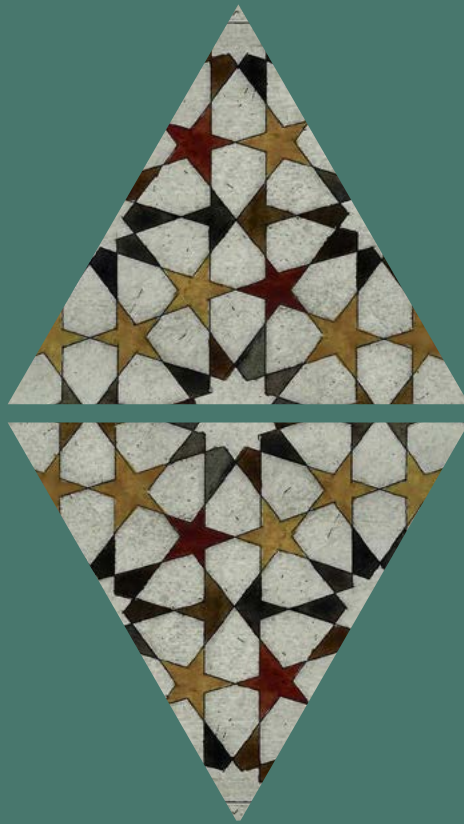


Correspondences

7.1 (2019)

Special issue
Islamic Esotericism



Guest editor
Liana Saif

Journal for the Study of Esotericism

Correspondences

7.1

Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism*

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Frontispiece: *Tenfold Star and Polygon Composition*, copper plate etching print with natural colour pigment by Dr. Katya Nosyreva, <https://www.katyanosyreva.com/>

Layout by Studio Sinjin Li, <https://sinjinli.com>

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ISSN 2053-7158 (Online)

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What is Islamic Esotericism?*

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Introduction

In the last few years, attention to Islamic forms of esotericism has become more pronounced in the field of Western esotericism as a repercussion of the problematisation of its implied regional and cultural demarcations, and also as an effect of the promotion of global perspectives. The instability of “West” and “Western” as regional and cultural categories and the question of their usefulness have been discussed by many scholars, involving a rethinking of the paradigms of comparison between Western and Islamic esotericisms.¹ However, the fruitfulness of a comparative endeavour is stipulated by a preliminary outlining of Islamic esotericism, which has not been systematically undertaken yet. Therefore, this article aims to prepare the grounds for more discerning comparative

1. Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 3–33; Granholm, “Locating the West,” 17–36; and Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah,” 151–66.

* I am grateful to Mark Sedgwick for supporting this special issue, and this article in particular, and for all the members of the European Network of the Study of Islam and Esotericism whose engagement with the ideas in this article has been constructive and illuminating. I am also indebted to Wouter Hanegraaff for making it possible for me to be involved in discussions and events, formal and informal, within the University of Amsterdam’s “Western Esotericism” program, ESSWE and related events. This has been a primary incentive for writing this article, in order for me to participate most fruitfully in the field. I would like to acknowledge Alexander Knysh and Michael Bergunder for reviewing drafts of this article, a generosity that helped me refine my arguments, methods, and sources. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Aren Roukema and Allan Kilner-Johnson for their enthusiasm for this special issue and their patience, in addition to everyone involved in the journal. I am thankful for Julian Strube’s valuable comments and invaluable support. Finally, I have received incredible encouragement from Rosalie Basten for which I am forever grateful.

approaches by setting up a theoretical framework for what can be called Islamic esotericism based on etymological and historical justifications. I propose assessing any Islamic esoteric current according to two epistemological paradigms; namely, intellectual or revelatory approaches to hidden phenomena (natural, celestial and divine), which intersect with social orientations perceived in personal and/or communal pieties. Special attention will be given to two periods when the concept of *bāṭiniyya*, translatable as esotericism, was catalysed. The first is between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, a period that witnessed a paradigm shift due to the development and institutionalisation of Sufism, which challenged intellectual and philosophical investigation of hidden realities, instead touting revelation as the only true way. The second is the early to mid- twentieth century when the term *ésotérisme islamique* emerged in the Traditionalist milieu. The chronological jump is justified here by, first, admitting that as a medievalist primarily, I have been analysing conceptions and the epistemes under which they were formulated as they manifest in texts from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, but also as they were reformulated and negotiated in texts from later periods. These influential medieval conceptions had a career of reception and were reconstituted according to new social, political and intellectual developments and geographical settings. Nevertheless, this article is in the big picture an invitation to explore the various forms of Islamic esotericism in different periods and regions. It does not pretend to be a complete survey.

From a genealogical perspective, the Traditionalists came up with the term “Islamic esotericism,” adopting and negotiating esoteric ideas from Islamic historical sources, including medieval ones. The Traditionalist conceptualisation drew on and became part of a history of reformulation and reconstitution of similar concerns revolving around *bāṭin* as esoteric and *bāṭiniyya* as esotericism that began in the medieval period. The objective of my own “interference” in this historical discourse is to begin creating a theoretically and historically legitimate platform for the study of Islamic esotericism based on a theoretical blueprint that is open for revision by the studies that it may inspire.

Before I delve into what Islamic esotericism is, I will highlight what it is not by looking at the ways that Islam has been discussed in the discourse of Western esotericism, which has successfully achieved what this article is aiming for, becoming a field. It is also important to do so since Islam is often the first to be called upon in the problematisation of Western esotericism as an academic construct and as a historical movement that, in various currents, embraced or reacted to the “East” generally, and Islam especially. I highlight the reduction of Islamic esotericism to a perennialist view of Sufism and Illuminationist philosophy, and then propose a perspective, preparatory to comparative endeavours, that is conscious of the areas of entanglement between Western esotericism and Islamic esotericism.

