

The Perfect Human in Modern Iranian Shī‘ism: Murtaḍá Muṭahharī’s ‘Irfān-Oriented Conception of the Ideal Human Being

Fitzroy Morrissey

DPhil (PhD) student, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford

Introduction – ‘irfān in 20th century Iran

The importance of ‘*irfān*’ for certain key members of the clerical establishment of 20th century Iran, among them Āyatullāh Khumaynī (d. 1989) himself, has been well established in recent decades.¹ Various translations as “Islamic theosophy”,² “gnosis”,³ “a kind of mystical philosophy”,⁴ speculative mysticism”,⁵ and “knowledge of the true world”,⁶ ‘*irfān*’, which does not appear to have been used

¹See e.g. Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 135-144; A. Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy,” *Middle East Journal*, 46/4 (1992), 631-653; Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 31-47.
²G. Böwering, “‘ERFĀN (1),” *Encyclopaedia*

Iranica (Online Edition, 1998, updated 2012), www.iranicaonline.org/articles/erfan-1 (accessed 9th May 2016).

³Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited,” 632.

⁴Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 31.

⁵Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Disputation to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 250.

⁶Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, 136.

Fitzroy Morrissey, “The Perfect Human in Modern Iranian Shī‘ism: Murtaḍá Muṭahharī’s ‘irfān-oriented Conception of the Ideal Human Being,” *Iran Namag*, Volume 2, Number 1 (Spring 2017), XXX-XLVIII.

Fitzroy Morrissey <fitzroy.morrissey@wadh.ox.ac.uk> is a DPhil (PhD) student at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford. He is interested in the history of ideas in the Islamic world (medieval and modern), Sufism, and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

as a technical term until modern times,⁷ is the term generally used by modern Shī'ī thinkers to denote theoretical Ṣūfism, particularly that of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) and his school, or the “transcendent wisdom” (*al-ḥikmah al-muta'āliyah*) of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), who produced a synthesis of the Neoplatonised Aristotelian philosophy (*falsafah*) of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), the “Illuminationist philosophy” (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and the Ṣūfī metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabī.⁸ *'Irfān* can thus be identified with the “Ṣūfī-philosophical amalgam”, to use Shahab Ahmed's term, which emerged as perhaps the dominant trend within Islamic thought during Marshall Hodgson's Middle Period (c. 950-1500).⁹ While this synthesis of mysticism and philosophy reached its pinnacle in Iran in the so-called “school of Shīrāz” – that is, among the Safavid-era thinkers Mīr Dāmād (d. 1630), his student Mullā Ṣadrā, and the latter's students 'Abd al-Razzāq Lāhijī (d. 1661) and Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1680) – it enjoyed a revival in the later Qājār period, beginning with the work of Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī (d. 1872),¹⁰ and continuing into the 20th century among a group of clerics at the *ḥawzahs* of Qum. It was one of these clerics, Muḥammad 'Alī Shāhābādī (d. 1950), who taught *'irfān* to Khumaynī,¹¹ who in turn began to teach *'irfān* at Qum in the 1940s, first in public at the *ḥawzahs*, and then in private at his home.¹² Despite the opposition of some clerics, therefore, *'irfān* undoubtedly informed the worldview of many of the intellectual leaders of the 1979 Revolution. Chief among those clerics who studied with Khumaynī, were influenced by his *'irfānī* outlook, and supported him in his political activities against the Shāh was Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (d. 1979), whose thought is the subject of this essay. Specifically, I intend to look at how Muṭahharī developed one of the key concepts in *'irfānī* thought, namely, the theory of “the Perfect Human” (Ar. *al-insān al-kāmil*, Per. *insān-i kāmil*), through a study of his work of that title,¹³ a collection of lectures given during Ramadan in the year 1974.¹⁴

Murtaḍā Muṭahharī: Life, Works and Thought

Muṭahharī was born in 1920 in the provincial town of Farimān in Khurāsān. His father was a noted scholar of Mullā Ṣadrā,¹⁵ which perhaps explains Muṭahharī's

⁷Böwering, “‘ERFĀN (1),” (1998/2012).

⁸See F. Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 10.

⁹Akbar S. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 31.

¹⁰See Toshiko Izutsu & Mahdī Muḥaqqiq, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavārī* (Delmar, N.Y.: Cara-

van Books, 1977).

¹¹Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 32.

¹²Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 33.

¹³Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil* (Tehran: Bunyād-i 'ilmī va farhang-i Shahīd-i Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, 2004).

¹⁴Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 9.

¹⁵Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 9.

attraction to *'irfān*, which he began to study as a teenager in Mashhad. In 1937 he went to Qum to continue his studies, seemingly motivated by the Qumī clerics' greater tolerance of the study of philosophy and *'irfān*.¹⁶ After a brief stay in Iṣfahān, where he studied *Nahj al-Balāghah* with Mīrẓā 'Alī Āqā Shīrāzī Iṣfahānī (d. 1956), he returned to Qum, where in 1944 he began to study Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) with Āyatullāh Sayyid Ḥusayn Burūjirdī (d. 1961), who was soon to become the leading "source of emulation" (*marji'-ul-taqlīd*) in Iran and who was known for his hostility towards philosophy and *'irfān*.¹⁷ Muṭahharī subsequently enrolled in Khumaynī's classes on jurisprudence, ethics (*akhlāq*) and *'irfān*, which included the study of Sabzavārī's commentary on his own versification of Mullā Ṣadrā's most famous work, *al-Asfār al-arba'ah* (*The Four Journeys*) and, later, the *Asfār* itself.¹⁸ He seems to have been greatly affected by Khumaynī's *'irfānī* perspective, describing the latter's ethics classes as being, in reality, lessons in "mystical knowledge and wayfaring" (*ma'rifat va sayr-u-sulūk*),¹⁹ and noting how his "teacher" (*ustād*) "had really tasted Islamic theology and understood its deepest ideas and was explaining it with the sweetest expression."²⁰ At the same time, Muṭahharī developed a keen interest in the materialist philosophies of the West, particularly Marxism. In 1951, after finishing his studies in Qum, he moved to Tehran, where he attended the philosophy classes of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981), a cleric who was deeply learned in philosophy and *'irfān*, and who wrote a voluminous commentary on the Qur'ān that is imbued with the *'irfānī* perspective.²¹

In 1954 Muṭahharī took up a teaching post at the University of Tehran in the Faculty of Theology, where the curriculum covered *'irfān*, philosophy and jurisprudence.²² At the same time, he became involved in religious and political activism and public speaking. The work under discussion in this essay, *Insān-i kāmīl*, is an example of this combination of academic teaching and religious instruction, it being based upon lectures given by Muṭahharī to a group of students at the Javīd Mosque in Tehran, a mosque noted for the political activities of its leaders and attendees.²³ This

¹⁶Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 148.

