

CHAPTER 15

The Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā')

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INTRODUCTION: THE CAULDRON OF SYNCRETISM

The Brethren of Purity, or Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' as they are called in Arabic, hold a certain place in the affections and interests of those who have studied the intellectual development of Arabic and Islamic thought. They are particularly beloved by the Ismā'īlīs who claim them as their own (see Netton (1982): 95–104). They continue to intrigue because of the synthetic quality of their thought and the mystery of their identity and place of origin. This chapter will concentrate principally on the former and only briefly refer to the latter. Their thought is indeed worthy of more than superficial study, for the Brethren are as famed in the Middle East as Hegel, Kant and Voltaire in the West. Their self-designation as "Sleepers in the cave of our father Adam" (R, 4: 18), clearly deriving from the Qur'ān and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus legend, certainly reflects the mystery of their identity. And while there are some things that do remain unclear about their thought – for example, were they, or were they not, Ismā'īlīs? – there is much that may be said with satisfaction and positive conviction about that thought. In particular, while it would be unfair and unjust to characterize it as a total syncretism, there is no doubting the impact of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, and especially Plotinus, on the philosophy of the Brethren of Purity. Such elements will be surveyed in this chapter.

A useful starting point in any analysis of this philosophy is the City of Basrah in southern Iraq. Like that philosophy it was – and is – open to much outside contact and influence. In the forefront of the news in recent times because of the 1980s Iran–Iraq War and the 1991 Persian

Gulf War, it was famed in the Middle Ages as a cradle of Arabic philology. It was home to a huge variety of immigrants from areas as diverse as Sind, India and Malaya. Its commercial and financial acumen made it the medieval equivalent of London or Tokyo today with all the cosmopolitan overtones which mention of such cities implies. And we start with reference to the city of Basrah because most scholars believe that this was the Brethren's home. "The rest", as I have put it elsewhere, "must be conjecture. Arabic sources differ over their individual names and perhaps it is a successful measure of the secrecy which they sought for themselves in their age that we know so little about their lives in our own. Like the deserted camp of the beloved in early Arabic poetry, the traces of their passage have become faint and shadowy" (Netton (1982): 1).

We will not, therefore, agonize here over the precise identities of these philosophers, nor their Age beyond situating them loosely in the tenth or eleventh century A.D. We may, however, with some certainty, reject from the start the extraordinary idea that the real author of the writings of the Brethren of Purity, their *Epistles* (*Rasā'il*), was the fourth Islamic Caliph 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), or the sixth Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765).

The Brethren of Purity produced as their *magnum opus* what was gathered into a veritable encyclopedia, a corpus of fifty-two *Epistles* of varying length and quality which survey a huge range of subjects ranging from music to magic. They are heavily didactic in tone and highly eclectic in content, providing both a pedagogical and a cultural mirror of their Age and its diverse philosophies and creeds. The *Epistles* themselves nearly divide into four main parts: fourteen focus on the mathematical sciences, seventeen deal with the natural sciences, ten with the psychological and intellectual sciences, and eleven conclude the latest four-volume Arabic edition by concentrating on what are called metaphysics or the theological sciences. A key aspect of the *Epistles* is its central section featuring a long debate between humans and delegates from the animal kingdom; this fills much of the twenty-second *Epistle* which goes by the name of *On How the Animals and their Kinds are Formed* (Netton (1982): 2). It has been magisterially surveyed, analysed and translated by L. E. Goodman (1978).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1978: 39) has warned that "the sources of the Ikhwān should not, however, be considered solely as historical texts". He translates part of a passage (R, 4: 42), in which "they themselves inform the reader of the universality of their sources, which include Revelation and Nature in addition to written texts", as follows:

We have drawn our knowledge from four books. The first is composed of the mathematical and natural sciences established by the sages and philosophers. The second consists of the revealed

books of the Torah, the Gospels and the Qur'ān and the other Tablets brought by the prophets through angelic Revelation. The third is the books of Nature which are the ideas [*suwar*] in the Platonic sense of the forms [*ashkāl*] of creatures actually existing, from the composition of the celestial spheres, the division of the Zodiac, the movement of the stars, and so on . . . to the transformation of the elements, the production of the members of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and the rich variety of human industry . . . The fourth consists of the Divine books which touch only the purified men and which are the angels who are in intimacy with the chosen beings, the noble and the purified souls . . .

