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chapter 1 - symbolic language & cosmology**Chapter 1 - Baha'i, Sufi and Gnostic Shi'a Spiritual Cosmology**

By Michael McCarron

SYMBOLIC COSMOLOGY

Neo-platonic philosophy has had a lasting and deep affect on Islamic thought, philosophy and mystical traditions. I will be examining the similarities between the philosophy of Plotinus and that of the Islamic Isma'ili movement, Sadrian, Shaykhi, and Sufi movements, and the teachings of the 19th Century Iranian messianic movement of 'Ali-Muhammad Shirazi (al-Bab) and Mirza Husayn-'Ali Nur (Baha'u'llah) (hereafter referred to collectively as the Baha'i movement) in detail. For my study I shall be looking at Plotinus' Eannead No. V and comparing it to the Hierocosmos of the Isma'ili and teachings on the Divine Presence of Iranian thought. Specifically examining the concepts of the Oneness of Divinity, Cosmogenesis, Symbolic Hierocosmos and the Five Divine Presences. My initial investigation shall be in regards to the Qur'anic or Orthodox understanding of Creation in it's many modes and a philosophical interpretation of this Creation archetype. Afterwards shall follow a sketch of the philosophy of the Isma'ili and Islamic mystical traditions including the writings of Husayn-'Ali Nuri and Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad-i Shiraz. I shall be dealing with their particular understanding of the Islamic creation archetype and how it is applied in their Cosmology, addressing in particular the role of hierachic symbolic (hierocosmic) cosmologies in their interpretations.

The Symbolic World ('Alam al-Mithal) and the Symbolic Language (lughat al-mithal)

Symbolism described and popularized in the west by Jung has for a very long time held captive our imaginations concerning the unseen and it's representation in artistic expression-- poetry, painting, architecture, etc. As is the case in most sciences and disciplines in the west the art of symbol, whether of the great painters of the 19th century or the poets of the Metaphysical Movement, has it's origin in the east. So it is in the study of Symbol that one encounters the voice of God in the immanent and present experiential basis in Sufism. It is interesting that the symbol understood in context in Iran of Sufi origin can be misunderstood in the west thus, it is important to have an idea of what the original context of a Sufi symbol carries in the context of the present page of it's environment or field of relationships. To quote the work of Lewisohn on this subject:

"(the symbolist) Those who approach Sufi poetry as a statement of archetypal logopoeia, that is to say, as a communication derived from the imaginal [or symbolic]

world ('alam-i mithal) or the realm of archetypal meanings ('alam-i ma'na), understanding it as an expression of precise symbolic meanings working systematically at a supraconscious associative level. Although scholars such as Toshihiko Izutsu, S.H. Nasr, and Henry Corbin have examined Persian philosophical doctrines from this point of view, no one has examined Persian metaphysical poetry from this standpoint, even though this is the mode of classical literary criticism[1] employed by the Sufis themselves. Considering the importance of symbolic structure and meaning as the main criterion of assessing a poem's ultimate meaning among the Sufis, it seems worthwhile to investigate the underlying philosophical assumptions of this poetic symbolism, the study of which has been neglected by Iranologists East and West alike." (Lewisohn, SH, pg. 154)

As the title of this study suggests we are concerned with a symbolic representation of the cosmos or intellectual world of the Islamic world, specifically, the eastern Islamic world of Iran dominated by Shi'ism. In this world the symbol becomes a powerful expression to convey information in an allegorical and metaphorical context. Thus, it is important to be cognizant of the ideas behind symbolic expression in the cultural context of Iranian mysticism. There are several literary devices used in Sufism the important element in literary works of Sufism is the concept of allegorical similitude (mathal). This is initially derived from the writings within the Qur'an where it is recorded that God disdains not to speak in allegories (Surah al-Baqara). In Sufism, the literary devices are:

1. Ramz-- symbol, it is said to be the manifestation of divine secrets at the level of the inner consciousness. The inward meaning of outward utterance.
2. Ima-- an enigmatic utterance w/o explanation, a gesturing of the inner conscious toward the light.
3. Kenaya-- metaphor, refers to a name for a thing by a name by which it is not usually known so that the visionary may perceive it.
4. Ishara-- Allusion, defined by Rudbari as "Our knowledge is 'allusion', and if it were ever stated directly, it could not be comprehended". Allusion is that which can not be expressed directly due to the subtlety to it's meaning." [tr. Nurbakhsh, "Ishara" in Nurbakhsh Lexicon]

