

Cosmogonic Myths in Sufism

Stephen Hirtenstein

How and why the cosmos came into being is one of the major themes in Sufi thought, drawn from profound contemplations on the nature of the human being and the world as depicted in the Qur'ānic revelation, and notions of the primordality of the Prophet Muḥammad. Myths and legends are sometimes regarded as antithetical to revelation, but in the Sufi contemplative context the scripture and even the cosmos itself becomes a revealed book that has to be re-imagined or "re-mythologised" by each human reader. In these contemplations the "object" or product of the divine creative activity varies: from the macrocosmic world to the microcosmic Perfect Human or Muḥammadan Reality and the creative realities that demand manifestation for their effects to be realised. Each of these aspects can be classified as a "cosmos," with its own cosmogonic story, based on explaining how the essential divine unity gives rise to and pervades the multiple forms that are witnessed in the world.

At the heart of all versions of Sufi cosmology lies the principle of *tawḥīd*, denoting the pre-existent and transcendent Unity behind all appearances. This means not simply the intellectual articulation that "there is no god but God," but the inner affirmation, vision, and realisation that the ultimate Reality is One and Absolute, and includes all forms of relativity. In Islam and Sufism, therefore, there is a direct and inalienable link between cosmology and spiritual psychology, between the origin and function of the cosmos and the origin and purpose of the human being, between cosmogony and eschatology. The relation between the pure singularity of the divine Essence and the plurality of worldly forms is framed in terms of the Qur'ānic notion of multiple divine Names and Attributes, which govern the world and which are all Names subsumed within the ultimate Name, the Name that designates the Essence insofar as It can be designated, *Allāh* (Ibn al-'Arabī, *Inshā' al-dawā'ir*, fol. 135a, ed. 37–8, English trans. 37). The principle of descent by which the ultimate Origin reveals itself in a "downward" manifestation (*nuzūl*, *tanzīl*) is also tied to the inevitable ascent or return to the Origin (*'awd*, *ma'ād*) (see Q 2:28). The whole of existence can be conceived of as a great cycle or circle of Being (*dā'irat al-wujūd*) at whose centre lies the unfathomable essential Reality, a cycle that begins and ends with the First Intellect, and is traversed by the true human being who descends and ascends to encompass all the degrees:

the relationship between the Reality and every point on the circumference (degree or state of existence) is identical, each contemplating Him, each receiving whatever He gives by way of existence and blessing (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 1:125). Every aspect of this process of generation from a single source was explored, sometimes in terms of number theory, sometimes in terms of Neoplatonic traditions of hierarchical emanation, sometimes in mythological terms. In Sufi tradition, which emphasises the twin perspectives of separation and union between the Uncreated and the created, the various depictions of how and why the cosmos and the human being came into existence should be understood as meditations or elaborations on specific passages in the Qurʾān and Sunna. The historical spectrum of Sufi approaches to cosmogony naturally show a wide variety of perspectives and interpretations, even if there is common ground in the revealed texts, and what follows is an overview of major themes that recur in Sufi tradition.

1 The Genesis of the World

The Qurʾān itself provides diverse cosmogonic accounts in dispersed, non-sequential statements, re-envisioning motifs found in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern beliefs: for example, the divine work of creation in six days, after which God seated Himself upon His Throne under the aegis of His All-Compassionate Mercy (*rahmān*) (7:54, 10:3, 25:59, 32:4); the creation of the heavens and the earth in two days by splitting them apart after they had been closed together, and the creation of all living things from water (41:9, 21:30); the creation of seven heavens out of smoke, in a series of layers, in two days (41:11–12, 67:3); the divine Throne established above the seven heavens and borne by glorifying angels (39:75, 40:7, 42:5).

The Qurʾānic “six days” of creation was taken as a general description of the genesis of the cosmos, but also points to the prime perfection of the number six: as the first mathematically “perfect number” (being the sum of its divisors), six was accepted as the most suitable numerical symbol of creation by early Jewish and Christian authors such as Philo, Origen, and St Augustine, and this idea was incorporated into Islamic mysticism. When describing the “voyage of origination” (*safar al-ibdāʿ*), which is “the voyage of creation and command” (see Q 7:54), the Andalusian master Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) interprets the Qurʾānic text (41:9–12) as specifying four “days” for the creation of the earth: two days in terms of its entity (*ʿayn*) and essence (*dhāt*), one for its exterior and one for its interior, and two days “when He deposited in the earth the unseen and seen kinds of sustenance”; and then two “days” for the

division and completion of the seven heavens (*K. al-Isfār*, 53–4). The Persian master Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) linked these days to six of God's essential attributes (*ṣifāt*: knowledge, power, hearing, sight, speech, and desire), akin to Adam's body prior to the divine spirit of the Essence, which is life, being blown into it (*ʿArāʾis*, 1:441, cited in Kazuyo Murata, 66–7; see also Elmore, Genesis, 7–12). The Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) contrasts the deliberation involved in God taking six days with the instantaneous nature of divine creativity in saying “Be” (*kun*, Q 36:82) (*Mathnawī*, 3:3500–1).

The two worlds of earth and heaven are often designated as the worlds of Creation (*khalq*) and Command (*amr*): the exterior “earth” of bodies, also known as the kingdom (*mulk*), and the interior “heavens” of the spirits, known as the dominion or the king's presence (*malakūt*) (Rāzī, 70–1; Rūmī, 4:3692, 6:78). The superiority of the creation of the heavens and earth over that of human beings (Q 40:57, “the creation of the Heavens and the Earth is greater than the creation of humankind, but most people do not know [that]”) is taken to mean that humans are generated from them both, and they are like two parents, not the obvious fact that they are greater in bodily mass (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 1:125).