¹⁷Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 275.

¹⁸Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 148-149.

¹⁹Muṭahharī, *Understanding Islamic Sciences* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2002), 7.

²⁰Quoted in Mahmood T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 19.

²¹See M. Muhit Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shi'a*, trans. S. Nasr (Qum: Ansariyan, 1981), 22-25.

²²Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Disputation to Revolution*, 249-250.

²³"Prorogation of Jvaid Mosque in Tehran by Pahlavi Agents," *Islamic Revolution Document Centre*, www.irdc.ir/en/calendar/293/default.aspx.

public preaching, together with his association with Khumaynī, occasionally landed Muṭahharī in trouble with the authorities. In 1963, after public riots against the Shāh following the arrest of Khumaynī, Muṭahharī was briefly imprisoned along with a number of other clerics close to Khumaynī. During the latter's exile from Iran between 1964 and 1979, Muṭahharī served as his representative within the country, collecting the taxes that were due to Khumaynī in his capacity as *marji'-ul-taqlīd*, and distributing money to his followers. On 1st May 1979, just after the Revolution, Muṭahharī was assassinated by the Islamic-Marxist Furqān group.²⁴

Muṭahharī was a prolific writer, whose books and speeches covered a comprehensive range of Islamic and philosophical topics, from traditional Shī'ī subjects such as the qualities of 'Alī and Ḥusayn, through to issues of Islamic law, women's rights in Islam, the weaknesses of materialist philosophy and 'irfān-oriented topics such as sainthood (*valāyat*) and the Perfect Human.²⁵ These writings "have been widely distributed and massively read in the course of the revolutionary period,"²⁶ reflecting how, despite the seemingly sophisticated and esoteric subject matter of many of his works, Muṭahharī wrote primarily for a general audience, writing in a simplified style and a language unencumbered by much of the abstruse technical terminology of pure 'irfānī works. Indeed, many of his works, like *Insān-i kāmīl*, are in fact collections of lectures that he gave to students, giving them a didactic quality that makes them good introductions to a certain strand of modern Shī'ī thinking.

Muṭahharī's writing style reflects a deeper aspect of his thought, namely his conception of Islam as a "total system" "providing guidance for the contemporary world,"²⁷ which is to say that he viewed the issues that he was writing about not merely as topics of academic discussion, nor as the preserve of an intellectual, mystical or scholarly elite, but rather as issues with contemporary and practical relevance for the education of Muslims and the building of a flourishing Islamic society. This practically-minded conception of Islam emerges in his discussion of the merits of 'irfān. As we have already seen, Muṭahharī was drawn to 'irfān from a young age, and continued to study and write on 'irfānī topics throughout his life. Nevertheless, he was not averse to criticising what he saw as the tendency within the Islamic mystical tradition towards excessive renunciation of the world and society.

²⁴This biography of Muṭahharī is based on Dabashi, 148-150; Ori Goldberg, *Shi'ī Theology in Iran: The Challenge of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2012), 40-41; Mahmood Muṭahharī, *Understanding Islamic Sciences*, 7-9.

²⁵For a partial list of Muṭahharī's works, see Muṭahharī, *Understanding Islamic Sciences*, 9.

²⁶Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 150.

²⁷Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 82-83.

Thus he criticises the ‘*urafā*’, in *Insān-i kāmil*, for their “absolute inwardness” (*darūn-garā’ī-yi muṭlaq*), describing how, “in ‘*irfān*, only the inward dimension is put forward, meaning that the outward dimension (*birūn-garā’ī*) is very much under the radar; thus the individual dimension (*janba-yi fardī*) is great, while the social dimension (*janba-yi ijtimā’ī*) is effaced or, we should say, obscured.”²⁸ Underlying this criticism is Muṭahharī’s insistence on the need to acknowledge the societal dimension of Islam alongside the mystical and the spiritual. As we shall see, it is through the prism of this understanding of the role of Islam that Muṭahharī’s conception of the Perfect Human must be viewed, and it is to this that we now turn.

The Perfect Human

A. Pre-Modern Conceptions

The first person to use the term “the Perfect Human”, Muṭahharī tells us at the beginning of his book on the topic, was the Andalusian Ṣūfī metaphysician Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, “the well-known ‘*arīf*” and “father of Islamic ‘*irfān*”. Indeed, all later Muslim ‘*urafā*’, including those from the Persian-speaking world, he says, should be considered “disciples of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī (*shāghardān-i maktab-i Ibn ‘Arabī*).”²⁹ Muṭahharī is probably correct in this assessment: “The phrase, *al-ensān al-kāmel*,” Böwering tells us, “was coined by Ebn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240, q.v.) in the first chapter of the *Foṣūṣ al-ḥekam*.”³⁰ Subsequent to Ibn ‘Arabī, Muṭahharī goes on to say, ‘*irfān* – and the concept of the Perfect Human in particular – was developed by his son-in-law, leading disciple and designated successor (*khalīfah*), Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), who, together with Ibn ‘Arabī, was responsible for making mystical thought “intellectual” (*ilmī*) and “very, very obscure” (*bisyār bisyār ghāmiḍ*).³¹ Muṭahharī’s reference to Qūnawī reflects the latter’s influence upon ‘*irfān*-oriented Iranian Shī‘ism: his *Miftāḥ al-ghayb* (*The Key to the Unseen*) was considered one of the three most advanced works of ‘*irfānī* metaphysics – along with Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Gemstones of Wisdom*) and Mullā Ṣadrā’s *al-Asfār al-arba‘ah* – in the *ḥawzah* curriculum,³² while the commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* written by Dā‘ūd Qayṣarī (d. 1350/1) – a student of Qūnawī’s student ‘Abd al-Razzāq Qāshānī (d. 1329) – was used as a key to Ibn ‘Arabī’s Ṣūfī metaphysics in that same institutional setting.³³

²⁸Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 161.

²⁹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 16.

³⁰G. Böwering “*ENSĀN-E KĀMEL*,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Online Edition, 1998, updated 2011), www.iranicaonline.org/articles/

ensan-e-kamel (accessed 9th May, 2016).

