

# **The Concept of the Perfect Man in Islamic Mysticism**

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**The Concept of the Perfect Man in Islamic Mysticism<sup>[1]</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Islamic mysticism as a system of knowledge is a kind of ontology or world view obtained through mystical experiences via living a mystical way of life. In this view, the real being is the Absolute Being or the Almighty God, Who is one, infinite and absolutely perfect. The world with all its multiplicity is the manifestation of His names and attributes. Among the creatures of the world, the human being enjoys a special status. He is composed of a physical body and an immaterial soul. With such a combination, human beings have all the merits that can be found in other creatures. Whatever exists in the world exists in human beings. For this reason the human being is known as the microcosm and the most universal being. The human being is the goal of creation and, thus, everything else is created for him. With such a creation, the human being has reason and free will from one side, and enjoys animal-like desires and impulses from the other side. The seed of human existence has both the potential for blossoming and growing, and the possibility for decay and fetidness. The perfect man is the one who has actualized all his potentials in the best possible manner. He is the most perfect manifestation of God's names and attributes. He is the mediator for others to receive God's grace, the fruit of creation, and is the divine vicegerent in the world. He is the proof of God and enjoys the status of *wilayah* (divine authority).

## Introduction

Attention to human beings and to their status in Muslim tradition has its roots in Islamic teachings. Many verses of the Qur'an and quite a large number of hadith have touched on the status of the human being in general and the perfect man in particular. Muslim mystics (*Sufis*, *'urafa*), perhaps more than any other groups, have focused on this aspect of Islamic teachings and dealt with its different aspects. Since the ultimate goal of mysticism is to achieve the highest stages of perfection through purification of the heart, knowing the real nature of man, his dimensions, and ultimate perfection, has fundamental importance. Hence, anthropology and mystical psychology enjoy a focal attention in Islamic mystical literature. Knowing the status of the perfect man, in so far as he shows the direction of the mystical journey and the ultimate goal of mystical life, is particularly significant.

The expression "perfect man" (*al-insan al-kamil*) can be seen in the works of 'Attar Nishabury, and Ibn Arabi in the seventh Islamic century. Ibn Arabi, more than anyone else, has systematically discussed the status of the perfect man in his theoretical mysticism (*al-'irfan al-nadari*) in different places especially in the first chapter of his *Fusus al-hikam*. All commentators of the *Fusus* have elaborated on the nature of the perfect man in the interpretation of this chapter. After Ibn Arabi his followers such as Sadr al-Din Qunawi, Fanari, Shabistari, Nasafi, Jilli, Ibn Turkah, Tabataba'i, Imam Khomeini and Mutahhari have discussed different aspects of the perfect man in their works.

Discussions related to the human being in Islamic literature are of various kinds:

- 1- philosophical psychology discusses the nature of man in general as a species;
- 2- theoretical mysticism discusses the idea of perfect man;
- 3- practical mysticism as a discipline deals with the soul in so far as it has an impact on one's behavior and life;
- 4- an individual's self- knowledge as the gate for purification of heart is emphasized in actual mystical training.

This paper focuses on the second type of Islamic anthropology, which elaborates the status of the perfect man from the view point of Islamic mysticism.

## Divine Manifestation

From the viewpoint of Islamic mysticism, real being and genuine reality is God, and the rest of the world consists of the manifestations of His names and attributes. God is infinite perfection. His one and simple essence contains all perfections in an infinite manner. Each name and attribute of God indicates one of His perfections. God knows Himself and sees Himself in Himself and does not need anyone else. However, since His perfection is absolute and His grace is eternal and never ending, the world manifests Him and He discloses Himself in the world and thus sees Himself in the world. Hence, God created the world in order to see His face in the mirrors of His manifestations.

In this view, God's names and attributes have consequences that are called immutable archetypes (*al-a'ayan al-thabitah* = eternal essences/ fixed entities). They are mental/intellectual correlates of things (*wujud al-'ilmi lil ashya'*) in the knowledge of God. These archetypes that are essences of things are created by the most holy emanation of God (*al-fayd al-aqdas*). Realities of the world are external consequences of God's names and attributes and objective existences of those essences. Each objective being is the manifestation of one or some of God's names and the reflection of some of God's perfections. These realities came into existence by God's holy emanation (*al-fayd al-muqaddas*). Thus, the real being is God and the rest are manifestations of His names and attributes. Each reality is like a mirror in which some of God's perfections reflected. And the world in its totality is the exhibition in which God's perfection is explicitly manifested. Each being reflects God's perfection according to its capacity.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Greatest Manifestation