Great importance is given to the ruling power of Compassionate Mercy (*rahma*) over everything and to the primacy of divine Generosity. Sufi authors sometimes depict the pre-creation state of Being as “the Cloud,” in reference to the response given by Muḥammad when asked where the Lord was before creation: “He was in the Cloud, above which there was no air, and no air was below it” (al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, Tafsīr, sura 11:1). This Cloud (*ʿamāʾ*) is also described as the divine “Canopy” (*surādiq*, an image taken from Q 18:29) due to its enclosed impenetrability, or the primordial matter, “the dust-cloud” (*habāʾ*, Q 56:6) within which the forms of all things arise—the cosmos can therefore be regarded as a collection of imagined or “imaginalised” forms of dust taking shape within the Cloud (see Abrahamov, 56–7; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 125–7; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *K. al-Isfār*, 50, *Futūḥāt*, 1:118, 3:443). The process of creation is then discussed in terms of its qualitative causation:

God desired to bring things into existence, and existence is the fruit of the generosity of divine Being, necessarily. So All-Mercifulness is undoubtedly the Ruler with respect to this separation. Thus the Name All-Merciful (*al-Rahmān*) sat upon [the Throne] in the Canopy of the Cloud ... The voyage of Mercifulness from the Lord's Cloud to the sitting upon the Throne comes into existence out of generosity. Everything below the Throne becomes existent from the One sitting upon the Throne.

In other words, the initial movement of Being from the state of absolute non-manifestation is regarded as a matter of sheer generosity (*jūd*): this establishes God as the All-Merciful Lord, who is seated on the Throne (Q 2:255). It is from this Mercifulness that all existence (*wujūd*) flows—although these two Arabic words technically come from different roots, they are often associated in Sufi teaching since the letters of the former (*jūd* = *j-w-d*) are included as part of the latter (*wujūd* = *w-j-w-d*). The overflowing of this Generous Mercy existentiates all the possibilities inherent in the Essence, not only the universal and particular worlds and the things that come into external existence but also the states of being particular to human beings such as paradise and hell. A two-step process of creation was delineated by Ibn al-ʿArabī: “Through our manifestation within the Cloud, He gave us an existence belonging to the Cloud: after having an intelligible existence, it took on existence as an individuated eye-entity (*ʿayn*)” (*Futūḥāt*, 2:231). While Mercy is generally taken to mean that God nurtures all beings through continual blessing (through the name *al-Raḥmān*), as well as covering with forgiveness at the end (through the name *al-Raḥīm*, the Most Merciful), one school of Sufi thought takes it to be identical with existence itself: the fact that something exists is the same as its having been mercified, and the first “thing” to which Mercy is extended is Itself. One implication of this doctrine, according to some, is that whatever has come from Mercy must ultimately return, or the circle of Being would be incomplete: however, this does not suggest a simple understanding of universal salvation, since each person is said to return to their “known place” (*maqām maʿlūm*, referring to Q 37:164), which indicates their own reality (Chittick, *Divine Love*, 25–6; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:429–43, *Fuṣūṣ*, 166; Izutsu, 116–20; Maybudī, 1:29, 9:397; Suhrawardī, 96).

Such a cosmological perspective has had various doctrinal consequences. For example, when considering the world as the object of divine creativity, Sufis have emphasised that this world and all that is in it is the effect of the divine will, and is therefore complete and perfect. They have followed al-Ghazālī’s famous and quite controversial dictum that “there is not in possibility anything whatever more excellent, more perfect and more complete than [this world],” arguing that if there were a better world and God had withheld it, that would signify a miserliness entirely incompatible with His infinite generosity (al-Ghazālī, 4:222–3; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Inshāʾ al-dawāʾir*, fols. 131b–132a, ed. 31–2, English trans. 32–3; for a detailed discussion of the controversy, see Ormsby, *passim*).

While the Qurʾānic cosmogonic passages have been described as “novel readings of a familiar narrative with the perspicuous tendency to de-mythicise it in some substantial traits, though not without introducing new mythic

elements" (Neuwirth, *Negotiating Justice*, 1:28), Muslim exegetes and Sufi authors can be said to have re-mythologised such accounts by reading the revealed text through a contemplative and imaginative lens, as part of the vertical relationship between the Sender of revelation and successive generations of human recipients. This often involved framing the discussion in theological and philosophical terms. For example, in one of his early works Ibn al-ʿArabī discusses the genesis of the cosmos in terms of how the evident causation of the world demonstrates its total dependence upon the incomparable divine Essence, which is dissociated from any need for the world, and how the Essence demonstrates its sovereign power within the world through the activity of the divine Names: these Names are not simply multiple but constitute a totality (*jamʿ*) by virtue of the One that they name (*Inshāʾ al-dawāʾir*, fol. 135a, ed. 37–8, English trans. 36–7, *Futūḥāt*, 1:122). He then goes on to discuss the particular Names that lead to the world's coming into being, in a way that was both clearly important in his thinking and highly controversial to some of his readers (see *The Creative Self-fulfilment of the Names* below).

