss in an anti-cathartic way. What happened at Córdoba is an object lesson to all multicultural societies in which the dominant group revenges itself upon the cultural artifacts of a subjected group, not an uncommon occurrence in the history of architecture.

The ‘clash of cultures’ mentioned in the title of my article¹ refers to the fact that after the 8th century Muslim conquest of Córdoba, a town of Roman origin on the north bank of the Guadalquivir in Spain, a mosque was erected there on the site of a Christian basilica. ‘Abd al-Rahman I had purchased part of this church, dedicated to St Vincent, from the Christian community for use as a mosque; but it was then completely demolished by the conquerors and the Great Mosque was erected in its place. After the expulsion of the Muslims from the city in 1236 the Christians consecrated the Great Mosque as a church. Not only was its function changed over time, but it was eventually vandalised by the insertion of a Gothic cathedral inside its vast arcaded space. In this way two groups of people, Christians and Muslims, took turns to assert their dominance by wreaking havoc on the place which both in turn held sacred [figures 1 &2].

¹This article is a revised version of the paper I read at the 33rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, 7-10 May 1998, held at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, USA. It was read in the session ‘Continuity within catharsis’. I wish to express my gratitude to both the University of South Africa and the Human Sciences Research Council for the grants I received to attend this conference.

Violence done to an architectural environment is obviously inflicted metaphorically, since stones cannot feel the pain of defeat. Ruined buildings to which people previously related emotionally will become fixed in the memory of a vanquished group. It is characteristic of memory that it always functions in a changed context. Even though the original meaning of an edifice that the vanquished group has lost will remain embedded in their memory, its original meaning will nevertheless fade and undergo inevitable change over time. This phenomenon is very common in architectural history. Very often buildings have been converted to functions they were not intended for because of subjugation by foreign rulers or cultural transformation in the society which built them. For example, the Pantheon in Rome was converted into a Christian Church while the Hagia Sophia, a Byzantine church in Constantinople, was converted into a mosque. On the sites of the ruins of Classical buildings in Rome and Greece new structures arose with very little regard for the *genius loci* of the original. Old buildings were used as quarries for new ones. In Cairo, for example, the cladding stones of the pyramids were used to build mosques, and the columns and other elements of Roman buildings became *spolia* for early Christian churches. The examples of functional conversion and cultural destruction can be elaborated *ad infinitum*.

In this article I will not deal with a building which was converted functionally or built on the site of a famous ruin. Instead, I will deal with a unique situation for which no precedent comes to mind immediately, namely the construction of a Gothic cathedral inside the Great Umayyad Mosque at Córdoba. The curious phenomenon of a building representing a particular culture and set of religious beliefs being installed within the envelope of another representing a different culture and set of religious beliefs can be explained only by reviewing the morality and emotions which motivated the successive builders to construct their respective religious edifices on the same sacred site according to their respective unique requirements.²

²In order to understand the unusual ‘conflict’ between a mosque and a Christian church, it is necessary to introduce the origin of edifices for worship in Islam and Christianity. Frishman notes that both these religions were born in an ‘architectural vacuum’ (30). Both are monotheistic and both abhor idolatry. At their inception both preferred a humble shelter for communal prayer, putting the emphasis on the assembly of believers and not on distracting edifices. However, Frishman states: ‘The monotheistic religions maintained their opposition [to imposing edifices] until it dawned upon their leaders that any faith with no new followers would soon die out and that potential converts could be attracted by, amongst other things, some recognisable symbol such as an impressive building. Inevitably those

The history of conflict between Islam and Christianity has been brought to our attention again by conferences on the Crusades which started 900 years ago (see Viljoen). In this article I will limit my comments to the medieval conflict between, and the recent attempt at reconciliation of, Islamic and Christian architecture at Córdoba, or Qurtoba as it was called by the Arabs. However, a brief overview of the conquest of Spain by the Arabs (referred to as the Conquista) and the reconquest (or Reconquista) of their country by the Spaniards is necessary in order to contextualise the conflict between religious groupings as exemplified in the successive occupation and reconstruction of buildings representing the beliefs and

who set foot on this path quickly came to realise that the more splendid they could make the sacred shrine, the greater would be its magnetism, and hence the deeper became the paradox.' The paradox is that: 'Inventing an architectural form to provide for the worship of an invisible, non-representational deity has never been achieved, and anything that became an accepted form had to evolve through the passage of time.' And, one may add, the vicissitudes of culture.

