The Muslim Artist's Conflict: Figurative prohibition in Islam

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Abstract

In most Muslim societies today, artists practice figurative art. However, figurative prohibition in artistic representations has been also debated. Personal choices will differ based on understandings of *Koran*, *Hadiths* and *Tafsirs*. However, some religious scholars argue that figurative representations are prohibited not only in Islamic way of life but also in art based on *Hadiths*, although there is no direct reference in *Koran* itself. This view suggested that taking a perspective based on only *Koran*, and permitting the use of figurative representations is not appropriate in Islamic tradition. Because for a normative Muslim, there are multiple sources, such as *Hadiths*, *Sunnah* and *Tafsir*; one has to follow when taking action based on Islamic belief system. This article investigates conflicted views regarding art especially figurative prohibition based on primary and secondary sources of Islam. The purpose of this paper is neither defending nor refuting figure-prohibition observed in Islamic belief, but articulating various and sometimes conflicting views of the phenomenon in its context.

Keywords: figurative prohibition; art in Islam; Islamic Art; Aniconism in Islam.

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1. The Artist's conflict: Figurative prohibition in Islam

Islam is a monotheistic, *Abrahamic* religion articulated by *Koran*, a religious text considered by its adherents to be the verbatim word of God (*Allah*). As for the *Koran*, Muslims consider it both the unaltered and the final revelation of God. Islamic aspects of art and questions about form and context in Islamic Art have been largely debated. There have been conflicting approaches about figurative-prohibition. Religion has been one of the core and defining characteristics of culture and usually has more influence on the cultural understanding and worldview than any other agents (Kottak, 2000). Western and Oriental, Christian and Muslim values, traditions, cultures, and understandings have come to a closer contact by the information age. While religion has been defined as one of the main distinctions of civilizations, art has been their expressions, representations and their public display.

This paper investigates a debated notion; *figurative ban* and *aniconism* in Islam. Islamic canon, philosophy, norms, way of life, and understanding of the belief system are all defining characteristics of Art in Islamic culture. Religious traditions have been built around values and religious fundamental principles, shaped by hundreds of years of religious and cultural practices. During history Christian and Muslim belief systems have been two distinct traditions and they created two distinct civilizations. Although Islam, an Abrahamic religion, is coming from and built upon the same belief system as Judaism and Christianity; Islamic belief claims being the latest, unchanged, the final and true religion. Accepted practices of art within Islamic rules and traditions should also be considered from public and societal perspectives to understand concept of art and related phenomena.

2. Sources and references of Islamic Belief

Judaism is the oldest of Abrahamic religions, and has direct influences on Christianity, and later on Islam. Although, Judaism and Islam are two distinct religions; we see the oldest references of aniconism and figure-prohibition in Judaic belief system. In normative Judaism, the rules regarding aniconism and artistic representations are rooted to *Shulchan Aruch* set by 16th Century Rabbi *Joseph Karo*. Today's understanding of *Yoreh De'ah*– Laws about Idolatry– is based on accepted codification of *Shulchan Aruch* and is consisted of eight paragraphs (Schwarzschild, 1975)*. Yoreh De'ah* includes clearly stated rules regarding representations. As the oldest Judaic historical record related to figural prohibition, we see the Second Commandment: *"Thou shalt not make an image of the moral subject!"* (Ex. 20:4-5 and Deut. 5:8). We have to remember that, Islamic belief system accepts *Moses* as prophet and does not reject *Ten Commandments*, this simply means: *Second Commandment* is an accepted norm and foundation and is the oldest reference of figure-prohibition in Islam, too.

Similarly, including other rules but not limited to a paragraph of *Yoreh De'ah* stating that making representations of sacred images including human beings, is prohibited. Kant and Hegel described Jews as a community of oral tradition that preferred abstract expressions and monotheism to materialism and possible idolatry of art objects and artifacts (Silver & Baskind, 2011). Basak (2016) mentioned the roots of limitations and the rules of Jewish art and aesthetics. These rules clearly have influence on Christianity and Islam. For example, Jewish artists preferred abstract expressions; similarly, Muslim artists preferred abstract, elaborated ornamentation and calligraphy as art forms.