The Neoplatonic schema of emanation from the One was also utilised to give an orderly structure to the overflowing of the Essence into the multiple forms of manifest existence, although Sufi authors were often at great pains to point out that this emanation (*fayḍ*) should not be understood in the sense of any actual separation from Reality. Qurʾānic images of the Pen and Tablet, as well as Greek concepts such as Universal Nature or the four elements, were employed in Islamic philosophy and Sufism from the time of the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, fourth/tenth century), to give shape to the hierarchical nature of existence (Nasr, 51–62, 76). The cosmological structure which was generally subscribed to in medieval times situated the earth at the centre of the cosmos, as a world of generation and corruption, above which the heavenly spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy constantly rotate; transcending both levels of physical change is a static hierarchy of Universals emanating from the Transcendent Unity, as elaborated by the Neoplatonists. This was broadly followed by medieval Sufi authors: while earlier figures had tended to emphasise a more ascetical perspective, viewing the world as petty and corrupt in comparison to the afterlife, later writers mainly promoted a harmonious vision of the world in accord with al-Ghazālī's principle of perfection through expression, with the added dynamic of the crucial importance of the human being: prophetic realities were incorporated as rulers for each of the heavenly spheres, and the perfect human being was made to be both the endpoint of the hierarchy and its *raison d'être*. Thus the ladder of existence begins from the divine Pen (*qalam*, Q 68:1) or First Intellect, and proceeds in a "descent" to the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ*, Q 85:22) or Universal Soul, Nature (*ṭabīʿa*), the

Dust-Cloud (*habāʾ*, Q 56:6) or Prime Matter, Universal Body, the Lord's Throne (*ʿarsh*, Q 20:5), the Footstool or Pedestal that extends over the heavens and the earth (*kursī*, Q 2:255), the starless sphere or the constellations (*burūj*, Q 85:1), the sphere of fixed stars or lunar mansions (*manāzil*, Q 10:5), which includes paradises and hells, the seven planetary heavens, the four elements and the various inhabitants (both spiritual and physical beings such as plants and animals, angels and jinn), concluding with the human being. Basing themselves on numerical associations, some Sufi authors discuss 28 degrees of existence (the second "perfect" number, the number of lunar mansions and of Arabic letters), while others give 40 (the number of preparation, purification, dissolution, and death; see Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, ch. 198, 2:397ff.; for the framework of ascension, see also ch. 167, trans. *Alchemy*, 167–72; al-Būsawī, fols. 474a–b; al-Jīlī, passim; see also Chittick, *Self-disclosure*, xxviii–xxxii; Schimmel, *Mystery*, 122–6, 245–53; Todd, 65–73).

In this cosmological hierarchy, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school, "every active principle is a father, and every passive principle is a mother." Human imagery of fathers, mothers, conjugal union, and offspring is used to explain the interaction of different macrocosmic degrees in an explicit anthropopathy:

The First Intellect or Sublime Pen was the first thing to be created, with no other originated thing besides it. Then it underwent the effect of God causing the Preserved Tablet to be brought forth from it, just as Eve was brought out from Adam in the world of bodies, so that the Tablet would be a place and receptacle for what the divine Sublime Pen would write upon it ... Thus between the Pen and the Tablet there took place an intelligible, spiritual conjunction (*nikāḥ*), as well as a visible, sensory effect ... The trace [of the Pen] that is deposited on the Tablet is like the sperm that flows into the woman's womb, and the meanings that appear from this Scripture are akin to the spirits of the children that are placed in their bodies.

IBN AL-ʿARABĪ, *Futūḥāt*, 1:139; for the development of the relationship of Pen and Tablet in the writings of AL-QŪNAWĪ and FARGHĀNĪ, see TODD, 66–8

2 The Genesis of the Human Being

The primary cosmogonic myth of the creation of the first human being, Adam, which is common to all three Abrahamic traditions, is dramatised in the Qurʾān through a direct encounter between God and the angels in the unseen world

of the spirit. When the angels object to the idea of this Adamic creature being placed on the earth as a divine representative (*khalīfa*) on the grounds that he “will wreak mischief in it and shed blood, while we glorify You with praise and declare You holy” (Q 2:30), they are rebuked by God for assuming that their glorification is superior and not recognising the divine wisdom in creating Adam. They are depicted as not seeing that the apparent incompatibility of the spiritual and physical worlds, the two worlds of command (*amr*) and creation (*khalq*), hides a deeper truth, a truth which will only be realised by the human being (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, 2:575). God then tells Adam to teach them their “names,” of which they have no prior knowledge. This proof-text was taken to point both to the unparalleled dignity of the human being in perfection, inherently superior to the highest of created beings in terms of knowledge, and to the implicit divine warning that even His closest servants can err through being ignorant of the real meaning of being human (Baqī, *Abhar*, 32; Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 29). This view of the true place of the human within the created order may be contrasted with the Old Testament myth which focuses on Adam’s transgression and fall from grace, initiating a historical process of unpredictable human—divine interaction (see Neuwirth, *Myths and Legends*, 3:485, 490–1).