Although realities of the world are manifestations of God's names, and the whole world can show all His names; however, before the creation of the human being there was no single creature that was capable of being the manifestation of all God's names. God wants to create something that can alone show all His names and thus God can see Himself with all His names in this mirror. The only thing in the world that has such a capacity is the human being.<sup>[3]</sup> Even celestial beings, angles and intellects do not have this capacity. Therefore, God created the human being that is his greatest manifestation and the most perfect theophany.<sup>[4]</sup> Since the name "Allah" is the most comprehensive name of God, the perfect man is the manifestation of this name. "The perfect man is the manifestation of God's most comprehensive name (al-ism al-jami') and the mirror for the disclosure of his greatest name (*al-ism al-a'dam*)."<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, we can say that manifestation of God is either in a separate manner and explicitly in the multiplicity of the world, or implicitly in a unitary way of appearing in the perfect man.

It is noteworthy that the human being is a species; and thus all its individuals potentially have this capacity; however, its actualization depends on one's own free efforts, and thus, at the end, only some individuals enjoy this status. These individuals are in fact described as the perfect man (al-insan al-kamil), divine great manifestations, microcosm and the most universal being. These are prophets, and saints (*anbiya' wa awliya'*). They are not all at the same level; rather, their perfection has degrees. Highest of all is the status of the seal of prophets: Muhammad (s).<sup>[6]</sup> Other people depending on the spiritual status that they earn enjoy some degrees of this perfection.

## Creation of the Human Being

The difference between human beings and other creatures has its roots in the creation of the human being. Human beings, like other material beings, have a physical dimension, and, like other living beings in nature, have biological life. The Qur'ān explicitly mentions the origin of human natural life and stages of development from the embryo to death: "If you are in doubt about the resurrection, (consider that) We indeed created you from dust, then from a drop of [seminal] fluid, then from a clinging mass, then from a fleshy tissue... then We bring you forth as an infant ..." (22/5) In chapter 23 says: "Certainly We created man from an extract of clay. Then We made him a drop of [seminal] fluid...Then We created the drop of fluid as a clinging mass. Then We created the clinging mass as a fleshy tissue. Then We created the fleshy tissue as bones. Then We clothed the bones with flesh" (23/12-14).

But according to the Qur'ān, human life is not restricted to its natural biological life as at the end of the previous verse the Qur'ān says: "Then We produced him as [yet] another creature. So blessed is Allah, the best of creators!" (23/14) It says that after its corporeal and biological creation God bestowed on him another creation. Thus, besides its physical nature, the human being has a nature of a different and higher kind which is its immaterial nature. In another verse the Qur'ān elaborates it more explicitly: "When your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed I am going to create a human out of a dry clay [drawn] from an aging mud. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, then fall down in prostration before him'" (15/28-29).

The human being has a substance that makes him different from others and makes him closer to God. He enjoys a divine soul. A famous hadith says that God created man in His own image.<sup>[7]</sup> Although there are some controversial discussions about the authenticity and the interpretation of this hadith, many mystics agree that the hadith means that God created man in His own image. This is in accord with the overall mystical view of the status of human being as the best manifestation of God and His vicegerent. Some verses of the Qur'ān also support this idea. For example, God says that He gave the human being the best form: "He created the heavens and the earth with the truth, and He formed you and perfected your forms, and toward Him is the destination" (64/3). Also: "We certainly created man in the best of forms" (95/4).

## Value and Dignity of the Human Being

No doubt, from the Qur'ānic view, the human being has a special status in the world. This is the human being that has a different creation, enjoys reason and free will, is the most perfect creature, and is created in the image of God. Thus, the human has the highest value, honor and dignity among all creatures. The Qur'ān states: "Certainly We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all good things, and given them an advantage over many of those We have created with a complete preference" (17/70). The human being enjoys such a noble status that God commands the angles to prostrate before him. Because he has a divine soul, he deserved to be honored: "So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, then fall down in prostration before him" (15/29).