³¹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 17.

³²Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited,” 365.

³³Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited,” 631-633.

It is thus in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, along with those of Mullā Ṣadrā, who was himself strongly influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī, that we must look for the pre-modern *‘irfānī* conceptions of the Perfect Human to which Muṭahharī would have been exposed. As alluded to by Böwering, Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the Perfect Human is perhaps best summed up by his description of Adam in the first chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*. In that chapter, Ibn ‘Arabī lays particular emphasis on what he calls “the divine synthetic nature” (*al-jam‘iyyah al-ilāhiyyah*) of Adam.³⁴ The meaning of this synthetic nature, he goes on to say, is that Adam “synthesises (*jam‘*) two forms: the form of the world and the form of the Real” (*ṣūrat al-‘ālam wa-ṣūrat al-ḥaqq*). This dual nature derives from the fact that God “composed his outer form (*ṣuratahu al-zāhirah*) from the realities of the world and its forms (*min ḥaqā‘iq al-‘ālam wa-ṣuwarihi*) and composed his inner form (*ṣuratahu al-bāṭinah*) according to His form (*alā ṣūratihī*).”³⁵ It is this synthetic nature, says Ibn ‘Arabī, that enables us to call Adam the Perfect Human.³⁶ The Perfect Human is thus understood by Ibn ‘Arabī to be the individual who is able, as a “synthetic being” (*kawn jāmi‘*), to bridge the divide between the divine and the created. To understand how so, we have first to appreciate that the basic insight of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Ṣūfī metaphysics is that the phenomenal world or creation (*al-khalq*) is nothing but a manifestation (*tajallī*) of the divine being (*al-ḥaqq*), and specifically of the divine names and attributes (*al-asmā‘ wa-l-ṣifāt*).³⁷ In keeping with this idea, Ibn ‘Arabī holds that human beings are the phenomenal existents that best manifest the divine attributes within the created world. The Perfect Human, then, is the human being who manifests the divine names and attributes in the most complete manner, thus bringing about the synthesis of God and creation within himself.³⁸

This conception of the Perfect Human in terms of the principle of synthesis was taken forward by Qūnawī and other members of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school. In *al-Fukūk* (*The Redemptions*), his summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Qūnawī uses the concept of the “isthmus” (*al-barzakh*), “a term that represents an activity or an active entity that differentiates between two things and (paradoxically) through that very act of differentiation provides for their unity,”³⁹ to highlight the Perfect Human’s role

³⁴Muhammad Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-‘Alā ‘Affīfī. (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1946), 49.

³⁵Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 55.

³⁶Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 55.

³⁷Izutsu and Muḥaqqiq, *The Metaphysics of Sa-bzavārī*, 152.

³⁸M. Takeshita, *Ibn ‘Arabī’s Theory of the Perfect Man and Its Place in the History of Islamic Thought* (University of Chicago, Doctoral Thesis, 1986), 110.

³⁹Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Barzakh: the Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 7.

in synthesising God and creation: “The true Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil al-ḥaqīqī*),” he writes, “is the isthmus (*al-barzakh*) between necessity (*al-wujūb*) [i.e. God, *wājib al-wujūd*] and possibility (*al-imbkān*) [i.e. creation, *al-wujūd al-mumkin*], and the mirror that synthesises (*al-mirāh al-jāmi ‘ah*) the attributes of eternity and its connecting principles, and the attributes of originated things, and the intermediary (*al-wāsiṭah*) between the Real and creation.”⁴⁰ Likewise, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1421/8), whose *al-Insān al-kāmil* is one of the most important elaborations of the doctrine of the Perfect Human, describes the Perfect Human as both a “copy of the Real [i.e. God]” (*nuskhat al-ḥaqq*) and a “copy of creation” (*nuskhat al-khalq*), that is, “a complete, synthetic, perfect copy” (*nuskhah kāmilah jāmi ‘ah shāmilah*),⁴¹ and states that “the Perfect Human is, through his self, the counterpart of all the existential realities (*muqābil li-jamī‘ al-ḥaqā‘iq al-wujūdiyyah*), for he is a counterpart to the higher realities (*al-ḥaqā‘iq al-‘ulawīyyah*) through his subtle nature, and to the lower realities (*al-ḥaqā‘iq al-sufliyyah*) through his course nature.”⁴² Again, the idea is that the Perfect Human is the locus for the synthesis of the created and the divine.

These earlier presentations of the Perfect Human fed into Mullā Ṣadrā’s conception of human perfection. In the *Asfār*, Mullā Ṣadrā defines the Perfect Human, whom he more often refers to as “the transcendent sage” (*al-ḥakīm al-muta ‘allih*) in similar terms to al-Jīlī. The Perfect Human, he writes, is “[a]n expression of the comprehension of all the divine and existential levels of intellects and universal souls.”⁴³ In the same work, he describes how the human being, having achieved perfection of the soul (*istikmāl al-nafs*), “emerges as a mixture (*ma‘jūn*) of two ingredients – the spiritual form (from the world) of [the divine] command (*ṣūrah ma ‘nawīyyah amriyyah*), and a sensible matter (from the world of) creation (*māddah ḥiṣṣīyyah khalqīyyah*).”⁴⁴ Mullā Ṣadrā develops this conception of the synthetic nature of the Perfect Human via an elaboration of the “four journeys” of the title of his work: “Know that wayfarers among the mystics and the saints (*li-l-sullāk min al-‘urafā‘ wa-l-awliyā‘*),” he says, “possess four journeys: the first of them is the journey from creation to the Real (*min al-khalq ilā al-ḥaqq*); the second of them is the journey in the Real with the Real (*bi-l-ḥaqq fī l-ḥaqq*); the third journey is the

⁴⁰Quoted in Tahānawī, 281. See also M. Chodkiewicz, trans. L. Sherrard, *Seal of Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 70-71.

⁴¹A. Jīlī, *Sharḥ mushkilāt al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, ed. Youssef Ziedan (Cairo: Dār al-amīn, 1999), 159; 161-162.

⁴²Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma‘rifat al-awākhir wa-l-awā‘il* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyyah, 1997), 211.

⁴³Quoted in Sajjad H. Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being* (London: Routledge, 2009), 129.

