



BRILL

# Metaphysics of Muhammad

*The Nur Muhammad from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765)  
to Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 672/1274)*

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the development of the theme of the “Light of Muḥammad” (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadi*) or the “Muḥammadan Reality” (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*) among several Shi'i and Sufi thinkers through the seventh/thirteenth century. These thinkers include Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (early to mid 4th/10th century), the Ismaili *dā'īs* Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) and Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt (d. 526/1131), Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274). I argue that the “Light of Muḥammad” as a theological and metaphysical idea evolved historically through three distinct but cumulative phases of conceptualization: mytho-cosmological narrative, Neoplatonization, and ontological theophanization. Through these developments, the theological status of the Light of Muḥammad underwent a gradual but decisive shift from being reckoned as the first spiritual creation of God in the early period to being revered as the ontological self-manifestation of God in later periods.

## Keywords

*ḥaqīqa* – Ibn al-'Arabī – intellect – Ismaili – Muḥammad – Neoplatonism – *nūr* – Shiism – Sufism – Ṭūsī – Tustarī – Muḥammadan Reality – Muḥammadan Light

## 1 Introduction

The Prophet Muḥammad has held a central place in Islamic thought and piety throughout history and across multiple Muslim communities of diverse

spiritual affiliations. The myriad of ways that Muslims understand and portray the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad testifies to the diversity of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural expressions of historical Islam.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this fact was initially ignored by many Western scholars of Islam and commonly held perceptions of Islamic belief among contemporary audiences, for whom the normative status of the Prophet Muḥammad precludes any notion of divine qualities or cosmic authority.<sup>2</sup> In such presentations, one finds an emphasis on the humanity and passivity of the Prophet before the all-powerful God of the Qur'an as the cardinal element of Islamic monotheism. The pervasiveness of this common refrain—that Muslims in general view Muḥammad as a mere mortal and ascribe neither divinity nor devotional veneration to him—can be validly challenged on the basis of historical Muslim cosmological understandings of the Prophet.

Across time and space, Muslim conceptions of Muḥammad have been constructed through a vast array of theological and historical perspectives through a number of literary discourses including biographical literature, *ḥadīth*, hagiographical literature, Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), philosophical theology (*kalām*), peripatetic philosophy (*falsafa*), and Sufi devotional and philosophical traditions. Each of these discourses have laid emphasis on particular functions of the Prophet over others. Muslim visions and depictions of Muḥammad are

1 For the diversity of portrayals of Muḥammad, see Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Christiane Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One: Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

2 Zareena Grewal, *Islam as a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 38: “In sum, although Muslims believe Muḥammad was human and not divine, his exemplary life shares divine authority with the Quran.” Yahya Michot, “Revelation”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 185–7: “If the Prophet is so important in the eyes of the Muslims, it is due to his divine election, to his total humility as conveyer of God's speech, and to his perfect, paradigmatic implementation of this message, not because he partakes in its production. In this respect, apart from some modernists, today's Sunnis are still convinced that, in this extraordinary intervention of the transcendent in human history signified by sending down the Qur'an to Muḥammad, the part played by God is worthy of infinitely greater consideration than that played by His Prophet ... Someone believing in the power of ideas to mould the course of history should not underestimate the consequences that the traditional Sunni view of the Qur'an as divine speech, and of the role of the Prophet in its conveying as that of a *causa serva* only, had on the shaping of Muslim societies.” Hans Kung, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 94: “However, the person of the Prophet is completely subordinate to his prophetic office: there is not the slightest indication in the Qur'an that Muḥammad might be the object of veneration, even worship. In one of four passages in which the Qur'an mentions the name of Muḥammad, there is an explicit stress on his mortality.”

inspired, in large part, by the Quranic presentation of the Prophet's roles, duties, and mandates. The Qur'an actually presents the Prophet Muḥammad as a multi-faceted figure: he is, at once, the proclaimer of inimitable revelatory recitations concerning God's Signs, a lawgiver, an exemplar of piety, a statesman and military leader, the purifier of his followers, the prime instructor of his community, a manifest evidence of God, a model for spiritual life, God's vicegerent commanding fealty and obedience among human beings, an intercessor between God and humanity, etc. A summary of the Quranic depiction of Muḥammad's status and functions from a synchronic perspective is provided in Figure 1 below:

#### Messenger of God

- ✓ An honourable Messenger (*rasūl karīm*) (69:40; 81:19–21)
- ✓ Recites the Signs (*āyāt*) of God (2:151, 62:2; 3:164)

#### All-Encompassing Authority

- ✓ Commands the lawful and forbids the wrong (7:157)
- ✓ The judge of the Believers (4:65; 4:105; 24:51; 33:36)
- ✓ He who gives their allegiance (*bay'ā*) to the Prophet has given it to God (48:10)
- ✓ He who obeys the Messenger, obeys God (4:80; 4:64)
- ✓ Holds more authority (*awlā*) over the Believers than their own souls (33:6)
- ✓ The lord-guardian (*walī*) of the Believers (5:55)

#### Spiritual and Ethical Teacher and Guide

- ✓ Divinely-inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit (42:52, 26:192–94)
- ✓ The teacher of the *kitāb* and Wisdom and new knowledge (62:2; 3:164; 2:151)
- ✓ The witness over humankind on the Day of Judgment (2:143, 33:46; 4:41)
- ✓ The guide of the Believers to the Straight Path (42:52)
- ✓ Brings the people from darkness to Light (14:1; 14:5 65:11)
- ✓ A light from God (5:15) and a radiant lamp (*sirāj munīr*) (33:46)
- ✓ A beautiful exemplar for the Believers (33:21)
- ✓ Makes things clear to the Believers (5:15; 5:19; 16:44; 16:64; 14:4)

#### Intermediary between humans and God

- ✓ Prays and intercedes before God for the Believers' forgiveness (4:64, 63:5, 3:159, 60:12)
- ✓ Forgives or pardons the mistakes of the Believers (5:13; 3:159; 7:199)

- ✓ Purifies and sanctifies the believers (9:103)
- ✓ Summons the Believers to that which gives them life (8:24)
- ✓ Sends *ṣalawāt* (blessings, prayers) upon the Believers (9:103)
- ✓ Receives offerings (*ṣadaqa*) and repentance from the Believers on God's behalf (9:103; 58:12)

#### Exalted Character

- ✓ The mercy (*rahma*) to the worlds (21:107)
- ✓ Merciful (*rahīm*) and kind (*ra'ūf*) to the Believers (9:128)
- ✓ The possessor of power (*dhū l-quwwa*) and honor (81:20–21)
- ✓ Possesses sublime (*'azīm*) character (68:4)

#### FIGURE 1 The Quranic roles of Prophet Muḥammad

Note: I originally compiled this list of Quranic references about the Prophet Muḥammad in Figure 1 and Figure 2 several years ago. I have used older versions in slides, course materials, blogposts, etc. and have given permission for other scholars to use them appropriately with credit. What appears in this publication is the most updated version.

While the above summary is based on a synchronic study of the Qur'an, a diachronic approach to the Qur'anic status of the Prophet reveals similar results in terms of the evolution of the Messenger's status from the Meccan to the Medinan periods. In sum, while Muḥammad's function and status in the Meccan Qur'an is rather lowly, limited, and reduced to that of a warner, the status of Muḥammad in the Medinan period was significantly elevated. The divine-prophetic authority of Muḥammad features prominently in the Medinan Qur'an in numerous verses that speak to Muḥammad's role of conveying guidance and explanation (Q. 5:15, 5:19) and call for absolute obedience of the believers to the commands and judgments of the Messenger (Q. 4:80, 4:64, 4:65, 4:105, 7:157, 24:51, 33:6, 33:36, 48:10).<sup>3</sup> For example, the phrase "God and His Messenger" appears as the subject of singular authority and religious faith in numerous verses (Q. 4:59, 5:92, 8:20, 8:24, 24:51, 24:54, 25:51, 31:32, 33:36, 48:9–10, 49:1–3). As David Marshall observes, "obedience and disobedience to God are inseparably tied up with obedience and disobedience to Muhammad;

3 The latest study on the nature of Muḥammad's authority in the Medinan verses of the Qur'an is Nicolai Sinai, "Muḥammad as Episcopal Figure," *Arabica* 65/1–2 (2018): 1–30. See especially the sub-section entitled "Muḥammad's Status and Functions in the Medinan Qur'an", where the author analyzes numerous examples and verses that I have mentioned above. An earlier study of this topic is Alford T. Welch, "Muḥammad's Understanding of Himself: The Koranic Data," in Richard G. Hovannisian and Speros Vryonis (ed.), *Islam's Understanding of Itself* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983) 15–52.

human response to God is virtually coterminous with human response to His messenger.”<sup>4</sup>

- ✓ God is *al-Raḥmān* (The Merciful) and Prophet Muḥammad is *raḥma* (mercy) (21:107)
- ✓ God is *al-Raḥīm* (The Beneficent) and Prophet Muḥammad is *raḥīm* (9:128)
- ✓ God is *al-Raʿūf* (The Kind) and Prophet Muḥammad is *raʿūf* (9:128)
- ✓ God is *al-Karīm* (The Generous) and Prophet Muḥammad is *karīm* (69:40; 81:19–21)
- ✓ God is *al-Nūr* (The Light) and Prophet Muḥammad is *nūr* from God (5:15) and radiant lamp (*sirāj munīr*) (33:46)
- ✓ God is *al-Ḥalīm* (The Forbearing) and Prophet Muḥammad is *halīm* (11:75)
- ✓ God is *al-Qawīyy* (The Strong) and Prophet Muḥammad is *dhū l-quwwa* (possessor of power) (81:20–21)
- ✓ God is *al-ʿĀlim* (the Knower) and Prophet Muḥammad is the teacher (*muʿallim*) of knowledge (62:2; 3:164; 2:151)
- ✓ God is *al-Shahīd* (The Witness) and Prophet Muḥammad is the *shahīd* (witness) over humankind (2:143, 33:46; 4:41)
- ✓ God is *al-Walī* (The Guardian) and Prophet Muḥammad is the *walī* of the Believers (5:55)
- ✓ God is *al-Ghaḥḥār* (The Forgiver) and Prophet Muḥammad intercedes for people’s forgiveness (4:64, 63:5, 60:12)
- ✓ God is *al-ʿAfū* (The Pardoner) and Prophet Muḥammad pardons the Believers (5:13; 3:159; 7:199)
- ✓ God is *al-Hādī* (The Guide) and Prophet Muḥammad guides to the Straight Path (45:25)
- ✓ God is *al-Aẓīm* (The Sublime) and Prophet Muḥammad’s character is *ʿaẓīm* (68:4)
- ✓ God is *al-Ḥakam* (The Judge) and Prophet Muḥammad is the judge of the Believers (4:65; 4:105; 24:51; 33:36)
- ✓ God is *al-Mubayyin* (The Clarifier) (5:75, 24:58) and Prophet Muḥammad makes things clear (5:15; 5:19; 16:44)
- ✓ God is *al-Muṭahhīr* (The Purifier) (4:49; 33:33) and Prophet Muḥammad purifies the believers (9:103)
- ✓ God is *al-Mawlā* (The Master) and Prophet Muḥammad holds *awlā* (authority) over the Believers (33:6)

4 David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers* (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), 167.

- ✓ God is *al-Muhyī* (The Giver of Life) and Prophet Muḥammad summons the believers to life (8:24).
- ✓ God recites His Signs (2:252; 3:108) and the Prophet Muḥammad recites His Signs (2:151).
- ✓ God sends *ṣalawāt* (blessings) and Prophet Muḥammad sends *ṣalawāt* (blessings) (9:103)
- ✓ God receives *ṣadaqa* (9:104) when Prophet Muḥammad receives *ṣadaqa* (9:103; 58:12)
- ✓ God brings people from darkness to Light (2:257) and Prophet Muḥammad brings people to Light (14:1; 14:5 65:11)
- ✓ He who gives their allegiance (*bayʿa*) to Prophet Muḥammad has given their allegiance to God (48:10)
- ✓ God commands and forbids (16:90) and Prophet Muḥammad commands and forbids (7:157)
- ✓ He who obeys the Prophet Muḥammad, obeys God (4:80; 4:64)
- ✓ When Prophet Muḥammad threw stones, it was actually God who threw (8:17)

FIGURE 2 Quranic correspondence of God's names and the prophet's functions

Furthermore, a close reading of the Qur'an demonstrates numerous correspondences between the names and qualities of God and the names and functions of Muḥammad in relation to his community and the unbelievers (see Figure 2). Marshall describes these verses as "the Godward movement of Muhammad" that "point to a narrowing of the functional gap between God and Muhammad":

What we now see at Medina, especially after Badr, is the narrowing of this gap, as the Qur'an increasingly links the status and action of God with the status and action of Muhammad.... We will see that in this process Muhammad acquires characteristics which in the Meccan paradigm had been associated with God alone.<sup>5</sup>

Nicolai Sinai, in his recent study of the Medinan Qur'an, summarizes the exaltation of the Prophet Muḥammad as God's representative who exemplifies certain divine qualities in the Medinan *sūras* and the practical social consequences of this idea as follows:

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 170.

Medinan texts closely link the Messenger with God by calling not only for obedience to “God and His Messenger” but also by demanding “belief in God and His Messenger” (Q. 49:15, 57:7-19, 28, 64:8), as opposed to “belief in God and the Last Day.” Such bracketing induces what David Marshall has described as a “godward movement of the Messenger.” Q. 9:128 goes so far as to ascribe to the Messenger two attributes (kindness and mercy) that are otherwise reserved for God and thus implies the Messenger’s “participation in divine characteristics”.... In line with the lofty status claimed for the Messenger, Medinan passages repeatedly address the etiquette of being received by him or interacting with members of his household (Q. 24:62–63, 33:53–55, 49:1–5, 58:12–13). An atmosphere of almost courtly distance is thus created around him ... In sum, the Medinan suras portray the Messenger as an awesome, towering figure who unites paternal, kingly, and priestly aspects and whose role certainly goes far beyond the function of relaying divine revelations that is predominant in the remainder of the Qur’an.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the Medinan *sūras* elevate the authority and functions of the Prophet Muḥammad far beyond merely delivering and reciting qur’anic recitations to his community. They grant “extra-Quranic” authority to Muḥammad, which means that his prophetic authority, guidance, judgments, and conduct are representative of God’s will and decree and include much more than the Quranic recitations. These Quranic *sūras* further entail the functional participation of the Prophet in God’s own names and attributes as evidenced by many verses that apply divine characteristics to Muḥammad when framing his relationship to the believers and unbelievers. As we will see in the theological and cosmological material that follows, the above Quranic paradigm of Muḥammad as the deputy of God and human representation of His qualities seems to prefigure the later theologically mature visions of the person and the Light of Muḥammad as the self-manifestation of God’s Names and Attributes.

## 2 The Light of Muḥammad

Amidst the various conceptions of the Prophet in Muslim tradition, one of the most important yet understudied ideas is a doctrinal formulation called the Light of Muḥammad (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadī*) or “Nūr Muḥammad.” This is

6 Nicolai Sinai, “The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qur’an,” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016): 47–96: 70–1.

a spiritual-cosmological understanding in which the essence of Muḥammad is conceived as a pre-existent divine light, a cosmological creative principle, and a divine theophanic manifestation. The Light of Muḥammad is a prominent theme within both Sunni and Shi'ī traditions of Islam, and is referenced by a variety of names and technical terms including the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kullī*), the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*), the Pen (*al-qalam*), the Command of God (*amr Allāh*), the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*), the Muḥammadan Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-Muḥammadi*), the All-Merciful Breath (*al-naḥās al-raḥmānī*), etc. The distinctive features of the Nūr Muḥammad theme stress the pre-existence of Muḥammad's spiritual essence or light (*nūr*), the cosmogonic role of the Light of Muḥammad in creating and sustaining the Cosmos, the manifestation of God's attributes in and through the Light of Muḥammad, and the human manifestation of the Light of Muḥammad through a series of Prophets, Imams, and God-Friends (*awliyā'*), culminating in the historical Muḥammad.<sup>7</sup> In certain respects, the Light of Muḥammad motif parallels the Logos doctrine in Christianity and particular versions of it may correspond to the Divine Energies or Uncreated Light in Orthodox Christian theology.<sup>8</sup> Thankfully, scholarship on the esoteric traditions of Islam has already shed some light on the Light of Muḥammad concept in a variety of contexts. However, most studies that analyze this doctrine are often limited to looking at the views of a single Muslim thinker—such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896),<sup>9</sup> 'Ayn al-Qudāt (d. 526/1131),<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240),<sup>11</sup> or

7 I have chosen to translate the term *walī Allāh* as “God-Friend” and *awliyā'* as “God-Friends” as opposed to the conventional “Saint/Saints.” In my view, the meaning and concept of *saint*, derived from Western Christianity, neither does justice nor maps to the concept of *walī Allāh*.

8 For a comparative perspective on the Light of Muḥammad and the Logos or Son of God in Christianity, see Reza Shah-Kazemi, “Light upon light?: the Qur'an and the Gospel of John,” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, eds. Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (Eugene: OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 116–48; Robert J. Dobie, *Logos and Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2010); Khalil Andani, “The Metaphysics of the Common Word: A Dialogue of Eckhartian and Isma'ili Gnosis (part 1),” *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 26 (2011): 41–64; *idem*, “The Metaphysics of the Common Word: A Dialogue of Eckhartian and Isma'ili Gnosis (part 2),” *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 27 (2011): 61–8.

9 Gerhard, Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Sahl At-Tustarī D. 283/896*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980); *idem*, “The Light Verse: Qur'anic Text and Sūfi Interpretation,” *Oriens* 36 (2001): 113–44.

10 Hamid, Dabashi, “'Ayn al-Qudat Hamdani and the Intellectual Climate of His Time,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 374–433; Mohammed Rustom, “Everything Muḥammad: The Image of the Prophet in the Writings of 'Ayn al-Qudat,” *Sacred Web* 35 (2015): 33–40.

11 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989); *idem*, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of*



Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school of interpreters including Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Mu‘ayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300), ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kashānī (d. 730/1330), and Dā‘ūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350–51), and ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 827/1424).<sup>12</sup> Other studies are synoptic surveys, often only representative of views from within a single corpus or tradition such as Sunni *ḥadīth*,<sup>13</sup> Twelver Shi‘i *ḥadīth*,<sup>14</sup> or the theoretical, devotional, and visual texts of the Sufi tradition.<sup>15</sup> In all these studies and analyses to date, a comparative-diachronic perspective of the Light of Muḥammad motif in Muslim thought remains a desiderium. The emergence of many studies on thinkers associated with Sufism and the Ismaili traditions of Shi‘i Islam over the last decade presents a fresh opportunity for an analysis of the Light of Muḥammad concept that brings together several perspectives from both the Sunni and Shi‘i discourses into conversation, tracks the evolution of these ideas over time, and showcases the

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*Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); idem, *The Self-disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1998. Besides Chitick’s studies, see also Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). A comparative study of Andalusī and Ismailī Neoplatonism, albeit not focusing on the Nūr Muḥammad doctrine is provided by Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in Al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn Arabi and the Ismaili Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

- 12 Their views on the Light of Muḥammad doctrine are discussed in Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (University of California Press, 1984); Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992); Valeri J. Hoffman, “Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice”, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31/3 (1999), 351–69; Mohammed Rustom, “Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī: Notes on His Life, Influence and Reflections on the Muḥammadan Reality,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 38 (2005): 51–64.
- 13 Uri Rubin, “Pre-Existence and Light—Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 62–119. This remains a classic study of the topic but remains focused on *ḥadīth*.
- 14 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*. Albany: State U of New York, 1994; idem, *The Spirituality of Shi‘i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011). A few of my quotations from the early Shi‘i *ḥadīth* corpus will draw straight from Amir-Moezzi’s studies since he has already compiled and translated the important material.
- 15 Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muḥammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); idem, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). A concise synoptic survey is provided in Carl Ernst, “Muḥammad as the Pole of Existence,” *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad*, ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123–37; Christiane Gruber, “Between Logos (*kalima*) and Light (*nūr*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting,” *Muqarnas* 26 (2009): 229–262.

metaphysical frameworks and nexus of ideas that these different perspectives share. Such a study makes it possible to uncover the important theological and intellectual trends in how Muslim thinkers and mystics conceptualized the Light of Muḥammad through the centuries.

This paper analyzes the concept of the Light of Muḥammad in the thought of several Muslim thinkers from the esoteric traditions of Islam within both Shi'ism and Sufism, with particular focus on the development of this idea from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. The paper follows the theme of the Light of Muḥammad and its equivalents through the formulations of the several major Sunni and Shi'i thinkers—Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (early to mid 4th/10th century), Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt (d. 526/1131), Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274). Through the course of this analysis, the study uncovers important trends in Muslim theological constructions of the Nūr Muḥammad doctrine and argues that this concept developed in history through three distinct but cumulative phases of theorization: mytho-cosmological narrative, Neoplatonization, and ontological theophanization. The first phase of cosmological narrative is articulated in some of the earliest Shi'i *ḥadīth* reports attributed to the Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and the *tafsīr* of Sahl al-Tustarī, in which the Light of Muḥammad is described through mythic narrative as the first and greatest creation of God and where the emphasis is laid upon how the Muḥammadan Light is the first being to worship, praise and glorify God. The second phase, Neoplatonization, is found with the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and the Ismaili Neoplatonist *dā'īs* Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, who fuse earlier Shi'i ideas of the pre-existent Light of the Prophet and the Imams with the Neoplatonic concept of the Universal or First Intellect. These Ismaili authors explicitly identify the First Intellect as the spiritual archetype and heavenly support of the Prophet Muḥammad, whom they regard as the human manifestation of the Intellect. Eleventh century Ismaili ideas also contain the first seeds of "theophanization", understood here as a form of theological exegesis where names and attributes traditionally associated with God are re-assigned to the Universal Intellect. Among eleventh-twelfth century Sunni thinkers, one finds Neoplatonic ideas in conjunction with Sufi ideas in the thought of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt. 'Ayn al-Quḍāt provides a novel vision of the Light of Muḥammad as the first Muslim thinker to explicitly "theophanize" the Nūr Muḥammad by defining it as an uncreated aspect or quality of God's Essence, to the point that the creation and consummation of human existence is rooted in the Light

of Muḥammad. With Ibn al-ʿArabī, the earlier Neoplatonic and theophanic visions of the Nūr Muḥammad are fused and transfigured into an “ontological theophanization”, where the Muḥammadan Light is explicitly defined as the highest self-manifestation or theophany of the ineffable Divine Essence, the manifest presence of God’s Names and Attributes, and a metacosmic principle that is higher than the Neoplatonic First Intellect. Accordingly, Ibn al-ʿArabī depicts the person of the Prophet Muḥammad as the most perfect *mazhar* (locus of manifestation) of God in the entire created order. In parallel to Ibn al-ʿArabī, Nizārī Ismaili discourses on the Light of the Imamate—the Nizārī Ismaili equivalent of the Nūr Muḥammad concept—showcase a similar ontological theophanization in Neoplatonic frames. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī synthesizes metaphysical ideas from the Ismaili Neoplatonists, ʿAyn al-Qudāt, and ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī; he identifies the Light of the Imamate with the uncreated Command of God, defined as God’s eternal creative act that is superior to the Universal Intellect. This Command of God is depicted as the ontological principle of being containing all the Divine Names and Attributes and is theorized by Ṭūsī as being neither separate from nor identical to God’s Essence. Thus, by the end of the thirteenth century, major Ismaili and Sufi thinkers conceived the Light of Muḥammad or the Light of the Imamate along similar if not identical lines.

