

Secret Tradition of Islam

By LIFE SCIENCE FELLOWSHIP

The initiatic journey to Islamic soil has been a repeated theme of European esotericism, ever since the Templars settled in Jerusalem and the mythical Christian Rosenkreuz learnt his trade in "Damcar" (Damascus). We find it in the lives of Paracelsus and Cagliostro, then, as travel became easier, in a whole host that includes P. B. Randolph, H. P. Blavatsky, Max Theon, G. I. Gurdjieff, Aleister Crowley, Rene Guenon, R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, and Henry Corbin. There was very likely some element of this in Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1797, when he announced to an astounded audience that he, too, was a Muslim.

- Joscelyn Godwin¹

In the modern world, religion has been reduced to 'moralism' and a question of faith. Once cherished doctrines are now just simple formulas and routine practices, devoid of any higher meaning. It is not really surprising that for large numbers of people in the Western world the great religions are unable to answer the most fundamental questions of existence. Yet throughout history we find people convinced the great religions are a necessary 'outer shell' veiling a Primordial Wisdom that alone can reveal humanity's real origin, purpose and destiny. Hidden behind vital religious practices and doctrines is an esoteric or occult knowledge. But as the scholar of religion James Webb points out:

Something may be hidden because of its immense value, or reverently concealed from the prying eyes of the profane. But this hidden thing may also have achieved its sequestered position because the Powers That Be have found it wanting. Either it is a threat and must be buried, or simply useless, and so forgotten.²

Some of Europe's leading seekers after ancient secret wisdom were convinced that in the Muslim lands of the Orient could be found a Primordial Tradition transmitted from generation to generation within closed communities of initiates. They sought inspiration in a cultural and religious milieu long denounced as the 'enemy' by European Christianity.

The French poet and historian Gerard de Nerval (1808-1855) was of the opinion that secret Islamic communities, principally the Druze, the Ismailis and the Nusairis, had been responsible for transmitting ancient wisdom to Europe through their influence on the Knights Templar.

Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, the reactionary nineteenth century chronicler of secret societies, believed the Knights Templar (and the Freemasons) derived their doctrines and practices from the Ismaili Assassins, who in turn inherited them from the ancient Gnostics.

Godfrey Higgins (1772-1833), whose books influenced Madame Blavatsky and the early Theosophists, also concluded the Ismaili Assassins passed their mysteries on to Europe's Templars, Freemasons, and Rosicrucians. Higgins resolutely defended Muhammed, the Prophet of Islam, and expressed the hope to visit the Moorish lands of Egypt, Palestine and Syria before he died.

Early this century the writer and mystic Laurence Oliphant reasoned the Druze and Nusairi sects were the custodians of the most complete system of secret knowledge. In **The Treasure of Montsegur**, an authoritative book on the medieval Cathars, the scholar R.A. Gilbert argues that the doctrines of the Nusairis are identical to those of the Cathars.

Wherever we look we find historians and authors searching for the key to spiritual enlightenment among the Orient's arcane Muslim communities. Elaborate 'myths' may guard the source of the teachings of Europe's occult fraternities, but they all point to the Muslim lands of North Africa and the mysterious East.

Eighteenth-century Rosicrucians claimed sources in Arabia for their secret wisdom. Indeed, a central Rosicrucian 'myth' tells how young Christian Rosenkreuz [Rosie Cross] journeyed to "the mystic Arabian city of Damcar" in search of lost knowledge. According to Manly P. Hall:

C.R.C. [Christian Rosie Cross] was but sixteen years of age when he arrived at Damcar. He was received as one who had been long expected, a comrade and a friend in philosophy, and was instructed in the secrets of the Arabian adepts. While there, C.R.C. learned Arabic and translated the sacred book *M* into Latin, and upon returning to Europe he brought this important volume with him. After studying three years in Damcar, C.R.C. departed for the [Moorish] city of Fez, where Arabian magicians declared further information would be given him.³

Returning to Europe from his sojourn in the Moorish lands, C.R.C. is said to have established a secret "House of the Holy Spirit" modelled on the Muslim "House of Wisdom" he visited at Cairo in Egypt. Even the name Rosicrucian, a follower of the path of the Rose Cross, is remarkably similar to the common Moorish Sufi phrase "Path of the Rose." One has only to intelligently study Rosicrucian rituals and legends to see the borrowing of Moorish imagery and the debt to Islamic esotericism.

