PRE-MORTALITY IN MYSTICAL ISLAM AND THE COSMIC JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

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On the Origin of the Soul

Across centuries and cultures, the origin of the human soul has been a subject of deep interest and yearning, often finding wondrous expression in theology, philosophy, science, and art. Ruminating on the profound mystery of earthly existence, the noted medieval Ṣūfī mystic Jalāluddin Rūmī (d. 1273 CE) pondered:

> All day I think about it, then at night I say it.
> Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?
> I have no idea.
> My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
> and I intend to end up there.[1]

Implicit in Rūmī's meditation is an impulse that there might be heavenly antecedents of the soul, and that the soul perhaps not only extends into an eternal future from birth, but also into a spiritual past. Rūmī imagines that his birth and his beginning are perhaps two distinct things. The soul, as conceptualized by Rūmī and others, is the intelligent, individuated, and immortal essence of humankind—a self with a long history that precedes and transcends mortal embodiment.[2] The notion of a disembodied, self-conscious moral agent having its own history prior to joining the body is not unique to Rūmī's time period or region, but one that is traceable across millennia and across cultures. The idea of preexistence in a variety of forms is easily discernable in classical settings of Greek, Egyptian, and Persian strands of thought, and, in turn, vestiges of the notion found their way into early Jewish and Christian thinking.[3] However, it is a concept that has long been obscured by history due to its usually belonging to more mystical and esoteric strands of wisdom. A modern exception to this obscurantism, at least within the Christian tradition, occurred in the 1830s when Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, claimed to receive revelation emphatically affirming a doctrine of human preexistence.[4] The LDS doctrine of pre-mortality, or premortal existence, continues to be one of many theological concepts differentiating Mormonism from conventional Christianity.

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[1] Coleman Barks, trans., *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 2.

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[2] The definitions of the terms *spirit* and *soul* have long and complex histories with shifting meanings over time. The terms used by many ancient thinkers (*ruach* and *nephesh* or *neshamah* in Hebrew; *pneuma* and *psyche* in Greek; *rūḥ* and *nafs* in Arabic) were often harnessed synonymously to represent the incorporeal and eternal elements of the human being. The soul's premortal existence, in the sense explored here, is distinct from reincarnation or metempsychosis. The scholars, poets, and theologians identified within this essay largely reject soul transmigration, favoring the idea that the soul has only one embodiment in its present human form.

[3] Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Givens provides a masterful treatment of the conceptual development of the preexistence in Western civilization.

[4] See Abraham 3:24. See also Blake Ostler's treatment of the origin and development of the doctrine of pre-eternity in "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 59–78.

Islam has had its own intellectual, religious, and emotional interaction with the idea, but the concept of pre-mortality was ultimately consigned by mainstream Islam to the fringes of theological idiosyncrasy. Even so, the explanatory power of pre-mortality has provided a remarkably durable ontological coherence and symmetry for many Muslims across time.

Mainstream Interpretations

Before exploring the notion of the preexistent soul, it is necessary to understand the more widely accepted theological narrative of the soul's origin as found within mainstream Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam.[5] Immortality, by most monotheistic orthodox derivatives, is unidirectional, assuming the soul originates at birth and extends into an infinite future.[6] The human soul comes into existence as a direct creative act of God at the time of birth as a composite of physicality and spirit. On the human soul generally, and pre-mortality more specifically, the primary texts of Islam provide very little insight. Qur'ān 17:85 reads: "they ask you about the soul (*rūḥ*). Say: The soul is one of the commands of my Lord, and you are not given aught of knowledge but a little."[7] Indeed for mainline Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam, the nature of the spirit or soul is presumed to be a mystery that God reserves to himself, and humans cannot and should not try to grasp its secrets or unravel its mysteries. All that mortals are intended to understand is the timing of when the *rūḥ* is breathed into the body when life begins. In Islam, the spirit is usually believed to be breathed or blown into the fetus sometime between 40–120 days after conception.[8] Foundational to this conventional position on life beginning at birth is Qur'ān 32:9, which reads: "Then He made him complete and breathed into him of His spirit, and made for your ears and the eyes and the hearts." God, in other words, animates the body by breathing the spirit of life into it. The spirit, in this sense, is a by-product of God, not an independent, self-existent entity, and God's breathing the spirit into the body is understood as a metaphysical occurrence beyond human comprehension. Since the human soul is accepted as a mystery in mainstream Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam, it is understandable that discourses about the soul's preexistence are largely ambiguous or viewed as a peripheral theological matter not warranting sustained attention.[9] Ibn al-Qayyim's (d. 1350 CE) *Book of the Soul* (*Kitāb al-Rūḥ*) ranks as one of the few books in the classical period on the subject and is widely accepted as doctrinally sound by both branches of orthodox Islam. Ibn al-Qayyim explores in detail the timing and the nature of the soul's beginning, which can be summarized by: "The Holy *Qur'ān* (and) the Traditions (*ḥadīth*) denote that He, glory be to Him, (that He) breathed in (man) of His spirit, *after* creating his body. From that breath the spirit was created in (man)."[10] In essence, Ibn Qayyim reinforces the idea that the souls of humankind only come into existence sometime between conception and birth.

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[5] Sunnī Islam constitutes between 85%–90% of all Muslims worldwide. The second largest branch of Islam is Shī'ī Islam, which constitutes about 10–15% of all Muslims.

[6] See "Soul, Human, Origin of," *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 13:353–56; David Calabro, "Soul, Jewish," *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History,* edited by Roger S. Bagnall, et al. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 6337–38; "Nafs," *Encyclopedia of Islam,* 1st ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1936), 55–56; and Duncan B. Macdonald, "The Development of the Idea of Spirit in Islam," *The Muslim World* 22, no. 2 (1932): 153–68.

[7] All English translations of the Qur'ān in this essay are from M. H. Shakir, *The Qur'ān* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'ān, 1999).

