Article

The Concepts of the Absolute and Perfect Man in Mulla Fayd al-Kashani

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Fayd Kashani was a prominent scholar in various fields of learning. Most notably, he is reported to have written in the realms of *hadith*, exegesis, and ethics, as well as in gnosis and intellectual intuition. He was raised in Qum and later moved to Isfahan, where he died in 1091/1680—1681**.** He left many works in Arabic and Persian, which cover a wide range of religious and philosophical topics. He is especially celebrated as a *hadith* scholar. Some 120 of al-Kashani's works are known to us though some of them seem to be listed more than once under different titles.

This paper will explore the many dimensions of this remarkable scholar. More specifically, it will examine his contributions to Islamic *hadith* literature and will assess Kashani's contribution in the field of gnosis.

Introduction

Much has been written concerning Fayd Kashani's background and learning. Hence, this introduction will be brief. Fayd was born in a family in which all the members were considered learned in the religious realm. His first name was Muhammad and his nickname was Muhsin. Later he was given the title of Fayd by the famous Shi'i theosophist, Mulla Sadra. His father, who was one of the well-known jurists of his time, was called Mulla Murtada, also known as Shah Murtada. His father was the son-in-law of Zia al-Oraphay-e Razi, who was a man of taste and gnosis and had attained lofty spiritual

stations.

In his biography, which he wrote himself, Fayd does not refer to his birth date and only says that he learned the literary sciences, Arabic, logic, and religious sciences, as well as the preliminaries when he was a student under his father and uncle during the first twenty years of his life. Since his father (Shah Murtada) passed away in 1009 H.G in Kashan, Fayd must have only learned the preliminaries, that is, literature and Arabic, under him and acquired most of his knowledge under his uncle, the son of Zia al-Orafaye-Razi. During his time, Isfahan was both the capital city of the Safavids and a learning center for jurisprudence, philosophy and other fields of study of that time. When he was twenty years old, Fayd left Kashan and went to Isfahan. He says in his biography:

> "I went to Isfahan when I was twenty years old and found that city a gathering place for all learned people. I learned mathematics and other sciences from the professors there. .... I went there and studied the science *of hadith* under him (Sayyed Majed Bohrani) through audition and recitation and succeeded in obtaining the permission from that Shaykh to narrate *hadith.* I attained such insight in his presence that I became needless of imitation..."

It is apparent from his statement that he studied mathematics and other sciences, which regularly included old medicine, astronomy and astrolabe, and the so-called modern basic sciences in Isfahan. We also know that he did not feel the need to study jurisprudence, *hadith*, theology, philosophy and gnosis there anymore. Thus, in spite of the presence of so many prominent teachers, such as Mir Damad, Shaykh Baha, Mir Fendereski, and other famous jurists, philosophers and scientists, Fayd did not attend any of their classes.

Later on he returned to his home town, Kashan where he established a school to teach philosophy and theology. His wrote Gnostic poems and a number of books in Arabic, including *Mafatih, al-Wafi, Usul al- ma 'arif* and *al-Mahajj al-bayza*.

Studies in *Hadith*

One of Fayd's reasons for choosing the class of Sayyed Majed Bohrani was his great reputation in *hadith* and in his being a spiritual leader, whose journey or emigration from the suburbs of Iraq and Bahrain had made him famous in the seminaries and attracted many enthusiasts for *hadith* towards him. Fayd's other reason was his inclination toward *hadith* and being a scholar of *hadith* (traditionist) which can be inferred from his urgent and fast journey from Isfahan's Dar al-Ilm (house of sciences) to Shiraz, and also from his extensive writings and works on *hadith.*

Fayd was involved in the learning of *hadith,* or in his own words, *"ilm-al-hadith"*, in two ways: audition (listening to the scholar *of hadith)* and recitation (reading the *hadith* from the book for the teacher so that he confirms and edits his reading and grants the reader the permission to narrate or criticize it).

According to the scholars of *hadith,* audition is the best way, since the teacher makes fewer mistakes in speaking in comparison to listening. In spite of its relative perfection, reciting *hadith* and presenting it to the teacher is not equal to audition in efficiency. Nevertheless, these two methods, or the so-called *tahammal al-hadith* (that is, obtaining and preserving *hadith),* are considered the best methods for learning *hadith* and creating a relationship with the teacher of *hadith.* It is from here that the degree of the growth and capabilities of the student of *hadith* and even the teacher's methodology and his closeness to the student can be discerned.