### 3 Ninth–Tenth Centuries: Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) and Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896)

Muslim reflections on the Light of Muḥammad are found as early as the mid-second/eighth century. One of the earliest Quranic commentaries to invoke the concept of the Light of Muḥammad is found in the *tafsīr* attributed to the early Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). Commenting on Q. 24:35, the “Verse of Light”, Muqātil wrote that “the likeness of His light” (*mathalu nūrihi*) is “the likeness of the Light of Muḥammad, God’s blessings and peace be upon him, when it was deposited in the loins of his father ʿAbdullāh b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib.” He went on to read the later phrase “light upon light” (*nūrun ʿalā nūrin*) to mean that “Muḥammad came forth from the loins of the Prophet, meaning Abraham.”<sup>16</sup> Another early Quranic theme that Sunni Muslim exegetes connected to Muḥammad’s pre-existence is that of his *taqallub* (Q. 26:219). As studied by Rubin, Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845) was among the earliest traditionists to equate Muḥammad’s *taqallub* to the transmigration of Muḥammad’s essence

16 *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, published on [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com), accessed 12/25/2017.

from one Prophet to another Prophet until the physical birth of Muḥammad. Rubin has traced the development of this exegesis in Sunni *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* well into the eleventh century.<sup>17</sup> These same ideas are greatly expanded in the Shi'i narrations about the pre-existent Light of Prophet Muḥammad and the Shi'i Imams attributed to the Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. These narrations are found in the early Shi'i *ḥadīth* texts compiled by the Imami scholars al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī (d. 290/902–3), al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941) and Ibn Bābawayh (d. 381/991), which have been studied in the work of Uri Rubin (1975) and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (1994, 2011). Karim Douglas Crow has extensively studied the intellectual and historical context that gave rise to the Shi'i ideas of the pre-existent Light of the Intellect (*'aql*), Muḥammad, and the Imams. As he notes in his unpublished dissertation on the place of *al-'aql* in early Muslim tradition, the first and second centuries after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad saw the circulation of *ḥadīths* describing God's creation of the *'aql* and the *'aql's* obedience to God, known as the *aqbili* tradition. The earlier reports begin with the phrase “when God created the *'aql*” (*lammā khalaqa Allāhu al-'aql*) and the tradition later received its final form that begins with the phrase “the first of what God created was the *'aql*” (*awwalu mā khalaqa Allāhu al-'aql*). Crow believes that the latter form of the tradition emerged under the influence of other ideas. These include the Shi'i notion of the pre-existent light of the Prophet and Imams, Hellenic and Gnostic ideas, and the biblical traditions concerning Wisdom as the first-born of all creation.<sup>18</sup>

The early Shi'i *ḥadīth* corpus—which textually dates to the early fourth/tenth century and is attributed to the Imams living in the second/eighth century—consists of numerous narrations, in the form of mythic narratives, about the first-created Light of Muḥammad and the Shi'i Imams. These narratives generally describe the primordial creation of the Imams as Light in the presence of God prior to the creation of the world. There are several versions of the first-creation narrative: Intellect (*'aql*) as the first creation; the creation of one Light consisting of the bi-unity of Muḥammad and 'Alī; the creation of the five lights of Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn from the light of God's glory; the creation of the Imams as luminous spirits around the Throne of God; and the creation of the Imams' spirits and hearts from an

17 Uri Rubin, “More light on Muḥammad's pre-existence: qur'anic and post-qur'anic perspectives”, in Andrew Rippin and Roberto Tottoli (eds), *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the occasion of his 75th birthday* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, Islamic History and Civilization 113, 2015), 288–311: 294.

18 Karim Douglas Crow, *The Role of Al-'Aql in Early Islamic Wisdom: With Reference to Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq*, Doctoral Dissertation (Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 1996), 175–6.

exalted clay, and the subsequent creation of the Imams' bodies and the spirits and bodies of the faithful from lower levels of clay. Some of these traditions also speak of the Light of the Imams being transmitted from the first human being, Adam, through an exalted physical lineage of Prophets and inheritors, down to the historical persons of the Prophet Muḥammad and 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.

The earliest Shi'ī traditions concerning the Light of the Muḥammad and the Imams of his *Ahl al-Bayt* contain three interrelated themes—the Light of the Intellect, Muḥammad, and 'Alī as God's first creation, the relationship of this cosmogonic Light to the historical Muḥammad and the Imams, and relationship of the Light to the creation of the believers and humanity in general. The theme of the Light as the first creation of God is clearly expressed in a tradition attributed to the Imam Ja'far and recorded by al-Kulaynī on the creation and testing of the Intellect (*'aql*):

Verily God created the Intellect (*al-'aql*) as the first among the spiritual creatures from the right side of the Throne from His own light. Then He said to it: "Go back" and it went back. Then He said to it: "Come forward", and it came forward. Then God said: "I created you as a sublime creation and I honoured you over all of My creation."<sup>19</sup>

In this tradition, the Intellect is called "the first among the *rūḥāniyyin*" and is said to be created from God's light, although light imagery itself does not figure prominently in this tradition. After obeying God's command, the Intellect is declared to have pre-eminence over all of God's creatures. The tradition continues to describe the creation of Ignorance (*jahl*) and the seventy-five armies that God appoints for Intellect and Ignorance. But what concerns us here is the fact that the Intellect is both the first creation and supreme creature of God. A longer later version of the *'aql* tradition attributed to Mūsā al-Kāzīm b. Ja'far al-Ṣādiq describes the creation of the Intellect in vivid detail and imagery.<sup>20</sup> In this tradition, God creates the Intellect "from a concealed treasured light in His foreknowledge" (*nūrīn makhzūnīn makhnūnīn fī sābiq 'ilmīhi*) that no Messenger-Prophet or closest Angel has knowledge of. God infuses the constitution of the Intellect with moral qualities; the Intellect's soul, spirit, head, eyes, tongue, mouth and heart are described as knowledge (*al-'ilm*), comprehension (*al-fahm*), abstention (*al-zuhd*), perplexity (*ḥayra*), wisdom

19 Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Fajr, 2007), *Kitāb al-'aql wa l-jahl*, Ḥadīth No. 14, 11: <http://alfeker.net/library.php?id=1443>, (accessed 11/20/2018), hereafter cited as *Uṣūl al-kāfi*.

20 Ibn Bābawayh, *Ma'ānī l-Akhbār*, ed. 'A.A Al-Ghaffari (Tehran, 1959), 312–13, in Crow, 262–3.

(*al-ḥikma*), tender-pity (*al-raḥfa*), and loving-compassion (*al-raḥma*) respectively. God also clothes and empowers the Intellect with ten powers: certainty (*al-yaqīn*), faith (*al-īmān*), veracity (*al-ṣidq*), inner-tranquility (*al-sakīna*), sincerity (*al-ikhhlās*), friendly kindness (*al-rifq*), liberal-gift giving (*al-‘atiyya*), contentment (*al-qunū‘*), acceptance (*al-taslīm*), and gratitude (*al-shukr*). After the Intellect is tested to go back and come forth and complies, this tradition has the Intellect utter a formula of praise in which God is exalted above and beyond any peer (*nidd*), likeness (*shibh*), resemblance (*shabīh*), equal (*kufū‘*), match (*‘ādīl*), similitude (*mithl*), or analogy (*mathil*). God then praises the Intellect as His best, most obedient, highest, illustrious, and most cherished creature. God then declares that the Intellect is the means by which He is declared one (“by means of thee I am declared one”, *bi-ka uwaḥḥadu*), worshipped (*bi-ka u‘badu*), called upon (*bi-ka ud‘a*), hoped for (*bi-ka urtaja*), sought (*bi-ka ubtagha*), feared (*bi-ka ukhafu*), warned against (*bi-ka uhadhdharu*), reward is earned (*bi-ka al-thawab*), and punishment is merited (*bi-ka al-‘iqab*). The Intellect prostrates to God for a thousand years and then God grants the Intellect the right of intercession for all in whom it is present.

Three other ‘*aql*’ traditions found in the Twelver Shi‘i *ḥadīth* corpus describe the relationship between the heavenly Intellect and the ‘*aql*’ found in human beings. In one tradition quoted by al-Mufid (d. 413/1022), the usual creation and testing of the Intellect are described and the last phrase of the tradition has God declare to the Intellect that “I shall strengthen the one whom I love by means of thee (*u‘ayyidu man aḥbibtuhu bi-ka*).”<sup>21</sup> In another *ḥadīth* reported by al-Kulayni, the Imam Ja‘far explains how the ‘*aql*’ in the human being is his chief support from which astuteness (*al-fitna*), understanding (*al-fahm*), attentiveness (*al-ḥifẓ*) and knowledge (*‘ilm*) come forth. The Imam then adds: “If the ‘support’ (*ta‘yīd*) of his ‘*aql*’ is from the light (*nūr*), then he becomes knowing, attentive, mindful, sagacious, and understanding.” The Imam continues to describe the benefits of a strengthened ‘*aql*’ and then emphasises again that “all of this comes from the support of the intellect (*ta‘yīd al-‘aql*).”<sup>22</sup> It emerges from the various ‘*aql*’ traditions discussed above that the Intellect is a heavenly spiritual being and the first creature that God directly creates out of His light or knowledge; Intellect is the supreme creature of God and is pre-eminent above all things to the point where the Intellect mediates all creaturely relations with God (as the longer ‘*aql*’ tradition describes), including supplication, guidance, punishment and reward. Human beings have a share of the Intellect and can

21 Al-Mufid, *al-Ikhtisās*, ed. ‘A. A. Ghaffari (Tehran, 1959), 244, in Crow 267.

22 *Uṣūl al-kāfi, kitāb al-‘aql wa l-jahl*, No. 23, 13. See also Crow, 268–9.

receive its support (*ta'yīd*) and the Prophets possess the highest degree of intellect over all others.

The Shi'i materials examined thus far speak of the Light of the Intellect (*nūr al-'aql*) as opposed to the Light of Muḥammad. But two more traditions in al-Kulaynī attributed to Imam Ja'far and his son al-Kāzīm explicitly link the 'aql to the Prophets and Imams:

The proof (*ḥujjah*) between God and his servants is the Prophets and the Imams, and the proof (*ḥujjah*) between the servants and God is intellect ('aql).<sup>23</sup>

Verily, God has two proofs (*ḥujjatayn*) over humankind—the manifest proof (*ḥujja zāhira*) and the hidden proof (*ḥujja bāṭina*). As for the manifest (proof), it is the Messengers, the Prophets, and the Imams. As for the hidden (proof), it is the intellects (*'uqūl*).<sup>24</sup>

The above statements establish an equivalence or, at the very least, a correspondence between the Intellect (whether in heaven or in the human), and the Prophets and Imams. Another tradition attributed to the Prophet states that: "God did not send any Prophet or Messenger except that his intellect is perfected and nobler than all of the intellects of his community."<sup>25</sup> Thus, what distinguishes a Prophet from ordinary humans is the Prophet's perfect intellect. These ideas set the stage for examining another set of statements from the Shi'i Imams, which describe the first creation of God as being the Light of the Prophet and Imams. In these traditions, many of the descriptions of the Intellect as the first and highest creation are attributed to the Light of the Prophet and Imams. Two such traditions attributed to the Imam Ja'far describe the Light of Muḥammad and 'Alī as the first entity created by God:

God existed when nothing else existed. Then He created existence and place and created the Light of Lights from which all lights are illumined. He made [this Light of Lights], from which all lights are illumined, flow forth from His Light. This is the Light from which He created Muḥammad and 'Alī. These two were the primordial Lights since nothing existed before them. These two Lights continued to flow as pure purified (lights)

23 Al-Kulayni, *al-Uṣūl min al-kāfi*, kitāb al-'aql wa l-jahl, in Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, 144.

24 *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, kitāb al-'aql wa l-jahl, Ḥadīth No. 12, 9.

25 *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, kitāb al-'aql wa l-jahl, Ḥadīth No. 11, 6.

through pure loins until they separated as two pure persons in ‘Abdullāh and Abū Ṭālib.<sup>26</sup>

Two thousand years before creation, Muḥammad and ‘Alī were a light before God, a light formed from the principal trunk from which a resplendent ray went forth. God said: ‘Here is a light [taken] from my own light; its trunk is prophecy and its branch is the imamate. Prophecy comes from Muḥammad, my servant and messenger, and the imamate from ‘Alī, my proof and my friend. Without them I would not have created any of my creation.’<sup>27</sup>

According to the above traditions, unlike the *‘aql* narrations, the pre-existent Light that God creates before all things is explicitly identified with the spiritual essences of Prophet Muḥammad and Imam ‘Alī. This Light is a bi-unity that illuminates all other lights and creatures and manifested through a pure lineage of human beings—from the first human being on earth to the immediate forefathers of the historical Muḥammad and historical ‘Alī. This formulation entails that all of the ancestors of the historical persons of Muḥammad and ‘Alī, including their respective fathers ‘Abdullāh and Abū Ṭālib, were pure human beings and “bearers” of the Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī;<sup>28</sup> they perhaps occupied the office of the Imamate themselves. This latter idea was endorsed by Ismaili thinkers, who revered ‘Abdullāh and Abū Ṭālib respectively as the holders of the Lights of Prophethood and the Imamate and specifically regarded Abū Ṭālib as the divinely-guided Imam who spiritually initiated Muḥammad into the mantle of Prophethood.<sup>29</sup>

26 *Uṣūl al-kāfi, kitāb al-hujja*, Ḥadīth No. 9, 280.

27 Ibn Bābawayh al-Ṣadūq, *‘Ilāl al-sharā’ī*, p. 174, ch. 139, quoted in Amir-Moezzi, “Only the Man of God is Human” in *The Spirituality of Shi‘i Islam*, 300.

28 On this theme of the moral purity of the ancestors of Prophet Muḥammad, see Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, 169, n. 204.

29 According to a narration related by the Twelver Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, ‘Alī once remarked that: “I swear by God, who sent Muḥammad as a Prophet with the truth, if my father interceded for all the sinners upon the face of the earth, God would accept his intercession for them. How can my father be punished in Hellfire while his son is the divider of Paradise and Hellfire. I swear by He who sent Muḥammad that on the Day of Resurrection, the Light of Abū Ṭālib will extinguish the light of the creatures, except for the five lights: the Light of Muḥammad, my Light, the Light of Fāṭima, the Light of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, and the Light of the Imams of his progeny. His Light is from our Light which God created one thousand years before He created Adam.” Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī, *al-Amālī* (Qum: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 2000), 702, accessed on 6/25/2020: [http://shiaonlinelibrary.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8/1334\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%8](http://shiaonlinelibrary.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8/1334_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%8)



This Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī has a cosmological role since, as the tradition states, God would not have created anything without it. Other traditions quoted in the Shi‘i *ḥadīth* corpus describe God’s primordial spiritual creation of five lights—referring to the historical *Ahl al-Bayt* consisting of Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Fāṭimah, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn. One *ḥadīth qudsī* found in Shi‘i collections has God describe His own creation of five spiritual lights:

O Muḥammad. Verily I created you and ‘Alī as a light (*nūran*), that is a spirit (*rūḥan*) without body, before I created My heavens, earth, throne, and seas and you did not cease glorifying and praising Me. Then I gathered your spirits and made them one and you were praising, sanctifying and glorifying Me. Then I divided you into a pair and I divided each pair into a pair. So there came to be four [spirits]: Muḥammad was one, ‘Alī was another, and al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn were a pair. Then I created Fāṭimah from the light of your origin as a spirit without a body.<sup>30</sup>

Another group of traditions speak of the creation of Muḥammad and the Imams as “luminous spirits,” “shadows,” or “silhouettes of light.” Imam al-Bāqir said to his companion Jābir: “O Jābir, verily the first of what God created was Muḥammad and his progeny as guides and rightly-guided ones. They were silhouettes of light before God ... Shadows of light, luminous bodies without spirits. They were supported through a single spirit that is the Holy Spirit by which they worshipped God.”<sup>31</sup> In reference to the above traditions, Amir-Moezzi differentiates between two levels of the creation of the Imams as Light. The highest level, which he terms the “Mother of the Book” consists of the creation of a single light—the Light of Intellect, Muḥammad and ‘Alī—and the next level down is the creation of the individual Prophet and Imams as luminous spirits or shadows—called the “First World of the Shadows.” This is a matter of interpretation as the traditions themselves do not present

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4%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9\_724. On the Ismaili belief in Abū Ṭālib as the special Imam who guided Prophet Muḥammad, see Ja‘far b. Maṣūir al-Yaman, *Sarā’ir wa-asrār al-nuṭuqā’*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār Andalūs, 1984), 80–4, 146; Nasseh Ahmed Mirza, *Syrian Ismailism* (Richmond, BC; Curzon, 1997), 78, 130 n10. See also Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Firās, *al-Qaṣīda al-Shāfiyya*, ed. and tr. Sami Nassib Makarem in “Al-Qaṣīda Ash-Shāfiya (The Healing Poem) of Shihāb ad-Dīn Abū Firās,” Doctoral Dissertation, (University of Michigan, 1963), verse 554, p. 127: “The soul of the *wālī*, distinguished with the sublime, exalted divine light was the guarantor ‘Imrān, the noble in lineage; he was Abū Ṭālib, the adornment of the Arabs” (my translation of the edited Arabic text).

30 *Uṣūl al-kāfi, kitāb al-ḥujja*, Ḥadīth No. 3, 279.

31 *Uṣūl al-kāfi, kitāb al-ḥujja*, Ḥadīth No. 10, 280. For Amir-Moezzi’s interpretation, see *The Divine Guide*, 32–7.

these narratives in any systematic form. Amir-Moezzi admits the existence of only “certain imprecise and allusive details” to ground this interpretation. Nevertheless, these details are worth noting as they form the raw material for some of the later interpretations constructed by later Ismaili *dāʿīs*.

Finally, a number of traditions illustrate the relationship between the primordially created Light and the material human form of the Prophets and Imams. Several *ḥadīths* found in al-Qummī and al-Kulaynī describe the creation of the Imams’ spirits and hearts from a heavenly source associated with an exalted Clay called *ʿIlliyīn*. In another tradition attributed to the Imam Jaʿfar, the Clay that makes up the Imams’ spirits and hearts is associated with the Divine Throne, while the Imams’ bodies and the spirits of the believers are created from a lower level of clay. The *ʿIlliyīn* tradition and the Throne tradition are quoted below:

Verily God created us from *ʿIlliyīn* and created our spirits from above that. He created the spirits of our partisans from *ʿIlliyīn* and created their bodies from below that. Because of this there is a closeness between us and them and their hearts incline towards us.<sup>32</sup>

God created us from the light of His sublimity (*min nūri ʿazamihi*). Then He fashioned our creation from a hidden treasured clay from underneath the Throne and then He settled that light within it. Thus, we were human luminous creations (*naḥnu khalqan wa basharan nūrāniyyīn*) to whom He granted a share the like of which no one else has. He created the spirits of our partisans from our clay and their bodies from a hidden treasured clay lower than that. Except for the Prophets, God granted a share to them the like of which no one else has.<sup>33</sup>

These narratives not only establish the Imams at the supreme level of the first luminous creation of God, but they also depict a cosmic and spiritual affinity between the Imams and the believers. The Imams’ creation seems to take place on three levels: the light of the Imams created from the light of God’s Majesty, the spirits and hearts of the Imams created from a Clay higher than *ʿIlliyīn* (or Clay under the Throne), and the Imams’ bodies created from Clay of *ʿIlliyīn*. The creation of the Prophets and believers, in contrast, takes place at two levels: their spirits are created from the Clay of *ʿIlliyīn* which sources the Imams’ bodies, and their bodies are created from a lower Clay. A metacosmic and spiritual kinship or affinity exists between the Imams and the believers because the

32 *Uṣūl al-kāfi, kitāb al-ḥujja*, Section 151, Ḥadīth No. 1, 243.

33 *Uṣūl al-kāfi, kitāb al-ḥujja*, Section 151, Ḥadīth No. 2, 243.

spirits of the latter are created from the very same *ʿIllyyīn* Clay that the bodies of the Imams are created. These traditions also showcase the cosmic superiority of Muḥammad and the Imams over the other Prophets, believers, and humankind at large, since the spirits and hearts of the former are created from the higher Clay. Further traditions go on to narrate how the Light of Muḥammad and the Imams is transmitted from the first human, Adam, through lineage of pure ancestors and personalities, down to the historical Muḥammad and ʿAlī, and continues to be transmitted through the hereditary Shiʿi Imams.

The Shiʿi traditions concerning the pre-existent light of Muḥammad and the Imams closely parallel the *ʿaql* narrations found in the same corpus. The descriptions and attributes of the Light of the Intellect and Light of Muḥammad coincide in numerous respects: the Light is created from God sublime Light, the Light is the primordial worshiper of God through specific formulas of praise and unification, the Light is the means for the creation of the Cosmos, the Light is primarily present in the Prophet Muḥammad, the Imams, and the pure ancestors from whose line they issue forth, the Light is also partially present in the believer whose intellect can be strengthened through it. While these traditions all appear in tenth and eleventh century Shiʿi *ḥadīth* compilations, their content probably dates back to earlier periods and possibly to the Imams themselves. The *tafsīr* of Sahl al-Tustarī provides an appropriate point of comparison to analyze the Light of Muḥammad ideas prevalent in the same period outside the Shiʿi circles. A comparative analysis between the Shiʿi material examined above and Tustarī’s discourse on the Light of Muḥammad reveals a shared nexus of core ideas surrounding this theme common to the Shiʿi and Sufi milieus.

Sahl al-Tustarī holds a renowned place in the Sufi traditions of Islam and is reported to have started teaching in 860. He claimed to have been granted wisdom and knowledge of the unseen by God and objections to his teaching activity in Tustar forced him to flee to Basra. His disciples, within a generation of his death, compiled his *tafsīr*. According to Bowering, this *tafsīr* likely consists of teachings he delivered in sessions during which Qur’an recitation took place. Like the Shiʿi Imams, Tustarī held that the verses of the Qur’an possessed different layers and levels of meaning including an outward dimension (*ẓāhir*) and an inward dimension (*bāṭin*).<sup>34</sup> The concept of the Light of Muḥammad figures prominently in Tustarī’s *tafsīr* and is elucidated in his commentary on the verses Q. 2:30 and 7:172 about the creation of Adam and his progeny, the *āyat al-nūr* (24:35), and Q. 53:13–18 on the Prophet’s celestial ascension (*miʿrāj*). We now present Tustarī’s comments about the Light of Muḥammad with a

34 *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, tr. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), Translator’s Introduction, 26–7.

focus on the themes as opposed to following the actual order as it appears in his *tafsīr*.

