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The New Morabitun Mosque of Granada and the Sensational Practices of Al Andaluz

Oskar Verkaaik

The conundrum of beauty and religion is a particularly salient one for the community of Western Islamic converts who have settled in Granada, Spain.¹ Known as the Morabitun – the Arab word for the Almoravids who ruled most of Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries – this group of converts came to Granada in the 1980s where most of them have lived in the neighbourhood of Albaicin, located opposite the Alhambra with a view of the Sierra Nevada. Aiming to revive the Islamic culture of Al-Andaluz, they chose as their home a place of objective beauty, even despite the fact that Albaicin was a run-down, neglected and romantically dangerous part of the city in the 1980s that has been gentrified, tamed and renovated since the influx of the converts from all over Spain, from other European countries, the US and Latin America. Many of these new *Granadinos* mention the architectural splendour of the Alhambra and the natural beauty of the Sierra Nevada as an essential part of their lives as Muslims in Andalusia. Living in the shadow of the Alhambra, the former centre of what they perceive as European Islam, is part of their religious identity as converts. Yet, they are also concerned with the notion of Islam as primarily an ethical tradition and an inward form of spirituality that is cultivated by the believer's personal worship of God and his or her submission to the religious tradition. From this perspective, one is apprehensive of too much emphasis on aesthetic delight. If piety needs to be evoked by the outward beauty of architectural ornamentation, well-designed gardens or even snow-capped mountains, there is apparently something lacking inside. As the founder of the Morabitun community Sheikh Abdalqadir as-Sufi – born Ian Dallas – writes in one of his books, the doctrine of the oneness of God leads to a radical transcendence in which God cannot even be compared to all the beauty in the world (As-Sufi 2009: 33-47). How, then, should one reconcile this interpretation of Islamic doctrine with the aesthetic pleasure of living in the heart of Andalusian heritage?

This is not the only enigma Granada Muslim converts have to deal with. They are not the only ones who are attracted to the Islamic cul-

ture of Spain. They share the Albaicin neighbourhood with hippies and backpackers who gather around the Mirador de San Nicolas to listen to flamenco music, drink cheap beer and play with their dogs, while taking pictures of the famous hilltop on the other side of the Darro river. Classy tourists in search of the authentic Andalusian experience, which the large hotels downtown cannot offer, come to stay here in expensive, exclusive guesthouses while yuppies and artists renovate old houses and gardens, decorating them with Moorish tiles (*azulejos*) and woodwork. For Muslim converts, their own fascination for Al-Andalus comes dangerously close to that of others from whom they nonetheless need to distance themselves. They share with the hippies a dislike of capitalist consumer society, and both groups have in common a preference for a simpler lifestyle, but the Muslims reject the hippies' antisocial behaviour, their dogs and their drinking habits. Like the tourists and the artists, they are aesthetically attracted to the Alhambra, but at the same time Al-Andalus is more to them than cultural heritage alone – it is a cultural tradition they seek to revive and live. But how this desire differs from the tourist search for authenticity is not altogether clear, especially because a significant number of Muslim converts make a living in the tourist industry, selling self-made or imported pottery, woodwork, leatherwork or recorded Sufi music.

Muslim converts in Granada, then, cannot simply admire the aesthetic quality of Andalusian heritage and landscapes. Religious dogma and mass tourism force them into a level of reflectivity that stands in the way of unpretentious delight. And yet, they deliberately seek to live close to the Islamic heritage of Al Andalus in order to recreate a new Muslim lifestyle that they feel is intrinsically connected to Spain's Islamic past. Al Andalus heritage is central to what I will call 'sensational practices', that is, an aesthetically informed lifestyle through which the convert community creates a complex of bodily habits or 'habitus'. It is through these sensational practices that Muslim converts develop their Islam into an entire way of life, beyond mere religious doctrine, connected to former aesthetic traditions.

In this article I will look at the centre of the Morabitun community – a new mosque opened in 2003 – by asking how Granadino Muslim converts deal with these dilemmas. The new *Mezquita Mayor de Granada* is built on a prominent spot, just next to the Mirador de San Nicolas with its splendid views of the Alhambra and its around-the-clock tourist industry (plate 17). The gardens of the mosque offer equally panoramic views of the Alhambra set against the Sierra Nevada, and those tourists who want to get away from the hustle and bustle of San Nicolas come to take their pictures here and enjoy the tranquillity of the gardens. Built in the Mudéjar

style of the surrounding churches and convents, the *Mezquita* is hardly recognisable as a mosque from the outside (which is, of course, ironic, given that the Mudéjar style was a continuation of Islamic architecture under Christian rule), but the sight of clean-shaven men dressed in suits and ties who come to say their daily prayers here and stop to have a chat with fellow Muslims amidst the flowers and the fountains while checking their iPhones for their next business appointment gives the place a sense of everyday routine that is quite distinct from the heritage/holiday atmosphere to be found outside its walls. The mosque apparently creates a space in which the converts' dilemmas are at least partially and temporarily solved. Below I will analyse the new mosque as a creative and to some extent successful response to these dilemmas.