For Muslims, the sources of belief are, verses from *Koran* that is considered as primary source; *Hadiths*, gospels that tell of the precepts of Mohammed; and the *Sunnah* (pl. '*sunan'*) which are the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, silent permissions or disapprovals of Mohammed, as well as various reports about Mohammad's companions; and finally, *Tafsirs*, or *Koranic* exegeses, which are detailed contextual explanations, interpretations of *Koranic* verses by respected Islamic scholars. These four records constitute a methodology for Muslim to find answers to the questions regarding not only Islam but also everything about life, existence, and *Allah*.

In a study Soganci (2006) summarized arguments about the figurative representation in Islam. As he pointed out there are two approaches by the scholars: one claiming that based on *Koran* which is primary source of Islam, there was neither reference to figurative prohibition nor a direct reference to figurative art in *Koran*; on the other hand it was mentioned in an indirect way in the *Koran*.

O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, idols [al-ansab] and divining arrows are an abomination, of Satan's work. Leave them aside in order that you may succeed. (The Koran, 1998: 5:90)

Based on Besancon (2000)'s work, Soganci (2006) stated that the idols mentioned are the stones of pre-Islamic Arabia, which do not seem to have been figurative. The Arabic word *al-ansab* in this verse means objects or representations used for worshipping, and it does not imply representations in general (p. 138). Soganci (2006) also pointed that according to Creswell (2002) there was no passages in Koran which forbids paintings as well.

Soganci (2006) also noted that according to Grabar (1973) aniconism in Islam was limited to religious buildings before mid-eighth century and figurative representations were not opposed except religious places. However, by the end of the eighth century the attitude widened to from religious contexts to almost all contexts (p. 138). This was almost two centuries after the prophet Mohammed. Soganci (2006) also questioned why Muslims preferred avoiding figurative representations starting by the end of eighth century.

Hadiths, also constitute another major source of principles in Islamic tradition and practices. For a Muslim; *Hadiths*, then *Sunnah* are typically described as 'the way to follow' in case of any doubt or confusion about verses from *Koran*. Whenever there is any doubt about an action, or there was no clear and/or direct reference in *Koran*; then a believer should follow Mohammad's route through *Hadiths* and *Sunnah*. It should be remembered that in normative Sunni Islamic tradition, *Hadiths* have great significance and that *Koran* is primary but not the single source of tradition. Muslim scholars' perspectives on *Hadiths* were also referred (Soganci, 2006), some of the perspectives mentioned are:

Hadiths were intended to discourage not artistic creativity, but idolatry and pride behind creating imitation representations of living things being created by *Allah* (Ali, 1999).

Banning figurative art from a point of view that representations are liable to be worshipped resembles in its absurdity tying up a tongue because it is liable to tell lies (Mohammad Abduh cited in Issa, 1977, p. 62).

It is illogical to claim that Islam opposes figurative representation, because anything that elevates the mind and develops through is recommended in Islam (Issa, 1977).

Islam encourages the pursuit of human expression in art therefore Muslim artists are free from person-made conventions and traditional restrictions on figurative representation (Sakilli, 2000).

And finally the perspective favored by Taha Jabir Al-Alwani: In unclear religious matters, people are caught between ultra-conservatives who interpret law strictly so as to forbid, prohibit, restrict the scope of what is permitted, and moderates who constantly seek to enlarge the scope of what is permitted, and restrict the scope of what is prohibited. The tendency of the contemporary reformist school of Islamic jurisprudence is to take the expansive approach as to what is permitted (Al-Alwani, 2000, p. 27).

Indeed, in a range of belief, there may be moderate and conservative approaches. *Riyazu's Salihin* (Nevevi, 1976) is a compilation of *Hadiths* of Mohammed and valued as an important religious resource. Nevevi compiled these *Hadiths* based on three well-accepted *Hadith* resources: *Hadisi*, *Buhari*, and *Muslim*. In his work, Nevevi (1976) assigned a chapter specifically about *creating*

figurative representations. These *Hadiths* mentioned are as followed: *(The numbers at the beginning are corresponding Hadith numbers)*