In his commentary on the *āyat al-nūr*, Tustarī explains that the words “His light” (*nūrihi*) in “the likeness of His light” refers to the likeness (*mathal*) of the Light of Muḥammad.<sup>35</sup> The creation of the Light of Muḥammad in the presence of God is narrated in detail by Tustarī in his commentary on Q. 7:172—the verse that speaks of God extracting the progeny (*dhurriyya*) of Adam. Tustarī explains that the progeny of Adam consists of three kinds—with the first being the Light of Muḥammad:

The progeny (*dhurriyya*) comprise three [parts], a first, second and third: the first is Muḥammad, for when God, Exalted is He, wanted to create Muḥammad, He made appear (*aẓhara*) a light from His light, and when it reached the veil of divine majesty it prostrated before God, and from that prostration God created an immense crystal-like column of light, that was inwardly and outwardly translucent, and within it was the essence of Muḥammad. Then it stood in service before the Lord of the Worlds for a million years with the essential characteristics of faith (*ṭabāʿiʿ al-īmān*), which are the visual beholding of faith (*muʿāyanat al-īmān*), the unveiling of certainty (*mukāshafat al-yaqīn*) and the witnessing of the Lord (*mushāhadat al-Rabb*). Thus He honoured him with this witnessing, a million years before beginning the creation.<sup>36</sup>

In his commentary on the *miʿrāj* verses, such as Q. 53:13–14. Tustarī discusses how the Prophet’s celestial vision of God in *another time* is identical to the pre-creation time that the Light of Muḥammad worshipped God:

That is, in the beginning when God, Glorified and Exalted is He, created him as a light within a column of light (*nūran fī ʿamūd al-nūr*), a million years before creation, with the essential characteristics of faith (*ṭabāʿiʿ al-īmān*), in a witnessing of the unseen within the unseen (*mushāhadat al-ghayb biʿl-ghayb*). He stood before Him in servanthood (*ʿubūdiyya*), *by the lote tree of the Ultimate Boundary* [53:14], his being a tree at which the knowledge of every person reaches its limit.<sup>37</sup>

35 *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, 138. For this text, I am relying on the Anabel Keeler translation, but I have analyzed the Arabic text of each quoted passage. For the Arabic text, see Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm* (Dār al-Ḥaram li-Turāth, 2004), 206.

36 *Ibid.*, 77–8. For the Arabic text, see Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, 152–3.

37 *Ibid.*, 213. For the Arabic text, see Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, 262.

Tustarī provides a mythic narrative describing how God creates the Light of Muḥammad “a million years before creation”, as a light from His own Light. The Light of Muḥammad’s immediate act is to submit and prostrate to God in a state of absolute faith, certainty, unveiling and witnessing of his Lord. The Light of Muḥammad, following its prostration, is described as a translucent column of light containing the essence of Muḥammad, described as a whole as “a light within a column of light.” These are all spiritual states that Tustarī describes throughout his Quranic commentary as constituting the spiritual realization of the seekers, but the Light of Muḥammad seems to exemplify them. Tustarī goes on to explain that all of creation, including the Prophets, the heavens and the physical realm are from the Light of Muḥammad: “For the light of the prophets is from his [Muḥammad’s] light, the light of the heavenly dominions is from his light and the light of this world and the Hereafter is from his light.”<sup>38</sup> Tustarī writes concerning Q. 2:30, in which God announces the creation of Adam to the angels that “He created Adam from the clay of might consisting of the Light of Muḥammad.”<sup>39</sup> Further details are provided when Tustarī explains the second and third categories of the *dhurriyya* mentioned in Q. 7:172:

The second among the progeny (*dhurriyya*), is Adam. God created him from the Light of Muḥammad. And He created Muḥammad, that is, his body, from the clay of Adam. The third is the progeny of Adam. God, Mighty and Majestic is He, created the seekers [of God] (*murīdūn*) from the light of Adam, and He created the [divinely]-sought (*murādūn*) from the Light of Muḥammad. Thus, the generality among people live under the mercy of the people of proximity (*ahl al-qurb*) and the people of proximity live under the mercy of the one brought near (*al-muqarrab*)—*With their light shining forth before them and on their right.* [57:12].<sup>40</sup>

This passage provides a noteworthy schema of both cosmology and anthropology in terms of the centrality of the Light of Muḥammad. Having explained earlier how God creates the Light of Muḥammad from His own light, Tustarī then places the creation of Adam as coming *from* the Light of Muḥammad. The passage seems to imply (but not clearly specify) that Adam’s creation has two levels—spiritual light and physical clay (the body). Only the physical body of Muḥammad is created from the clay of Adam while the Light of Muḥammad

38 Ibid., 92. For the Arabic text, see Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 166.

39 Ibid., 16. For the Arabic text, see Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 91.

40 Ibid., 77–8. For the Arabic text, see Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 152–3.

is wholly superior to Adam. One can also suppose that the physical bodies of all people are from the clay of Adam. The “progeny of Adam” then consists of two groups—the seekers (*murīdūn*) and the guides (*murādūn*). The *murīds* are created from the light of Adam—and this must refer to the spirits or hearts of the *murīds* being created from Adam’s light. The spirits of the *murāds* are created from the Light of Muḥammad. Tustarī thus provides a three-level anthropological schema derived out of the Nūr Muḥammad cosmology. The first and highest level is Muḥammad himself whose essential spirit *is* the Light of Muḥammad and whose body is Adamic clay. The second level is Adam himself whose spirit and clay are created *from* the Light of Muḥammad. Occupying the same or parallel rank are the *murāds* whose spirits are created *from* the Light of Muḥammad and whose bodies are of Adamic clay. At the third and lowest level are the *murīds* whose spirits are from the Light of Adam and whose bodies are from the clay of Adam. Tustarī alludes to these three levels—Muḥammad, the *murād* (including Adam), and the *murīd* with his statement that “the generality among people live under the mercy of the people of proximity (*ahl al-qurb*) and the people of proximity live under the mercy of the one brought near (*al-muqarrab*).” Each level of humanity partakes in some degree of the original Light of Muḥammad, “*With their light shining forth before them and on their right*” [Q. 57:12].

The Shi‘i accounts of the Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī and Tustarī’s depictions of the Light of Muḥammad converge in many respects both in terms of form and content. The form of all these traditions and commentaries consists of mythic narrative in which the Shi‘i Imams and Tustarī engage in a descriptive commentary on a term or Quranic verse. The Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī is God’s first creation out of His own light and likewise the Light of Muḥammad for Tustarī is created out of God’s light. In the *‘aql* traditions, the first created Intellect submits and obeys God upon coming into existence and makes prostration for a thousand years. Similarly, Tustarī’s Light of Muḥammad, immediately upon coming into being, falls prostrate for a million years. The Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī and in both the *‘aql* narrations and the *ashbāh* narrations, praises God through specific formulas of witnessing *tawḥīd*, glorification and sanctification (*taḥmīd*, *tamjīd*, *tasbīḥ*, *taqdīs*), while al-Tustarī’s Light of Muḥammad stands before God with faith (*īmān*), servitude (*‘ubudīyya*), and spiritual witnessing (*mushāhada*). The primordial Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī presides over a hierarchy of created human beings: 1) the spirits and hearts of the Imams created from the Light; 2) the bodies of the Imams and spirits of the Prophets and believers created from the *‘Illīyyīn* Clay; and 3) the bodies of the Prophets and believers created from a lower Clay. Tustarī also presents a three-tier hierarchy consisting of: 1) Prophet Muḥammad whose

spirit is the Light of Muḥammad and whose body is of Adamic clay and is called *al-muqarrab*; 2) the *murādūn*, *ahl al-qurb*, or the Guides whose spirits are from the Light of Muḥammad and whose bodies are of Adamic clay, and 3) the *murīdūn* or seekers whose spirits are from the light of Adam and whose bodies are of Adamic clay.

The conceptions of the Light of Muḥammad (and ‘Alī) attributed to the early Shi‘i Imams and elucidated by Sufi exegetes like Tustarī through the ninth and tenth century converge in numerous areas. In this period, these ideas are mainly presented in the form of mythic narratives in which God’s primordial creation is described using light imagery. One also finds similar ideas concerning the pre-existence of the Light of Muḥammad and its manifestation in the Prophets and the Friends of God in the works of Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and al-Ḥākim al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 300/910).<sup>41</sup> This early material informed further developments in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, especially at the hands of Shi‘i Ismaili thinkers working with Neoplatonic philosophy. The next section examines how the Light of Muḥammad is developed in the thought of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ and the Ismaili philosophizing *dā‘īs* Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī and Hamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, who each employ Neoplatonic cosmologies. The Ikhwān’s and Ismaili *dā‘īs*’ fusion of Shi‘i thought, Ismaili esotericism, and Neoplatonism left a lasting influence upon later presentations of Ismaili philosophy and also among non-Ismaili thinkers in subsequent centuries.

#### 4 Tenth–Eleventh Centuries: Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (Early to Mid 4th/10th Century), Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971), and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020)

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ are famous for their epistles, the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*, which have exerted considerable influence on the development of Islamic theology and philosophy. There is no agreement on the exact dating of the Epistles and the precise religious affiliation of the Ikhwān. The proposed viewpoints include the Ikhwān being pre-Fatimid Ismaili revolutionaries writing in the late ninth and early tenth century, a pro-Fatimid Ismaili group writing throughout the tenth century, or a Qarmati group writing in the mid-tenth century. Regardless of their exact affiliation or dating, Michael Ebstein has convincingly argued that the Neoplatonic, cosmological and soteriological ideas of the Epistles greatly influenced the theosophical Sufi mystics of al-Andalus,

<sup>41</sup> See excerpts from their works quoted in Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 66.

particularly Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931) and Ibn al-‘Arabī.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore appropriate to examine their metaphysics of the Light of Muḥammad before analyzing its development in the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī.

The Ikhwān employ a metaphysics and cosmology that merges both Neoplatonic and Quranic ideas. Neoplatonic cosmology found its way into Islamic thought mainly through the ninth century Arabīc translation and commentary on Plotinus’ Enneads known as the *Theology of Aristotle*. The *Theology* exists as a shorter version and a longer version. The shorter version presents the standard Neoplatonic metaphysics consisting of God (the One), the Universal Intellect, the Universal Soul, Prime Matter, and Nature. The longer version, however, presents a modified Neoplatonic cosmology in which the Divine Word (*kalimat Allāh*) occupies the level in between God and the Universal Intellect.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, the longer *Theology* presents a scheme in which God originates the Universal Intellect by means of this intermediary variously called God’s Word (*kalima*), Command (*amr*), Oneness (*waḥda*), Will (*irāda*), Power (*qudra*), and Knowledge (*‘ilm*). This Command or Word is referred to as the cause (*‘illa*) of the Universal Intellect, and also as the cause of causes (*‘illat al-‘ilāl*) because God transcends being a cause or an effect. The longer *Theology*, however, does not grant any sort of discrete ontological status to the Command or Word, remarking that the Universal Intellect is united (*muttaḥid*) with the Command that causes it.<sup>44</sup> The exact source of this doctrine of the Command or Word of God as the intermediary between God and created reality is unknown, although the terminology and general idea is inspired by the Quranic verses that speak of God creating by His Command or Word, “Be” (Q. 16:40, 36:82). It is also worth noting that the idea of God bringing cosmic existence into being by His Command and Word is found in the pre-Fatimid Ismaili texts such as the *Kitāb al-‘ālim wa l-ghulām* which states that “the beginning of creation was the will (*irāda*) of a command (*amr*) by means of a saying (*bi-qawl*).”<sup>45</sup> Such is the intellectual and cosmological framework behind the cosmology of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ in which they develop a Neoplatonized conception of what the earlier Shi‘i and Sufi traditions call the Light of Muḥammad.

The term Light of Muḥammad does not itself appear in the Epistles of the Ikhwān. However, they do speak at length of the Universal Intellect as

42 Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus*, 29.

43 Ibid., 37.

44 Ibid., 38.

45 Ja‘far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue*, tr. James W. Morris (London, New York: I.B. Tauris in Association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001), 79.



the first created being and as “God’s light” mentioned throughout the Qur’an, the creative intermediary of God’s creation of the Cosmos, and the celestial archetypal reality that manifests on earth through the Speaker-Prophets or *Nātiqs* of whom the historical Muḥammad is the greatest. In these respects, the Ikhwān’s idea of the Universal Intellect is an equivalent of the Light of Muḥammad concept in a Neoplatonic context. The Ikhwān describe the Universal Intellect in terms of its relationship to God, its relationship to the world, and its connection to the Prophets throughout their Epistles. Firstly, the Ikhwān differentiate between origination (*ibdāʿ*) and creation (*khalq*). The former refers to God bringing an existent into being from nothing (*lā min shayʿ*) while the latter refers to the determination (*taqdīr*) of a composite thing from another existent thing.<sup>46</sup> The Universal Intellect is “originated” by God through an instantaneous act of command.<sup>47</sup> The Intellect is therefore originated but not created, and this speaks to the Intellect’s unique ontological status over all other beings. The Ikhwān also explain how the Intellect has a share in certain Divine Attributes as God has “emanated (*afāda*) on it existence (*al-wujūd*), completeness (*al-tamām*), permanence (*al-baqāʿ*), and perfection (*al-kamāl*) all at once, without time (*dafʿatan wāḥidatan bi-lā zamān*).”<sup>48</sup> The Universal Intellect continually receives being (*wujud*) through God’s Command and is conjoined to it. The Command flows through the Universal Intellect upon the rest of the creatures. The Intellect holds a great ontological and theological rank in the hierarchy of creation, as the Ikhwān note:

It [Universal Intellect] is like the supreme veil (*al-ḥijāb al-aʿẓam*) and the greatest door (*al-bāb al-akbar*), the one from which there is the conjunction to the unity of God (*al-wuṣūl ilā tawḥīd Allāh*), the Exalted, the vision of Him (*al-naẓar ilayhi*), and being in His presence (*al-wuqūf bayna ya-dihī*) [may occur].<sup>49</sup>

The Universal Intellect is both the first originated being and the highest existent through whom God can be recognized. The Ikhwān also describe the greatness of the Universal Intellect in the context of a commentary upon *āyat al-nūr* of the Qur’an. “As to His saying, The parable of His Light—it means [the

46 Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa-khullān al-wafāʾ, *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, 4 Vols., ed. Buṭrus al-Bustānī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), Vol. 3, Epistle 42. I am relying on the translations in Carmela Baffioni, “The Role of the Divine Imperative (*amr*) in the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ and Related Works,” *Ishraq Islamic Philosophy Yearbook* 4 (2013): 46–70, 48.

47 *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* Vol. 2, Epistle 19, 128. See Baffioni, 50.

48 *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* Vol. 3, Epistle 35. See Baffioni, 49.

49 *Risālat al-Jāmiʿa*, quoted in Baffioni, 59. Translation slightly modified.

light of] the Active Intellect, namely, the first originated being He originated.”<sup>50</sup> Commenting on the phrase “Light upon Light”, the Ikhwān state that the Intellect is “Light upon Light, so the Intellect’s light [is] above the Soul’s light, Allah doth set forth Parables for men.”<sup>51</sup> Just as the early Shi’i *ḥadīth* and Tustarī interpreted God’s Light in *āyat al-nūr* to mean the Light of Muḥammad and ‘Alī, the Ikhwān interpret God’s Light to be the Universal Intellect.

In the schema of the Ikhwān, the Universal Intellect is manifest throughout the Cosmos and in the human form specifically. They describe the Universal Intellect as “the act of the Creator, may He be exalted, which He performed with His own essence; it is the book which He wrote with His own hands.” The Intellect displays God’s “very own form and pattern” (*ṣuratahu wa-mithalahu*) and is supported by His power. In the subsequent passage, the Ikhwān mention the tradition of how Adam is created according to God’s form and pattern.<sup>52</sup> In another passage, the Ikhwān offer the same description of the human form, saying that “he [man] is the book which Allāh has written with His own hands, His handiwork which He Himself has crafted and His word which He has created with His own essence.”<sup>53</sup> The Ikhwān identify the Speaker-Prophets—the seven Speaker-Prophets recognized by the Ismailis (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, the *Qā’im al-qiyāma*) as “the man of knowledge and the figure of religion” (*al-insān al-‘ilmī wa l-shakhs al-dīnī*) and the “universal perfect man” (*al-insān al-kullī l-kāmil*).<sup>54</sup> According to Ebstein, these seven Speaker-Prophets are the human manifestations of the Universal Intellect and, by extension, of God’s creative command. The Command of God “appropriates from among the human virtuous figures the prophets, messengers and righteous men.”<sup>55</sup> The human soul of the Speaker Prophet is supported and infused by divine support (*ta’yīd*), which the Ikhwān describe as “heavenly support and Divine Command (*ta’yīd samawī wa-amr ilāhī*).” This divine support of the Command reaches the human soul through the mediation of the Universal Intellect.<sup>56</sup> The Prophet, described as the “man of knowledge and figure of religion,” is also called “the holy soul supported by the power of the Divine word” (*al-naḥs al-qudsiyya l-mu’ayyada bi-quwwat al-kalima l-ilāhiyya*).<sup>57</sup>

50 *Risālat al-Jāmi’a*, quoted in Baffioni, 63–4.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Epistle 4, translated and quoted in Ebstein, 168.

53 *Risālat al-Jāmi’a*, in Ebstein, 176.

54 Ebstein, 161.

55 *Risālat al-Jāmi’a* in Ebstein, 48.

56 *Risālat al-Jāmi’a*, in *Ibid.*, 60.

57 *Risālat al-Jāmi’a*, in *Ibid.*, 68.

The Epistles of the Ikhwān thus present a Neoplatonization of the idea of the Light of Muḥammad. While they do not employ the precise term Nūr Muḥammad, the Ikhwān elucidate the Neoplatonic idea of the Universal Intellect as the first being originated by means of God's Word, Command, Knowledge, or Power. The Intellect is described as the "light of the Creator", the "supreme veil" of God, and the act and book of God. The cause of the Intellect is the Divine Word or Command, but the Command and Universal Intellect are conjoined (*muttaṣil*) and not ontologically distinct. The emanation of God's Command reaches the world only by means of the Intellect's mediation and all other spiritual and physical beings such as the Universal Soul, Prime Matter, Nature, etc. come into existence and subsist through the Intellect. The human form, in the view of the Ikhwān, is the mirror and representation of the Universal Intellect in the physical world. Both the Universal Intellect and the human being are described as possessing God's form and referred to as the "book" which God wrote by His own hand. The person of the Prophet is called the universal perfect man and receives divine support (*ta'yīd*) from God's Command through the Universal Intellect. The picture that emerges from the Ikhwān's cosmology is that the human form manifests the Universal Intellect generally, while the perfect human being manifests the Universal Intellect and God's Command in the most perfect way. This will become highly important when examining the thought of Ibn al-'Arabī and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī. Therefore, in the thought of the Ikhwān, the Universal Intellect corresponds to the "Light of Muḥammad" and may in fact be identified with it. This is because the Universal Intellect doctrinally conveys the very same theological motifs that early Shi'ī and Sufi exegetes associate with the Light of Muḥammad and 'Alī: the Intellect is the first originated being through God's word, command, power or knowledge; the Intellect is the pre-eminent "light"—corresponding to the light of God mentioned in the *āyat al-nūr*; the Intellect is the means by which all other existents (Universal Soul, Matter, Nature, sublunary world) are created and sustained by God; and finally, Intellect is the celestial archetype for all human beings in general and the Prophet Muḥammad in particular through whom it manifests on earth.

A parallel and more intricate Neoplatonization of the Light of Muḥammad concept takes place in the thought of the Persian Ismaili *dā'ī* Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī. Sijistānī was probably the most prominent Ismaili Neoplatonist of the fourth/tenth century and was engaged in exchanges with his fellow *dā'īs* Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 331/943) and Abu Ḥāṭim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934). Nasafī seems to be the earliest Persian Ismaili *dā'ī* to employ the aforementioned Neoplatonic structure in which the Word or Command of God mediates between God and the Universal Intellect. But it was Sijistānī

who took this Neoplatonic system to a new level in which he recognized the role and authority of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs after being won over to their cause. This is probably one of the reasons why Sijistānī's metaphysics and cosmology became incorporated into Fatimid doctrines by many *dā'īs* in the following century and remain influential even in post-Fatimid Ismaili thought. This section argues that Sijistānī's conceptions of the Universal Intellect and the Speaker-Prophet or *Nāṭiq* are a synthesis of Neoplatonic ideas common to the Ikhwān and some of the early Shi'i *ḥadīth* material.

Before turning to Sijistānī's cosmology, it must be noted that he championed a radical apophatic theology: God transcends and is exalted above all corporeal, metaphysical, and divine attributes. This means God eludes the categories of cause, effect, substance, accident, essence, and existent. He transcends the traditional names and attributes such as power, wisdom, knowledge, life, eternity, etc. Sijistānī also went beyond ordinary negative theology by holding that all positive attributes and their opposites must be negated from God. God is not described and not not described; God is not existent and not non-existent. In this way Sijistānī aimed for the purest expression of *tawḥīd* that human language could allow. This is the theological setting in which Sijistānī explains how God brings all existents into being through His act of origination (*ibdā'*)—variously called His Command (*amr*), Word (*kalima*), Will (*irāda*), Knowledge (*ilm*), Power (*qudra*), Munificence (*jūd*), or Truth (*ḥaqq*).<sup>58</sup> The immediate product and effect of God's origination is the Universal Intellect, also called the Preceder (*al-sābiq*) in the older mytho-gnostic Ismaili cosmology that Sijistānī was familiar with. The Intellect is immaterial, perfect and without disparity, difference or defect.<sup>59</sup> The Intellect is the first, highest and most powerful of all beings, and contains the intelligible seed of all created essences: "Intellect itself is the very thingness of things in their totality and the thingness of things altogether is Intellect."<sup>60</sup> The Intellect also possesses seven distinct powers that are within its substance at all times—eternity (*dahr*), truth (*ḥaqq*), joy (*shurūr*), demonstration (*burhān*), life (*ḥayat*), perfection (*kamāl*), and self-sufficiency (*ghunya*).<sup>61</sup> As in the thought of the Ikhwān, Sijistānī also has to account for the elusive and tenuous relationship between the Command of God and the Universal Intellect. In one respect, the Command is the first cause and the Intellect is the first effect. However, Sijistānī stresses that the two are

58 *Kitāb al-Yanābīr*, tr. Paul E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom: A Study of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's Kitāb al-Yanābīr: Including a Complete English Translation with Commentary and Notes on the Arabic Text* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 97.

59 *Ibid.*, 53.

60 *Ibid.*, 55.

61 *Ibid.*, 68.

not truly separate because once the Intellect exists, it is immediately joined to the Command. In one passage, he writes that “when the Preceder [the Intellect] appeared, that cause united with it and came to exist henceforth as if it is the identity of the Preceder itself.”<sup>62</sup> At the same time, Sijistānī makes the point that the Intellect is the highest of all finite existents while the Command or Origination is infinite. The Intellect is an existent (*ʿayn*) while the Command “is non-being with the sense of denying both beingness (*ʿaysiyya*) and nonbeingness (*laysiyya*).”<sup>63</sup> While the exact relationship between the Command and the Intellect can be the subject of an entire study, it can be better expressed using different terminology. The Command of God is “sheer existence” or unrestricted being which God grants, deploys and spreads upon all created beings and the Universal Intellect, as the first existent, is the first receptacle of the Command qua being. While Sijistānī does not really use the terms “existence” and “essence” in his vocabulary, one can appreciate that the Universal Intellect as the first existent lacks the absolute simplicity of God and is instead comprised of both existence and essence. This is probably why Sijistānī himself says that everything caused by the Command contains duality.<sup>64</sup> Therefore the Command of God is being itself which must be always united with Intellect *qua* essence for the Intellect to exist. Thus, the Command and the Intellect remain logically distinct while existentially united as one substance. The precise metaphysics of the God—Command—Intellect relationship will become important again in the thought of Ibn al-ʿArabī and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī.