The mosque as a sensational form

Approaching the question of architecture from a perspective of problem-solving implies a departure from a representational approach that focuses on the meaning of architectural forms in terms of power and identity. From a representational perspective, a religious building is an 'argument cast in stone' (Mekking 2009: 12), a political statement by means of architectural form. It expresses power or represents a certain identity. Most studies on contemporary mosque design in the West adopt such an approach, either implicitly when they speak of spatial politics (e.g. Metcalf 1996; Sunier 2005) or explicitly as an alternative to approaches that portray architectural history in terms of temporal and regional styles (Roose 2009). What I would like to call a local concern approach does not at all deny the relevance of power and identity, but it does not assume these questions to be most crucial to all cases either. It rather starts by empirically exploring the nature of the local context in which a religious structure is built, what issues it raises and what concerns it seeks to remedy. The term 'local' here is meant in a relative and situational sense: the locality of a representative religious building that attracts a lot of national or even international media coverage will be much wider in scope than the locality of a village church or mosque. Power and identity are likely to play a role in all cases of religious architecture, but other concerns such as a consideration of religious doctrine or habitus may be just as relevant (Verkaaik 2012).

A purely representational analysis of the new Granada mosque would be rather straightforward. By choosing the Mudéjar style, the community

not only adapts to the local environment (as was in fact the city government's demand), it also places itself firmly within the Islamic tradition in Spain, presenting itself as a continuation to some extent of Al-Andaluz, as indeed its name – the Morabitun – also suggests. Besides, it is an affirmation of the essentially European identity of the Morabitun community as well as a statement that Islam is historically part of the European religious landscape. On one of my first visits to the mosque, the caretaker, clearly used to showing visitors around, pointed out to me the horseshoe ornamentation of the entrance to the praying room, narrating that this element, although now widely taken to be an essentially Islamic architectural feature, is in fact Visigoth and therefore pre-Islamic in origin. I later discovered this to be a statement about the quintessentially native nature of Muslim Andalusia. According to the caretaker, the Islamic culture of Al-Andaluz had developed out of an indigenous pre-Islamic past and had not imported its art and architecture from the Middle East. Although the Muslim kings originated from Damascus, he said, they had adapted to the local culture and developed it. At the same time, however, the interior of the mosque also makes pan-Islamic references, such as the *qibla* wall (that points towards Mecca) that is modelled upon the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Al-Quds (Jerusalem), calligraphy that is based upon the Topkapi palace in Istanbul, or wooden decoration derived from the Madrasa Ibn Yusuf in Marrakech (Robinson 2007: 268-9), all of which suggests the Morabitun's ambition to be part of mainstream Islamic tradition. In short, this somewhat eclectic mix of architectural references can rather straightforwardly be taken to identify the Morabitun as traditionalist Muslims with a strong sense of Spanish and therefore European identity.

All of this may be true and important, but it overlooks the enigma of aesthetic pleasure and religious doctrine that forced the converts into a deeper engagement with the mosque project than would have been the case if mosque design were a matter of representing a religious identity alone. This is an issue that some of the more perceptive studies of contemporary mosque design in Europe and the US are attentive to. As Jerrilynn Dodds has shown in a study on mosques in New York, American Muslims tend to reject the question of architectural design as religiously irrelevant. Time and again they told Dodds that Muslims can pray anywhere as long as the chosen spot is clean. As the mosque is essentially about spirituality and community life, its architecture is obsolete. Prayer, they argue, is 'an act out of time', 'in prayer all external concerns must vanish' (Dodds 2002: 65); hence, it is irrelevant to place, too. Especially the notion of the mosque as a sacred place is sometimes condemned as transplanting

Christian ideas about religious architecture into Islam (Eade 1996: 226). And yet, despite this contemporary Islamic iconoclasm, we find a strong preference for conventional architectural forms and decorative elements like domes, minarets, arches, calligraphic bands, mosaics and the like in the vast majority of new Western mosques. Some criticise this trend as a form of migrant nostalgia (e.g. Avcioglu 2007; Welzbacher 2008), whereas others see it as a religiously obsolete but socially relevant symbol of Islam in a predominantly non-Muslim society (Dodds 2002: 81-89). It seems to me, however, that such explanations simply accept contemporary interpretations of religious doctrine as reality, assuming that Muslims literally practise what they preach, thereby circumventing the real issue that modern Muslims in the West need to deal with the discrepancy they might experience between contemporary religious doctrine and certain aesthetic traditions. The only study that I know of that seriously engages with this dilemma is Akel Ismail Kahera's book on American mosque design, in which the author tries to develop a theory of mosque aesthetics from the theology of Ibn Arabi. For the latter, beauty is both one of the attributes of the divine (*Al-Jamal*) and the result of human creativity (*al-jamal*), both dimensions forming a continuum. From this it follows that subjective human creativity is not an absolute innovation, which, if translated as *bida*, does not have a positive connotation in Islamic theology but 'a synthesis of preexisting visual expressions' and therefore allowed or even desirable (Kahera 2002: 13). As I read it, this is an attempt to ground architectural practice and spatial experience in Islamic theology, creating a space for aesthetic practice within religious doctrine, but it is not an ethnographic exploration of how contemporary Muslims do or do not solve the problem of aesthetic pleasure and religious doctrine.