⁴⁴Quoted in Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 17.

opposite of the first because it is from the Real to creation with the Real (*bi-l-ḥaqq min al-ḥaqq ilá l-khalq*); and the fourth is the opposite of the second in a sense because it is with the Real in creation (*fī l-khalq bi-l-ḥaqq*).⁴⁵ In delineating the four journeys of the Perfect Human in this fashion, Mullā Ṣadrā attempts to demonstrate how the perfecting of the soul is a process that incorporates all existential levels, both created and divine and, most importantly, how the attainment of perfection carries with it obligations within this world, an idea that seems to reflect the Shī'ī context in which Mullā Ṣadrā was writing, given its echoes of the doctrine of the return of the Twelfth Imām as the Mahdī. As we shall see, this emphasis on the Perfect Human's "functions as a religious leader"⁴⁶ would prove particularly attractive to Muṭahharī, owing to the latter's practically-minded conception of Islam.

Before we move on to look at Muṭahharī's engagement with and elaboration of these earlier ideas, let us briefly consider *who* the Perfect Humans were, in the view of these pre-modern 'irfanī thinkers. We have already seen how, in the first chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn 'Arabī identifies the Perfect Human with Adam. Since Adam is traditionally conceived of as "the father of humanity" (*abū l-bashar*), that is, as the archetypal human being, there is perhaps a suggestion here that every human being is inherently perfect. Indeed, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī seems at one point to agree with this view, stating in *al-Insān al-kāmil* that, when God describes how He breathed His spirit (*rūh*), the locus of human perfection⁴⁷, into Adam (Qur'an 23:12), what is meant is that He breathed His spirit into "every member of this human race."⁴⁸ This is not to say, however, that every human being can be called the Perfect Human; rather, it underlines the inherent *perfectability* of every human being, a perfectability that is only realised, however, by those who have undergone the requisite mystical training. In this regard, we find that Ibn 'Arabī often uses the term Perfect Human to refer to the fully realised mystic or as a synonym for "saint" (*walī*).⁴⁹ Hence it can be said that, for Ibn 'Arabī and most thinkers of his school, the Perfect Humans are those who have reached the end of the Ṣūfī path and attained communion with God – i.e. the prophets (*anbiyā'*), prior to Muḥammad, and the saints (*awliyā'*) or "inheritors" (*warathah*) after him.

This being said, there is also a sense that, at the metaphysical level, the title Perfect Human is properly speaking reserved for Muḥammad alone, for the term is also synonymous, in the technical lexicon of Ibn 'Arabī's school, with "the Muḥammadan

⁴⁵Quoted in Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics*, 31; see also Kynsh, "'Irfan' Revisited," 634.

⁴⁶Kynsh, "'Irfan' Revisited," 635.

⁴⁷Jīlī, *Sharḥ mushkilāt al-Futūḥāt al-Makki-*

yyah, 159.

⁴⁸Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma'rifat al-awākhir wa-l-awā'il*, 131.

⁴⁹Izutsu and Muḥaqqiq, *The Metaphysics of Sa-bzavārī*, 223.



Reality” (*al-ḥaqīqah al-muḥammadiyyah*), a sort of logos-principle through which God brings creation into existence.⁵⁰ As the name suggests, this metaphysical principle is identified with the spiritual reality of the Prophet Muḥammad, who according to Islamic tradition was already a prophet while Adam “was still between water and clay.”⁵¹ In this sense, then, “perfection is possessed only by Muḥammad, the ultimate and total manifestation of the *ḥaqīqah muḥammadiyyah*.”⁵² We can therefore say that, for Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, while perfection is attainable by all those who reach the end of the mystic path, Muḥammad is the archetypal or ideal Perfect Human; hence Ibn ‘Arabī describes him in the *Fuṣūṣ* as “the most perfect being in this human race,”⁵³ while al-Jīlī writes of how “no [individual] within existence was designated with the same perfection as Muḥammad, that [degree of perfection] being limited to him in his unique attainment of it.”⁵⁴

While this is undoubtedly the dominant view among the Ṣūfī thinkers of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, an alternative – and, for our purposes, very significant – conception of the archetypal Perfect Human can be seen in the writings of those Shī‘ī thinkers – such as Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. after 1385), his student Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā‘ī (d. 1495/6), and Mullā Ṣadrā and Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī – who attempted to integrate parts of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Ṣūfī metaphysics into their Shī‘ī worldview. One element of these thinkers’ synthesis of Ṣūfī and Shī‘ī metaphysics involved their identification of the Ṣūfī Perfect Humans with the Shī‘ī Imāms, which seems to have resulted from their awareness of the echo of the traditional Shī‘ī view of the Imāms in the Ṣūfī conception of the Perfect Human.⁵⁵ Thus Ḥaydar Āmulī, who set in motion this process of synthesis,⁵⁶ describes how “the Pole (*al-quṭb*) [a term used by Ibn ‘Arabī’s school as a near synonym for the Perfect Human⁵⁷] and the Imām are two persons possessing the same meaning and referring to the same person.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Āmulī’s leading disciple, Ibn Abī Jumhūr, “believed that ‘Alī was a saint (*walī*) and the ‘Perfect Man’ (*al-insān al-kāmil*), and that the Twelver Imāms formed a chain of successive Ṣūfī masters.”⁵⁹ These ideas

⁵⁰Chodkiewicz, 70-71; F. ‘Irāqī, *Divine Flashes*, trans. W. Chittick, and P. Lamborn Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 11-12.

⁵¹Ronald L. Nettler, *Sufi Metaphysics and Qur’ānic Prophets: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Thought and Method in the Fuṣūṣ al-hikam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 177.

⁵²Chodkiewicz, 71.

⁵³Ibn ‘Arabī, 214; see also Nettler, 177; Chodkiewicz, 71.

⁵⁴Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma’rifat al-awākhir wa-l-awā’il*, 207.

⁵⁵See Mohammad Amir-Moezzi, *The Spiritual-*

ity of Shi‘i Islam: Beliefs and Practices (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 107-113.

⁵⁶See Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 149-213.

⁵⁷See S. Ḥakīm, *al-Mu‘jam al-ṣūfī* (Beirut: Dandarāh li-l-ṭabā‘ah wa l-nashr, 1981), 909-915; Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma’rifat al-awākhir wa-l-awā’il*, 210.

⁵⁸Quoted in Seyyed Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 111.