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[8] Qur'ān 22:5 and 23:12–14 describe the fetal development process. *Ṣaḥiḥ Al-Bukharī* vol. 8, book 77, number 593: "Allah's Apostle, the truthful and truly-inspired, said, 'Each one of you collected in the womb of his mother for forty days, and then turns into a clot for an equal period (of forty days) and turns into a piece of flesh for a similar period (of forty days) and then Allah sends an angel and orders him to write four things, i.e., his provision, his age, and whether he will be of the wretched or the blessed (in the Hereafter). Then the soul is breathed into him.'" See also Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans., *Summarized Ṣaḥiḥ Al-Bukharī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1996), 643.

[9] The only debate of real note is the dispute over the noted Andalusian Ṣufī philosopher Ibn 'Arabī's (d. 1240) arguments that a human being exists "both in time (in the body) and before-time (in the spirit)" and is an uncreated and an "eternal and after-time organism." See Mullā Alī Al-Qarī Al-Ḥanafī, unpublished *Extracts from the Book Ibtāl Al-Qawal bi Waḥdat al-Wujūd,* which outlines the various refutations of Ibn 'Arabī's uncreated soul position, available at http://docs.umm-ul-qura.org/ibtal.pdf. To reinforce his point, Ibn 'Arabī quotes the venerated theologian and jurist Abū Ḥāmid Al Ghazālī (d. 1111): "and the soul is not created, it is directly from the realm of God's command." Many scholars and philosophers influenced by the schools of

Heterodox Interpretations

However, within the more mystical strains of Islam, one can locate various propositions of a spiritual, premortal realm as a coherent premise of the soul's beginning. The doctrine of pre-mortality in Islam emerged more through religious absorption and syncretic assimilation than through any of its own primary scriptural sources. Most of the extant sources on this topic are found through Qur'ānic and *ḥadīth* interpretative commentary and through various creation accounts compiled by religious scholars both orthodox and mystic. The most notable mystical-

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Al Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī have taken issue with the notion of an uncreated human soul, arguing that the soul cannot be co-eternal with God. However, it is not the soul's co-eternality with God with which this essay is concerned. The thinkers and scholars used here would likely agree that the soul can be both created by God *and* preexistent to mortality. Another contributing variable the concept of pre-morality is not well developed in mainstream Islam is likely due to its doctrine of singularity where there is no god but God, and "He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him" (see Qur'ān 112:1–4). Many orthodox theologians, particularly from the Sunnī fold, have taken issue with the notion of preexistence, arguing that this might imply a familial relationship with God, albeit spiritual, creating a dangerous chain of reasoning suggesting human divinity, a blasphemous (*kufr*) conception.

[10] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Kitāb al-Rūḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 256. Emphasis mine.

ascetic aspect of Islam is Ṣūfīsm. Ṣūfī orders constitute a small religious minority within present-day Islam and seek a deeper inner and esoteric religious experience than the larger orthodox branches of Islam. Ṣūfī narratives are replete with premortal imagery and are integral to such fundamental theological ideas in Ṣūfīsm such as *dhikr* (remembrance) and *tawhid* (unity). [11]

Perhaps the greatest impact on the doctrine of pre-mortality in Islam can be traced to Platonic and Neoplatonic influences. Hellenic intellectualism deeply penetrated regions in and around the Mediterranean and was "in the air and easily accessible" to Muslims in Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt.[12] Plato gave form and legitimacy to human preexistence in the fourth century BCE, and the idea was later elaborated on by such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria, Origen, and Plotinus.[13] As Terryl Givens notes, the fact that "most of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato is particularly true in the case of preexistence."[14] Plato had a similar impact on nascent Islamic philosophical development. As Islam expanded between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, so did its contact with other ideas and religious communities, where convergences of thought and assimilation were almost certain. Inevitably, mystical elements also found expression in Islam, influenced in varying degrees by its own porous boundaries with Jewish, Christian, and Hindu ideas.[15] With Islam's growth and expansion also came differing Qur'ānic and *ḥadīth* interpretations split along Sunnī, Shī'ī, and Ṣūfī lines. It was in this milieu that the concept of pre-mortality emerged in Islam, even if it was to ultimately fall outside both intellectual and theological convention. However, unlike many other speculative cosmologies that met a demise from critical debate, pre-mortality as an idea persisted with uncommon historical resiliency within specific forms of Islamic thought.

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[11] Ṣūfīs are considered neither Sunnī nor Shī'ī by some, while others claim that their mystical approach can apply to either Sunnī or Shī'ī Islam. Hence, a Ṣūfī can technically be a Sunnī or Shī'ī in the eyes of many.

[12] Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1914), 14. For further elucidation on the influence of Greek thought on Islam, see Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

[13] See T. Taylor, ed. and trans., *The Works of Plato,* 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1984), in particular see Phaedo 71d–84c; Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1970); C. D. Yonge, trans., *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); and A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus,* 7 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966–88).

[14] Givens, *When Souls Had Wings,* 27.

In a peculiar passage in Qur'ān 19:9, God addresses Zachariah, "Indeed I created you before, when you were nothing." A particular reading of this passage suggests indirect evidence that the soul is an independently created entity. Further, the soul is said to be taken and returned, intimating perhaps that the soul is traceable to a particular origin. Passages such as "Return unto thy Lord (*'Irjah'i illa rabbiki*)" and "Every soul shall taste of death; then unto Us you shall be returned (*turja'ūn*)"[16] could imply either a reintegration of the soul's divine energy with God at death, or as others have suggested, a literal return of a self-existent but unembodied being to a place of its beginning. A couple of unique passages in the *ḥadīth* literature provide a glimpse into how the prophet Muḥammad might have conceptualized the human spirit in the context of premortal relationships. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim,* one of the most widely trusted compilations of the prophet's *ḥadīth,* Muḥammad is claimed to have said:

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[15] See R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: Athlone Press, 1960) and Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (New York: Frank Cass, 2012), 190–216. Certain Arabic terms also help conceptualize that immortality and eternity might be extended infinitely in both directions and perhaps understood more as an infinite geometric line rather than a geometric ray that only begins at birth. The Arabic term *qidam* (or *kidam*) is defined as eternity *a parte ante*. Etymologically, the word *qidam* should be also associated with the cognate term *azal,* meaning a "constant duration of existence in the past." See R. Arnaldez, "*Ḳidam,*" *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 95.

