Ritual Preparation for Artistic Production: The Spiritual Aesthetics of Spiritual Ascetics in the Abrahamic Faiths

By Peter Schadler

Abstract: While considerable research has gone into the Abrahamic faiths and their art, almost none has explored links among artisans in spiritual preparation for their artistic endeavors. This paper considers such links as may be found in ascetic practices of artisans, scribes, and craftsmen in preparation for their endeavors and the beliefs that such practices might impose on their future project, as well as divergences within those practices across the Abrahamic faiths. It is argued that in each of these faith traditions the customs and ascetic practices associated with particular artistic productions only follow the development of doctrinal rubrics and technical artistic requirements established by the receiving faith community by a considerable length of time; practical production and the doctrinal assessment of that production's technical aspects preceded efforts to control how the item was produced, and by whom.

The following serves as a preliminary to further much needed investigations into a host of related issues bearing on the ascetic practices of artisans, scribes and craftsmen of the Abrahamic traditions in preparation for their sacred and artistic endeavors. Indeed, these clearly deserve to be independent research areas, each with their own set of unique approaches. The theologies governing the three religious communities affect questions of what constitutes 'artistic' production on the one hand or 'sacred' production on the other, in which contexts these overlap, and so forth. A number of categorical divisions need establishment before a full comparative study can be undertaken.[1] Nevertheless, the origins of ascetic practices in preparation for either artistic or sacred art production with regard to all three faith traditions has received such scant attention that initial research yields immediate results.[2]

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[1] Questions about what kind of work counts as 'art' vs. 'sacred transcription', whether an artifact can be thought to participate in both categories, and whether these categories can be conceived of across religious boundaries all complicate any careful comparative study, some of which will be made obvious by what I say here. To give one example, the fact that Jews and Muslims have from a very early period in their faith traditions' histories guarded their sacred books and often refused to allow non-Jews or -Muslims from copying those texts, while Christians on the whole did not, already betrays a crucial difference in how these related faith communities perceived of their written texts. For the sanctity of the text in the Jewish tradition, see E. Tov, 'The Scribal and Textual Transmission of the Torah Analyzed in Light of Its Sanctity', in A. Moriya and G. Hata (eds.), *Pentateuchal Traditions in the Late Second Temple Period: Proceedings of the International Workshop in Tokyo, August 28-31, 2007* (Brill, 2012), pp. 57-72. For the sanctity of the text in the Muslim tradition, see T. Zadeh, 'Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Qur'an', *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* 129.3 (2009), pp. 443-66. For the quick pace with which Christians abandoned the scroll in favor of the codex, a format usually reserved for works of lesser import, see F. M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] Interestingly, some work has been undertaken as regards ascetic scribal practices among Buddhist monks of Japan. See B. D. Lowe, 'The Discipline of Writing: Scribes and Purity in Eighth-Century Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies,* 39.2 (2012), pp. 201-39.

In the main, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions concerned with the purity of the producer of sacred art in preparation for artistic endeavor arise on the popular level, and little documentary evidence from official or canonical sources testify to supposed needs for such practices, though there is material in more popular and deutero-canonical sources. Further, in considering the sources in these three religious traditions together, an interesting and important 'coincidence' emerges. Clear articulations of concerns for the purity of the practitioner, and his or her associated ascetic practices in preparation for artistic or sacred material production, emerge in our sources only centuries after concern for the technical accuracy of their correlative artistic products, despite what some of the later sources might have us believe.

For the great majority of artistic activities stemming from these three faiths plentiful examples exist of artisanal borrowing for the production of artifacts in each other's traditions. Early Arabic traditions have the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid (668-715) writing to the Byzantine emperor and even threatening him if he would not deploy Christian craftsmen to help build and design two of the world's oldest mosques, the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the Prophet's Mosque of Medina, while the famous tenth-century Mosque of Cordoba was, at the request of Abd al-Rahman III, completed with the aid of craftsmen sent by the Byzantine Emperor as well.[3] One of perhaps only three surviving synagogues from Medieval Spain, the Synagogue *El Transito*, which was built on the order of Samuel ha-Levi in the 14th century, contains inscriptions from the Qur'an, strongly suggesting, if not proving, the participation of Muslim craftsmen in its construction.[4] Meanwhile it has recently been shown that copyists of early New Testament manuscripts were certainly not always 'vetted' for professional accuracy, and their confessional credentials have similarly been rightly questioned.[5]

