

Venetian Academy of Indian Studies Series, no. 4

# Guru

*The Spiritual Master*

in Eastern and Western Traditions  
— Authority and Charisma —



Edited by  
Antonio Rigopoulos

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VAIS



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— Authority and Charisma —

गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णुः गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।  
गुरुः साक्षात् परब्रह्म तस्मै श्री गुरवे नमः ॥

*gururbrahmā gururviṣṇuḥ gururdevo maheśvaraḥ ।  
guruḥ sāksāt parabrahma tasmai śrī gurave namaḥ ॥*

The *Guru* himself is Brahmā [the Creator], Viṣṇu [the Preserver] and Śiva [the Destructor]. He is the embodiment of the Supreme Spirit. I bow down to that *Guru* ॥

*Edited by*  
Antonio Rigopoulos



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PREFACE

This volume comprises most of the papers which were presented at the National Conference "Guru. The Spiritual Master in Eastern and Western Traditions: Authority and Charisma", held in Venice, 18-20 April 2002, organized by the Venetian Academy of Indian Studies (VAIS) in collaboration with the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Venice, Ca' Foscari, and the Cultural Center Palazzo Cavagnis. These twenty-seven essays are grouped according to the different cultural and religious traditions involved, moving from West to East and circularly coming back to the West. In a crossing of boundaries which sharpens the comparative exchange, we move through the following civilizations and worldviews: Ancient Greece, Judaism, Christianity, Islām, Hinduism, Indian Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, Native Americans. Two final articles on the *guru* as mediator of healing and on the figure and role of the master between East and West bring the volume to a close.

Though the majority of papers are devoted to the religions and philosophies of India and the manifold expressions of its *guru* institute — the main focus of the Conference — all other traditions are equally represented, each scholar aiming at rigorously placing in con-

It's both an honour and a pleasure to remember the patronage of the Indian Embassy of Rome, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Regione Veneto, the Comune and Provincia of Venice, and UNESCO.

Finally, I wish to thank my mother, Sally Rigopoulos, for her precious work of proofreading the entire volume.

Antonio Rigopoulos

#### NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In view of the difficulties and even impossibility of using a single system of transliteration for all articles in the book, individual authors' decisions as to the method of transliteration have been respected. They were only asked to maintain consistency.

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## SOCRATES AND THE MAIEUTIC ENTERPRISE

MICHELE BOTTA

**A**s long as consciousness maintains the distinction between master and pupil, between the truth of the first and the imperfection of the latter, no form of knowledge is possible. In the learning of truth there are neither masters nor pupils, neither experts nor beginners. Truth is learning *what is*, moment after moment, free from what was in the past and what can still exercise its influence in the present.

(J. Krishnamurti, *Questions and Answers*, 1983)

We ourselves must be our own masters and our own disciples. There is no other guide, no other saviour, no other master. We must transform ourselves by ourselves, and thus we must learn to watch ourselves and know ourselves. It's a fascinating discovery which brings pure joy.

(J. Krishnamurti, *Talks with A. S.*, 1977)

### 1. Masters and Disciples

We might ask ourselves whether the provocation present in these statements should be taken seriously or not, since Krishnamurti (1895-1986) taught for many years and with great public resonance:

ENCOUNTERS WITH KHIḌR:  
SAINT-IMMORTAL, PROTECTOR FROM THE WATERS,  
AND GUIDE OF THE ELECTED ONES BEYOND THE  
CONFLUENCE OF THE TWO OCEANS

THOMAS DÄHNHARDT

A mong the many extraordinary characters we encounter in the vast universe of the Islāmic world, the enigmatic figure of Khiḏr (as he is known in Turkish and Persian sources as well as in the indigenous traditions of the Indian subcontinent) or al-Khaḏir (in the Arab world), both terms meaning “the green one”, holds a pivotal position due to his multiple functions as protector of mankind at large and spiritual guide of the intellectual elite. His importance in the traditional perspective is reflected on one side in the manifold forms of popular devotion that live on in numerous cults, festivals, and sanctuaries dedicated to Khiḏr all over the Near East and Middle East and, on the other, in his frequent appearance in the esoteric traditions perpetuated by the great Sufi authorities within the context of the orthodox *turuq* (pl. of *ṭarīqa*).