The Rosicrucians - also called the 'Society of Unknown Philosophers' and the 'Invisible College' - counted among their number not only Sir Francis Bacon, but Robert Fludd, Saint Germain and Cagliostro. Held to be one of the founders of Western science and philosophy, Francis Bacon is also the real author of Shakespeare's works. Within the writings attributed to Shakespeare can be found Sufi ideas placed there by Francis Bacon.

Roger Bacon, known as the "miraculous Doctor," received his knowledge of medicine and the natural sciences from North African Moorish teachers. He often wore Arab dress at Oxford, knew the Arabic language, and translated

Sufi texts. Bacon asserted that his knowledge was only part of a whole body of ancient wisdom known to Noah and Abraham, to Zoroaster, to the Chaldean, Egyptian and Greek masters, and to Muslim mystics.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Napoleon invaded Egypt. The French Emperor "held long discussions with the Ulema [religious scholars] of Cairo on Moslem theology, holding out to them the possibility of the whole French Army being converted to Islam."⁴ The French writer Gourgaud noted in his **Memories**, "the Emperor reads the Koran in silence. He raises his head and says, as in a dream: 'Muhammad's religion is the most beautiful.'" Under Napoleon's patronage, one of his generals embraced Islam and founded the secret Order of the Seekers of Wisdom.

Like Christian Rosenkreuz, the Sicilian magus Alessandro Cagliostro (1743-1795) reputedly travelled to the Moorish lands in pursuit of ancient wisdom. And like Rosenkreuz, Cagliostro - dubbed the "noble traveller" - was seen as the emissary of a powerful secret society. He claimed to have received initiation into Eastern mysteries at the pyramids of Egypt. Cagliostro wore Moorish robes and worked to establish a universal esoteric Order "above all sects and schisms, which would restore the patriarchal religion under which Adam, Seth, Noah, Abraham, etc., were in direct communion with God, and eventually lead mankind back to the state enjoyed before the Fall."⁵ After spreading his ideas throughout Europe Cagliostro travelled to Rome, where he was arrested by the Catholic Inquisition and died in prison.

Dr. Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875), the influential Black American Rosicrucian author, also followed in the footsteps of the legendary Christian Rosenkreuz. He journeyed over much of the old Moorish lands through Ireland, North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Palestine and Turkey. His encounters with Sufis, Dervishes and other Muslim mystics undoubtedly influenced much of his writings. In these Randolph refers to the Muslim "Ansairs" (also known as the Nusairi and Alawis), the "Ansairitic Mysteries", and the secrets of "the Syrian mountaineers." From his solitary travels in the Orient, he claimed to have brought back arcane knowledge and practices that revolutionised Western esotericism. Randolph's biographer says his ideas "left their traces on Madame Blavatsky, her Theosophical Society, and many practising occult organizations in Europe and America today."⁶

The enigmatic teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1872-1949), who travelled the Orient in search of lost wisdom, mentions the mysterious "Aissors" in his book **Meetings with Remarkable Men**. At least one writer speculates they are the same as the secret community of Islamic esotericists encountered by Randolph. Today, Gurdjieff's students believe his system to be derived from centuries old arcane traditions, whose representatives he met in the Muslim lands of Central Asia. The Russian journalist P.D. Ouspensky, perhaps Gurdjieff's greatest pupil, thought his teacher had derived his ideas from the hidden wisdom found among the Muslim Sufis. The British author and mystic J.G. Bennett attempted to replicate Gurdjieff's journeys in Central Asia. In Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Persia he met Sufi masters and wandering Dervishes.