As we can see, from the Islamic perspective, the human's value totally depends on his relation to God, not autonomously and on his own. Because he is the best manifestation of God, has a divine soul, and is created in the image of God, he has the highest value among the creatures. For God is the only source of value, dignity and honor. At the same time, we can say that human dignity is essential, not accidental, for his relation to God is in his very essence and existence. And this is the difference between Islam and Humanism, Liberalism and other secular schools of thought with regard to human value. We must also add that since human value has its roots in human existence itself, the value of individuals is genuine and not dependent on their status in the society.

In this view, the value of the human being is not only static and predetermined; rather he has of two types of values: first the essential value of the human species, which has its root in his creation and, therefore, is common to all individual humans; and second, the dynamic dimension of value and perfection that each individual acquires by his/her own free will. This value depends on each individual's knowledge/faith and practice/piety and therefore, is different from one to another. The Qur'ān says: "O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godfearing among you" (49/13).

The first part of the verse refers to the common value of all people; and the second part refers to the acquired and therefore different values of individuals. This value depends solely on piety (*taqwā*) which is the natural combination of faith and good deeds. Knowing God, loving God and obeying God are three essential elements of the way to perfection. Whoever goes further along this way reaches the higher stages of perfection.

It must be noted that according to Islamic mysticism, there is no ending point in human perfection. Whatever stage one reaches he/she can go further and further toward the infinite. And this is another advantage for human beings among other creatures.



## **The Other Side of the Coin of the Human Being**

Because of its combination of material and spiritual substances, and because of its conflicting desires, on one hand, and its free will, on the other hand, man's final destiny depends on his own choice. He himself decides his future destiny. He can ascend upward to heaven or descend downward to hell. He can go beyond the angels or below the beasts. "We certainly created man in the best of forms; then We relegated him to the lowest of the low, except those who have faith and do righteous deeds. There will be an everlasting reward for them" (95/4-6).

The human being in its nature has a tendency toward the good, however, he has selfish desires, too. The Qur'ān says that the example of one who denies the truth while he knows, "is that of an ass carrying books" (62/5). Elsewhere the Qur'ān compares those who follow their selfish desires and turn their backs toward the truth to dogs. "Had We wished, We would have surely raised him by their means, but he clung to the earth and followed his [base] desires. So his parable is that of a dog: if you make for it, it lolls out its tongue, and if you let it alone, it lolls out its tongue, such is the parable of the people who deny Our signs" (7/176). Those who are slaves of their desires and do not benefit from their reason are lower than all creatures. "Indeed the worst of beasts in Allah's sight are the deaf and the dumb who do not apply reason" (8/22). Hell is the consequence of the behavior of those who so indulge in the lower pleasures that they neglect the truth. They are no longer human beings. "Certainly We have created for hell many of the jinn and humans: they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they do not hear. They are like cattle; rather they are more astray. It is they who are heedless" (7/179). Thus, although man can fly toward light and happiness by the two wings of faith and good deeds, however, if his selfish desires overcome his reason, he will be imprisoned in darkness and misfortune. The Qur'ān says: "By Time! Indeed man is at a loss, except those who have faith and do righteous deeds" (Ch. 103).

## The Most Universal Being

In Islamic mysticism, the human being is not merely a creature besides other creatures; rather, he is a comprehensive being who contains within himself all beings. Since man is the greatest manifestation of God, the world in its totality is summarized in him. In other words, since man reflects all names of God, he encompasses everything and is present in all worlds.

In this view, the human being is not only a species among others; rather he is a world that contains all other worlds. Mystics recognize four stages of worlds: the world of fixed entities ('alam al-a'yan al-thabitah), the world of intellects ('alam al-'uqul) the imaginary world ('alam al-mithal), the world of nature ('alam al-tabi'ah) and the world of most universal being or the world of human being ('alam al-insani).<sup>[8]</sup>

Since the human being in his arc of descent (*al-qows al-nuzuli*) has crossed all worlds and contains and comprehends all, he has a kind of unity with all worlds.<sup>[9]</sup> The unity of the perfect man with the world and his presence in all stages of the world is likened to the unity and presence of the soul with and in its faculties.<sup>[10]</sup> Hence, Ibn Arabi says that the perfect man is the spirit of the world and the world is his body. The world without the perfect man is like a body without soul, i.e., a dead body.<sup>[11]</sup> Therefore, the perfect human being is called the minor world or the microcosm (*al-'alam al-saghir*) and the world is called the greater human (*al-insan al-kabir*). This description is according to the outward form, however, in reality, the human being is the macrocosm and the world is microcosm.<sup>[12]</sup>

Since the human being represents both God and the world, knowing the human is the key to knowing God and the world. As a prophetic hadith says, "one who knows himself knows his lord;" or knowing the self is the most beneficiary knowledge and the key to all knowledge.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Man as Vicegerent of God

As mentioned above, the human being is the best manifestation of God and the closest of creatures to Him. Because of this status God has chosen the human as His vicegerent in the world. We can understand from the Qur'ān that God created the human being in order to be His vicegerent.

