

Bridging Bede Griffiths' Vision and Islam:  
Universal Man, Cosmic Covenant, and Divine Feminine

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It was only toward the end of his life that Father Bede Griffiths began to deeply develop connections between his "New Vision of Reality"<sup>1</sup> and Islamic Traditions and Muslim Spirituality. In his 38 years at Saccidananda ashram in Shantivanam near Thannirpalli in Tamil Nadu, Bede had immersed himself deeply in Christianity and Hindu Vedantism. Dom Bede was a Benedictine Monk of the Comaldalese order. Unlike his predecessor, Henri LeSaux (Swami Abhishikdananda) Bede did not formally receive initiation as a Vedantan guru, although he did take *sannyasi* (renunciant) vows and also received the Sanskrit name Dayananda ("the Bliss of Compassion"). Only later in his life did Bede explore Islamic teachings in relation to his interspiritual approach. For example, his omnibus World Religions reader includes a disproportionately small number of passages from Islamic sources.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Bede laid the groundwork for establishing significant bridges of interspirituality between his "vision of reality" and Islamic spirituality. Three of Bede's principle categories for bridging religious worlds have been richly developed by Muslims since the time of the Prophet Muhammad: (1) the Cosmic Person or the Archetype of the Universal Man; (2) the Cosmic Covenant; and (3) the Divine Feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*. Springfield Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Bede Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom: A Journey through the Sacred Wisdom of the World*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994.

In this essay I will introduce some essential Islamic resources which apply to these three major categories of Father Bede's vision of religious unity. I will begin by outlining nine key Islamic paradigms of the Universal Person: (1) the Prophet Muhammad, (2) 'Ali; (3) Jesus Christ, (4) Adam, (5) al-Khidr [the Immortal Green Man and Prophet], (6) Idris [Enoch/Hermes Trismegistus], (7) Jelaluddin Rumi; and the two major symbols of the Divine Feminine in Islam, (8) the Virgin Mary and (9) the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. In addition to these figures, Islam's own context of a Cosmic Covenant -- continuous and universal prophecy and its traditions of the Sacred Feminine -- provide important connections to Bede's vision.

In *A New Vision of Reality* Father Bede alludes to an important starting point, the "Universal Man." This phrase resonates with the title Muslims ascribe to Muhammad as the "Perfect Man" (*insan al-kamil*). I would like to explore what this title and other aspects of Muhammad's prophetology mean in the light of Father Bede's ecumenical vision. Since Bede developed a more detailed account of the Archetype of the Universal Man in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions than he did in Islamic traditions, I would like to explore how this comparison might be fulfilled. Secondly the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad's life, and a number of Islamic holy persons provide a dynamic conception of the cosmic covenant. And finally, numerous Muslim sources develop a spirituality of the Divine Feminine, especially as articulated in the lives of Mary the Mother of Jesus and Fatima the daughter of Muhammad.

Some of these models and interpretations belong especially, though not exclusively, to the Sufi dimension of Islamic piety. Sufism focuses on cultivating piety and virtue, the pursuit of the direct experience of God, and the sharing of love among all creation. In its method, Sufi traditions rely on personal transmission, instruction, and spiritual guidance. Sufi training aims at selflessness, submission, transmission, self-examination, and integration. As Bede strikingly puts it, “[The emergence of Sufism] is very similar to the emergence of Mahayana within the earlier Buddhism...”<sup>3</sup>

In comparing the emergence of Sufism within Islam with the emergence of Mahayana within earlier Buddhism, Bede was emphasizing the similarities among the doctrines of *wahdat al-wujud* (the oneness of being) ascribed to Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), Shankara’s Vedantan conception of *nirguna brahman* (formless absolute) and Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamika* (middle way) teaching of *shunyata* (spaciousness).<sup>4</sup> As Bede observed, these abstract formulations correspond to Christian mystical expressions of the Godhead and the Ground of Being articulated by Dionysus the Areopagite, Eckhart, and Ruysbroeck.<sup>5</sup> But more importantly Sufism, as most Muslims practice it, emphasizes ideals to which Bede gave greater attention: the Universal Man, spiritual guidance, and moral development. I will focus on these correspondences between Bede’s work and Sufism because I believe, overall, Bede emphasized these intimate and devotional aspects of the spiritual life. In this sense, Bede’s comparison of Sufism with Mahayana Buddhism is even more apt: like the Mahayana, Sufism provides a universal path toward

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<sup>3</sup> Griffiths (1989: 142-143)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 243-254.

spiritual fulfillment, i.e. a path leading toward a very immediate and personal sense of God's presence, grace, and power.

Fundamentally, Bede affirmed the Personal dimension of God. This is clear from the Upanishad text he chose for his last rites:

Aum. I know that great Person  
Of the brightness of the sun  
Beyond the darkness.  
Only by knowing him  
One goes beyond death.  
There is no other way to go.<sup>6</sup>

Among the diversity of Upanishads, and especially among their wealth of monistic or impersonalist portrayals of divinity, Bede especially selected and affirmed this vision of God as intimate and personal. Of course here Bede was pointing to Christ as pre-figured in the Upanishads. However I feel Bede left this clue as a clear indication of how to proceed in our interspiritual or ecumenical work by pursuing the figure of the Universal Person.

Similarly, Bede identified Sufism as a movement akin to the Mahayana in its compassion and accessibility. Sufism shows a refreshing face compared to recent outbursts of militarized and politicized acts of terrorism, violence, and suffering. People of any faith or no faith can choose to use (or abuse) their traditions for their own agendas. I identify this explicitly because, some readers may find here a surprisingly positive representation of Islamic spirituality. But I hope it will become increasingly clear that this spirituality is a long-standing, deeply-rooted, and widely-embraced foundation of the Islamic tradition.

And it is older and closer to the original spirit of Islam than the more recent notorious distortions.

*The Prophet Muhammad, Perfect Man and Logos*

In *A New Vision of Reality* Father Bede alludes to an important starting point, the title ascribed to Muhammad as “Perfect Man” (*insan al-kamil*).<sup>7</sup> Many Muslim conservatives and modernists have overemphasized Muhammad’s mortal nature and downplayed reports of miraculous episodes in his life and traditions of metaphysical doctrines about his nature. As a result, the idea of Muhammad as a religious paradigm exemplifying Father Bede’s Archetype of the Universal Man may require explaining. I’d like to reprise and explore these long-standing traditions here as complementary examples of what Father Bede illuminated so fully from his comparative Christian-Vedantan perspective.

*Rasul Allah: Universal Man as Paradigm.*

Although Muhammad is not considered divine, he is hailed as divinely inspired. He is human, but honored as the perfect human and a “jewel among men.” In addition, according to his favorite wife ‘Aisha’, his character was that of the Qur’an in practice.<sup>8</sup> His exemplary precedent, called the *sunna*, defines the absolute standards of piety and practice. His most widely used title *Rasul Allah* (Messenger of God), identifies his uniqueness as the culmination of all previous prophets and messengers (*khatm al-anbiya’* ) and in another sense one among the legacy of continuous revelation.