Perhaps the element most commonly associated with Khiḏr, who is known for his extreme mutability and transient features, is water in its manifold aspects. On a popular level, we find a myriad of local and regional cults and customs, which bear witness to this mythical figure’s association with the sea, rivers, lakes, and fluvial estuaries,

as well as with islands, rocks, reefs, and atolls emerging from the waters of the ocean. We know, for instance, that it was a long-established custom among the inhabitants of Baghdad struck with illness to dip small oil-lamps fixed on date-palm wood into the current of the river Tigris at sunset, accompanied by a prayer to al-Khaḍir that he may free them from their disease. In the Indian sub-continent, Khwāja Khiḍr is venerated as a fluvial deity and benign spirit by both Hindus and Muslims, acting also as a custodian of wells, springs, and other places bearing a relation with water. The fishermen of coastal Bengal pay homage to him before embarking on their daily journeys into the vast open space of the Indian Ocean, many of their boats bearing the name of the revered saint and protector. In the great fluvial plains of Northern India, the ancient custom still survives of honouring Khiḍr on the day of the "festival of the raft" (*berā*) celebrated in the course of the month of Bhādon, which falls in the midst of the Indian monsoons. On such occasion, people leave thousands of small rafts and other kinds of craft illuminated by oil lamps to the current of the river Ganges, so as to ensure a safe passage to the other shore. Inshā Allāh Khān 'Inshā' (d. 1233/1818), the celebrated poet at the court of the Nawabs of Lucknow, mentions in his verses the annual boat-festival held along the banks of the river Gumti, in honour of Khwāja Khiḍr.

The main sanctuary (*dargāh*) dedicated to the 'green man' in mainland India is found on a small island along the river Indus, in the proximity of the old fortress of Bhakkar, identified with the ancient settlement of Sogdi which is said to have been established by Alexander the Great during his campaigns in the Sind region of what is now southern Pakistan. Here, both Hindus and Muslims used to pay their respects to the saintly patron of the waters, before the compound was almost entirely washed away by the floods of the mighty river in the early 1990's. Elsewhere, on the southern island of Sri Lanka, associated by the Arabs since time immemorial with paradise, we find an important sacred complex dedicated to al-Khiḍr, mentioned by the famous North African traveller Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century. Situated on the slopes of Mount Sarandib (nowadays popularly known as "Adam's Peak"), where according to a widely

diffused myth Adam first set his foot on earth the day of his departure from the celestial garden of Eden, the sanctuary spreads around a large rock formation associated with the appearance of Khiḍr to a shaikh of the Qadiri order during a nocturnal vision (*ru'ya*).

Among other sacred places in the Islāmic world which are linked to Khiḍr's cult, it is worth mentioning the town of Samandağ located at the mouth of the river Orontes on the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean sea, at the border between Anatolia and Syria. Ritual sites and places built to the memory of the mysterious 'green man' can be found in several locations in this tiny town. The most important among these is situated on the local beach, consisting of a recently rebuilt sanctuary which incorporates a rock formation bearing a clear phallic resemblance. According to local tradition, the site corresponds to the location of Moses' encounter with al-Khaḍir, a belief that draws the pious crowds of pilgrims to perform a reverent triple circumambulation in anti-clockwise direction (*tawāf*) around this sacred place.

But what do we really know about the identity of this mysterious figure venerated by many Muslims as the saint of waters, protector of fishermen, patron of sailors and seafarers, and supreme guardian of confluences?

According to the canons of orthodox esoteric science, al-Khaḍir is one of the ancient saint-prophets mentioned in the Holy Qur'ān, along with Idris (Enoch), Ilyās (Elias), and 'Isā (Jesus), who are considered "immortal" (*khālid*) and "long-lived" (*mu'ammār*). Free in their essential function from the limitative conditions of time and space that characterise God's creatures, including humans, the mission entrusted to these special individuals by Allāh - who in the cosmological doctrines represent the four cornerstones, *awtād*,<sup>1</sup> of the interior edifice of the Islāmic *Dm* - extends over the entire human

<sup>1</sup> More precisely, in the context of ancient Arabia's predominantly nomadic population, this term refers to the wooden 'tent pegs' used to fix the tent to the ground at its four corners.

cycle up until the day of resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāmat*).<sup>2</sup> Their essentially spiritual nature does not, however, prevent them from playing a role in the world's destiny also in historical terms, in a way similar to the first and last in the chain of prophets, Adam and Muḥammad. Thus, they assume now and then the shape of human beings so as to directly intervene at the appropriate time in the dominion of mankind (*insāniyat*). As a matter of fact, numerous traditions mention the name of al-Khiḍr in a genealogical line of descent derived from (or even identifying the 'green man' with) the prophet Noah, the lord of the ark, who crossed the waters of the universal deluge with the blessings of the Almighty. These traditions confer on Khiḍr both a historical and human dimension, emphasizing his tangible, concrete function albeit somewhat remote in time.