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[3] For a summary of the sources for the tradition, see H. A. R. Gibb, 'Arab-Byzantine Relations under the Umayyad Caliphate', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* 12 (1958), pp. 221-33. There has lately been some discussion regarding the authenticity of the sources. For my purposes here, however, it is enough that the tradition developed among Muslims that the Caliph asked for Byzantine craftsmen to help in the building of these two mosques, and that this was not seen as offensive by many Muslims. Sauvaget offers some examples of traditions in which mosque decoration by infidels is said to be forbidden, but Gibb rejoins how minor a tradition this must have been since the sources reveal no resentment to al-Walid's initiative. J. Sauvaget, *Les mosquée omeyyade de Médine: études sur les origines architecturales de la mosquée de de la basilique* (Van Oest, 1947), pp. 111-12. For the mosque at Cordoba, see H. Stern, *Les Mosaïques de la Grand Mosquée de Cordoue* (Madrider Forschungen, 1976).

[4] The first person to remark on this in more than passing appears to have been Jerrilynn Dodds. Since then, several others have referenced this peculiarity in passing puzzlement, but to date no one has offered a convincing explanation. See J. D. Dodds, 'Mudejar Tradition and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony', in V. B. Mann, T. F. Glick, and J. D. Dodds (eds.), *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain* (George Braziller and The Jewish Museum, 1992), pp. 113-31, for the initial reference, and J. Ray, *The Jew in Medieval Iberia: 1100-1500* (Brill, 2011), p. 39 for further bibliography.

[5] Aland speculated that the author of Papyrus 66, a near complete Greek codex of the Gospel of John from the second century was copied in a non-Christian Scriptorium. While this has been disputed by Royse, it remains reasonable among scholars in the field that other early manuscripts of the New Testament found non-Christian copyists. It has also been argued that the copyist of one of the earliest Latin manuscripts of the Bible was copied by a pagan. On this issue, see J. R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (Brill,

Thus in certain fields of artistry and craftsmanship, the borrowing of artisans and craftsmen does not raise concern in either typical canonical sources, or in general, more popular ones. However, the three traditions have sought to place limitations on the purity of their artists in a few specific areas. Jews have sought first and foremost to limit the identity of scribes who copy the Torah, and processes by which they work. Muslims have exerted control over both who could teach and practice the sacred art of calligraphy, and who could write a Qur'an, while Christians have tried to limit who could paint icons. That inscribing the Qur'an finds its proper analogue in the Christian iconographic tradition has been noticed before, but largely to focus on technical skills needed for the exercise, and in how the products themselves were received by the faithful.[6]

It was in these three religious types of productions that the most stringent efforts since the medieval period were made to control both the confessional identity of the practitioner, and his or her discipline, and so in these I will concentrate my analysis. Nevertheless, in at least the cases of Jewish and Muslim scribes, it must be admitted that sources stemming from high places of religious authority in those respective traditions could permit exceptions to the normative central requirements that a Jew write a Torah, and that a Muslim teach the art of calligraphy.[7]

Judaism

The first work of which we are aware to systematically document the regulation of Jewish scribal practices is the text of the *Masseketh Soferim* or *Hilkoth Soferim.*[8] This work is usually found in the manuscript tradition bundled in with a group of texts known as the *Massektoth Ketanoth* or "Minor Tractates of the Talmud."[9] In all cases scholars agree that the *Soferim* was compiled sometime after the final redaction of the Babylonian Talmud in the eighth century CE and outside of that canon, reproducing *Talmudic* traditions.[10] Most of the *Soferim* is concerned with the writing implements, preparation of the paper, ink, etc. One rule, however, sticks out in an effort to cover all questions regarding the identity of the scribe. Rule 13 of the first chapter reads: "A scroll of the Torah that was written by a Sadducee, an informer, a proselyte, a slave, a woman, a madman or a minor may not be

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2008), pp. 399-544. More generally, and supporting the view that Christians generally employed Christians to copy Christian texts, see K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters : Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

[6] A. Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (NYU Press, 1984), pp. 83-84.

[7] See further below for examples.

[8] For a modern English translation, see A. Cohen (ed.), *Minor Tractates of the Talmud* 2 vols. (Soncino Press, 1965), pp. 211-324.