Put in terms recently developed in material religion studies, the question is to what extent it is justified to consider the contemporary Western mosque as a 'sensational form.' Birgit Meyer has recently defined religion as a 'practice of mediation' between 'human beings and a transcendental or spiritual force that cannot be known as such' (Meyer 2009: 11). Religion offers certain forms and techniques that make it possible to contemplate the divine that is not of this world, and it is only through these forms and techniques that we are able to get near the divine. In fact, Meyer seeks to dissolve the whole distinction between form and substance, as it is only in religious form that religious beliefs can be manifested. She coins these forms and techniques 'sensational forms' that constitute a 'religious aesthetics,' because of their affective impact on the practitioners (ibid: 13). Like an older anthropology of religion that emphasised the centrality of

ritual practice, Meyer shifts the attention from the cerebral to the sensory aspects of religious experience, asking how religious mediations invoke an ongoing engagement with the divine and the religious community. In the case of contemporary Islam, one can think of praying, dietary practices or dressing styles as sensational forms that create a sensory experience of piety (Mahmood 2005). From a perspective of reformist theology, it is a lot more controversial to consider the mosque as a sensational form. But if we consider prayer not merely as an act of the mind that places itself out of time and out of place but as a contemplative technique of the body in its entirety that allows for this transcendental experience, it becomes imperative to think about the sensory, and hence spatial, dimension of the ritual.

It is important to note that Meyer defines 'aesthetics' in Aristotelian terms as the sensory experience of the world rather than simply beauty. Much of the religious aesthetics that the authors in Meyer's edited volume talk about invokes sensations of the sublime or the habitual rather than the beautiful. When in this article I use the term 'beauty', I do not mean to refute Meyer's definition of the aesthetic. I rather do so for empirical reasons. For the Morabitun, as probably for a lot of tourists, the Islamic heritage in Spain is primarily described in terms of beauty, pleasure, harmony, order, geometry, peacefulness, etc. But in contrast to most tourists, Al-Andaluz for the Morabitun also stands for a past and a way of life that one seeks to revive by physical proximity and imitation. Al-Andaluz is therefore more than mere beauty or heritage. It is, as we shall see, an Islamic ethics concealed in beauty and sensory pleasure. At the same time, the public use of cultural heritage is diverse and contested, as Granada attracts many visitors who come to see the Alhambra. It is by taking Al-Andaluz as a tradition that is as ethical as it is aesthetic that the Morabitun distinguish themselves from the tourist search for Islamic heritage.

Muslim converts in Spain

The new mosque of Granada is the most prominent physical proof of the presence of contemporary Islam in Andalusia. It is also one of the first representative mosques in Europe established by Western converts. Spokespersons of the Morabitun, however, do not pride themselves for this fact. They rather insist that they are part of a much wider trend of conversion to Islam among native Europeans. The reason why this trend of conversion is given so little attention, they say, is because dominant

voices in the public debate always depict Islam as foreign to Europe. They see themselves as living proof that this commonsensical notion is false. Al-Andaluz, with its tradition of *convivencia* (coexistence, tolerance), is evidence that historically, Europe has been multi-religious. They see the expulsion of the Muslims and Jews from Spain after 1492 as a form of genocide or ethnic cleansing and the beginning of a long Christian effort to drive Islam beyond Europe's borders. They resist this attempt to obscure the past. For them, the new mosque is therefore not the result of recent globalising trends that bring Muslims to Europe but rather a milestone in the ongoing restoration of an original pre-1492 Europe.

The Morabitun of Granada number around a thousand families – a flexible figure because new converts constantly join in whereas others move out. They are but one among various groups of Spanish converts, but many of these groups originate from them. The Morabitun are an initially British Sufi group led by Ian Dallas, a Scottish writer and actor, who had been initiated into the Darqawiyah brotherhood in Morocco in the late 1960s and who later called himself Sheikh Abdalqadir as-Sufi (Geaves 2000: 142-145). Spanish travellers to the UK brought the Morabitun to Spain, where they founded a first community in Cordoba in 1976, moving to Granada in the early 1980s. Around the same time, in 1981, the movement initiated the mosque project when the city government offered them a plot in Albaicin opposite the Alhambra. At a time when popular resistance against Islam was still negligible due to the fact that there were hardly any Muslims in Granada, the municipality anticipated that a new mosque built in the traditional Mudéjar style would help promote the city's reputation as an exotic tourist destination. But the project was delayed by financial problems and growing resistance from local anti-mosque activists, among them several Catholic organisations (Roson Lorente 2001). Meanwhile, the Morabitun moved from being initially a movement engaged in Sufi mystical practices, such as the reciting ritual of *dhikr*, to a more sharia-based interpretation of Islam and a rejection of Western capitalist society. Many converts travelled to Syria and Saudi Arabia to study Arabic and theology at Islamic universities (*madrasah*). The Morabitun became more and more a closed, endogamous group which resulted in the emergence of a strict social hierarchy with a number of major schisms. Run-away groups settled in places like Orgiva (in nearby Alpujarras), Murcia, Sevilla and Almodovar del Rio (near Cordoba), whereas new convert groups sprang up in Barcelona and Valencia. At the same time, Muslim labour migrants from Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, Pakistan and other Muslim countries came to Spain, whereas the beach resorts at the Costa

del Sol attracted wealthy Muslim families from the Gulf region. There is, however, relatively little interaction between converts and migrants (Rogozen-Soltar 2012). Whereas migrants form their own local communities, converts are well-integrated into transnational networks of fellow converts, such as the global Nasqhbandi brotherhood, travelling and visiting each others' centres in the UK, Germany, the US, Morocco and the Middle East (Dietz 2004: 1093). This also explains why the Morabitun include many natives from European and American countries.

