

Abrahamic Mythological Universe

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Man lives, not directly or nakedly in nature like the animals, but within a mythological universe, a body of assumptions and beliefs developed from his existential concerns. -Northrop Frye¹

Introduction

The Abrahamic religions are the architects of an immense mythological universe. The sacred Scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the blueprints used to construct a multifaceted world. Composed of carved stone tablets, heroic patriarchs, glorious temples, bloody sacrifices, sacred prophecy, epic battles, colourful horsemen, arch angels and heavenly steed, this shared construction is an aggregation of the religions' Scriptures, histories, artifacts and architecture. The Abrahamic Mythological Universe is co-authored, yet the faiths view their creation through unique lenses resulting in three distinct interpretations. The study of the similarities and differences among the religions expands our understanding of their collective Abrahamic tradition.

The focus of this paper is on a drawing series entitled *Abrahamic Architecture*² (Baechler, 2013-2016). The series investigates synagogues, churches and mosques renovated for use by another Abrahamic religion. The co-authored monuments are unique in the history of Jewish, Christian and Islamic architecture and require additional study. *Abrahamic Architecture* drawings are produced using research-creation methods and interpreted here through the thought of literary critic Northrop Frye and mappae mundi drawings as a window on to the Abrahamic Mythological Universe.

Mythological Universe

In a lecture titled *The Word and World of Man*, published in 1976³, Northrop Frye discussed the concept of a "mythological universe" as a "vision of reality" that societies construct for themselves as a reflection of their concerns, hopes and anxieties. This idea was refined in the literary critic's late work including his last two books *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of 'The Bible and Literature'* (1990). Frye argued that the Christian Bible presents a "vast mythological universe, stretching in time from creation to apocalypse, and in metaphorical space from heaven to hell."⁴ Frye suggests that the Christian "vision of reality" is revealed in Western literature and built upon their Bible. The study of words, images, metaphors, language events and modes of language used in the Scriptures reveal the biblical foundation of Western literature. Frye argues that the Christian Bible is the key to understanding the Western world as it is fabricated in the work of contemporary poets.

¹ Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code*. (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982) p.xxviii.

² Baechler, Mark. "Abrahamic Architecture." ACS 6 Architecture, Culture and Spirituality Symposium. Trinity College, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON. June 2014.

³ Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.3-31.

⁴ Ibid, p.14.



Figure 1. *Psalter Mappa Mundi Recto and Verso* (c.1265 ce) London British Library, Add MS 28681 Fol. 9r and 9v.

Mappae Mundi

Mappae mundi are often included in medieval versions of the Bible and prayer books. In this context, the world maps serve as illustrations of the universe according to the Christian perspective. The Psalter mappa mundi (Fig. 1) is an example of this unique type of map as it illustrates the 'vision of reality' described in the Scriptures. The map was created in c.1265 ce and bound within an English psalter, a prayer book containing the Book of Psalms. The Psalter map is similar in structure to the Ebstorf (1239 ce) and Hereford (1285 ce) mappae mundi. The T-O schema locates Jerusalem at the center of a circular depiction of the world; Asia residing to the east of the Holy Land occupies the top of the map while Europe and Africa divide the lower half of the globe. Jesus is depicted at the top of the image flanked by angels presiding over the world. The Garden of Eden is located in the east; Adam, Eve and the Tree of Knowledge are illustrated below Christ; symbolizing the creation and judgment of the world. A blue river extending westward from the Garden flows into a brightly painted Red Sea divided by Moses. The Psalter map collapses time, geography, and mythology and displays the world as a composite of quantitative and imaginative dimensions. The binding of mappae mundi and the Holy Scriptures suggests that the drawing offers a unique window on to the Christian world that is not immediately obvious when reading the texts.

Abrahamic Mythological Universe

According to Frye, the Christian Bible can be understood as a small library of divinely inspired books that collectively form an understanding of God, a society, and its place in the world; a mythology. The Christian 'vision of reality' is discovered through a comprehensive study of Western literature, implying that a mythological universe is revealed through the aggregation and study of cultural artefacts. Mappae mundi are unique drawings that collapse time, geography, history and allegory to illustrate a mythological universe. Both Frye's literary criticism and mappae mundi drawings offer insightful references in understanding the *Abrahamic Architecture* drawings as a representation of the Abrahamic Mythological Universe.



Abrahamic Architecture No.3:1 and No.1:1 (Baechler,2013-2016) 8'-4"x 11'-3" Graphite on paper.

Abrahamic Architecture No.1:1 and No.3:1

The *Abrahamic Architecture* drawing series uses research-creation methods to reveal, investigate and exhibit co-authored Jewish, Christian and Islamic worship spaces. Research-creation combines creative and academic research methods; it supports the development of knowledge through visual investigations. The large size graphite drawings are created to reveal knowledge that may be inaccessible through traditional academic research. Additionally, the project is built upon the scholarly work of Frye, religious historian F.E. Peters⁵ and numerous architectural historians.⁶

⁵ F.E. Peters: *The Children of Abraham* (2004); *Judaism, Christianity and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation* (1990); *The Monotheists: Volume I and II* (2004); *Jerusalem and Mecca*(1986).