We should not, therefore, lose sight of the sheer diversity of source material drawn upon by the Brethren of Purity, even though in this chapter we will restrict ourselves to the more "philosophical" elements of those sources. Moreover, all that follows presupposes a background or, to put it another way, a cauldron of syncretism, a Middle Eastern milieu familiar with the thought of both Aristotle and Plotinus which it absorbs but dresses in its own forms, not without some change, from much (but by no means all) of the translated Aristotelian corpus. We note, finally, the existence in the background of pseudo-Aristotelian texts, like the notorious *Theologia Aristotelis*, which had far more in common with the philosophy of Plotinus than that of the Stagirite (see Netton (1989): 12–13). With all this, it is small wonder that the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity have been characterized as syncretic.

~ PYTHAGORAS: ~ PHILOSOPHY AND NUMBER ~

Even the most cursory reading of the *Epistles* highlights the Brethren's devotion to number. It is good that one study mathematics and number before other (higher) branches of knowledge like physics, logic and divinity (R, 1: 49). The Brethren held "the Pythagorean belief that the nature of created things accords with the nature of number" and stated: "This is the school of thought [*madhhab*] of our Ikhwan" (Netton (1982): 10). They also followed the Pythagoreans in their devotion to *certain* numbers: in particular the Brethren manifested a particular reverence for the number four, a reverence which transcended the sphere of pure mathematics: they drew attention, for example, to the four seasons, four winds, four directions and four Empedoclean elements. There were four natures and four humours. The lute had four strings and even matter was divisible into four types. The reasoning behind such veneration for this particular

number is not hard to find: God created "most things in groups of four and . . . natural matters are arranged in fours principally to correspond to, or harmonise with, the four spiritual principles which rank above them, consisting of the Creator, the Universal Intellect, the Universal Soul and Prime Matter" (Netton (1982): 11).

For the Brethren one could learn about God's unity by knowing something of number and they stated that Pythagoras held that the second led to the first (R, 3: 200). Yet with all their devotion to number the Brethren managed to avoid the prime Pythagorean error, noted by Aristotle, in which a number and the thing(s) numbered were confused. They also rejected Pythagorean notions of transmigration, holding rather that purification achieved in a single life on earth gained humans admission to Paradise (Netton (1982): 12–14).

~ PLATO: ~ PHILOSOPHY AND THE HERO ~

Despite some references there is no deep discussion of, or involvement with, the Platonic Forms or "Ideas" (*ideai*) in the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity. These *Epistles* can in no way be described as Platonic. What the Brethren do stress very powerfully, however, is their conception of the Platonic philosopher as hero. In passages which show some familiarity with at least the outlines of the *Phaedo* and *Crito* dialogues, Socrates is held up for admiration and respect as a great philosopher who knows how to die bravely. It is also interesting that the Brethren orient their description of Socrates' death scene towards their own doctrines. Terminology is put into Socrates' mouth which is heavily reminiscent of the Brethren's own chosen hierarchy (Netton (1982): 16–19). Plato's own view that the body was an impediment to the achieving of spiritual perfection was also shared by the Brethren of Purity, but the latter rejected Plato's epistemology with its suspicion of sensory perception. The Brethren "explain carefully that the method of instruction should be through the senses, then by the intellect and finally by logical deduction; but without the senses one can know nothing" (R, 3: 424). The contrast between this view and that of Plato could not be more apparent (Netton (1982): 17–18).

