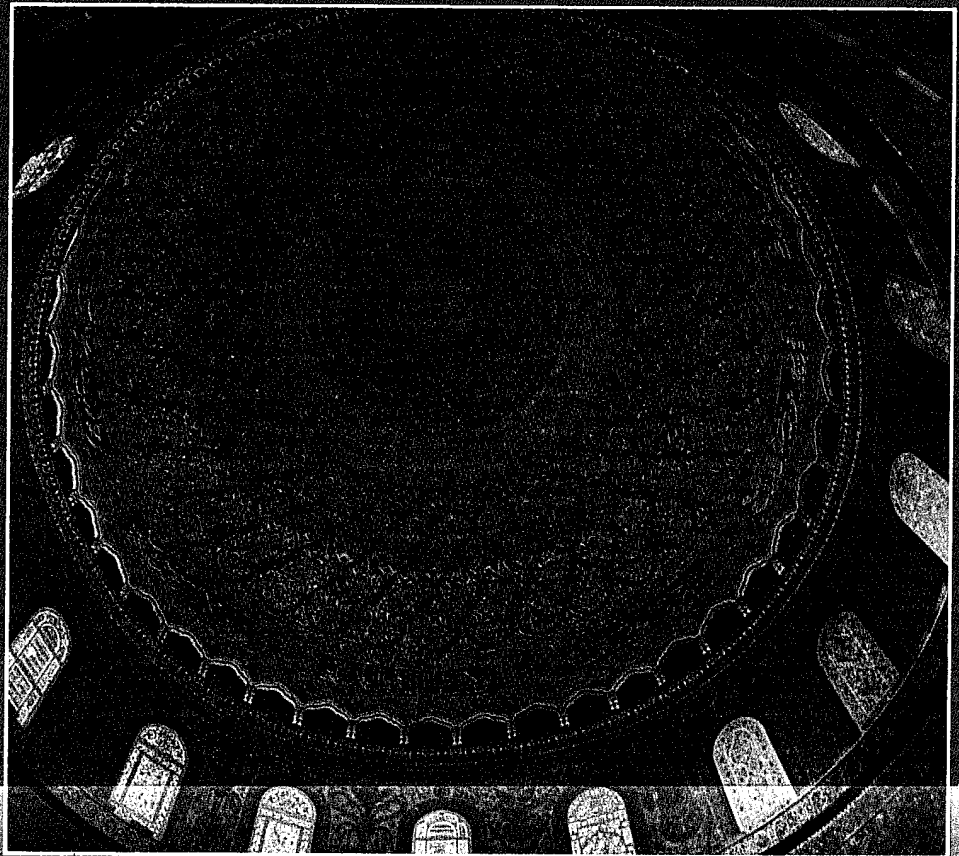


WORLD SPIRITUALITY  
AN ENCYCLOPEDIA HISTORY OF THE RELIGIOUS QUEST

# ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY MANIFESTATIONS



EDITED BY  
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BP  
189  
I85  
1997

1997  
The Crossroad Publishing Company  
370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017

World Spirituality, Volume 20  
Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Art Editor

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Printed in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Islamic spirituality : manifestations / edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

p. cm. (World spirituality ; v. 20)

Includes bibliographical references (p.

ISBN 0-8245-0768-1; 0-8245-1724-5 (pbk.)

1. Sufism. I. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. II. Series.

BP189.I85 1990

297'.4—dc 20 89-25272

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# Spiritual Chivalry

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE to discuss Islamic spirituality without dealing with that spiritual reality which is called *futuwwah* in Arabic and *jawān-mardī* in Persian and which can be rendered into English as "mystical youth" or spiritual chivalry. Both the Arabic and Persian terms (*fata* in Arabic and *jawān* in Persian) refer to youth or the Latin *juvenis* but have acquired a meaning related much more to the youth associated with the eternal spring of the life of the Spirit than to physical young age. To possess *futuwwah* or *jawān-mardī* is to be embellished with the characteristics of courage and generosity associated with a chivalry transposed onto the highest level of meaning from the realm of external action to that of the spiritual life, without, however, excluding the world of external action. Therefore, their translation as "spiritual chivalry" evokes more than any other expression this basic Islamic concept, whose reality has been manifested in so many domains, from the activity of the guilds in the bazaars to those of knights on the battlefield, from the world of Sufi contemplatives to that of sultans and viziers.<sup>1</sup> Much of the spiritual substance of the Muslim soul has been molded over the centuries by *futuwwah* and *jawān-mardī*, and to this day a traditional Muslim looks with awe, reverence, and trust upon a person who manifests this "spiritual chivalry."