⁵⁹Colin Turner, *Islam without Allah?: The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 120.

were picked up by Mullā Ṣadrā and his students, who, it should be remembered, were writing in a historical context – early Safavid Iran – in which Shī'ism was in the ascendant and opportunities existed to recast traditional Shī'ī doctrines along new lines.⁶⁰ For Mullā Ṣadrā, as for Ḥaydar Āmulī, the Imām is “the Pole of poles” (*qutb al-aqtāb*), while “the degree of the Imāmate,” he writes, “signifies the Perfect Human, who is the king of the terrestrial world.”⁶¹ This is not to say, however, that Shī'ī ‘*irfānī*’ thinkers *limit* the title of Perfect Human to the twelve Imāms; rather, Mullā Ṣadrā and Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī hold, like Ibn ‘Arabī and the majority of thinkers of his school, that the title belongs to the prophets (*anbiyā’*) and saints (*awliyā’*), the difference being that while, for the Ṣūfī thinkers, it is the fully realised Ṣūfīs who are the archetypal *awliyā’*, for the Shī'ī thinkers it is the Imāms.⁶²

B. Muṭahharī’s Conception of the Perfect Human

As already mentioned, despite obviously being drawn to the study of ‘*irfān*’, Muṭahharī also displays a certain ambivalence towards the ‘*irfānī*’ legacy. This ambivalence emerges in his presentation of his own understanding of the theory of the Perfect Human, which, on the one hand, is heavily indebted to earlier ‘*irfānī*’ ideas, yet, on the other, reflects his own concerns as a 20th century Iranian Shī'ī cleric who viewed Islam as a practical system to be implemented in the modern world. Thus, while Muṭahharī adopts the ‘*irfānī*’ term Perfect Human (*insān-i kāmil*), he does not fully identify his position with the ‘*irfānī*’ conception; rather, he distinguishes between “the Perfect Human of ‘*irfān*’” and what he calls “the Perfect Human of the Qur’an” and “the Perfect Human of Islam,”⁶³ the implication being that the latter corresponds to his view.

Muṭahharī’s ambivalent stance towards the ‘*irfānī*’ conception of the Perfect Human can best be seen in his use of the concept of synthesis as a key to understanding the Perfect Human. As we saw above, this concept is central to the pre-modern conceptions of the Perfect Human. In keeping with these earlier conceptions, Muṭahharī identifies synthesis and comprehensiveness as the defining attributes of the Perfect Human. He states this very clearly when he says that being the Perfect

⁶⁰See James Winston Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 15-18.

⁶¹Quoted in Henry Corbin, “The Imams and the Imamate,” in *Shī'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality*, trans. S.H. Nasr, H. Dabashi, and S.V. Nasr, (State University of New York Press,

1988), 167-187-179.

⁶²See Morris, 83-84; Shiguru Kamada, “*Walāya* in Fayḍ Kāshānī,” in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy, and Mysticism in Muslim Thought*, ed. T. Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 461.

⁶³Muṭahharī (2004), 12; 161-162.

Human means “being the synthesis of opposites (*jāmi‘-ul-aḥdād būdan*).”⁶⁴ In associating the theory of the Perfect Human with the ancient philosophical principle known as “the union of opposites” or *coincidentia oppositorum*, Muṭahharī thus utilises an idea that was key to Ibn ‘Arabī’s and his school’s conception of the relationship between God and creation: “The discourse of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī,” says Shahab Ahmed, “...is riven through by *coincidentia oppositorum*,”⁶⁵ a claim supported by the fact that Ibn ‘Arabī often quotes the famous statement attributed to the Ṣūfī Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. 279/890-286/899), “I only knew God through His synthesising of opposites.”⁶⁶ For Ibn ‘Arabī and his school, therefore, just as God synthesises seemingly contradictory attributes such as “the First and the Last (*al-awwal wa-l-ākhir*), the Apparent and the Hidden (*al-zāhir wa-l-bāṭin*)” (c.f. Qur’an 57:3), so too does the realised mystic or Perfect Human, in becoming a complete manifestation of the divine names and attributes, reconcile these apparent contraries within himself.

Though Muṭahharī thus adopts the terminology of these earlier ‘*irfānī*’ thinkers, nevertheless his conception of synthesis differs from their metaphysical conception of the term. Whereas, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the Perfect Human being the synthesis of opposites means that he synthesises God and creation or the divine attributes and created forms, for Muṭahharī, by contrast, being a synthesis of opposites means to synthesise what he calls the “human values” (*arziṣhā-yi insānī*). These values, he tells us, include acts of worship (‘*ibādāt*), serving people (*khidmat bi-khalq*), freedom (*āzādī*), love (‘*ishq*), reason (‘*aql*), justice (‘*adl*), etc.⁶⁷ The perfection of the human being (*kamāl-i insān*), he explains, thus consists in attaining “moderation” (*ta‘ādul*) and “balance” (*tawāzun*) in displaying these values,⁶⁸ that is, in not allowing for one or two particular values to dominate one’s nature: “What is the state (*hāl*),” he asks rhetorically, “of the human who is the Perfect Human? Is it the state of the one who is only a pure worshipper (‘*ābid-i maḥḍ*)? Is it the state of the one who is only a purely free man (*āzāda-yi maḥḍ*)? Is it the state of the one who is only a pure lover (‘*āshiq-i maḥḍ*)? Is it the state of the one who is only a purely rational man (‘*āqil-i maḥḍ*)? No! None of these is the Perfect Human. The Perfect Human is that human within whom all the human values have grown, to the highest degree, in coordination with one another.”⁶⁹ Muṭahharī repeats this idea later in the book:

⁶⁴Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 49.

⁶⁵Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 398.

⁶⁶See Binyamin Abrahamov, *Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Sufis* (Oxford: Anqa, 2014), 64-68.

⁶⁷Abrahamov, *Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Sufis*, 36-43.

⁶⁸Abrahamov, *Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Sufis*, 33.

⁶⁹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 34-35.

