

THE PERFECT MAN IN AL JĪLĪ'S THOUGHT

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In the great religions of mankind, the Founders or the Avatars are seen as manifestations of the Logos: they are seen as forms of a universal, impersonal reality that each religion identified with its own Founder or its particular Avatars. From the Christian point of view, the Christ is the Logos; from the Buddhist, the Buddha is the Logos, or Shunyamurti, the Manifestation of the Void; from the Hindu, the Avatars are manifestations of the Logos; and so on. In esoteric Islām, or Ṣūfism, Muḥammad has both a historical and transhistorical nature. Traditional exoteric Islām knows the historical form of the Prophet and has developed dogmas around him that are in general silent about his inner, universal character as Logos. It is Ṣūfism alone that has a great deal to say about this transpersonal reality of the Prophet. For Ṣūfism, the Muḥammad of history is the manifestation of this universal Logos, and indeed all the Messengers and Prophets and saints are manifestations of this unique Logos, more or less like the rays of the sun are manifestations of the sun.

This Ṣūfī view of the Logos-nature of Muḥammad is based on Qur'ānic verses and on certain ḥadīths of the Prophet himself. When he said, for example, "I was a Prophet while Ādam was still between water and clay," he was of course referring to his transcendent reality as the Logos that pre-existed the series of Messengers and Prophets culminating in himself as the Seal of the Prophets. The Ṣūfī teachings, basing themselves on this type of ḥadīth and certain Qur'ānic verses, see in Muḥammad the luminous Spirit at the center of the entire Creation: this is the *Nūr Muḥammadī* that radiates from this solar center to the extreme periphery of the created cosmic sphere. As Logos, Muḥammad is both central solar Spirit as well as the totality of the

Creation seen as an unimaginably vast sphere, and which encloses other, less spheres.

In all teachings on the Logos, whether in Islām or Christianity, there is always a danger of confusing the different planes of existence; the human and the spiritual levels thus become confused. A result of this is the anthropomorphic interpretation of the Logos, so that its impersonal, transcendent nature is lost sight of in due time. The Christ is indeed the Word made flesh, but the Word itself, on its own plane of existence, is not the same as the flesh, and is indeed infinitely greater and more sublimely real.

Something of that kind of confusion occurs also in Şūfism. Its teachings on *al Insān al Kāmil*, or "The Perfect Man," are a highly symbolic and complex ensemble of doctrines that evolved out of the Qur'ānic texts and ḥadīths of Muḥammad which speak of his spiritual nature. To Ibn al 'Arabī, the thirteenth-century Andalusian Şūfī master, is attributed the first written exposition of the teachings on the Perfect Man, which we find scattered throughout his different works. 'Abd al Karīm al Jīlī, the fifteenth-century author of the celebrated work called *al Insān al Kāmil*, has followed Ibn al 'Arabī in many details on the nature of the Perfect Man, but in others he follows his own inspirations. The two see eye to eye on the essentials, however. Moreover, much of what is considered to be their contributions to the eventual doctrine can be traced back to earlier Şūfīs and, in the long run, to Qur'ānic texts and ḥadīths of the Prophet. What they did was to give the doctrine on the Perfect Man a more systematic elaboration. In Şūfism, the doctrine on the Perfect Man is quite simply the esoteric teaching on the dual nature of Muḥammad as both man and Logos.

Like the corresponding teachings in Christianity on the Christ as the unique Logos for the entire world, the Şūfī teachings on Muḥammad see him as the unique Logos for the entire world. But there is an extremely important difference: the Perfect Man in Islām never assumes the nature of an incarnation of God, as does the Christ in Christian teaching. Allah, in Islām, has no associates, no peers, no offspring; for all the cosmic grandeur that the role of the Perfect Man entails, no associationism is possible. The Perfect Man is indeed an intermediary between God and man, but he is not the Absolute in itself. The Perfect Man is the mirror that reflects the divine Reality, but he is not that divine Reality itself. He is the entire Creation (*al Khalq*) as a reflection of God (*al Ḥaqq*), but he is not God. The doctrinal formulations on the nature of the Perfect Man are really mystical commentaries on the Second Shahādah, *Muḥammadun Rasūla-llah*: Muḥammad is the Messenger of God. Understood mystically, this sacred formula of Islām means that the entire Creation is the messenger or reflection of God.