A mosque (Arab *masjid*) is a Muslim house of prayer. Even though Islam requires no physical structure for valid prayer, buildings are constructed especially for the purpose of congregational prayer at Friday noon. In English, this kind of mosque is usually referred to as a 'Great Mosque', as at Córdoba. According to Ardalan, the fundamental Islamic 'mandate of architecture', apart from fulfilling necessary functional requirements, should be to manifest a purposeful sense of beauty (18). The emphasis on beauty, Ardalan points out, is a natural outgrowth of the Koran which emphasises goodness, truth and knowledge, while placing the primary concern on Beautiful Deeds.

A church, on the other hand, is a building for Christian worship. Since Early Christian times the basilican church underwent numerous variations in order to accommodate the liturgy, which was essentially congregational. During the Late Middle Ages the Gothic cathedral became the quintessential symbol of Christian belief, representing the heavenly Jerusalem as described in the Book of Revelation. Besides its symbolic meaning the cathedral is in many respects an unsurpassed engineering feat with its flying buttresses and soaring verticality of spires which are visible externally and an equally impressive interior volume with masonry ceilings, up to 23 metres above floor level. 'Through its emphasis on the perpendicular,' Lancaster writes, 'Gothic architecture reveals its most Western affiliation, that was brought to fruition centuries later in the American skyscraper' (197). In contrast, the more horizontal design of the mosque represents, as in Far Eastern architecture, the repose which typifies a repose which is attuned to the universe (Lancaster 297).

cultures of the warring groups.

The Muslim invasion of Spain started in July 710 when a reconnaissance force of about 400 men crossed from North Africa to the southernmost tip of the Peninsula. During the following year an army of 7 000 men, reinforced subsequently by 5 000, invaded Spain and decisively defeated King Roderick, the last Visigothic ruler. By about 715 the Muslims had occupied all the main towns of Spain and entered into treaty relations with the local rulers. Islamic Spain reached the height of its power in the reign of 'Abd-al-Rahman III (912-61). By the time of his death he had established his rule over most of Al-Andalus, as Spain came to be called by the Arabs. These people established centres of learning of which Córdoba was among the most famous. A ruler called An-Nasir established a college attached to the Grand Mosque to which students came from far afield. Ziadeh mentions a library attached to the palace at the time of the ruler called al-Hakam which contained 600 000 volumes, as well as three more libraries, which had belonged to previous rulers, and were amalgamated by al-Hakam. Many branches of knowledge flourished under the Arab rulers, especially in Córdoba. According to Ziadeh Córdoba 'was a frontier of learning, and, like many other cities in Arab Spain, was a place where cultures mingled and met, and thus produced a civilization which had a character of its own' (36-37). The Mozarabs represented a blending of Muslim and Christian cultures, but these cultures existed in Iberian Al-Andalus in their separate yet internally fractious forms as well.