There are several factors that help explain the revival of Islam in Spain. At the beginning, there was the fascination for 'Oriental' mysticism in the counterculture trend of the 1960s and 1970s, which included Sufism. One American convert who has lived in Spain since 1979 recalled that he got in touch with Sufism in California through a Palestinian sheikh, not yet realising that Sufism was Islam. He travelled to Morocco and after his initiation settled in Spain. Like him, the majority of the first Spanish converts were young left-wing students, critical of consumerism and interested in spirituality.² The transition from counterculture Sufism to a more scriptural or Sunna-based form of Islam was accelerated by interactions with Syrian students and refugees who had come to Spain in the 1960s as a result of Spain's cultural policy toward the Arab world which offered students from the Middle East the opportunity to study at Spanish universities. These students founded the first Islamic centre in Granada in 1966. Syrian students belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood stayed in Spain as refugees, as Syria had outlawed the Brotherhood. These well-organised groups maintaining transnational links across the Muslim world successfully mediated for the Morabitun to get funds and arrange scholarships in the Middle East. They also criticised the Sufi-minded converts for being 'out of Sunna', warning them against heterodox communities like the Ahmediyyas (who built a mosque in Pedro Abad near Cordoba in 1982), inviting them to accept Islam as a discursive moral tradition (Arigita & Ortega 2012).

After the death of Franco in 1975, Islam began to play a role in the construction of a separate regional identity of Andalusia in the context of federalisation and secularisation. Under Franco, Spain had been a mono-confessional Catholic state, actively trying to 'castilianise' the various regions. Democratisation put an end to this by granting equal rights to religious minorities, a long process finalised in 1992 (Arigita 2006: 565), and allowing greater regional autonomy. However, the new constitution distinguished between two kinds of regions: those based on 'historical nationalisms' with distinctive cultural and linguistic features, and those

without such cultural idiosyncracies. Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country belonged to the former category, but Andalusia initially did not, partly as a result of the fact that as of the 1960s the Spanish tourist industry had promoted Andalusian popular culture (Semana Santa, bullfighting, flamenco and gypsies) as Spanish culture. In its search for greater regional autonomy, the provincial government did not only try to reclaim this heritage as essentially Andalusian, but also stressed the *Moro* legacy as a distinctive feature of Andalusia. Although Muslim converts reject this instrumental use of Al-Andaluz by non-Muslim politicians, their very presence in Andalusia has in fact endorsed these claims (Dietz 2004: 1094-5).

On a national level, too, Islam and the Al-Andaluz legacy have played a significant role in recent national identity debates. Since the 1970s, the left-of-centre PSOE has consistently stressed Spain's mediating role between Europe and the Islamic world. This also included a policy of dialogue with domestic Islamic communities and the affirmation in 1992 that Islam was historically 'well established' (*notorio arraigo*) in Spain. In this symbolically loaded year, half a millennium after the fall of the last Muslim kingdom of Andalusia, the government stated that the 'Islamic religion is one of the spiritual beliefs that has configured the historical personality of Spain. Our culture and tradition cannot be separated from the religious foundations that have forged the most profound essences of the Spanish people and character' (quoted in Arigita 2009: 225-6). As part of the same ceremonies commemorating the events of 1492, the Saudi-sponsored King Abdel Aziz al Saud mosque in Madrid – better known as the M30 mosque for its proximity to highway M30 – was inaugurated in the presence of the royal families of Spain and Saudi Arabia. We find the same sympathetic attitude towards Islam after the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) when Prime Minister Zapatero called for an 'allegiance of civilizations', a clear response to Huntington's infamous 'clash of civilizations'.

Such statements, however, are deliberately meant to counter a widespread notion of the Spaniards as an essentially Catholic nation rooted in a centuries-long war with Islam. Hence, at the same time as Zapatero was proposing an allegiance of civilisations, his political rival José Maria Aznar placed the terrorist attacks of 2004 in the context of the *reconquista*, suggesting that 'many radical Muslims' strive to invade Spain again (ibid: 232). Given its symbolic history, it is not surprising that Granada is not just a meeting place for Muslim converts but also the site where this anti-*Moro* sentiment finds a ritual expression in the annual *Día de*

la Toma, or Day of the Fall, the city's main festival when the conquest of Al-Andaluz by the Kings of Castile and Aragon is celebrated. It is an increasingly controversial festival, contested by Muslims and non-Muslims alike who seek to replace it for a *Fiesta de la Tolerancia*. These conflicts symbolise Spain's and Andalusia's ambiguous identity as a place where Europe and Islam come together and at the same time a frontier state against invading Moors.