For al Jīlī, the Perfect Man is Muḥammad. He is the axis or pole around which the spheres of existence revolve. He has always been and always will be the Perfect Man: he was the Perfect Man at the beginning of existence; he will be the Perfect Man at the end of time. There is only one Logos-Muḥammad in the entire cycle of creation. This Logos-Muḥammad is what the Ṣūfīs call *al Ḥaqīqah al Muḥammadiyah*, or “the Muḥammadian Reality.” Other terms and phrases are also used by the Ṣkūfīs to refer to Muḥammad in his capacity as Logos, and al Jīlī makes use of them. When referring to his function as the luminous center of the Cosmos, Muḥammad as Logos is called “the Intellect,” which is the first thing created by God, according to a certain ḥadīth; and when referring to the spiritual character of the Logos, Muḥammad is called *Rūḥ Muḥammadiyah*; and so on. In his impersonal nature, Muḥammad as Logos is a solar, paradisaic reality that is connected to all things in the universe by rays of light; but he is in particular connected to the Messengers, Prophets, and saints. This of course means that the Ṣūfī saints are directly connected, via their own spiritual rays, to the Muḥammadian Sun at the center of the Universe.

Indeed, one of the characteristics of the Logos-Muḥammad is its capacity to assume different human guises in different epochs. This sounds like the Hindu concept of reincarnation, at first glance; but al Jīlī warns us that this is not a reincarnationist concept. The Muḥammadian reality, as Logos, is like a unique essence manifesting itself in multiple forms — like the different Messengers, Prophets, and saints — in different temporal periods. According to al Jīlī, the Logos-Muḥammad manifested itself to him in the year 796 of the Hijrah, in Zabīd in al Yaman, taking on the form of his own master, al Shaykh al Jabartī. At first, al Jīlī did not know that Shaykh al Jabartī was Muḥammad, though he did know that he was indeed a master. Only afterwards, through intuition, he learned that al Jabartī was indeed Muḥammad. But this has to be understood correctly, for of course al Jīlī is not really saying that Shaykh al Jabartī was the historical Muḥammad come back to earth again — this is reincarnationism. Rather, what al Jīlī is saying is this: Shaykh al Jabartī, in his inner reality, was united with that solar Logos-Muḥammad. In his external, human form, however, Shaykh al Jabartī was merely one of the vicegerents of that Logos-Muḥammad, the latest ray of light falling on a human form in a long series stretching back to the initial creation of Ādam, for the Logos-Muḥammad pre-existed Ādam.

As the luminous Spirit at the center of the Universe, the Perfect Man is the origin of all existence from top to bottom. As both Center and Sphere, he receives within his mirror-like Intellect the divine commands of creation which are transmitted to the periphery of the Sphere. The Perfect Man is to God, therefore, like a mirror is to a person wanting to

see his own image, according to al J̄lī. It is because of his mirror-like, reflecting nature that the Perfect Man radiates in his center and throughout his universal cosmic spherical nature the Divine Names and Attributes. Just as God is the one who is Living, Knowing, Powerful, Loving, Hearing, Seeing, and Speaking, so likewise the Perfect Man reflects these Divine Attributes in himself, so that he also is Living, Knowing, Powerful, and so forth.

But that is not all: the Logos-Muḥammad contains within himself the prototypical ideas that later on will emerge from him as the angelic and archangelic domains, and indeed the entire universe, with its subtle and visible worlds, and in the visible world, the Mineral, Plant, and Animal Kingdoms. As the first thing created by God, the Logos-Muḥammad as cosmic Intellect transmits the divine creative orders and presides over the unfolding of the entire universe.