In describing the nature of the Intellect with respect to its origination by God and its all-pervading power over creation, Sijistānī makes use of light imagery and symbolism. Referring to God’s origination of the Intellect, he relates how God is “He Who emanates upon the First Existent such lights and such radiance that none can know anything behind it.” God originates the Intellect as the “Lord of Lords” (*rabb al-ʿarbāb*) and as “the wellspring of all corporeal and spiritual light.” God, who transcends all being and all relationships, delegated the governance (*tadbīr*) of the spiritual and corporeal realms of creation to the Universal Intellect.<sup>65</sup>

In a later Persian translation of Sijistānī’s *Kashf al-mahjūb*, the Universal Intellect is described as “the Mercy of God (*rahmat-i khudā*) which was poured out upon the creatures in such a way that every thing had a glitter from the

62 Ibid., 50.

63 Ibid., 66–7.

64 Ibid., 51.

65 Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, ed. Wilferd Madelung and Paul Walker (Tehran: Miras-e-Maktoob, 2016), 3. Special thanks to Paul Walker for making this text accessible to me for my project.

light of the Prime Intellect in accordance with its own ‘measure’ (*miqdār*).<sup>66</sup> Explaining how the Intellect is a luminous substance that is reflected within all creatures, Sijistānī writes that “the Intellect is a light poured forth upon creation, shining in every thing, and its luminosity is in accordance with the measure of the substance of [each] thing, depending on the wide or narrow range of that substance.”<sup>67</sup>

In addition to light imagery, Sijistani discusses how the Intellect is the first “worshipper” of God. In the *Wellsprings*, he devotes an entire section to explain how the words of the *shahāda* originate with the primordial worship performed by the Intellect. The four words of the *shahāda* respectively stand for glorification, attribution, supplication, and exaltation and these all refer to postures of the Intellect in its worship of God. Sijistānī summons his reader “to understand how this *shahāda* was sown in the Preceder’s being so that we are properly equipped to understand the manner by which it worships its Originator, most glorious and exalted is He.”<sup>68</sup> Sijistānī’s depiction of how the Intellect worships God through the *shahāda* contains echoes of the early Shi’i *ḥadīth* material in which the primordial Intellect glorifies God above all attributes and the Lights of Muḥammad and the Imams are the first creatures to utter formulas attesting to the unicity (*tawḥīd*) and the glorification and sanctification (*taḥmīd*, *tamjīd*, *tasbīḥ*, *taqdīs*) of God. It is also reminiscent of Tustarī’s description of the Light of Muḥammad falling prostrate before God for a million years before creation.

In Sijistānī’s metaphysics, all creatures in the world of nature from minerals to animals receive emanations of the intelligible light of the Universal Intellect by means of the Universal Soul, Prime Matter and Nature (see Figure 3). Human beings occupy a special place in the natural order because the human soul, as a part of the Universal Soul, receives spiritual benefits from the Intellect. In general, all human knowledge is ultimately from the Intellect since “those acts of intelligence acquired by us are outpourings of the universal Intellect upon the particular souls (*furū-rikhtan-i ‘aql-i kull ast bar nufūs-i juzvī*), while [Intellect] is one in knowing all things and all knowables.”<sup>69</sup> The highest class of human beings are called the divinely-supported persons (*al-mu’ayyadūn*) because they receive the benefits of Intellect without any cessation or

66 *Kashf al-mahjūb*, tr. Hermann Landolt, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia: Volume 2*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mehdi Amin Razavi (London, New York: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008), 96–7.

67 *Ibid.*, 97.

68 *Wellsprings*, 80.

69 *Kashf al-mahjūb*, tr. Hermann Landolt, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 94.

interruption.<sup>70</sup> Among these *mu'ayyadūn* are the Speaker Prophets, their Legatees (*awṣiyā'*), and the Imams. The Intellect's bestowal of benefits upon the soul of the divinely-inspired person (*mu'ayyad*) is called *ta'yīd* (support, assistance, inspiration). The term *ta'yīd* is derived from the verb *ayyada* mentioned in the Qur'an in connection to God supporting Jesus with the Holy Spirit. But Sijistānī explicitly frames *ta'yīd* as the exclusive function of the Universal Intellect. The Intellect is "the beacon of God's unity from which the light of *ta'yīd* shines",<sup>71</sup> and "the wellspring of *ta'yīd*",<sup>72</sup> while "*ta'yīd* is within the domain of Intellect."<sup>73</sup> The connection between the Intellect and *ta'yīd* reveals the influence of the early Shi'i *ḥadīth* material discussed above in which the Imam Ja'far explicitly connects the terms *ta'yīd* and *'aql*. In one of these *ḥadīths*, God proclaims that He will "strengthen" (*u'ayyidu*) by means of the Intellect and in another tradition, the Imam Ja'far explains that the human being acquires a number of virtues and attributes "if the 'support' of his intelligence is from the light (*ta'yīd 'aqlihi min nūr*)."<sup>74</sup> Thus, Sijistānī's emphasis on *ta'yīd* as the activity of the Universal Intellect demonstrates how his cosmology and epistemology draws on both Neoplatonic concepts and early Shi'i ideas on the light and *ta'yīd* of the first-created Intellect.

The figure of the Speaker Prophet (*nāṭiq*) in Sijistānī's framework is the foremost recipient of *ta'yīd* from the Intellect. The term Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-quḍṣ*) is another term that Sijistānī uses for *ta'yīd* and he accordingly defines the *Nāṭiq* as "that pure man who is inspired with the holy spirit."<sup>74</sup> The Universal Intellect is, therefore, the Light that inspires, emanates, and radiates upon the soul of the Speaker Prophet and the Prophet Muḥammad is the sixth of the Speaker Prophets. The Intellect's *ta'yīd* grants "pure knowledge" upon the inspired persons. This pure knowledge conveyed in *ta'yīd* is contrasted with knowledge obtained through physical and ordinary methods; pure knowledge is beyond the knowledge possessed by astrologers, kings, rational proofs, and scholars. At the same time, the pure knowledge granted in *ta'yīd* allows the divinely-inspired person to guide human beings on how to live in this world and return to the Intellect.<sup>75</sup> The inspired person, by virtue of this *ta'yīd*, also serves as the place of manifestation of the Intellect's attributes and powers.

70 *Wellsprings*, 64.

71 *Ibid.*, 41.

72 *Ibid.*, 45.

73 *Ibid.*, 108.

74 Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 117.

75 *Kashf al-mahjūb*, tr. Hermann Landolt, in *Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, Volume 2, 94–5.

Thus, Sijistānī explains how “prophethood is facilitated for Prophets, namely, by way of the manifestation of the activity of Intellect.” He goes on to describe how “lights were pouring forth from Intellect, and then, an individual body (*shakhs*), having the most complete harmony, the most subtle natural constitution and the most perfect disposition, was fashioned from Nature and Soul in such a way that [this individual] was capable of receiving the spiritual support of Intellect (*ta’yīd-i ‘aql*).”<sup>76</sup>

In Sijistānī’s worldview, the Prophet functions as the creaturely image and vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of the Universal Intellect in the corporeal world. Sijistānī

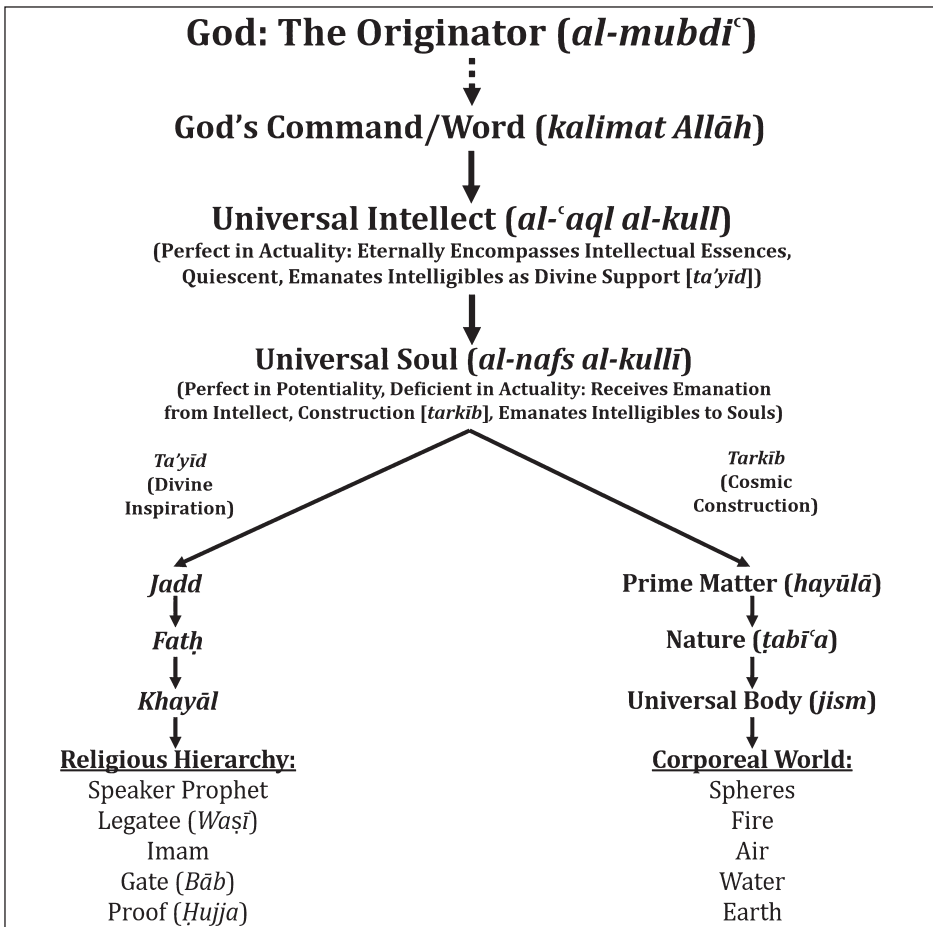


FIGURE 3 Sijistānī’s Ismaili Neoplatonic worldview

76 Ibid., 113.



understood the claim of the Prophets to bring God's Speech to their people as an allegorical description of the Universal Intellect modulating the supra-cosmic Word of God to all levels of existence:

The summons of the Prophets was that Prophethood is the vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of the Intellect in the corporeal world. They invited people to the Word of God sent down to them, because they knew that the Intellect appeared from the Word of God without intermediary. They related Prophethood and the prophetic message (*al-risāla*) to the Speech of the Creator (*kalām al-khāliq*) and Prophethood became the cause of whatever comes after it including the executorship (*waṣīyya*), Imamate, the guides, and the bearers of knowledge, just as the Intellect became the cause of whatever comes after it among the Follower, Matter, Form, and Cosmic Construction (*tarkīb*).<sup>77</sup>

There is a cosmic correspondence between the Intellect as the cause of all spiritual and corporeal creatures and the Prophet as the cause of the ranks below him in the religious hierarchy. Based on the cosmic syzygy between the Universal Intellect and the Prophets, al-Sijistānī described the person of the Prophet as a “corporealized intellect” (*‘aql mujassam*) or a “speaking intellect” (*‘aql nāṭiq*) and his *sharī‘a* as a “prophetically composed intellect” (*‘aql mu‘allaf*).<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Sijistānī spoke of the Universal Intellect as God’s “first messenger” (*awwal rasūl*) and “spiritual messenger” (*raṣūl rūḥānī*) to human beings—to which every person has partial access in the form of their own intellectual faculty—while defining the Prophet as God’s “last messenger” (*ākhir rasūl*) and “corporeal messenger” (*rasūl jismānī*). The intellect within human beings recognizes and corroborates what the Prophets command and forbid, because both the human intellect and prophetic revealed guidance issue from the same spiritual and luminous source—the Universal Intellect. Without an innate intellect present within the human receiver of the prophetic message, what the Prophets teach would be unintelligible.<sup>79</sup>

These various formulations of Sijistānī show that he considered all the Speaker Prophets including Muḥammad as the human reflections of the Universal Intellect on earth such that the Intellect’s attributes and functions are concretely embodied by Muḥammad. The ranks below the Prophet, such as his legatees (*waṣī*) ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Imams, and their proofs (*ḥujjas*) receive

77 Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, 194.

78 Ibid., 72, 95.

79 Ibid., 69–72.

lower degrees of *ta'yīd* from the Intellect.<sup>80</sup> This demonstrates how within the Neoplatonic Ismaili framework, the Universal Intellect is equivalent to the Light of Muḥammad: the historical person of Muḥammad is continuously inspired by the Universal Intellect; Muḥammad functions as the human reflection of the Universal Intellect among humanity and embodies its attributes.

Sijistānī's Neoplatonic framework was further developed by the fifth/eleventh century Ismaili *dā'ī* Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī. Following his Ismaili predecessors, Kirmānī affirmed the absolute transcendence of God beyond all attributes and categories: God transcends existence, substance, cause and effect, and the popular divine names do not validly describe Him due to being finite in their meanings.<sup>81</sup> God brings into being and sustains the realms of spiritual and corporeal existence, consisting of ten eternal Intellects and ten celestial spheres in accordance with al-Fārābī's cosmology.<sup>82</sup> The First Originated Being (*al-mubda'*) and the First Existent (*al-mawjūd al-awwal*) that God originates is the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*). Unlike the prior Ismaili thinkers, Kirmānī did not logically distinguish God's Command from the First Intellect; for him, the Command and Intellect are two names for the same reality. The First Intellect is eternal, living, intellecting, actual, and the actualization of all perfections: "It [the First Intellect] is Living (*ḥayy*) in its entirety, Powerful (*qādir*) in its entirety, Knowing (*'ālim*) in its entirety, Intellecting (*'āqil*) in its entirety, Eternal (*azalī*) in its entirety, All-Encompassing (*muḥīṭ*) in its entirety, and Perfect (*kāmil*) and Complete (*tāmm*) in its entirety."<sup>83</sup> In sum, Kirmānī's First Intellect possesses many of the names and attributes that most Muslim theologians ascribe to God, as he admits: "It is the First in existence and it is not preceded by anything; it is the Cause to which the existence of all existents is affixed; it is the Goal of the paths, it is Light and Luminescence, Glory, Exaltedness, Sublimity, Greatness, Power, and Perfection; and it is Pure Actuality in existence without intermediary between it and the Transcendent."<sup>84</sup> To the First Intellect belong the most hallowed divine names of *al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm*

80 Walker, *Early Philosophical Shi'ism*, 183.

81 For al-Kirmānī's understanding of the concept of God, see Faquir Muḥammad Hunzai, "The Concept of *Tawḥīd* in the Thought of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī," (Ph.D. Dissertation, McGill University, 1986).

82 This is fully documented in Daniel De Smet, "Al-Fārābī's Influence on Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī's Theory of Intellect and Soul," in Peter Adamson (ed.), *In the Age of al-Fārābī* (London: Warburg Institute, 2008), 131–50.

83 Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'aql*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983), 188–9. My translations from this text have greatly benefited from the input of Khaled El-Rouayheb.

84 *Ibid.*, 208.

and *Allāh*.<sup>85</sup> This entails the theophanization of the First Intellect in Ismaili thought in the sense that the First Intellect “stands-in” for the Transcendent God in terms of possessing relationships with created existents. In Kirmānī’s worldview, the First Intellect spiritually produces or emanates two effects: an incorporeal actual intellect called the Second Intellect and a potential intellect called Prime Matter and Form. Likewise, the Second Intellect emanates two effects—a Third Intellect and the Sphere of Fixed Stars. This process continues until there are ten eternal actual Intellects and ten material spheres—with the earth being the lowest material sphere.<sup>86</sup> The First Intellect stands as the summit of the intelligible and natural hierarchies; this Intellect is the “First Cause” of the all existents and constitutes the furthest limit of human intellectual and spiritual realization while God transcends the entire system (see Figure 4).

In the world of human beings, who are distinguished from other living things due to their rational souls, the most perfect human souls such as the Speaker Prophets including Muḥammad are the recipients of continuous *ta’yīd* from the First Intellect. As Kirmānī explained, this *ta’yīd* comes into the Prophet’s soul as the Holy Spirit, which is a continuous intelligible radiation from the First Intellect: “The Spirit is the blessing of holiness and the celestial world

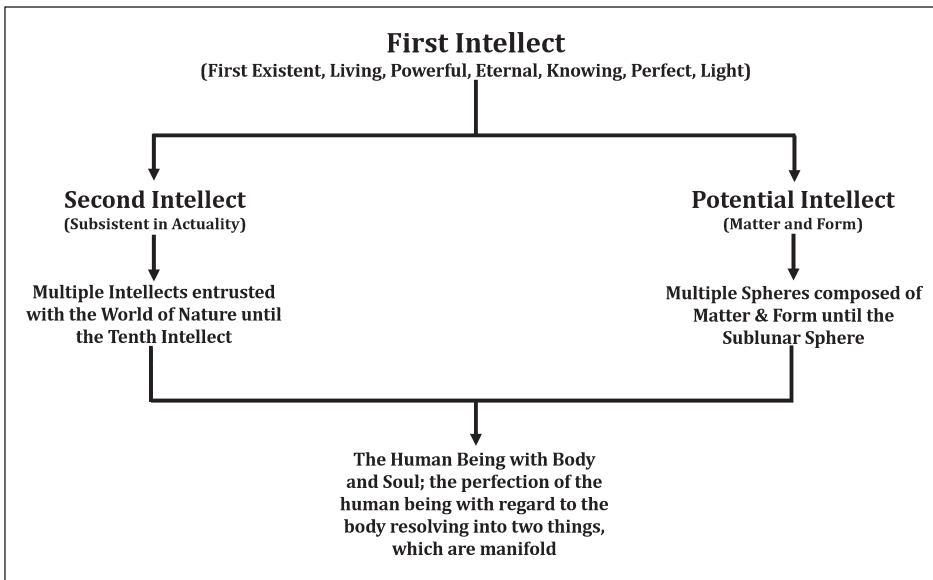


FIGURE 4 Kirmānī’s model of the world of intellect and world of nature

85 Ibid., 189–95.

86 Ibid., 168.

(*malakūt*) emanating from [God's] Command, which is the First Originated Being and the First Existent."<sup>87</sup> The Prophet Muḥammad's soul is effectively a mirror-like receptacle (*qābila*) for the emanations and the attributes of the First Intellect: "The divinely supported soul through its being essentially a life, power, knowledge, and a substance in actuality, is distinguished by the virtues (*faḍā'il*) through which the First [Intellect] is distinguished."<sup>88</sup> As Kirmānī further explains, the person of the Prophet Muḥammad—called the Speaker Prophet—is the image or representation of the First Intellect in the created world:

The Speaker Prophet (*al-nāṭiq*) in the World of Religion is a likeness (*mathal*) of the First Intellect in the Abode of Origination. His being the cause for the existence of the World of Religion entails that the Origination, which is the First Originated Being and the First Intellect, is a cause for the existence of the Emanated Intellects in the World of Holiness. [The Prophet], who exists within perfection according to the upper limit by which he dispenses with the need for human parables (*amthāl*) in the expansion of blessing, divine governance, and bringing souls to the Enclosure of Holiness entails that the First Intellect is within perfection according to the upper limit by which it dispenses with requiring anything else in establishing wisdom.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, Muḥammad is the human manifestation of the First Intellect in the world and functions in the human realm in a way analogous to the role of the First Intellect in the spiritual realm (see Figure 5). The Prophet Muḥammad is the summit and cause of a religious hierarchy just as the First Intellect is the cause of the intelligible world. Just as the First Intellect has two relationships—to the Second Intellect and to Prime Matter, the Prophet Muḥammad has two relationships: "a relationship to the World of Holiness and a relationship to the World of Nature."<sup>90</sup> The First Intellect emanates two effects—the Second Intellect that resembles the First Intellect and Prime Matter/Form that is a passive potential intellect. Likewise, the Prophet Muḥammad produces two effects—his successor Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib who spiritually resembles him as an Imam in actuality and the Quranic Scripture (the Book), which is an Imam only in the state of potentiality: "What exists from the Speaker Prophet

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87 Ibid., 511.

88 Ibid., 550–1.

89 Ibid., 213.

90 Ibid., 213.

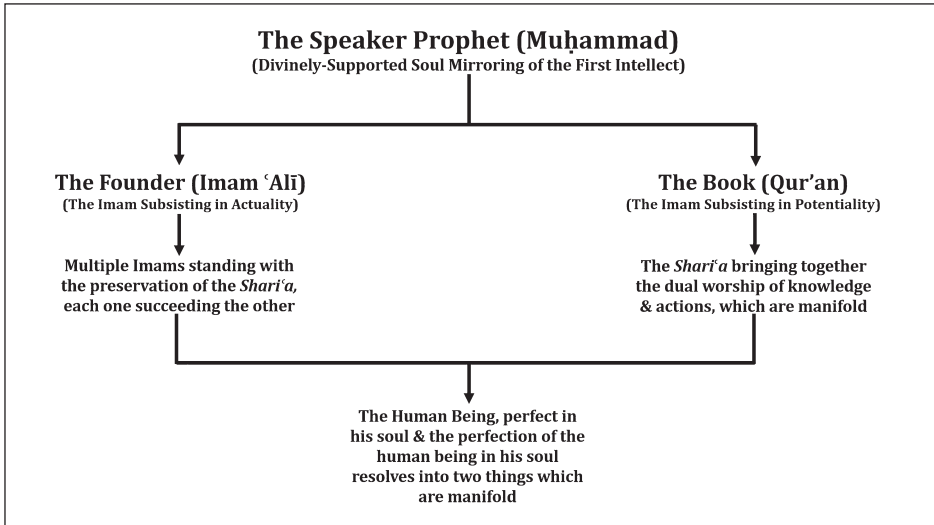


FIGURE 5 Kirmānī's model of the world of religion mirroring the world of intellect

is likewise two things: the Legatee (*al-waṣī*) standing in his place in actuality and the Book (*al-kitāb*), which is an Imam subsisting in potentiality. It is in the station of Matter and Form which are the materials (*mādda*) enclosing each thing.”<sup>91</sup> In this Ismaili perspective, the Prophet Muḥammad and each Imam of his progeny are ontologically superior to the Qur’ān, which serves as a passive product to be moulded by their interpretations. Based on these various attributes and relationships, the Prophet Muḥammad in the corporeal world resembles the First Intellect in the spiritual world. The Ismaili Imams from the progeny of Muḥammad continue to function as the likenesses of the First Intellect in the world of humanity. In this way the First Intellect is the spiritual archetype or celestial essence of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imams who succeed him.

In accordance with their own respective worldviews, the Ikhwān, Sijistānī, and Kirmānī Neoplatonized the concept of the Light of Muḥammad. They accomplish this feat by affirming the ontological status of the Universal Intellect or First Intellect as the First Originated Being and the First Existent that God brings into existence through His creative Word or Command. They cosmologically situate the Universal Intellect as the locus of the intelligible forms and the divine names and explicitly identify the Intellect as God’s Light (*nūr*) manifesting in and through the spiritual and corporeal realms of created

91 Ibid., 241–2.

being. They further depict the First Intellect as the primary agent and source of the divine inspiration and support (*ta'yīd*) that flows to God's Prophets including the historical Muḥammad. Within these Ismaili cosmologies, the soul of Muḥammad serves as the mirror of the First Intellect, and in his religious functions, Muḥammad reflects the attributes of the First Intellect as its human image. It should also be kept in mind that the Ismaili doctrine of *manifestation, likeness, or mirroring* is quite different and starkly opposed to the idea of incarnation or indwelling (*ḥulūl*). According to the concept of manifestation, the First Intellect emanates the lights of its *ta'yīd* upon the soul of the Prophet Muḥammad, which is akin to a mirror-like receptacle; the qualities of the First Intellect are reflected within the Prophet without the First Intellect materially entering into or being contained within the Prophet's physical body; this is similar to how the light of the Sun is reflected in the Moon even while the Sun itself remains external to the Moon. The Ismaili Neoplatonization of the Light of Muḥammad as the Universal Intellect subsisted through the Ismaili theologies of later periods.