⁶ K.A.C. Creswell, Erwin R Goodenough, Carl H Kraeling, Richard Krautheimer, Michael White, etc.

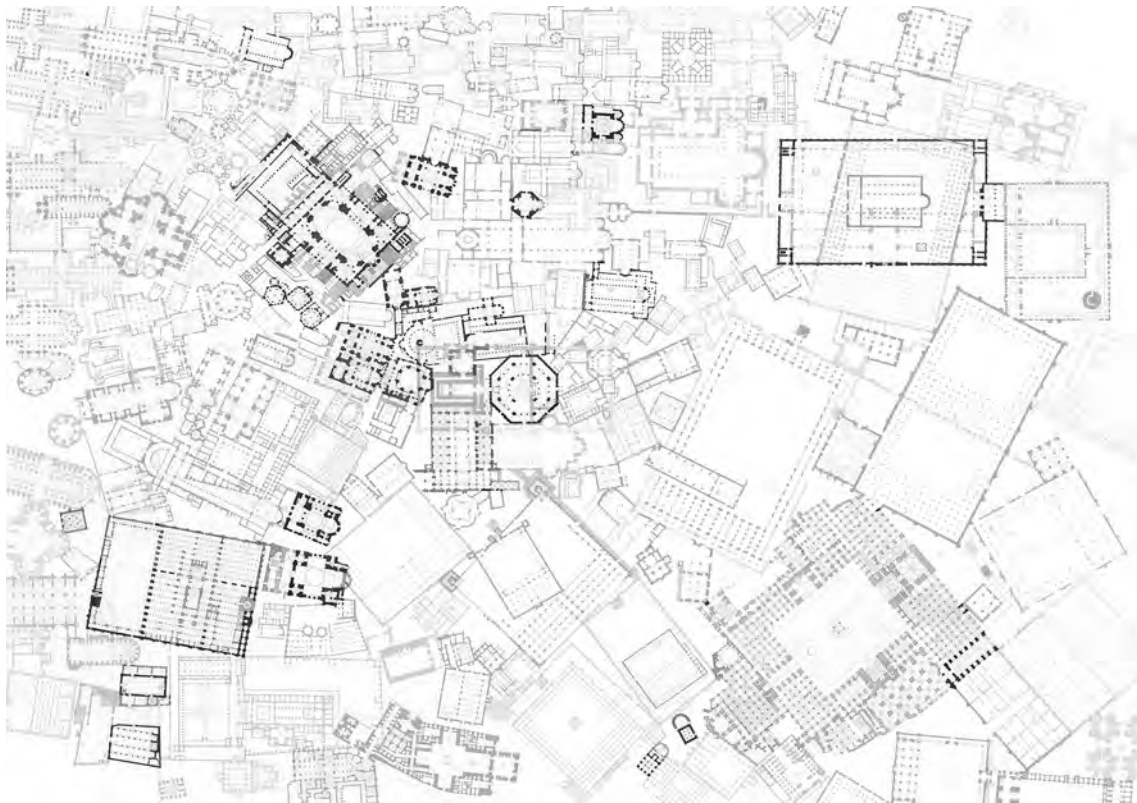


Figure 2. Abrahamic Architecture No. 1:1 (Baechler, 2014) 8'-4"x 11'-3" Graphite on paper. This reproduction of the drawing highlights 29 'Abrahamic' buildings that are included in Abrahamic Architecture No. 1:1 and No. 3:1.

The original drawing in the series, *Abrahamic Architecture No. 1:1* (Baechler, 2014), displays a collection of over 180 synagogues, churches and mosques constructed between 970 B.C.E.-1679 C.E. Within the composition there are 29 co-authored 'Abrahamic' buildings that appear as thresholds among the Jewish, Christian and Islamic architectural traditions (Fig. 2).

Abrahamic Architecture No. 3:1 (Fig. 3) is the second large size drawing in the series. The 29 'Abrahamic' buildings in *No. 1:1* are reiterated in *No. 3:1* (Fig. 2). These existing monuments are accompanied by approximately 100 additional examples of 'Abrahamic' buildings constructed between 970 B.C.E. – 1650 C.E. The scale (1:400), orientation and relative geographical location of the individual structures are portrayed accurately.