For most of the authors examined here the following excerpts from the Sufi tradition holds true on metaphor (kinaya), allusion (ishara) and symbol (ramz):

Metaphor (kinaya) and allusion (ishara) are similar to one another. Metaphor is clearer than allusion inasmuch as it brings news of Divinity to the seekers (taliban) of the unseen (ghaib) through the tongue of expansion. At times, metaphor refers to a name for a thing (musama) by a name (ism) by which it is not usually known (mu'aruf) so that the visionary may perceive (shahid), while the one who is absent is none the wiser. The gnostic experiences (shahud 'arif) metaphor through vision at the station

(maqam) of mysteries (asrar) and expansion (anbasit). Metaphor is employed in the Qur'an as in the verse... (Lahiji [tr. Nurbakhsh, 'Lexicon'], MA pg. 164)

Symbol (ramz) is said to be the manifestation (zahara) of divine secrets (asrar ilahi) at the level (tawr) of the inner consciousness (sirr) through the devotions ('ibadat) of the nafs, as well as allusion (isharat) of the intellect ('aql). ([tr. Nurbakhsh, 'Lexicon'], TT, pg. 201)

Symbol (ramz) represents the inward meaning (ma'ni butun) of outward utterance (kalam zahir) which brings realization (zafar) only to Divinity's adherents (ahl). The true nature (haqa'iqat) of symbol (ramz) comprises the truths (haqqa) of the unseen (ghayb) in the nuances (daqqa) of knowledge ('ilm), articulated (talifaz) enigmatically (huruf mu'kusi) by the tongue (lisan) of the inner consciousness (sirr). (Ruzbehan Baqli [tr. Nurbakhsh, 'Lexicon'], SS, pg. 561)

Allegory has been a large stumbling block to others outside the Sufi tradition in understanding the symbolic utterance of the Sufis. Perhaps the most important element of Sufi utterance is that of Shathit, the ecstatic utterance relating the Sufis perception of reality and identification within the Sufi as being a part of the object of his experiential contemplation thus unifying object with subject in an ecstatic moment. This is the basis of the famous utterance by the al-Hallaj: "I am the Truth (Haqq)". It has been arguably related that this is not an utterance with a literal truth but is an utterance full of symbolic meaning relating the Sufis love and intimacy with the object of his contemplation. It is also seen in Mirza Husayn-'Ali Nuri's writing that "I am He and He is I" (Anna Huwa wa Huwa anna). One of the greatest Sufi and scholars of Islam al-Ghazzali writes of the use of symbolic metaphor in Sufism as:

"We mean by metaphor or analogue (mathal) to render meaning (ma'na) into the external form (surah). So if one sees its inner meaning, he finds it true. But if he sees only its external form, he finds it deceiving...The prophets can talk to the people only by means of the metaphors (amthal), since it is necessary to talk to the people in accordance with their intellect. Their intellect is on the sleeper's level. So it is necessary to make use of metaphors to explain to the sleeper...their understanding does not go beyond the apparent meaning, because of their ignorance of the interpretation, called 'metaphorical interpretation' (ta'wil), as the decipherment symbols in dream is called 'the interpretation of dream' (ta'bir)" (GHZ, al-Ghazzali, Ihya, IV, 23-24)

Mystical Discourse through the Symbol:

In Sufism the symbolic is expressed through a varied ways of expression. No longer do we have the common literal meaning attached to things. No longer is a light merely a collection of photonic discharges, but is an expression of divine source or enlightenment, a non-physical non-literal expression attached to a common literal object but having an internal vocabulary known to the adept which reveals itself in a code which can exalt the adept to a higher plane understanding the code attached to the literal object which is a symbol of the esoteric. Nicholson writes of the Sufi symbolic style:

"...the Sufis adopt the symbolic style because there is no other way of interpreting mystical experience. So little does knowledge of the infinite revealed in ecstatic vision need an artificial disguise that it cannot be communicated at all except through types and emblems drawn from the sensible world, which, imperfect as they are, may suggest and shadow forth a deeper meaning than appears on the surface." (NCH)

Some common symbols in Sufism according to Dr. Nurbakhsh, leader of the Ni`matu`llahi Tariqat, are:

1. Kaa'ba: Symbolizes the station of Union according to Iraqi. It is a spiritual place not a physical place for Rumi and Hafiz. For Bakhrazi "the outer form of the divine focal point of anything is called the Kaa'ba of that thing, as the earthly Kaa'ba is the house of God." There is also the designation of an outer Kaa'ba and an inner Kaa'ba.