We must not forget that the perfect Man is not God. We cannot therefore attribute any divinity to him, even by reflection, for this would lead to associationism and take away the absoluteness that belongs exclusively to *Allah*, who is the One without a second or any associate. But if the Perfect Man is not God, in his innermost nature he is not other-than God. The reason for this lies in the teaching that all created perfections lose themselves in their infinite roots within the uncreated perfections of Allah. Therein lies also the ambiguous nature of Muḥammad: As the Perfect Man who mirrors the perfections of God, he is other-than God, and his perfections do not belong to him, for they are only reflections in his mirror. Nevertheless, those perfections in the Perfect Man owe their origins to their prototypes in God, and those prototypes are uncreated. The logos-Muḥammad is therefore both created in its manifestation and uncreated in its divine essence. While Christianity says of the Christ that he is “true man” and “true God,” Ṣūfism supplies a missing intermediate dimension by saying of Muḥammad that he is “true man,” “true intermediate Spirit,” and “true God,” so that the Perfect Man has an earthly, historical nature that can vary from epoch to epoch but that receives its definitive form in the person of Muḥammad; then, beyond that earthly nature, there is a vast intermediate realm wherein Muḥammad is the presiding Spirit; and finally, beyond the Creation, in his uncreated reality, there is the divine prototype of the Perfect Man. Al J̄lī, like other Ṣūfīs, can jump from one level within the creation to another when speaking of the Perfect Man; he can also jump from the created world to the uncreated reality of Allah. Just as there is a certain ambiguity between the historical and transhistorical Muḥammad in the imagery of al J̄lī and other Ṣūfīs, so likewise there is a certain ambiguity between the created Perfect Man as pure Logos and the uncreated Divine Origin of the Perfect Man.

What is the value, for Ṣūfism, of this theory on the Perfect Man?

Ultimately, the Ṣūfī concept of the Perfect Man offers to the would-be mystic an objective and subjective view of Muḥammad. Seen as an objective, cosmic manifestation, Muḥammad as Perfect Man is the origin, middle, and end of the universe. He is indeed the all-englobing Spirit at the center of the Cosmos and the Cosmos itself. His role is to manifest the commands of the Creator; and it is no doubt for this reason that Muḥammad means “the glorified,” for the Perfect Man is glorified in manifesting the omnipotent creativity of the Lord.

The subjective view of Muḥammad has to do with the inner, contemplative voyage of the mystic looking within his innermost being. It is in this inner mystical life that the contemplative mystic meets the Logos-Muḥammad as a universal Spirit. According to a ḥadīth, no one can meet God who has not first of all met Muḥammad. This can mean, of course, meeting Muḥammad in his Sunnah and therefore abiding by its forms; but it also has an inner, mystical meaning. One must first of all meet the Logos-Muḥammad as the Spirit and expand into its universal perfections before one can meet Allah, that is to say, before one can unite with Allah. It is no doubt because of this esoteric interpretation of things that we find in the numerous Ṣūfī orders various litanies on the Prophet.

Finally, there is a pressing question which al Jili does not answer, or rather, did not have to answer: Is the Logos really Muḥammadian in nature and are the Christ and the other Messengers and Prophets lesser manifestations of the Perfect Man who is Muḥammad: The answer is Yes and No. Yes, because just as there are paradises that are special to the Islāmic world that extends upwards from the earth to the Throne of God, to use a scriptural image, so likewise there must be something in the universal Logos that is definitely Muḥammadian in nature. In other words, the Logos, whether created or uncreated must have something Muḥammadian about it, otherwise the earthly Muḥammad would never have had any celestial roots and would have been merely a historical phenomenon without vertical connections with the Absolute. And from this point of view, the other Messengers and Prophets would naturally seem like emanations from the Logos-Muḥammad.

And No, the Logos is not exclusively Muḥammadian in nature, for it is also the same Logos that contains the Christ, Rama, Krishna, the Buddha, and so on. The Christ-Logos can also be seen, and with equal validity, as the unique Logos containing within itself all of the other Messengers and Prophets, who would then be seen as manifestations of the Christ, who said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” That is indeed the way the Christian could see things, if he so wanted to. This is no refutation of the thesis of the Ṣūfīs that the Perfect Man is Muḥammad,

for the Logos is an impersonal reality, as Ibn al 'Arabī has said, as well as a historical personality called Muḥammad. All religions, in claiming for their Founders or Avatars the exclusive right to monopolize the Logos, are simply transferring to the impersonal nature of the Logos the personal characteristics of the human nature of these Founders and Avatars. They are all partially right, seen in the light of comparative mysticism; they are altogether and absolutely right, seen from within their own traditions, where the Logos-Muḥammad, the Logos-Christ, and Logos-Buddha, and the others, play fundamental and indispensable roles in the inner life of the mystics belonging to the different religions.