I. The Globalisation of Esotericism and Islam

The debate of globalising esotericism often begins with pointing out the conspicuous absence of other cultures and societies in the narrative of Western esotericism as formulated in the seminal works of Antoine Faivre, especially *Access to Western Esotericism*. The cause of this is his belief that esotericism is a Western phenomenon that took formal shape in the Renaissance.² He is wary of any notion of a universal esotericism that may result from a religionist attitude; that is the meta-empirical perspective of the believer which contrasts with the methodological agnosticism of the scholar.³ He stresses, “to be sure, there is perhaps ‘some esotericism’ in other cultural terrains (e.g. ancient Egypt, Far East, Amerindian civilisations, etc.), and the temptation to apprehend a ‘universal’ esotericism, to seek out its probable invariants is understandable.”⁴

Naturally then, Faivre does not say much about “Islamic esotericism” real or imagined. Nevertheless, in the bibliographical guide a small section is included entitled “esotericism and Islam” where he lists authorities on “Arab

2. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 3.

3. For the application of this in the definition of esotericism see Hanegraaff, “Empirical Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism,” 99–129.

4. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 17.

esotericism.” This bibliography comprises seven works by Henry Corbin, four by Mohammad Amir-Moezzi, and works by William Chittick, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Pierre Lory, Fuat Sezgin and Manfred Ullmann. The prominence of Corbin and the inclusion of Chittick and Nasr is indicative of an adherence to a “Westernist” attitude, since these authors represented in their works a form of universalism directed and influenced by Western Traditionalist and perennialist perspectives.⁵ This is explicit in Faivre’s discussion of “imagination and mediation,” the third out of four primary criteria of Western esotericism. Without delving into the oft-discussed problematics of his criteria, it is worth noting that Faivre references Henry Corbin’s concept of *mundus imaginalis*, which he describes as “an Arabic influence (Avicenna, Sohrawardi, Ibn Arabi) [that] was able to exert a determinative influence here in the West.”⁶ The three mentioned here are the Muslim “sweethearts” of perennial philosophy. As will be later shown, this is a persistent reduction of Islamic esotericism. Furthermore, in a note on Corbin, Faivre writes, “In this area, H. Corbin is the principal reference author. Reading his works not only allows us into Shiite esotericism, but also helps us to better understand Judeo-Christian esotericism, especially since the author himself never missed the opportunity to establish discerning connections. All of his work should be cited.”⁷ Despite the above-mentioned reductionism, credit must be given to Faivre’s implicit invitation to look at Islamic esotericism as the other side of the story of Western esotericism, something that is often overlooked by his critics as we shall see below.

Accepting Western esotericism as “a modern scholarly construct,” without denying any reality to the field,⁸ Wouter Hanegraaff echoes Faivre when he admits

5. Knysh, *Sufism*, 39; Ernst, “Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy, and Islamic Studies,” 176–81; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 157. Corbin and Chittick did so in the context of Eranos (for its perennial commitment see Hakl, *Eranos*, 221, 254; Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 20–35; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 153–57.

6. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 12–13.

7. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 338.

8. Hanegraaff, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 3–4.

that “Western esotericism must have its parallels in the East. The logical result of such a perspective is that the study of ‘esotericism’ turns into a form of comparative religious studies that seeks to discover the universalia of ‘inner’ religion world-wide.” The religionist model and its resulting notion of “general world-wide ‘esotericism’” cannot coincide with the study of Western esotericism from the religious studies perspective that rejects that model. It seems, then, that an academic global study of Islamic esotericism is caught between a pestle and a mortar, religionism and non-existence. Though Hanegraaff stresses “the importance of inter-confessional exchange and ‘discursive transfer’ across cultures,” he adds that “the point should not be exaggerated. It still remains the case that Jewish and Islamic forms of ‘esotericism’ have emerged and developed as largely self-contained and relatively autonomous traditions, accessible during most of their histories only to pious Jews and Muslims within their own respective communities.”⁹

When it comes to Islam, this last claim has not been, and really cannot be, substantiated by any systematic study; there are no programs that are dedicated to the study of Islamic esotericism. More significantly, the very idea of “self-contained” traditions is problematic, when we consider the movement and translation of texts (Indian, Persian, Greek, Byzantine, etc.) in the Islamicate world, the movement of people (al-Andalus), and military expansion (Mongols, Turkic peoples, etc.). Moreover, to be part of esoterology it is not necessary, as this article will show, to reduce the conversation to discursive transfer. Nevertheless, the bypassing of the medieval period in the dominant grand narratives of Western esotericism, particularly as articulated in the works of Faivre, still diverted attention away from the cross-cultural transfer of ideas and practices that are central to the conceptualisation of Western esotericism, such as “gnosis,” the nature of semiological world-views, and occult philosophy.¹⁰ This article will show that Islamic esotericism (ar. *bāṭiniyya*) can exist independently from Western esotericism as

9. Hanegraaff, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 15.

10. Saif, *The Arabic Influences*, *passim*.

modern heuristic construct, yet its inclusion, though not exclusively, in the study of Western esotericism is extremely fruitful because of its entanglement with the *historical* currents that are being expressed by and negotiated within the *construct*.