[9] Scholars have traditionally given the eighth century CE as a date for this text, and locate its origins in either Babylon or Palestine. However, more recently it has been suggested that the first nine chapters of this work were written in Europe, and that perhaps the whole of the work belongs to a later period, reproducing, of course, earlier traditions from the Talmud. See D. R. Blank, 'It's Time to Take Another Look at "Our Little Sister" Soferim: A Bibliographical Essay', *Jewish Quarterly Review,* 90.1-2 (1999), pp. 1-26.

[10] Ibid. See also the introduction to the text in Cohen (ed.), *Minor Tractates of the Talmud* .

used for the lection. This is the rule: Whosoever cannot act in religious matters on behalf of the public is not permitted to write a scroll of the Torah."[11]

What is interesting about this passage, apart from the fact that it limits the confessional identity of a scribe of Torah for use in worship, is that it adumbrates material in the *Talmud* dealing with similar issues, while at the same time adding further categories of limitation. Here, the passage being summarized is from the tractate *Gittin,* a book largely dealing with the nature of documents and divorce. The *Talmud*, as it does so often, reports in *Gittin* a number of rabbinic traditions seemingly at odds with each other and interprets each in such a way as to harmonize the opinions of the Rabbis.[12] Here, the redactors of the *Mishnah* worked on the subject of those from whom scrolls of the law should be purchased and what their relative value is. In the course of producing their opinions, however, the rabbis debate the conditions in which a heathen may write a scroll on the one hand and/or under what conditions such a scroll may be read by a member of the community on the other. Removing further in time, nothing or perhaps nearly nothing unambiguously referring to the copying of the Torah is found in the Scriptures themselves. To be fair, it is often claimed that the reason early sources do not address questions found in later answers is that many of the traditions articulated in a later period were taken for granted in earlier periods. Yet, if this were simply so in this case, one would expect the *Soferim* to articulate more specifically, not less specifically in into which category the heathen falls, and why, under what specific circumstances a heathen could copy a scroll, etc. Instead, the heathen is altogether excluded by virtue of the fact that he is not able to act in religious matters on behalf of the public, and therefore according to the rule forbidden from writing a scroll. Another tradition on which one might dwell is the *mikveh* or ritual bath. *Soferim* makes no mention of the use or need for a *mikveh* at any stage of the scribal process, whereas later traditions require a *mikveh* either prior to writing the Torah, or at each inscription of the name of God, or both.[13]

Christianity

As I noted above, Christians seem to have been the least concerned of the three Abrahamic traditions to safeguard the confessional identity and purity of their scribes. Such was not the case, however, when it came to their images. The eighth century witnessed the Iconoclast Controversy in the East Roman Empire, initiating the first sustained treatises on the nature of the image. Here, however, the question of the *status* of the image was under consideration, and not the painter who painted it, and how he

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[11] Cohen (ed.), *Minor Tractates of the Talmud*, p. 216.

[12] B. Gittin 45b.

[13] While the *mikveh* certainly does feature in the Talmud, it does not appear in *Soferim.* I have not had an exhaustive search of the Talmud to see if there are passages linking the *mikveh* to scribal activity. One place where these two are clearly married is in the work *Kesset HaSofer*, a primer for scribes written by Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried in the 19th century. There, he reports that some scribes do not write the name of god unless they are in a state of purity and that others leave all of the spaces where they would write the name of god blank, immersing in the *mikveh* before filling in the name throughout the manuscript (ch. 10.18) See http://www.hasoferet.com/halakha-for-scribes/keset-ha-sofer/.

prepared for his craft. Interest in such questions as those came forth very slowly. Our earliest manuals dedicated to the work of craftsmen focus on technique, materials, colors, and so forth. Theophilus' tripartite manual on painting, the production of stained glass, and techniques for metalwork dates from the early 12th century, but we receive only hints of concern for prayer as it might be attached to the crafts.[14] *The Hermeneia,* an icon painter's manual written by Dionysius of Fourna between 1730-34 offers more material for consideration, and supplies specific prayers to be said before engaging in one's craft. It does not, however, go into much detail regarding the need for purity in the icon painter.[15] Additionally, it has recently been shown that Latin Christian theologians working in the Carolingian court, while in general agreement with their Greek-speaking coreligionists regarding the theology of images, did not enter into ontological discussion of the image or its justification in the eighth and ninth centuries, and only partly began to think in special terms about the cross in the ninth.[16]