During the 11th century, however, a number of petty kingdoms replaced the one large Muslim kingdom, and the Umayyad state disintegrated under 'Abd-al-Rahman's grandson. By 1031 there were some thirty independent local rulers among whom dissension was rife. Rivalries among the various Islamic rulers obviously favoured the Christian advance of the Reconquest, which was motivated by a fervour to fight the enemies of Christianity. After centuries of subjection, but also of acculturation, a religious fundamentalist conception of their identity became established among the inhabitants of the kingdoms of Leon, Navarre and Castile as members of a Catholic Christendom. This upsurge of religious purpose would lead to the unification of Spain, since, as Watt phrases it, there was 'a close association between the new Spanish identity and militant Catholicism' (48). After centuries of acceptance of Arab culture, the Spaniards began more and more to assert their Catholic identity and deny their cultural indebtedness to the Arabs. Therefore, when Islamic Spain began to disintegrate, the independent Christian states in the North took the opportunity to expand southwards. Toledo was captured in 1085. More decisive was the occupation of Córdoba on 29 June 1236 by Ferdinand III of Castile. Seville was taken in 1248 and the Muslim stronghold of Granada fell in 1492.

As indicated above, it was during their occupation of Córdoba that the

Muslims turned a Christian church, St Vincent, itself erected over a Roman temple (Hillebrand 129), into a mosque. Not satisfied with this arrangement, they demolished the church. ‘Abd al-Rahman I, the first Ummayyad to rule independently over most of the Iberian Peninsula, commenced building the Great Mosque in 785, over the foundations of the church. The great Mosque was repeatedly extended by his successors. The most notable successor was al-Hakam II (961-76), who was responsible for the extant *mihrab* area and the magnificent geometric and vegetal mosaic decoration [figure 3].

By the year 1000 the Great Mosque of Córdoba, called the ‘jewel of Islam’, was considered to be one of the wonders of the world. Even its dimensions, planning and construction are indications of its splendour. Its area, 198 x 137 metres (25 893 square metres) was enclosed by buttressed walls 18 metres high. These were pierced by 21 horseshoe arches having doors encrusted with brass decoration. The roof cover consisted of lead and the exterior was decorated with various abstract designs. The Great Mosque was divided into two parts: the open courtyard on the north and the interior prayer chamber on the south. The former area had an arcaded path on three sides while the latter had double arcades, 19 arcades from east to west and 31 from north to south.

The interior of the Great Mosque is unique because its system of supports is not only structurally sound, but rhythmic and decorative [figure 4]. The arcades originally contained 1 239 columns, made from jasper, marble, and porphyry, many of which were quarried from Roman ruins. These were topped by capitals covered with gold. The columns supported 360 horseshoe arches and piers which carried an upper tier of semicircular arches, constructed by alternating brick and stone voussoirs. At the intersections of the arcades lobed arches are formed which screen off the bays in front and on either side of the *mihrab*, linked to a small octagonal room behind an open arch. The decoration around that arch consists of innovative arrangements that influenced later mosques in the western Islamic world. This most unique *mihrab* is octagonal in shape, crowned by a cupola carved from a single block of marble, its eight intersecting arches supported by elegant columns [figure 5]. The enclosing walls are clad in gold and the dome adorned by multi-coloured mosaics.

The part of the building which was added by al-Hakam II was reserved for the caliph and his nobles. It contained three domes (still extant) where the art of Muslim builders was displayed in a virtuoso manner. The *maqsurah*, the enclosure surrounding the *mihrab* was described as having three doors of pure gold, a floor paved with silver and columns placed in clusters of four with one capital (Salloum 147).

The *minbar* (pulpit) to one side of the *mihrab* was constructed from 36 000 pieces of ivory and precious timber, fastened together with gold and

silver nails, studded with precious stones. A precious Qur'an was kept there. Also worth mentioning is the minaret, still a landmark in Córdoba, built by 'Abd al-Rahman III, which had no equal in Islamic lands [figure 6]. It was 33 metres high and had two staircases, one for ascending and the other for descending. The summit was intricately decorated with natural motifs cast in silver and pure gold.

Immediately after Córdoba fell into the hands of Ferdinand, he and a group of bishops purified the Great Mosque for Christian worship, consecrating it as the Cathedral of Santa Maria. Chapels were created which transformed areas of the Muslim space. Later in the 13th century the Capilla Real, a pantheon for the kings of Castile, was constructed in the Mudejar style. Dodds (24) notes that, in this way, 'The Christians who conquered Córdoba understood that there was much more power to be gained from appropriating this extraordinary metaphor of their conquest than from destroying it.' What was gained was the power of control and dominance over a subjected architectural metaphor.