Hanegraaff revisits the problem of West-centric perspectives in “The Globalisation of Esotericism.” He argues for a historically inherent “global” aspect to Western esotericism since from its conception in the early modern period, it resulted from an ahistorical view of the universal function of religions as maps for the same Truth.¹¹ Hanegraaff argues that this inherent “globalist” tendency of Western esotericism was also part and parcel of early modern Protestant polemics that contributed to the conceptualisation of esotericism as welcoming “pagan” heresies. In a way, this was continued by the Enlightenment thinkers’ opposition to “superstition” and its association with esotericism. He sees this as “our first instance of the globalization of ‘esotericism’ – although that particular term was not yet used at the time, and the valuation was still wholly negative.”¹² Furthermore, according to Hanegraaff, the globalisation of esotericism is evident in the nineteenth century, when “magic” and “occult” were reclaimed by “a new class of enthusiasts and practitioners as positive and superior human endeavours, encountered everywhere around the globe.”¹³ What Hanegraaff addresses here is the *universalistic* tendencies in the conceptualisation of Western esotericism by opponents and proponents. In reality, the former weaponised “paganism” and later “superstition” as tools for othering all those around the world who did not subscribe to the protestant ideology and European rationality respectively. The latter exoticised “the rest” of the world to reclaim authenticity for themselves. Such a universalism cannot be understood as globalisation. A globalist approach rejects traditional geographic units (“areas” and “civilisations”), and calls attention to zones of interaction which can be geographical but also chronological: where and when

11. Hanegraaff, “The Globalisation of Western Esotericism,” 57.

12. Hanegraaff, “The Globalisation of Western Esotericism,” 64–66.

13. Hanegraaff, “The Globalisation of Western Esotericism,” 68.

intellectual exchanges occurred and perhaps even contributed to the (re)shaping of global trends. Universalism in its positive or negative form whitewashes cultural variants and historical-political contexts; globalisation emphasises them and sheds light on the networks of association and reference between them.¹⁴ Notwithstanding this, as Hanegraaff emphasises in his article, a cultural and geographical expansion of the meaning of Western in Western esotericism is underway and the conversation is opening up.¹⁵

Inviting experts on Islamic contexts will enrich the conversation and we will be able to effectively witness the motion of currents that not only demonstrates exchanges of ideas but the ways whereby these exchanges become strategies of identity formation. “East” and “West” are always shifting in boundary and meaning, especially in the case of the Islamic and Christian ecumenes. Their identities are in part fashioned relative to one another; therefore, to set any cultural and religious borders is difficult.¹⁶ The interaction between them as powers competing for centuries over the legitimization of one version of the Abrahamic message, and proclaiming one religious narrative, allowed them to occupy common yet contested conceptual, ideological and geographical terrains, and esotericism is in there somewhere. Therefore, Hanegraaff is correct in pointing out that this has “highly sensitive political implications: you cannot think about the nature of ‘the West’ for very long – in fact, you probably cannot think about it *at all* – without coming face to face with the painful but unavoidable legacy of Western imperialism, colonialism, orientalism, racism, and so on.”¹⁷ These issues and their repercussions are crucial for the *historical* appraisal of Western and Islamic esotericisms which Hanegraaff and others are demanding.¹⁸

14. Hanegraaff, “The Globalisation of Western Esotericism,” 57–58.

15. Hanegraaff, “The Globalisation of Western Esotericism,” 61.

16. The case of medieval Spain: Tiezen (ed.), *Christian Identity amid Islam*; Tiezen, *Cross Veneration in the Medieval Islamic World*; The case of Czech identity: Lisy-Wagner, *Islam, Christianity and the Making of Czech Identity*.

17. Hanegraaff, “The Globalisation of Western Esotericism,” 60.

18. It must be made clear, that Wouter Hanegraaff has personally invited me to take part in several

Rejecting the singularisation of “Western” and “non-Western,” Kennet Granholm’s tactic is to divert the conversation from “how the esoteric has been othered” to “othering as an integral element of esoteric discourse itself.”¹⁹ Here he views the romanticisation of the esoteric Other as a type of “positive orientalism” which is contrasted with a “standard orientalism” that creates an exotic – perhaps exoteric – Other whose morals and manners are at odds with high European values.²⁰ According to Granholm, this began with what John Walbridge, followed by Hanegraaff and Dylan Burns, refers to as “Platonic Orientalism”: the fascination for an exoticised version of ancient Persia, Egypt and Chaldea among Platonic and Pythagorean philosophers,²¹ which continued in The Theosophical Society’s veneration of non-Western culture, particularly India. It was interrupted by nineteenth-century occultist movements that cultivated a Western tradition in opposition to the Theosophical Society. Nevertheless, “positive orientalism” is gleaned in Traditionalism and its followers who embraced Islam and Orthodox Christianity. It is still present in the New Age fascination with “Eastern Wisdom.”²² However, it was the nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultist movements that introduced the term “Western.” Granholm proceeds to show how late-modern societal processes of globalisation, detraditionalisation, increased pluralism and post-secular re-enchantment further complicate the already problematic issue of what is to be placed under the “Western” banner, concluding that it is best to avoid employing it as essentially as it has been in the field.²³

events, and has been keen, as are the organisers and members of ESSWE, to have Esotericism in Islam represented in the field. The European Network for the Study of Islamic Esotericism has been recently established by Mark Sedgwick, and I am one of the founding members.

19. Granholm, “Locating the West,” 22.

20. Granholm, “Locating the West,” 23.

21. Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East* 5-8; Hanegraaff, *Rejected Knowledge*, 12-16; Burns, “The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster,” 158-79.