Drawing *No. 1:1* is intended to be contextual; it locates 'Abrahamic' architecture as a distinct type among Jewish, Christian and Islamic building traditions. Drawing *No. 3:1* advances the inquiry through the presentation of a comprehensive collection of exclusively 'Abrahamic' architecture. The graphite drawing is rendered to identify which religion built the particular components of each building. Jewish constructions are drawn using 2B graphite (black), Christian components are rendered with HB graphite (grey) and Islamic structures are represented with 2H graphite (silver).

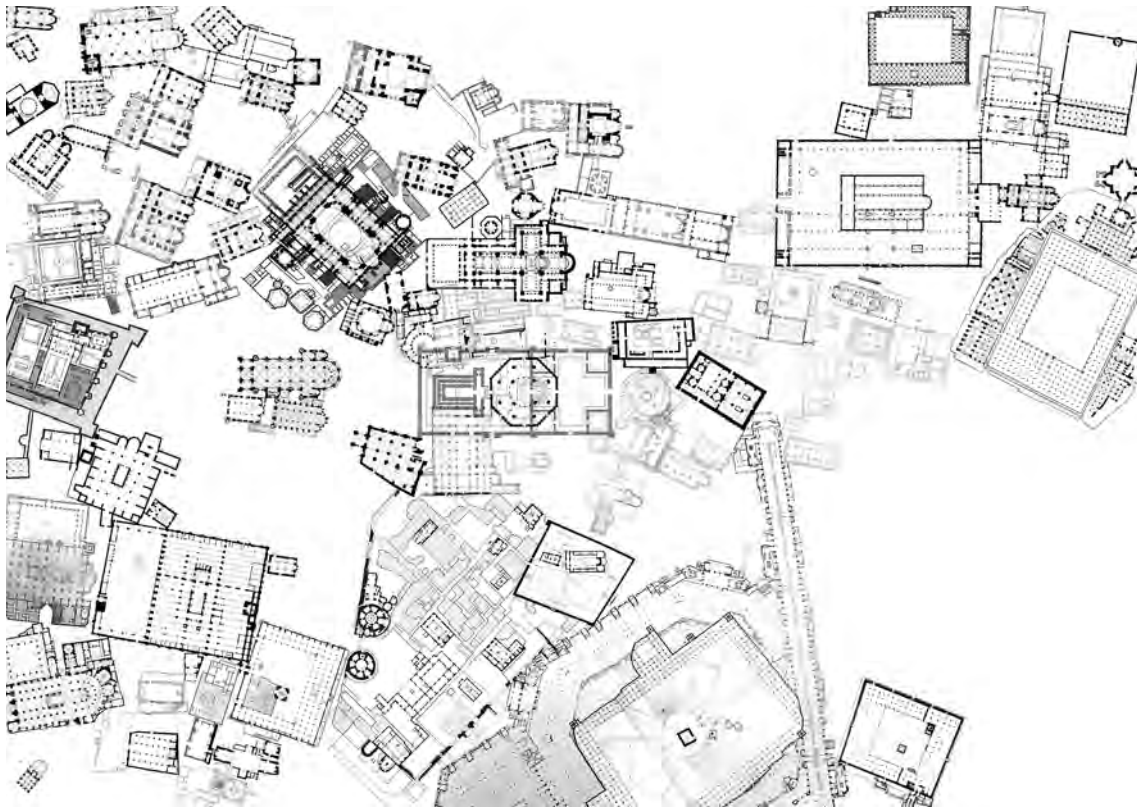


Figure 3. *Abrahamic Architecture No.3:1* (Baechler, 2016) 8'-4"x 11'-3" Graphite on paper.

Time and geography are collapsed in drawing No.3:1 as a means of aggregating 'Abrahamic' architecture. When the drawing is viewed closely, the collaborative histories of the individual buildings are revealed. Several buildings consist of walls and elements built by all three of the religions,⁷ while others display later additions to an existing structure.⁸ When the drawing is viewed from a distance, the collection appears to compose one building at the scale of a city containing numerous synagogues, churches and mosques. The identities of the worship spaces are both specific and ambiguous, for example, what appears to be a church was once a synagogue.

The *Abrahamic Architecture* drawing series is part of a project investigating the field of Jewish, Christian and Islamic architecture in search of interconnections. Drawing *No.3:1* is the latest development in the research and illustrates a comprehensive collection of co-authored 'Abrahamic' architecture as a unified edifice. When viewed through the mythological lens of Northrop Frye and Mappae mundi drawings a mythological universe is revealed. Residing at the centre of the composition is the Jerusalem Temple from which the Abrahamic Mythological Universe expands one addition after another.

⁷ Cave of the Patriarchs (Hebron), Temple Mount-Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem), Ibn Shushan Synagogue-Santa Maria la Blanca Church (Toledo), etc.

⁸ Hagia Sophia Church-Mosque (Istanbul), Church of St. Mary Panachrantos-Fenari Isa Mosque (Istanbul), The Great Mosque of Córdoba-Cathedral of the Assumption of Our Lady (Córdoba), etc.

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