- 1710- Those who make idols (to worship) will be punished at The Judgment Day. *Give life what you made, create if you can*, then they will be asked. Their punishment will be longer because it will take time while they try to imitate what Allah created (p. 224). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1711- It is told that one day when coming from a battle, Mohammed saw an object hid behind a curtain which was illustrated (details of decorative illustration unknown), his face went cold and white then commanded his wife to remove the curtain. He added: *Hey Ayse, those who will be punished most harshly will be those who try to imitate what Allah created*, then Ayse took the curtain away, cut and made one or two pillow covers. (p. 224) *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1712- Those who make idols (to worship) and those who accept this act will go to hell. There, in hell, one punisher will be created for each figure they (artists) made and they (artists) will be punished. – *Ibn-i Abbas*, who reported this *Hadith*, says to person who claimed not having any skill other than being artist, "*If you have to illustrate, then illustrate things such as trees or landscape.*"- (p. 225). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1713- Whoever illustrates animals, will be asked to bring them to life and give soul to what they created; since they will not be able to do it, their punishment will be longer in the Day of Judgment (p. 225). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1714- Artists will be the ones who will be punished harshest (p. 226). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1715- Mohammed noted that *Allah* commanded: *"Who could be more vicious than those, who are willing to create like Me. If they dare, they should create an ant, or a tiny wheat from none, I don't see any!-* (p. 226) *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1716- Angels do not step into a house when there is dog, or animal figures in it (*except those hunting dogs and sheep*) (p. 226-227). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1717- When Mohammed was waiting for *Gabriel* in his house, there was a puppy hiding in the house, and Gabriel was late. When Mohammed saw Gabriel outside and complained about his being late, he replied: *"We, angels, do not go into a house when there is any dog, or figurative representations."* (p. 227). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Buhari and Muslim)*

- 1719- *Ali* once said I will command what Mohammed commanded me: Wherever you see animal representations eliminate them, and wherever you see a grave that is built too tall, demolish. (p. 228-229). *(Sourced back to Hadisi, Muslim, Ebu Davud, Tirmizi, and Nesei)*

Common views so far, might be differentiated from the perspectives of either religious scholars or persons who are involved in art. For example, when it comes to figurative representations in Islam, common view is mostly based on tradition. Islam was born in Arabian Peninsula in the Seventh Century based on its Holy Book *Koran*, which is addressed as *'The Words of Allah'*. As the information age brings prospects for dialogue between cultures; debates and controversial discussions appeared as natural tendency through communication. In today's art world, Western canon in aesthetics has been the authoritative measure and the imperious set of principles. Art forms are the major expressions of cultural identity including expressions of religion itself. Variations in aesthetical canons also are partly rooted to traditions that are shaped over time by cultural values, worldviews and philosophies. Conflicts between such as Christian and Muslim values and understandings have created controversies among societies and cultures. Aesthetical theories and views are also shaped accordingly within cultural perspectives; hence Islamic Art has its own theories and canon. It is clear

that the perspectives of informed aesthetes and scholars have diverged from common belief and traditional Islam. Religious traditions are built around the values, which are shaped hundreds years of religious and cultural practices. These practices and traditions are mostly seen as reference points that tell us about another religion.

During history Christianity and Islam have been two distinct traditions and religions that defined two major civilizations. Scholarly views do not necessarily represent conventional views of a tradition. They can contribute to the progress of a tradition when they become powerful enough. However, typically, tradition is more powerful since it is shared with quantitatively more members of a society. Traditional views usually define conventional practices even in aesthetical taste.

3. Pursuit of righteous verdict

Islam is not a single entity belief system in itself; there are various sects, which separate themselves from others by means of practices and traditions. The sects such as Shia, Sunni, and others are all based on *Koran*, however they diverged in terms of practices over history and have built distinct traditions. Nevertheless, for all sects and for all adherents, there are sources of their religious values and practices that are not limited to *Koran*. In Sunni tradition, *Koran* is the fundamental and the primary source. *Hadiths* are secondary sources but they are usually debated in terms of their authenticity; and *Sunnah* is tertiary in case of confusion for an act. *Mohammed,* the messenger of *Allah*, is the ideal Muslim and his sayings, practices, deeds or life style are exemplary for a Muslim. *Tafsir* is the Arabic word for exegesis or commentary. *Tafsirs*, or *Koranic exegeses*, are also principle resources for daily and religious practices.