22. Granholm, “Locating the West,” 23-24.

23. Granholm, “Locating the West,” 31.

Granhholm provides a useful outline of the forms of othering adopted by Western esotericists. It remains, however, unclear how “positive orientalism” challenges the qualifier. The sacralisation of the Orient is not an inclusive gesture, rather it is a product of the European imagination of the Orient as a mythologised land of mystery, secrets, and wisdom. Moreover, to qualify it as “positive” is precarious, since it overpasses real ideological topographies. Historically, Western esotericism has been largely dismissive of local variances of lived religions. It sees in them a degeneration of an apocryphal projection of a pure Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.²⁴ In at least its colonial manifestations, this esoteric orientalism demoted the beliefs, convictions, and practices of the majority of people, often deeming them superstitious and irrational, part of an “Islam” construed as a spiritually bereft “religion.” It perceived valuable expressions of esotericism in limited circles such as Sufi elites and poets, by generating apocryphal histories of ancient religions – prominently Persian, Chaldean, and Egyptian – that permeate the air of the Orient. At best it was something that inspired literary and visual motifs; at worst, it contributed to the dehumanisation of real people and marginalisation of their own esoteric practices such as popular *tasawwuf*.²⁵ Granhholm is indirectly alluding to the two trends of Orientalist engagement with esoteric currents that have been posited by Alexander Knysh in relation to Sufism. Knysh distinguishes between arm-chair academics who were mainly philologists and translators more attentive to classical Sufi texts, and a pragmatic colonial administrative power that focused on the social aspect of Sufism. The former were more empathetic with their subjects and the latter were less so if one follows Edward Burke III’s analysis. However, Knysh and others such as Linda Sijbrand have emphasised that the separation should not be exaggerated and they provide examples of such ambiguity.²⁶

24. In the case of the Theosophical Society and Sufism, see Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 144.

25. Sijbrand, “Orientalism and Sufism,” 99–101 ; Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 20.

26. Sijbrand, “Orientalism and Sufism,” 1–5, 98; Knysh, *Sufism: A New History*, 5–7; Burke III, “The

Kocku von Stuckrad is resolutely critical of the exclusion of Jewish and Islamic esoteric “traditions” from the grand narrative of Western esotericism and denounces its bypassing of antiquity and the medieval period. In this he directly challenges Faivre.²⁷ The latter responds to this critique by insisting that the exclusion was a methodological choice rather than a deliberate diminishing of the importance of these traditions. Instead he chose to deal with an “occident visited by Judaism and Islam.” He intended to leave the study of Islamic “esotericism” – whether or not it is, or can be, called this – to the experts, in order to avoid any universalism.²⁸ In his response to this defence, von Stuckrad rightly points out the problematic idea of a West merely “visited” by Judaism and Islam, citing also the entanglement of Christian/European identity with Islam and Judaism.²⁹ However, Faivre’s call for the experts to speak about Islamic esoteric experiences is fair; especially since, as he points out, von Stuckrad’s own treatment of the subject is very limited and hardly contributes to the expansion of the narrative.³⁰ It confuses more than illuminates. First, he exemplifies the Islamic tradition with Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191) almost exclusively, attributing to him “the establishment of a philosophical system that integrated rational modes of demonstration with experiential modes of gaining truth, the latter being itself part of a demonstrable system of interpretation.”³¹ This is not unique to Suhrawardī and was developed by thinkers before him. Islamic philosophy and mysticism has been characterised by a tension between syllogistic-intellectual and experiential-revelatory modes of knowledge.³² Furthermore, in a study that calls for considering the contribution of the Islamic “tradition” in Western esotericism, von Stuckrad does not sufficiently demonstrate how this

Sociology of Islam: the French Tradition,” 155; Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 118–19.

27. von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 19.

28. Faivre “Kocku von Stuckrad et la notion d’ésotérisme,” 208.

29. von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 19–20 .

30. Hanegraaff, “Review of *Locations of Knowledge*,” 71–72.

31. von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 83–88, esp. 88.

32. Saif, “From Ġāyat al-ḥakīm,” 297–45.

supposedly Suhrawardian way of thinking influenced European esotericism, and what kind of important role the Islamic circles played in the conceptualisation of *philosophia perennis* and its influence on European discourses.³³ If the intention is to confirm the existence of an Islamic esotericism, then choosing Suhrawardī is emblematic of its reduction to the perennialist characterisation à la Corbin.³⁴

In comparative work between Islamic and Western esotericisms it is not necessarily the best strategy to re-designate the qualifiers “Western” and “European” that have become determinate of the comparative structure. First, this would ignore the fact that “Western esotericism” is itself a historical designation developed in the nineteenth century. As Julian Strube demonstrates, nineteenth-century French esotericists constructed an “occidental esotericism” to dissociate themselves from the Eastern esotericism of the Theosophical Society.³⁵ However, as Michael Bergunder writes, “this re-designation would also ignore the most important fact, that is that nowadays these general terms are used globally. It is not solely in the possession of ‘Europe’ or the ‘West’ to (re)claim them exclusively.”³⁶

In reality, “East” and “West” are identifications that are constantly shifting and changing based primarily on political and economic aspirations of different groups at certain periods of time. For example, in the eighth and ninth centuries, Islamic cultures of “the East” were identifying themselves as of the “West” in relation to India, the tantric bloc, and China when trade with these areas was heavy.³⁷ Interacting with Buddhism, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism had an organic influence on Islamic culture and its religious and esoteric practices, and this same political and economic aspiration created channels of entanglement

33. von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 25–26. For a study on the influence of Medieval Islamic philosophers, astrologers, and occultists on European occult and esoteric philosophies, see Saif, *The Arabic Influences*, *passim*.

34. Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*, 8, 13, 110; Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients*, 9–10, 223–25; see also the review of this work by Gutas, “Essay-Review,” 303–9.