Among the various legends concerning al-Khiḍr that have been passed down over many generations in the regions of the *dār al-Islām* from ancient times, one of the best known narrates the story of how he attained immortality after quenching his thirst at the source of eternal life (in Arabic: '*ain al-khuld* or '*ain al-hayawān*'; in Persian: *chashma-yi āb-i ḥayāt*).<sup>3</sup> The variants of this story in Arabic and

<sup>2</sup> Although not explicitly named in the Holy Text, al-Khaḍir appears frequently in association with Ilyās or Elias (*Koran* XXXVII, 123-132), the prophet of the desert mentioned in the Old Testament (*Book of Kings* I, 17-22; II, 1-2) whose twofold nature, heavenly and earthly, is attested to by his ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire or a horse of fire. Here, one should note the complementary symbolism of water and fire represented respectively by Khiḍr and Elias, especially with regard to posthumous destiny.

<sup>3</sup> According to another popular version of the story, Khiḍr attained immortality following a promise made by Allāh to concede this special boon to those among His creatures who would bury the corpse of His first servant Adam; see ABŪ HĀTIM AL-SIJISTĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-mu'ammarrīn* (I. GOLDZIEHER, ed., 1982). Here, we detect obvious similarities with the ancient Syrian-Aramaic myth of Melchizedek, an incarnation of celestial priesthood mentioned in the book of *Genesis* (XIV, 18-20). The story goes that Noah ordered his son Shem to follow Melchizedek on the way leading to the centre of the world, Mount Golgotha, to bury Adam's corpse. Once the task had been successfully accomplished, God raised Melchizedek to the rank of high priest and perpetual guardian of that sacred place. We can see how these versions in a way complement each other,

Persian sources<sup>4</sup> show evident similarities with the ancient Greek, Hebrew, and Syrian versions of the epic cycle which developed around the ancient world sovereign, Alexander (Ar./Pers.: Iskandar). These tales inform us that Khiḍr (or, alternatively, in pre-Islāmic versions of the story, the cook of Alexander) reached the fountain of eternal life at the vanguard of an expedition organised by King Dhū'l-Qarnain. This 'two-horned' sovereign is mentioned in the same chapter of the Holy Qur'ān which tells the story of the mysterious Khiḍr, Dhū'l-Qarnain being identified by many Muslims with Alexander the Great himself! Apparently, Khiḍr recognised the fountain's miraculous properties after witnessing a pickled fish turning back to life through contact with it.

Although Khiḍr is nowhere explicitly mentioned with his name in the Holy Qur'ān, he can nevertheless be identified on the basis of the numerous hints made by prophet Muḥammad (*aḥādīth*, pl. of *ḥadīth*) to the mysterious figure mentioned in the *Chapter of the Cavern* (*Sūrat al-kahf*, *Koran* XVIII, 60-82). Among other important events, this chapter tells the episode of Khiḍr who appears as the authoritative guide of the prophet Moses. Moses entrusts himself to him so as to receive from Khiḍr the knowledge of crossing the "straight path" (*rushd*).<sup>5</sup> In a way, this tale constitutes the prototype of the innumer-

making explicit the real meaning of the fountain of immortality by using the symbolism of the centre of the world, from where it is possible to have access to the superior worlds located on the celestial plane.

<sup>4</sup> See IBN BĀBOYE, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa tamām al-n'ima*, Teheran, 1958; 'ABD AL-MALIK AT-TA'ĀLIBĪ, *Ghurār akhbār mulūk al-Fars*, Paris, 1963; ILYĀS b. YŪSUF NIZĀMĪ, *Sikandar-nāma*, *Qiṣṣat al-Iskandar*. For a detailed study of many of these legends of both the pre-Islāmic and Islāmic period, see I. FRIEDLANDER, *Die Chadirlegende und der Alexanderroman: eine sagesgeschichtliche und literaturhistorische Untersuchung*, Berlin-Leipzig, 1923.