Fayd succeeded in getting to the stage of obtaining the "permission" for *hadith* (obtaining the permission for narrating *hadith* from the teacher and the chain of narrators before him). As Fayd himself said, he became not only a narrator of *hadith*, but also a religious jurist capable of inferring Islamic laws independently of imitating another scholar. His book of *"al-Wafi*" testifies to the veracity of this claim. In his own words, he composed this book in order to rectify the four Shi'i books of *hadith (al-Kafi, Man la yahzur, Tahzib, Istibsar)* and valued it higher than them.

Fayd's quitting Sayyed Majed's classes and returning from Shiraz to Isfahan can be considered as a sign of the completion of his knowledge of *hadith;* however, immediately after his arrival in Isfahan, as he himself says, he went to the seminary of Shaykh Baha' Amuli. Fayd writes: "At the time I returned to Isfahan, I enjoyed the presence of Shaykh Baha' Amuli, and obtained the permission for narration [of *hadith*] from him".

Gnosis

In the seventeenth century, there emerged in Isfahan an important school of Shi'i theosophy, which combined philosophical Sufi and theological approaches toward gnosis. The aim of this school was to reveal the secret truth hidden in the Imams' teachings and traditions. Its basic sources were the same as that of the orthodox '*ulama*' i.e., traditions attributed to the Imams that were systematically compiled in the authoritative works of Kulayni (d. 940), Ibn Babuya (d. 991), and the Safavid theologian Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (d. 1699). Leading philosophers wrote their commentaries on these works.

What differentiated the theosophers' approach from that of the orthodox '*ulama*' was that while the latter was dialectical, the former was essentially hermeneutic, or

spiritually interpretive. Echoing the Akhbari approach, the theosophers denounced the orthodox '*ulama*'s rigid approach to the study of religion. In fact, a number of Isfahani theosophers, notably Muhsin Faiz Kashani and Qazi Said Qumi (d. 1691), defended the Akhbari school in their battle against the Usulis.

Sadruddin Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (1572—1641), was indubitably the most brilliant member of the Isfahan theosophers. He attempted to construct a philosophical system that would satisfy both the philosophic and religious demands, and reconcile mysticism to pure philosophy. Having studied the entire philosophical/religious and mystical heritage of Islam, he consciously created a synthesis of the neo-Platonic tradition of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and his school; the Ishraqi or Oriental philosophy of Illumination of Suhravardi (d. 1191) and his followers; and the Sufi theosophy of Ibn Arabi and his disciples.

Early in his career, Mulla Sadra had openly expressed his belief in a pantheistic doctrine of existence, and had affirmed Suhravardi's unorthodox view, as taught by Sadra's master, Mir Damad (d. 1631), that essence is the primary reality, existence being a mere mental phenomenon. Just as, centuries earlier, Suhravardi had to expiate and suffer martyrdom at the hands of the Sunni '*ulama'*, and Mir Damad encountered censorship from Shi'i clerics, so was Sadra forced to escape religious persecution by taking refuge in a small village near Qum for a period of seven to fifteen years (depending on the source).[1] Solitary confinement, he tells us in the introduction to his most famous work (*Sih asl*), made him realize how he had erred by relying too much on intellectual powers. Strenuous spiritual exercises and intense contemplation helped him

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[1] Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*: *Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 28.

discover new truths, and comprehend intuitively what he had learned rationally. Through such mystical experiences, he claimed to have access to divine secrets that he had not previously understood.

True knowledge, Sadra stated, lies neither in jurisprudence, philology, grammar nor medicine; rather, true knowledge is the esoteric comprehension of the Imam's teachings, accessible only to the initiated. The light of the Qur'anic revelation can shine only through the eye that can see and reflect it. Philosophical contemplation is this eye, and this is available to the theosopher, the beholder.[2]

Like his teacher Mulla Sadra, the views and teachings of Fayd Kashani were strongly colored with mysticism and philosophy. In fact, Fayd embraced much of the "transcendent theosophy" elaborated by that master, but he exhibited also an extraordinary interest in Sufism, at least in its theoretical and literary aspects. His shorter work is the treatise on the spiritual path. In it, he seeks to illustrate the stages of spiritual wayfaring *(suluk)* with copious citations from the Imams, thus showing again his concern with transmitting to Shi'i Iran, in appropriately modified form, part of the Sufi legacy that he deemed worth preserving.