[16] Qur'ān 89:28, 11:4, 29:57. See A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955).

> People are like mines of gold and silver . . . and the souls are troops (*al-arwah junūd mujannada*) collected together and those who had a mutual familiarity amongst themselves in the store of prenatal existence would have affinity amongst them, (in this world also) and those who opposed one of them, would be at variance with one another.[17]

In this extraordinary account, the prophet Muḥammad seems to provide insight into the immediate affinity humans occasionally experience when meeting for the first time. In a discursive note on this *ḥadīth* it reads: "just as the birds of a feather flock together, in the same way good souls remain close to one another in the prenatal state of existence and in the material world also."[18] In *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī,* another highly respected *ḥadīth* source, it is also recorded: "Spirits are like conscripted soldiers: those whom they recognize, they get along with, and those whom they do not recognize, they will not get along with."[19] Ibn Ḥajar (d. 1448 CE), the noted medieval Shafiʿite Sunnī exegete, commenting on this specific *ḥadīth* notes:

> It could be that what is being referred to is the beginning of creation in the realm of the unseen (*ḥāl al-ghayb*) when, it is reported, souls were created before bodies (*al-arwāḥ khuliqat qabl al-jasām*), and used

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[17] A. H. Ṣiddīqī, trans., *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim,* vol. 3, book 32, *ḥadīth* 6377 (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, n.d.), 1386. See also *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim,* book 45, *ḥadīth* 2638 (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' Al-Torāth Al-ʿArabī, 2000). M. S. ʿAbd al-Raḥman, *Islamic History and Biography,* vol. 14 (London: MSA Publication, 2004), 117, comments: "narrated by Abū Hurayrah the *ḥadīth* does not say 'humans were alive before being born.' Only [that] the souls were in heaven. This heaven is not the one people with good deeds go to in the hereafter. It is somewhere that we do not know. . . . In simple words, this place is like a bank where the souls created by Allah were placed."

[18] Ibid.

[19] "*Al-arwāḥ junūd mujannadah fa-mā tā ʿaraf min-hā iytilāf wa mā tanākir min-hā ikhtilāf,*" as found in Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, "*Bāb al-Aḥadith al-Anbiyā, Bāb al-Arwāḥ Junūd Mujannadah*" (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub Al-ʿilmiah, 2007).

> to meet one another and express their pessimism about the future. When souls have entered bodies (come to the physical realm) they may recognize one another from the past, and may be on friendly terms or otherwise based on that past experience.[20]

The prominent Indian *ḥadīth* scholar Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaq ʿAzīmabādī (d. 1911 CE) also interpreted this *ḥadīth* to mean: "souls meet each other before they get into their bodies."[21] Without an *a priori* conception of pre-mortality as an operational framework, passages like these are perhaps rendered less intelligible and more strained for logical consistency.

Creation Narratives

Ḥadīth and medieval creation narratives describe an entire epoch and a panoply of created beings with varying degrees of free will participating in a long and complex drama well before humans arrive on the scene. Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh Al-Kisāʾi (c. 1100 CE), in his noted *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā',* describes one such creation myth. According to Al-Kisāʾi, prior to the creation of Adam, God created "seven heavens and seven earths," each with its own nations and inhabitants.[22] Al-Kisāʾi also lays out an angelology of the heavens prior to the advent of humanity. Interestingly, the seventh heaven is described as being occupied with angelic inhabitants "in the form of men."[23] After God created time and the natural phenomena found in the heavens and various earths, he then created "the Soul Rational (ʿ*aql*)." Speaking to the yet unembodied but rational, responsive soul, God said:

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[20] Ibn Ḥajar Al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fatḥ al-Bārī* (Beirut: Dār Al-ʿArafa, n.d.), vi. 236.

[21] Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaq ʿAzīmabādī, *ʿAwn al-Ma'abūd* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), xii. 124.

[22] Al-Kisāʾi, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' of Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh Al Kisāʾi,* translated by T. Wheeler (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997).

[23] Ibid., 12. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude these angels were incarnated humans given Islam's conventional differentiation between the two beings, with angels possessing no free will in the cosmic hierarchal order.

> "Draw nigh!" And it drew nigh. Then he said to it, "Draw back!" and it drew back. "By My Majesty and Splendor," God said, "I have not created anything so beloved to me as thee. Through thee I shall take away and through thee shall I give. Through thee I shall reward and through thee I shall punish."[24]

This account of the creation of an independent soul is situated in an epoch preceding human history. Ibn Sīnâ or Avicenna (d. 1037 CE), the great Persian polymath, argues that it is this first intelligence (*al-'aql al-awwal*) from which human souls emanate.[25] Ibn Sīnâ contends that what differentiates humans from other sentient creation is that humans possess a soul with rational faculties and an independent free will preexisting the body. In poetry he writes of the grief of the soul's descent from the heavens to its temporary rendezvous with the material world.[26] Depicting the spirit/body duality of the human being, he writes:

> There descended upon you from that lofty realm,
> A dove, glorious and inaccessible.
> Concealed from the eye of every seeker,
> Although openly disclosed and unveiled.
> Reluctantly she came to you,
> And reluctantly, in her affection, will she depart.
> She resisted, untamed; then upon her arrival
> She grew accustomed to this desolate waste.
> She forgot, I think, promises of sanctuary and
> Abodes from which she had been unwilling to leave.[27]

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[24] Ibid., 10.

[25] Ibn Sīnâ, *Kitab al-Najat* (Cairo: Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Kurdī Press, 1938).