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<sup>6</sup> Svetashvatara Upanishad 3.8.

<sup>7</sup> Griffiths (1989: 145, 148)

<sup>8</sup> Fritjof Schuon, “The Spiritual Significance of the Substance of the Prophet.” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*. New York: Crossroads, 1987, 57.

The Qur'an describes God and the angels continually invoking blessings (*salawat*) upon him and commands humanity to also join in this act of praise (33.56). For God to ask humanity to join with Himself and the angels in continuously invoking blessings upon the Prophet suggests a universal status and stature for Muhammad which resonates with the concept of Universal Man central to Bede's interspirituality.

A frequently quoted verse expresses the purpose of Muhammad's existence as "a Mercy to all Creation (*Rahmat li 'l- 'Alamin* [21.107]) The Qur'an describes his character as "a most beautiful model (*uswatan husanan* [33.40]) for humanity to follow, one whose nature is pre-eminently great (*khuluqun 'azim* [68.4]). As the Night of Revelation (*Laylat al-Qadr*) implies, he is the recipient of the final scripture. And in using one of his most popular titles, the Beloved of God (*Habib Allah*) Muslims express a degree of love and appreciation for him which parallels Christians' love of Jesus.

In a broader sense many Muslims appeal to two verses concerning human nature to clarify some of these aspects of the Prophet's virtue. Firstly the Qur'an ascribes to humanity the status of *taqwim*, "established in the best of forms" (95.4); secondly it asserts that humanity is endowed with a quality of excellence in its creation (*fitra* [30.30]) which explains our innate capacity to recognize and acknowledge morality and spirituality.

This description of Muhammad the Messenger of God explains the aspects of his character which relate to Father Bede's comparative category of the Universal Man. Although not an object of worship, Muhammad is revered and adored as an exceptional exemplar. However in this description so far I am attempting only to frame a somewhat conservative characterization which meets with a broad consensus of visions of Muhammad's nature and role among Muslims. In this view, Muhammad is a Universal Man in a functional or honorific sense. His status is paramount and his role paradigmatic.

However, we will more dramatically see the relevance of Father Bede's vision of the Universal Man in Islam in four other aspects of the Islamic Prophetology of Muhammad: (1) Muhammad as Logos; (2) Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension; (3) the recitation of the Prophet's names; and (4) the relationship of Muhammad and Jesus. First we will turn our attention to a view of Muhammad which describes his status as Universal Man more dramatically.

#### *Nur Muhammad: Universal Man as Logos*

Mystical exegetes and Shi'i Muslims have more broadly envisioned Muhammad's original and eternal nature as a primordial light, the *Nur Muhammad* (Light of Muhammad). In this conception, the first created being was a light which was the source of the being of all the Prophets. This doctrine presents Muhammad ontologically as the personification of the Logos.

The following quotes attributed to God and the Prophet Muhammad demonstrate a logos-based prophetology of the Universal Man. In a *Hadith Qudsi*<sup>9</sup> God speaks of the Prophet Muhammad as essential to the creation: *laulaka ma khalaqtu 'l-aflaka* (“If not for thee I would not have created the heavens.”)<sup>10</sup> Other such *hadith qudsi* expand on the logocentric theme: “I was a Prophet when Adam was still between spirit and flesh.”<sup>11</sup> “I was the first among prophets in creation and the last among them to have a mission of prophecy.”<sup>12</sup> “The first thing God created was my spirit.”<sup>13</sup> “Whoever sees me has seen God.”<sup>14</sup>

The 10<sup>th</sup> century paragon of Sufism, Mansur al-Hallaj described the Prophet Muhammad’s status as divine light and logos in these outpourings of veneration:

All the lights of the Prophets proceeded from his light; he was before all, his name the first in the book of Fate; he was known before all things, all beings and will endure after the end of all. By his guidance have all eyes attained to sight....All knowledge is merely a drop, all wisdom merely a handful from his stream, all time merely an hour from his life.<sup>15</sup>

Some encomiums of the Prophet Muhammad’s status refer to him as “Ahmad.” The name Ahmad is an alternative name for Muhammad, derived from the same root, but meaning “most praised.” When spelled this way only a single letter is differentiated from the

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<sup>9</sup> “sacred hadith,” a genre of transmissions of God’s direct extra-qur’anic speech revealed through the Prophet

<sup>10</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975: 215 (my trans.)

<sup>11</sup> Jameh Saghir, vol 2, p. 26 quoted in Javad Nurbakhsh, *Traditions of the Prophet, Vol. 1*. London and New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1981, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Hafez Abu Na’im Ispahani, *Dala’il an-Nabuwat* (Hyderabad, Vol. 1, p. 6) in Nurbakhsh, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Kalamat Maknuneh Fayz-e Kashani* (p. 70) in Nurbakhsh, *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Sahih-e Bukhari* (Vol 4, p. 135); *Sahih-e Muslim* (Vol. 2, p. 54) in Nurbakhsh, *ibid.*, p. 36. (The paraphrase of these words found in the Gospel underscores the radical prophetology of this testimony. The fact that it is recorded in the two most widely-accepted *hadith* collections grants it a place as orthodox doctrine among even the most conservative.)

<sup>15</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. p. 70

divine name “One,” *Ahad*. The Sufi poet Mahmud Shabistari incorporated a sacred prophetic tradition (*hadith qudsi*)<sup>16</sup> to reflect on Muhammad’s significance as the Universal Man:

Between Ahmad and Ahad (the One) there stands but a single letter “m” –  
The universe is contained in that letter.<sup>17</sup>

*Isra’ and Mi’raj* (Muhammad’s Night Journey and Ascension).

Muhammad is further described as the Universal Man in the narrative of his night journey and ascension. Even in the most ordinary level of understanding, this is an archetypal event establishing for all Muslims the rite of prayer, its schedule, its content, its form, and its intention. Furthermore in the ascension Muhammad stood before God at His Throne and also interceded with God requesting the number of daily prayers be reduced so the community might realistically fulfill them. Here Muhammad serves as both mediator and a human transcending categories of space and time. As illustrated this way in the ascension, Muhammad stands as a figure compatible with Bede’s vision of Universal Man.