## 5 Eleventh–Twelfth Centuries: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt (d. 526/1131)

The Neoplatonic ideas of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and other Ismaili thinkers influenced the eclectic thought of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. One of his later works, *The Niche of Lights* (*mishkāṭ al-anwār*), betrays both Ismaili Neoplatonic imprints and a Sufi vision that prefigures the perspective of monorealism or *wahdat al-wujūd*. Recent studies have shown that al-Ghazālī appropriated certain features of eleventh century Ismaili cosmology and the ideas of Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 481/1088) in particular.<sup>92</sup> One of the most prominent features of this Ismaili cosmology is the concept of the Universal Intellect already discussed above. While al-Ghazālī does not explicitly mention the term *al-Nūr al-Muḥammadī*, his *Niche of Lights* subscribes to a hierarchical vision of the spiritual Cosmos that shares important similarities to Neoplatonic Ismaili thought. In al-Ghazālī's understanding of the spiritual world, the first and highest "light" or "intellect" of the celestial hierarchy is the Pen or the First Intellect and shares many features with the concept of the Light of Muḥammad.

Al-Ghazālī presents a monorealist doctrine in the *Niche of Lights* in which God is the Real Light and the only real existent (*al-mawjūd al-ḥaqq*) while

92 Khalil Andani, "The Merits of the Bāṭiniyya: al-Ghazālī's Appropriation of Isma'ili Cosmology," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 29/2 (May 2018): 181–229.

all other existents have borrowed existence and are purely non-existent in reality.<sup>93</sup> As he says, “there is none in existence save God ... when the essence of anything other than He is considered in respect of its own essence, it is sheer non-existence.”<sup>94</sup> Al-Ghazālī’s cosmological model features the existence of two realms—a spiritual world and a physical world. The former consists of a spiritual hierarchy of angels, lights or intellects with one specific light, intellect, or angel closest to the Lordly Presence at the highest level. This supreme intellect of the spiritual world is “the light nearest to the First Source” due to which it “is more worthy of the name ‘light’ because it is highest in level (*a’lā rutba*).”<sup>95</sup> In other works of al-Ghazālī, the supreme intellect or angel is called the Pen and the First Intellect (*al-‘aql al-awwal*) along with other names like the Throne (*al-‘arsh*) and the Obeyed One (*al-muṭā‘*).<sup>96</sup> Al-Ghazālī notes in the *Veils Section* of this text that the Obeyed One is worshipped as God by a certain group of Muslims but emphasises that in reality, this Obeyed One is the highest level of God’s creation and corresponds to the Sun among the sensory lights. The supreme light, Pen, Throne and Obeyed One of al-Ghazālī seems to be the closest corresponding concept to the Light of Muḥammad and the Universal Intellect. The Ghazālīan text, *Ma‘ārij al-quds*, explicitly speaks of the First Intellect or Pen as the First Originated Being (*mubda‘ al-awwal*) by God’s Command in the very same terms as contemporary Ismaili authors like Nāṣir-i Khusraw.<sup>97</sup>

The worldview presented in *The Niche of Lights* also raises another all-important issue concerning the creative activity of God and His relationship to created existents. After explaining how a created thing, considered in and of itself, is sheer non-existence, al-Ghazālī remarks that “when it is viewed in respect of the ‘face’ (*wajh*) to which existence flows forth from the First, the Real, then it is seen as existing not in itself but through the face adjacent to (or turned to) its Giver of Existence. Hence, the only existent (*mawjūd*) is the Face of God.”<sup>98</sup> He summarizes this explanation by saying that any existent thing “viewed in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent but when viewed in terms of the Face of God, it exists. Hence, nothing exists but God and His

93 *Mishkāt al-anwār*, tr. David Buchman, *The Niche of Lights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press for Brigham Young University, 1998), 15.

94 *Ibid.*, 16.

95 *Niche of Lights*, 14.

96 Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280; *Niche of Lights*, 51.

97 Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 280.

98 *Niche of Lights*, 16.

Face.”<sup>99</sup> Ghazālī’s mention and emphasis of *God and His Face* as being the only real existent suggests that there is more to Ghazālī’s worldview than a simple monorealism. Hermann Landolt concludes as much when he writes:

Note that the image of the “Face of God” plays here exactly the role of the one entity to which existence emanates from the One; and it is for this reason that—contrary to ordinary Qur’an interpretation—it is clearly not taken to mean the divine “Essence” itself. But neither is it a separate reality such as the “Obeyed one” of the “Veils-section.” The “Face of God” is surely not “originated”, nor has it anything to do with the physical motion of the Universe. Rather, it is nothing else than the “flow” of existence itself.<sup>100</sup>

This “Face of God” is not the supreme intellect or first originated being—as the text never suggests that. And yet the Face of God is not identical to the Essence of God. The Face of God appears to be an intermediary level of being between God’s Essence and created existents, but still situated on the Divine side of the God-creature division. This is significant because the Face of God serves as a Ghazālīan version of the Ismaili Neoplatonic doctrine of the Command of God that is the cause of the Universal Intellect and all existents. In a similar way, for al-Ghazālī, the Face of God is both distinct from God and the proximate cause of the creation of all things including the First Intellect or Obeyed One. Al-Ghazālī’s monorealist worldview, in this respect, may be the precursor to the metaphysics and cosmology of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and Ibn al-‘Arabī. While al-Ghazālī does not identify either the Face of God or the Obeyed One with the Light of Muḥammad, one finds this more explicit in the thought of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, to whom we now turn.

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt read al-Ghazālī’s works and admitted that they saved him from his own spiritual crisis. Most importantly, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was among the first Sufi thinkers after Sahl al-Tustarī to offer an explicit theory of the Light of Muḥammad that focuses both on the cosmogonic principle and the person of Muḥammad. We argue that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was among the earliest to explicitly “theophanize” the Light of Muḥammad by portraying it as an uncreated aspect of God’s Essence and as the final goal of the mystical quest. In this respect, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt presents the Light of Muḥammad as the primordial theophany or manifestation of God’s Essence. This

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>100</sup> Hermann Landolt, “*Ghazālī and ‘Religionswissenschaft’*: Some Notes on the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* for Professor Charles J. Adams”, *Asiatische Studien*, 45:19–72, 61.



theophanization of the Light of Muḥammad by ‘Ayn al-Qudāt prefigured how Ibn al-‘Arabī and his interpreters came to understand the same motif. Mohammad Rustom, whose forthcoming monograph deals with the rich constellation of ideas in ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s thought, has remarked that the Nūr Muḥammad idea “is developed by ‘Ayn al-Qudāt in a doctrinal manner unlike any writer before him, and is closely linked to what we can call his wider ‘Muḥammadology.’”<sup>101</sup>

In his *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq*, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt considers the difficulties in understanding God in His essential oneness. He explains that God, as Necessary Being, is absolutely one in terms of “oneness of essence” (*aḥadiyya*). At the same time, God’s Essence has a necessary concomitant called the “oneness of existence” (*waḥda*). The difference between *aḥadiyya* and *waḥda* is explained by ‘Ayn al-Qudāt as follows:

Oneness (*waḥda*) is a concomitant of the Essence of the Necessary Being (*dhāt wājib al-wujūd*). How can oneness not be Its concomitant when unity (*aḥadiyya*), which is more particular than oneness, is a concomitant of It?... If you reflect upon the relation of the Essence as such, which is Necessary in Itself, you will discover that it is one without multiplicity in any way whatsoever. When the wayfarers look at this Essence with the eyes of their hearts, they discover it to be this way, without doubt. However, on account of the multiplicity of the relations (*nisab*) of this Essence to the other existents which derive existence from that Necessary Essence—not from themselves—the wayfarers have to depend upon the alternation of Its standpoints (*‘ibārāt*) such that the realities of these relations can be conveyed, by way of these standpoints, to the understanding of the weak-minded (*du‘afā’*). Thus, since this Essence is related to the effusion (*ṣudūr*) of the existents which [emerge] from It, and it is known that they are contingents (*mumkināt*) and that it is undoubtedly the Necessary who existentiated them, the standpoint of this relation which is between It and the existents is called “power;” sometimes, from [the perspective] of another relation, it is called “will.”<sup>102</sup>

101 Mohammed Rustom, “Everything Muḥammad: The Image of the Prophet in the Writings of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt,” *Sacred Web* 35 (2015): 33–40, 34.

102 ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq*, translation in Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Spirit: The Mystical Theology of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt* (forthcoming), Chapter 4, 38. The author kindly shared his translation of this passage with me for use in this article. Cf. the translation in Landolt, *Ghazali and Religionswissenschaft*, 58.

In this passage, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt explains how *wahda*—oneness of existence—as a concomitant of the Necessary Being comes into view only when one considers God in relation to the procession of existents from Him. In other words, when God is considered in terms of His relationship to created and contingent existents whose existence always depends upon God, then this relationship between God and contingent existents is called “Power” (*qudra*), “Will” (*irāda*) or some other attribute. ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s comments are highly significant because the terms (*wahda, qudra, irāda*) he uses to describe God’s relationship to contingent existents in which He continuously bestows existence upon them—are precisely the same terms by which the Ikhwān and the Ismaili Neoplatonists designate the Word/Command of God that causes the First Intellect. In other words, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt has effectively proposed a concept that is the equivalent of the Command of God doctrine upheld by the Ismaili Neoplatonists. It is also not difficult to appreciate how the *wahda/qudra/irāda* of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and the Word/Command of the Ismaili Neoplatonists corresponds to the Face of God in Ghazālī’s *Niche of Lights*. For all these thinkers, an essential intermediary or “concomitant” of God—which is both distinct from and yet not ontologically other than God and still higher than even the first originated being (the Intellect)—is posited as a necessary part of their metaphysics. This intermediary or concomitant is variously designated as the Face of God, Oneness, Power, Will, Command or Word of God. This concept of a necessary intermediary or concomitant of God’s Essence in relation to created beings informs ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s view of the Light of Muḥammad.

Throughout his *Tamhīdāt*, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt illustrates his metaphysical understanding of the Light of Muḥammad. Referring to 24:35, “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth”, he explains that God is the Substance (*jawhar*) while the “Light” (*nūr*) mentioned in the verse refers to an accident (*‘araḍ*) of God *qua* Substance. This Light *qua* accident comprises two lights, a higher and a lower light called the Light of Muḥammad and the light of Iblis respectively.<sup>103</sup> Regardless of the numerous issues this formulation generated (especially the role of Iblis), for the purpose of this study, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s presentation is significant because it implies that the Light of Muḥammad is an “uncreated” accident (*‘araḍ*) conjoined to God’s Substance as opposed to being an originated being such as the First Intellect. This may be one of the earliest formulations of the Light of Muḥammad where it is presented as an uncreated aspect of God’s Essence instead of the first created being. When ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s prior

103 David Emmanuel Sing, *Sainthood and Revelatory Discourse: An Examination of the Basis for the Authority of the Bayān in Mahwī Islam* (Oxford: Regnum International, 2003), 59. See also Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 252 for more quotes ‘Ayn al-Qudāt on this topic.

mentioned discussion on God's *wahda*, *qudra* or *irāda* is read in conjunction with his view of the Light of Muḥammad as the uncreated accident with God, it follows that God's will, power, and oneness *is* this Light of Muḥammad. Thus, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt views the Light of Muḥammad as an uncreated aspect and eternal concomitant of God.

This understanding of the Light of Muḥammad is the basis for 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's claim that "all of the existents have been created on account of Muḥammad."<sup>104</sup> This follows from the very fact that God's meta-cosmic relationship to each contingent being—by which existence "flows" from God to each and every contingent being—*is* the Light of Muḥammad. 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's understanding of the metaphysical reality of Muḥammad finds expression in his reverence for the historical person of Muḥammad. Accordingly, he reveres the Prophet as supra-human entity, remarking that "whoever calls the pure spirit of Mustafa 'human' is an unbeliever ... This is a spirit that is pure of humanity, and is free of this world."<sup>105</sup> 'Ayn al-Quḍāt regards Muḥammad's physical body as exalted and only having the appearance of other humans. He views the Prophet Muḥammad, even as an individual, to be entirely spiritual and luminous and even more luminous than all the prophets: "O friend! All of the prophets are light, but Muḥammad is more light than all of them."<sup>106</sup> The idea that the Light of Muḥammad is an uncreated concomitant of God's Essence is perhaps the metaphysical basis of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's somewhat elliptical and oft repeated claim that God's love for Muḥammad is actually God's love for Himself as opposed to God's love for a created being:

Alas! From these words you imagine that God's love for Muṣṭafā is for Muṣṭafā. But this love for him is for Himself. Have you not heard it from that great one, who said, "God has fallen in love with Himself so much that He has no care for anybody, and He does not turn toward anybody"? Yet people imagine that He is their lover!<sup>107</sup>

The only way that the above statement makes sense logically is if Muḥammad's Light, reality or essence is identical with God in a certain respect. If the Light of Muḥammad is defined as the eternal concomitant or aspect of God *qua* Necessary Being or Substance, then God's love for Muḥammad essentially reduces to God's love for Himself. The only difference between God's Essence

<sup>104</sup> Rustom, "Everything Muḥammad," 34.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

and the Light of Muḥammad would be in terms of manifestation—in the same way that the image of an object within a mirror is essentially nothing other than the original object, despite the object and the reflection remaining formally distinct. This appears to be what ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt alludes to when he says that “God is only a lover of Himself. Thus, I say that God’s love for Muṣṭafā is also love for Himself.”<sup>108</sup>

Framing the Light of Muḥammad as the uncreated manifestation of God as opposed to a created entity (like the Intellect) has further implications on ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s theory of the spiritual ascent of the mystic. In his own writings, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt stresses how the ultimate goal and highest level of spiritual realization for a human being is the Spirit or Light of Muḥammad, as in the passages below:

Alas! Listen to these words: the end and conjunction of all of the wayfarers is with the light of Muṣṭafā [the Prophet Muḥammad]. However, I do not know with whom Muṣṭafā’s end and conjunction will be! “He who sees me has seen the Real.” The explanation of this statement has been done (T 303, § 398).<sup>109</sup>

When man reaches this station—namely that he becomes intoxicated from the wine of knowledge—when he reaches the perfection of intoxication and the end of his own finality, the spirit of Muḥammad—*A messenger has indeed come unto you from yourselves* (Q 9:128)—is displayed to him. “Blessed be the one who sees me and believes in me.” The robe of his days is prepared. He finds a wealth beyond which there is no other wealth. Whoever knows his own self, knows the spirit of Muḥammad. And whomever knows the spirit of Muḥammad has placed the foot of aspiration in knowing the Essence of God: “He who sees me has seen the Real.”<sup>110</sup>

There are two stations for the wayfarer at the end of the path. The first station is that the light of “no god but God” is seen in the veil of the light of Muḥammad the Messenger of God just as the shining moon stands in the midst of the sun. The second station is that the light of Muḥammad is seen in the light of God, like the light of the stars in the light of the shining moon. (T 77, § 108)

108 Ibid., 39.

109 These passages are all translated in Muḥammad Rustom, *Inrushes of the Spirit*. I obtained these quoted passages from Oludamini Ogunnaiké, “Annihilation in the Messenger Revisited: Clarifications on a Contemporary Sufi Practice and its Precedents,” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1/2 (2016): 13–34, 21–2, 27.

110 Rustom, “Everything Muḥammad,” 40.

In the above statements, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt puts forth an understanding of the spiritual journey of the Sufis that reaches its apex in the Light of Muḥammad. The Light of Muḥammad is where the mystical quest reaches its final consummation. This is noteworthy because the prior Sufi discourses, such the spiritual itinerary depicted by al-Ghazālī, locate the telos of the mystical journey in a union with God. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt identifies the highest station of human perfection, self-knowledge, and spiritual conjunction with the Light of Muḥammad: “Whoever knows his own self, knows the spirit of Muḥammad.” The realized mystic even perceives the *shahāda*, “no god but God”, at two spiritual stations—both of which are permeated with the Light of Muḥammad. In the first level the Light of Muḥammad functions as the place of manifestation, akin to a veil; at the second level, the mystic perceives the Light of Muḥammad in the Light of God. In all cases, it appears that the spiritual journey revolves around the Light of Muḥammad until finally merging with it.

The ideas of al-Ghazālī and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt demonstrate how Islamic mystical discourses in the twelfth century incorporated both the Neoplatonic and Sufi monorealist trends into a discussion of the Light of Muḥammad. In this respect, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s contribution to the discussion is novel because he is the first Muslim thinker to portray the Light of Muḥammad as an uncreated accident, concomitant, or manifestation of God’s Essence. This leads him toward a very high “Muḥammadology”, permeated with a devotional reverence for the person of Muḥammad, the exaltation of Muḥammad’s person above the level of humanity, and an understanding of the mystical journey culminating in union with the Light of Muḥammad as opposed to God’s Essence. In sum, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt is the first Muslim thinker to “theophanize” the Light of Muḥammad by portraying it as an uncreated cosmic principle and by locating Muḥammad’s Light as the endpoint of humanity’s spiritual quest. What one does not find in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s vision is an overt Neoplatonic framework. However, the aforementioned Neoplatonic understanding of the Light of Muḥammad in Ismaili discourses and many of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s insights find a synthesis in the spiritual vision of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) to whom we now turn.

## 6 Twelfth–Thirteenth Centuries: Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240)

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views on any particular subject are scattered throughout his writings, and he often discusses issues using a variety of terms drawn from different theological and philosophical traditions. His worldview can be approached from at least three angles or points of view—theological, ontological, and cosmological. From a theological perspective, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s scheme of

reality consists of the Divine Essence, the Divine Names, and the Divine Acts. The Divine Essence is God *qua* God without any reference to other things. The Essence of God is Absolute Being (*wujūd muṭlaq*) and transcends all descriptions, names, and attributions. The Divine Names refer to God's relationships with His creation—which is a perspective in which God is qualified and described by the Attributes of Life, Knowledge, Power, Speech, etc. The Divine Acts refer to all created things insofar as each created existent (*mawjūd*) is a trace (*athar*) or locus of manifestation of one or more of the Divine Names.<sup>111</sup> From an ontological perspective, God *qua* Essence is Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*). Everything other than God's Essence, such as the myriad of created beings or existents (*mawjūdāt*), exists only through Absolute Being. "The existence attributed to each created thing is the Being of the Real" while the essence or entity of each thing is non-existent in itself and merely serves as a *mazhar* or locus of manifestation for God *qua* Being.<sup>112</sup> God is true *wujūd* and the opposite of *wujūd* is absolute non-being (*al-'adam al-muṭlaq*). Therefore, all created existents occupy a sort of vague ontological status that Ibn al-'Arabī calls relative non-existence (*al-'adam al-idāfī*). In this framework, the different kinds of existents can be arranged according to various levels or "presences." The Essence of God is Absolute Existence and the first self-manifestation of God's Essence is called the Level of the Divine Names or the Divinity. This is followed by the Spiritual World, the World of Imagination, and finally, the Corporeal World. Each of these levels under the Essence of God is a *barzakh*—an isthmus which mediates between two different levels of reality while possessing the properties of both. Manifest existence as a whole is a *barzakh* between Absolute Being and absolute non-being.<sup>113</sup> Finally, Ibn al-'Arabī's worldview is also presented in the context of Neoplatonic cosmology. In this schema, the Essence of God brings the Cosmos into existence through the Divine Word, Speech or Command. This Command is called the Breath of the All-Merciful (*al-nafas al-rahmānī*) and is symbolized by a Cloud. The Command corresponds to what the Ikhwān and Ismaili Neoplatonists call the Word or Command of God. Another name that Ibn 'Arabī gives to the All-Merciful Breath is "the Real by means of which the creation takes place" (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*). The Breath or Cloud is metaphorically the "space" in which originated or created existents take form—beginning with the First Intellect, and continuing with the Universal Soul and the Spiritual World as a whole. Universal Nature and Prime Matter emanate from the Universal Soul

111 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge (SPK)*, 7–9.

112 Ibid., 92.

113 Ibid., 14–15.

and give rise to the Universal Body. The Universal Body is the locus in which the Corporeal World—containing the Spheres, the Elements and the mineral, vegetal and animal Kingdoms—is formed. The human being is the goal of creation and represents its actualization as the mirror of the Divine Names and the microcosm.<sup>114</sup>

Created beings do not have any relationship with the Essence of God, but rather, relationships exist only through what Ibn al-‘Arabī calls the “Level” (*martaba*) of Divinity (*ulūhiyya*). From an ontological point of view, the Level of Divinity is the first and highest self-manifestation of God *qua* Essence. From a theological point of view, the Divinity is the presence of all the Most Beautiful Names that describe both God and refer to the features of created existents. The Divine Names can be conceived as relationships between God *qua* Divinity and created existents.<sup>115</sup> For this reason, the Divinity is called the One/Many (*al-wāhid al-kathīr*). The Essence of God does not have relationships with anything but the Divinity has relationships and demands relationships—since the Divine Names are nothing more than relationships with Life as their single essence. Even the name *Allāh* refers to the Divinity or Level: “That which is denoted by the name *Allāh* demands the cosmos and everything within it. So this name is like the name “king” or “sovereign.” Hence, it is a name of the Level, not the Essence.”<sup>116</sup> In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmological scheme, God originates the Cosmos by His Command or Word “Be”, which is called the Breath of the All-Merciful.<sup>117</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī further refers to the Breath as the Cloud that contains all the forms and qualities that will become manifest in the Cosmos: “The Cloud is identical with the Breath of the All-merciful.... The Cloud is the Real through whom takes place the creation of everything. It is called the ‘Real’ since it is identical with the Breath.”<sup>118</sup> The Breath / Cloud is variously called “the Real through Whom Creation takes place (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*)”, the Supreme *Barzakh*, the Reality of Realities, the Sphere of Life, and the

114 For the cosmological model see Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994), 280–3.

115 Chittick, *SPK*, 50.

116 *Ibid.*, 50.

117 *Ibid.*, 126.

118 *Ibid.*, 128, 134. There is a subtle distinction between the All-Merciful Breath and the Cloud that Ibn al-‘Arabī affirms—technically the Cloud is derived from the Breath (p. 126). However, Ibn al-‘Arabī also says that “the immutable substance (*al-jawhar al-thābit*) is the Cloud, which is nothing other than the Breath of the All-merciful” (p. 127), a claim he repeats elsewhere: “The Cloud is identical with the Breath of the All-merciful.... The Cloud is the Real through whom takes place the creation of everything. It is called the ‘Real’ since it is identical with the Breath” (p. 134). Thus, the Breath and Cloud are two concepts about one and the same entity.

One-Many (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*) because the entire Cosmos comes into existence by means of this Breath.<sup>119</sup> The Breath or Cloud is both “a description of God” (*wasf ilāhī*) and a description of the Cosmos with respect to the Divine Names like Knowing, Living, Speaking, etc. since it contains the forms of the Divine Names that human beings refer to in speech.<sup>120</sup> Ontologically speaking, since God *qua* Essence is absolute *wujūd*, and the Cosmos is relatively non-existent, the Breath as the highest *barzakh* would occupy a middle position. This is confirmed when Ibn al-Arabī writes that the Breath/Cloud/Reality of Realities “is neither existent nor non-existent, neither temporally originated nor eternal, but eternal in the eternal and temporally originated in the temporally originated.”<sup>121</sup> Based on this preliminary examination, the Divinity—which is, theologically speaking, the domain or “Level” of God’s Names and Attributes—is cosmologically identical to the Breath of the All-Merciful/Cloud/Reality of Realities given how these concepts are characterized by Ibn al-Arabī.