[26] Golam Dastagir, "Avicenna's Mystical View of the Soul: His Responses to Aristotle and Plotinus," *The Jahangirnagar Review* 9 (2000): 1–15.

[27] Ibn Sīnâ, "*Al-Qasīda Al-'Ainiyya* (Ode on the Soul)," as found in Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnâ)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 92. It is difficult to reconcile Ibn Sīnâ's mystical accounts of the soul's descent with other philosophical arguments he made for the soul's origination with the body. To illustrate the inconsistency of Ibn Sīnâ's views on this point, see Lukas Muehlethaler "Revising Avicenna's Ontology

Muḥammad Shahrastānī (d. 1153 CE), an influential Persian historian, in his book *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal,* describes a creation narrative as held by certain heretical sects within the Mu'tazilah traditions in this way:

> They hold that God created men healthy, sound in body and intelligent, in an adult state, and in a world other than this one in which they now live. He created in them the full knowledge of himself and showered on them blessings. It is impossible for the first of God's creatures to be anything but intelligent and thinking beings, able to draw lessons from experience, whom, from the beginning, God placed under an obligation to show gratitude to him. Some of them obeyed in all things God allowed to remain in heaven where he had placed them from the beginning. Those who were disobedient in all things God cast out of heaven and put in a place of punishment, namely hell. Those who were partly obedient and partly disobedient God sent to this world and clothed them in these gross bodies.[28]

Creation myths like these, adapted from the Qur'ān and other Islamic literature, underscore the myriad trans-historic beings found in the cosmos prior to human corporeal creation.[29] These stories are iconic in Islamic culture and, to a degree, establish a scaffolding in which various actors, including disembodied human souls, might exist and exercise free will prior to mortality. Even if these narratives are considered fanciful, some Muslims still believe these stories to contain profound and

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of the Soul: Ibn Kammūna on the Soul's Eternity *a Parte Ante,*" *The Muslim World* 102 (October 2012): 597–616.

[28] Shahrastānī is specifically referring to the Khābiṭīya and Hadathīya sects. See Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, "*Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal,*" in *Muslim Sects and Divisions,* edited by A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul, 1984), 54.

[29] In another influential compilation on the creation narrative is by the venerable Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE), who wrote the monumental work *Ta'rikh al-Rusūl wa' al-Mulūk* (*The History of Prophets and Kings*). Within this work, Al-Ṭabarī carefully documents various traditions regarding early Islamic cosmology where God created other categories of intelligent, sentient beings preceding the creation of Adam. See F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood,* vol. 1 (New York: State University Press of New York, 1989), 250.

sacred truths, and they remain cultural manifestations of pre-mortality's appeal. Through the wide range of the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* genre, preexistent realms serve as powerful interpretative tools in making sense of humanity's relationship to the heavens and situating the human soul in a divine drama prior to life on earth.[30]

The Verse of the Covenant and 'The Trust'

One of the most enigmatic but thought-provoking passages in the Qur'ān reads:

> And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! We bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: Surely we were heedless of this.[31]

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[30] Other available printed versions of the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* are: 'Abd al-Ṣāḥib al-Hasanī Al-'Āmilī, *al-Anbiyā : Hayātuhum, qiṣaṣuhum* (Beirut: al-A'lami, 1971); Isḥāq Ibn Bishr, *Mubtada' al-Dunyā wa-Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā* (Bodleian Library, Oxford: Huntington 388, fols. 106B–170B); Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al- *Ḥadītha*, 1968); Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manṣūr Ibn Khalaf al-Nīsābūrī, *Qiṣa al-Anbiyā'* (Tehran: Majmū'ai Mutūni, 1961); Al-Sayyid Ni'mat Āllāh Al-Jazā'irī, *al-Nūr al-Mubīn fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' wa' l-Mursalīn,* 2 vols. (Najaf: n.p., 1374); Juwayrī, Muḥammad, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā,'* ed. Ḥajj Sayyid Aḥmad Kitābchī (Tehran: n.p., n.d.); Muḥammad-Bāqir Majilisī, *Hayāt al-Qulūb Dār Qiṣaṣ wa-Aḥwālāt-I Payghambarān-i 'Izām wa-Awṣiyā-i Īshān,* 3 vols. (Tehran: Chāpkhāna-I Islāmiyya, 1373); 'Abd al-Wahāb Al-Najjār, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al- 'Arabī, n.d.); Nāṣir al-Dīn ibn Burhān Al-Rabghūzi al-Dīn, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *'Ismat al-Anbiya'* (Cairo: Silsilat al-Thāqafa al-Islāmiyya, 1964); Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis: Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Rakhiyya al-Kutub al-'Arabīyya, n.d.); Sa'id ibn Hibat Āllāh Al-Rāwandī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: n.p., 1968).

[31] Qur'ān 7:172.

This verse is referred to by Muslims as the Verse of the Covenant (*al-Mīthāq*), where God enters into a primordial compact with Adam and all future humankind. [32] There are widely differing interpretations surrounding this verse, ranging from the figurative to the literal, but there is almost universal agreement in Islam that humanity will be held accountable at the Day of Judgment for this self-conscious but premortal admission of God's ultimate lordship. This particular scriptural passage, however, has fostered a long but obscured history of theological speculation on the soul's origin by a variety of Muslim scholars, philosophers, and mystics. ʻAbd Allāh Yūsuf Alī says of this verse, "According to the dominant opinion of commentators each individual in the posterity of Adam had a separate existence from the time of Adam, and a Covenant was taken from all of them."[33]

From the earliest periods of Islamic history, the Verse of the Covenant seized the imagination of Muslim scholars and made a tremendous impact on Islamic literary expression, particularly those from the medieval exegetical and speculative traditions.[34] Most reports on the Verse of the Covenant describe God's creating Adam and then summoning all future humanity in spiritual form to acknowledge and testify of their unqualified commitment to worship only God. The details of the event vary depending on the narrator, but most accounts generally go as follows:

> When Allah created Adam, he stroked with his Hand over his back. So all the souls which were due to be born in his progeny until the Day of

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[32] The Verse of the Covenant has alternatively been referred to as the Day of the Covenant (*Yawm al- Mīthāq*), Day of the Primordial, and the Day of *Alast* (after the first word of God's question 'Am I not your Lord?' '*Alastu bi-rabbikum?*').