<sup>5</sup> According to a tradition of the Prophet reported by al-Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, the recital on a Friday of this particular *sūra* – which also narrates the story of the Sleepers in the cave (XVIII, 1-31) and of the enigmatic sovereign Dhū'l-Qarnain including details about his building a dam to withhold the hordes of Yā'jūj and Mā'jūj (Gog and Magog; XVIII, 82-98) – bears the capacity of pro-

able encounters with Khidr which are documented in the course of the centuries both in the exoteric and esoteric tradition. But in order to get a better understanding of the story told in the Holy Qur'ān, we must put it in context by turning our attention to the teachings imparted by the prophet of Islām outside of the Qur'ānic revelation. In other words, we must turn to the *aḥādīth*, some of which comment upon the tale told in the *Chapter of the Cavern* thus providing a frame to the story. In his collection of prophetic traditions (*al-Ṣaḥīḥ*), al-Bukhārī (d. 356/870) reports a *ḥadīth* according to which Muḥammad narrated that one day, when Moses was preaching to the people of Israel, a man appeared to him and asked: "Do thou know anybody whose knowledge by far excels the degree of your own [knowledge]?" To which Moses, overconfident about his own wisdom, replied firmly: "Indeed not!" God then revealed Himself to His prophet and said to him: "Well then, there is a servant of Ours, called Khaḍīr, who possesses a knowledge yet unknown to you!" And when Moses enquired with His Lord about the possibility of meeting this unknown holder of a superior wisdom, Allāh gave him a fish in token of His guidance accompanied by the warning: "Follow the way [indicated by this fish]! But proceed carefully and stop at the place where thou will have lost [it] from your sight! From there, retrace your steps immediately [till you will reach the rock] ... there thou shall meet him [= al-Khaḍīr]!"<sup>6</sup>

protecting the faithful (*mu'minīn*) from the evil influences of the activities of al-Dajjāl, the anti-Christ, who will appear at the time of final dissolution at the end of the present human cycle.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Bukhārī: *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-'ilm*, *bāb* 16, 19, 44; *kitāb al-anbiyā'*, *bāb* 27; *kitāb tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. See also: Muslim: *Fadhā'il*, 17-74; al-Tirmidhī: *bāb* 1. It should be noted that other traditions expressly mention that the fountain of immortality gushes out from a rock identified with the "confluence of the two oceans" (*majma' al-baḥrain*) which, in turn, is said to be the same rock where Moses and his companion stopped to rest on their journey to meet the mysterious wise man mentioned by Allāh. Moreover, the story goes that after coming in contact with a few drops of water gushing out from that fountain, the fish given to Moses as his guide disappears into the ocean: see *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *kitāb al-tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, *bāb fa-lammā jāwazī qāla li-fatūhu*.

Based upon these premises, the episode of Moses and Khaḍīr continues with the explicit intention of Moses to undertake a long and difficult journey, in the company of his faithful servant, with the aim of reaching the "confluence of the two oceans" (*majma' al-baḥrain*) in order to attain the highest degree of wisdom. In this undertaking, the two wayfarers are guided by the fish, agile agent of the divine will, which leads Moses and his companion along the [initiatory] path until they eventually reach a rock - demarcating the place where the two oceans meet - where their fish guide suddenly disappears, diving into the deep waters of the ocean (*saraban*). After a moment of initial distraction following their night rest - during which the two travellers direct their steps beyond that place - they come back to the rock in search of the fish and ultimately meet "one of the humble servants of Allāh" (*'abdan min 'ibādīnā*), to whom "God had conceded His mercy" (*raḥmata min 'indīnā*) and to whom He had taught a "science sprung from His intimate presence" (*wa 'allamnāhu min ladunnā 'ilman*). Looking back to the story of pre-Islāmic origins, there appears a striking similarity between the journey covered by Khidr himself and the one followed by Moses as revealed by the prophet Muḥammad in the Holy Book, as if the leader into the promised land was to follow in the footsteps of his archetypal predecessor.

In short, the Qur'ānic episode ends as follows: Moses requests Khidr to accept him as his follower so as to receive from him the instructions regarding the "secret science" (*'ilm al-ladunnī*). Moses solemnly promises to remain patient and obedient at the side of his mysterious guide. Khidr, though well aware of Moses' ultimate inability to stick to his pledge due to his limited comprehension and insight, nonetheless accepts to lead him along the journey through the stations of the divine mysteries. Moses must never question the actions and deeds of his guide. However, after three enigmatic and apparently nonsensical and cruel acts performed by Khidr - the hidden sense of which baffles Moses, inducing him to openly criticise his companion - their common journey comes to an end: Moses having failed to fulfil his initial promise, Khidr bids him farewell not

without revealing the hidden sense of his actions to the remorseful prophet (verses 78-82).

