

The Ka‘ba Orientations: Readings in Islam’s Ancient House

Simon O’Meara

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Every day, Muslims orient themselves to the Ka‘ba for ritual prayer, just as they avoid doing so when defecating or urinating. Every year, they flock to Mecca to perform “pilgrimage of the House” (*hajj al-bayt*), a Qur’anic command for all who are able (Q. 3:97). Even in death, Muslims face the House of God; those presiding over the burial will be sure to turn the deceased towards the Ka‘ba in their final place of rest. Despite the Ka‘ba’s central role in Islamic culture, it has remained relatively obscure in scholarship on Islamic art and architecture. In this inspiring study, Simon O’Meara seeks to understand how the Ka‘ba works in the Islamic world, “and what that work enables for Islam and generates for the Islamic world” (1).

The title may lead some readers to suppose O’Meara’s work to be a literary history, perhaps tracing descriptions of the Ka‘ba over time. This is not the case; he adopts an approach that is both disciplinarily creative and evidentially extensive. Inspired by Erwin Panofsky’s iconological method (applied to Islamic Art by Ernst Grube and endorsed by the late Shahab Ahmed), O’Meara “moves to and fro between the Ancient House of Islam and its representation in the myriad documents pertaining to Islam,” especially those dating to the early, medieval, and pre- and early modern periods (6). These “myriad documents” include the “pictorial and textual, Arabic and Persian, Sunni and Shiite, scriptural and theological, historical and geographical, legal and mystical, cartographic and cosmological, archaeological, poetic and biographical” (4).

In chapter one (“The Ka‘ba as Qibla”), O’Meara shows that the *qibla* was at the heart of a “deliberate play of analogies between kingship and divinity,” reflecting its more customary meaning as a “direction or goal deemed sacred” (23-24). From the Umayyad caliph Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Mālik (r. 96-9/715-17) to various Qajar shahs, rulers belonging to a myriad of dynasties were likened to the *qibla*, thus reflecting their place in the divine order. In some cases, this honorific was also rendered architecturally, especially in the case of the Abbasids but also in the Mughal period of India. The ruler’s audience hall was oriented against the *qibla* so that only they faced Mecca, and their subjects in turn faced them. In this way rulers at once benefited

from, and vied with, the *qibla*'s symbolic register (38). Another material manifestation of the *qibla* is in the central or earliest quarters of some Islamic cities. Garrison towns dating chiefly to the first hundred years of Islamic urbanism, among them Kufa and Basra, were oriented towards the *qibla* at their genesis, a practice which continued in a more limited fashion in the medieval period.

In chapter two ("The Ka'ba as Navel"), O'Meara argues that the Ka'ba has functions that are both generative and organizational. Geographical divisions of the world from as early as the third/ninth century display a centrifugal vector in which the world is ordered from, and umbilically tied to, the Ka'ba (46). Later *qibla* diagrams show "a Ka'ba-centred world in which the Ka'ba occupies the centre and the cities and localities occupy everywhere else" (46). In late medieval and pre-modern *mappi mundi*, the world is often represented as if uncoiling from the Ka'ba. This is significant, argues O'Meara, because early Islamic traditions represent the Ka'ba as the site of the world's generation. Moreover, early traditions hold that the corners of the Ka'ba gave their names to the regions of the world and that the Ka'ba's sides named the four winds. The Ka'ba is also at the center of diagrams representing Islamic cosmological tradition, highlighting its role at the heart of the cosmic axis and its connection to the uppermost, celestial Ka'ba, the "Frequented House" (*al-Bayt al-Ma'mūr*). Based on Kant's proposition that only bifurcated, bilateral bodies can orient space, O'Meara maintains that the Ka'ba has a world-orienting capacity precisely because it was conceptualized as this type of body (60).

O'Meara moves spatially closer to the Ka'ba in chapter three ("The Ka'ba as Substructure") by investigating why, if the Ka'ba is the Muslims' *axis mundi*, its many destructions have not occasioned apocalyptic fear and grief. He offers four explanations: firstly, none of the destructions of the Ka'ba have fit the signs of the apocalypse that are established in Prophetic hadiths. Secondly, the unearthly foundations of the Ka'ba are what count as the *axis mundi* and not what is built upon them. These foundations are the remains of the archetypal Ka'ba and have never been destroyed. Thirdly, in Sufism the Ka'ba is divided into two earthly forms: "the base, stone Ka'ba of Mecca and the noble, corporeal Ka'ba of the heart" (79). As long the corporeal is preserved, the fate of the material is less consequential. Fourthly, because the Ka'ba is as much an intellectual phenomenon as a material object, "it is insignificant if the material Ka'ba falls into ruin, because the concept-facilitating Ka'ba lives on" (79). In particular, the Ka'ba

facilitates abstract thought by having primordially structured, bodily derived concepts for that thought—for example, inside/outside, left/right, and front/rear. This latter explanation is perhaps the least convincing of the four, though O’Meara himself accepts it is conjectural in nature and almost solely reliant on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s philosophy of embodied cognition.