### *The Prophet’s Names*

Although icons are not a part of traditional Muslim observance, the recitation of names comes closest to this type of devotion. In this context is helpful to reflect on some of the popularly attributed names of the Prophet Muhammad as these show how extensively the Prophet is recognized as a Universal Man. His names are often canonized in lists of 202

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<sup>16</sup> *Hadith Qudsi* (holy or sacred traditions) are those testimonies of the Prophets words which the Prophet and his companions accepted as directly revealed by God, but which God did not decree for inclusion in the Qur’an.

names to match the canonical lists of 99 or 100 names of God. Such names include: *Sayyid*, prince and master of the universe; *Habib Allah*, the Beloved of God; *Muhyi*, the reviver (of the dead hearts); *Nur*, light; *Siraj*, the illuminating torch; *Misbah*, the lamp of faith; *Huda*, the guide; *Miftah*, the key (to paradise); *Miftah al-Rahmah*, the key to God's mercy.<sup>18</sup> The meaning and practice of these names is well described in these words:

In reciting the names of the Prophet, the Muslim draws closer to the Prophet and participates in some degree in those qualities and virtues which the names reflect. The names of the Prophet are the colors with which the spiritual portrait of the Prophet is engraved in the hearts and souls of the members of his community, facilitating the emulation of his *Sunnah* and providing the channel for that *barakah* [spiritual blessing or power], which is expressed concretely when his *Sunnah* is lived and emulated in life.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Relationship of Muhammad and Christ in Muhammad's Own Words*

Inasmuch as Father Bede's conception of the Universal Man is inspired by a Christian vision, it is helpful to explore Islamic understandings of the relationship between Muhammad and Christ. In a canonical hadith Muhammad proclaims that belief in Christ is required to enter paradise. From a Muslim perspective, Christ's universalism is a key to piety. Furthermore Christ's miracles of healing and resurrection are cornerstones of Islamic doctrine (Qur'an 5.110). Moreover, Christ's speaking from the cradle in his infancy of his prophetic mission (Qur'an 19.30-33) underscores the direct transmission of prophetic knowledge and authority. In the context of the unity of prophethood which the Qur'an and hadith underscore, these orthodox points of appreciation of Christ contribute to an understanding of the nature of Muhammad

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<sup>17</sup> Mahmud Shabistari (d. 1320) quoted in *Islamic Spirituality I*, p. 109

<sup>18</sup> These names appear among others in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Sunnah and Hadith," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*. New York: Crossroad, 1987, pp. 99-100. I have adapted the definitions and translations.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Bede summarized his description of Christology around three New Testament passages. (1) Phil 2:16 *morphe tou theo* (the form or image of God); (2) Col 1:15 “the image of the invisible God”; (3) Heb 1:3 *apaugasma* (reflection, character, stamp, impress, expression, mirror)<sup>20</sup> These articulations bear comparison with the vision of Muhammad’s cosmological status as *Nur Muhammad*, the first created being whose essence is light. Bede asserted that Ibn ‘Arabi’s formulation of Adam as the perfect man in whom God’s image is reflected corresponds to the idiom of Col, 1:15, “the image of the invisible God.”<sup>21</sup> A popular Sufi hadith echoes the Christology of John 14:9: “Who saw me [the Prophet Muhammad] has seen God.”<sup>22</sup> As noted earlier, the Prophet Muhammad’s favorite wife ‘Aisha’ reported: “His character was that of the Qur’an.”<sup>23</sup> And, in connecting Jesus and Muhammad, many Muslim interpreters have asserted that Muhammad is the Paraclete. Such exegetes frame this interpretation around the fact that the name Ahmad (“most praised”) translates into Greek as *pariklytos*, a word spelled similarly to *parakletos* (paraclete). This semi-homonym then bolsters a more substantial interpretation of the following Qur’anic verse:

And when Jesus son of Mary said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah unto you confirming that which was revealed unto me in the Torah, and bringing good tidings of a messenger who cometh after me, whose name is the praised one (Ahmad).<sup>24</sup>

Among Muslims who believe the Prophet Muhammad transmitted the Qur’an exactly as he received it, some have taken Muhammad to be the Johanine Paraclete who “will not

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<sup>20</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*. Springfield, Ill: Templegate, 1989, pp. 122-125.

<sup>21</sup> Griffiths (1989: 145)

<sup>22</sup> Badi’uz-Zaman Furuzanfar’s *Ahadith-I Mathnawi* no 163 cited in Schimmel (1975: 223)

<sup>23</sup> Schuon (1987: 57)

<sup>24</sup> Qur’an 61.6

speak of himself, but whatsoever he shall hear that he shall speak.” (John 16:13) These attributions further a conception of Muhammad as the Universal Man.

*‘Ali ibn Talib* (ca. 600-661)

Muslims of the *Shi’a* tradition similarly identify the Prophet’s cousin, adopted son, and son-in-law, ‘Ali, as a figure of the Universal Man. The historical issue that ‘Ali was the Prophet’s intended and only bona fide successor only begins to touch on this appreciation which transcends the historical interpretation that ‘Ali was the Prophet’s first, closest, and most deeply-knowledgeable companion in the path of Islam. The *Shi’a* interpret many key words in the Qur’an as referring to ‘Ali, including: *sabil* (the way); *mizan* (the weight or measure); *sirat* (the path); and *ni‘ma* (the blessing), among other names preserved in heaven. And among more ardent *Shi’a* such understandings circulate that ‘Ali will be an intercessor on the Day of Judgement, that he was the stone (*kesf*) which had fallen from heaven (Qur’an 34.9; 52.44). Still these attributions are among the more modest points.

Among Nusayri Isma’ili Shi’a, “ ‘Ali is the incarnation of the universal soul and an emanation of God. Thus ‘Ali has not begotten nor been begotten (cf. Qur’an 112.4).”<sup>25</sup> As another tradition asserts, “ ‘Ali is God who appeared in every generation in a different guise: once as Hasan, then as Husayn. ‘Ali sent Muhammad to the world as a Prophet; Muhammad is the veil (*hijab*) under which ‘Ali was hidden. ‘Ali’s symbol is the spiritual meaning (*ma’na*) while that of Muhammad is the name.”<sup>26</sup> Members of the Turkish Sufi Order of the Bektashis (among whom included the Ottoman Empire’s Janissary Military

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<sup>25</sup> E. Kohlberg, ‘Ali b. Abi Taleb,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Vol. I, p. 845. Accessed June 2005 at [www.iranica.com](http://www.iranica.com)

Corp) also viewed ‘Ali as this interior or superior aspect of Prophethood. For all *Shi’a* the office of those directly descended from ‘Ali and Fatima, the Imams (Imamate) holds a mystery regarding the inner meaning of the Prophet Muhammad’s role. ‘Ali existed before all humanity and represents the “Greatest Name of God.”

From these perspectives, Muhammad and ‘Ali were constituted of the same light (*nur*) and only differentiated in this world to demonstrate the roles of prophethood and sainthood (*walaya*). One of the most popular mystical quotations about ‘Ali is his self-declaration, “I am the dot under the *ba* [the letter “ba”].” Here ‘Ali describes himself as the defining feature -- a single point -- of the first letter of the Qur’an. In the mystical understanding of calligraphy this means ‘Ali is the dot which transforms the transcendent letter *Alif* which begins the name Allah into forms of meaning in the Qur’an.

### *Adam*

The Qur’an explains Christ’s birth as analogous to Adam’s. (3.59) In this and other ways the Qur’an clearly represents Adam as the Universal Man. One verse narrates that God brought forth the myriad souls of all humanity from the loins of Adam and addressed the assembly asking, “Am I not your Lord,” to which all humanity affirmed, “Yes, You are our Lord.” (7.172) This depiction of Adam clearly presents him as the collective and Universal Oversoul. Bede views this as a description of “Adam who is pre-existent” as the *purusha* (the Vedic term for the Universal Man) in whom all creation is found and with whom God has made an eternal covenant.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 845.