## The Origin of *Futuwwah*

There has been a great debate concerning the origin of *futuwwah*. Some believe that the pre-Islamic Persian institution of *'ayyārī* became combined with Sufism to create *futuwwah*. (The term *'ayyār* means in general "keen of intelligence" and "brisk," but it was connected more particularly with organized groups that often rose up against the central authority of the caliph and his governors in various Persian provinces.) Others believe that just as there existed among the pre-Islamic Arabs the virtue of *muruwwah* (manliness), which consisted of courage (*shajā'ah*) and generosity (*sakhāwah*), so did the corresponding virtue develop among the sedentary

# Chivalry

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## *futuwwah*

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people during the Islamic period under the heading of *futuwwah*. Yet others consider *futuwwah* to be a branch of Sufism with its own peculiar characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The traditional sources, especially those of the followers of *futuwwah*, consider the founder of this spiritual chivalry to be the father of monotheism, Abraham himself. The term *fatā* or youth is used in the Quran concerning Abraham in the following verse: "They said: We heard a youth (*fatā*) make mention of them, who is called Abraham" (XXI, 60). This is in reference to Abraham's breaking of idols. The celebrated Khurasani Sufi Imam Abu'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī says in his *Risālah* (*Treatise*): "The *fatā* is he who breaks an idol. And the idol of each man is his ego."<sup>3</sup>

The Quran (XVIII, 13) also refers to the Seven Sleepers of the Cave (*ashāb al-kahf*) as young men (*fityān*), and they too have been considered as people of *futuwwah* in later Islamic works on the subject. Considering the "ecumenical" significance of the Seven Sleepers, who belong to the whole monotheistic family,<sup>4</sup> and the role of Abraham as the father of monotheism, it is easy to see why *futuwwah* always possessed an "ecumenical" character. Before modern times, the followers of spiritual chivalry, whether they were Jews, Christians, or Muslims, formed a brotherhood that went beyond confessional boundaries. The *Gottesfreunde* mentioned in Rhenish mysticism bear a striking similarity to the *awliyā' Allāh*, the "friends of God" of mystical *futuwwah*, and the ideal of the followers of *futuwwah* is very similar to what one finds in the poetry of Wolfram von Eschenbach.<sup>5</sup> Abraham, who separated himself from the seductions of this world to seek the One God, remains the father of this spiritual chivalry common to Islam and the traditional West.<sup>6</sup>

"Abraham made this group embark upon the ship of the *tarīqah*, the mystic path. He cast the ship upon the full sea of the *haqīqah*, the metaphysical truth, and made it land at the island of *futuwwah*, where the group established its domicile."<sup>7</sup>

Abraham was therefore the initiator of the cycle of *futuwwah*, which, according to later authors such as Wā'iz Kāshifī, was transmitted like prophecy (*nubuwwah*) itself. Abraham passed it to Ishmael and Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, and Jacob to Joseph, one of the chief exemplars of *futuwwah*. Then it was transmitted to Christianity and finally Islam. The Prophet of Islam received through the "Muḥammadan Light" the truth and power of *futuwwah*, which he transmitted to 'Alī, who henceforth became the supreme source of *futuwwah* in Islam for both Sunnis and Shi'ites. In one of the later treatises on *futuwwah* by 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī entitled *Tuhfat al-ikhwān fī khasā'is al-fityān* (*The Gift of Brothers concerning the Characteristics of Spiritual Chivalry*), the cycles of prophecy and *futuwwah* are compared as follows:<sup>8</sup>

prophecy ( <i>nuburwah</i> )	}	origin - Adam
		pole - Ibrahim
		seal - Muḥammad
<i>futuwwah</i>	}	origin - Abraham
		pole - 'Alī
		seal - Twelfth Imam al-Mahdī

### The History of *Futuwwah*

There is no doubt that historically *futuwwah* was at first closely associated with Shi'ism and also Persia. After 'Alī, it was Salmān al-Fārsī who was revered as the master of *futuwwah* and after him Abū Muslim Khurāsānī, the famous Persian general who brought about the downfall of the Umayyads. *Futuwwah* remained closely bound to the Shi'ite idea of *walāyah* or initiatic and spiritual power. Throughout the centuries, those devoted to the Twelfth Imam have been considered as *jawānmards* and *fatās par excellence*, as those knights who carry out the ultimate battle of good against evil and of the spirit against that externalization which stultifies and eclipses spiritual reality. Even after the sixth/twelfth century, when *futuwwah* spread to Sunni circles in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, it retained its attachment to 'Alī, while in Ottoman Turkey it continued to possess a strong Shi'ite color until the rule of Sultan Selim, when Shi'ism in general became ever more curtailed in the Ottoman world.

The utterance *lā fatā illā 'Alī lā sayf illā dhu'l-ḥaḥ* (there is no *fatā* except 'Alī and no sword except *dhu'l-ḥaḥ* [the famous double-bladed sword of 'Alī]) has been traditionally attributed to the archangel Gabriel, who transmitted it to the Prophet. This celebrated saying has echoed over the centuries throughout the Islamic world and is especially revered in the Shi'ite world but is not confined to it. The personality of 'Alī, at once sage and knight, contemplative and protector of laborers and craftsmen, has continued to dominate through the centuries over the horizon of *futuwwah* as it has over much of Sufism.

During the Umayyad period, *futuwwah* gained many adherents among the non-Arabs and especially Persians who had embraced Islam (the *mawālī*). It is known that Salmān, 'Alī's close associate, had contacts with the class of craftsmen in Iraq as did Abū Muslim, around whom an extensive literature grew during later centuries when he became one of the heroes of *futuwwah*. Despite the decadence of certain forms of *futuwwah* in the