Early this century another "noble traveller", Noble Drew Ali (born Timothy Drew), the self-taught son of former Black slaves, took a job as a merchant seaman and found himself in Egypt. According to one legend, Noble Drew Ali travelled around the world before the age of twenty-seven, in an effort to discover all he could about the heritage of his people and the tenets of Islam. It is commonly believed he received a mandate from the king of Morocco to instruct Black Americans in Islam. At the Pyramid of Cheops he received initiation and took the Muslim name Sharif [Noble] Abdul Ali; in America he would be known as Noble Drew Ali. On his return to the United States in 1913 he founded the Moorish Science Temple, "to uplift fallen humanity by returning the nationality, divine creed and culture to persons of Moorish descent in the Western Hemisphere."

A charismatic leader, Noble Drew Ali taught that the true origin of Black Americans was 'Asiatic', and Islam their original religion. "The fallen sons and daughters of the Asiatic Nation of North America," he wrote, "need to learn to love instead of hate; and to know of their higher self and lower self." Allah, the one true God, has been known by many names, "but everywhere His is the causeless cause, the rootless root from which all things have grown". Noble Drew Ali acknowledged Prophet Muhammad as "the founder of the reuniting of Islam" and the promised one foretold by Jesus. All prophets came with basically the same message, and Islam was the original divine faith to which Muhammed called people to return.

Noble Drew Ali laid the foundations of the Islamic movement in the United States. He showed that knowledge of one's own identity - one's self, community and religion - is indispensable to a creative life for the individual and community. Noble Drew Ali commented, "When we rely upon others to study the secrets of nature and think and act for us, then we have created a life for ourselves, one which is termed 'Hell.'" Through his message thousands of Black Americans were exposed to Moorish history, culture, religion, as well as the Islamic principles of "Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom, and Justice." But his meteoric success brought disaster. Noble Drew Ali died in 1929, in the words of one commentator, "some say from severe police beatings, others say he was assassinated by his rivals in the movement. In his sincerity and undoubted innocence, Noble Drew Ali met a martyr's end."⁷

Esoteric Core

[The] conception of every doctrine as having two aspects, one exoteric and the other esoteric, apparently contradictory but in reality complementary, may be taken as a general rule since it corresponds with the nature of things as they are. Even when this distinction is not openly acknowledged, there exists of necessity in any doctrine of any depth at all something which corresponds to these two aspects, illustrated by such well known antitheses as outer and inner, the bone and the marrow, the visible and the occult, the wide road and the narrow, letter and spirit, the rind and the flesh.⁸

When we examine the life of Jesus, as presented in the New Testament as well as the so called apocryphal Gospels, we discover he made a clear

distinction between the inner, hidden or esoteric teachings and outer, external or exoteric ones. There are several places in the Gospels where Jesus publicly gave exoteric teachings to the masses of the people, while privately instructing his trusted disciples in the inner (esoteric) meaning. After the manner of the apostles, the early Christians preached openly to the public the Gospel message, while preserving the esoteric doctrines for those who became initiated disciples.

The distinction between outer doctrines and their higher inner meaning was known to Moses, an initiate of Egyptian wisdom, and the Israelite prophets. The exoteric form of the Mosaic revelation contained laws and commandments supremely suited to the people and conditions of that era. While the esoteric doctrines, explaining the meaning behind the external forms and rituals, were preserved by the real priests and prophets.

By the time of Jesus, the esoteric spiritual side of the Hebrew religion had been corrupted and almost lost. People were enslaved to the "letter of the law," kept in the bondage of ignorance by false teachers, not realising that "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Thus the Essenes, being the true Israelite priests and the mystic precursors of the early Christians, concerned themselves with rediscovering the inner meaning of the Mosaic Law.

Within the first four centuries after Christ, the teachings of Jesus underwent the same corruption and loss as those proclaimed by Moses. Christianity emerged as a powerful institution dominated by a clerical hierarchy largely ignorant of the original esoteric truths. The Gospels, like the books of the Old Testament, underwent editing and revision to comply with the exoteric Christian creed. The many Christian Gnostic texts, that spoke of esoteric doctrines, were denounced and confined to the flames.

