

Book Review

Review of “A Vida Secreta das Cidades (The Secret Life of Cities)” by Mateus Soares de Azevedo

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“The Secret Life of Cities”, authored by Brazilian writer Mateus Soares de Azevedo, fathoms the unknown spiritual dimensions present in the culture, art and history of emblematic cities around the world. The analytical and contemplative work is carried out by the author in loco in symbolic cities belonging to six religious traditions – Sunni Islam, Shiite Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Christianity. The author's modus operandi is not that of the voyeur, the adventurer, or the collector of novelties, but rather that of the pilgrim in search of knowledge.

As for Dar al Islam, the book covers the more or less incognito history of four seminal cities: Cairo, Istanbul, Isfahan, and Fes (not counting the Hispano-Islamic Toledo, in Spain, of which we will speak later). Concerning the Egyptian metropolis, focus is directed onto three targets: the Islamic city around Iman Hussein mosque; the Christian city around the remnants of the presence of the sacred Family in Cairo during the persecution of king Herodes against Jesus Christ, more than two thousand years ago; and the Cairo of René Guénon and the Perennial Philosophy. In Istanbul, the book attention is on the two emblematic sacred buildings in the city center, the Hagia Sophia, built by order of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, in the 6th century, and the Blue Mosque, imperial mosque constructed in 1617 by Ahmed I.

With regard to Fes, the spotlight is on the influence of the various Muslim mystics and sages, known and anonymous, who shaped its history, including Ibn Arabi and Ibn Khaldun. Moreover, Fes is viewed as a kind of prototype of the traditional Islamic city, reflexing and refracting in urbanistic mode the metaphysical foundations of Islam. It offers a particularly propitious environment to embrace the needs and aspirations of the integral man, composed not only of a body and therefore of material needs, but also and above all of a soul and a spirit and, thus, of horizons that reach the infinite. “In Fes, the sacred could be captured in every part, it is so to speak in the air, one could not escape it”, as Frithjof Schuon noted in a letter. Fes embodies the history of a people and its tradition, with a sometimes erratic historical path, but also heroic and holy, as William Stoddart observed.

The chapter on Isfahan, Iran, captures the fascination this city produces in the visitor,

fascination whose cause is the empire of Islamic beauty that this city made with its refined architecture, art and culture. There, beauty reigns, and the principles of perennial wisdom are expressed with particular exuberance. "Beauty is the splendor of truth," as Plato taught. This concept is an important key to understand the mysterious beauty this city embodies, beauty that in reality comes from wisdom.

The city of Toledo, in central Spain, former capital of a Visigoth kingdom, has in its gothic cathedral, the primate church of the country, something that does not exist in any other church in the whole world. In the main chapel, at the entrance to the central altar, there is a statue of a believer from another religion, Abu Walid, in this case a Muslim! The chapter tells the whole history of this highly unusual feature.

Other pieces are dedicated to the unveiling of the extramundane origins of São Paulo, the Brazilian metropolis, which go beyond territorial occupation and commercial exploitation. The deep motives that link Itacerá (the mysterious "lightning stone" of the Indian chief Tibiriçá), which was the center of the Indian "campo santo" in which the city was established in an expedition led by Jesuit missionaries Anchieta and Nóbrega, who founded the city in 1554.

In the following chapters, we accompany William Shakespeare's "hermetic" trail in Stratford-Upon-Avon, and marvel at a symbolic study of the city of Basel, Switzerland, which witnessed the beginnings of the Perennial Philosophy of Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and René Guénon (1886-1951), whose works expound the traditional symbolism of different civilizations, in particular of Islam and Christianity, universal metaphysics and a profound and far reaching criticism of the materialist and relativist mentality of modernity. Other chapters cover the Moscow of the tsars and Eastern Christian mystics; the Kyoto of the samurai, geishas and monks of the Buddhist sect of the "Pure Land". Not forgetting Fátima (in Portugal) and Czenstochowa (in Poland), major European centers for Marian peregrinations and miracles.