The first important issue to examine in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s worldview is the exact status of the Light of Muḥammad or the Muḥammadan Reality as he tends to call it. The difficulty arises because Ibn al-‘Arabī’s comments can appear ambiguous and less than definitive on this identification. The background of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Neoplatonic thought and its continuity with the views of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ has well been established in Ebstein’s study.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, Yousef Casewit has studied the antecedents of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ideas as found in the thought of the Andalusian mystic Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141).<sup>123</sup> The latter put forth the idea of the Universal Servant (*al-‘abd al-kullī*) as the intermediary between God and the created world. The Universal Servant is created through God’s command and contains all of created being as a single totality (*jumla*) in an eternal universal mode. According to Casewit, Ibn Barrajān’s idea of the Universal Servant is based on the Ikhwān’s doctrine of the Universal Intellect and prefigures Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own ideas.<sup>124</sup> In several passages in the *Futūḥāt* analyzed by Ebstein, Ibn al-‘Arabī states that the Muḥammadan Reality is the same as the First Intellect. For example, in the third chapter, he writes that

119 Ibid., 141.

120 Ibid., 34–5, 138.

121 Ibid., 136. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes that “the Reality of Realities possesses temporal origination in the temporally originated thing and eternity in the Eternal” (p. 137). He further states that “the Cloud is that which we have mentioned as eternal in the eternal and temporally originated in the temporally originated” (ibid.). Therefore, the Reality of Realities and the Cloud are one and the same entity.

122 Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus*.

123 Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barrajān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

124 Ibid., 173–8.



“the originated object of action (*al-maʿfūl al-ibdaʿī*) is the Muḥammadan Reality according to us and the First Intellect according to others. And it is the Exalted Pen which God originated from nothing (*min ghayr shayʿ*).”<sup>125</sup> In the sixth chapter, he states that “the Reality of Muḥammad, peace be upon him, is named the Intellect.”<sup>126</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī also discusses how the cosmological rank of the human being in general corresponds to the First Intellect: “He [man] corresponds to the First Intellect and is connected to it ... Man became attached to the [first] Intellect, in the same manner as the end of the circle is attached to its beginning; and so, a circle ensued.”<sup>127</sup> Based on such statements, many scholars have simply equated the Muḥammadan Reality and the First Intellect.<sup>128</sup> In this respect, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s view is nearly identical to that of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ who also revere the human being as the reflection of the Universal Intellect in the world.

At the same time, it must be recalled that in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmology, the First Intellect is the first originated being in the spiritual world and the Breath of the All-Merciful occupies a higher ontological station than the First Intellect. Expressed in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s own imagery, the Breath is the all-encompassing Cloud (*ʿamā*) and the First Intellect is one of a number of ecstatic spirits to take form within the Cloud.<sup>129</sup> Thus, if the Reality or Light of Muḥammad is the First Intellect and nothing else, then the All-Merciful Breath or Level of Divinity still stands between the Essence of God and the Light of Muḥammad. It is worth noting that in another section of the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-ʿArabī equates the Reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the Perfect Man with the All-Merciful Breath when he writes that “the Perfect Man, in reality (*ʿalā ḥaqīqa*), is the Real by means of which (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*)—that is, by reason of which—the world was created.” The term *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi* is another name for the All-Merciful Breath and the Supreme *Barzakh* that mediates between God’s Essence and created existents.<sup>130</sup> This statement makes it apparent that the Reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is the All-Merciful Breath or the Level of

125 *Al-Futūḥāt*, i, 140 (chapter 3), in Ebstein, 152.

126 *Al-Futūḥāt*, i, 169 (chapter 6), in Ebstein, 152.

127 *Al-Futūḥāt*, i, 139 (chapter 3), in Ebstein, 155.

128 See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (University of California Press, 1984), 237–8; Robert J. Dobie, *Logos and Revelation: Ibn ʿArabī, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2010), 52, 226, 240–4. The views of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s interpreters are also unclear. For example, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī seems to suggest that the Muḥammadan Reality is the First Intellect while ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī appears to place the Muḥammadan Reality above the First Intellect, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 166–7, 188–90.

129 Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 165.

130 *Al-Futūḥāt*, ii, 390 (chapter 198), in Ebstein, 116.

Divinity, beyond which there is only the ineffable and absolute Essence of God. Further clarity on the ontological, theological, and cosmological status of the Muḥammadan Reality in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought may be gleaned from examining some of the passages in his *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (*Kitāb ‘anqā’ muḡhrib*). Its translator, Gerald Elmore, has described this text as a “manifesto” on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of *walāya*. Accordingly, the term Muḥammadan Reality and its equivalents are discussed in detail in the second section of the text. At the beginning of the second section of this work, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

When the Will of the Real (*irādat al-Ḥaqq*) (Praised be He!) became attached to the production of His Creation (*ijād khalqī-hi*) and the determination of His Blessings (*taqdīr rizqī-hi*), the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiya*) emerged out of the Everlasting Lights (*al-anwār al-ṣamadīya*) and the Unitary Presence (*al-ḥadra al-aḥadiya*)—that being when He manifested Himself to Himself through Himself (*tajalla li-naḡsi-hi bi-naḡsi-hi*) in the Heaven of the Qualities (*samā’ al-awṣāf*).<sup>131</sup>

Following the above passage, Ibn al-‘Arabī relates the details of this process in highly elusive language. He explains how the Muḥammadan Reality exists “in the Image of [God’s] Provision (*‘alā ṣūratī ḡkmi-hi*)” and how, in its arising, “[God] “stripped It off” (*salakha-hāi*) from the Night of His Transcendence.”<sup>132</sup> The Muḥammadan Reality thus “arises in the [Divine] Unity (*al-qā’ima bi-l-aḥadiya*).”<sup>133</sup> In this text, Ibn al-‘Arabī equates the Muḥammadan reality to the Command of God or All-Merciful Breath when he says that “he [Muḥammad] is designated by the [creative Word] “Be!” (*Kun*) to that which is not (*li-mā lam yakun*), for no Command will be effected except by Him, nor any News (*ḡhabar*) transmitted except through Him.” He goes on to say that the Muḥammadan Reality is “the Veil of [God’s] Self-Manifestation (*ḡijāb tajallī-hi*) and the Fashioning of His Self-Adornment (*ṣiyāḡhat taḡallī-hi*).”<sup>134</sup> Adopting a narrative tone, Ibn ‘Arabī explains how God invests the Muḥammadan Reality, in the realm prior to creation, with His Authority, Names and manifestation. He quotes God’s address to the Muḥammadan Reality, as saying: “I am the King (*al-Malik*) and You are the Kingdom (*mulk*)... I will establish You as a Manager and a Leader (*rā’is wa-mudabbir*), forbidding and commanding (*nāḡiyan*

131 *Kitāb ‘anqā’ muḡhrib*, tr. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, 372.

132 *Ibid.*, 372–3.

133 *Ibid.*, 387.

134 *Ibid.*, 394.

*wa-āmīran*), in a Mighty Kingdom (*mamlaka ʿuzmā*)... You will give unto them commensurate with what I will give to You, and You shall be for them as I am for You; for *there is none other than You, even as You are none other than Me*. You are My Attributes and My Names among them.”<sup>135</sup> This discourse of God causes the Muḥammadan Reality to perspire and as a result “the Wellsprings of the Spirits (*ʿuyūn al-arwāḥ*) began flowing forth copiously” from the sweat of the Muḥammadan Reality.<sup>136</sup> This results in the creation of the Cosmos—wherein God “detached” the world as “a particularized exposition (*tafṣīl*)” of the Reality of Muḥammad, such that “[the manifest World] is a Garment (*thawb*) on the luminous Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadīya al-nūrānīya*).” Within the world, “the Human, Adamite Form” (*al-ṣūrat al-Ādamīya al-insānīya*) also arises as a likeness of the Muḥammadan Reality.<sup>137</sup>

The ontological and cosmological picture which Ibn al-ʿArabī presents in the *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* is a hierarchy of the absolutely transcendent God, the Muḥammadan Reality, the human Adamic Form, and the world which consists of different grades of humans including Prophets, God-Friends, and other human beings. These all exist in a cosmological arrangement where each level has a specific relationship to God and the higher and lower levels. The below passage, worth quoting in full, explains the details of this framework:

For Muḥammad, (May God bless and keep Him!) is a Copy of a Real One/Reality (*nuskhatu Haqq*) with marks of distinction (*bi-l-aʿlām*), and Adam [in turn] is a Copy from Him in entirety (*ʿalā l-tamām*); while we, we are a Copy of Them both (Peace be upon Them!), and the World, [both] earthly and heavenly, is a Copy of us—and [there] the pens run dry ... As for the Prophets [sent with Scriptures and those not sent with Scriptures (*al-nabīyūn al-mursalūn wa-ghayr al-mursalīn*)], and the Gnostic-Inheritors (*al-ʿarifūn al-wāriṭhūn*) {among us} [-they are all] a Perfect Copy [of the Muḥammadan Reality and the Adamic Image] (*nuskha min-humā ʿalā l-kamāl*). And as for the Gnostic-Inheritors [among all other nations (*min sāʾir al-uman*)], {and the true Believers among us} [-they are] a Copy of Adam and the Heart (*wasat*) of Muḥammad (Peace be Upon Them!), in accordance with a Most-exact Image (*ʿalā atqani mithāl*), while the [mere] Believers [among all of the nations] are a Copy of Adam and the Exterior (*zāhir*) of Muḥammad (Peace be upon Them!) in Presence of the [Divine] Majesty (*ḥaḍrat al-jalāl*). As for the people

135 Ibid., 391.

136 Ibid., 392.

137 Ibid., 377.

of mischief and the Left-hand (*ahl al-shaqāwa wa-l-shimāl*), [they are] a Copy of the clay (*tīna*) of Adam and nothing else—there being no way for them unto any good.<sup>138</sup>

The above passage, despite its length and heavy language, provides one of the most lucid expositions of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmological framework in the context of his theory of *walāya*. The Muḥammadan Reality is the greatest manifestation of God *qua* transcendent Essence and it is referred to in the above passage as “the Copy of the Real.” Keeping in mind Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology in which God is Absolute Being and all existents are limited reflections of Him, the word “copy” (*nuskh*) can be understood here as akin to a reflection in a mirror. The Adamic Form is a complete “copy” or reflection of the Muḥammadan Reality. Human beings are a (incomplete) “copy” or manifestation of both the Muḥammadan Reality and the Adamic Form. The Prophets (whether they are sent as Messengers or not) and the Gnostic-Inheritors of Muḥammad’s community are perfect copies or manifestations of the Muḥammadan Reality and the Adamic Form. The Gnostic-Inheritors of other communities as well as the true believers of Muḥammad’s community are the copies of the Heart of Muḥammad and the Adamic Form. Meanwhile, the true believers of other communities outside Islam are copies of the external reality (*zāhir*) of Muḥammad and the Adamic Form. Finally, the people of mischief are copies of only the clay of Adam. Thus, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s exposition in the *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* makes it clear that the Muḥammadan Reality is the first arising or manifestation that comes about through God’s self-manifestation to Himself. There is no intermediary reality between God’s Transcendent Essence and the Muḥammadan Reality—these two are even referred to as the “Night of Transcendence” and the “Day of Manifestation” respectively. Numerous statements referenced above establish this. The Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadīya*) “emerged out of the Everlasting Lights (*al-anwār al-ṣamadīya*) and the Unity Presence (*al-ḥadra al-aḥadīya*)”; the Muḥammadan Reality “arises in the [Divine] Unity (*al-qā’ima bi-l-aḥadīya*)”; the Muḥammadan Reality is “the Veil of [God’s] Self-Manifestation (*ḥijāb tajallī-hi*) and the Fashioning of His Self-Adornment (*ṣiyāghat taḥallī-hi*).” The Muḥammadan Reality is the presence of God’s Names and Attributes, as God said to him: “You are My Attributes and My Names among them.” Finally, in a most explicit manner, Ibn al-‘Arabī says that “Muḥammad, (May God bless and keep Him!) is a Copy of a Real One/Reality (*nuskhatu Ḥaqq*).”

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 377–8.

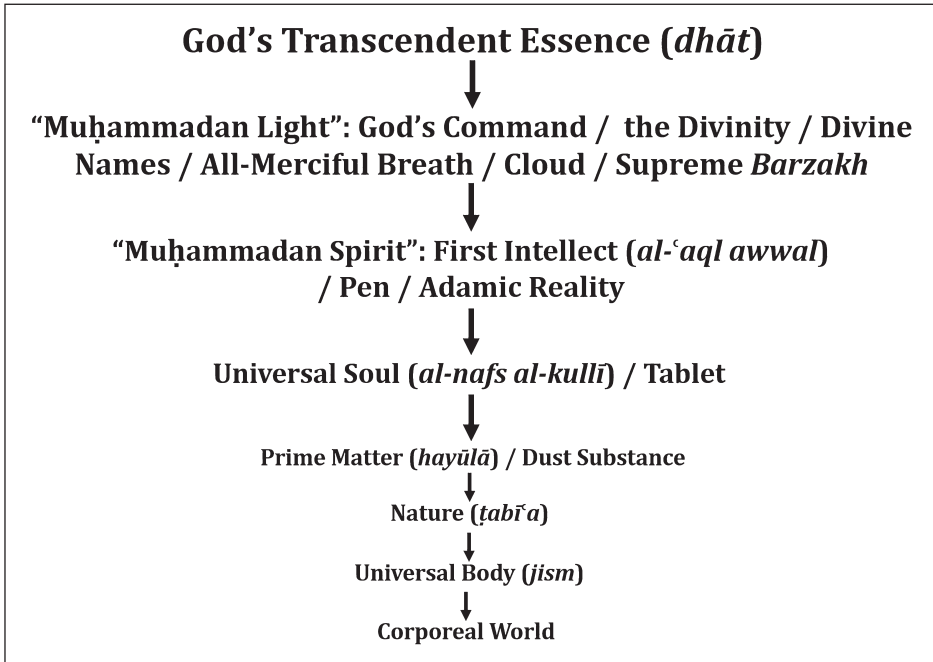


FIGURE 6 Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology

When these statements are considered in light of Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysics and cosmology as a whole (see Figure 6), the logical conclusion is that the Muhammadan Reality is the Level of Divinity that hosts all of God's Names and Attributes, the cosmological All-Merciful Breath, the Reality of Realities, and the Supreme *Barzakh* which mediates between the Transcendent Essence of God and everything other than God. Thus, the Muhammadan Reality is ontologically and cosmologically prior to the First Intellect. Yet Ibn 'Arabī's prior statements that identify the First Intellect with the Muhammadan Reality still require explanation based upon Ibn al-'Arabī's perspective as a whole. One viable and compelling explanation is that since the Muhammadan Reality is the All-Merciful Breath, and all realities are manifestations of the Breath, it would follow that the First Intellect is the first and highest originated mirror of the All-Merciful Breath. For this reason, the First Intellect can be called the Muhammadan Reality because it is the first "deployment" of the Muhammadan Reality in the spiritual realm of the Cosmos and it still counts as the *ḥaqīqa* (reality) of the historical Muhammad. From the perspective of the oneness of *wujūd*, the First Intellect is *nothing other than* the Muhammadan Reality in the same way that an image in a mirror is *essentially identical to* the object it reflects. At the same time, the First Intellect according to Ibn al-'Arabī

corresponds to the human form (as noted above) and therefore, the “human Adamic Form” (*al-ṣūrat al-adamiyya al-insāniyya*) mentioned in the *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* likely refers to the First Intellect itself. Understood in this perspective, the Muḥammadan Reality *qua* the All-Merciful Breath and the Divinity is the first “copy” or self-manifestation of the Essence of God and the human Adamic Form *qua* First Intellect is the “complete” (*kāmil*) copy or self-manifestation of the Muḥammadan Reality. This interpretation—distinguishing between the Muḥammadan Reality *qua* uncreated All-Merciful Breath and the Muḥammadan Reality *qua* originated First Intellect—is confirmed by Murata’s distinction between the Muḥammadan Reality and the Muḥammadan Spirit. In this respect, Murata states that the Muḥammadan Reality is the uncreated root of all beings and encompasses all of the Divine Names while the Muḥammadan Spirit comes into existence from the former and is the summit of created being.<sup>139</sup>

This interpretation that distinguishes between two levels or “modes” of the Muhammadan Reality—as the Muhammadan Light at the Divine Level and as the First Intellect at the originated spiritual level—resonates with the ideas of some of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s commentators, namely Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 699/1300) and ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 730–6/1329–35). As recounted by Giuseppe Scattolin, Farghānī describes the First Self-Manifestation (*al-tajallī al-awwal*) or the First Entification (*al-taʿayyun al-awwal*) of God’s Essence as the Reality of Realities (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqāʾiq*), the Supreme *Barzakh*, and the Eternal Reality of Muḥammad (*al-ḥaqīqa al-aḥmadiyya al-thābita*)—which is described as “nearest” (*aw adnā*) to the Essence of God. Subsequently, Farghānī characterizes the Second Self-Manifestation or Second Entification of God’s Essence as the “Perfect Human Reality” (*al-ḥaqīqa al-insāniyya al-kamāliyya*). Thus, Farghānī clearly distinguishes between the Muḥammadan Reality and the Perfect Human Reality, with the latter being secondary to and lower than the former.<sup>140</sup> As Scattolin describes: “Adam, and in him every perfect prophet and saint, is the image of the Second Level of manifestation, i.e. that of the Relative Unity (*al-wāḥidiyya*), while Muḥammad is the image of the First Level of manifestation, i.e. that of the Absolute Unity (*al-aḥadiyya*). For this reason Muḥammad’s rank is far above all beings: after the supreme Mystery

139 Murata’s view is explained in David Lee, *Contextualization of Sufi Spirituality in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century China: The Role of Liu Zhi 1662–1730* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co. 2016), 140.

140 Giuseppe Scattolin, “The Key Concepts of al-Farghānī’s Commentary on Ibn al-Fārīd’s Sufi Poem, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-Kubtā*,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 39 (2006), 33–83: 45–50.

itself, he has the highest rank in the whole of Being.”<sup>141</sup> Likewise, Kāshānī writes that the Light of Muhammad “was the first self-determination with which the Essence at the level of Unity determined Itself before any other forms of self-determination.... In fact, there is nothing above him only the Essence at the level of its absolute Unity, which transcends all self-determinations, whether than of an attribute, name, description, definition, or qualification.”<sup>142</sup> The later Indian mystical thinker Muḥammad Faḍl Allāh al-Burhanpūrī al-Hindī (d. 1029/1620) likewise distinguished between the Muḥammadan Reality and the Perfect Human Reality as the two highest hierarchical self-manifestations of God’s Essence.<sup>143</sup> This interpretation—differentiating between the *uncreated* Reality of Muhammad as the first self-manifestation of God’s Essence in the form of the Divine Names and the *originated* Reality of Muhammad as the First Intellect or celestial archetype of humankind best resolves the apparent inconsistencies within Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statements about the Muḥammadan Reality. It also correlates with how some of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpreters understood his ideas.

One important implication of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding is that he has effectively raised and exalted the theological status of the Muḥammadan Reality from earlier Muslim understandings. Whereas the early Shi‘ī *ḥadīth* narrations and Tustarī clearly saw the Light of Muḥammad as the *first created* of God and higher than all created beings, and the Ismaili Neoplatonists understood the Light of Muḥammad as the *first originated being* by God and higher than all originated and created beings, both ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and Ibn al-‘Arabī have granted the Light of Muḥammad the status of being *uncreated*. Ibn al-‘Arabī even goes further when he uses the terms *tajallī* (manifestation) and *nuskh* (copy) when referring to the Muḥammadan Reality’s position before God. No longer merely a “first creation”, the Light of Muḥammad is now revered as the highest theophany and reflection of God’s Essence. This theophanization of the Light of Muḥammad also affects the way Ibn al-‘Arabī understands the status of the *person* of Muḥammad.

The theological and ontological status of the historical Muḥammad in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought is best understood in the context of his theory of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). A detailed description of the status of the Perfect Man is given by Ibn ‘Arabī in his *Futūḥāt*:

141 Ibid., 56–7.

142 Al-Kāshānī, quoted in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 237.

143 On al-Hindī’s hierarchy of Being and its manifestations, see Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 61, 83.

In the Perfect Man is the power of all existents in the world. He has all the levels and consequently is the only one who was given the form. He unites the Divine true essences (*al-ḥaqā'iq al-ilāhiyya*), which are the [Divine] names (*al-asmā'*), with the true essences of the world, for he is the last existent: the Merciful Breath (*al-naḥās al-rahmānī*) reached his existence only after it had gathered with it the power of the levels of the whole world ... Man is the most perfect existent ... everything other than man is created for man, who is both a creature (*khalq*) and the Real (*ḥaqq*). So the Perfect Man, in reality (*'ala ḥaqīqa*), is the Real by means of which (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*)—that is, by reason of which—the world was created.<sup>144</sup>

The Perfect Man is the manifestation of all levels of reality, from the Divine names to the immutable entities. The human form appears last in the world because the All-Merciful Breath includes all prior levels in man. Since he is the most perfect of all existents, Ibn al-'Arabī refers to the Perfect Man as the “creature and the Real” (*khalq wa-ḥaqq*). In his essence or reality, the Perfect Man is identical to *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*, which, as we have seen above, is the Muḥammadan Reality, the Level of God's Names and Attributes, and thereby superior to the First Intellect. The Perfect Man, therefore, is the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of God insofar as He is revealed in Names and Attributes. For Ibn al-'Arabī, the Prophet Muḥammad is the greatest of all human beings and the Perfect Man in totality. He explains how the Prophet Muḥammad, being in possession of “the all-comprehensive words”, is superior to Adam who was only taught the names (Qur'an 2:30): “Muḥammad was the greatest divine self-disclosure, and thereby he came to know ‘the knowledge of the ancients and the later folk.’ Among those of old was Adam, who had knowledge of the names.”<sup>145</sup> As the Muḥammadan Reality, Prophet Muḥammad exists prior to all of the Prophets that preceded him in history. In fact, the other prophets and messengers with respect to their legal functions are all deputies of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Hence from him [Muḥammad] branch out the Laws to all the prophets. They were sent by him to be his deputies in the earth in the absence of his body. If his body had existed, none of them would have a Law.... His Law is its root, and he was sent “to all people” (34:28), while this belonged to no other prophet. “People” extend from Adam to the last human being, and

144 *Al-Futūḥat*, ii, 390 (chapter 198), in Ebstein, 116.

145 Ibn al-'Arabī quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 240.



among them there have been Laws, so they are the Laws of Muḥammad in the hands of his deputies. For he is sent out “to all people,” so all the messengers are his deputies, without doubt.<sup>146</sup>

The revealed law of each Prophet was a manifestation of the Light of Muḥammad and effectively a substitute for Muḥammad’s physical form on earth prior to his historical appearance. In addition to the pre-eminence of Muḥammad in relation to the prophets and their missions, Ibn al-‘Arabī reveres the person of Muḥammad as the greatest manifestation of God.