Only in the 16th century, and in Russia, was the purity of the painter brought into question.[17] There, at the Council of Stoglav, several chapters were devoted to establishing the need for purity in the iconographer. Chapter 43 is the most often cited, and with good reason:

> It is fitting for a painter of icons to be humble and meek, and reverent, and not given to idle talk or laughter, nor to be quarrelsome, nor envious, nor a drunkard or murderer, but in all things to keep spiritual and corporeal purity with all caution…and to come to his spiritual fathers frequently for confession and in all things to be forthcoming, and thus act according to their instruction and teaching, to participate in fasting and prayer, and avoiding all shame and unruliness…[18]

The chapter goes on to further regulate and guard the purity of the iconographer in all his work, going even so far as to stipulate under what conditions he should be removed from his craft, and why. Less than another century would go by before a list of prescribed prayers and rules were produced by the Stroganov school for icon painters, in which the iconographer is told of how to pray while he works, how to keep silence, to whom to offer

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[14] Theophilus, *On Divers Arts*, trans. J. G. Hathorne and C. S. Smith (University of Chicago Press, 1963). See now also a recently discovered early Byzantine painter's manual dating to ca. 1355, which is, again, concerned primarily with technique. G. Parpulov, I. V. Dolgikh, and P. Cowe, 'A Byzantine Text on the Technique of Icon Painting', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* 64 (2010), pp. 201-16.
[15] Dionysius of Fourna, *The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fourna*, trans. P. Hetherington (Oakwood Publications, 1974).
[16] See T. F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 366-70.
[17] See further below for analysis of sources that point to earlier possibilities.
[18] I thank Professor Jack Haney for translating the Russian text of chapter 43 that I have used here. For a French translation of the same, see *Le Stoglav ou les Cent chapitres: recuil des décisions de l'assemblée ecclésiastique de Moscou, 1551*, trans. E. Duchesne (Édouard Champion, 1920).

prayer (the saint an iconographer is painting is usual), and how to ask the Lord's help in determining how next to proceed with his icon.[19] By the eighteenth century at the latest, the connection of the iconographer's purity to his craft had made its way to Greece (if indeed it had not started there). In the *Synaxaria* compiled by Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749-1809), we find the tradition that Lazaros Zographos, a ninth-century iconographer, persevered in "asceticism and prayer so as to prepare himself to transcribe his inner contemplation onto the images that he painted…"[20] Though it is not likely this tradition predates Nicodemus, it remains possible, as always, that traditions linking the iconographer's inner state to his iconographic production are much older.[21] Nonetheless, even presupposing a much earlier date for the generation of such traditions, their total absence from the early works of John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite strongly suggest that at that time the purity of the iconographer was of considerably less concern than it would be several hundred years later in Moscow.

Islam

As in the case with Judaism, Islam is traditionally aniconic, even if multiple exceptions exist in both traditions. This has led to an increased focus on the ornamentation of the Qur'an in Islamic tradition, and along with that, traditions involving the sanctity of the art of calligraphy and the preparation of the scribe needed in order to properly undertake the task of writing a Qur'an. Here again, however, we will need to wait several centuries before the most elaborate traditions concerning the purity of the calligrapher are expressed. Instead, the earliest traditions again focus on the technical aspects of calligraphy and Qur'an inscription. The kinds of materials used to write the Qur'an, what kind of script is used, how to prepare the pen and ink, and so forth all witness to early concerns for the technical accuracy of the craft.[22]

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[19] These rules were first printed in Russian as the *Stroganov Figurative Iconographic Patternbook* from a single manuscript, now lost, in 1869. It is thought, on limited grounds, that the Patternbook must date to prior to 1606, when the patron saint of the Stroganovs, Tsarevich Saint Dmitri, was canonized, as he does not appear in the book. A date in the early 17th century is not unreasonable, although one as late as the 19th century cannot be ruled out either. See C. P. Kelley (ed.), *An Iconographers Patternbook: The Stroganov Tradition*, trans. C. P. Kelley (Oakwood Publications, 1992), p. ix. For the list of rules for the Iconographer, see p. iv.