“When your Lord said to the angles, ‘Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on the earth,’ they said, ‘Will You set in it someone who will cause corruption in it, and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?’ He said ‘Indeed I know what you do not know.’ And He taught Adam the Names, all of them; then presented them to the angles and said, Tell me the names of these, if you are truthful.’ They said, Immaculate are You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed You are the All-knowing, the All-wise.’ He said ‘O Adam, inform them of their names,’ and when he had informed them of their names, He said ‘Did I not tell you that I indeed know the Unseen in the heaven and the earth, and that I know whatever you disclose and whatever you were concealing?’” (2/ 30-33).

According to these verses, the position of vicegerency is related to man's knowledge of names. It is explicitly mentioned that since Adam knows the names, he is chosen as God's vicegerent. He knows all names because he is the manifestation of all names. When he knows himself he knows all names. But other creatures, even angles, do not reflect in themselves all names; therefore, they do not know them. Consequently, they cannot have the position of vicegerency and must prostrate before Adam. And so they did: “And when We said to the angles, ‘Prostrate before Adam,’ they prostrated, except Iblis: he refused and acted arrogantly, and he was one of the faithless” (2/34).

In the same line, the Qur'ān talks about a trust that all creatures refused to carry but the human being. “Indeed We presented the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it; and were apprehensive of it; but man undertook it” (33/72).

### Perfect Man as the Mediator for Creation and Sustainment of the World

The perfect man is the first creature emanated from God and the mediator for the creation of the rest of the world. God's grace reaches the world via the perfect man. He is the isthmus between necessity and contingency, a mediator between the creator and creatures. He is the guardian and cause of the continuity of the world. Without him the world cannot receive the grace of God and thus could not exist.<sup>[14]</sup> As Qaysari states; “The perfect man is the intermediary cause of the world's creation, sustention and perfection.”<sup>[15]</sup> Therefore, although formally and apparently he is posterior to all; however, spiritually he has priority to all.

It must be emphasized that this position of the perfect man does not mean that he is as a partner of God. The perfect man achieves this position through obedience to God. According to Islamic mysticism, the perfect man par excellence is the prophet Muhammad (s) whose most distinguished quality is “the servant” (al-'abd). The human being through obedience and purification of the soul can reach a point to become the mediator between God and the world, God's vicegerent and lord of the world.<sup>[16]</sup> His lordship

is the shadow of God's lordship, and his intervention is by the permission of God (bi idhnillah). He is God's agent. In fact, his heart is the mirror of God and reflects His lordship.

## **The Perfect Man as the Goal of Creation**

Before the creation of the perfect man, the world is incomplete and the goal of creation has not yet been achieved. Only by the appearance of perfect man the goal of creation is met, for the ultimate goal of creation is God's complete manifestation. Only the perfect man can reflect all God's names and attributes. Therefore, without the perfect man the purpose of creation has not been met.<sup>[17]</sup> As we already said, the perfect man is the intermediary cause of creation; but he is also the final cause of creation. The final cause has priority to the effect in the knowledge and will of the efficient cause, though its existence follows the existence of the effect. As Jalaluddin Mawlavi (Rumi) says, although in the appearance the fruit comes out of the tree, but in reality the fruit is the cause for planting the tree.<sup>[18]</sup>

It follows that without the existence of the perfect man, the world would cease to exist. When the last perfect man dies, the resurrection will commence. This is in accordance with some Shi'a hadith which say that without a hujjah (the proof/the perfect man) the earth and its dwellers will vanish.<sup>[19]</sup> If the perfect man is the channel of God's grace to the world, the guardian of the world and its final cause and the world is created for him, it follows that the world cannot exist without the presence of a perfect man.

## Nabī, Rasūl and Walī

Each name of God has a requirement in God's explicit knowledge which is called a fixed entity. The name "Allah" which is the most comprehensive name has a reflective eternal fixed entity that is called al-haqīqah al-Muhammadiyah (the reality of Muhammad). The external manifestation of this reality in each period of history is one of the prophets. Its most perfect manifestation is in the person of the Prophet Muhammad (s). Therefore, all prophets, and thus all their messages, originated from the same source and are different reflections of the same light.