<sup>27</sup> Griffiths (1989: 145)

A second aspect of the story of Adam also commands our attention. The Qur'an informs us that God "taught Adam the names of all of them." (2.31) This idiom has been interpreted variously from the simple knowledge of the names of all things and phenomena, to the knowledge of the nature and attributes of creation, to ultimately the knowledge of God's divine names. One decisive aspect of this story is that it is a knowledge that the angels lack. (2.31-33). When asked by God to declare these names, the angels confess their inability. Finally God commands the angels to prostrate before Adam (2.34). The word God uses is the same word used for making prostration in prayer (*sajada*). In both these events of Adam's knowledge of the names and the angels' prostration before Adam, God, as given voice in the Qur'an, has placed humankind (at least) a little *higher* than the angels. In these three motifs, (1) Adam as the archetype of humanity's forthcoming generations, (2) possessor of the knowledge of the names, and (3) recipient of submission by the angels, we are presented with a clear and vivid vision of Adam as the Archetype of the Universal Man.

#### *Khidr, the Immortal Green Man*

One of the more dramatic and intriguing Islamic examples of the Archetype of the Universal Man is that of al-Khidr. Al-Khidr is a figure representing inner and esoteric guidance who appears in the Qur'an's Chapter of the Cave (18.60-82). His name literally means the "Green Man" and he is an archetypal figure, an immortal prophet. He bears this name, according to the Prophet Muhammad, because whenever he would sit in a

barren place, after he arose, the land would be verdant<sup>28</sup>. This in itself forms an implicit symbol of resurrection and a Universal Man motif. Archetypally, such motifs evoke parallels among such figures as Osiris, Adonis, Attis, the Green Knight of Sir Gawain, and St. George.

### *Khidr and Christ*

An immediate association with Christ is that Khidr appears when Moses, while journeying, loses a fish at the place where two seas meet. In his journey Moses is accompanied by Joshua (son of Nun) who witnesses the fish slip away into the sea.<sup>29</sup> One way in which Khidr resembles Christ is that he surpasses Moses and is symbolized by a fish. Khidr's superiority to Moses (even if specialized) manifests clearly in Moses' request that Khidr guide him on a journey of spiritual training. In a radical reading of this story, a French Jesuit scholar, Charles Ledit suggested that two of the Khidr story's motifs represent an implicit and indirect affirmation of Christ's resurrection. Ledit asserted that the disappearing fish and subsequent appearance of Khidr signify Christ's resurrection and the meeting of the two seas symbolize the Old and New Testaments.<sup>30</sup> As much as Ledit exaggerates, his speculation aligns with an interesting phenomenon concerning the eighteenth chapter of the Qur'an where the story of Khidr appears. This

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<sup>28</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol. 4, Book 55, no. 614.

<sup>29</sup> Although the Qur'an does not name Khidr and Joshua, the Prophet Muhammad gives this information in Prophetic Traditions (Hadith). The name of Joshua's father, "Nun," means fish.

<sup>30</sup> Ledit, Charles, *Mahomet, Israel et le Christ*. Paris: La Combe, 1956, p. 149-152, cited in Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*. Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1991, pp. 109-110. Although Ledit may be stretching this point, it is interesting and important that the same chapter (surah 18) also contains a version of the story known among late ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean Christians as the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus which was understood as a resurrection parable.

chapter involves a number of unique Christian references<sup>31</sup> used as examples of a different interpretation of the notion that "...God has taken a son. (18.4)".

Here follows a brief summary of the story of Moses' journey with Khidr which is found in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'an (18.60-82):

Moses, accompanied by Joshua, seeks the mystical "place where two seas meet." (*majma' al-bahrain*) vowing to continue even if it takes ages. The two sit on a rock and a fish they have brought with them slips into the water. After journeying, Moses, fatigued, suggests they eat their meal. Joshua then remembers to inform Moses that their fish had disappeared wonderously. Moses realizes this is the place they seek to which they retrace their steps. At the rock, Moses finds Khidr, one of God's exceptional servants to whom God has directly imparted compassion and inner wisdom. Moses asks Khidr if he might follow him to receive training in his wisdom. Khidr explains that Moses will not be able to follow him. "How can you patiently bear what you can not comprehend?" Moses asserts that God willing, he will be patient and obedient. Khidr sets the condition that Moses must ask no question until Khidr first raises the issue.

On the first leg of their journey, Khidr gored holes in the hull of a boat in which they rode. Moses protested and asked if Khidr meant to drown the innocent passengers. Khidr warns him, "Did I not tell you, you could not bear with me?" Moses asks for pardon. Next they encounter a young boy whom Khidr slays. Moses protests the killing of an innocent soul. Again Khidr warns and reminds Moses. Now Moses offers his excuse: "If I question you again, part company with me." Then they enter a village where they are denied hospitality. Khidr finds a wall and raises it up. Moses protests Khidr's abandonment of his right to wages for his work.

Khidr responds that this marks the parting between himself and Moses, but that before departing he will explain the acts which Moses could not bear with patience. First, the ship belongs to poor fisherman. Khidr damaged it because an evil king was advancing from the rear and seizing boats for a war. As for the boy, his parents are true believers and God and Khidr were both concerned that the boy might corrupt them with his arrogance and unbelief. Thus they wished that he would be replaced by one better in purity and mercy. As for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys whose father had been virtuous. He had buried under it a treasure as their inheritance and God desired that they should become old enough and strong enough to retrieve their treasure, which is a mercy from their Lord. Khidr explains he committed none of these acts of his own accord and thus completes his explanation of what Moses did not have the patience to bear.

Obviously this narrative raises as many questions – if not more – than it answers. Where do Khidr and Moses go? What kind of being is Khidr and what is the nature of this event?

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<sup>31</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> chapter (Sura al-Kahf, the Chapter of the Cave) includes two stories received from Christian sources which were popular in the Near and Middle East: the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (18.9-27) and the

Khidr is a popular figure throughout and beyond the Islamic world. In Islamic lore, he is an immortal and eternally wandering prophet who saves people in danger and distress and imparts esoteric knowledge to saints, masters, and advanced students.

Testimonies, folktales and parables about his miraculous appearances circulate widely. Khidr and Elijah are the centerpiece of a Turkish folk fertility festival *Hidirellez*, currently celebrated in May 5 and 6<sup>th</sup> and previously on St. George's Feast Day, April 23<sup>rd</sup>. He is the figure from the Qur'an most readily accepted as an allegory for the spirit (*ruh*) or holy intellect (*'aql al-quds [nous]*). Khidr conveys unmediated knowledge (*'ilm ladduni*) through direct unveiling (*kashf [aletheia]*).