In the context of a person’s spiritual journey towards the vision of God, Ibn al-‘Arabī urges the spiritual seeker to contemplate the figure of Muḥammad because the Prophet’s spiritual constitution, being most balanced and complete, serves as the locus of the most perfection manifestation of God:

Place him before you as the mirror within which you gaze upon your form and the form of others. When you do this, you will come to know God must disclose Himself to Muḥammad within his mirror. I have already told you that the mirror displays an effect in that which is seen from the point of view of the observer who sees. So the manifestation of the Real within the mirror of Muḥammad is the most perfect, most balanced, and most beautiful manifestation, because of the mirror’s actuality. When you perceive Him in the mirror of Muḥammad, you will have perceived from Him a perfection which you could not perceive in respect of considering your own mirror.<sup>147</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī regards the Prophet Muḥammad as the greatest locus of manifestation or *mazhar* of God. While it is true that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology regards every existent as a *mazhar* or locus of manifestation of God *qua* Absolute Being, these *mazāhir* are diverse, possessing different degrees of preparedness and receptivity to Being. As Ibn al-‘Arabī explains it, what serves as a *mazhar* is an immutable entity (*‘ayn thābita*) which is akin to a possible thing or non-existent essence fixed in God’s eternal knowledge. Each immutable entity has a different degree of preparedness and receptivity toward the light of Being. God’s creative act—the All-Merciful Breath—bestows being upon these immutable entities and they become manifest in the world as *mazāhir* of God’s Names and Attributes. This process can be conceived akin to the Sun shining upon a diversity of mirrors with each mirror having a different shape, curvature,

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 352.

and constitution. Among these *mazāhir*, the Prophet Muḥammad is the most polished and most perfect mirror in constitution. This is why the perfect manifestation of God, the Real, may be found by contemplating the self-disclosure of God within the mirror of Muḥammad's *mazhar*. Ibn al-'Arabī's further expresses his views on the status of Muḥammad as God's manifestation in his commentary on the famous *ḥadīth* attributed to 'Ā'isha, who once stated about Muḥammad that "his character was the Qur'an."

God described that character as being "tremendous" (*'aẓīm*), just as He described the Qur'an in His own words, "the tremendous Qur'an" (15:87). So the Qur'an is his character. If a person in the community of the Messenger who has not met the Messenger of God desires to see him, let him look upon the Qur'an. When he looks upon it, there is no difference between looking upon it and looking upon God's Messenger. It is as if the Qur'an takes the configuration of a corporeal form which is named Muḥammad ibn 'Abdallāh ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib. The Qur'an is God's Speech and His attribute, so Muḥammad in his entirety is the attribute of God. "He who obeys the Messenger has obeyed God" (Qur'an 4:80), since "He does not speak out of caprice" (53:3), for he is the tongue of God.<sup>148</sup>

In the above passage, Ibn al-'Arabī most explicitly identifies the Prophet Muḥammad in his essential nature as God's Speech and God's attribute. This further confirms the idea that the historical Muḥammad functions as the human manifestation of God's qualities as opposed to merely reflecting God's highest creation.

Ibn al-'Arabī's worldview brings about a major development in the evolution of the Light of Muḥammad motif. His ideas build upon the early Sufi notions of the likes of Tustarī, the cosmology of the Ismaili Neoplatonists, and the mystical doctrines of al-Ghazālī and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt. With Ibn al-'Arabī, the Light of Muḥammad idea shifts from the notion of the first created or first originated being to the status of the uncreated self-manifestation of God's Names and Attributes. In other words, the Light of Muḥammad is the primal self-disclosure or "image" of the unknowable and unmanifest Essence of God; the Light of Muḥammad is effectively the "Face of God" turned toward created beings. Chittick confirms this interpretation when he states that "the *reality of the perfect human being*, also known as the 'Muḥammadan Reality', is then the nonmanifest form of God as known by God Himself, or the divine

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148 Ibid., 241.

face turned toward the creation of both macrocosm and microcosm."<sup>149</sup> In this respect, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conception of the Muḥammadan Reality intersects with the doctrine of the Command of God elucidated by the Ikhwān and the Ismaili Neoplatonists, the Face of God mentioned by al-Ghazālī, and the Light of Muḥammadan as explained by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt. Similarly, the Prophet Muḥammad as the pre-eminent *mazhar* of the Muḥammadan Reality is revered as the mirror-like manifestation of God’s Names and Attributes. The direction in which Ibn al-‘Arabī takes the Light of Muḥammad concept is paralleled in the Nizārī Ismaili thought of the thirteenth century. Nizārī Ismaili philosophy and Imamology reached new heights with the arrival of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī in Alamut and we now proceed to examine his metaphysics of the Light of Imamate.

## 7 Twelfth–Thirteenth Centuries: ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274)

Fatimid Ismaili thinkers in the eleventh century further refined and developed the metaphysics of Sijistānī and Kirmānī discussed earlier. By the time of al-Mu‘ayyad al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1077) and Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. 481/1088), the Fatimid *dā‘īs* defined the Prophet Muḥammad and every succeeding Imam succeeding him as the earthly human reflection of the Universal Intellect, which was conceived as a metacosmic spiritual light (*nūr*) emanating upon the souls of the Prophets and the Imams. Fatimid Ismaili Imamology underwent further developments following the schism in the Ismaili *da‘wa* that divided the Ismailis into the Nizārī Ismailis and the Musta‘li Ismailis. Our focus will be on the Nizārī developments in the thought of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. However, it is first necessary to briefly examine the views of one of Ṭūsī’s predecessors, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 547/1153), a renowned Ash‘arī theologian who harbored certain Ismaili views in his metaphysics and hermeneutics. Ṭūsī was familiar with Shahrastānī’s works, referring to him in his *Sayr wa sulūk*—his spiritual autobiography—as a chief *dā‘ī* who instructed his material uncle.<sup>150</sup> Recent research into Shahrastānī’s writings reveal that a number of his metaphysical and hermeneutical ideas were recast in Ṭūsī’s

149 William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 35.

150 Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, ed. and tr. S. J. Badakhchani (London, New York: I. B Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1998), 26.

Nizārī Ismaili writings.<sup>151</sup> For our purposes, it is Shahrastānī's concept of the Word or Command of God (*kalimat Allāh, amr Allāh*) and his idea of the Divine Word being manifest in a human locus of manifestation (*maẓhar*) that is most relevant to the formulation of the Light of Muḥammad or the Light of Imamate in Ṭūsī's Ismaili writings.

Shahrastānī's understanding of the pre-eternal Divine Word (*kalimat Allāh*) or the Command of God (*amr Allāh*) appears to fuse elements from eleventh century Ismaili, Ash'arī, and Hanbalī-traditionalist ideas concerning the modality of God's Speech.<sup>152</sup> As mentioned earlier, Ismailis conceived the Command of God as God's pre-eternal (*azalī, qadīmī*) act of originating (*ibdā'*) or producing all created being. Accordingly, God's Command transcends all time, space, words, and letters; it does not consist of sounds and it is not identical with the Arabic Qur'an. The Ash'arīs conceived the Speech of God as a pre-eternal Divine attribute (*ṣifa*) subsisting (*qā'im*) in or super-added to (*zā'ida*) to the Essence of God. They understood the eternal Speech of God to be beyond words and letters and framed the Arabic Qur'an as consisting of created representations (*hikāyāt*) or expressions (*'ibārāt*) of the Divine Speech. The Hanbalīs and other traditionalists took exception to the Ash'arī view, claiming that the Ash'arīs did not recognize the Arabic Qur'an as the actual Speech of God but merely as an imitation (*hikāya*) of it and this often led to the accusation that the Ash'arīs believed in two Qur'ans. Against the Ash'arī thesis, the Hanbalīs insisted that God's Speech was ontologically identical to the Arabic Qur'an and consisted of eternal uncreated words and letters.

151 For example, Shahrastānī's concept of the "accomplished" (*mafrūgh*) and the "inchoate" (*musta'naḥ*), fundamental to his Qur'anic hermeneutics is found in Ṭūsī's Nizārī Ismaili treatise, *Rawḍā-yi taslīm*. See Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Keys to the Arcana*, tr. Toby Mayer (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28–30, 34, 43, 45, 64–5, 108, 111, 113–16, 172, 179, 185, 186; Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *The Paradise of Submission*, ed. and tr. S. J. Badakhchani (London, New York: I. B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), 20, 40, 249. Another example is the idea of the three worlds of Command (*amr*), Creation (*khalq*), and Reward (*thawāb*), see Shahrastānī, *Keys*, 156–7; Ṭūsī, *Paradise*, 17, 57, 64. Shahrastānī distinguishes between a general relationship that all people have with God and a specific relationship that only believers have with God as their Guardian-Lord (*walī, mawlā*), see *Keys*, 110, 157; likewise, Ṭūsī reproduces this idea when he speaks of a "common creatural confession" that every person makes regarding God as their Creator and an "exclusive confession pertaining to the realm of the Divine Command" specific to the believers for whom God is the Guardian-Lord (*walī, mawlā*), see *Paradise*, 16–17, 89, 144. I will write about these commonalities and trace them from Shahrastānī to Ṭūsī in a future article.

152 A similar point is made by Toby Mayer in his study of Shahrastānī's Qur'anic hermeneutics. See Toby Mayer, "The Cosmogonic Word in al-Shahrastānī's Exegesis of *Sūrat al-Baqara*", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 16/2 (2014), 1–41: 10–13.

In the midst of these debates, Shahrastānī devised his own original synthesis in which the Command or Word of God is pre-eternal and initially manifests through eternal transcendent (non-material) letters (*hurūf*) and archetypal Words (*kalimāt*), which are in turn manifested as the Arabic letters and words of the Qurʾan. In holding this view, Shahrastānī maintains that he is in accordance with the pious ancestors (*al-salaf*) and their belief in God's Speech:

The pious ancestors (*al-salaf*) among the people of Islam used to say that: "Verily, the Speech of God (*kalām Allāh*), may He be exalted, is eternal (*qadīm*). It is letters and words and all of them are eternal (*qadīma*). They are the causes of the existents. The *kāf* and the *nūn* from His utterance, 'Be,' are the first cause and they are the first locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) for the Eternal Command.<sup>153</sup>

In Shahrastānī's cosmological vision, the Word, Speech or Command of God is the root-principle (*maṣdar*) and the cause (*'illa*) of all creation and the act by which all things come into being. In this vision, creation unfolds through a hierarchical flow of manifestation beginning with the Universal Intellect and continuing through the Universal Soul, Matter, and Nature in accordance with classical Ismaili cosmology (see Figure 3 above). The Command of God first manifests in the Universal Intellect and Soul, then at the celestial level as God's transcendent or Holy Words (*al-kalimāt al-qudsiyya*), and subsequently in the physical world of creation (*khalq*) in the form of corporeal existents.<sup>154</sup> Central to this framework is the idea of *zuhūr* (manifestation), not to be confused with incarnation (*ḥulūl*). The concept of *mazhar*—the word being the noun of place for the *zāhir* (manifest)—is best understood in terms of the idea of a mirror in which an object appears through the form of its reflection. In this analogy, the object is manifest (*zāhir*) in the form of a reflection while not actually being incarnate in the substance of the mirror. Nevertheless, the reflection of the object is a real and immanent presence of the object in the mirror and the mirror is the *mazhar* or "place of manifestation." In Shahrastānī's manifestational cosmology, the Holy Words are the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the Command of God, and the physical world of creation and its contents are the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the Holy Words. In general, the Command of God becomes manifested throughout the various levels of creation. "His Command is the root-principle (*maṣdar*) of His creation, and His creation is

153 Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābiḥ al-abrār*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Āzarshah (2 vols, Tehran: Mirās-i Maktūb, 2008), 125.

154 Illustrated in Mayer, "The Cosmogonic Word", 20–6.

the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of His Command.”<sup>155</sup> Shahrastānī offers a unique view of the theological status of the Arabic Qur’an and the Prophet Muḥammad. He presents the person of Prophet Muḥammad as the mirror-like locus of manifestation of the Command of God and the Holy Words whereby the Arabic Qur’an uttered by the Prophet becomes a subsequent locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the Command of God.

Another secret is that the First Command (*al-amr al-awwal*)—when it manifested (*zahara*) through the Holy Words, and the [Holy] Words manifested through the glorious Qur’an until it was seen by their eyes, heard by their ears, recognized by their hearts, and testified to by their tongues—its [the Command’s] first locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) in this world is the person of al-Muṣṭafā [Prophet Muḥammad], or his soul, his mind or his heart, and according to every designated expression. The loci of manifestation in every instance of being are the dwelling places of the Qur’an. This is the meaning of sending down (*al-inzāl*) and revelatory descent (*al-tanzīl*) without the intervention of the imagination. They are like mirrors facing that which manifests the forms of the existents within them, in the most inspired manner of what is capable and the quickest manner of what is awaited. This is also the meaning of inspiration and emission into the mind. God, may He be exalted, said: “The Trusted Spirit descended upon your heart” (Q. 26:193–4), and this is a locus of manifestation. He also said: “in clear Arabic language” (Q. 26:195), and this is also a locus of manifestation.<sup>156</sup>

Thus, in Shahrastānī’s worldview, the Prophet Muḥammad is the first locus of manifestation of the Command of God among human beings. The Qur’an with respect to its Arabic expressions and content is the secondary locus of manifestation of the Command of God. In this particular ontological and cosmological vision, the Command becomes immanent and present through its loci of manifestation (*mazāhir*) and Shahrastānī makes this a point of difference between his idea of manifestation and the Ash‘arī view of the Arabic Qur’an as a mere imitation or representation (*hikāya*) of God’s pre-eternal Speech or Command. But what is important in Shahrastānī’s formulation, for the present purpose, is

155 ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Majlis-i maktūb-i Shahrastānī mun‘aqid dār Khwārazm*, ed. Jalālī Nā’īnī, in Diane Steigerwald, *Majlis Discourse sur l’Ordre et la creation* (Laval: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1998), 80.

156 Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, 145. Cf. Mayer, “The Cosmogonic Word”, 10–11.

his claim that the Command of God becomes manifest, revealed, and immanently present in the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad.

All of this means that the essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the Prophet Muḥammad—what Shahrastānī would call his *maṣḍar* (root-principle)—is the Command or Word of God. As a *mazhar* of the Command of God, Prophet Muḥammad effectively becomes the mirror or receptacle in which the powers, qualities, and functions of God's Command are reflected, concretized, and personalized in the world of creation. The Command is the primary and eternal expression of God's Will, implying that the Prophet was the most perfect manifestation of God on earth. In fact, Shahrastānī's comments found in his *Kitāb al-milal wa l-nihāl* demonstrate his view that the Command of God is the Light of Muḥammad. In the course of Shahrastānī's presentation of an imaginary debate between the Sabians and the *Hunafā'*, Shahrastānī has the *Hunafā'* make the argument that the Muḥammadan Light (*nūr Muḥammad*) was the first reality to exist and the final reality to become manifest in the world.<sup>157</sup>

The last [existent] with respect to existence in terms of personal figure (*al-shakṣ*) in this [physical] world is the first [existent] with respect to existence in terms of the spirit in that [spiritual] world, and accordingly it is reported that the first existent (*awwal al-mawjūdāt*) is the Light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*). Thus, since his [Muḥammad] person is the last in existence among the entirety of the persons of prophethood (*al-ashkās al-nabawīyya*), his spirit would be the first [existent] among the entirety of the lordly spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-rabbāniyya*).<sup>158</sup>

Shahrastānī evidently regards the Shi'i Ismaili Imams of the Prophet's *Ahl al-Bayt*, beginning with 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, as the successors of Muḥammad and the personal figures (*ashkās*) in which the Command of God continues to be manifested until the end of time. Just as Jesus is called God's word in the Qur'an (Q. 6:171), "the Holy Words are epiphanized through specific individuals."<sup>159</sup>

157 The full debate is found in Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa l-nihāl*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub 'Ilmiyya, 1992), 289–345.

158 Ibid., 323.

159 Mayer, "The Cosmogonic Word", 10: "Shahrastānī specifies what he means by the epiphanies (*mazāhīr*) of the Command as (a) the verses of holy scripture, i.e. par excellence, the Qur'an, and crucially, (b) the human individuals in possession of [the knowledge of] the arcana of the verses (*al-ashkhās alladhīna ladayhim asrārūhā*). This last expression seemingly refers in practice to the imāmate. The discussion indeed reiterates the claim that, interchangeably with revealed scripture itself, an élite of human individuals are, like it, manifestations of 'the holy words' which in turn are manifestations of the isolated transcendental letters. As he states: '... The holy words are epiphanised through

Shahraṣṭānī also draws an analogical correspondence between the Arabic letter *alif* as the source of all letters and words, the pre-eternal Command of God as the source of all existents, and the living Imam through whom the community is perfected and purified.<sup>160</sup> Both the revealed Qur'an (*al-qur'ān al-munazzal*) and the Imam possessing religious authority and spiritual charisma (*walāyah*) after the Prophet Muḥammad are the locus of manifestation (*mazḥar*) of the Primordial Word (*al-qawl al-awwal*) of God.<sup>161</sup>

Having expounded Shahraṣṭānī's viewpoint of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Ismaili Imam as the *mazḥar* of God's pre-eternal Word and Command, we are finally in a position to examine Ṭūsī's interpretations and reformulations of these ideas. Ṭūsī sketched the intellectual basis for his acceptance of the Nizārī Ismaili Imam as the rightful spiritual guide and successor of the Prophet Muḥammad in his *Sayr wa sulūk*. In the course of this recollection, Ṭūsī also provided a succinct account of his Imamology in which Shahraṣṭānī's ideas of the Command of God and its manifestation through *mazāhir* is expanded upon. One of the major reasons that convinced Ṭūsī of the truth of Nizārī Ismaili doctrine was a point of metaphysics that has particular bearing on the discussions concerning the Light of Muḥammad theme thus far. Having accepted the Nizārī Ismaili arguments on the necessity of a supreme infallible instructor (the Nizārī Ismaili Imam) and the futility of placing one's trust in a collective of mutually conflicting scholars, Ṭūsī proceeds to examine the status of the first instructor's knowledge of truth in order to ascertain, in his words, "what particular characteristics would distinguish that instructor from other teachers."<sup>162</sup> Ṭūsī's reflections lead him to conclude that the first instructor must indeed possess "knowledge of the True One, the exalted, the most high, who is the origin of [all] beings."<sup>163</sup> For this to be possible, Ṭūsī reasons that there can be no intermediary between God and the first instructor. The first instructor must be the closest person to God and his knowledge of God must be unmediated. After explaining how the "surest intelligible knowledge" consists of the knowledge that non-material beings have of their own selves, he reasons that absolute certain knowledge "is that in which the effect becomes known

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specific individuals (*zāharat al-kalimāt al-qudsiyya bi-ashkhāṣ makhṣūṣīn*)!" See also Shahraṣṭānī, *Maḥāṭib al-asrār*, 119–20.

160 Ibid., 125.

161 Shahraṣṭānī interprets the Qur'anic phrase "*Qāf* and the glorious *qur'ān*" (Q. 50:1) as a reference to the Command of God and its *mazāhir*—the Qur'an and the Legatee (*waṣī*) of Prophet Muḥammad, see *ibid.*, 123.

162 Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, 32.

163 Ibid., 33.



through [its] cause.”<sup>164</sup> Ṭūsī then turns to the metaphysics upheld by the Muslim Peripatetic philosophers (*falāsifa*) in which God qua Necessary Being is the first cause and the First Intellect is the first effect without there being any intermediary between them. In this system, the highest level of knowledge possible for man is the level of the First Intellect. But the First Intellect, being the first effect of God, cannot possess certain knowledge of God, because it is merely an effect and effects cannot comprehend their causes. On these grounds, Ṭūsī rejects the philosophers’ metaphysics as untenable because it cannot ground anyone’s recognition of God. Ṭūsī instead concludes that the rank and knowledge of the first instructor, the Nizārī Ismaili Imam, “must be higher than that of the first effect, in order that his knowledge of the True One, the Exalted, the Most high, may be the noblest knowledge.”<sup>165</sup>

At this juncture, Ṭūsī makes an argument for the Nizārī Ismaili position that the Command or Word of God must be the intermediary between God and all existent beings including the First Intellect. He first evokes the Avicennian principle that “from the Real One comes forth only one entity.” The demonstration of this principle is that if two effects were to come into being from God, this would necessitate the existence of two aspects (*i’tibār*) in God: the first effect would proceed from one aspect in God and the second effect would proceed from another aspect distinct in God that is different from the first aspect. If this were the case, God’s essence would be composed of two aspects; thus God would be composite and therefore no longer be God (since a composite being is a created being). The logical conclusion of this demonstration is that the first effect that God brings into existence can only be one entity—called the First Intellect. On the basis of this demonstration, Ṭūsī argues that even if God brings into being a single effect, this would still necessitate that the effect proceeds from one aspect (*i’tibār*) in God as opposed to two. The philosophers have ignored this reality, Ṭūsī notes, but the Nizārī Ismailis have affirmed this one aspect of God from which the First Intellect proceeds and they refer to this aspect as the Word or Command of God mentioned in the Qur’an.<sup>166</sup> Ṭūsī then takes up the difficult question of whether the existence of this aspect—the Word or Command of God—is additional to God’s Essence or not. Ṭūsī explains that the Command “is not something additional to His sacred essence, in so far as He is He” otherwise it would require another intermediary for its origination. Instead, he maintains, the Command of God is only additional or distinct from God when one considers the relationship between

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164 Ibid., 34.

165 Ibid., 35.

166 Ibid., 36.

God and the first effect. In this latter perspective, the Command of God is the direct cause of the First Intellect and from this relative point of view only, the Command is distinct from God's Essence. At the same time, Ṭūsī emphasises that God considered in Himself "cannot in so far as He is the first origin, be attributed with cause or effect, existence or non-existence, temporality or eternity, necessity or contingency, nor any of the other kinds of opposition, contradiction or concatenation."<sup>167</sup> In other words, Ṭūsī holds that God's Command is neither identical to nor separate from God's Essence. In this respect, Ṭūsī's description of God's Command clearly parallels 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's aforementioned explanation that God's Power, Will, or Oneness is a necessary concomitant of God's Essence with respect to God's relationship to contingent beings.

Ṭūsī goes on to relate the classical Ismaili position regarding the absolute transcendence (*tanzīh*) of God beyond all positive and negative predications and categories. He explains that the knowledge of the Nizārī Imam is at the level of the Command of God, the first cause of all effects, and that therefore the Nizārī Imam knows God through God.<sup>168</sup> As for the ontological and theological position of the Command, Ṭūsī explains that the Command "is the sustainer of existents in the world and that by which each reaches its perfection, originating from it and returning to it."<sup>169</sup> The Command is infinite knowledge and power and ranks higher than all possible beings and effects. The various powers and capacities manifest in the Cosmos are all manifestations of the Command, and people speak of the Command in terms of its diverse manifestations and traces.