35. Strube, “Occultist Identity Formations,” 568–95.

36. Bergunder, “What is Esotericism?,” 39.

37. Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 11–12, 26–27, 32–33, 59–60.

that reached Europe and the US. As another example, Muslims of al-Andalus were viewed as part of *al-maghreb*, meaning “the West,” and the Muslim cultures of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Persia were called *al-mashriq*, “the East.”³⁸ Therefore, “West” and “Western” have their place; however, to use them we must be aware of the power structures that have placed these orientations on the map. In other words, using these qualifiers in our research must reflect the cultural, political, and economic orientations of the actors, groups, and regions we are analysing.

In our case, the cross-cultural complex that is “esotericism” is historically and ideologically real, as this article demonstrates, and the dust from the polyphonically entangled political, cultural and intellectual currents that play a part in the formation and destabilisation of identities and discourses of power has never settled.

Thus, the argument for an entangled history of esotericism is also a solution to navigating the dichotomy of Western vs Islamic and West vs East. Islam as a limitation of East immediately implies that the Islamic experience is geographically contained there. What about African-American Islam and its esoteric experience? What about European experiences of Islamic esotericism, Western Sufism for example? Of equal significance is the process of Western esotericisation of Islamic traditions such as Sufism. With a global perspective, we can still critically retain the prototype of “West” for the feasibility of comparison as argued above and look at the experiences of Islam as culture and religion in Europe, America and elsewhere.³⁹

Matthew Melvin-Koushki, aiming to de-orientalise the conversation on Islamicate occult sciences, calls for the un-Easting of Islam and the recognition of “Islam as equally the West,” which naturally results in rescuing the Islamicate early modern period from the decline narrative that sees it as an intellectually/scientifically bereft period, coinciding with the rise of Europe and its intellectual reinvention. Indeed, it is in the Islamicate early modern period that great scientific activity was imperially patronised and utilised, at the centre

38. Lopez Lazaro, “The Rise and Global Significance of the First ‘West’.”

39. Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity,” 34-52.

of which were the occult sciences.⁴⁰ He describes the “Arabo-Latin” traditions “as the two parallel and equally powerful philosophical-philological trajectories that together defined early modern Western—i.e., Hellenic-Abrahamic, Islamo-Judeo-Christian, *west of South India* [my italics]—intellectual history.”⁴¹ Melvin-Koushki’s framework is a geo-political one; namely, early modern Islamicate Persian, Chingizid and Ottoman imperial ideologies.⁴² His “de-orientalisation” is a fruitful tactic for destabilising categories and beginning to see often-ignored historical, intellectual, and political entanglements, especially in the construction of scientific modernity. However, it can potentially exclude and orientalise Islamic esoteric experiences and currents to the “East” of South India, which must not be overlooked and whose own philosophical-philological trajectories are deeply entangled with regions “west of South India.”

So it seems that historical and theoretical (re)formulations have led to the emergence of “Western” “esotericism” that is a heuristic construct, and “Western esotericism” as a historical movement. To begin to understand what could be called Islamic esotericism in an effective way that allows for future comparison, I propose that we invest in the academic capital of the theoretical construct and simultaneously look for a historical discourse, gleaned from textual evidence, which we could call Islamic esotericism.

II: A Note on the Islamic Studies Perspective

From the perspective of Islamic Studies, the use of “esoteric” and “esotericism” has been, for the most part, unreflective. In a recent article Feras Hamza highlights the problematics of this usage. Focusing on the context of Qur’anic exegesis, around which most of the discussion revolves, he points out that the term has been used mostly in relation to Sufism and Shīʿa Islam without a satisfactory

40. Melvin-Koushki, “De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism,” 287-96.

41. Melvin-Koushki, “Tahqīq vs. Taqlīd,” 193.

42. Melvin-Koushki, “Early Modern Islamicate Empire,” 355.

explanation of why these terms are used in connection with the wider Shīʿī exegetical literature and Sufism. He traces the genealogy of this tendency to Eliade and Corbin, explaining that this has been justified by the use of the binary of esoteric vs exoteric in their texts, and relates it to Shīʿī and Sufi traditions of *taʿwīl* that were driven by political expedience in a persecutory environment requiring discretion. Furthermore, the binary “esoteric” vs. “exoteric” has been used in a semantically asymmetrical way: “esoteric” contrasting with “exoteric,” which is more firmly defined by Islamicists as grammatical and lexicographical engagement with the text.⁴³ Hamza also points out that inferring the meaning of these terms from the field of Western esotericism risks ignoring political and cultural specifics.⁴⁴

Hamza’s analysis of the ambiguity of the “esoteric” in Islamic Studies is a necessary step towards outlining “Islamic Esotericism” from the Islamic Studies perspective. Hamza does not attempt this in his article as his focus is the genre of *tafsīr* (exegesis) and contemporary usage of the term and its arbitrariness. However, this very focus has the tendency to reduce the discussion to texts and statements only. In challenging the usage in *tafsīr* studies, he asks, “What makes a commentary esoteric?” and, “Is the ‘esotericism’ of a particular passage of Qur’anic commentary, or, indeed, of an entire *tafsīr*, located in some structural, linguistic, or rhetorical device?”⁴⁵ Indeed, as he contends, just because exegetes mention the *bāṭin* in their *tafsīr*, it does not mean they are committed to an esoteric content. However, texts and passages are not essentially esoteric, and “esotericism” is not entirely identifiable textually. Texts cannot be isolated from the epistemes under which they were written. The question should not be how esoteric a text is, but what it says about a way of knowing that can be described as esoteric, justified by historical currents and records beyond just commentaries on the Qur’an. This cannot be achieved without delving into historical defi-

43. Hamza, “Locating the ‘Esoteric’ in Islamic Studies,” 358, 360–62; Keeler and Rizvi, eds., *The Spirit and the Letter*; Morris, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Esotericism,’” 37–64; Lory, “Aspects de l’ésotérisme chiite,” 279–98.