From the descriptions given in verse 65 of the Qur'ānic chapter, it becomes clear that the main characteristics that distinguish Khidr in his guiding role are those of being endowed with two special qualities conceded to him in virtue of his intimate relationship with Allāh, that is, mercy (*al-rahma*) and knowledge, which he received from the "intimate presence of Allāh" (*'ilm al-ladunnī*). And it is precisely because of this latter aspect related to divine knowledge that the figure of Khidr, beginning with the episode told in the *Chapter of the Cave*, will assume fundamental importance in the esoteric tradition of *taṣawwuf* or Sufism, since knowledge constitutes the prime modality for the realization of the divine mysteries pertaining to the invisible world (*'ālam al-ghaib*). On the other hand, it is important to underline that, from an Islāmic point of view, this aspect is intimately linked with and, in a sense, issues from divine mercy (*rahmat Ilāhī*), for it is through His mercy that the Most Exalted Allāh offers mankind - the crown among His creatures (*taj al-makhlūqāt*) - the possibility to take part in His Omniscience (*al-'Alīm*). For this purpose, He sends His envoys in the shape of messengers (*rusul*), prophets (*anbiyā'*), and intimate friends (*awliyā'*) into whom He infuses His own mercy. Therefore, in virtue of their intrinsic quality these exalted ones act as living examples of the magnitude and almightiness of Allāh for all world creatures.

We learn from the Qur'ānic exegete al-Qushairī (d. 465/1074) that to all creatures who are especially close (*qurb*) to their Lord i.e. saints and intimate friends, Allāh concedes to take part in His intimate science, for the sake of all creatures. According to the explanatory comments made by al-Qushairī, this science can be obtained through direct divine inspiration (*ilhām*), without the need of any effort or activity on the part of the chosen individual. Nor can this sort of wisdom be contested to those who truly possess it, since the

knowledge resulting from this inspiration is of an extremely subtle nature and, therefore, essentially beyond the need for any proof.<sup>7</sup>

Another famous exegete, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), commenting upon verse 18:65, adds the following: "The expression 'from my intimate presence' (*min ladunnī*) indicates that the knowledge possessed by Khidr has been transmitted to him directly by Allāh. It cannot possibly be learned or acknowledged if not through intuitive revelation (*mukāshafa*) - hence the venerated shaikhs of *taṣawwuf* call it the 'ladunic science' (*'ilm al-ladunnī*)."<sup>8</sup>

And the renowned shaikh and scholar Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 506/1111) points out in his treatise *Al-risāla al-ladunniya* - which, as the title suggests, is entirely devoted to the divinely revealed science - that the knowledge possessed by humans can be of two kinds: one can be acquired through the means of instruction by another fellow human being, the other one must be imparted through direct divine instruction. In its turn, this latter one can be further distinguished into two different types of science or, rather, transmitted knowledge: *wahy*, that is, knowledge acquired through infallible divine revelation, an exclusive prerogative of Allāh's prophets and messengers and no longer possible since the prophets' epoch has been brought to conclusion by Muḥammad's mission (*khatimat al-nubuwwa*); and *ilhām*, that is, celestial intuition, a special characteristic of the "intimate friends of Allāh" (*awliyā' Allāh*), which refers to that "hidden science" (*al-'ilm al-ghaibī*) of which Khidr is the natural custodian. This secret science is understood to flow from its source in the realm of the Transcendent directly into the heart of the *walī*, without any need of intermediaries (*bi lā wāsiṭa*) or of sheikhs belonging to initiatory lineages (*silsila*).

From these descriptions the intimate relationship subsisting between Khidr and the concept of *ilhām* appears evident. It is in this role of transmitter of a science of an extremely sublime nature that Khidr transcends the attributes of his historical and human condition

<sup>7</sup> *Laṭā'if al-ishārat*, Cairo, Basyuni, pp. 78-84.  
<sup>8</sup> *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr* XXI:149.

(on which subject some exegetes among the *ahl al-ẓāhir*, such as the historian al-Ṭabarī, have so extensively commented upon), thus assuming the dimension of a super-human, universal archetype, of an essentially spiritual nature. Khidr presents himself as the mediator between the divine realm and the human world, in a way similar to the angels. In special moments in the history of mankind, through Khidr's intervention, one or more individuals said to have been chosen by Providence to receive a certain kind of instruction will become the receptacles of Its mercy. These persons are believed to receive a most secret knowledge, pertaining to the intimate nature of the Most Sublime Principle. Thus, he who receives initiation and instruction from Khidr will himself be introduced into the transcendent order (*tasbīḥa*) which lies beyond time and space, allowing him to dominate over the immanent realm (*tanzīḥa*).