[33] ʻAbd Allāh Yūsuf Alī, trans., *The Meaning of the Qurʻān* (Beltsville, Md.: Amana Publications, 1989), 395, n. 1146.

[34] See Wadād al-Qāḍī, *The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qurʻān* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2006).

> Judgment came out of his back. In front of all the eyes of every human He made a shining light and put them before Adam. Adam said: O Lord! Who are they? He replied: They are your progeny.[35]

Al-Kisāʻi writes that when God made this covenant with Adam and his posterity, angels gathered around Adam, who was overcome with "fear and trembling." God then touched Adam's loins, first with his "Right Hand of Might" and then with his left. In the first case, all the righteous posterity of Adam appeared, led first by Muḥammad and his apostles, then a "party of believers proclaiming God's Oneness and affirming their faith in Him." After God's left hand touched Adam, all the unrighteous came forth with Cain, son of Adam, in the vanguard. When all of Adam's descendants to the end of time were finally assembled, God put the question to all future humanity: "Am I not your Lord?" They all answered with assent, "Yea, we do bear witness." However, Al-Kisāʻi notes, while "the people on the right answered immediately, . . . those on the left hesitated before answering."[36] For those who accepted this covenant, a transhistorical contract—with free will as a necessary precondition—was established between humanity and the divine. Absolutely fundamental to Islam is the autonomy and accountability of the individual soul, and implicit in this conception and in the Verse of the Covenant is a prerequisite domain of action prior to mortality consequential to the soul's future temporal and spiritual spheres.

Another verse that occupies space in the Islamic mythic imagination is Qurʻān 33:72, which reads in part: "Surely We offered the Trust (*ʻAmāna*) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant." This verse has been debated

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35. Rashād Azamī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā of Isma'il Ibn Kathīr Al-Damishqī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, n.d), 32. Translated by author.

36. Al-Kisāʻi, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā',* 63. Variations exist depending on the narrator that ascribe, for example, the simultaneous physical presence of all future generations in miniscule form such seeds (*durriyyah*) or particles of light.

among Muslim scholars for centuries as to what the Trust actually is. Arguments range from the more pedestrian Sunnī interpretation as generic duties of humankind and the attendant accountability for disobedience to the more domesticated Shī'ī interpretation as proof text to support the question of the early imamate in Islam.[37] Ṣūfīs, on the other hand, have tended to interpret the Trust as love, free will, and responsibility. In any case, the verse arguably plays a crucial role in the plot structure of the Adamic narrative and is implicitly related to the primordial covenant. Other interpretations on the *'Amāna,* albeit more in the heresiographical tradition, place the Trust at a time when "God created people before [creating] their bodies."[38] Just as God offered humanity a compact at the Day of the Covenant, so too did he invite humankind to accept his Trust when heaven and earth refused. Al-Mughīra bin Sa'id al'Ijlī (d. 737 CE), a figure associated with an early *Shī'ī ghulat* sect writes, "God then proposed to the heaven, earth and the mountains that they take upon themselves 'the trust' . . . but they refused. God next proposed the Trust to men."[39] For Al-Kisā'i and other commentators, the Trust is given considerable attention in that heaven and earth were created sentient and endowed with intelligence. [40] Various *tafsīr* on the *'Amāna,* including Al-Ṭabarī's, leave little doubt about the Trust's primordial nature.[41] Al-Mughīra describes preexistent humanity this way and situates the *Mīthāq* antecedent to the Trust:

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[37] For an exposition on the range of debates on the meaning of *'amāna,* see S. Alexander, "The Divine Trust: An Examination of the Classical Tradition Concerning the *'Amāna of Qur'ān* 33:72" (master's thesis, Columbia University, 1986).

[38] Ibid., 13.

[39] Al-Mughīra bin Sa'id al'Ijlī as found in A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, *Muslim Sects and Divisions* (London: Kegan Paul, 1984), 153.

[40] Al-Kisā'i, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā',* 63. To illustrate this point further, Al-Kisā'i writes: "The angels gathered around Adam in their various forms, and Adam was overcome with fear and trembling. Gabriel leapt and clasped Adam to his breast, as the valley began to tremble and quake with fear of God. 'Be still, O valley!' cried Gabriel, 'for you are God's first witness to the covenant God

> When He (God) wished to . . . He created creation in its entirety. . . . That was on account of God the most high, by what they claim, creating at that moment the shadows of the people (*zalāl al-nās*). The first among them that God created was Muḥammad. . . . He sent Muḥammad to the people altogether while they were yet shadows and He commanded him to have them bear witness on their own account of their recognition of the lordship of God. [42]

It is possible to infer from Al-Mughīra that the *ʿAmāna* is potentially as significant for the premortal soul as the *Mīthāq* in its religious potency and symbolic power for pre-incarnated humanity. In another source, Al-Mughīra connects the period of time of the Trust when humanity was in a preexistent "shadow" state but possessed the agency and capacity to accept or refuse God's Trust and be accountable for that decision. Of course, Al-Mughīra's perspective on this epoch of Islamic meta-history was never accepted as part of the mainstream understanding of this verse, but it does offer a notable mythic alternative to the more particularist Sunnī exegetical positions. As we will see, Ṣūfīsm interprets both the *Mīthāq* and ʿ*Amāna* as Qurʿānic substantiation of the believer's original, primeval status to which they yearn to return.

Expressions of Origin and Return

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is making with the descendants of Adam.' And the valley, with God's permission, was still."