44. Hamza, “Locating the ‘Esoteric,’” 358.

45. Hamza, “Locating the ‘Esoteric’ ,” 364.

nitions of “esoteric” and “esotericism” in Islamic sources and the emergence of the latter term in the Traditionalist milieu as discussed in the next sections. This also cannot be done without admission of our epistemological background as scholars postulating a construct to understand historical evidence.

The problematisation of the esoteric-exoteric dichotomy in Islamic Studies, particularly in Sufism, was also recently taken up by Simon Sorgenfrei. He rightly rejects the view of Islamic esotericism as being exclusively represented by Sufism, but in the process, he seems to reject the possibility that Sufism can be part of Islamic esotericism at all. For him, the label “esoteric” has been used to denote secrecy, elitism, rejected knowledge, and lack of adherence to exoteric or religious duties. To demonstrate, he gives the example of Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi, whose “mystical experiences and esoteric practices are not, however, meant to take priority over ordinary religious duties (*ḥaḍ*) or what might be deemed the exoteric dimension of Islam. ‘Correct dogmatic affirmation remains a prerequisite to embarking on the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi path.’”⁴⁶ His rejection of the dichotomy is the result of an adherence to another binary, orthodoxy vs heterodoxy, replaced here by esodoxy and exodoxy, which is equally problematic.⁴⁷ As we shall see below, Islamic esotericism functions in relation to a negotiated adherence to Law. This relationship was, and is, never so clear-cut; therefore, to use adherence to the Law as a criterion for being non-esoteric is misleading.

Furthermore, Sorgenfrei argues that the understanding of Sufism as Islamic esotericism is the result of particularities in the study of Western esotericism and some of its modern Islamic depictions. This is due to several factors: first, the suffix *-ism* in both esotericism and Sufism confers, according to Sorgenfrei, a name to something that does not exist and therefore Islamic esotericism is merely a transferal of this problem.⁴⁸ Second, the orientalist’s subsumed Sufism/*taṣawwuf* under the universalist category of mysticism rendering it an ahistorical

46. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden,” 150–51.

47. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden,” 151–52.

48. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden,” 153.

construct which was strengthened by the Traditionalist perennial view.⁴⁹ Finally, the condemnation of Sufism for its esoteric occupation by the early twentieth-century Muslim reform movements of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), and the Muslim Brotherhood preserved the invented dichotomy.⁵⁰ Hence, Sorgenfrei seeks to demonstrate that Islamic esotericism and Sufism do not reflect the historical realities of *taṣawwuf*. He is right in that these points show that Sufism and Islamic esotericism meant different things to different people and served different political purposes; however, it is not clear why this excludes Sufism/*taṣawwuf* from being investigated as a current of an Islamic esotericism by a genealogical perspective that includes all the actors he cites. For examples, why isn’t the Traditionalist take considered historical? This ambiguity is exacerbated by the fact that it is not clear what Sorgenfrei understands by “esoteric” beyond *bāṭin* as teachings on inner dimensions, in opposition to “exoteric.”⁵¹ Lacking in the studies of Sorgenfrei and Hamza is a look at whether a construct similar to “esotericism” existed in earlier sources, what it means, and what are the epistemes under which it was constructed. This will be dealt with in the following section.

An important discussion of Islamic esotericism is found in the PhD thesis of Noah Gardiner, entitled “Esotericism in a Manuscript Culture: Aḥmad al-Būnī and His Readers through the Mamlūk Period.” Here, esotericism is a term Gardiner uses to frame his study of the works of the occultist Aḥmad al-Būnī (lived as late as 1225) and their circulation in late Ayyūbid and Mamlūk exclusive communities and networks that maintain discretion of knowledge and the elitism of its Sufi and occultist producers-readers (*khawass*). He writes, “the distinguishing characteristic of ‘Islamic esotericism(s)’ is that these social attitudes and practices are allied to theories of Qur’ānic hermeneutics which hold that the holy text conceals *bāṭin* (hidden) meanings unavailable except to initiates of the given

49. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden,” 154–55.

50. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden,” 157–59.

51. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden,” 145.

esotericist community.”⁵² Gardiner associates the term with *kitmān* (concealment) and *taqīyah* (caution) which were practices of discretion of early Shīʿa.

As shall be shown in what follows, Qurʾanic hermeneutics is seen as one, but not the only, principle of Islamic esotericism. However, the aspect of discretion recedes in the latter part of the fourteenth century, giving way to what Gardiner refers to as “post-esotericist” occult sciences, particularly *ʿilm al-ḥurūf* (the science of letters, letterology). This shift becomes largely responsible for their efflorescence.⁵³ Matthew Melvin-Koushki picks this up and argues for “de-esotericisation” of the occult sciences and their utilisation in imperial Timurid and Ottoman agendas.⁵⁴ Gardiner and Melvin-Koushki, thus, deploy the term esotericism to refer to the social discretion of a certain group of knowledge producers, which includes Sufis and occult scientists. The fluctuation of the importance or urgency of discretion means that it cannot be deemed a defining trait of Islamic esotericism — *bāṭiniyya* — as a construct with a historical genealogy, as shown in this article, though it is necessary to define and understand certain esoteric currents in specific periods and regions. It is for this reason that secrecy is not considered a primary principle of Islamic esotericism, in this article and others in this volume.