During the 14th century *mudejar* (conquered Muslim) craftsmen built the Puerta del Pardon (Gate of Pardon) from which one enters the building from the Patio de los Naranjas in which orange and palm trees grow. Most of the 12 doorways of the Great Mosque were bricked up, or converted for Christian use, such as the Portal of Mohammed I, called the Puerta de San Esteban by the Christians. Another opening, called the Puerta de las Palmas, was built in a wall which did not exist in Arab times. Entering from this doorway, darkness now seems to engulf the entire building, since the open archways of the Arab era were converted into walled-in chapels. As the visitor's eyes grow accustomed to the semi-darkness the previous splendour of the virtual forest of 1 293 columns constructed by the Muslims becomes visible.

Even in Christian Córdoba, which, like the rest of Spain, came under the influence of the Flemish Gothic style during the 15th century,³ the Great Mosque was still admired. However, by then this Christian city had ceased to live in subordination to Islamic cultural values. Therefore, further alterations to the Great Mosque were made in the international Gothic style. Under Bishop Manrique (1486-96) the first major modification was executed in the form of a new choir. This extensive project is indicative of the artistic taste of Christian Córdoba in the time of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (Edwards 181).

Then, during the 16th century, the Christians destroyed the central part of the interior of the Great Mosque, ripping out 437 of the columns, leaving

³Gothic influence reached Spain initially from France and Germany in the 13th century, as seen in Burgos Cathedral. During the 15th century Flemish influence became dominant.

only 856 standing. This was done in order to construct a complete Gothic cathedral [figures 2 & 7]. Emperor Charles V, who had originally supported the canons in their petition to build within the Great Mosque, is recorded to have remarked upon seeing the new cathedral: 'You have taken something unique and turned it into something mundane' (Dodds 25).

Even though the Great Mosque of Córdoba has been a Christian church for 741 years, its interior and exterior retain much of its former glory, notwithstanding the alteration of its horizontal emphasis which was drastically modified by the verticality of the Gothic intruder which appropriated the landmark minaret in a modified way as a bell-tower.

In one building the simultaneous presence of the earthly beauty of the mosque and the transcendental aspiration of the Gothic cathedral may be seen by some viewers as contrapuntal, by others as dissonant. Hillebrand says that 'the Christian buildings within the mosque have something of the same palimpsest quality of the Muslim structure itself. Perhaps it was no accident that ... these Christian buildings definitely ruined the impact of the great sanctuary' (132). Thus, the present edifice, still generally referred to as the Great Mosque of Córdoba, is not a harmonious unity. The conflicting styles of the 10th century mosque and the 16th century cathedral will, in their coexistence, for as long as they remain standing, evoke the memory of the reactive opposition of Christians to Islam. These edifices can never be separate entities, but will remain conflicting embodiments of rival moralities.

Before resuming the theme of the clash of cultures, and more specifically the rhetoric of architectural conflict, a definition of violence should first be provided. Resisting reactive opposition is, according to Wink, one of the most profound and difficult truths in Scripture (15). He observes that once an individual or a group succumbs to the urge of reactive opposition 'we become what we hate'. He explains: 'The very act of hating something draws it to us. Since our hate is a direct response to the evil [or injustice] done, our hate almost invariably causes us to respond in the terms already laid down by the enemy. Unaware of what is happening, we turn into the very thing we oppose. We become what we hate.' He also states that: 'It would make a fascinating story to write a history of the world from the perspective of the principle of forcible resistance transforming into its opposite. One can find instances from virtually every period.' (17) Indeed, at Córdoba the Muslim dominance turned against Christian worship and, in turn, Christian dominance transformed itself into its enemy, acting vengefully.