The language and alphabet in *Koran* is Arabic. In Islamic belief, *Koran* is the only authentic holy book and there have never been changes or alterations, it is the verbatim words of Allah. The language of *Koran* is very different from contemporary Arabic. Thus, verses require contextual and historical explanations. There are four traditional sources for commentary of the *Koran:*

1. The *Koran:* The most respected form of *tafsir* is when one verse of the *Koran* is used to explain another.

2. The *Hadith:* The second preferred method of *tafsir* is Mohammed's commentary on the meaning or virtues of particular verses of the *Koran*, and those statements are reported as *Hadiths*. In famous *Hadith* collections, there are also passages about *tafsir.*

3. The reports of the *Sahabah*: The *Sahabah*, life companions of Mohammad, also interpreted *Koran*. If nothing in particular is referenced in *Koran* or in *Hadith*, the commentator has recourse to what *Sahabah* reported about various verses.

4. *Tabi'un*, are the next generation who learned from the *Sahabah*. As the next degree, the reports of the *Tabi'un* are valued. These people grew up with people (*Sahabah*) who had enjoyed everyday interaction with Mohammed, and had often asked about the meanings of verses or circumstances of their revelation.

In the latter approach there are numerous sources of interpretation, which include: Primary-foundational and secondary-supportive historical sources. The *Koran*, alone is the basic and foundational resource while the traditions of former prophets, based on established historical facts and the Scriptures of the earlier nations constitute the ancillary and secondary resource. The classical Arabic poetry and the text of the *Koran* are two linguistic resources that also can be used as foundational reference in ascertaining the meaning and signification of the remaining literal and figurative diction of the *Koran* and its style of expression. Reading *Koran* only from translation and following the literal meaning is not a suggested practice; believer should consider *tafsirs*, because verses may carry different meanings based on its historical and cultural context.

As one perspective, *Koran* is the only testament and there is no direct reference regarding figurative ban in Islam. Others disfavor this approach such as orthodox *Sunnis*, since they have to consider *Hadiths* as well. In fact, there are many other similarly disputed issues in Islam. Typically, scholars follow certain steps to resolve these matters. These steps include *Koran, Hadith, Tafsir, Sahabah, and Tabi'un*; respectively. There may not be direct reference in *Koran*, but there are *Hadiths* against the use of figurative representations in daily life and religious context both. In addition, *Sahabah* and *Tabi'un* reported in the same way.

As Soganci (2006) reported, Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, the president of the Islamic Jurisprudence Council of North America conveyed their stance in unclear matters as taking expansive and moderate approach (Al-Alwani, 2000, p. 27). On the other hand, traditionalist Islamic authorities favor to forbid, prohibit, and restrict the scope of debated topics. This is precautionary against any possibility violation. As typically suggested: *"If you have tiny doubt in your heart, you would better avoid it."*

Muslims ask for verdict *(Fatwa)* on disputed issues from religious institutions and scholars. *Fatwa* is a verdict concerning Islamic law. Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey, gave *Fatwa* as "not approving figurative representations in art and in daily life." Muslim could decide to act based on *Koran, Hadith, Sunnah,* and *fatwa*, and Islamic convention. Personal responsibility in actions is fundamental in Islam except *Fatwa*. *Fatwa* is a verdict for general reference and gives direction to many Muslims regarding a disputed matter. A scholar or an institution takes great responsibility when giving a *Fatwa*, because it means taking responsibility of righteous acts for many adherents. An artist could take personal responsibility and create figurative representations, but if pursuing righteous decision; one should follow progressive steps of verdict. Today, in most Muslim societies, artists practice figurative art forms and many Muslim artists do not even think about figure-prohibition with the exceptions of sacred figures such as *Allah* and *Mohammed*. There are many methodized views, understandings and sects in Islamic belief system. One of the major sects, *Sunnis* preferred progressive escalation method as explained. Other sects, denominations and communions have their own perspectives and understandings. These various views may conflict at times.

We can observe most artists' styles with characteristics from their cultures and religions. Art as an expression carry conscious and unconscious elements from cultural-societal identities and this contributes to an artist's personal style. Therefore, it may be a great conflict for an artist who describes his identity as Muslim. For Muslim artist the artwork you are creating is a part of your identity, and is limited and restricted with your beliefs. When your art is against your belief system, somehow you will be confused and biased in terms of your identity.

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