The Perfect Human,” he says, “means the human who is a champion (*qahramān*) of all human values, who is a champion in all domains of humanity (*dar hamayi maydānhā-yi insāniyat*). What lesson should we learn from this? We should learn from this that we should not make the mistake of obtaining one value alone and forgetting about the other values. Although we ourselves may not be able to be a champion of all values, nevertheless we should possess all the values together to the extent that we can. Even if we are not the Perfect Human, in the end we will become a balanced human (*insān-i muta‘ādil*). It is then that we will take the form of a true Muslim in every field.⁷⁰

While the pre-modern *‘irfānī* thinkers primarily understood synthesis, at least as it applies to the theory of the Perfect Human, as a metaphysical principle, for Muṭahharī, by contrast, we see that it is primarily an *ethical* principle. It is no use, he argues, to cultivate one particular ethical value or practice alone; rather, what is called for is the cultivation of all practices, worship of God, serving others, loving, using one’s reason, etc., in harmony. Muṭahharī thus *humanises* the *‘irfānī* theory, which is to say that he brings it back down to earth and makes it relevant for all human beings, the harmonisation of values being a goal that all individuals are capable of striving to attain, even if they may not actually attain it. Muṭahharī spells out this difference for us in the section of the book where he presents a critique of *‘irfānī* theory, specifically in his aforementioned critique of the inwardness of *‘irfān*:

The Perfect Human of *‘irfān*.” he writes, “is not a social human (*insān-i ijtimā‘ī*); he is a human who is wrapped up in himself. As for Islam, however, although it is said to support everything [proposed by *‘irfān*] regarding the heart (*dil*), and love (*‘ishq*), and spiritual wayfaring (*sayr-u-sulūk*), and the science of effusions (*‘ilm-i afādī*), and the spiritual science (*‘ilm-i ma‘navī*), and the refinement of the soul (*tahdhīb-i nafs*), its Perfect Human is a synthetic human (*insān-i jāmi‘*). He is turned outwards (*birūn-garā*) and turned towards society (*jāmi‘a-garā*). He is never only wrapped up in himself; if he spends the night wrapped up in himself, and forgets the world and what is in it, by day he will place himself within society.⁷¹

This quotation captures well, I think, Muṭahharī’s ambivalence towards, and development of the *‘irfānī* conception of the Perfect Human. While he does not reject the mystical or metaphysical dimensions of the *‘irfānī* theory, nevertheless he

⁷⁰Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 50-51.

⁷¹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 161-162.

views the attainment of mystical union and the knowledge that accompanies it as only one dimension of what it means to be the Perfect Human. In concentrating on the mystical dimension of the Perfect Human theory, he argues, the *'irfānī* thinkers do not conceive of the Perfect Human as a truly synthetic being, as does Islam. In particular, they overlook the this-worldly, societal functions of the Perfect Human. This latter dimension is particularly important for Muṭahharī: the Perfect Humans, he says, “are the reformers of their society (*muṣliḥān jāmi 'a-yi khud*).”⁷² This view, it should be noted, fits with his broader conception of Islam as a totalist system: just as Islam should govern how modern society is run, so too should the Perfect Human, who is the archetypal Muslim, be involved in the reform and running of society.

Muṭahharī's conception of the socio-political role of the Perfect Human reflects, I think, three major elements of his intellectual and religious make-up. Most generally, his conception echoes the traditional Shī'ī view of the Imām's rightful role as political leader of the Islamic *ummah*. This is something that Muṭahharī draws attention to in another of his works, *Valā'hā va valāyat-hā (Types of Loyalty and Leadership)*, where he delineates the different dimensions of the Imām's leadership (*valāyat*), which include, so he tells us, political leadership (*za'āmat*) of the Muslim community.⁷³ Secondly, while the pre-modern *'irfānī* theory lays emphasis on the metaphysical dimension of the Perfect Human, nevertheless there is also an acknowledgement of the Perfect Human's role in this world.⁷⁴ This is particularly true, as we have seen, of Mullā Ṣadrā, who, in delineating the four journeys of the Perfect Human, locates his ultimate goal in the return to society and leadership of the community. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Muṭahharī does in fact cite, with approval, Mullā Ṣadrā's theory of the four journeys,⁷⁵ and refers to the *Asfār* as one of the “books of philosophy inclined towards *'irfān*,” the implication perhaps being that Mullā Ṣadrā does not suffer from the same extreme inward focus as other, more purely *'irfānī* thinkers. Finally, in terms of the immediate historical context in which Muṭahharī was writing, it might also be suggested that his conception of the worldly function of the Perfect Human carries an echo of Khumaynī's theory of the political leadership of the religious scholar (*valāyat-i faqīh*), which Khumaynī was formulating from his exile in Najaf around the same time as Muṭahharī was giving his lectures on the Perfect Human.⁷⁶ As we have seen, Muṭahharī was in continuous

⁷²Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 162.

⁷³Muṭahharī, *Wilāyah: The Station of the Master* (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982), 67-75.

⁷⁴See Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited,” 635.

⁷⁵Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 83.

⁷⁶Hamid Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: from Ali to post-Khomeini* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

contact with Khumaynī during the latter’s period of exile, which, together with Muṭahharī’s high regard for his teacher, makes it likely that Khumaynī’s thinking at that time would have left its mark on his former student. Certainly, it is not correct to claim, as Hamid Mavani does, that while Khumaynī conceived of *valāyat* in terms of political leadership, Muṭahharī, treated the same concept “from an exclusively mystical perspective that was free of any contemporary political relevance.”⁷⁷ Rather, it is clear that Muṭahharī, though deeply affected by the ‘*irfānī*’ perspective, agreed with Khumaynī on the practical, socio-political function of the religious leader, that is, the Perfect Human.

All this is not to say that Muṭahharī *limits* his conception of the Perfect Human to the socio-political domain. Indeed, as one of the leading Iranian and Muslim critics of Marxism, Muṭahharī was deeply critical of all purely materialist philosophies that divest mankind of his spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. Thus he declares, in *Insān-i kāmil*, after speaking about the tendency in Islamic societies of the past to focus excessively on ritual practices, “I feel that once again, another wave of extremism (*mawj-i ifrātī*) is building up, meaning that certain people want to pay attention to the social tendencies of Islam (*garāyishhā-yi ijtimā’ī-yi Islām*), while forgetting the divine tendencies (*garāyishhā-yi khodā’ī*) of Islam. This is a... deviation (*inḥirāf*) and mistake (*ishtibāh*).”⁷⁸ In the latter part of the book, meanwhile, he goes on to critique the socialist view of the human being, contrasting the materialism of socialism with the asceticism (*zuhd, tark-i dunyā*) of Islam, which is exemplified in the saying attributed to ‘Alī, “O world! I have divorced you.”⁷⁹ Similarly, when discussing Mullā Ṣadrā’s four journeys, he states clearly that the religious-political leader in this world must first undergo the mystical journey to God before he can hope to save others: “If we say that the journey of the human being is from creation towards God, and that here he remains, we have not understood the human being. And if we say that the human, without moving towards God, must go towards other humans (like today’s humanist materialist schools of thought (*maktabhā-yi māddī-yi insānī-yi imrūzī*)), to save humanity (*barāyi najāt-i insān*), then this will achieve nothing and is a complete lie (*durūgh-i muṭlaq*). Only those who have first saved themselves can save humanity.”⁸⁰ For Muṭahharī, then, the theory of the Perfect Human cannot be understood solely in a this-worldly sense, just as it cannot be understood solely in a metaphysical sense; each of these positions, when held on

⁷⁷Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi’ism*, 10.