I conclude this section by highlighting the peculiarity of the way in which the esoteric and exoteric binary is envisaged in relation to Islamic philosophy in general, in order to understand the bigger place of *bāṭiniyya* in Islam. Here I refer to the late Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943–2010).

In his *Falsafat al-taʾwīl* (“The Philosophy of *Taʾwīl*”), Abū Zayd reconsiders and rejects the deeply set separation of *taʾwīl* (interpretation) and *tafsīr* (explanation or exegesis). For both orientalists and people of tradition (salafis, traditionalists, *ḥābirīs*), *tafsīr* is perceived as an objective act of interpreting the Qurʾanic text that assumes the interpreter’s (*mufasssīr*) ability to transcend his/her own

52. Gardiner, “Esotericism in Manuscript Culture,” 54–55, 60.

53. Gardiner, “Esotericism in Manuscript Culture,” 56.

54. Melvin-Koushki, “De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism,” 287–90.

historical and cultural framework. As a result, the text is good for every age, place, and person. *Tafsīr* thus unpacks the *zābir*. In contrast, *taʿwīl* of the *bāṭin* is a subjective act that challenges the perceived ‘truth’ of *tafsīr* and triggers an anxiety about the relevance of the revealed words. Often, the subjective method of *taʿwīl* is seen as reliant on foreign elements, mainly Greek, that colour the lens of the interpreter (*muʿawwīl*). Abū Zayd calls for moving beyond this anachronistic distinction between *taʿwīl* and *tafsīr* and instead understanding them as one multi-modal method on the basis of the fact that the interpreter in her relationship with the text cannot act outside her historical dimension, so that objectivity is never achievable. In the bigger picture, this allows us to better appreciate Islamic philosophy beyond just the study of its foreign sources, mainly Greek, (the “philosophy” in Islamic philosophy). Orientalists and traditionalists have denied Islam’s capability of producing philosophy due to this unmalleable imposition of categories. As Abū Zayd points out, “*taʿwīl* is a philosophical method that aligns existence and text.”⁵⁵ It enables us to establish the link between historical contemplations of the nature of reality and text thus placing Islamic esotericism, which is based on this alignment, at the heart of the Islamicate intellectual and mystical endeavour, past and present, in all its shifts. Islamic esotericism is thus a type of content generated from this alignment, as I hope the following pages will demonstrate.

III: “Bāṭiniyya”

It has become generally accepted to use “esoteric” and “exoteric” to translate *bāṭin* and *zābir* respectively. According to Ibn Manẓūr’s *Lisān al-ʿArab* (*The Language of the Arabs*), completed in 1290, *bāṭin* can signify the interior of things. *Bāṭin* and *zābir* are among the names of Allah. Furthermore, each verse of the Qur’an is described as having a meaning that is *bāṭin* (concealed and requiring interpretation) and *zābir* (manifest). This is derived from a popular ḥadīth (transmitted prophetic

55. Abū Zayd, *Falsafat al-taʿwīl*, 11-12, further discussion found in 13-16.

saying) often cited in support of an esoteric hermeneutics: “The Prophet of God said ‘the Qur’an was revealed over seven letters, to each verse an exterior (*ẓāhir*) and an interior (*bāṭin*)’.”⁵⁶ As Mark Sedgwick points out in his contribution to this special issue, the word *ghayb* shares the sense of something hidden with the term *bāṭin*; nevertheless, the latter denotes knowledge developed by a discourse generated by exegesis, whereas the former refers to realities such as the world of angels and the afterlife, and these are not esoteric ideas but realities, whose precise natures are known only by God, which all Muslims must believe.⁵⁷

Al-bāṭin is also used to describe “that which is veiled from the sight and imagination of people.”⁵⁸ In this way it is close to the Greek adjective *esoterōs* (ἑσώτερος, α, ον), meaning “inner,” and “the part that is within.” It is well known that Lucian uses it to describe some of Aristotle’s teachings and it was used to describe the secret doctrines of Pythagoras. Samuel Johnson’s eighteenth-century *Dictionary of the English Language* defines ‘esoterick’ as “[Lat. *esotericus*, inward] secret; mysterious. A term applied to the double doctrine of the ancient philosophers; the publick, or exoterick; the secret, or *esoterick*. The first was that which they openly professed and taught to the world; the latter was confined to a small number of chosen disciples.”⁵⁹

“Bāṭiniyya,” moreover, could be translated as “esotericism.”⁶⁰ The use of this Arabic term is historical and has reflected positive, neutral and pejorative senses,

56. Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Musnad al-saḥīḥ*, 243; the non-Sufi exegete Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) interpreted *bāṭin* as knowledge of future events that only God knows, therefore, not a hermeneutic direction. In contrast the mystic/esotericist Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896) understood it as the inner sense accessed by a spiritual elite; Zahra Sands, *Sūfi Commentaries on the Qur’an*, 8-9.

57. Sedgwick, “Islamic and Western Esotericism,” 279-81.

58. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 13:54-55; see Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” 336.

59. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2: under “esoterick.”