~ ARISTOTLE: PHILOSOPHY. ~ DEFINITION AND STRUCTURE ~

Loosely speaking, from a philosophical point of view, we can say that the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity rest on twin foundations: Aristotelianism

and Neoplatonism. What must be enunciated and stressed right at the beginning however, in any coverage of either the Aristotelianism or the Neoplatonism of the Brethren is that they used the doctrines of Aristotle and Plotinus and shaped them in accordance with their own beliefs, not always producing a hybrid which either Aristotle or Plotinus would have recognized.

That the Brethren respected Aristotle is not hard to prove. Quite apart from the influence of the Stagirite on the content and terminology of their *Epistles*, the Brethren produced "a story about Muḥammad in which the Prophet claims that, had Aristotle lived to know the Islamic message brought by him, the Greek philosopher would have undoubtedly been converted to Islam" (R, 4: 179; Netton (1982): 19).

Apart from direct references to, and *Epistles* based upon, several of Aristotle's major treatises (see especially Netton (1982): 115 n. 79), the primary contribution of Aristotle to the writings of the Brethren was in the field of metaphysical terminology, an area frequently invaded by the terminology of Neoplatonism. Thus we find substance and accident, matter and form, potentiality and actuality, and many other Aristotelian terms being peddled throughout the text of the Brethren. Two examples must suffice here of the way in which the basic terms of Aristotle were Neoplatonized: the first relates to Aristotle's Classical four causes:

Of the four causes of plants, two are recognizably Aristotelian: the material cause of plants is the . . . four elements while the final cause is the provision of nourishment for animals; but the efficient cause is the powers of the Universal Soul and the formal cause is linked with astral reasons involving a lengthy explanation.

(R, 2: 155; Netton (1982): 25)

My second example illustrates what the Brethren did with Aristotle's categories. If hierarchy, division and emanation may be said to be the key features of Neoplatonism, then the first two at least are apparent in full measure in the following:

substance divided first into its corporeal [*jusmānī*] and spiritual [*rūḥānī*] aspects. Corporeal substance then further divided into that which pertained to the celestial sphere [*ṣalākī*] and the natural sphere [*ṭabī'ī*], and so on outwards until a final division into animals born from the womb, those born from an egg, and those born from decayed matter, was reached. Quantity [*kamm*] was similarly divided into the separate [*munfaṣil*] and the linked [*muttaṣil*].

(R, 1: 408–9; Netton (1982): 37)

Most extraordinary perhaps of the metamorphoses which overtake Aristotle's terms is the following, in which form is described in terms of substance:

The Ikhwān wrote: Know that form [*al-ṣūrah*] is of two kinds: constituting [*muqawwimah*] and completing [*mutammimah*]. The scholars called constituting forms substances [*jawāhir*] and completing forms accidents [*a'rāḍ*].

(R, 1: 401; Netton (1982): 45)

~ PLOTINUS: PHILOSOPHY, EMANATION AND HIERARCHY ~

The principal focal point in any study of the *Rasā'il* or *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity must be their Neoplatonism which pervades the entire text. A survey of the Brethren's use of the main features of this doctrine will therefore here conclude this chapter.

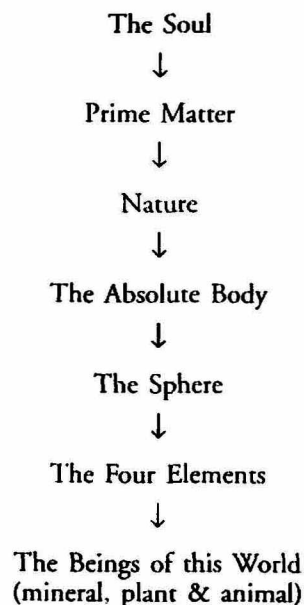
Both emanation and hierarchy, those key features of classical Neoplatonism, figure prominently in the thought of the Brethren of Purity. Making use of a sun simile, which has analogies with an earlier comparison employed by Plotinus, the Brethren tell

how the generosity and virtues which were in God emanated [*aḥādah*] from Him "by the necessity of wisdom [*bi-wājib al-ḥikmah*]" in the same fashion that light and brightness emanated from the eye of the sun. The first product of this unbroken emanation [*ṣayḍ*] was called the Active Intellect, from which emanated, in turn, the Passive Intellect [*al-Aql al-munfa'il*] or Universal Soul; from the latter emanated Prime Matter.