Sufi authors explain the story of Adam being taught all the names (Q 2:31) as meaning that the human being is first and foremost created in the divine image, and that this theomorphic “image,” whose only quality is absolute dependence or servanthood (just as a mirror-image is nothing in itself but a reflection), contains or mirrors everything that is in the original, including above all the knowledge of all distinctions which is the mark of divine love (Sam‘ānī, 625–6). The main difference between the angels and Adam is that the angels are beings that perform works of adoration, while the truly human being is given pure knowledge. The divine “Names” are the prime distinctive qualities or aspects of God that are to be found through manifestation, and only the human being can recognise all of them by virtue of knowing that which they name. Thus, for example, the Forgiver (*al-ghafūr*) is a Name that lies beyond the knowledge of angels, since they do not recognise the existence of lack which such a Name requires in order to manifest its effects. These Names, which are in themselves innumerable, can be summarised as the 99 Most Beautiful Names (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*), as articulated in the revelation of the Qur’ān and Sunna (see Chittick, *Divine Love*, 53–69, *Sufi Path*, 33–46; Izutsu, 99–107).

Other aspects of Adam’s creation feature prominently in Sufi texts: the unique privilege of his being created in the form or image (*ṣūra*) of God by the two divine Hands (Q 38:75), which are variously interpreted to mean the attributes of divine beauty and majesty, the created exterior form of the universe

and the interior divine form of the Real (Baqlī, *ʿAbhar*, 38; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 31–3; Jāmī, 75); the 40 days needed for the kneading or fermenting of Adam’s clay (*ḥadīth*), signifying the completion of all the perfections that are gradually included in his make-up, and corresponding to the achievement of human maturity at the age of 40 (Rūmī, 3:3502, 6:1216; Samʿānī, 173); and perhaps most importantly, the blowing of the divine Spirit into Adam after being shaped from clay (Q 15:29), which is taken to mean that he was given knowledge of all the divine Attributes, both those of the Essence, like life, and those of the divine Acts which manifest majesty and beauty (Baqlī, *Mashrab*, 176; Kazuyo Murata, 84–85, 102–7), or that he brought together the beauty of the spiritual world of Command and the “taint” of creation (Maybudī, 3:297–8), or that the full capacity to receive the constant effusion of Being was actualised (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 27; Jāmī, 53).

Adam’s creation not only gives rise to dispute among the angels but leads to the appearance of Satan (al-Shayṭān or Iblīs), whose subsequent role as misleader (see Q 28:15) is not simply a manifestation of divine anger but more importantly, a hidden mercy (Chittick, *Divine Love*, 83–7; Maybudī, 3:589). On the other hand, Rūmī draws on another tradition that even the earth could not bear the prospect of Adam’s arrival: the four archangels, Gabriel, Michael, Seraphiel, and Azrael, were each commanded by God to take a handful of clay from the earth for the creation of Adam’s body, but the earth lamented so much that the first three could not bear to do so. Only Azrael had enough resolution and strength of purpose to fetch the clay, and as a consequence was rewarded by becoming the angel of death, who leads the human being “from a dungeon and prison into a garden” (Rūmī, 5:1556–714). However, in contrast to those who viewed the human being as an angelic light trapped in the prison of materiality, the idea that human embodiment is superior to the purely spiritual realm of the angels is one that became normative amongst Sufis: this superiority reflects the ontological status of the Manifest in relation to the Non-Manifest (see below for the discussion of the hidden treasure), and is realised through abasement and servanthood rather than through exaltation and power (for example, see Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 132–3; Izutsu, 230–2; al-Jilānī, 83; Shaikh, 134–5).

3 Adam and Eve

Great cosmological and ontological importance is given to the figure of Eve, as the mate that made the singular human being, “the first father” of humankind, Adam, into one of a pair. The proof-text of Q 4:1 (“Fear your Lord, who created you all from a single soul, and who created from it its spouse, and who spread

many men and women from the two of them”) is taken as describing not simply the origination of the human microcosm from Adam (the single soul) and Eve (its spouse or mate), but also that of the whole macrocosmos itself, as deriving from the One Being that divides Its singular Self into the realms of heaven (spirit, male) and earth (matter, female) and all that lies within them in terms of degrees and inhabitants. The creation of the cosmos is manifested in the synergy between the sky or heaven and the earth: when rain falls upon the earth, all existent beings are brought out and nourished, “just as the man casts his semen through sexual union into the woman” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, 1:131). In this perspective the whole of creation is female in relation to God, who is the sole active principle, and the divine creative act is conceived of as an unceasing sexual union between the Real and the essential reality (‘*ayn*) of the possible thing: the “offspring” of the nuptial act is the actualisation or existentialisation of the possibility (Shaikh, 120–31).

Another proof-text, Q 49:13 (“O humankind, We have created you, from a male and from a female, and We have made you [all] as peoples and tribes”), is taken by Ibn al-‘Arabī to explain what he calls the four kinds of human body, that of Adam (created directly by the two Hands of God from clay), of Eve (born from a male only, Adam, from a rib), of Jesus (born from a female only, Mary, from an inbreathed spirit), and of the children of Adam (born from a male and female combined, from “lowly fluid,” Q 32:8) (*Futūḥāt*, 1:124, 131). Adam represents both the prototype of the human being and the “first father,” from whose short rib (*quṣayrā*) Eve was created according to tradition. Eve is described as not simply the mother of humankind but as a “second father,” in the sense that she participates fully in the active creative process (paralleling the Neoplatonic tradition propounded by the fourth/tenth-century philosopher al-Fārābī that the First Intellect gives rise to secondary levels of Intellect, which are in turn “active” in relation to levels below them). In this respect

a woman in relation to a man is like Nature in relation to the divine Command ... those who recognise the degree of Nature know the level of woman, while those who recognise the degree of the divine Command know the level of man and the fact that the existence of all existent things other than God depends upon these two realities, although this truth is too hidden and subtle to be known by their children among the intelligences.