Messenger of Allah

At the same time that in the West the Church of Rome emerged triumphant, in the East arose a new prophet and Messenger of God. In the ancient land of Arabia, in fulfilment of age old prophecies, Muhammed began to proclaim complete surrender to the One God of all mankind. His message became known as Islam, the last of the great revealed religions. And after the manner of Moses and Jesus, the prophet Muhammed distinguished between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion. Being the last of all the celestial faiths, Islam contained the essential divine truths of all the earlier revelations.

In his youth Muhammed spent time in the desert conducting caravans from Mecca to Syria. Here, according to some, he first encountered seekers looking for the "original religion of Abraham." Later he began the practice of retiring each year to Mount Hira near Mecca for a time of meditation and prayer. During one of these periods he entered a level of higher consciousness and while in a sublime trance state the Archangel Gabriel

revealed to him the first chapter of the Holy Quran, the sacred book of Islam and the direct Word of Allah (God).

At first Muhammed confided his experience only to a small group of close associates. Soon, an inner circle or secret school of disciples began to form around him, and in time they publicly proclaimed the exoteric message of surrender to Allah. Prophet Muhammed never claimed to found a new religion. In fact, he always said he was just continuing the primordial tradition that was working long before him. Like Moses and Jesus, Muhammed came in a long line of prophets who from time to time delivered to their people, under divine inspiration, the same revelation of God's nature and of Man's relationship to Him, as had been given to Adam. Muhammed came to reinstate this eternal pristine message that had been obscured by ignorance, idolatry, and used to enslave rather than liberate humanity. From this perspective the Holy Quran teaches the primordial unity of all religions and the common origin of each. It affirms that there is not a nation or people to whom a prophet has not been sent.

The central message of Islam is the declaration of faith (shahada): "There is no god but God [Allah] and Muhammad is the Messenger of God [Allah]." From the esoteric perspective this is also understood as "there is no reality except Reality". The exoteric practice is summed up in the 'Five Pillars of Islam'. These are Faith, Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving and Pilgrimage.

The Holy Quran has both an exoteric (zahir - the outer or apparent) meaning and an esoteric (batin - the inner or secret) meaning. Within Islamic esotericism, as in the original Mosaic and Christian revelations, knowledge is made accessible depending on the integrity and cognitive ability of its recipients, with the consequence of requiring the withholding of information from the uninitiated. This is why there has always been a gradual unveiling or communication of spiritual truths to mankind. What Muslim esotericists call the "wisdom of gradualness" (hikmat at-tadrij).

Spiritual knowledge, states a highly regarded Islamic esoteric text, is like food and light:

Just as a small child needs to be fed gradually, stage by stage, until it reaches adolescence, so that it may not eat something detrimental to its constitution, and just as light is appropriate only to persons with open, healthy and strong eyes, so that a person whose eyes have been shut, or had just emerged from darkness, will be severely dazzled by daylight, in the same way, those who get hold of this Letter should communicate it only to those who are in need of it.

Christian mystics travelled to Arabia seeking a genuine spiritual Master Teacher. In fact, mystics surrounded Muhammed during his life. These Companions, as they are known, he privately instructed in the doctrines of Islamic esotericism. Two of these Companions, the Prophet Muhammed's close friend Abu Bakr and his son-in-law Ali, later inspired their own Orders.

Although Muhammed, as the last of the prophets, was the repository of a complete treasure of precepts, Muslim tradition asserts he publicly declared only some of them, leaving the rest undeclared. This was due either to their inapplicability at the time, or because of the expediency of disseminating them in that particular period of history. It is said even Prophet Muhammed himself mentioned certain secret moments of revelation, saying, "If the Muslims knew of them, they would stone me." He therefore entrusted the undeclared precepts to the Companions and through them to the worthy of succeeding generations so that they would progressively reveal them at appropriate junctures according to their wisdom, whether by inferring the particular from the absolute, or the concrete from the abstract.