(Netton (1982): 35)

However, a major difference between Plotinus and the Brethren of Purity is instantly perceptible in the latter's hierarchy of being. Plotinus postulated a relatively "simple" structure, at least in its composition if not in its theological elaboration, of One, Intellect and Soul. The Brethren enlarged this hierarchy of being into a ninefold emanationist structure comprising:

The Creator
↓
The Intellect
↓



(R, 1: 54, R, 3: 56, 181)

It seems that in such complexity and multiplication of hypostases, the spirits of the later Neoplatonic masters like Iamblichus (c. A.D. 250–c. 326) and Proclus (A.D. 412–85) are abroad. And it is clear from the briefest study of the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity that the concepts of emanation and hierarchy dominate the entire text in a profound and penetrating fashion, even invading and “Neoplatonizing” Aristotle’s own categories (see Netton (1982): 36–7). As for their view of God, it is obvious that the Brethren perceived Him in two different and unharmonized ways: on the one hand, God takes on many of the classical Neoplatonic characteristics like unknowableness; on the other, elsewhere in the text, He is the traditional Qur’ānic Deity, acting in a recognizable Islamic fashion. No specific attempt is made by the Brethren to reconcile what are often opposing or contradictory views of Divinity (see Netton (1982): 39–42).

The Neoplatonism of the *Epistles* produced by the Brethren of Purity cannot be overemphasized. Its permeation of these writings, together with the Aristotelian and other elements, makes their corpus one of the most syncretic known in the history of the intellectual development of Islamic thought. That said however, we must not leave their writings giving the impression that they constitute a total unoriginal syncretism and nothing else. The *Epistles* are not simply a sum total of influences and no more. The reality is much more subtle, as I hope will be apparent

from the concluding paragraphs. The syncretism probably explains some of the contradictions in their text; but their intention highlights their true originality.

What the Brethren of Purity were really intent upon, and the goal towards which they employed every Islamic and un-Islamic doctrine which they could muster, was salvation to be achieved by purification in this life. As I have summarized it elsewhere:

They were Neoplatonic teachers intent on, and infatuated with, the propagation of a doctrine of purity, achieved through asceticism, self-denial and righteous living, as a passport for entry to the Islamic Heaven. The pillars of this doctrine were tolerance, mutual help [*ta’āwun*] and a philosophy of eclecticism *which utilised any text which might bolster their own teaching.*

(my italics: Netton (1982): 108)

Were the Brethren of Purity really Muslims? The point can be argued both ways and must depend on how exclusivist or inclusivist an image one has of the Islamic religion anyway (see Netton (1982): 106). Perhaps a neat way of characterizing them, or summing them up, is to describe the Brethren as “Wisdom Muslims” (Netton (1981): 67). They had an immense veneration for knowledge and wisdom. Revering the intellect they often despised the body in a truly ascetic and Platonic fashion (*ibid.*: 66). Their desire for thoroughness in thought, and support for their ideas, led them to a thorough eclecticism which sometimes embraced the Christian and the Indian as well as the further reaches of mathematics. Were they really philosophers or mere intellectual magpies without a system? If one defines a philosopher according to the actual etymological sense of that word, then the answer must be a resounding “yes”. They may not have produced a single “tidy” system but neither did Wittgenstein! Their text may appear sometimes to be shot through with contradictions but there is no doubting that it is underpinned by a genuine philosophical and theological stance, that of salvation via asceticism and wisdom.

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IN: HISTORY OF ISLAMIC
PHILOSOPHY I