2. Qibla: symbolizes the focus of attention of the heart. "As soon as I made your face the qibla of my regard, I turned your way into another Kaa'ba."

3. Ma'ad (the Place of Return): According to Tahanawi "In conventional usage, the place of return is an allusion to the hereafter. In sufi terminology, it is said to represent the universal names of God, just as, the place of origin (mabda') represents the universal existential Names. The wayfarer descends from the universal existential Names, which are his place of origin, to the universal divine names, which are his place of return."

4. Resurrection (Qiyama): Yevgeny Bertels relates "Resurrection symbolizes the turning of the wayfarers heart from the forms of illusory multiplicity to visions of the theophanies of Majesty at the different levels of manifestation of the divine beauty. At each level, of manifestation which is directed inwards, a resurrection takes place and the phenomenal realm is constantly full of these resurrections."

5. Paradise (Jannat): Paradise symbolizes the station of theophanies, whether of effects, Acts, Attributes or the Essence.

6. Light (al-Nur): Sufis consider light to be symbolic of existence, while darkness is considered indicative of non-existence.

7. Glory (Baha'): according to Ruzbihan, "Whenever God wishes to adopt someone as his loving intimate, He shows that person the glory of His Beauty, so that the person falls in love with everything beautiful. The Prophet said, 'The red rose is part of God's glory. Whoever wishes to contemplate God's glory, let him behold the rose.' The gnostic said: 'The vision of God's glory occurs at the site of intimacy and expansion.'"

We can see from these excerpts of Sufi symbols that common objects within Islamic vocabulary no longer have their orthodox outer (zahiri) understanding but take on a inner (batini) mystical representation as elements of the path. In the Kaa'ba we have the symbolic representation of intimacy. And in the Qiyama we no longer have a day of judgment, but rather, a level of presence and experience of spiritual insight. It shall be seen later that some other popular symbols are those of the Jabarut and the Malakut. Each according a symbolic relevance to it's realm of meaning.

The symbolic expression of the universe or cosmos in these traditions relates to a special system of inspiration not based on empirical data. Thus we will find a different way of speaking about the universe. The question of symbolic expression is taken up in the Qur'an as well. The question of many verses is whether they are apparent (mubayna) or allegorical (mithali). In many of the following interpretations the universe is seen in an allegorical light (mathal). It should be kept in mind while reading these portrayals of cosmic elements that what is intended is a description in allegorical language of realities experienced in mystical revelation (kashf).

The Cosmological World

The cosmos, an ancient word (kosmos) known in Greece as 'order' for others cosmos has a mystical dimension and among dimensions it has more than the typically thought of three that we apparently live in. It is a realm full of more than physical contents but also has spiritual and angelical and mystical aspects as well. This is the type of cosmos we shall be concerning ourselves with, the symbolic. Important along with the notion of cosmos is that of cosmogony.

"The word cosmogony is derived from the combination of two Greek terms, kosmos and genesis. Kosmos refers to the order of the universe and/or the universe as an order. Genesis means the coming into being or the process or substantial change in the process, a birth. Cosmogony thus has to do with myths, stories, or theories regarding the birth or creation of the universe as an order or the description of the original order of the universe."(Eliade ed., ER IV, Cosmology)

The myth of the creation of the cosmos is set apart from the empirical collection of data regarding the primal beginnings of this young universe used by science. It should be remembered that the genesis of science was in myth also, as philosophy grew out of the mythic stories of the world or cosmos around us. The symbolic representations of the myth should be remembered to be symbols of an ancient past recorded in the language of our primordial minds.

"In the cosmogenic myth the symbols give expression to the religious imagination of the creation of the world. As the prototypical story of founding and creation, the cosmogenic myth provides a model that is recapitulated in the creation and founding of all other human modes of existence (ER IV, "Cosmology")

Of these mythic representations there are six types: creation from nothing; from chaos; from a cosmic egg; from world parents; through a process of emergence; and through the agency of an earth diver. In the following discussion on the role of the Divine Realm we shall be mostly concerned with the first type; although, interestingly, there are parts of all six mythic types of cosmogony in the symbolic representation of creation of the Shi'a and in the Baha'i cosmogony there is a creation from the Word of God, which is a something although entirely different from any something we can imagine. Which draws us into a necessary discussion of cosmology.