The Perfect Man and the Self-manifestation of the Absolute

One of the central concepts of Islamic mysticism is that of the Perfect Man *(insan kãmil)*. Some mystics try to overcome the gap between the Absolute and human beings by positing the idea of the Perfect Man. Fayd al-Kashani discussed the idea in the context of a wide range of the subjects under the general heading of mystical philosophy in his

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[2] Ibid., 29.

short work, ‘The Hidden Discourses Concerning the Knowledge of Those Who Have Wisdom and Gnosis’ *(Kalimat maknuna min ‘ulum ahl al-hikma wa’l-ma’rifa).* He understood the idea of the Perfect Man in the framework of the self-manifestation of the Absolute.[3]

Fayd starts by discussing the relation between the Absolute and the finite. He states that the Absolute is the plenum of reality before ‘His’ self-determination into the actual world. In other words, the self-sufficient whole is determined into individual realities, which insist on their own independent exclusive identities. The actual world, whose intrinsic nature is multiplicity or many-ness, emerges through this process. The world is one with the Absolute and participates in His reality insofar as the world is one of His determined forms. But, at the same time, the world remains far from the Absolute insofar as it is determined and is a limited existent. The Absolute and the world are polar opposites.

In order to explain the relationship between absolute oneness and many-ness, a certain intermediate dimension between them is necessary in the process of the divine manifestation or emanation.[4] This dimension is called that of ‘relative oneness’ *(wahidiyya),* which corresponds to the position of the divine Names discussed in detail in Islamic theology down the centuries. As the Qur’an reminds us, God has many names such as the Creator *(al-khaliq),* the Beneficent *(al-rahman),* the Provider *(al-razzaq),* the Avenger *(al-muntaqim)* and others. This means that while He keeps supreme oneness for himself, God has aspects that correspond to the multiplicity of the transient world.

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[3] Shigeru Kamada, "Fayd al-Kashani's Walaya: The Confluence of Shi'i Imamology and Mysticism," in Todd Lawson ed. *Reason and Inspiration in Islam* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2005), 457.

[4] Ibid., 458.

Fayd argues that the locus of manifestation that reflects the Absolute in His manifold forms is the world. The sphere of the divine names, which is the divine dimension corresponding to the many-ness of the world, is included in the comprehensive name, Allah. Each individual divine name is manifested by an individual thing in the created world as a locus of its manifestation. However, the comprehensive name, Allah, is manifested in the Perfect Man as its locus of manifestation, who comprehends the entire world in himself, since he corresponds to Allah in his comprehensiveness.

The process of the self-manifestation or emanation of the Absolute is divided into two steps. The first is the step of the manifestation of the divine names, and the second that of the manifestation of the actual world. For Fayd, the Absolute wills that He manifests His essence in a perfect locus of manifestation. The locus includes all the other illuminated loci of manifestation as well as the shadowed loci of appearance. It also comprises the entire realities, both secret and open, and encompasses all the particles, both hidden and manifest.

The ipseity *(huwiyya)* necessary for its own essence *(dhãt)* cognizes its own essence without any addition to its essence. There is nothing distinguished from the ipseity either in intellection *(ta'aqqul)* or in concrete reality *(al-waqi')* . In the same way, the attributes and names of the ipseity are cognized as suprasensible essential relations without their having to manifest their traces or to distinguish one from another in concrete forms.[5]

This shows the first step of the self-manifestation, and there is no influence on the external world yet. In this step the Absolute is virtually determined towards the external

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[5] Ibid., 459.

world, but still in His oneness. Just as the process of the self-manifestation of the Absolute being is divided into two steps, the Perfect Man seems to have two aspects. Namely, the first is one in which the unknowable essence of the Absolute comes into existence by His determining himself as a name. By reflecting himself in the form of the Perfect Man, the Absolute descends on the world of relativity and is manifested.