Living like an urban bedou

Unlike the hippies of Albaicin, most Muslim converts are now economically well-integrated and self-sufficient, holding jobs in civil services or running private businesses. A significant number of them are active in the creative industry and the tourist sector as designers and constructors, musicians, ceramists, tilers or woodworkers. This is more than just a way of making a living. Consider Ahmad³, a carpenter who received a formal education in modern woodworking, but then began to study and practice the Mudéjar techniques that he found in and around Albaicin. Not knowing much about these traditional techniques at first, he gradually discovered their logic by imitation. Next he moved on to study the subtle woodworks of the Nasrid monuments that he had always admired for their dazzling ingenuity and their effect of making you feel lost in endless repetitions of criss-crossing patterns. To his surprise, he discovered that all these wonderfully decorated ceilings and doors were based on a simple logic. 'Pure mathematics,' he says: 'Once you are on to it, it is as rational as modern carpentry, only much more beautiful and inventive.' Now he makes a living decorating new private houses, or renovating old ones, in Nasrid or Mudéjar style. In times when business is slow, he makes small wooden boxes with inlaid patterns of various kinds of wood that he sells to tourist shops. Although he realises that his products are remakes, he does not feel that he is cheating on tourists looking for authentic souvenirs. Nor does he think that his work as a carpenter and designing woodworker creates mere illusions of a long-gone Islamic past. His aim and pleasure, he says, do not lie in the recreation of old forms as such but in learning to use the traditional craft. Employing and developing these old techniques as a carpenter has become a form of self-transformation. 'When I am at work, I feel close to that wonderful Muslim culture.' Besides, he considers his work to be of higher quality than the cheap, mass-produced, quasi-Nasrid columns with readymade arabesques, mozarabs

and Koranic texts that are used to decorate the often Moroccan-owned teashops in and around Albaicin.

What struck me in my conversations with Muslim converts in Andalusia was the centrality of the notion of ‘Muslim culture’ in the way they talked about their lives. For Abdul, a musician born in the UK, Sufi music has been the gate that led to his conversion. In the early 1990s he met a group of Spanish Muslims on his first hajj. Although he lived in Syria for ten years to study Arabic and the Sunna, he spent almost every summer in Granada before finally settling here five years ago. With his Granada-based music group, he travels a lot to Europe, the US, Morocco, Turkey and the Middle East to give concerts, but he now considers Granada his home. Playing Sufi music in Britain, he always felt out of place. In Syria he was so absorbed in learning that he hardly touched his violin. Syria deepened his religious knowledge, which he considers immensely valuable, but Granada and his return to music have reminded him of his first love for Islam. ‘The first cut is the deepest,’ he says, and what he calls ‘the spirit of Granada’ comes very close to that primary experience. ‘Granada is Europe and not Europe. It has got this wonderful Islamic architecture that was built to last a thousand years. My hope is to have an international Sufi music festival here. Granada is the perfect place for it.’

What Ahmad and Abdul convey to me is that ‘Muslim culture’ means more to them than just Sufi music or Nasrid woodwork. Music and woodwork are rather suggestive of a whole way of life that they associate with Islam. This lifestyle includes a certain rhythm of the day structured by the times of prayer, drinking tea in a coffee-minded and alcohol-addicted environment, eating dates, nuts and halal meat, sharing the Friday afternoon lunch in the mosque, or wearing clean and modest clothes. But given their personal interests and talents, composing Sufi music or designing Nasrid-styled ceilings happens to be their preferred way of engaging with this ‘Muslim culture’. The aspiration is twofold. On the one hand, making music or woodwork is a pedagogical or disciplining practice – an *Anthropotechnik* in Peter Sloterdijk’s terms (2012) – through which Muslim converts seek to create a religious habitus that has not been part of their upbringing. On the other hand, they also seek to revive this ‘Muslim culture’. Perhaps Miguel Ruiz Jimenez expresses this ambition most accurately. A sculptor and a potter who has built his workshop in a village just north of Granada, he makes replicas of the huge Alhambra jugs that he sells to the Gulf region. He has spent years trying to reconstruct the traditional pottery skills in order to make the 1.5-metre-high jugs. He has rebuilt Arab-type kilns big enough for the jugs. He has experimented with

various kinds of wood to reach the right temperature inside the kilns. But the point of all these efforts, he writes, is not to bring to life an art that was destroyed 500 years ago. Apart from the obvious commercial purposes, his aim is rather to continue, rather than duplicate, a tradition that was interrupted by war and expulsion. It is his objective to treat Nasrid art as a living culture rather than mere heritage. And although he himself is not a Muslim, his ambition is illustrative of the ways many converts in Andalusia engage with what they call 'Muslim culture'. It also shows that in Spain one need not be a Muslim to seek the revival of 'Muslim culture'.