[41] Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'u ʿIlbayān ʿAn Ta'wil āy al-Qu'rān,* 2nd printing (Miṣr: Shirka Maktaba wa-Matbaʿa Mustafa al-Babī Ishalbī wa-Awlādihī, 1954), 54.

[42] Wilferd Madelung and Paul E. Walker, *An Ismaili Heresiography: The ʻBāb al-Shayṭān' from Abū Tammām's Kitāb al-Shajara* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 70. See also R. Khanam, ed., *Encyclopedia of Middle East and Central Asia,* vol 1. "*Al-Mughiriyya*" (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2005), 570.

The implications of the Verse of the Covenant and the Trust have enormous significance in Islamic thought, but probably most profoundly in Ṣūfī speculative theology. Annemarie Schimmel writes at the outset of her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*:

> The idea of this primordial covenant (*Mīthāq*) between God and humanity has impressed the religious conscience of the Muslims, and especially the Muslim mystics, more than any other idea. Here is the starting point for their understanding of free will and predestination, of election and acceptance, of God's eternal power and man's loving response and promise. The goal of the mystic is to return to the experience of the "Day of *Alastu,*" when only God existed, before He led future creatures out of the abyss of not-being and endowed them with life, love, and understanding so they might face him again at the end of time.[43]

A central feature of Ṣūfī theology is for individuals to ceaselessly strive to return to one's original, primordial state. Humanity's phenomenal existence in the world of creation is meant to be a divine testing period separate from the Beloved or God. Schimmel elaborates on the religious task of the Ṣūfī mystic: "Man should recover the state he had on the Day of the Primordial Covenant, when he became existentialized, endowed with individual existence by God, which, however, involved a separation from God by the veil of createdness."[44] The true self, according to Ṣūfīsm, must transcend the confining, finite physicality of the body to evolve and progress to a higher, more perfect state of existence. Spiritual and physical discipline, then, is the primary purpose of earthly, bodily existence in order that both the soul and body can become perfected through the eventual unification with the divine. Amīn al-Dīn Balyanī (d. 1334 CE) describes Ṣūfī sensibility in this regard:

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43. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 24.

44. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions,* 143.

> The wisdom behind imprisoning the spirit (*rūh*) within existence (*wujūd*) is this: When the spirit came forth in the original world (*'alami-I asli*), it had no veil. It had come forth within the blessing of union [with God] (*visal*) and did not know the value of this blessing. . . . It was unacquainted with tasting and desire, affection and love, and all the stations and degrees. . . . Then it was turned from the world of union to that of separation so that pain and sorrow, and love and desire, come forth in it. . . . Then whenever it would reach a new station among the stations of this path it would reach a fresh light and [eventually] attain perfection through this journey.[45]

The penultimate religious goal of the Ṣūfī, then, is to return to one's origins—to spiritually progress in order to recover one's original unity with God. Schimmel writes, "The Ṣūfīs . . . often longed for their true home, for a time and place of their lofty primal state."[46] The concept of *Tawḥid* (unity) in Ṣūfī thought is not only to affirm God's own absolute and delimited oneness, but also reflects the believer's deep longing for a unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) with God.[47] Al-Junayd al-Baghdadī (d. 910), an early Ṣūfī figure, transposed the idea of *Tawḥid* onto the Day of the Primordial Covenant this way:

> Unification is this, that one should be a figure in the hands of God, a figure over which His decrees pass according as He in His omnipotence determines, and that one should be sunk in the sea of His unity, self-annihilated and dead alike to the call of mankind to him and his answer to them, absorbed by the reality of the divine unity in true proximity, and lost to sense and action, because God fulfills in him what He hath

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[45] Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 35.

[46] Clyde Edward Brown, *Religionless Religion: Beyond Belief to Understanding* (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2009), 92.

[47] The aspiration of all Ṣūfīs for a union with God presumes a paradox of being an eternally constituent of God and the individual self. Mystical ascent in Ṣūfīsm tends toward a stress on the enigma of a self that both originates and terminates in God, yet possesses a will that is free and independent.

> willed of him, namely that his last state become his first state, and that he should be as he was before he existed.[48]

Arguably the greatest of all Ṣūfī philosophers to verbalize the spiritual journey from a premortal sphere to an incarnated earthly experience and back again was Jalāluddin Rūmī, the thirteenth-century mystic whose poetic expressions continue to transcend culture, time, and place. He rhetorically asks: "We were in heaven, we were the companions of angels—when will we return there again?"[49] Rūmī, who often harnesses the simile of a bird to represent the human soul, muses: "I am the bird of the spiritual Garden, not of this world of dust; For a few days, they have a cage of my body made."[50] In other instances Rūmī depicts the soul as a falcon who leaves the sultan's royal abode and descends to the company of crows. Exiled to this lower existence and longing to be reunited with his king, he hears the falconer's drum calling him from exile to his rightful home and nobility.[51] Rūmī writes:

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[48] ʿAlī ibn ʿUthmān al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-Maḥjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism,* translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Brill, 1959), 282–83, as found in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions,* 146. See also Junayd, as found in Maulānā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-Uns,* edited by M. Tauḥīdīpūr (Tehran: n.p., 1957).

[49] Jalāluddin Rūmī, *Dīwān al-Kabīr yā Kulliyāt al-Shams,* edited by Badīʿuz Zamān Furūzānfar, vols. 1–7 (Tehran: n.p., 1957), poem 463.

[50] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: Harper, 2007), 234.

[51] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions,* 307. Carrying the soul metaphor further into another animal allegory, Schimmel points out: "One of the finest images in Persian poetry (Aṭṭār, Khalqanī, Nizāmī and later by Rūmī) in the late twelfth century is that of the elephant who dreamed of India. The elephant, an animal invariably connected to India, may be captured and carried away from his homeland to foreign lands, but when he sees his home in a dream, he will break all his chains and run there. This is a perfect image of the mystic's soul, which in the midst of worldly entanglements, is blessed with the vision of its eternal homeland and returns to the primordial Hindustan" (*Mystical Dimensions,* 308).