Futūḥāt, 3:90

Eve represents the part that is contained within the whole, the created cosmos in relation to the Real, the divine form that is the perfect human in relation to God. The curvature of the rib bone is explained by Ibn al-‘Arabī as indicating

the inclination of love in relativity, reflecting ultimately the love of God to be recognised. Likewise, Adam can be regarded as “mother” insofar as he gave birth to Eve from inside himself, just as women give birth to babies from inside themselves, and the “hole” left by the birth of Eve was filled with passion for her. This mirrors the ontological picture of the divine Being “giving birth” to the “contents” or possibilities of His own nature and being filled with love for whatever He creates (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 207–8, *Futūḥāt*, 1:124, 136, 2:466, 3:87, 3:314, 516; Sachiko Murata, 177–81, 200).

4 The Fall of Adam

While the Qur’ānic account of Adam’s expulsion from paradise is brief, stating simply that “Adam disobeyed” (20:21) and was told to “go down” (2:38), Sufi authors commented at some length on the necessity for his descent into this world, not as a function of Adam’s wrongdoing or disobedience but in terms of the requirements of certain Names which are included in the divine Essence. Thus the Names of majesty and severity have no application in a paradisiacal domain ruled by mercy and gentleness. Adam symbolises the complete representative (*khalīfa*) of God in this world, so all the Names have to find fulfilment in him. The pain of suffering in this world is like putting salt into a stew, producing the full ripe taste of love. The Persian author Sam‘ānī (d. 534/1140) interprets the divine command of Q 2:38 as saying: “come into this world, which is the workshop of seeking. The teacher, who is poverty, will write out for you the alphabet of love” (Sam‘ānī, 296–7, 420; see Chittick, *Divine Love*, 69–74, *Sufism*, 141–77; Lange, 207). The eponymous founder of the Qādiriyya *ṭarīqa* ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (d. 561/1166) also sees this descent as progress, describing the human being brought down to “the lowest degree” (referring to Q 95:5) as “being increased in intimacy and closeness” to the divine (al-Jilānī, 83).

5 The Primordial Covenant

Following the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, the Qur’ān speaks of a special eternal covenant which all human beings have made with their Lord prior to being individuated in the manifest world: “When your Lord took from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify concerning themselves, [saying]: ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said: ‘Yes indeed, we testify [to that]’” (7:172). This passage attracted the attention of generations of Sufi commentators, who refer to this primordial event as the “Day of the

Covenant" (*yawm al-mithāq*) or the "Day of Alast" (*rūz-i alast*, from *a-lastu bi-rabbikum*, "Am I not your Lord?"), when every human being recognised their essential nature as servant, and affirmed God's lordship and glorified Him (for example, Ibn Barrajān, 112, 393). Sufis believe it is possible, even necessary, for the human being to re-experience the Day of Alast and recover the state in which "the soul flew in the world of divine love with the wings of human love" (Baq̄lī, *Abhar*, 4; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 24, 143, 299). The Egyptian poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) memorably evokes the covenant in the famous opening stanza of his Wine Ode (*khamriyya*): "in memory of the beloved, we drank a wine; we were drunk with it before the creation of the vine" (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, 47; see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 351). Baq̄lī also viewed the covenant as a matter of passionate love in the face of divine beauty and majesty, in which human spirits heard the divine address and fell in love with God: "the Real unveiled His beauty (*jamāl*) to the spirits of the passionate lovers in His first appearance after introducing Himself to them by saying: 'Am I not your Lord?'" (*Mashrab*, 10). However, it is noteworthy that he presents the emphatic response to this address as only being made by certain human spirits, those of the prophets and saints, that is, the elect who hear and recognise the beauty of His essential majesty, rather than a universal "Yes indeed" (*Abhar*, 129–30, *Mashrab*, 307; Kazuyo Murata, 80–3). The Persian exegete Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (d. post-520/1126) also distinguishes two groups among those who hear the divine address: those who only accept the attributes of divine exaltedness and dominance, on the one hand, and those who also receive His gentleness and generosity, on the other (3:793–96, cited in Chittick, *Divine Love*, 43–5; cf. Aṭṭār, 235–6, who distinguishes three groups according to the spirits' love for the world, paradise, or God alone). In the account of creation by al-Jīlānī, the only obstacle is forgetfulness (*nīsyān*), a word often treated as cognate with *insān*, human being, suggesting that the human is both the most intimate with God (*anīs*, from *uns*, intimacy or familiarity) and the most prone to forget (see Q 20:115). The human spirits descend in successive clothings of light from the divine realm (*lāhūt*) to the world of divine omnipotence (*jabarūt*), where they are arraigned as rulers (*sultān*), to the angelic realm (*malakūt*), where they become spiritual travellers, and finally the physical world of the kingdom (*mulk*), where they become embodied but due to their connection with corporeality forget the agreement they had made on the Day of Alast (al-Jīlānī, 69–70, 83).

The "seed" (*dhurriyya*) of the children of Adam gave rise to the doctrine of minute luminous particles (*dharr*) propounded by the early Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), according to which this original eternal existence, prior to manifestation in the body, was in forms of light. For his contemporary, the Baghdad

master al-Junayd (d. 298/910), the human being's existence at this covenant is a purely spiritual matter and a timeless state prior to the condition of individuality:

He addressed them when they had no existence apart from His existence as them, when they were existent in the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) without having any existence in themselves. So the Real was with the Real therein, existent in the meaning that is known and experienced by none other than Him.