"Cosmology is the term for the study of cosmic views in general and also for the specific view or collection of images concerning the universe held in a religion or cultural tradition. The two fold meaning of the term is reminiscent of the double meaning of mythology, which is at the same time the study of myths and the dominant or representative assemblage of myths in a given tradition. However, the double usage of the term cosmology is still wider in one respect: quite explicitly, it relates also to inquiries in the natural sciences."(Eliade ed., ER IV, Cosmology)

In one sense the images we have of the universe is our cosmology like signs of an invisible language they form a sort of formula for the theory we hold of how the universe is and how it came to be 'that is that it is,' it's quiddity. This image is a sort of world view or Weltanschauung, as Kant defined it-- an image of the world, it can also be an ideology. So what we are concerned with is an image, or theory, of the cosmos how it was created and how it exists and how, indeed, it will ever, philosophically, get back to its origin. For our study we shall be mainly concerned with the type of cosmology that is usually harbingered by the "Divine Male Fashioner" or Demiurge[2] (in our study it shall be seen that the fashioner of the world is Third One or the Adamic Logos, in Greek mythos Zeus).

This typology is common amongst the monotheistic religions, ie. Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, along with the sky as the seat of transcendence. This heavenly transcendence is set against the fixation of the earth, another didactic relationship is that between good and evil. In our case the good of heavenly or idealic transcendental state and the evil state of matter in earthly existence. A common characteristic in the cosmological myths of the differing religious traditions is that of "the renewal of the world" celebrated in the Solar New Year (Naw Ruz), which was common in the Mesopotamian Empire. Some common characteristics found by Douglas A. Knight in his study of the middle east are deserving of attention:

1. "the cosmos is viewed as a closed, three-storied whole, all parts of which are under the control of divinity, either polytheistically or monotheistically conceived."
2. "The cosmos and humanity did not come into existence by chance or without intention, for some creator Divinity is directly responsible for its existence."
3. "There is virtually no sense of creatio ex nihilo. Something exists prior to the creation act--whether it be the elements of chaos in Babylon, or the waters of Nun from which the Egyptian creator-Divinity Atum emerged, or 'the face of tehom' in Genesis 1, or the dry land in Genesis 2."

4. "...the creation act is not limited to bringing the physical world into existence. Rather, above all it establishes the proper order of things in this world."

5. " the underlying theological pattern of the various creation accounts is the sovereignty of the Gods, and usually also the identification of the creator or 'high God' with the one who ultimately maintains and judges the world." (Knight, COHT, pg. 138-140)

We may also think of the teachings of concerning many births and rebirths in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism; they fit in traditions that speak of world cycles (cf. also, Isma'ili, Baha'i, Druze, 'Irfani etc.), succession of worlds, and multiple worlds. Finally, the intimate relationship of the macrocosm and the microcosm, which is widely attested, is a striking formal link between various views of the cosmos.(cf. ER IV, pg. 104, Cosmology)

Another common cosmological view is that in the field of cosmic law. "The term cosmic law designates the principle or set of principles believed to represent the most generalized nature of the order of things in the universe." (ER IV, Cosmic Law) For our concerns this principle is that of the Logos or the theophany of the divine in the physical realm, the manifestation of the spiritual in the material. "Examples of the concept of cosmic law include the following: 'rta' and, later, 'dharma' in Indian tradition[3]; 'dharma' (Pali, 'dhamma') in Buddhism[4]; 'tao' or 't'ien-ming' in Confucianism and Taoism[5]; 'maat' in ancient Egyptian religion; 'moira', 'dike', 'logos', or 'heimarmene' in the Greco-Roman tradition[6]; haqq, qismah, shari'ah, fitrah, or khalq in Islam[7]" (Eliade ed., ER IV, Cosmic Law) and according to Francis Cornford the Persian or Zoroastrian equivalent is 'asha'. And in the Judaic tradition this is 'hokma' or wisdom and in the Christian tradition this is the Logos of the Gospel of John (cf. F. Cornford, From Religion to Philosophy). And in the Monotheistic traditions of the Middle East we have the notion of God as the Author of such principles which govern the order of the physical cosmos. What is the nature and configuration of the governing principles this is the topic of the Divine. Which brings us to the Qur'anic, Plotinian, Isma'ili, 'Irfani and Baha'i intellectual and meta-physical worlds.