After the death of Prophet Muhammed in 632 A.D., the Companions, particularly Abu Bakr, Ali and Salman al-Farisi, continued to preserve the esoteric tradition within the exoteric faith of Islam. Abu Bakr becoming the first Caliph, leader of the Muslim community. However in time, just as Muhammed had warned before his death, the thirst for power and political intrigue soon caused strife and division among the Muslims. The mighty Islamic empire became divided as positions of authority were usurped by individuals bereft of spiritual understanding. Those who seized power and wealth did so in the name of the prophet and the exoteric creed of Islam. The outer creed represented by the law (sharia), the accumulated customs of the Prophet (hadith), and a literal reading of the Quran, emerged as 'orthodox' Islam. Again, exotericism appeared to vanquish esotericism. Many Muslim initiates, custodians of esoteric wisdom, went into hiding or exile. Yet a number of Muslim spiritual teachers, considered by the people to be saints, did not conceal the fact they had been initiated by members of a school or brotherhood (tariqah) founded by one of the Companions.

The Sufis

Our cause is the truth of truth. It is the exoteric, the esoteric of the exoteric and the esoteric of the esoteric. It is the secret of the secret; it is the secret of that which remains wrapped in secret.
- **Hadith of the Sixth Imam**

At the end of the eighth century and the beginning of the ninth century, many Muslims who followed the spiritual path openly declared their connection with Islamic esotericism. They divulged truths based on spiritual experience that, because of their outward appearance, brought on them the condemnation of orthodox Islamic jurists and theologians. Some were imprisoned, flogged, and even killed. Historically, the practitioners of esotericism were associated with the descendants of the family of Prophet Muhammed. Ali, Muhammed's son-in-law, being universally regarded as the fountainhead of esoteric knowledge. The relationship between the Prophet Muhammed and Ali, symbolic of the exoteric form and the esoteric core of divine religion. This is similar to the Christian Gnostic idea of the relationship between Jesus, representing the exoteric, and the beloved disciple John to whom the esoteric doctrine was divulged.

Over time, from this Islamic esoteric tradition, eventually emerged distinct Muslim groups such as the Fatimids, Ismailis, Nusairi [Alawis], etc. Certain mystical brotherhoods and Orders formed within Muslim communities and became known as Sufis, the mystics or esotericists. It is commonly thought the word Sufi comes from the Arabic word suf ('wool'); the rough woollen clothing worn by early ascetics to demonstrate their detachment from the world.

The Sufi appeal and ".strength lay in the satisfaction which it gave to the religious instincts of the people, instincts which were to some extent chilled and starved by the abstract and impersonal teachings of the orthodox and found relief in the more directly personal and emotional religious approach of the Sufis."⁹ Clearly, the growth of Sufism was in response to the legalism of orthodox Islamic exoteric practice and the dry intellectualism of the mainstream Muslim thinkers.

The Sufi, like all genuine mystics, aims for a glimpse of the Eternal while still trapped by life in this world. To achieve such a personal encounter with their Divine Beloved, "the Sufis laid out the 'path' (tariqah) that would lead to gnosis (marifah) or mystic knowledge of the Lord. The 'path' of ascension to divine union with God passes through stages known commonly as 'stations' or 'states': the last stage is that of fana, or passing away in God, which is the ultimate desire of a successful mystic. The Sufi at this point ceases to be aware of his physical identity even though he continues to exist as an individual."¹⁰

Although the majority of Sufi Orders meticulously observe the Islamic law (Sharia), they believe it to be only the outer clothing or external shell protecting the core, the esoteric truth. The Holy Quran calls those who know the essence of things "the possessors of the kernels." The Sufis liken esoteric wisdom to a "kernel" hidden within a shell. Exoteric Islam, experienced as a traditional way of life, creates the environment, the culture, the community, and necessary psychological orientation, from which certain individuals are called to initiation into esotericism. The authentic gnostic and mystic is always a minority when compared to the great mass of humanity who are fully satisfied with exoteric religion.