AL-JUNAYD, 41

Rūmī makes the same point in a more poetic vein: “the whole night until dawn, that exalted King is Himself uttering an *Alast* and a *balā* (Yes indeed)” (6:2300), describing this as “night” because the whole event takes place in the invisible realm prior to manifestation. Elsewhere Rūmī also stresses the intrinsic tension between the eternal world of the covenant and the physical world of daily life: “From the Day of *Alast* there is a hereditary enmity of that heart to the Sabzawār [fortress] of the carnal nature” (5:895), as well as the provisional and often erroneous nature of human judgement: “Here the name of ‘Umar was idolater, but in *Alast* his name was believer” (1:1241; see also 2:3137, 3:4543, 5:895, 5:2126).

A comparison is often made between this general covenant of all human beings and the one said to have been made expressly with the prophets (Q 33:7), whose primary task is to remind people of what has already been agreed to in the eternal divine presence (see, for example, Böwering, 154–7; Ibn Barrajān, 83, 112, 249; al-Jīlānī, 70; al-Tustarī, 40).

6 The Muḥammadan Reality

It is clear from the Qurʾānic story of Adam that the cosmos, in the sense of the unseen spiritual world, the heavens and the earth, was already in existence prior to the creation of the Adamic human being, and that various stages of “descent” from the Absolute state of Unknowableness had already taken place. This cosmogonic “gap” was bridged by the doctrine of the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*), which is equivalent to the Reality of all realities (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqāʾiq*) that precedes all creation. The principle is based on two sayings (*ḥadīth*) of the Prophet Muḥammad: “Before [creating] anything else, God created the light of your Prophet from His light” (as related by Jābir b. ‘Abdallāh, cited in al-Zurqānī, 1:54); and “I was a prophet while Adam was still

between water and clay" (alternatively, "between spirit and body"; al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi'*, Manāqib, 1; see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 405 n. 3; Chodkiewicz, 60–1).

The first to develop a theory around the light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*) as the origin of the cosmos and of humankind seems to have been al-Tustarī, who speaks of creation in terms of three stages of minute luminous "particles" or "seeds" (*dharr*): firstly, Muḥammad, the beloved (*ḥabīb*) who is described as a light, from whose prostration God created a column of light, and within this light Muḥammad stood in worship and pure servanthood "before the Lord of the worlds a thousand thousand years with the primordial faith, being in the invisible's revelation of the invisible a thousand thousand years before the beginning of creation"; secondly, the luminous particle of Adam, who was created of clay from the light of Muḥammad; and thirdly, Adam's descendants (al-Tustarī, 95; al-Daylamī, 54–5). This primordial eternal identification of the light of Muḥammad with the absolute Light of Being leads al-Tustarī to make a further distinction between those human beings created from the light of Adam ("the children of Adam"), whom he calls "those who desire [God]" (*murīdūn*), and those created directly from the light of Muḥammad himself, meaning the prophets and saints, whom he calls "those who are desired [by God]" (*murādūn*) (al-Tustarī, 41; cf. Böwering, 149–57, 192–3; al-Daylamī, 54). Some later authors went even further in describing the whole world as nothing but the manifestation of the divine light or "the rays of God's light" (al-Qūnawī, *I'jāz*, 50, cited in Todd, 59).

Other traditions such as "I have created Muḥammad from the light of My Face" and "If not for you, I would not have created the universe" (both divine sayings, *ḥadīth qudsī*), as well as the Prophetic tradition that "the first thing God created was my spirit (*rūḥ*)" (equated in different versions with Light, Intellect, and the Pen), were equally invoked as proof-texts for the primordality of Muḥammad over all other created beings. "O Muḥammad, O unique pearl! ... I created all for your sake, and I created you for My sake ... O Muḥammad ... I lifted up the curtain between Myself and you, and I showed Myself to your spirit" (Maybudī, 7:174; see also 7:525, 9:375, cited in Chittick, *Divine Love*, 35–8). According to al-Jīlānī, "God first created the spirit of Muḥammad from the light of His Beauty (*jamāl*)," and this Muḥammadan Reality

is named a light because it is completely purified from the darkness [associated with] Majesty (*jalāl*) ... The Muḥammadan spirit is the quintessence of all created things, the first of them and their origin ... from [his spirit] were created all the spirits in the realm of divine nature, in the true "best of forms" (*aḥsan al-taqwīm*, Q 95:4). It is the name for the bridal chamber of intimacy in that [primordial] world, and the original

homeland. After four thousand years had elapsed, God created the Throne from the light of the essence of Muḥammad, and from it the rest of creation; then the spirits were sent down to the lowest level of creation, i.e. the corporeal bodies.

AL-JĪLĀNĪ, 69; see also ANQARAWĪ, 47:7

Some authors explained darkness as the necessary condition of the created state and associated it with the attribute of divine anger or severity (Rāzī, 67), while others emphasised that the appearance of light necessitated the appearance of its relative opposite in the form of shadow, describing creation as an isthmus (*barzakh*, using the terminology of Q 55:19–20) lying between the pure light of Being and the sheer darkness of non-Being (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 2:304, 3:274).