NOTES:

1 The classical literary criticism developed by al-Jurjani is what is referenced here. See his Ta'rifat for an elaboration on Sufi terminology.

2 "Demiurge" is defined in the Encyclopedia of Religion as the Greek term 'demiourgos' (together with its variants) is derived from the words 'demos' (people) and 'ergon' (work) and thus has the basic meaning of 'one who works for the people,' an artisan or a professional. This etymological basis subsequently developed in two directions. On the one hand, 'demiourgos' came to refer to a magistrate; on the other hand, it became a name of the original creator of the world, in the specific sense of an ordainer or arranger, someone who as an artist fashions the world out of pre-existing matter in accord with a preexisting model. It is this second meaning that is of primary concern here. The verb for making is demiourgeo.

3 "Hindus developed a concept of cosmic law during the earliest stage of their religious history and the idea has served as the central basis for the development of the entire tradition up to the present day. Two terms have usually been used to refer to cosmic law, namely 'rta' and 'dharma'. In the Vedic literature 'rta' designates cosmic order, the law governing the natural world, or simply the course of things. Derivative uses include such related meanings as established order or divine law; reality or truth; what is fitting, proper, or right; or, by extension, righteousness. 'Dharma', the post-Vedic term that supplanted 'rta', is derived from 'dha' (to establish, create, or support). Hence the term refers to what is established and firm, with regard to both the natural order and the socio-moral order (i.e. law, ordinance, customary observances, duty, right, justice, or virtue). When interpreted as referring to the general principle of human behaviour, the term is a virtual equivalent of 'religion'. ("Cosmic Law" in ER)

4 "...dharma is nothing more or less than reality reflected in the Buddha Dharma. As a philosophical or metaphysical term, dharma is used in singular form to refer to ultimate, eternal, and unconditioned reality and in the plural form to designate the plethora of subtle factors or conditions that constitute finite things and states of being. Hence there is nothing within the universe or beyond that is not embraced by this term. The word includes all aspects of reality: eternal and temporal, infinite and finite, conditioned and unconditioned, good and evil. As the appellation for the whole of reality, dharma is manifested in the dharmas, or fundamental constituents of the universe." ("Cosmic Law" in ER)

5 "...Confucius employed 'tao' in two ways, quite similar to the use of 'dharmas' by the Buddhists. As a single and singular universal law, the Tao governs the production and transformation of all things. Its generational activities are articulated succinctly in the aphorism 'One yin and one yang, this is the Tao'. In its pluralistic and multifaceted manifestation, the Tao is a myriad of 'tao' principles that determine the definitive essences of various classes of objects—that is, the wetness of wet things, the finitude of finite things, the sovereignty of sovereigns, and so forth. The concept is somewhat similar in function to Plato's use of these ideas and various other Western thinkers' notions of universals." ("Cosmic Law" in ER)

6 "Confusion reigned in ancient Greece as to the precise identity of the root cause of all events of whatever nature. Among the numerous candidates for this office were fate (moira), destiny (heimarmene), natural law (dike), a cosmic source of all existing entities (physis), chance or universal randomness (tyche), the decrees of heaven or the Divinities, universal reason (logos), the wandering stars, the four elements in varying combinations, or, finally, the decisions of the individual which set events moving in a given direction with ineluctable determination." ("Cosmic Law" in ER) Hesiod, the early Greek mythographer, laid the foundation for the use of 'dike' and 'heimarmene' and it was from early myth that the later philosophical concepts developed.

7 Cyril Glasse defines 'fitrah' as (lit. primordial nature). The primordial norm; a harmony between man, creation and Divinity, such as existed between Divinity and Adam in the Garden. Islam sees itself as the restoration of the religion of Abraham, which itself is a re-consecration and a prolongation of the religion of Adam as primordial man after his fall, and reconciliation with Divinity. The concept of 'fitrah', the primordial norm, is at once the measure of truth in our actions and being, and at the same time the quality of harmony between ourselves and cosmos. It corresponds exactly to the Hindu notion of universal 'dharma', or to the Chinese 'Tao'.

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