The fact that in relation to Him people speak of Necessity, Unity, Simplicity, Will, Knowledge and Power, and likewise of [His] other attributes is all because His Exalted [Command] is one pure light, one uncontaminated emanation (*ḥayḍ*), one bounty (*jūd*) and one generosity (*sakhā*) which, in the primordial past (*mafrūgh*), was the cause for the existence of the 18,000 worlds, and, in the subsequent future (*musta'nif*) will be the cause for the perfection (*kamāl*) of their essences and of this [realm of] multiplicity, duality and plurality. The fact that Necessity, Unity, Existence, Simplicity, Will, Knowledge, Power and other attributes are manifested differently, although in essence [all] are one, follows necessarily because

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 40–1.

the one making the description is a human being whose descriptions accord with created beings.<sup>170</sup>

Since man, insofar as he is a created thing, must necessarily speak on this topic from his own perspective, we can only say that—although His exalted Command, which is the cause of all creation and existence, is one absolute grace (*ḡayḡ-i muṡṡlaḡ*) that shines equally upon the 18,000 words with no special illumination (*tajallī*) or favour (*ināyat*) on one rather than another being—every creature will speak about Him, the Exalted, according to the existential rank that it has received from His exalted Command, and in proportion to the existential traces of Him which he witnesses in his own essence.<sup>171</sup>

Accordingly, people only think of God in terms of multiple Names and Attributes because of their different standpoints and situations, but the reality is that God's Command is one emanation and one relationship. In this respect, Ṣūsī is proposing a definition of the Command of God that is derived from Shahrastānī's and prior Ismaili formulations, informed by 'Ayn al-Qudāt's views of Muḡammadan Light being a concomitant of God's Essence, and also nearly identical to Ibn al-'Arabī's concept of the Muḡammadan Reality. As will be recalled, Ibn al-'Arabī sees the first manifestation of the Divine Essence—variously called the All-Merciful Breath, the Supreme *Barzakh*, and the Level of Divinity—as the Muḡammadan Reality. Since the Essence of God transcends all descriptions and relationships, it is the Divine Level or Muḡammadan Reality that is the locus of all Divine Names and Attributes. Likewise for Ṣūsī, the Command of God is the primary intermediary or interface between the Essence of God and the world of creation and plurality. When human beings speak of God's many names, they are in fact referring to the single-same Command of God:

In fact, whatever attribute has been ascribed to the first cause by distinguished philosophers and people of knowledge (*ahl al-ma'rifat*) among the men of intellect, is a reference to His Command, one facet of which is directed to the world of pure, eternal unity, the other to the world of multiplicity and contingency; but God as such is free from, and exalted above, both these facets.<sup>172</sup>

170 Ṣūsī, *The Paradise of Submission*, 19–20.

171 *Ibid.*, 28.

172 Ṣūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, 38.

In a later passage, he quotes Quranic verses (20:50) to imply that the Command of God is the Lord (*rabb*) of all things. He evokes Qur'an 53:7—"He is the first and the last, the manifest and the hidden; He has knowledge of all things"—and applies these names and attributes of God to the Command of God. Ṭūsī understands all of the Divine Names and Attributes that people conceive as the qualities of God to be references to the Command of God. In other words, Ṭūsī sees the Divine Names not as accidents (*'araḍ*) in the Ash'arī sense, but rather, as referring to a single eternal ontological effusion from God that continuously shines upon contingent beings—this being the Command of God. In a manner quite similar to how Ṭūsī situates the Command of God as having one face turned toward the pure unity of God's Essence and another face toward the created realm of plurality, Ibn al-'Arabī also spoke of the Divine Level, identical to the Muḥammadan Reality, as a two-faced *barzakh* in almost the same terms:

The Divinity ... confronts the creatures through Its own essence and It confronts the Essence through Its own essence.... It has a face toward creation through which It discloses Itself in the forms of creation; It has a face toward the Essence through which It becomes manifest to the Essence. So the created things do not know the Essence except from behind this *barzakh*, which is the Divinity. Nor does the Essence exercise properties within the created beings except through his *barzakh*, which is the Divinity. We have verified It, and we have found it no different from the Most Beautiful Names by which we call upon.<sup>173</sup>

Ṭūsī and Ibn al-'Arabī present two very similar metaphysical formulations concerning the Command of God and the Muḥammadan Reality respectively. Ṭūsī's formulation also recalls the distinction made by 'Ayn al-Qudāt between God's *aḥadiyya* and God's *waḥda* where the latter is God's ontological support of contingent existents and the former is God considered in Himself without reference to creation.

While Ibn al-'Arabī holds that the Muḥammadan Reality achieves its supreme locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad, Ṭūsī believes that the Command of God must always be present in the world in the form of a human person as its locus of manifestation (*mazhar*)—the Nizārī Ismaili Imam in every age. Once again, framing the Imam as the *mazhar* of God's Command is a clear nod to Shahrastānī's ideas discussed early. Ṭūsī

173 Ibn al-'Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 62.

then explains the reason for why the Word or Command of God must always be manifest in creation:

As for the Word of the exalted Creator ... if it had no connection (*ta'alluq*) to the sensible world, the latter would have never come into existence. Since there is such a connection, which is of the same kind and therefore has to be perceptible to the senses, the Command and the Word must inevitably be manifest in this world, and the locus of its manifestation (*mazhar*) must be in the form of an individual human being who appears to be like other humans [one who] is born, grows old and succeeds to the one before him in a continuous line, so that it [the Command] will be preserved in perpetuity ... And since his appearance in this world is because he is its perfection, as long as the world remains it can never be devoid of him: 'If the earth were devoid of the Imam even for a short time, it would be convulsed with all its inhabitants.'<sup>174</sup>

The arguments that Ṭūsī makes above for the existence of the *mazhar* of the Command in the world at all times parallel what Ibn al-'Arabī has offered with respect to the necessity of the Perfect Man in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Just as Ṭūsī says "as long as the world remains it can never be devoid of him", Ibn al-'Arabī writes about the Perfect Man that "God preserves His creation through him, just as the seal (*khatm*) preserves the treasures ... In this way, He appointed him the vicegerent for the preservation of His kingdom [i.e. the universe]. As long as the Perfect Man is in the universe, the universe continues to be preserved."<sup>175</sup> Ṭūsī refers to the Command of God as "light" and the Nizārī Imam as "the *mazhar* of that light."<sup>176</sup> On this basis, later Nizārī Ismailis refer to the Command of God as "the Light of Imamate" just as the Muḥammadan Reality is called the Light of Muḥammad. The Nizārī Imam, according to Ṭūsī, is manifest in three distinct realms of knowledge and perception—in the world of similitudes as a physical person resembling others, in the realm of differentiation as the first instructor of the believers, and in the realm of unity as the Command of God itself. He further explains that the Imams must succeed one another based on two recognized relationships so that people in any time may have access to the Imam: the first is a physical relationship by way of lineal descent in which each Imam is succeeded by one of his descendants. The second is a spiritual

174 Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, 40–1.

175 Ibn al-'Arabī, in Masataka Takeshita, "The Theory of the Perfect Man in Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*", *Orient* Vol. IXI 1983, 88.

176 Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, 43.

relationship by way of designation in which the present Imam points out and designates the succeeding Imam by a clear appointment (*naṣṣ*).<sup>177</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī recognizes the perpetual presence of the Prophet Muḥammad in the form of the revealed prophetic laws upheld by the prophets before him, in his historical appearance on earth, and subsequently in the Muḥammadan God-Friends and revealed laws. Ṭūsī, in accordance with Nizārī Ismaili doctrine, believes there is always a continuous physical lineage of Imams in every age—both before the Prophet Muḥammad and after him. The constant presence of the Imams guarantees that human beings in any age or time have access to the gnosis of God’s unity (*tawḥīd*): “The formula of the Word of Divine Unity (*kalima-yi tawḥīd*) is the [exclusive] heritage to be transmitted and inherited through his sacred progeny and holy descendants, in one line of descent and essence—‘*offspring one after the other*’ (3:34)—[a lineage] which will never be ruptured, even unto the end of time.”<sup>178</sup> These Imams come from a single blessed lineage that includes the present Nizārī Ismaili Imam, his ancestor-Imams going back to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, ‘Alī’s father Abū Ṭālib who is reckoned as the last Imam of the period of Jesus, and the Imams stretching back through their lineal ancestors including Ishmael son of Abraham, Seth the son of Adam and even prior to the biblical Adam:

From the time of Adam that legacy has continued in the progeny of Seth, ‘*offspring, one of another*’ (3:34), and will continue to the end of the life of the world.... It is said that after Abraham—peace up upon him—[the functions of] royalty, prophethood, and religion and the Imamate continued in two lineages. One was the exoteric lineage [through] the progeny of Isaac (Ishāq), and the other was the esoteric lineage [through] the progeny of Ishmael (Ismā‘īl). While the signs of royalty and prophethood continued to be passed down in the lineage of Isaac, the lights of religion and the Imamate continued in the lineage of our lord Ishmael.<sup>179</sup>

Ṭūsī further quotes a number of statements from the sermons of the Nizārī Imam Ḥasan ‘*alā-dhikrihi al-salām* that portray the spiritual status and lineal descent of the Imams, the loci of manifestation of the Command of God, as being superior to the Prophets and other human rulers. While the Prophets reflect multiplicity and change, the Imams are perpetually present on earth, as expressed by the Imam Hasan ‘*alā-dhikrihi al-salām*: “This means that while

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ṭūsī, *The Paradise of Submission*, 121–2.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 136–7.

the Prophets and the *ḥujjats* may change—at one time this one, at another time that one, the Imam will never change: ‘We are the people of eternity.’<sup>180</sup> The lineage of Imams, although sometimes coinciding with the families of the Prophets, is actually independent of the lineage of the Prophets, as the Imam Hasan ‘*ala-dhikrihi al-salām* stresses: “What remedy is there except to submit oneself to the command of these Imams of ours, who are [true Imams] neither [as] sons of the Prophets nor [as] sons of anyone else.”<sup>181</sup>

In Ṭūsī’s Ismaili framework, the Imams functionally rank higher than the Prophets: the Imam is the *mazhar* of God’s Command, the person of the *Ḥujja* (the foremost spiritual deputy of the Imam) is the *mazhar* of the Universal Intellect, and the Prophets are the loci of manifestation of the Universal Soul. However, the historical person of Prophet Muḥammad—also held a rank of Imamate during his time and thus occupied an exalted status alongside the Imams due to his own reception of the Light of Imamate: “Muḥammad the Chosen was a grand spiritual compendium, unifying in himself both the terminus of those signs and the commencement of those illuminations. He was thus unique, without peer in authority, prophethood, majesty and statesmanship, pre-eminent both in the spirituality of his words and his physical conduct.”<sup>182</sup>

The Nizārī doctrine of a pre-Muḥammadan and post-Muḥammadan lineage of Imams, as the locus of manifestation of the Command of God, is a reformulation of the early Shi‘i material about the descent of the Column of Light from Adam down through the ancestors of the Prophet and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and continuing in the Shi‘i Imams. What Ṭūsī and Ibn al-‘Arabī have in common is their emphasis on the perpetual presence of the earthly manifestation of the Command of God or Muḥammadan Reality respectively. The former presents this in the series of continuous Imams from the beginning of time to the Day of Judgment while latter sees this taking place through the revealed laws, the person of Muḥammad, and the Muḥammadan *awliyā’*. In other words, the presence of the human locus of manifestation of God’s Command or the Muḥammadan Reality is primordial, perpetual and ever-present in the world—whether it be a continuous hereditary lineage of Imams or various corporeal manifestations of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Ṭūsī regards the Nizārī Imam, the *mazhar* of the Command of God, as the medium through which human beings attain the mystical recognition or

180 Ibid., 123.

181 Ibid., 125.

182 Ibid., 137.

gnosis of God. In one respect, this recognition is facilitated by the very person of the Nizārī Imam who reflects God's Names and Attributes:

God has clothed him [the Imam] in the garment of His own oneness and has granted him His own eternity and perpetuity. God has bestowed on him something of His own Names (*asmā'*) and the traces of those Attributes (*ṣifat*) by which He manifests Himself, and the lights of that Name and the traces of those Attributes appear in him. [Accordingly], his speech is the speech of God, his command is the command of God, his word is the word of God, his decree is the decree of God, his will is the will of God, his power is the power of God, his face is the face of God, his hand is the hand of God, his hearing is the hearing of God, and his sight is the sight of God.<sup>183</sup>

In the view of Ṭūsī, the Imam as *mazhar* of the Command of God is the human personification of the Divine Names and Attributes. This follows from the fact that the Command of God, as opposed to God's transcendent and indescribable Essence, is the ontological presence of God's Names. Therefore, the person of the Nizārī Imam is the mirror in which "the traces of those Attributes" and "the lights of that Name" appear. Once again, the concept of *mazhar* should not be confused with the idea of *ḥulūl* (incarnation), which Ismaili and Akbarī thinkers always rejected. Consequently, the qualities of the Imam are the likeness or reflection of the attributes of God in the world of humanity. This is identical to the formulations of Ibn al-'Arabī for whom the Prophet Muḥammad serves as the most perfect and balanced mirror for the manifestation and self-disclosure of God's Names. Just as Ibn al-'Arabī calls people to perceive God "in the mirror of Muḥammad", Ṭūsī quotes the Imam Ḥasan 'alā-dhikrihi al-salām where he summons people to recognize God through recognizing the Imam:

Everyone must know [God] through knowing me, since a person becomes a knower (*'arif*) through my knowledge and becomes a monotheist (*muwahhid*) through my monotheism (*tawhid*). Then the reality of knowledge (*ma'rifat*), union (*ittiḥād*) and oneness (*waḥdat*) comes completely into existence and the reality of worship becomes evident.<sup>184</sup>

The Nizārī Ismaili thought of Naṣir al-Din Ṭūsī completes an evolution of the Light of Muḥammad motif within the Ismaili tradition that parallels

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>184</sup> Imam Ḥasan 'alā dhikrihi al-salām, in Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, 44–5.



the developments in the formulations of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Firstly, Ṭūsī situates the Light of Imamate as the level of the Command of God above the First Intellect just as Ibn al-‘Arabī elevates the Muḥammadan Reality to the ontological level of the All-Merciful Breath or the Reality of Realities that is superior to the First Intellect. In this respect, Ṭūsī stresses that God’s Essence is absolutely transcendent and identifies God’s Command with God’s Face and Names in the same way that Ibn al-‘Arabī understands the Muḥammadan Reality as the Level of Divinity and the presence of God’s Names in which the unknowable Essence of God is initially manifest. It is also worth observing that Sa‘īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī’s understanding of the Muḥammadan Reality and its ontological superiority to the Perfect Human Reality most clearly matches Ṭūsī’s view of God’s Command and its cosmological superiority to the First Intellect. Secondly, Ṭūsī explicates the perpetual manifestation of the Light of Imamate through a continuous line of Imams while Ibn al-‘Arabī holds that the Perfect Man is always present in the Universe while stressing that Prophet Muḥammad, as the greatest Perfect Man, is physically present on earth through the revealed laws, his historical appearance, and the Muḥammadan *walāya*. Finally, Ṭūsī portrays the Nizārī Ismaili Imam as the *mazhar* or reflective mirror of God’s Names just as Ibn al-‘Arabī recognizes God’s greatest manifestation in the mirror of the Prophet Muḥammad. One thus finds a remarkable convergence between the Nizārī Ismaili metaphysics of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī on the matter of the Light of Muḥammad and its manifestation in the world.

## 8 Conclusion

From the ninth century to the thirteenth century, the theological idea of the Nūr Muḥammad was expounded by numerous Muslim thinkers including the Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (early to mid 4th/10th century), Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) and Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt (d. 526/1131), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), and ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274). Through these thinkers’ expositions, the Nūr Muḥammad formulation evolved through the successive phases of mytho-narrative, philosophical Neoplatonization, and onto-cosmological theophanization, while influencing and interpenetrating one other. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Shi‘i mythical narratives attributed to the Imam Ja‘far and the Sufi narrative exegesis of Tustarī presented the Light of Muḥammad as God’s first and supreme creation

wholly manifest in the Prophet Muḥammad (and the Imams) and also present, albeit in various degrees, in a hierarchy of human beings. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and the Ismaili *dā'īs* Neoplatonized the earlier Shi'i doctrines by conceiving the Light of Muḥammad as the Universal Intellect—the first originated being and the archetypal cause of the Cosmos—which is also manifest in the Prophets and Imams by means of radiating divine support (*ta'yīd*) upon their pure souls. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Sunni thinkers like al-Ghazālī and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt further developed the Neoplatonized ideas of the Light of Muḥammad under the influence of Sufi ideas. 'Ayn al-Quḍāt was particularly responsible for reframing the Muḥammadan Light as an uncreated accident or concomitant of God's Essence, thus paving the way for further developments. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Ibn al-'Arabī's mystical thought fused a monorealist ontology, the ideas of the Andalusian Sunni mystics, and the Neoplatonic doctrines drawn from the Ismailis. This fusion elevated the status of the Light of Muḥammad from the first originated being or First Intellect to the level of the God's existentiating Command or All-Merciful Breath—identified with the Divine Level of God's Names and Attributes and the highest self-manifestation of the unknowable Essence of God. At the same time, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's formulation of Nizārī Ismaili metaphysics drew upon prior Ismaili ideas, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's insights, and Shahrastānī's cosmological vision of God's Command and its loci of manifestation in the Prophet, the Qur'an, and the Imams. Ṭūsī re-conceptualized the Light of the Imams as the Command of God and the highest kataphatic self-manifestation of God's Essence, thereby framing the person of the Prophet and the Imam as the locus of manifestation of God's uncreated pre-eternal Command and the Divine Names therein.

Although the present study ends off with Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Muslim mystics and thinkers continued to elaborate and develop a Light of Muḥammad doctrine in the centuries that followed. The Muḥammadan Reality doctrine was further refined by Ibn al-'Arabī's many commentators—Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Sa'īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 699/1300), Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300), 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 730/1330), Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 827/1424)—among whom the resultant metaphysical formulations become more precise and systematized.<sup>185</sup> Later Twelver Shi'i thinkers influenced by Ibn al-'Arabī such as Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 1319/1385), Mīr Damad (d. 1014/1631–2), Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640), and Fayḍ

185 Some examples are given in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 166–7, 188–90. Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī's views on the Muḥammadan Reality are found in his introduction to the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as published in Mukhtar Ali, *The Horizons of Being* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680–1) conceived the Muḥammadan Reality as the First Intellect and the first self-manifestation of God's Essence.<sup>186</sup> Meanwhile, the Nizārī Ismailis, even after the fall of their Persian fortresses to the Mongols in 1256, continued to produce doctrinal and devotional literature focused on the Nizārī Imam's status as the *mazhar* of the Command of God and these Nizārī discourses emphasized how the vision (*dīdar*) of the Light of Imamate is the apex of the believer's spiritual quest.<sup>187</sup>

Even in modern times, the Sufi and Shi'ī Ismaili traditions of Islam continue to evoke the idea of the Light of Muḥammad in their contemporary practice. The studies of Valerie Hoffman and Oludamini Ogunnaike have shown how the doctrine of the Muḥammadan Reality found expression in the spiritual practices of various Sufi thinkers from the fifteenth century to the present day.<sup>188</sup> The eighteenth-century Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, founder of the Tijānī *Ṭarīqa*, emphasised how the *Ṭarīqa* Muḥammadiyya is essentially a path toward achieving the vision of and union with the Muḥammadan Reality. In Tijānī thought, the living God-Friends are inspired by the Muḥammadan Reality and annihilated in the essence (*dhāt*) of the Prophet.<sup>189</sup> In the modern Naqshbandī *Ṭarīqa*, the *shaykh* or *pīr* serves as the intermediary (*barzakh*) between the believer and the Muḥammadan Reality. Loving one's *pīr* is tantamount to love for the Prophet and God as a result of which the disciple's soul receives the "effulgence of Muḥammadan electricity" through the *pīr*.<sup>190</sup> In the contemporary Nizārī Ismaili discourses of Imamate, the present Nizārī Ismaili Imam, Prince Shāh Karīm al-Ḥusaynī Āghā Khān IV and his predecessor Sir Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh Āghā Khān III (d. 1376/1957), describe the Imam as the living locus of manifestation or *mazhar* of the pre-eternal Light of 'Alī and Muḥammad. Sir Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh, upon succeeding to the Nizārī Ismaili Imamate at

186 Mullā Ṣadrā's understanding of the Muḥammadan Reality is explained in Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 65–72. Fayḍ al-Dīn al-Kāshānī's views are summarized and quoted in Shigeru Kamada, "Fayḍ al-Dīn al-Kāshānī's *Walāya*," in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam*, ed. Todd Lawson (London, New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), 455–70.

187 Post-Mongol Nizārī Ismaili doctrines are discussed in Shafique Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

188 Oludamini Ogunnaike, "Annihilation in the Messenger Revisited: Clarifications on a Contemporary Sufi Practice and its Precedents," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1/2 (2016): 13–34; Hoffman, "Annihilation in the Messenger."

189 Zachary Wright, *On the Path of the Prophet: Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and the Tariqa Muḥammadiyya* (Atlanta: African-American Islamic Institute, 2005), 128–32.

190 Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Shaykh* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 201–2.

the age of eight, evoked the concept of the Muḥammadan Light before his Ismaili followers:

Jamats, do not consider me small. I am the descendant of the Prophet and my grandfather is the Commander of the Faithful (‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib) and my grandmother is the Lady of Paradise Ḥazrat Fāṭima. I am the Light (*nūr*) of both Hazrat ‘Alī and the Holy Prophet (Muḥammad). Though young in age, I am exalted.<sup>191</sup>

The present Ismaili Imam, Āghā Khān IV, continues to employ the symbolism of light to explain the status of the Imam in his private addresses to the Community and sometimes in his public discourses. In a 1965 interview with the Sunday Times, the Āghā Khān stated that “I have been the bearer of the ‘*Nūr*’ a word which means ‘The Light’. The *Nūr* has been handed down in direct descent from the Prophet.”<sup>192</sup> In his spiritual guidance to the Ismaili community, the present Ismaili Imam has frequently described the Ismaili *murīd*’s spiritual ascent as one in which the human soul first spiritually attains to the Light of Imamate through the person of the Imam, and subsequently, through the Light of Imamate, attains nearness to God’s Transcendent Essence called “He who is above all else.”<sup>193</sup> The continued prevalence of such imagery among contemporary Sufi and Ismaili communities illustrates how the Light of Muḥammad concept is not merely a doctrinal motif that Muslims speculate about theoretically, but also a reality that is lived and experienced in contemporary Muslim thought and devotional life.

In conclusion, the metaphysical, theological, and cosmological interpretations of the Light of Muḥammad among Muslim thinkers proceeded along a particular trajectory through the ninth to thirteenth centuries among Sunni Sufi and Shi‘i Ismaili thinkers: these interpretations gradually Neoplatonize and then theophanize the theological and ontological status of the Light of Muḥammad from being understood as the first spiritual creation of God to

191 Āghā Khān III, *farman* made in Bombay, September 1, 1899, quoted in Jonah Steinberg, *Ismaili Modern* (Columbia: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 211. Transliterated spelling has been slightly altered.

192 Āghā Khān IV, Nicholas Tomalin, “The Sunday Times Interview, Part 1, “The Ruler Without A Kingdom” (London, United Kingdom), December 12, 1965. Accessed on the NanoWisdoms Archive, ed. Mohib Ebrahim, on May 11, 2015: <http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1400/>.

193 On “He who is above all else” as a modern Ismaili term for God’s absolute Essence, see Aziz Esmail, “Reason and Religion: The Old Argument Revisited,” *Ilm* 7/3 (Dec 1981-Feb 1982): 32–40.

being revered as the ontological self-manifestation of God; similarly, the person of the Prophet Muḥammad (and each of his successors among the God-Friends and the Imams) becomes theophanized as the locus of manifestation or reflective mirror of God's Names and Attributes. The Light of Muḥammad motif therefore serves an eminent example of how thinkers across Sunni and Shi'i communities, despite differences in theology and practice, continuously draw upon, search for, and express reverence for the universal metaphysical reality represented by the Prophet Muḥammad.

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