The German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe admired the significance of Khidr so much as to begin a book of his poetry with this verse praising him:

North and South and West are crumbling.  
Thrones are falling, kingdoms tumbling.  
Come flee away to purer East.  
There on patriarch's air to feast.  
There with love and drink and song,  
Khiser's spring shall make thee young.<sup>32</sup>

Here again the Qur'an, other Islamic sources, and as we shall continue to see, even traditions beyond the Islamic world, find in Khidr and other figures a model of the Universal Man which complements Father Bede's vision.

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Alexander Romance (18.83-96).

<sup>32</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Reineke Fox, West-Eastern Divan and Achilleid*, trans. By Alexander Rogers. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890, pp. 199-200). Goethe's *Divan* belongs to a genre of Islamic-Persian poetry. In this case, Goethe sought to experiment with the form as it had been perfected by the Persian poet Hafiz. (d. 1389).

### *Khidr, the Guide and Cook to Alexander the Great*

Islamic versions of the Alexander Romance also identify Khidr as the guide, cook, and servant of Alexander the Great. The verses of the Qur'an which follow the story of Moses and Khidr appear to be a summary of the Alexander Romance, a work which featured a figure named Andreas who became immortal when a fish slipped out of his hands and he drank the water at that place.<sup>33</sup> Folios of these Persian *Iskandarnama* often feature a miniature of Khidr sitting with Elijah at the fountain of life showing Khidr's fish swimming in the water of eternal life. Khidr's prominence in this literary genre extends his significance throughout both intellectual and popular spheres.

### *A Bridge Over Life-Giving Waters: Khidr, Elijah, and Saint George*

Muslims, Jews, and Christians of Turkey, Lebanon, and Palestine have for many centuries revered many sacred sites as equally shared by Khidr, Elijah, and Saint George. This created a popular sense that the three are one and the same immortal being. J.E. Hanauer and William Dalrymple relate that at Bayt Jala, beside Bethlehem there is a Church of St. George where Muslims, Jews, and Christians have worshipped side by side. Christians have held it to be St George's birthplace; Palestinian Jews considered it sacred to Elijah; and local Muslims designated it as a home of al-Khidr.<sup>34</sup> Alluding to a long-standing tradition of associating Khidr with the Gilgamesh epic's Utnapishtim from

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*. London: Penguin, 1991, p. 121. The Greek Alexander Romance was not a history, but rather a highly-popular collection of tales circulated in multiple cultures in the Ancient and Late-Ancient world. It had been translated into Latin by the fourth century A.D. and then during the Middle Ages was translated into fifteen languages. The Syriac version of the Alexander Romance was translated into Ethiopic, was transmitted by Nestorian missionaries to Central Asia. This was likely the version known to those to whom the Alexander narrative in the Qur'an is addressed. The Syrian version then became the basis for the Persian versions of Nizami (1140-1203) and Firdausi (941-1019). An English version Nizami appears in *Iskandarnamah*, tr. Minoo S. Southgate (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

whom Gilgamesh seeks immortality, Dalrymple makes an interesting case that perhaps Khidr is the oldest figure in literature. Khidr shares Utnapishtim's archetype: Utnapishtim resembles Khidr as he stands at the mouth of two rivers (*ina pi narati*) and in the resemblance of the meaning of his name as, "He who saw life.: or "He who came to possess everlasting life."

Khidr and Elijah also share an especially intimate knowledge of God: Khidr receives "knowledge from within God's presence (*'ilm ladunni* [18.65]); Elijah hears God's "small still voice" (I Kg. 19:12). And since the site of Elijah's intimate theophany is Mount Horeb where Moses received a more dramatic theophany, this association deepens our sense of affinity between Elijah and al-Khidr, the guide of Moses. Like Khidr, Elijah in the Jewish tradition in some ways surpasses Moses, especially as a prophet who continues to personally visit *rebbes* and *zaddiks* as well as pious and poor people in distress. By the ninth century a Jewish version of the story circulated featuring Elijah as the guide of Rabbi Jehoshua ben Levi (220-250 A.D.).<sup>35</sup>

The scriptural stories of both al-Khidr and Elijah each give us intimate portraits of master-disciple relationships scored with a number of illuminating parallels. In the portraits of Khidr with Moses and Elijah with Elisha, we see their discipleship as a journey leading up to the departure of the master. Elisha appears in the Hebrew Bible soon before he will witness the departure of his master Elijah (II. Kings 2). In both the

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<sup>34</sup> Augustinovich, El-Khader, (1972) lists dozens of such sites.

<sup>35</sup> Micha Joseph bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael: Selected Classical Jewish Folktales*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, p 109-111.

story of Moses and Khidr and Elisha and Elijah, the master and disciple stop together at three places, where the disciple commits an error, after which the mentor takes his leave.

### *The Avatar Khidr*

Some Hindus have claimed Khidr as an avatar of Vishnu, often specifically *Matsya* Avatar, the Fish Avatar. In this way they have also worshiped Khidr as a river God. Artists in the Punjab and Bengal have often painted Khidr riding on the back of a large fish. In Sindh, he was called Raja Khidar, the god of boatmen. Sindhis embarking on journeys on rivers and oceans and descending into wells offered lit candles on well heads and gifts of food to brahmins to merit Raja Khidar's favor.<sup>36</sup>

### *Carl Jung's Alchemical Khidr*

Carl Jung's interpretation of Khidr may add to our appreciation of Khidr as the Universal Man. Looking at the relationship of Moses and Khidr as an intra-psyche dynamic, Jung writes: "Moses accepts him as a higher consciousness and looks up to him for instruction."<sup>37</sup> Khidr was a figure of great interest to Carl Jung who described him as "the human personification of Allah."<sup>38</sup> Jung's full length essay on al-Khidr focuses on his role as a symbol of rebirth and transformation. In this essay Jung observes, "The appearance of Khidr seems to be mysteriously connected with the disappearance of the fish. It looks almost as if he himself had been the fish."<sup>39</sup> Jung interprets the fish and the water of life as alchemical symbols and goes on to describe Khidr's fish as "a figure

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<sup>36</sup> William Dalrymple, *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi* (London: Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 297-304)

<sup>37</sup> Jung, *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>38</sup> Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959, 2002, p. 17.

comparable to Hiranyagarba (the Golden Embryo from which creation emerged), Purusha, Atman and the mystic Buddha.”<sup>40</sup>

In any of these understandings of Khidr, we are presented with a figure who stands outside the conventional bounds of the Abrahamic covenant. Thus we might reasonably understand Khidr as a representative of a “cosmic covenant,” a point to which we will turn now.