Stone, cement and sand are not enough to support the existence of a true civitas. The city is a luminous undertaking of social mimicry of the Cosmos, and it is by deciphering its symbols that we can understand the unfolding of the spiritual in the historical. The traditional nucleus of a city usually has a sanctuary, temple, cathedral, or mosque as its center, which is usually the place where pilgrims go; it is from this original nucleus with centripetal force that the process of spatial population starts from concentric circles, where the ends cannot fail to communicate with the center. The city is seen as a visible, material and socially accessible sign of the Cosmos' secrets.

Sacred cities are unique human dwellings consciously built as a work of social art guided by a sense of the sacred. Cities built by human hands with the finger of God to praise the Sacred. Cities tailored to cosmography, the sacred geography, and not as products of an assembly line or fashionable merchandise. Such cities are not the fruit of chance, of self-centered, aestheticist desire or the result of collectivist planning, but of the will to record for posterity the memory of the city of God. Sacred cities stand out more for their spiritual and symbolic heritage than for their economic, political and intellectual capital. Each of these sacred cities has a hermetic richness that invites us to go beyond aesthetic sensations. In these cities you can access the treasures of ancient traditions, an extraordinary experience for those who live in the stone chaos of modernity. Sacred cities show that the needy soul cannot be satisfied by material prosperity alone. Just as man does not live by bread alone, but fundamentally by truth, justice and beauty. Sacred cities show that beauty matters.

Modern man considers himself superior to traditional man because he believes in "progress" and "evolution". That's why they always treat what's new and novel as

something better than what's traditional and old. And all social forms are reduced to ideologies and their individualist, collectivist, sentimentalist or rationalist superstitions. Modernity is marked by the absence of a sense of the sacred and ignorance of metaphysical principles, while traditional civilization is one that has its foundations in metaphysical principles transmitted by religious revelation. Religious revelation is a fundamental unveiling of existence that is expressed in all dimensions of personal and social life, in the arts, architecture, literature, clothing, morality, literature, etc. Every great culture is the personal and social expression of a religious revelation. We live life in modernity like the blink of an eye, time fades between our fingers, it's the feeling of life liquefying, while tradition conveys the feeling of perpetuity.

Traditional here does not refer to what is old, routine or superstitious. Tradition is more than the set of beliefs and habits replicated by social or legal pressure, it is a theoretical and practical wisdom whose foundation is uncreated and whose revealed principles have consistent and lasting consequences in all dimensions of human life and activity. The power of tradition is not a superstition, fad or retro trend.

In the terms of the perennial philosophy, tradition means the multidimensional continuity of religion in personal and social life. Tradition is not a mechanical repetition, but an organic gift. The traditional man is the one who applies metaphysical principles and spiritual values to the various individual and collective problems and issues of human life. This means that beyond beliefs, rites, symbols, values and wisdom, tradition is an organic totality, not a circumscribed *campus*.

A traditional society is not one that is "backward", "peripheral" or devoid of technological apparatus and rationality. It's a society where metaphysical principles and spiritual values are the north of life. There is no culture without cultivation, care and, above all, worship.

These sacred cities bring us the memory of God or the remembrance of the eternal. Cities built for sacred social interaction with God, the community as an expression of man's communion with God.

A sacred city is not an individualistic or group work, it is a social work of art in which geniuses, tradesmen, warriors, builders, workers, intellectuals, etc., work with the conviction that they are contributing to building something that reflects the city of God on earth, a social sanctuary with a view to the world to come.

The book combines historical, urbanistic, artistic and philosophical references with a personal account, seeking to record the spiritual and symbolic meaning of cities, their hidden soul, so to speak. Its focus is on deciphering the visible signs of the invisible.

A Vida Secreta das Cidades ("The Secret Life of Cities") presents abundant content for geographers, historians, artists, architects, urban planners, photographers, and for those who want to know where to start to know the secret soul of paradigmatic cities like these. It is an invitation to contemplate the great cities, from the West and the East.



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