The Perfect Man is an indispensable mirror for revealing the manifestation of the Absolute. The second aspect is one which mediates between the divine Names, which are of necessary existence, and the individual existents in the world of creation, and makes them manifest. The individual and limited forms of the Absolute in the forms of divine Names need their counterparts in the world of creation as loci of their manifestation. Each divine Name reflected in the Perfect Man continues to exist through its finding an individual existent in the world of creation as a locus of its manifestation, which corresponds to its counterpart among divine Names.[6]

By virtue of divine love, that is to say the self-manifestation of the Absolute which is unknowable in itself, the world of creation comes into existence. In this cosmic scheme of divine self-manifestation, the Perfect Man is located in its focal point, which mediates between, and connects, the divine names and the world of creation. Fayd al-Kashani states in Persian as follows:

"In general the Absolute, Glory be to Him the Most High, manifests himself in the mirror of the heart of the Perfect Man, who is His vicegerent. The reflection of the lights of the self-manifestations emanates across the world from the mirror of his heart. With

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[6] Ibid., 460.

the arrival of this emanation the existence of the world continues. As long as this Perfect Man remains in the world, he draws from the Absolute the essential self-manifestations. They are the mercy of divine clemency and compassion made evident through the divine Names and Attributes, whose loci of manifestation are these worldly existents. Therefore, by this process of drawing and emanation, the self-manifestations are preserved as long as this Perfect Man is in the world. No meanings come to the outer from the inner without his judgment and nothing comes to the inner from the outer without his order *(amr)*."[7]

Aspects of the Perfect Man

The Perfect Man is described with such different expressions as 'Muhammadan Light' and 'Reality of Realities. The root, the place of origination, the place of return and the place of beginning of the entire creature are the presence of the Reality of Realities. That is the Muhammadan Reality *(haqiqat-i Muhammadi)* , and the Muhammadan Light *(nur-i Ahmadi).* The form of the presence is one and unique, comprehending in it all divine perfections as well as those of the world, and setting the scale of all the degrees of moderation pertaining to angels, animals and human beings. The world and those in it are forms and parts of its elaboration. Adam and human beings are subjugated to its power to create perfection *(takmil).*[8]

From this quotation we understand that the Muhammadan Reality is the reality of the entire created world, and the world created is the externally developed form of the Muhammadan Reality. Human beings in the actual world are subject to the Reality

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 463.

insofar as they are transformed from virtuality into actuality in accordance with their predetermined forms in the Muhammadan Reality. Kashani goes on to quote and interpret many *ahadith* to vindicate this position.

From the intermediate position of the Perfect Man between God and men can be drawn the idea that the Perfect Man supports the existence of the world and that the world would cease to be without his existence. Fayd al-Kashani states as follows:

Since the objective of the creation and continuation of the world is the Perfect Man, namely the just Imam who is the vicegerent *(khalifa)* of God on the earth in the same way as the purpose of the body is the rational soul *(al-nafs al-natiqa)* , it must follow that the lowest world [this world] would perish with the removal of this man in the same way as the body would decay and perish with the departure of the rational soul. He, Praise be to Him, does not manifest himself in the lowest worlds without an intermediary. Therefore with his [Perfect Man's] absence *(inqita')* the assistance [of God] which is imperative for the continuation of [the world's] existence and perfections would cease. This world would pass away with his passing *(intiqal)*, and the meanings and the perfections that are in it would leave it for the other world. At this moment, the firmament would split, the sun would lose its radiance and the stars would be darkened and dispersed.[9]

Conclusion

[9] Ibid., 464.

This article has had the limited aim of outlining some of Fayd Kashani's thought regarding the Absolute and the many-ness of this world. He brings the concept of the Perfect Man into the discourse and identifies him with the Imam. The idea of the Imam in Shi'i Islam started with the believers' ardent veneration of their Master, and Shi'i thinkers developed an idea of the supranatural and semi-divine nature residing within the Imam. As the notion of Imam crystallized, Ibn al-'Arabi's world view, especially his idea of the Perfect Man, was adjusted to fit and incorporated into their speculations. The confluence of Shi'i Imamology and Ibn al-'Arabi's mysticism is typically seen in Safawid *'irfan*, and Fayd al-Kashani's exposition in his *Kalimãt-i maknuna* is a good example of this.