Here, we should distinguish between three connected concepts: al-nabī (the prophet), *al-rasūl* (the messenger) and *al-walī* (the saint, the friend of God). One person may accumulate in himself all three concepts, as the great prophets, such as Moses, Jesus and Mohammad, do. Each of these concepts constitutes one dimension of a prophet's spiritual personality. Walī is the one who has a direct relation to God; his acts, qualities and essence are annihilated in God. Nabī is the one who receives the message from God via a medium like an angle. And rasūl is the messenger who has a shari'ah and is obliged to deliver God's message to the people. The wilayah of a nabī is the inner dimension of his prophethood and thus the wilayah of a nabī is higher than his prophethood. All rasūls are nabī and walī. All nabīs also are *walī*, but all walī is not necessarily nabī or rasūl. Nubuwwah (prophethood) and *risalah* (messengerhood) are not eternal. After the last prophet there will not be any nabī or rasūl; however, wilayah is eternal and the world will never be without a walī. For the word "*al-Walī*" is one of the names of God which requires a manifestation, unlike "*nabī*" and "*rasūl*."<sup>[20]</sup> According to Shi'ite doctrine, after Prophet Muhammad, each of the twelve Imams of his household are walī.

Beside the cosmic roles that prophets and sages play as the perfect men, they are masters and guides for the religious and mystical life. They are gates for salvation. Without following their teachings and examples spiritual journey of mystics is not complete. Therefore, knowing the walī and following him is essential. As the Qur'ān says: "[O Muhammad] Say, 'If you love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins, and Allah is All-forgiving, All-merciful'" (3/31).

## **Conclusion**

According to Islamic mysticism, the essence of God is absolutely hidden and cannot be comprehended. We know God through His names and attributes. The names and attributes emerge from the essence and the world emerges from God's names and attributes. God first discloses Himself in His names, and then with the mediation of His names in the world. The highest discloser and manifestation is in the human being which is the most universal being and capable of reflecting all God's names. This is due to the nature of the human being which is composed of both physical and spiritual, earthly and heavenly, and material and immaterial substances. The human has reason and a tendency toward the good, but at the same time, it has selfish desires too. Since he has free will, man can go in any direction. He can achieve the highest stages of perfection, as he can fall into the lowest pit of deficiency. The perfect man is the one who fully actualizes his potential for perfection. He is the vicegerent of God, the microcosm, the bearer of God's trust, the intermediary cause of creation, the ultimate goal of the world, the channel for sustaining the world and guardian of the world, the friend of God, the mirror through which one can see God, the master, guide and perfect example in the journey toward God, the prophet, the Imam.

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## Notes

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- [2]. See, Imam Khomeini, *Misbah al-Hidayah ila al-Khilafati wal Wilayah*, p. 44.
- [3]. See Ibn Arabi , *Fsus al-Hikam*, p. 48.
- [4]. Imam Khomeini, *Sharh Du'a al-Sahar*, p. 159.
- [5]. Imam Khomeini, *Sharhe Chehel Hadith*, p. 635.
- [6]. See, Abdulkarim Jili, *al-Insan al-Kamil*, Second part, p. 71.
- [7]. Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 4, p. 14.
- [8]. Dawood Qaysari, *Sharh Fusus al-Hikam*, Introduction, ch. 5, p. 27.
- [9]. This idea is confirmed by some hadith from the Imams; for example see, Kulaini, *al-Kafi*, kitab al-hujjah.
- [10]. Imam Khomeini, *Misbah al-Hidayah*, p. 18.
- [11]. Hbn Arabi, *al-Futuhah al-Makkiyyah*, vol. 2, p. 67.
- [12]. See Jami, *Naqd al-Nusus*, p. 91; also Rumi, *Mathnavi*, the Fifth Book, line 521.
- [13]. ]Imam Khomeini, *Ta'liqat 'ala Fusus al-Hikam*, p. 59.
- [14]. Jami, *Naqd al-Nusus*, p. 97.
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- [16]. See, Ibn Sina, *al-Shifa al-Ilahiyyat*, p. 455.
- [17]. Jandi, *Shrah Fusus al-Hikam*, p. 151.
- [18]. Rumi, *Mathnavi*, the Forth Book, line 524.
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