In this function as the spiritual agent of divinity, Khidr can play a double role: he appears as a 'spontaneous guide' conferring the type of initiation known as *'uwaysī* (which takes its name from the Yemenite saint 'Uways al-Qaranī, d. 18/639, reputedly an intimate companion of the prophet Muḥammad and an ardent follower of his message without ever meeting him physically), which is characterised by a sudden irruption, similar to a 'lightning out of blue sky', into the life of an individual. Such individual is thought to be chosen by divine Providence so as to snatch him from his ordinary condition and offer him a special teaching: this spiritual doctrine is always thought to be adapted depending on the different periods in the history of mankind. This type of spiritual rapture is known as *jadhba* and those saints who benefit from it are known as *majdhūb*.<sup>9</sup>

Alternatively and by far the most commonly encountered case in Sufi literature, Khidr appears in the role of the "most sublime teacher" or "master of masters" (*shaikh al-shuyūkh*). Those to whom he appears in an extraordinary vision (*ru'ya*) must regard his com-

<sup>9</sup> This being the true, superior meaning of the term. More frequently, it is used in common parlance to designate those people apparently afflicted with mental disorders, the so-called 'mad-men'.

pany as a great privilege, sign of outstanding qualification and spiritual rank which, as al-Ghazālī explains, remains an exclusive prerogative of "those who possess the heart" (*arbāb al-qalb*). The sublime degree of esoteric realization attained to by these most sincere ones, leads them to "feel with purity of heart" and to "see with the eyes of the heart". It is said that Khidr blows the subtle knowledge of Allāh's intimate science into the "ears of the heart" of these extraordinary individuals, once they have accomplished the degree of spiritual perfection corresponding to what is known in Sufi circles as the stage of "major sainthood" (*wilāyat al-kubrā*). In these cases, Khidr acts as a substitute of the regular, outer shaikh and takes up the role of interior master, waiting for the initiate at the 'isthmus' of the heart to conduct him along the journey through the inner spaces of the Self (*sair al-anfus*).

The Sufi authorities who have largely contributed to the teachings of the esoteric science (*'ilm al-bāḥīn*) perpetuated until today within the *khānaqahs* all over the Muslim world, provide us with several examples of encounters with the 'green man', during which he appears to have poured streams of divine wisdom into the calyx of men's purified hearts. There are many examples of authoritative shaikhs in both orthodox and heterodox Sufi orders who claim to have received precise instructions regarding the metaphysical doctrine, the science of cosmology, and the modalities and methods of the initiatory path from Khidr himself. Here, it shall be sufficient to mention the elaborate metaphysical teachings of Shaikh al-Akbar Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), synthesized in the doctrine known as *waḥdat al-wujūd* ("oneness of existence"), which from its formulation between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE continues to represent the basis of spiritual education in the entire Muslim world. The great master affirms that this doctrine is the outcome of his repeated meetings with the inner guide al-Khaḍīr. Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), the renowned leader of the *Naqshbandiyya* order in India, largely owes the title of "Renovator of the Second Millennium of Islām" (*mujaddid al-f-i thānī*) because of his vision culminating in the doctrine known as *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, based on the wisdom which he acquired thanks to his 'meetings' with Khidr. Yet another celebrated

example is that of the Persian shaikh and poet Maulānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), who recognised in his spiritual guide Shams al-Tabrīzī the “Khiḍr of his time” (*Khiḍr-i zamān*), thereby developing the concept of the lover and the beloved of Khiḍr whose heart is inflamed by the heat of his passionate desire to meet him (*‘ishq*): an image which has inspired generations of “searchers for Truth” (*murīdīn bar Haqq*) in an effort to describe their spiritual longings, their wish to passionately ‘dive’ themselves into the sea of Khiḍr.

It is said of Khwāja ‘Abd al-Khālīq al-Gujdawānī (d. 575/1220), one of the chief authorities of the *ṭarīqa-yi khwājagān* later known as *Naqshbandiyya*, that he received the instructions regarding the silent *dhikr* (*dhikr-i khafī*) - a technique peculiar to this *ṭarīqa* - as well as the eight principles upon which the order’s spiritual path rests, from Khiḍr himself who taught him to recite the *dhikr* with the tongue of his heart, while remaining immersed under water for ever longer periods of time.<sup>10</sup>