The Sufi schools and brotherhoods are renowned for propagating Islam throughout the world. Their piety, deep spirituality and tolerance, enabled the Sufis to attract a large following. As one author says:

The brotherhoods rendered their incalculable, monumental services to Islam in three different ways: they prevented Islam from becoming a cold and formal doctrine, keeping it alive as an intimate, compassionate faith; they were mainly responsible for spreading the faith in east Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; and they were among the foremost leaders in Islam's military and political battles against the encroaching power of the Christian West.¹¹

By the tenth century, descendants of the Prophet Muhammed through his daughter Fatimah, and her husband Ali, established the Fatimid empire over

a large part of North Africa. Many Muslims saw this as a fulfilment of a prediction attributed to the Prophet that a time would come in which "the Sun [of Islam] would rise in the West." Prior to accepting Islam, North Africa had been home to a number of Gnostic communities. One historian speculates the Fatimid's esoteric doctrines were widely received by the North African tribes "due to the fact that [they were called] to a contemporary version of their old beliefs, now clothed in the form of the newly dominant religion."¹² The dynasty's enemies even claimed the Fatimids were the philosophical descendants of Bardesane, the renowned Gnostic Christian Master Teacher.

The Fatimids ushered in a 'golden age' of Islam. They established the city of Cairo in Egypt, calling it: "The Victorious City of the Exalter of the Divine Religion". From the new capital the empire grew to include Palestine. The public devotions of the Fatimids differed very little from the orthodox Muslims. Esoteric teachings being restricted to those of the community able to receive them. A proper understanding of their books required special education and years of training. At Cairo the Fatimids established the Grand House of Wisdom (Darul Hikmet) for the training of missionaries (dais) skilled in the propagation of Islamic esoteric philosophy.

Students came from all over the Orient to the House of Wisdom for instruction and initiation. Twice a week, every Monday and Wednesday, the Grand Prior convened meetings, which were frequented by adepts dressed in white. These gatherings were named 'philosophical conferences' (Majalis-al-Hikmet). The Fatimid Caliph was also the Grand Master of the House of Wisdom. One of the students who attended was Hasan Sabbah. On return to his native Persia, he formed the so called 'Assassins' with headquarters at the mountain monastery-fortress of Alamut.

From North Africa the Fatimid rulers despatched missionaries (dais) throughout the known world. Under cover they even infiltrated Christian Europe. Accomplished in the esoteric doctrine, the dais could use any outer form - be it artistic, scientific, religious or secular - to impart universal and perennial truths. Even poetry, for which the Sufis are renowned, could be used to transfer spiritual insights from one culture or religion to another. Their use of allegory and cipher amounted to a secret language, the universal language of initiates. Together with wandering Sufis, they transmitted ancient wisdom to Europe. A well-known ninth century Celtic cross bearing the Islamic Arabic inscription Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim ("In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful), suggests that the Celts were in close contact with North African Moorish initiates. The Fatimids also maintained communication with Persia, Turkestan and India through the secret networks of the dais.

So influential was the Fatimid House of Wisdom that, centuries later, European Freemasons copied its structure. In **A Short History of the Saracens**, the Muslim historian Ameer Ali says: "the account of the different degrees of initiation adopted in the [House of Wisdom] forms an invaluable record. In fact, the [House of Wisdom] at Cairo became the model of all the

[Freemasonic] Lodges created in Christendom". By the time of the Fatimid empire's demise in the twelfth century it was famous for its tolerance, prosperity, love of knowledge and great cultural achievements. The Fatimids founded the renowned al-Azhar University, today the most venerable orthodox institution in the Muslim world.

The spectacular rise of the Fatimids in North Africa, together with the influence of their underground networks, provoked the largely orthodox Abbasid rulers in Mesopotamia to launch a campaign against 'heresy'. With the backing of the hyper-orthodox scholars and the legalists of exoteric religion, Mansur al-Hallaj, the revered Muslim esotericist and Sufi saint, was condemned to death. Hallaj had penetrated the outer shell that is exoteric Islam, to reveal the inner core. He realised illumination, fana, or what the Sufi's know as 'death to one's self' and 'passing away in the Divine Beloved,' exclaiming:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is.
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
When thou seest me thou seest Him,
And when thou seest Him, thou seest us both.