In chapter four (“The Ka’ba as Beloved”), O’Meara argues that a pilgrim’s performance of *ṭawāf* represents a temporary fusion with the Ka’ba, and that subsequently cleaving to the Multazam (the area between the Ka’ba’s Black Stone and door) or entering the Ḥijr (the space within the semi-circular wall to the north-west of the Ka’ba) upon completion of *ṭawāf* are supererogatory acts which express this unification by placing pilgrims at once inside and outside of the Ka’ba. In this analysis of the experiential dimensions *ṭawāf*, O’Meara relies perhaps too greatly on Ibn ‘Arabī’s account of his first visit to Mecca in 598/1202. However, he does cite, albeit briefly, other Sufi luminaries in order to show that Ibn ‘Arabī’s experience was not an entirely isolated one. Chapter five (“The House as Holder”) moves beyond the exterior into the interior, arguing that the Ka’ba’s emptiness of cultic content and near emptiness of material content can be interpreted as a void that is constitutive of the Ka’ba’s mystery. On this basis, argues O’Meara, the ultimate work of the Ka’ba is “signifying the place where no thing is, place-holding the symbolic order of Islam” (129).

Based on descriptions and depictions of the Ka’ba by travellers, pilgrims and miniaturists, O’Meara argues in chapter six (“The House as Dwelling”) that the way in which the *Kiswa* is hung signals when a divine presence is imagined to dwell within the Ka’ba. He observes that in Persian miniatures, a tucked-up *Kiswa* meant that the Ka’ba was “imagined to be divinely animated from within: an active participant in the illustrated events and a House full of celestial life” (157). O’Meara disagrees that the *Kiswa* may in fact be tucked up because they depict the Ka’ba as it was during Hajj season, or because the illustrated events took place during the Hajj. Even if O’Meara is correct, there may be a third reason for depicting a raised *Kiswa*: it emphasizes the Ka’ba’s role as a site of forgiveness in and of itself. Perhaps this is why it is always the Ka’ba’s door which is shown uncovered, with pilgrims gathered around it with their hands raised in supplication.

O’Meara’s argument that the *Kiswa* animates the Ka’ba in more real terms during Hajj season is more persuasive. He explains that when the

old *Kiswa* is gathered up half-way, it is perceived to be in the consecrated state of *iḥrām*, along with the pilgrims around it. The old *Kiswa* is replaced by the new on or very close to the third day of the Hajj, when pilgrims too come out of *iḥrām*. However, the *Kiswa* remains shortened, even if it is more elaborately hung, until the end of pilgrimage season, when it is finally let all the way down. In the intervening period, the Kaʿba was open for public entry, as symbolised by its new, raised *Kiswa*. O'Meara also argues that the *Kiswa* robes, not veils, the Kaʿba, since it traces and reveals its form, becoming like skin to the Kaʿba's body. It is thus honoring the Kaʿba, not hiding it. Nevertheless, it must be noted that pilgrims (including Ibn ʿArabī) often referred to the *Kiswa* as a veil. Perhaps the raised *Kiswa* in the days of Hajj suggested to pilgrims that the Kaʿba had lifted its veil, much like women were mandated to lift their veils in these days as per the rules of *iḥrām*. Similarly, the raised *Kiswa* post-Hajj might have suggested to pilgrims that the Kaʿba's veil had been lifted in order to allow entry into the structure.

Even if O'Meara's monograph is the first exclusively dedicated to the subject of the Kaʿba, his work brings together a wealth of individual articles and chapters dedicated to various aspects of the building and drawing from different historical and cultural settings in the Islamic world. Especially in his earlier chapters (1 to 2), O'Meara combines his own readings of early Islamic tradition with an impressive treatment of this secondary literature. In later chapters (3 to 6), O'Meara pursues more novel lines of enquiry, often through a creative disciplinary and evidentiary mode. While doing so, he continues to critique and develop theories found in existing literature. Considering the original nature of O'Meara's study, a more extensive concluding chapter may have been useful as means of bringing together his findings. Future contributions might consider examining representations of the Kaʿba in myriad documents from a greater range of historical and cultural settings in the Islamic world. O'Meara's pioneering study has paved the path not only for these future studies, but also for all studies of Islamic art and architecture that are grounded in Islamic culture and tradition.

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