Girard explains the psychological cause of violence between groups as 'mimetic desire'. The one group envies an object because it is an object of desire for the model group. As the envy becomes more intense, 'mimetic rivalry' with the model results: admiration is transformed into conflict. The

imitator becomes increasingly malicious towards his model, causing a 'double bind' through which the model becomes the subject's 'monstrous double'. In the end the model is eliminated because of the desire to appropriate the model's identity.

Mack (1985: 157 & 1987: 6-17) explains Girard's thesis as follows: 'Mimetic desire, rivalry, the emergence of the monstrous double ... the hysteria of ecstatic experience, and the violence done to history, tradition, texts, and reputations [and one may add: architecture] of the "guilty" victim is obliterated in the attempt to possess its true being for oneself.'

It is clear that where violence is born of mimetic desire catharsis is not possible.⁴ Where no release of a double bind with the desired model can occur, the situation becomes anti-cathartic.

People are slow to erase the experience of conflict from their minds. The descendants of the Spaniards who were overrun by Arabs still hold the Muslim invader in awe. However, in order to erase the emotions of a centuries-old conflict from their minds, all Europeans, not only Spaniards, should acknowledge the truth of the following statement by Watt: 'For our cultural indebtedness to Islam, ... we Europeans have a blind spot.' (2)

In Spain acculturation took place notwithstanding conflict: 'In fact, though, the available evidence suggests that the state of war against the Moors coexisted with continued admiration for Islamic culture' (Edwards 180). The acknowledgement of mutual indebtedness is a step in the direction of reconciliation of cultures in conflict. What better time is there than the present — 900 years after the commencement of the first Crusade which contributed to the fuelling of the long conflict between Christianity and Islam — to acknowledge mutual indebtedness? Dodds concludes that the Great Mosque of Córdoba, 'was understood by Christians and Muslims alike as an intrinsically Spanish monument' (25). The appropriation of the Great Mosque by Christians established a new hegemony, but not a convincing one. The sacred spaces of the mosque and the church will co-

⁴Since the time of Aristotle catharsis has been notoriously difficult to define. The word is derived from *katharein*, a Greek word meaning 'to cleanse'. In his definition of tragedy Aristotle says that there is pity and fear and a catharsis in tragedy. In this regard Brunius says that: 'The translation of these last words is difficult not because we do not know the meaning of pity and fear and catharsis but because we do not know how they are related to each other. The final words of the definition are ambiguous. This ambiguity has created one of the most important bodies of exegetical literature.' (265) Since an exact interpretation of the ten words at the end of Aristotle's definition of tragedy cannot be given, relief of emotions and a resulting state of calmness is generally implied when the word 'catharsis' is used. See also White.

exist in perpetuity, the hegemony of either remaining unresolved.

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Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie navorsing is om die getuienis te ondersoek wat 'n bestaande argitektoniese monument bied ten aansien van die uitwerking van die konflik tydens die Conquista, gevolg deur die periode van Arabiese heerskappy in Spanje wat beëindig is deur die Reconquista. Die tema van die artikel is die Middeleeuse geweld en teengeweld wat uit die ontwikkelingstadië van die Groot Moskee in Cordoba en sy transformasie tot die Kerk van Santa Maria spreek. Ek ondersoek die etiese kwessies wat 'n rol gespeel het in die optrede van die Arabiere en Spanjaarde in Cordoba gedurende die verowering en herverowering van 'n gewyde plek wat deur verskeie eeue heen 'n teater geword het waarin religieuse emosies gewek is en op 'n teenkataarse wyse tot onbesliste verlies aanleiding gegee het. Wat in Cordoba gebeur het, is 'n aanskouingsles vir alle multikulturele samelewings waarin die heersersgroep hom op die kulturele artefakte van 'n onderwerpte groep wreek — iets wat nie ongewoon is in die geskiedenis van die argitektuur nie.

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