[20] English translation taken from S. Bigham (ed.), *Heroes of the Icon* (SVS Press, 1998), p. 88.

[21] I could not find such a tradition attributed to Lazaros, however, in the earliest witnesses to his life, the tenth century *Synaxarion* of Constantinople, or the eleventh-century collection modern Byzantinists refer to as *Theophanes Continuatus*. Similarly, the tradition cited by Tarasov that Isidore of Pelusium (fl. 4th century) wrote a letter to Eusebius in which he wrote that the painter should be pure and live a spiritual life with good morals, and that paintings "painted by the hands of unbelievers should not be accepted…" is of questionable authenticity. Tarasov does not cite where she found the letter in question, and I have been unable to find it thus far. There are over 2000 letters ascribed to Isidore, but the authenticity of some of these is in question. I am skeptical, however, that such a detailed concern for the purity of the painter would be exhibited at so early a date as Isidore. For the reference to the letter in Tarasov, see O. Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, trans. R. Milner-Gulland (Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 173-74 and 78.

[22] For an excellent introduction to these topics, see the recent work N. Mansour, *Sacred Script: Muhaqqaq in Islamic Calligraphy* (I. B. Tauris, 2011), which focuses on the sanctity of writing itself, and the associated script.

The *Fihrist* written by Ibn al-Nadim (d. c. 995) makes the case in point. Ibn al-Nadim, who penned a bibliography of all books of which he knew written before the end of the tenth century CE, devotes an entire chapter to language and calligraphy, which scarcely touches on the qualities of the calligraphers themselves.[23] Even so, from him we get indications that handwriting will become closely linked to the purity of the scribe. In a minor section on the Excellencies of Penmanship, we find the following two quotations: "Euclid (Aqlīdus) said, 'Handwriting is a spiritual designing, even though it appears by means of a material instrument… Al-*Naẓẓām* said, 'Handwriting is rooted in the spirit, even though it appears by means of bodily senses.'"[24]

Yet in the 16th and 17th centuries we hear the most profound connections made between the calligrapher and his sanctity. The Persian poet and author Qāḍī Aḥmad ibn Mīr-Munshī (d. c. 1606) wrote a work on Calligraphers in which he outlined his own path to improving in the art. At one point, he highlights how he became a calligrapher, and his ascetic practices necessary to improve in calligraphy:

After I had left the madrasa
None saw me return there.
I ensconced myself in a corner of my home.
And from the burning of my breast spoke thus to my wounded heart:
"O my heart! It is better either to say 'farewell' to writing,
"And to wash the traces of script off the tablet fo the heart,
"Or to write in a way that people should talk of it
"And entreat me for every letter."
Then I settled down in complete earnest and zeal,
In short, all day till nightfall,
Like a *qalam*, I girt my loins for practice,
Sitting on my heels.
I withdrew from friends, relations and companions
And finally received encouragement…[25]

He went on to write of fasting and other exercises undertaken to bring his writing into greater purity. He was followed in this tradition by another Persian author of the 17th century, Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī, who wrote a treatise called Ādāb al-mashq, which means, "Manners of Practice," in which he appears to be writing specifically to the novice

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[23] *The Fihrist of al-Nadïm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. B. Dodge (Columbia University Press, 1970).
[24] *Fihrist of al-Nadim*, pp. 19-20.
[25] T. Minorsky (ed.), *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise by Qāḍī Aḥmad ibn Mīr-Munshī* (Smithonian Institution, 1959), p. 111.

calligrapher.[26] He encouraged the calligrapher to pray for the benefit of the author, and according to Ernst, pays an unusual amount of attention to the need for inner concentration in order to achieve excellence in writing.[27]

In all three of these religious traditions, the sacred work of the practitioner follows a similar path: production of his artifact, followed by debate, discussion, and doctrinal articulation of the sanctity of the artifact by his co-religionists, only followed much later by the accompanying concerns for the production of the artifact, and whether the state of the producer has any effect on the sanctity of the artifact itself. The expression, "purity of writing is purity of the soul" was not seen until Qāḍī Aḥmad in the 16th century, and likewise in the case of Christianity and Judaism, the connection drawn between the product and its constituent producer took a far longer time to draw than did the one between the product and the faithful receivers of that product.

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[27] Ernst, 'Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy', p. 282.

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