A publication of the Morabitun entitled 'Welcome to the Islamic Capital of Europe' puts it this way: 'We, the Muslims of Al-Andaluz today, are not seeking the revival of a bygone culture and historical splendour, but rather the re-encounter with the essence of what it is to be human, the natural form of man: nobility of character and a society where justice prevails.' Still, despite the fact that the convert experience is inextricably linked to Al-Andaluz, there are various shades of meaning to the notion of 'Muslim culture', leading to debates and arguments that sometimes escalate into a schism. In Orgiva, a mountain town south of Granada, I talk to two converts, an American from Ohio and a Catalanian from Barcelona, for whom Al-Andaluz has strong ideological and political implications. We meet in a teashop (*teteria*) called Baraka, which serves Middle Eastern food and advertises courses in yoga, chakra healing and astrology for children. Despite this New Age feel, which is quite different from the Morabitun centre in Granada, Umar McBrien and Sheikh Nazim have more than just their personal spiritual wellbeing on their minds (even though they see the weekly trance-evoking chanting ritual of *dhikr* as their main religious practice, next to prayer). Their turn to Islam – both converted in the 1970s – is also an act of social criticism. Both bearded men, wearing robes, baggy trousers and a fez, describe modern society as a world of disorder, leading to social injustice and strife, ultimately heading for the apocalypse. They blame both the capitalist economy and the democratic political system for modern social anarchy. As Sheikh Nazim states, 'Our world is one of sexual freedom in return for financial slavery.' For them, Al-Andaluz stands for a just economic system without usury, based on the real material value of gold and silver rather than the virtual nature of modern money flows.⁴ It is also a sultanate that links sovereign power to social responsibility and honour, which they much prefer to a democratic system that puts power into the hands of the people without holding them responsible for their democratic acts. They interpret the apocalypse as the moment when modern society will be destroyed, after which the

sultanate will be restored. 'But we have no idea what that means,' says Umar McBrien: 'We have never lived in a system like that. We can only have trust.' The combination of their mystical practices and rejection of modern society has pushed them to the margins of society, as symbolised by their retreat into the Alpujarras mountain region, where they feel as though they are living as 'Moriscos', Muslim communities that continued to live in Al-Andaluz after 1492, taking refuge in the mountains, until they, too, were finally expelled in 1609.

Although the Muslims in Orgiva have left the Morabitun some twenty years ago after major disagreements with its leadership, what Umar McBrien and Sheikh Nazim tell me is remarkable similar to the ideology put forward by Ian Dallas alias Sheikh Abdalqadir as-Sufi, the Scottish founder of the Morabitun, who himself now lives in South Africa. In several books alternately published under both his names, he has circulated his sermons and lectures on Islam, which for him is as much a political and economic system as it is a set of pious practices. For him, this system that he calls Sufism is ultimately rooted in a certain way of life and mentality which he terms Bedouin or *Bedou*. A Bedou is not a slave of the modern economy, the international banking system or consumerism. Drawing on a mixture of German Romanticism, Sufi traditions and the sociology of Ibn Khaldun, as-Sufi defines the Bedou as someone who accepts the authority of the king as long as he is a just ruler, who is a responsible member of a spiritual community that transcends the tribal and familial, but ultimately listens only to his natural and eternal self that is part of divine creation rather than society. 'The Bedou,' he writes, 'is outside the urban system. The Bedou is cut off from the urban entity even if he is in it' (Dallas 2006: 275). He is 'an in-time creature somehow with a beyond-time contract' (ibid: 292). Like the Sufi, he will not submit to the kind of conformism that modern society demands from him but lives a life of permanent pious resistance.

Although his books are for sale in the *Mezquita Mayor de Granada*, they are hardly read as messages from a charismatic leader. His rejection of the modern financial system and his call to use only silver and gold for money, for instance, is completely ignored. Avoiding any association with the hippies on neighbouring Mirador de San Nicolas, most Morabitun members live middle-class lives, maintaining friendly relations with their neighbours. Some Muslim converts who do not consider themselves part of the Morabitun anymore but do go to their mosque to pray even dismiss the sheikh's admiration for Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt and Richard Wagner as 'fascist'. But his notion that being a Muslim entails more than the

performance of religious rituals and also assumes the self-cultivation of a certain mentality and lifestyle rings true to most of the people I talked with. In a community of converts, this is a highly reflexive search for an Islamic way of life. For most people it includes a sense of moral independence from non-Muslim society, a distrust of consumerism, certain moral obligations like hospitality and honourable behaviour, certain aesthetics, habits and everyday practices, as well as certain religious obligations like praying, attending the *juma* prayer on Fridays or partaking in Thursday night *dhikr* sessions. There are profound differences of opinion as to what extent being a Muslim is an implicit form of social critique or a political project, just as there is considerable disagreement as to how eclectic one can be in the formation of a religious habitus. Some, for instance, will condemn doing *dhikr* without accepting the Sunna as a mere New Age practice that makes you a part-time Muslim at best. What is clear, however, is that being a Muslim in Granada is in a way a total phenomenon and a mixture of moral concerns, aesthetic desires, everyday economic activities and social critique that some summarise as 'Muslim culture' whereas others, following the founder, call it a search for the urban *bedou*.