How should the falcon not fly
back to his king from the hunt
when the falconer's drum
it hears to call: "Oh come back"?
. . .
Oh fly, oh fly, O my soul-bird,
Fly to your primordial home![52]

The bird as an artistic surrogate for the human soul is a common convention in other Ṣūfī mystical poetry and literature. Probably the most celebrated example of the soul/bird motif is Farīduddin 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*) which describes the quest of birds journeying over seven valleys to find the lofty abode of their King (*Simurgh*)—the Lord of all Birds.[53] The birds represent different character archetypes and the individuated complexities inherent in humanity. The story is an allegory of the human journey from an original home to the depths and heights of temporal existence, and the worldly attachments that can obscure and divert the reunification of one's spiritual birthplace.

Ibn al-Farīḍ (d. 1235), another luminary of Ṣūfī poetry highlighting the "origin and return" theme, writes of the Beloved or God, "I knew no estrangement from my homeland when he was with me: my mind was undisturbed where we were—That place was my home while my Beloved was present."[54] Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209 CE), the great poet mystic from Fasa, harkens back to the Verse of the Covenant and of a premortal exchange with the Beloved when he muses:

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52. Rūmī, Jalāluddin, "How Should the Soul," in *Look! This is Love: Poems of Rumi,* translated by Annemarie Schimmel (Boulder, Co.: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 76–77.

53. Farīduddin 'Aṭṭār, *Manṭiq aṭ-Tayr,* edited by M. Jawad Shakur (Tehran: n.p., 1962). See also *The Risālat Al-Ṭayr (Epistle of the Birds),* originally written by Ibn Sīnâ (d. 1037) and later translated by Shahāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī into Persian. See also Al-Ghazalī's work of the same name for a similar story and idea.

54. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions,* 276.

> Look well, for the heart is the marketplace of His love, and there the rose of Adam on the branch of Love is from the color of manifestation of His Rose. When the nightingale "spirit" becomes intoxicated by this rose, he will hear with the ear of the soul the song of the bird of *Alast* ["Am I not your Lord?"] in the fountainplace of pre-eternity.[55]

While Ṣūfī notions of the preexistence are far from uniform, most Ṣūfīs resonate with the notion of an anterior existence. Most would agree that in this life humans are in a state of forgetfulness and must strive to retrieve the formal glory and knowledge of the soul's majestic beginning.

Elucidating further the theme of "origin and return" is the Shī'ī, Safavid theologian Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, better known as Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640). In his book *Elixir of the Gnostics,* he expounds on the theosophical notion that human souls have their origins in the first Cause (paralleling Aristotle's prime mover), eventually returning and being raised in perfection to that original, divine source.[56] Ṣadrā writes of the soul's "coming from the Presence of the Gatheredness" and "falling into the world of dispersion." Ṣadrā quotes Qur'ān 7:29, "As He brought you forth in the beginning, so shall you also return."[57] After several lengthy sections, Ṣadrā lays out the cosmic journey of the soul with its heavenly origin and the various stages of corporeal existence through which it passes on its return journey. "The natural home of the soul," Mullā Ṣadrā writes, "is in the world of the afterworld," and the afterworld is "the world of human souls, their homestead, and their true place of return." In its "original home," he continues, "the soul was alive, freely choosing, subtle, powerful, knowing through the potency of her Innovator, roaming in her world, joyful, at rest with her Author, in a seat of truthfulness with an All-Powerful King."[58] In this passage, it is significant that Ṣadrā uses the word *ḥayyah* in describing how the premortal soul was "alive," not in the sense of potential mortality but rather the attributes associated with living things, in particular the power of self-motion. His term "freely choosing" (better translated perhaps as *capable of choice*), or *mukhtārah,* indicates free will and a degree of personal, individuated agency where souls make choices prior to sinking to this "alien location."[59] Ṣadrā's system of origin and return is both a circuit and, as he calls it "a straight path," an ontological tour of all the various stages through which the soul passes, but in all times and all phases the soul's free will is preserved, a concept with which Muslim theologians through the ages have grappled mightily. [60]

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[55] Rūzbihān Baqlī, "Abhar al-'Āshiqīn," *Les Paradoxes des Soufis,* translated by Henri Corbin (Tehran: Tehran Institute, 1966), 396. Baqlī also heavily used the imagery of birds as a metaphor for the soul. See Carl W. Ernst, "The Symbolism of Birds and Flight in the Writings of Rūzbihān Baqlī," in *The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism,* edited by Leonard Lewisohn (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi, 1992), 353–66.

[56] Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics,* translated by William C. Chittick (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003).

[57] Ibid., 54.

The Divine Light of Muhammad

Early mystic sources also suggest that the spirit of the prophet Muḥammad existed as a central prophetic entity prior his birth. The motif of light (*nūr*) in mystic thought represents an exalted manifestation of Muḥammad's primordial condition. These interpretations evolve from the famous Qur'ānic Light Verse found in 24:35:

> Allah is the light (*nūr*) of the heavens and the earth; a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not—light upon light—Allah guides to His light whom He pleases, and Allah sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Cognizant of all things.

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[58] Ibid., 62.

[59] Ibid., 63.

[60] Ibid., 55.