### *Melchizedek and Khidr*

The renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholar-translator, Yusuf Ali, whose translation of the Qur’an is perhaps the most-widely read presented Khidr as a figure like Melchizedek.<sup>41</sup> Many works in the genre of “Tales of the Prophets.” *Qisas al-anbiya*, place al-Khidr as seven generations after Noah under the name Balya ibn Malikan (cf. Gen. 11)<sup>42</sup>. By way of comparison, Abraham follows Noah by ten generations. Such an association between al-Khidr and Melchizedek is important because Father Bede (and Swami Abhishiktananda/Henri LeSaux before him) understood their work as the fulfillment of a “cosmic covenant” described in Psalm 110:4: “You are a Priest after the order of Melchizedek.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed Bede appreciated the fact that the Mass card given to him at his

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<sup>39</sup> Carl Jung, “A Typical Set of Symbols Illustrating the Process of Transformation,” in *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2003, p. 88.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Jung, “A Typical Set of Symbols Illustrating the Process of Transformation,” in *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2003, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> Yusuf ‘Ali, translator and commentator, *The Holy Qur’an*. (Brentwood, MA: Amana, 1991, p. 727, fn. 2411)

<sup>42</sup> Noah, Sham, Arphaxad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, [Malkan], [Balya, i.e., al-Khidr] (Genesis 11.10-18; Chronicles 1:24-25)

<sup>43</sup> Shirley du Boulay. *Beyond the Darkness: a Biography of Bede Griffiths*. New York: Doubleday, 1998. Father Bede recognized the cosmic covenant as described in passages about Melchizedek (Gen. 14; Heb. 6; and Rom. 2:15 describing the “law written in our hearts.”)

ordination carried these words of the Psalmist confirming (prophetically) Father Bede's ultimate vocation.<sup>44</sup> Here is how Bede described Melchizedek as the model for the cosmic covenant:

...Melchizedek is surely the forerunner of those priests who continue to offer to God their daily oblations of rice, flower, lights and incense in the temples and sacred places of India.<sup>45</sup>

We will consider the Islamic conception of the cosmic covenant in a separate section below.

#### *Idris, the "Axial Prophet": Hermes and Enoch in Islam*

In addition to the Green One al-Khidr as the Universal Man, we turn to an association between Moses and the Egyptian figure of Hermes Trismegistus, famous for his Emerald, (i.e. green) Tablet.<sup>46</sup> By the 10<sup>th</sup> century Muslim exegetes had come to identify Hermes Trismegistus with the Torah's Hanokh (Enoch) and the immortal prophet named in the Qur'an as Idris (19.56; 21.85). In the earliest ascension narratives, the Prophet Muhammad greets Idris in the fourth or solar heaven. Enoch's solar affiliation is symbolized by his 365 years of life on earth. (Gen. 5:18-24)

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<sup>44</sup> Bede's appreciation of this proleptic gift is described in du Boulay (*op. cit.*) and was narrated to me from a personal experience by Sister Pascaline Coff of Osage Monastery in Sands Springs, Oklahoma in a conversation with me in 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in du Boulay, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> Associations between Moses and Hermes Trismegistus date back to at least the third-century B.C. from the Jewish historian Artapanus. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit Athanasius Kircher claimed to be transmitting an understanding from the Hermetic Tradition that identified the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus with Moses. (See Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*. London: Phoenix, 1999, p. 80)

In a canonical hadith, the Prophet Muhammad, commenting on the symbol of the pen in the first portion of revelation (96.4), explained that the pen was first used by Idris.<sup>47</sup> Such an attribution might have linked Idris to the Mesopotamian Nabu, the “god of scribes and scribe of gods,”<sup>48</sup> and more certainly to the Egyptian god of writing, Thoth,<sup>49</sup> whom the Greeks knew as Hermes Trismegistus. Aside from the irregular grammatical form of the name Idris in Arabic, it includes the root word for teaching and learning (*d-r-s*) and as such might be rendered as the “Teacher,” a title fitting for Hermes Trismegistus. In addition to the Prophet’s attribution of the invention of writing to Idris, other Muslim lore ascribes to him the invention of sewing.<sup>50</sup> Idris would only keep the stitches sewn with praise of God.

The Sufi Master and Theosophist Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240) among others designated Idris as the “prophet of the philosophers,” and the “father of the philosophers” (*Abu’l-Hukama*). Muslim alchemists and hermeticists revered him as the prophetic patron of alchemy and the Hermetic arts. Uniquely, Ibn ‘Arabi, identified Idris as Enoch, interpreted one of the verses about Idris as applying to Enoch (“And we raised him to an elevated state.” 19.57) and asserted that Elijah was Enoch returned.<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi revered Idris as the “pivot of the spheres,” and the axial prophet (*qutb*) sharing exclusively with Jesus, Elijah, and al-Khidr the status of immortals.<sup>52</sup> In Ibn ‘Arabi’s theosophy then we have four figures of the Archetype of the Universal Man each of whom complement the

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<sup>47</sup> *Sahih Bukhari* Book 60. 6.60 #480.

<sup>48</sup> Amin Maalouf, *The Gardens of Light*. London: Abacus, 1991, 1996.. p. 2

<sup>49</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*. 274C-75B; *Philebus* 18B.

<sup>50</sup> al-Kisa’i, *Qisas al-Anbiya*. Wheeler Thackston, *Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa’i*. p. 88

<sup>51</sup> Muhayuddin Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom* Ralph J. Austin, trans., (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 83-84.

Archetype of the Universal Man in the Prophet Muhammad: Elijah, Idris (Enoch), Khidr, and Jesus.

### *Rumi and the Spiritual Master in Sufism*

This concept of an “axial” prophet – and even more often an axial saint – brings us into another region of Islamic spirituality centered in what Father Bede identified as the Universal Man. A Prophetic Tradition revered by Sufis relates that “The Shaikh in his group is like the Prophet among his people.” In this sense the Spiritual Master in Sufism shares qualities of the Universal Man.<sup>53</sup> One of the best-known and most poignant examples of this phenomenon appears in the relationship between Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) and his teacher Shams-i Tabrizi (1180s-1247?) who catalyzed Rumi’s transformation from scholar-poet to impassioned poet-lover. In one explanation, Rumi’s son Sultan Valed allegorized their relationship to that between Khidr and Moses. Valed writes that once during a painful separation Rumi journeyed to Damascus and wrote on Sham’s door, “This is the station of the Beloved of Khidr.” In the spirit of the Universal Man, Shams wrote: “The meaning of the Book of God is not the text, it is the man who guides. He is the Book of God; he is its verses; he is scripture.”<sup>54</sup> Rumi once expressed the “entire account “ of his life in the words, “I was raw, I was cooked, I was burned [matured].” In Shams’ presence Rumi was “cooked;” in Shams’ absence he was “burned,” blazing with verses which have continued to captivate readers and seekers everywhere. As Rumi wrote of Shams, “The *qiblah* [focus of prayer] of my worship

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<sup>52</sup> Ralph W. Austin, trans. *Bezels of Wisdom* (Muhayiddin Ibn ‘Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*) New York: Paulist Press, pp. 83-84.

<sup>53</sup> Badi’uz-Zaman Furuzanfar’s *Ahadith-I Mathnawi* no. 224 cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, pp. 101, 237

became the face of my Beloved... You are my lover in the Kaaba and in the church...”<sup>55</sup>

To Rumi, Shams was the embodiment of the Universal Man.