⁷⁸Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 84.

⁷⁹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 274-276.

⁸⁰Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 83-84.

their own, is an example of “extremism” (*ifrātī*).⁸¹ Rather, the true Perfect Humans, as he sees it, achieve a *synthesis* of the metaphysical and the this-worldly, the inward and the outward, the spiritual and the socio-political, etc.: “All the while they are in the world,” he says, “they are not in the world. Whilst they are in this world, they are [also] in another world.”⁸² In this way, the Perfect Humans embody Islam, the “synthetic” or “comprehensive” religion (*dīn-i jāmi*).⁸³

It remains only for us to ask whom Muṭahharī considered to be historical examples of the Perfect Human. In keeping with his views on the socio-political function of the Perfect Human, Muṭahharī was insistent on the idea that the Perfect Human was not a mere theoretical construct, but rather a living human being: “The Islamic Perfect Human,” he says, “is not just a conceptual, imaginative and ideal human (*yik insān-i īdī’āl va khayālī va dhihnī*) who never attains outward existence; the Perfect Human attains outward existence, both at the highest level and the lower degrees.”⁸⁴ Who, then, are these individuals? At the beginning of the book, Muṭahharī suggests that the archetypal Perfect Humans are the Prophet Muḥammad and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the first Imām of the Shī‘ah: “The most noble Prophet himself – May God’s blessings and peace be upon him and his family – was an example (*nimūna*) of the Perfect Human. ‘Alī was another example of the Perfect Human.”⁸⁵ Thus far, Muṭahharī is in agreement with his fellow *‘irfān*-oriented Shī‘ī thinker Mullā Ṣadrā, that the Perfect Humans are the prophets and Imāms, Muḥammad being the archetypal prophet, and ‘Alī the archetypal Imām. This being said, throughout the rest of the book, Muṭahharī presents ‘Alī as the model Perfect Human, while hardly mentioning Muḥammad at all. Thus, immediately following the above mentioned quotation, he uses ‘Alī as an example of how, if we wish to learn about the qualities of the Perfect Human, we must look not at his “person” (*shakhṣ*), i.e. his “identity card” (*shināsnāma*), the bare facts of his life, but rather at his “personality” (*shakhṣiyat*), i.e. the qualities that he displayed. In ‘Alī’s case, he explains, we must recognise his “synthetic personality” (*shakhṣiyat-i jāmi*) in order to know that he is “the Perfect Human of Islam.”⁸⁶ In taking ‘Alī as a model for the synthetic nature of the Perfect Human, Muṭahharī thus appears to elevate ‘Alī above Muḥammad as the ideal Perfect Human.

This impression is reinforced by the terms in which Muṭahharī describes ‘Alī, and the way he uses the latter’s sayings as proof-texts for his ideas, in the remainder of

⁸¹Muṭahharī *Insān-i kāmil*, 36-43.

⁸²Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 67.

⁸³Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 9.

⁸⁴Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 12-13.

⁸⁵Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 13.

⁸⁶Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmil*, 13.

the book. Thus, in the course of explaining that the Perfect Human is the individual who is able to synthesise all the human values, he declares, “‘Alī is the Perfect Human, because within him all the human values have grown, to the highest degree, in co-ordination with one another,”⁸⁷ a statement that he repeats almost *verbatim* a few pages on.⁸⁸ Similarly, he states, “If we consider ‘Alī to be our model (*ulgū*) and Imām, then we should take him to be a Perfect Human, a balanced human (*insān-i mut ‘ādil*), and a human in whom all the human values have grown in co-ordination with one another.”⁸⁹ If ‘Alī is thus the model for the synthesis of human values, then his sayings, collected in *Nahj al-balāghah*, should similarly embody that synthesis of values, since “speech represents the speaking spirit (*rūḥ-i gūyanda*) [i.e. *al-naḥs al-nāṭiqah*, the rational soul].”⁹⁰ Hence we find that “*Nahj al-balāghah* contains many elements: when one reads it, sometimes one imagines it is Bū ‘Alī Sīnā that is talking; sometimes that it is Mullā Rūmī or Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī; sometimes that it is an epic writer like Firdawsī; or a liberal (*āzādī-khwāh*); or a world-renouncing worshipper (*‘ābid-i gūshah-nishīn*) or renunciant ascetic (*zāhid-i gūshah-gīr*); or a monk (*rāhib*).”⁹¹ He repeats the same idea later in the book, explaining that ‘Alī’s sayings embody all of these different elements to the highest degree: “In his speech, there is ‘*irfān* that is the peak of ‘*irfān*, philosophy that is the peak of philosophy, liberalism that is the peak of liberalism, an epic that is the peak of epics, ethics that are the peak of ethics.”⁹²

In other words, ‘Alī’s sayings, in synthesising philosophical discourse in the manner of Ibn Sīnā, the greatest philosopher, mystical discourse in the manner of Rūmī or Ibn ‘Arabī, the greatest Ṣūfī thinkers, the mythical discourse of Firdawsī, the greatest epic poet, and those who preach freedom of the individual and those who practice ascetic renunciation of the world, reflect how ‘Alī himself manifested the qualities of a philosopher, a Ṣūfī, an epic poet, a liberal, an ascetic, etc. It can thus be said, Muṭahharī concludes, that “‘Alī is a personality who synthesises opposites (*‘Alī yik shakhshiyat-i jāmi ‘ul-‘addād ast*),”⁹³ i.e. that he is a Perfect Human.

Whereas for Ibn ‘Arabī and the dominant tradition within his school, then, the archetypal Perfect Human is undoubtedly Muḥammad, for Muṭahharī it is quite clearly ‘Alī. This reflects Muṭahharī’s integration of the theory of the Perfect Human into his Shī‘ī worldview, although, as we have seen, there is a pre-modern precedent

⁸⁷Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 35.

⁸⁸Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 44.

⁸⁹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 46.