Viewed from the perspective of mainstream Islamic law, such a declaration is indeed shocking and forbidden. However, understood esoterically it is nothing less than the sentiment of an illumined mystic. Hallaj further offended the legalists with such statements as:

To claim to know Him is ignorance, to persist in serving Him is disrespectful, to forbid yourself to struggle with him is folly, to allow yourself to be misled by his peace is stupid, to discourse on his attributes is to lose the way.

The public execution of Hallaj in Baghdad (922 AD) attracted large and sympathetic crowds. He was first scourged, gibbeted, and finally decapitated. As he died, he prayed for mercy for his executioners. Years after his murder he was openly hailed by Sufis, dissident Muslims, and even some orthodox writers, as a martyr of exoteric incomprehension.

For many years Hallaj had travelled widely in Persia, India and as far as the borders of China. This has led some scholars to speculate that Hallaj presided over a secret network of missionaries and wandering Sufis.

Three decades after Mansour al-Hallaj stood upon the gallows in Baghdad, a secret society emerged in the Iraqi city of Basra. Like the Fatimids, the group, known as the Brethren of Purity (Ikwan as-Safa), dedicated themselves to the pursuit of science as well as political action. They published a veritable encyclopedia of existing knowledge. Their works covered such subjects as philosophy, theology, astrology, metaphysics, cosmology, and the natural sciences, including botany and zoology. The brotherhood recognised truth wherever found, accepting the wisdom in other religions. A seeker of truth must "shun no science, scorn no book, nor cling fanatically to a single creed." They attempted to compile a common

doctrine of Islamic esotericism beginning with self-knowledge and the emancipation of the soul from materialism leading to a return to God. The first letter of the brotherhood restated the Sufi axiom: "He who knows himself, knows his Lord". Condemned as 'heretical' and burnt by the authorities, their writings enjoyed a wide influence, even reaching Europe in the Middle Ages.

Knowledge Is Power

Traditional esotericism is at one and the same time doctrine and practice. It implies for the whole of the being, body, soul and spirit, a fundamentally different way of existence.¹³

Running through all Western culture are the threads of an 'underground' Primordial Tradition. In our current Dark Age of banality and materialism this great spiritual tradition is well concealed. That which in the West most often tries to pass itself off as 'secret', 'occult', or 'esoteric' knowledge is at best vain foolishness, at worst a dangerous counterfeit, a deadly parody of the universal supreme Truth. Nevertheless all things have their reason for being. Thus, as James Webb observed:

..if a newcomer to the vast quantity of occult literature begins browsing at random, puzzlement and impatience will soon be his lot; for he will find jumbled together the droppings of all cultures, and occasional fragments of philosophy perhaps profound but almost certainly subversive to right living in the society in which he finds himself. The occult is rejected knowledge: that is, an Underground whose basic unity is that of Opposition to an establishment of Powers That Are.¹⁴

For every fragment of truth there is a veritable cloud of confusion, ignorant speculation and falsity. In the present age of strife, this confusion, ignorance and falsehood is important because it permits the genuine Ancient Secret Tradition to remain hidden and protected.

On the eve of the twenty first century we do not need ever more 'new truths' but a conception that allows a rediscovery of that Primordial Revelation forgotten or parodied by the ignorant. For, as the Sufis say, "everything that comes from the Eternal One yearns to return to Him."

Footnotes

1. Joscelyn Godwin, The Theosophical Enlightenment
2. James Webb, The Occult Underground
3. Manly P. Hall, The Secret Teachings of All Ages
4. Napoleon and the Awakening of Europe
5. Joscelyn Godwin, Ibid
6. John P. Deveney, Paschal Beverly Randolph A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician
7. Peter Lamborn Wilson, Sacred Drift, Essays on the Margins of Islam
8. Luc Benoist, The Esoteric Path

9. H.A.R. Gibb, Modern Trends in Islam
10. Caesar E. Farah, Islam
11. G.H. Jansen, Militant Islam
12. Cyril Glasse, The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam
13. R. Abellio, The End of Esotericism

James Webb, Ibid