*Extending the Cosmic Covenant: the Buddha -- Khidr, Idris-Hermes, Dhu'l-Kifl*

Some Muslims wishing to emphasize an Islamic cosmic covenant have claimed the Buddha as a Muslim Prophet. One popular approach to this claim involves the ambiguously identified Dhu'l-Kifl (21.85; 38.48), who is classically, if perhaps unconvincingly, identified as Ezekiel. Since the name of the village where Shakyamuni Buddha was born is Kapilvastu, the name Dhu'l-Kifl, “the One from Kifl” bears a slight phonetic resemblance: Kifl, Kapilvastu. The title, Dhu'l-Kifl, which translates as “One having a portion which would suffice”<sup>56</sup> seems unrelated to Ezekiel – or to the Buddha for that matter. But one divergent speculation about this name deserves our attention here: taking the literal meaning of Dhu'l-Kifl together with the fact that the name Ishmael also appears in both of the two verses in which Dhu'l-Kifl is mentioned, one scholar has proposed uniquely that Dhu'l-Kifl is Melchizedek, the Priest who received a portion from Abraham. This is of interest to us since Melchizedek was emblematic of Bede’s participation in the cosmic covenant, a topic we will explore in a section later.

Concerning the Buddha, a more substantial, if less popularly disseminated tradition links Idris to the Buddha. In the tenth century the polymath al-Biruni (973-1050) and the astrologer Abu Ma’ashar al-Balkhi and, later, the twelfth-century Persian illuminationist

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<sup>54</sup> Franklin D. Lewis. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*. Oxford: One World, 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Yasar Nuri Ozturk, *The Eye of the Heart*. Istanbul: Redhouse Press, 1988.

<sup>56</sup> Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali, *The Holy Qur’an*. Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha’at Islam, 1917, p. 640, n. 1649.

(*Ishraqiyya*) philosopher Suhrawardi (1154-1191) all identified Idris/Hermes/Enoch with the Buddha. Al-Biruni wrote that “in the Torah Idris is called Enoch while others say that Hermes is the same as Budhasaf [Buddha, or Bodhisattva].”<sup>57</sup>

Another candidate for an Islamic identity for the Buddha is al-Khidr. The fourteenth-century historian Shahrastani who, like al-Biruni, visited India, described the Buddha as being Khidr for three reasons: first, because the Buddha in his *sambhogakaya* (self-enjoyment) body could appear anytime and anywhere; second, the Buddha was undying; and third, the Buddha returned as many different Buddhas in his *nirmanakaya* (embodied) form,<sup>58</sup> a phenomena which also resembled that of Khidr, who appears at various times and places to different people.<sup>59</sup>

These correspondences indicate how deeply and far back in Islamic history the resources run for those Muslims who would experience God’s presence through the Archetype of the Universal Man.

#### *The Divine Feminine:*

Having considered some aspects of the Universal Man in Islam, we turn now to consider the Universal Woman. Toward the end of his life Father Bede, especially after his stroke, came to appreciate even more deeply the importance of the divine feminine, the Mother.

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<sup>57</sup> Biruni, *Athar*, p. 206; trans. Sachau, *Al-Biruni’s India*. p. 188. Quoted in John Walbridge, *Wisdom of the Mystic East*. Albany: S.U.N.Y., 2001, 72.

<sup>58</sup> Bede discusses the three bodies of the Buddha (*trikaya*) in *A New Vision of Reality*. pp. 140-141.

<sup>59</sup> John Walbridge, *Wisdom of the Mystic East*. Albany: S.U.N.Y., 2001, pp. 70-73.

## Mary

The Qur'an asserts God "made her [Mary] and her son a sign for all peoples." (21.91; 23.50). The paragon of spiritual women, she comes closest to the potential status of prophet. She is described as a "Woman of Truth" (*Siddiqa*)<sup>60</sup> and "Obedient" (*Qanut*)<sup>61</sup> Mary is the only woman for whom a chapter is named in the Qur'an. Her chapter "Sura Maryam" presents Mary as if she belonged in the same class as the Prophets presented alongside her. In the Qur'an's chapter named for her ancestral household, 'Imran (Sura Al 'Imran, the People of 'Imran, chapter three), the angels announce that God "chose," "purified," and "preferred" Mary above all the women of creation. (3.42) These words evoke the title of the Prophet Muhammad, *Mustafa*, a word meaning "chosen," and "preferred" and derived from the root word for "pure." Since the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, she also carries in this specific sense the closest possible ranking of any woman in Islam to a prophet.

Many commentators give the meaning of Mary's name as "the one who worships." Framing many prayer niches (*mihrab*) in mosques is inscribed this verse: "Every time Zakariyya [Mary's uncle] went to her in the *mihrab* he found her provided with sustenance." (3.37) The postures and movements of Islamic ritual prayer (*salat*) are more fully described in Mary's narrative (3.39-43) than in any other Qur'anic except that of Abraham and Ishmael (2.125-128): Zakariya stood in the *mihrab* (3.39); Mary fulfilled God's command to prostrate and bow (3.43). Mary's title *Qanut* (the Obedient) connotes

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<sup>60</sup> Quran 5.75

<sup>61</sup> Qur'an 66.12

enduring long periods in prayer. Mary is implicitly compared with Muhammad in sharing with him the distinction of reaching the “farthest place” of prayer (19.22; cf. 17.1).

In the Qur’an Jesus especially honors Mary and even specifies that he never denigrated his mother (19.32; cf. Matthew 12:48). The Qur’an always refers to Jesus as “Jesus, the son of Mary” (‘Isa ibn Maryam), a title which emphasizes three meanings: (1) Mary is the mother of Jesus, rather than the “Mother of God” (*Theotokos*); (2) Jesus, like Adam, had no father; and (3) Jesus embodied *Mary’s* special characteristics of piety, purity, and prayerfulness. Through the Angel Gabriel, God “cast” (4.171) or “breathed” (21.91; 66.12) His Spirit into Mary. Since Mary was at this time fulfilling a vow of a fast of silence, such a fast is called *Sawm Maryam*, or the “Fast of Mary.” It was in *silence* that Mary gave birth to Jesus the “*Word* from God,” (3.45) and it was in *seclusion* that she gave birth to a son who so intimately knows and *relates* to creation (3.49-50).

The Prophet Muhammad named Mary among the holiest women in Islam along with his first wife Khadijah; Pharaoh’s wife Asiya, who saved Moses; and Moses mother, Umm Musa. To this list Shi’a Muslims give the highest place to one more: the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima.