⁹⁰Muṭahharī (2004), 44.

⁹¹Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 44.

⁹²Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 158.

⁹³Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 158.

for this “Shī’itisation” of the theory in the writings of Ḥaydar Āmulī and, following him, Mullā Ṣadrā and the school of Shīrāz. Moreover, like those earlier Shī’ī *irfānī* thinkers, Muṭahharī suggests that being a Perfect Human is a property of the Imāms more generally: the human within whom all the human values have grown to the highest degree and in perfect synthesis, he tells us, “is the individual whom the Qur’an calls “Imām”,⁹⁴ while he cites sayings of the fourth Imām, Zayn-ul-‘Ābidīn (d. 713) and the eighth, ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (d. 818), as proof-texts for his understanding of the theory.⁹⁵

Is all this to say that Muṭahharī confines the title of Perfect Human to the prophets and Imāms? It is true that he only explicitly applies the term to such individuals. At the same time, he clearly leaves open the possibility of other individuals becoming Perfect Humans:

If we want to become Perfect Humans and to reach human perfection under Islam instruction and education,” he says, “we must know what the Perfect Human is like: what kind of spiritual countenance is the Perfect Human’s spiritual countenance? What kind of spiritual appearance is the Perfect Human’s appearance? What kind of characteristics are the Perfect Human’s characteristics? Thus we can build ourselves and our society in that way. If we don’t know the Perfect Human of Islam, we can never become a complete or perfect Muslim (*yik musalmān-i tamām va-yā kāmīl*).⁹⁶

Muṭahharī thus seems to suggest that the believer is capable of becoming, if not a Perfect Human, then at least a perfect Muslim. Indeed, he indicates that the very purpose of his lectures on the Perfect Human is to inculcate within his listeners a sense of what the Perfect Human is like, in order that they might follow the Perfect Human’s example and become perfect Muslims. Later on in the book, he gives an example of individuals having become perfect Muslims via their emulation of the Perfect Human: the companions of the 12th Imām, Muḥammad al-Mahdī (*aṣḥāb-i ḥaḍrat-i ḥujjat*), he notes, are described in a widely-circulated *ḥadīth* as “monks by night and lions by day (*ruhbān bi-l-layl wa-luyūth bi-l-nahār*),”⁹⁷ a phrase that indicates their synthesising of the values of worship (*‘ibādat*) and active struggle (*jihād*) for the faith. In this way, he suggests that, by following the example of the Perfect Human, believers are capable of emulating the latter’s synthesis of human values.

A notable element of the passage quoted above is Muṭahharī’s connecting of the process of becoming a perfect Muslim with the building of a perfect Islamic

⁹⁴Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 34.

⁹⁶Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 12.

⁹⁵Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 25, 79, 147-148.

⁹⁷Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 86.

society. This fits with what we saw above, regarding the societal dimension of Muṭahharī's theory. Given the evident desire of Muṭahharī and the other clerical intellectuals of the pre-revolutionary period to build an Islamic society in their own time, the question that follows is whether Muṭahharī thought that there existed a living Perfect Human, or at least a perfect Muslim, who was capable of leading the construction of such a society, and if so, who? Certainly, Muṭahharī does not explicitly describe any living individual as a Perfect Human or perfect Muslim in the book. Nevertheless, at one point in the book, having quoted Zayn-ul-Ābidīn in order to demonstrate his insight into the reality of individuals, he does state that, "[i]n our own time, there were and are individuals who can perceive (*dark*) and see the reality of people,"⁹⁸ thus suggesting that certain living individuals do possess the insight of the Perfect Human. Unfortunately, he does not say who these individuals might be. Of course, given Muṭahharī's obvious closeness to Khumaynī, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest – while bearing in mind the potential for our perspective to be distorted by our knowledge of the fact that, five years after these lectures were delivered, Khumaynī did embark on the construction of an Islamic society in Iran – that he would have included the latter among those who possess this insight. Nevertheless, I have not come across an explicit statement to that effect in those works of Muṭahharī's that I have consulted. More concretely, it should be noted that, in *Valā' hā va valāyat-hā*, Muṭahharī states that Mīrzā 'Alī Āqā Shīrāzī Iṣfahānī, the cleric who taught him *Nahj al-balāghah*, was among those, like 'Alī and Zayn-ul-Ābidīn, who reached the second stage of perfection, that is, mastery over the soul, bodily desires and the imagination.⁹⁹ While Muṭahharī again does not go so far as to explicitly identify Iṣfahānī as a Perfect Human or perfect Muslim, the idea seems to be implied. Certainly, even if such individuals are not explicitly identified, for Muṭahharī, the theory of the Perfect Human remains relevant today.

Conclusion

Muṭahharī's exposition of the theory of the Perfect Human reflects both the intellectual heritage and worldview of a significant number of 20th century Iranian Shī'ī clerics. Thanks to decades of education in the seminaries of Mashhad, Qum and Iṣfahān, Muṭahharī was deeply learned in the traditional Shī'ī source texts, particularly *Nahj al-balāghah* and the Shī'ī *ḥadīth* books, and in the pre-modern Islamic mystical philosophy known as '*irfān*. He combined this learning, however, with an activist outlook on the contemporary world, wishing to remake Iran in the

⁹⁸Muṭahharī, *Insān-i kāmīl*, 25.

⁹⁹Muṭahharī, *Wilāyah: The Station of the Master*, 117.

image of the ideal Islamic society, and conscious of the need to combat what he saw as the malignant influence of the materialist philosophies of the West, particularly Marxism.

All of these aspects of his thought and personality went into his theory of the Perfect Human. His debt to *'irfān* is manifested in his utilisation of the principle of synthesis in his definition of what it means to be a Perfect Human. His Shī'ī heritage emerges in his identification of the archetypal Perfect Human with the first Shī'ī Imām, 'Alī. His activism, meanwhile, is reflected in his emphasis on the socio-political and practical functions of the Perfect Human, in contrast to the more metaphysical conceptions of the pre-modern *'irfānī* thinkers, while his opposition to western materialism comes through in his acknowledgment, in keeping with the original *'irfānī* conception, of the importance of the spiritual dimension of the Perfect Human. In bringing together all of these elements, Muṭahhari's *Insān-i kāmil* thus gives us an insight into the richness of 20th century *'irfān*-oriented Iranian Shī'ī thought, a richness which undergirded the thinking of many of those clerics who played a leading role in the Revolution.