According to another *ḥadīth* (transmitted by Ibn ʿAbbās, cited in Abū l-Shaykh, 1:492), the first thing created was “the white pearl” (*al-durra al-bayḍāʾ*), which is taken to mean an image of the First Intellect or Muḥammadan Light. The pearl began to “perspire” under the direct gaze of God in a state of awe and trepidation. From the bounteous water of this primordial “sweat” all the spirits came into being, followed by the divine Throne and the whole cosmos (Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 389–91; for the notion that this perspiring was due to “shame” rather than “rain,” see Rāzī, 60–1).

To explain the dynamic between divine Incomparability and cosmic existence, Ibn al-ʿArabī resorted not only to imagery but sometimes also to philosophical conceptions: Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), which is unknowable in Itself, is the first of three known things (*maʿlūmāt*). The second is Absolute non-Being (*al-ʿadam al-muṭlaq*), which can never exist and is the polar opposite of Being, entirely theoretical since it can never be said to exist or participate in Being. The third is that which divides these two, the supreme isthmus (*al-barzakh al-aʿlā*) between Being and non-Being, between the Unknowable and the known: it is called by many names such as the universal Reality of Muḥammad, the Reality of realities and the Truth by which all things are created (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*)—it is neither qualified by the side of existence nor non-existence; it simultaneously keeps the two apart and unites them. This isthmus (*barzakh*) is the means through which all manifestation comes about. The world, both macrocosmos and Adamic microcosmos, is thus the “child” or product of the primary fruitful marriage of Absolute Being and non-Being, coming about through the agency of the isthmus of isthmuses (*barzakh al-barāzikh*). This tri-partite structure, inherent in the nature of Being Itself, is reflected within the worlds of created existence, the higher world of spirits and the lower world of bodies coming together to produce the

intermediary *barzakhī* world of images (*Futūḥāt*, 3:46–7; Akkach, 41–3; for a similar discussion in terms of light and darkness, see Suhrawardī, 91ff.; also Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 184). In yet another version of this principal creation, Ibn al-ʿArabī delineates three degrees of Being: firstly, absolute Being which is existent in Itself, God in Himself; secondly, limited being, which designates anything in relativity, which he depicts as “the [divine] Throne, the Footstool, the Supreme Heavens and the beings they contain, the Sky, the Earth and all it contains of animals, insects, plants, and other beings”; and thirdly, the Reality of all realities, “a universal and intelligible reality subsisting [only] in the mind, which manifests in eternity as eternal and in temporality as temporal” (*Inshāʾ al-dawāʾir*, fols. 125a–126b, ed. 17–20, English trans. 24–5).

Other authors developed this idea of the Muḥammadan Reality preceding all creation by describing it as “the first individuation (*al-taʿayyun al-awwal*),” in which God manifested Himself to Himself in a total self-manifestation beyond any specific attribute (*maẓhar al-dhāt*), and interpreted the idea of Muḥammad’s prophethood “while Adam was still between water and clay” as his being the annunciation of truth to everything in the spiritual realm prior to any creation of a human being. “I had drunk the wine of the end when Adam had not yet finished drinking the draft of the beginning” (Samʿānī, 542–3, cited in Chittick, *Divine Love*, 38–40; Anqarawī, 47:7; al-Būsawī, fol. 23b; al-Jazāʾirī, 194; al-Qūnawī, *al-Fukūk*, 27:3).

7 The Dynamic of the Hidden Treasure

If the identity of the Muḥammadan Reality as the singular image of God’s Absoluteness underlies the philosophical and imaginative structure of Sufi conceptions of the origin of the world, it does not in itself explain the dynamic of the creative process and the motive behind the creation of the world. This is most commonly referred to through an oft-quoted divine saying: “I was a hidden [or in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s formulation: *lam uʿraf*, unknown/unrecognised] treasure and I loved to be known/recognised; so I created the creatures that I might be known [or: that they might recognise Me]” (for references, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 391 n. 14). The “hidden treasure” is taken to refer to the unknowable Reality in Its state of Absoluteness, hidden and unknown in Its own divine isolation, which desired or loved to be known through “another” (see Izutsu, 28, 32). The loving to be known implies the recognition that within the eternal receptive substance of the divine Cloud there is already the possibility of “another” who can know God fully. While the creation of the heavens and earth demonstrates divine omnipotence, the creation of Adam and his children is for showing the

secrets of the hidden treasure and for the full reciprocation of love (Maybudī, 8:387). Combining this *ḥadīth* with the Qur'ānic injunction "I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me" (Q 51:56), al-Jilānī emphasises that direct knowledge or recognition (*ma'rifa*) of God, in His Attributes and in His Essence, is the very purpose of human creation, and takes place in the original realm of divine nature (71–2). Creation may be understood as successive stages or presences (*ḥaḍarāt*) of individuation and self-determination (*ta'ayyun*) or of divine Self-revelation and disclosure (*tajallī*). The various ontological levels can also be described as different degrees of participation in the divine Presence, unfolding the hidden treasury of Being through the manifestation of the Most Beautiful Names (see Akkach, 60–82; al-Būsnawī, fols. 17a–b; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 13–14; Farghānī, 22, 34, 49, et passim; Izutsu, 11, 20, 152–7; Kazuyo Murata, 68–73).