But let us return to the symbolism of water, which so frequently accompanies the presence of our enigmatic guide, be it in the shape of the “fountain of immortality” (*chashma-i āb-i ḥayāt*) which appears in the tales relative to the Alexandrine cycle, be it in the image of the “confluence of the two oceans” (*majma’ al-baḥrain*) as in the episode told in the *Sūrat al-kahf*. Besides its generative power (is it not water that turns a barren desert into a green field?), water seems to bear an intimate relation with the symbolism of the polar axis representing the ascending and descending planes of universal existence. According to a tradition of the prophet transmitted through the authority of Ka’b al-Aḥbar, Khiḍr is said to have once expressed the desire to be immersed into the waters of the ocean of existence tied to a rope, so as to explore the secrets of its deepest abysses. After a journey which lasted several days and nights, he eventually met an angel who informed him of the futility of his undertaking. However, on the insistence of Khiḍr, the angel agreed to teach him the secrets

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, ‘Abd al-Raḥman Jāmī’s *Nafaḥāt al-uns* and ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusain al-Kashifī’s *Rashahāt-i ‘ain al-ḥayāt*.

which lie hidden in the ocean’s depth. Khiḍr thus learned that the entire world rests upon the back of a giant fish (once again!), the ‘breath’ of which causes regular water tides. Similarly, the seven insular continents of the world (*ṭabaqāt al-sab’a*) are said to rest on a single rock which, in turn, leans on the palm of the hand of an angel who firmly stands upon that very fish.<sup>11</sup> According to another tradition going back to Ka’b al-Aḥbar, Khiḍr is said to have appeared behind a radiating pulpit situated between the inferior and superior oceans, from where he instructed all creatures of the sea gathered around him.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the episode of the above-mentioned encounter between Moses and Khiḍr, there are numerous other passages in the Holy Book that quite explicitly mention these two oceans. Verse 12 of chapter 35 (the *Sūra of the Originator of Creation*) tells us that “the two seas are not alike; one is palatable, sweet, and pleasant to drink, the other one is salty and bitter to the tongue.” Another verse (XXV:53, the *Sūra of the Criterion*) specifies: “It is He Who has let free the two bodies of flowing water: one palatable and sweet, and the other salty and bitter; yet He has made a barrier between them, a partition that is not to be passed.”

This barrier mentioned in the Qur’ānic verse, called *barzakh*, constitutes a fundamental tenet of Islāmic cosmology. It marks the boundary between the two oceans of cosmic existence, representing from an esoteric point of view a barrier between two dominions of different nature (sweet and salty). At the same time, however, the

<sup>11</sup> From Ibn Abī Dunyā’s *al-‘Uqubāt*, pp. 205 ff. It should be noticed that among the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent one commonly encounters the image of Khiḍr riding on the crest of a fish. The fish symbolism was adopted by the Shi’a rulers of Awadh in their dynastic insignia: it can still be seen on numerous buildings in the cities of Faizabad and Lucknow, as well as on the coins that were in circulation during their reign (1722-1856). Hence, the possible association with the *matsya-avatāra* of the Hindū god Viṣṇu, who pulls the ark with the seeds of this world through the great ocean of universal deluge onto the shores of a new cycle of existence.

<sup>12</sup> From Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī: *Zahr* 29.

barrier is also understood as a juncture or meeting point and hence, in a way, a sort of passage - narrow though it may be - from one domain to the other. In Sufi terminology, these two oceans together represents the macrocosm ('*ālam al-kabīr*'), which is divided into two parts, an inferior and a superior one. The inferior part corresponds to the "world of creation" ('*ālam al-khalq*'), pertaining to the formal dominion in which live all creatures inhabiting the world as we know it. The superior part, referred to as the "world of order" ('*ālam al-amr*'), includes all the informal potentialities of the spiritual dominion: herein, we find the "world of spirits" ('*ālam al-arwāḥ*) and the "world of celestial archetypes" ('*ālam al-mithāl*'), known only to Allāh the Most Exalted One and to a select few of His intimate friends. This latter dominion corresponds to the celestial waters, of a sweet and agreeable quality from which all future generations will be born. For this reason, it is also known as the "radiant world" ('*ālam al-nūr*'). It stands in stark contrast to the former dominion, characterised by the sterility of its salty waters populated by beings who are imprisoned in the cage of their bodily sheaths which can either be of a gross nature, as that of common creatures, or of a subtle nature as that of angels.