Designing the infinite

How, then, does the *Mezquita Mayor de Granada* feature in this quest for a Muslim way of life in Spain? To arrive at an answer to this question, let's first have a brief look at its more than twenty-year long process of completion. As indicated above, the municipality of Granada was initially more than willing to accommodate the Morabitun's wish for a new mosque and offered them a prominent spot in what was then a neglected and uninviting part of the city for sale. The *Sociedad Para el Retorno al Islam en España* was formed to buy the plot in 1981. But when local protest rose, arguing that there were already too many 'religious buildings' in Albaicin (Robinson 2007: 264), the demands of the city government increased. The building was to be built in a local Mudéjar style so that it would not stand out amidst the churches and convents of Albaicin. There were also limitations to the size of the building and its minaret, with the result that the mosque is considerably smaller than the neighbouring San Nicolas church. When the plot was prepared for construction, pre-Roman remains were discovered and construction work had to be postponed for excavations to take place. But more than official restrictions, local protest and archaeological surveys, it was financial problems that delayed

the building process. For a long time the plot laid empty. Rather than the location of a new mosque, it became a dumping place for garbage, and the Granadino Muslims continued to pray in private houses and, on Fridays, on public squares. Meanwhile, a prominent member of the community left the Morabitun and, after spending years in the Middle East, returned to his ancestral lands in the Sierra de Segura – a desolate, inland region east of Granada – where he built his own mosque and madrasah with the financial help of the Shah of Sharjah. Set against the dry mountains covered by pine forests and olive groves, the white-washed complex with its low square minaret, marble mihrab, colourful tile work and horseshoe arches makes a clear reference to Moorish architecture, even though it is not an exact replica. Invited to inaugurate the complex, the Shah of Sharjah learned about the financial problems of the Granada community and offered to donate the necessary sum. This allowed the Morabitun to finally complete the mosque, which was opened in July 2003.

Designed by the Granadino architect Renato Ramirez Sanchez, the complex looks like a smaller version of the neighbouring San Nicolas church, painted white, with a square minaret adorned with a band of Koranic texts in Kufic calligraphy. The praying room is on the upper level, accessible by way of the gardens adjacent to the Mirador de San Nicolas. On the ground floor, which has its entrance on a narrow passage, the Carril de las Tomases, there is a cultural centre with a library, an exhibition room, classrooms and offices. Simple from the outside, the interior is more eclectically decorated. Apart from marble work resembling the Dome of the Rock and calligraphy inspired by the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, the most remarkable element is the mihrab that is a replica of the mihrab of the Mezquita of Cordoba (plate 18), only smaller and – according to the interior designer Sidi Karim – more mathematically perfect, since it was designed with the help of a computer. The marble patio with its washing place features wooden mozarabs, lattice work and mosaic tile work, some of which were made in Morocco, that are clearly reminiscent of the Alhambra, visible through the windows of the praying room.

I meet Sidi Karim, the interior designer who is now in his eighties, in the cultural centre of the complex. He tells me that he was born in Murcia – his family name is Viudes – and has lived in Granada for 30 years. He describes himself as a Muslim who has studied Islam in the Maliki tradition, one of the four law schools (*madhahib*) within Sunni Islam. This introduction surprises me, since no Granadino Muslim I have met before has mentioned his *madhhab*, but Sidi Karim explains that he deems the study of the tradition essential at a time when Muslims in Europe are

struggling with modernity. He mentions the Salafists as an example of modernised Muslims who have lost touch with what he calls 'classical' Islam. Asked what he means by classical Islam, he says: 'Sufism. In other words: praying five times a day.' He laughs. 'It is as simple as that. Praying is the essence of Sufism. It modulates time. It anchors time.' He explains that the Muslim converts in Granada try to bring some order into chaotic modern society by anchoring themselves in prayer.

Inviting me to the praying room upstairs, he says that the real mosque is not the physical place but the people and their pious and charitable deeds. I take that as an apology for his work as an interior designer. The moment we enter his masterpiece, he downgrades its relevance. This may be a response to the disapproval of some purist converts who think that too much money has been spent on design and decoration. He must be aware of their criticism that a mosque is, or should be, nothing more than a clean place for prostration. For a while they stayed away from the new mosque, preferring to pray in the small mosque located in an old house downtown in the area where the Moroccans and Senegalese run their tourist shops and tea stalls. But over time, such disagreements have gradually diminished. Although Granadino Muslims still form various communities, they do tend to come together in the new mosque for Friday prayer now.

Sidi Karim shows me around, pointing out the similarities with the Mezquita of Cordoba, making me feel the softness of the marble, indicating the craftsmanship of various decorative elements. Sheer beauty, he says, had been his only criterion. He did not try to copy anything or make a statement. 'We are not looking back nostalgically,' he says. 'I have built a 2003 mosque.' When I comment that many of the elements look traditional to me, he corrects me: 'They are classical. That means timeless.' He explains that Andalusian art is traditional in the sense that it was invented and developed in a certain era, but it is also timeless in the sense that it speaks of the eternal. He compares it to studying Islam in the tradition of one of the law schools. These traditions are man-made and the product of a certain time, but they lead you to what is infinite and timeless in Islam.

The explanation makes me see the difference between my own secular perspective on Andalusian art and architecture and Sidi Karim's religious perception of it. In a secular worldview, nothing can be out of time, everything is historical, man-made and political, including – and perhaps especially – claims to infiniteness and timelessness. From such a viewpoint, Andalusian art is heritage and its contemporary revival can be interpreted as a range of comments on the present. As I have argued

above, for many Muslim converts in Granada, however, Andalusian art is more than heritage; it is a way of life that was interrupted 500 years ago but is now being revived. Sidi Karim adds another dimension to this. For him, there are moments and glimpses of the eternal in the course of time. The whole point of praying, Sidi Karim argues, is to create such moments. Andalusian art has developed out of a similar attempt to evoke a sense of infiniteness through visual means. Although the result of human creativity, it also speaks of a dimension that is out of time and therefore, perhaps, of all times. Hence, there is no discrepancy in calling a praying room that clearly and deliberately bears the traces of various historical Islamic monuments 'a 2003 mosque'. Imitation serves to create an atmosphere that is supportive of the timeless act of praying. The result is a 2003 interpretation of the infinite – a prayer cast in stone.