The creative process itself takes place through what is called the "Breath of the Compassionate" (*naḥas al-raḥmān*, an expression based on two Prophetic *ḥadīths*; see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 127): this designates an exhalation that alleviates the "distress" (*karb*) of non-existence experienced by all the realities that lie buried within the Cloud of the hidden treasure and seek their fulfilment by being manifested in existence. This parallels the process of human articulation, where the letters are "places" of potential sound hidden between the throat and the lips, which produce words and meanings when the breath that arises from the chest passes over them. In other words, the first object of God's Compassionate Mercy is Himself, or rather, the possibilities inherent and latent within His own Being, the first of which is the individuated Muḥammadan Reality in the first degree of existence as active principle or Universal Spirit—it is this Spirit that is "breathed" into Adam, the first human being created of the elements (referring to Q 15:29, in which God tells the angels that "I shall create a human out of dried clay, from shaped mud; and when I have formed him and breathed into him of My Spirit, fall down before him in prostration"; see Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 386–7; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 203). The eleventh/seventeenth-century commentator on Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ*, ʿAbdallāh al-Būsnawī (d. 1054/1644), poetically describes this divine Breath as

streaming out from the constraint of annihilation, the all-conquering authority of Uniqueness (*aḥadiyya*) and the distress of non-being, within the global synthesis of the Cloud of the Essence ... the Reality of Muḥammad first had effect in the Compassionate Breath by his seeking It and his own individuation by It, as well as all the realities which were in potential within him.

8 The Creative Self-Fulfilment of the Names

Ultimately the immutable realities that lie latent within the divine Being are nothing other than His Most Beautiful Names. These Names are portrayed as yearning to express themselves: hence God's desire to create stems from His Name the Desirer or Willer (*murīd*), and in order for the meaning of this Name to be fulfilled, the created world, which is the object of the Name, is required. The Name Creator (*khāliq*) needs the existence of created beings (*makhliq*) to manifest its effects. The Names are therefore described as God's "immediate household," in contrast to created beings which are "His extended family": "The [manifest] cosmos asks from Him because of its possibility, while the Names ask from Him in order for their effects to be manifest" (Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:316–17; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 40–1).

With this in mind, Ibn al-'Arabī developed an innovative and daring cosmogonic myth in terms of the divine Names, which he expounded in at least four different texts, produced at different times during his life (for a translation of these texts and analysis, see Elmore, *Four Texts*). He notes that most people, even "some of those people of unveiling and realities who know God," end their inquiry into the cause of the genesis of the cosmos by simply stating that "He caused to exist that which He knew would be made to exist" (*Futūḥāt*, 1:99). Ibn al-'Arabī presents his own version of cosmogony as a further analysis of the process of creation, in the form of a psycho-dramatic dialogue occurring prior to creation between particular Names. These are personified in a way somewhat reminiscent of the Greek gods on Mount Olympus, although he is at pains to point out that one should not imagine the Names as actually meeting together since they have no substantial being: "they are multiple with regard to relationships, not with respect to any individuated existence, for the Essence of the Real is One inasmuch as it is [pure] Essence" (*Futūḥāt*, 1:322). While the Names that he chooses to focus on vary somewhat in the different accounts, the main anthropopathic storyline does not: the Names, which he calls "the Mothers who are necessary for the creation of the cosmos," gather together in the Presence of the Named One and contemplate their own realities and meanings. Falling in love with their own particular reality but finding no "theatre" in which to display their ruling properties, no treasury to open with their "keys," they ask for help from the greatest actualising Name, the Able/Powerful (*qādir*). He tells them that He is incapable of doing anything on His own as He is subject to the authority of the Desirer/Purposer (*murīd*)—the capacity to act is determined by a desire and will to act. The Desirer, however, admits to being under the authority of the All-Knower (*'alīm*), because His knowledge precedes creation—the capacity and desire to act imply a prior knowledge of

what to do. The Knower refers them all to the all-inclusive Name *Allāh*, who listens to their plea and in turn calls upon “the One Named” (*al-musammā*), the Transcendent Holy Essence beyond the level of the Names. Eventually permission is granted for the Names to manifest their effects through the agency of the Divinity (*Allāh*) and the Speaker (*mutakallim*) and the Names that establish the link to creation. In the earliest version of the story, the Names have no idea about anything beyond their own realities, as this is only known to *Allāh* and the Name the Knower—when the latter utters an impromptu blessing upon the Prophet Muḥammad, the Names are surprised to know there is a being they have never heard of, and the Knower then explains that the Muḥammadan Reality or Perfect Man is their epitome, summing up in microcosm all that they contain (Elmore, Four Texts, 6–9, *Islamic Sainthood*, 353–71). Unsurprisingly this doctrine has led to great controversy among Islamic scholars down the ages, including in recent times when in 1975 Kamāl Aḥmad ‘Awn sent an open letter to the Egyptian Ministry of Culture accusing Ibn al-‘Arabī of polytheism on the basis of this passage in the *Futūḥāt*: this was one of the factors that led to the People’s Assembly deciding in 1979 to temporarily ban the publication of Dr Osman Yahia’s edition of the *Futūḥāt* (see Homerin, 466ff.). Its decidedly anthropomorphic features may explain why it was not taken up by later Sufi writers.

The object or end-product of the divine creative activity varies in each of these accounts: from the Muḥammadan Reality or microcosmic Perfect Man to the macrocosmic perfect World, to the World in its archetypal form as the essential realities of the Names, to the contingent imperfect world which requires to be set in order by the Lord (*rabb*) (Elmore, Four Texts, 3–4). Ultimately, these “*cosmoi*” are portrayed in mythical terms, as the creative Self-revelations of the unnameable and unfathomable Holy Essence, albeit without the imagery and narrative normally associated with traditional cosmogonic myths.

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Edited by

Christian Lange
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