Mystics theorized that the phrase "a likeness of His light" implies Muḥammad's light nature, the luminous reflection of God's own divine light. The *Tamhīdat,* written by the great Ṣūfī martyr 'Ain al-Quḍāt Al-Hamadānī (d. 1131 CE), suggests:

> God created the light of Muḥammad from His light. He formed it and brought it forth at His own hand. This light remained before God for a hundred thousand years, during (which time) He beheld it seventy thousand glimpses and glances every day and night. At each glance He formed it into new light, and created from them all the existent beings.[61]

A notable facet of these interpretations places an emphasis on Muḥammad's superiority to other prophets and his place as the first prophetic entity created by God. 'Umar Qatada (d. 118 CE), an early narrator, reported a tradition in which Muḥammad claimed to be the first of the prophets to be created (i.e., as a primordial substance) and the last of them to be sent (as a real prophet).[62] Another tradition claims that the spirits of Muḥammad, 'Alī and the imāms, were created two thousand years prior to their bodies, and God said to Muḥammad: "I had created you and 'Ali as light—that is spirit—without body, before I created heaven, earth, the throne and the sea."[63] Another tradition referring to Muḥammad's pre-Earth life reads:

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[61] 'Ain al-Quḍāt Al-Hamadānī, *Tamhīdat,* in *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam,* edited by Gerhard Böwering (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 150. Böwering's excellent work on the Qur'ānic hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī scholar Sahl Al-Tustarī (d. 896) outline various events related to the world of preexistence, including an exposition on the light of Muḥammad and Day of the Covenant.

[62] Uri Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of *Nūr* Muḥammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 69. The renowned scholar 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181) is reported to have said that Allah created Muḥammad's light "424 thousand year prior to the creation of heaven, earth, the throne, the *kursi*, the tablet, the pen, paradise and hell, as well as before the creation of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, David, and the rest of those who believed in Allah's unity." See Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 116.

[63] Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 105.

> Before that [i.e., before your appearance on earth], you dwelt well among shadows [of paradise].
> Deposited where leaves were stitched [i.e., to cover Adam's loins];
> Then you descended to earth.[64]

Stories of this sort extend beyond the Islamic Middle East where the *Ḥikāyat Nūr Muḥammad,* a legend found in Malay literature, tells how the mystic light of Muḥammad was made manifest in the form of a glorious bird by God, and all existence came into being from the drops of water that fell from its body. [65] A similar story is found in Bengali Islamic syncretistic literature, where the drops from the body of Muḥammad's *nūr* resulted in the creation of 124,000 prophets along with other various objects and spirits.[66] If Muḥammad's preexistence is permitted, it is not a logical stretch to assume other human beings also had an origin in the eternal realms. Given Muḥammad's status as a human moral exemplar and not divine, it would not be inconsistent to presume that he serves as a prototype of the process of spiritual descent and re-ascension. [67]

Conclusion

One of the great and enduring existential questions is that of humanity's true essence and identity. In spite of more orthodox interdictions against it, the doctrine of premortal intelligences has demonstrated impressive endurance and is clearly found in varying but identifiable degrees within Sunnīsm, Shīʾīsm, and Ṣūfīsm, though in their more mystical and esoteric narratives. Mainstream Islam has generally relegated the doctrine of the premortal soul to the shelves of unorthodoxy if not light heresy. However, unlike many theological ideas that were confronted and defeated by hegemonic orthodoxy, the notion of the preexistence in Islam was not really defeated in a clear and identifiable contest of ideas. Actual, direct confrontation with the essential ideas of pre-mortality can rarely be found. Rather it appears the notion was swept aside by the broad theological tides and political skirmishes that raged throughout the early Islamic world. Pre-mortality was guilty by association when revered theologians argued clearly against more threatening notions as metempsychosis (*tanāsukh*) or soul transmigration. The view of the preexistence as conceptualized by certain mystics and gnostics merely became collateral damage to larger theological and polemical disagreements.[68] The more speculative and esoteric traditions that demonstrated a consonance with the doctrine of pre-mortality were also constrained and dismissed by scholars and jurists aligned with the prevailing political powers. As movements such as Ṣūfīsm began to be marginalized and even suppressed, so too did discreet doctrines that may have found fertile ground in mainstream Islam had they not been associated with such fringe and esoteric elements. Entire traditions, such as Ṣūfīsm, were gradually considered by Sunnī branches as unacceptable deviations of the true teachings of Islam, even if doctrinal portions could have generally been considered religiously sound.

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[64] Ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-Kātib,* edited by 'Abd al-Hamīd (Cairo: n.p., 1963), as found in Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 90.

[65] See T. Pigeaud and P. Voorheove, *Handschriften aus Indonesien* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985), 47 and V. Braginsky, *The System of Classical Malay Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 66–67.

[66] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 129.

[67] Qur'ān 18:110, speaking to Muḥammad's mortality, reads: "Say: 'I am only mortal like yourselves.'" It must be acknowledged that because he is in a category by himself in so many ways, Muḥammad's exceptionalism might be a logical argument against this assumption.

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68. Most Muslim scholars argued for the origination of the soul with its body, but a rare counterargument that may be the most comprehensive challenge to that position is by Ibn Kammūna, a thirteenth-century Jewish philosopher who advanced a systematic philosophical proof that preexistence is a necessary prerequisite for the soul's eternity *a parte post.* See Muehlethaler, "Revising Avicenna's Ontology of the Soul," 597–616.

In spite of more orthodox interdictions against it, the claim that the human soul has premortal origins doggedly persists. It has resurfaced at varying times and places in myriad forms and genres. The notion of a preexistence, like any enduring doctrine or idea, perseveres possibly because of its inherently deep, explanatory power. This version of the cosmic journey of the soul sheds light on some of the weightier problems of existence and has been invoked to answer such universal questions as: Where did we come from? What is our relationship to the divine? Why is there sometimes such an instantaneous bond between companions and lovers? Why are people endowed with unique and innate talents and aptitudes? Are we born against our will?

The history of pre-mortality in Islam is far from linear or consistent and assumes form in a variety of combinations, whether in crude myth, literal belief, or metaphorical abstraction. The idea's allure can easily be developed beyond the modest set of themes selected here, and certainly the ones chosen have permeable boundaries. There is, however, enough recurrence of the pre-mortality motif in segments of Islam to suggest that over the centuries it has powerfully met various important spiritual, emotional, and political needs of certain adherents. In the final analysis, this enduring but subsurface conception of the soul, as originating on the other side of birth, is a testament to the vast and universal human longing to fathom the depth and mystery of existence.