The point of contact which links and, at the same time, separates these two universal dominions consists of that very *barzakh* that certainly appears insurmountable to the ignorant ones whose uncultivated soul is dominated by lower, egotistic instincts. However, it is accessible to those who have progressed significantly in the purification of their hearts, to the extent of turning them into an immaculate mirror capable of reflecting the radiance of the celestial abode. It is believed that once the initiate has reached this stage of the esoteric path (*sulūk*) corresponding to the full realization of "major sainthood" (*wilāyat al-kubrā*), the external teacher (*shaikh* or *murshid*) is substituted by the interior master, the luminous *pīr* of supra-human nature to be identified with Khidr. He is the guide of the elected ones among the initiates, he conducts them through the heavenly abodes. These abodes are like a chain or series of islands in the celestial sea of the worlds to come. To use an image which is common among the authorities of the *Naqshbandiyya*, and which reflects a microcosmic

perspective, this is a journey through the intimate essence of the spiritual seeds contained in the subtle centres (*laḡā'if*, pl. of *laḡīfa*) sown by divine Providence into the sacred abode of the human heart (*maqām-i sīna*).

To conclude this brief presentation concerning some aspects of the multi-faceted, fascinating figure of al-Khidr, I would like to quote a vision of this mysterious master-guide as described in the renowned work by 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 832/1428), titled *Al-insān al-kāmil* ("The Perfect Man"). Herein, Khidr himself informs us about his function. According to the author, this passage - which is part of an elaborate commentary on the cosmological theories exposed by the *Shaikh al-Akbar* Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240 CE) in his Meccan revelations (*Fuūḡāt al-Makkiya*) - is itself the outcome of an encounter with al-Khidr, proving the role played by this extraordinary character. In the description given by al-Jīlī, Khidr appears as the ruler of a marvellous region called Yūh, situated somewhere in the farthest north of the world. At its centre there is a city described as being whiter than milk, where the air is sweeter than musk, the alleys of which are covered with a dust whiter than flour and above which there extends a firmament that glows in a shade of emerald green. This is the residence of the "hidden men" (*rijāl al-ghaib*), among whom Khidr bears the highest rank. Questioned by the wandering spirit of an intimate friend of Allāh concerning his real nature, Khidr agrees to unveil the secrets of his identity:

I am the sublime reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-'āliya*) and the subtlety that descends [from the heights of the heavens to the earth], I am the intimate mystery of the *wujūdī* man, I am the fountainhead of all esoteric wisdom, I am the path of the interior realities and the abyss of the dominion of the subtle, I am the shaikh qualified by the nature of the divine (*lāḥūṭī*), I am the guardian of the world of mankind (*ḥafīḍ al-'ālam al-nasūṭī*). I can assume every possible shape in the interior spaces of human beings, I can appear in every place at every time, I can change my appearance so as to appear in every possible shape. My dominion is the "world of the interior realities" (*al-bāḥīn*), marvellous and mysterious, my abode is the mountain Qāf ... I am the radiant full moon, I am the supreme guardian of the confluence of

the two oceans, I am he who plunges himself into the sea of omnipresence, I am He who draws from the fountain of all fountains, I am the guide of the fish in the sea of divine presence. I am the goal of those who have chosen to follow the path of inner research, I am the dot of the first and the last ... only a perfect man can discern my features and only the unified spirit (*al-rūḥ al-wāsil*) is capable of reaching me, to him alone I will concede access to my abode ... since he alone is the possessor of the knowledge of the Almighty Allāh.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Al-insān al-kāmil* II, 42-46.

## THE GURU AND DEATH<sup>1</sup>

GIAN GIUSEPPE FILIPPI

It is very unusual for a disciple, a *śiṣya*, to have a definite awareness regarding the function and role of the *guru*. In fact, the first impulse which leads a young human being to a spiritual master is the desire for a new, secret knowledge, reserved to an elite. The background of this quest, apart from any sincere aspiration for deeper knowledge, is generally an egotistical drive, led by pride in one's own mental and intellectual capacities. Thus, we read:

<sup>1</sup> Initiation, *dīkṣā*, either in the *śrauta* or in yogic traditions, is always understood as a radical and irreversible transformation of the inner essence of the disciple. In some texts, it has been declared as a third birth for the human being. The *upanayana*, on the contrary, defined in all Hindū texts as a second birth, marks the entrance of the child into his own caste. A confusion between these two rites has sometimes been generated within circles of historians of religions, with odd consequences. Indeed, in ancient times the *dīkṣā* was celebrated immediately after the *upanayana*, mostly in the families of *śrauta brāhmaṇa*-s, and this may have determined the above-mentioned misunderstanding. On these issues, see R. B. PANDEY, *Hindu Samskaras*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1976, pp. 111-133; G. G. FILIPPI, *Mṛtyu: The Concept of Death in Indian Traditions*, New Delhi, DK Printworld, 1996, pp. 70-76.