It now also becomes possible to see how Muslim converts distance themselves from the tourists in their admiration of Andalusian architecture. For although it is quite conceivable that tourists also sense a universal and timeless beauty in the Islamic heritage of Granada, there is a distinction between tourists and converts that becomes clear when we consider the possibility that most tourists may describe the Alhambra in terms of authentic beauty, whereas they will most likely use more ordinary terms like 'nice' or 'agreeable' for the new Granada mosque, provided they indeed like the place. This indicates that their aesthetic experience of Andalusian architecture is related to the auratic affect of heritage that loses much of its impact after imitation (Benjamin 1969). For Sidi Karim, however, the infinite dimension of Andalusian art is not in its aura of authenticity but in its capacity to recall and revive 'classical Islam', which for him does not belong to a bygone era but is of all times.

Sensational practices

Of course, some designers and architects may tend to rationalise their work in order to make the designing process – most often a contingent practice of improvisation and negotiation with various parties – look like the product of their artistic genius. Besides, over the years Sidi Karim has shown a considerable number of visitors around and in doing so he will have constructed a certain narrative about the mosque design that is nothing more than an authoritative interpretation of the creative process. Taking his account with a grain of salt, then, I do think that his account of the new Morabitun mosque as a space designed to ritually step out of time

resonates with the way habitual visitors of the mosque experience and talk about it. Several of the Granadino Muslims I talk with after Friday prayers relate how the 'classical' design of the mosque tends to have a deepening effect on the experience of prayer. Careful not to ascribe too much power to the aesthetic quality of the place, they do experience the act of praying in the Morabitun mosque as special compared to other spaces because of the sense of connection with the Islamic heritage of Al Andalus that it evokes. This suggests that Sidi Karim's story of the mosque design may be illustrative of a common way of experiencing the mosque shared by others in the Muslim community of Granada.

As such, his words may also show the limitations of a representational approach to mosque design. From a representational point of view, Sidi Karim's preference for the 'classical' art of Al-Andalus may be interpreted as a statement against Salafists or other Muslims who he considers overmodernised. And I do, in fact, think that there is some truth in that interpretation. Their origin in Sufi mysticism and fascination for Muslim culture tend to prevent most Muslim converts in Andalusia from deeply engaging with reformist Islamic trends, even though they have come to accept the authority of the Sunna. Although there are differences of opinion on this issue, aesthetic Islamic traditions are too dear to many of them to become purists. Hence, the Mezquita Mayor of Granada can indeed be read as an architectural statement against radical reformist tendencies in Islam. But Sidi Karim also lives in a community of converts in which the engagement with Islamic art is encouraged as a human technique to develop a religious habitus. In other words, the impact of these imitative practices and desires is not merely political in the sense that they serve as an identity marker vis-à-vis other Muslim groups. It is also profoundly religious and aimed at the spiritual transformation of the self.

In more general terms, I do think that a representational perspective has its merits. It is a welcome alternative to the art history paradigm with its roots in nineteenth-century historicism that explains architectural design in terms of epochs, *Zeitgeist* and regional variations, without taking the politics of the designing process seriously. A representational approach takes architects and commissioners to be rational, creative and political agents rather than mere children of their time and place. But applied to religious architecture, a representational perspective also tends to reduce religious architectural expression to a question of power and identity politics alone. In a period when Islam in Europe is already over-politicised, this may obscure motivations of a pious or aesthetic nature.

A final word about the question of beauty and religion. Obviously, this is not an issue that can easily be settled. It is rather a productive dilemma that shapes religious and artistic practices. What my conversations with the new Muslims of Al-Andaluz do suggest, however, is that it may be useful to make a distinction between sensational forms and sensational skills or practices. The new Granada mosque as a sensational form – or more broadly Andalusian heritage as sensational form – remains a controversial issue because of the doctrine of the divine’s radical transcendence, as explained above. Even Sidi Karim would deny that God becomes perceptible in human creations. God is, in fact, far too great for human beings to contemplate or to materialise. Despite the doctrine of the oneness of God, however, Islam does ascribe various attributes to the divine, and although it is accepted that human creations will never be able to portray the divine, they may evoke some of the divine attributes such as beauty or timelessness. Yet this remains a fiercely debated issue. It may, however, be less contentious to call the recreation of Islamic art and architecture a sensational practice. As I have argued, the development and mastering of these aesthetic skills is an inextricable and important aspect of the Muslim way of life in Granada and a method to immerse deeper in what it means to be a Muslim. In that sense, being a Muslim convert in Andalusia is a profound aesthetic experience.

Notes

- 1 I thank Marieke Brand, Elena Arigita, Annelies Moors and Jorada Verrrips for their comments and assistance.
- 2 Personal communication with Elena Arigita.
- 3 All names are pseudonyms.
- 4 See Nils Bubandt (2009) for a description of the Morabitun’s critique of modern capitalism and its call to a return to material money in the form of gold and silver.

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