#### *Fatima az-Zahra*

A second model of the divine feminine is the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima (605-632), honored with the title *khayr nisa’ al-‘alamin* (the best of women in all the worlds). Her epithet *az-Zahra*, the Illuminated, also indicates her exalted status. To

Muslims among the Shi'a she is the co-inheritor, with her husband 'Ali (c. 600-661) of the Prophet's complete and authentic transmission. Like Mary, Fatima is regarded as both a mother and a virgin (*batul*) and sometimes honored with the title, "Maryam al-Kubra." (Mary the Greater). Fatima is especially famous for the ascription, *Umm Abiha* which describes her mystical status as the "mother of her own father." In an Islamic symbol shared widely, the *Ahl-i Bait* Fatima is the one woman among the five: Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan, Husayn, and Fatima. Fatima holds spiritual importance on her own terms, as well as by virtue of being the mother of the two grandsons of the prophet and Shi'a martyrs, Hasan and Husayn. Her role as the matron among the *Ahl al-Bait* (or *Ahl al-Kisa*, people of the [Prophet's] cloak) relates in part to the name of the ubiquitous apotropaic symbol known as the "Hand of Fatima."

Some of the more esoteric Shi'a traditions ascribe to Fatima the role of *creatrix* sometimes supported by the word-play of *fatira* (creator) and her name *fatima*. In some accounts of the Prophet's ascension, after the Prophet passes beyond the seventh heaven and enters paradise, he greets Fatima. Such narrative positioning suggests that in some ways her spiritual significance surpasses even the major prophets.

Thus in Shi'a interpretation of the story of Adam in the Qur'an, what the angels are commanded to bow down to in Adam (20.117) is the light of Fatima.<sup>62</sup> In addition to this verse, exegetes have identified the meaning of the "Night of the Descent [of the Qur'an]"

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<sup>62</sup> Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Fatima," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Accessed June 2005 at [www.iranica.com](http://www.iranica.com)

with Fatima as well as the cave in which the Seven Sleepers (*Ahl al-Kahf* of Qur'an 18.9-27) slept and the rock from which water gushed forth before Moses.

The continued practice of revering Fatima also symbolizes the legitimacy of another instance of the Islamic Universal Man: the lineage of Shi'a Imams, the leaders and guides whose authority in part stems from their being the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad. And it is through Fatima exclusively that the Prophet has generations of heirs and progeny. The symbol of Fatima brings us full circle to the Universal Man, since for Shi'a of all schools, the identity of the "Imam of the Age," i.e., the living Universal Man depends on his genealogical descent from the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

The esoterically-minded Isma'ili founders of North Africa's Fatimiyyun (Fatimid) Dynasty (909-1171) chose the name of Fatima to emphasize the legitimacy of their authority. The spirituality surrounding the figure of Fatima indicates a strong symbol of the divine feminine in the Muslim tradition.

#### *The Cosmic Covenant: a Core Islamic Doctrine*

Beyond potential cosmic covenant figures such as Khidr or Melchizedek, the idea of the cosmic covenant is explicitly developed in the Qur'an. First the Qur'an expresses the idea clearly that every community has received a prophet who taught the oneness of God and mandated justice. (5.48; 13.38; 14.4; 16.36; 16.63; 21.25; 35.24; 40.78) The Qur'an emphasizes the consistency among all these Prophets' original teachings (2.213; 2. 136) Second, the concepts of People of the Book and Protected Peoples involve a very real

sense of an historically-practiced cosmic covenant. This notion of salvation has specifically included Muslims, Jews, Christians, and the Sabaens. The term Sabaens is a title which has been attached at different times to Zoroastrians, Hermeticists and Hindus.<sup>63</sup> (2.62; 2.111-112; 3.64; 3.113-114; 3.199; 5.69) Taken together these two concepts, both of which date from the origins of Islam in Qur'an and Sunna, describe a very clear vision of a cosmic covenant based on universal and progressive revelation.

Some Muslims have even taken these precedents as including figures such as Buddha, Krishna, and Confucius. As we have explained above, Shahrastani argued that the Green Man al-Khidr is the Buddha. As we have mentioned, al-Biruni, Abu Ma'shar, and Yayha al-Suhrawardi proposed an identification for the Buddha as Idris based on his previously-described identification with Hirmis (Hermes/Mercury), and in turn the Sanskrit name of the planet Mercury as Budhi. More recently some Muslims have argued that the ambiguous figure of the Prophet Dhu'l-Kifl is the Buddha by suggesting that this title means, "The One from Kapilvastu." These interpretations exemplify the range of Muslim discursive practices extended from an ethos rooted in both Qur'an and Prophetic sunna of universal and continuous prophecy.

### *Conclusion.*

Islamic texts, traditions, and practices offer three aspects which contribute to Father Bede's interreligious approach: figures of the Universal Man; signs of the Cosmic Covenant; and the Divine Feminine.

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<sup>63</sup> The title Sabaens may have originally referred to the Christians of Iraq who revered John the Baptist more highly than Jesus. See John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*. Albany: S.U.N.Y., 2001, p.

In his work Father Bede Griffiths identified the category of the Universal Man as a variable which serves as a meeting point among cosmic and revealed religions and a starting point for deeper appreciation and comparison. As Father Bede alluded, Islam offers a rich vision of the Universal Man. What I have attempted here is to detail a number of Islamic frames of reference for conceptions of a Universal Man. The first frame involves the Prophet Muhammad in the *sunna*, in the Nur Muhammad, and in salient symbols in the Prophet's biography and popular devotion, especially in the recitation of his 202 names. This frame is complemented by the Shi'a doctrines of 'Ali as the inner essence of Muhammad's light. The second frame of reference points to four "pre-Islamic" prophets, Adam, Khidr, Idris, and Jesus. The third frame of reference features Rumi's representation of the role of the Sufi Master as focal point of devotion to God. And finally the divine feminine figures, Mary and Fatima disclose an integral Islamic Spirituality of the sacred feminine.

The Universal Man motif which Father Bede used as a way of relating World Religions appears vividly in the Prophet Muhammad, Adam, and Khidr. It also appears in milder forms in Islamic conceptions of Jesus and Mary. Finally, mystical understandings of all of these figures contribute to recognizing that among his own circle, the Sufi Master is like a Prophet among his people.<sup>64</sup>

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31-34. Bruce Lawrence, *Shahrastani on Indian Religions*. The Hague: Mouton, 1980.

<sup>64</sup> Badi'uz-Zaman Furuzanfar's *Ahadith-I Mathnawi* no. 224 cited in Schimmel (1975: 101, 237)

The divine feminine archetype is especially symbolized in Mary and Fatima. Maryam, the Virgin Mary and mother of Jesus, represents piety, purity, and prayerfulness. Fatima represents among the Shi'a the Universal Woman and the mother of the legitimate heirs to the Prophet's spiritual transmission, who are each in turn the living embodiment of the Universal Man .

Two figures presented as embodying the Cosmic Covenant are the Prophets Idris and al-Khidr. Both link Islamic and extra-Islamic traditions in a number of ways. Idris has been variously identified with Hermes Trismegistus, Enoch, and the Buddha. The Islamic Green Man, al-Khidr, whether or not linked with Melchizedek, as Yusuf 'Ali has suggested, represents, both in theory, and in practice, a symbol of the "cosmic covenant" to which Father Bede devoted his life.

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