60. Amir-Moezzi, “Introduction et Remerciements,” 2. Although Amir-Moezzi considers esotericism a suitable term to use in this collection of articles, he recognises no equivalent in Arabic or Persian for the word “esotericism.” He also equates “esoteric” with “mystical” and places under it the Arabic *bāṭin*, the Persian *darūn*, *‘irfān*, even *ma‘navī* (of valuable meaning), and *ruḥānī* (spiritual). This conflation invites confusion since “mystical” is itself an unstable and ambiguous term, as are, to a degree, the words included under it if not contextualised.

all of which pertain to esoteric exegetical practices and the occupation with hidden phenomena and truths. The favourable sense was sometimes adopted in relating the term to Greek wisdom. The physician Ibn Abī Uṣaibi‘a (1203–1270), in his *‘Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’* (‘Sources of Reports on the Classes of Physicians’) tells the reader that the wisdom (*ḥikma*) of Empedocles, which he received from the wiseman Luqmān in Syria before settling in the lands of the Greeks, is the foundation of the thought of the *bāṭinis* who were concerned with decoding his discourse.⁶¹ Among the *bāṭinīs*, he includes the Andalusian mystic Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Masarra (883–931) who was occupied with the letter structure of a hypostatic emanative cosmos. The historian and geographer Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī, in his *Murūj al-dhahab* (‘The Meadows of Gold’) relates Plato’s ideas on divine love to those of the “*sufi bāṭinīs*” (*al-bāṭiniyya al-mutaṣawwifa*).⁶²

In a less favourable tone, Abū ‘Abd Allah al-Qurṭubī in his *Tafsīr* (exegesis of the Qur’an), citing the imam Abū al-‘Abbās, berates the *bāṭiniyya* for viewing

the general dictates of the Law (*al-aḥkām al-shar‘iyya al-‘amma*) to be applied only to prophets and the public, but as for the *anbiyā’* (saints, friends of God) and the elite crowds, they do not have a need for these dictates. They give more prominence to what takes place in their hearts and are directed by their prevailing thoughts. They say this is due to the purity of their hearts from [materialistic] grime and their being clear of degradation, and so divine sciences and divine truths are revealed to them, thus learning the secrets of [all] existents.⁶³

In a chapter on “The Science of Exegesis” (*‘ilm al-tafsīr*) in *Kashf al-zunūn*, (“Dispelling Doubts”), Ḥajjī Khalīfa (1609–1657) censures the theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1150–1210) for buttressing his interpretation of the Qur’an, known as *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (“The Keys to the Mysterious”), with the sayings of philosophers and sages.⁶⁴ In this exegetical masterpiece, al-Rāzī acknowledges that

61. Ibn Abī Uṣaibi‘a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, 1: 230. The Arabic Empedoclean system is in essence neoplatonic. On the Arabic reception of Empedocles, see De Smet, *Empedocles Arabus*.

62. al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 3:309.

63. al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*, 11:40.

64. Ḥajjī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-zunūn*, 1:431–32.

“the science of the purification of the interior” — *‘ilm tasfiyat al-bāṭin* — is a branch of human sciences that seeks “to make manifest the spiritual lights and divine revelations.”⁶⁵ For him, “the scholars of the esoteric” — *‘ulamā’ al-bāṭin* — are the sages/philosophers (*al-ḥukamā*) whose intellects are so advanced they are capable of comprehending what “the scholars of the exoteric” cannot. This is mentioned in his discussion of the mysterious disconnected letters found at the beginning of 29 suras and has become a characteristic concern of Sufis and mystics.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, al-Rāzī appears inconsistent in the tone with which he discusses esotericists; often he can be apprehensive of the exegetical practices of *al-bāṭiniyya*,⁶⁷ yet elsewhere he implies that “the sciences of the esoteric” are to be pursued after perfecting “the science of the *shari‘a*.”⁶⁸ The fact that this appears under the title of *tafsīr* and along with the general acceptance of *shari‘a* as a behavioural modality that does not necessarily negate esoteric interpretation attests to what was emphasised earlier, namely that the separation of *ta’wīl* and *tafsīr* and the view of the esoteric and exoteric as being mutually exclusive are orientalist and polemical inventions that nevertheless defined nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of Islamic esotericism, as we shall see. At the core of this discourse on esoteric exegesis and its legitimacy is navigating the spectrum of *ḥaqīqa* (Truth) and *shari‘a* (the Law), the attainment of the former being the ultimate objective of esotericists. In his *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (“The Ranks of Sufis”), the Sufi hagiographer Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (325–412/937–1021) explicates these concepts, defining *shari‘a* as “the obligation to adhere to servitude” and *ḥaqīqa* as “witnessing the Divine” adding that “every law that is not buttressed by the truth is unacceptable and every truth not buttressed by the law is unacceptable.”⁶⁹

65. al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:157.

66. al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 2:250, 3:174, 14:194.

67. al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 2:257, 17:294; 22:10

68. al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:490.

69. al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 168.

Returning to Ḥajjī Khalīfa, he accuses esotericists (*abl al-bāṭin*, lit. people of the esoteric) or the *bāṭiniyya*, such as the Sufis, of dropping the exoteric significance of the Qur’anic verses and investing only in the esoteric meaning. As such they are heretics (*malāhida*). However, some of the *muhāqqiqīn* — a term used to describe Sufis who attained the truth — do not veer from rectitude when they maintain that “there are hidden allusions to subtleties that are revealed to the masters of [Sufi] paths/conduct (*sulūk*) which can coincide with the intended exoteric meanings. For this is the perfection of ‘gnosis’ (*ʿirfān*) and absolute faith.”⁷⁰ Even the master mystic Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) distances himself from those *bāṭiniyya* who “ignore in their ‘interiorizations’ (*bawāṭimihim*) the dictates of Law.”⁷¹ It is from this negative view of “extremist” exegesis that the term *bāṭiniyya* developed as a pejorative term attacking the Ismāʿīlīs specifically, Shīʿa in general, and the Qarāmiṭa, as we see in the works of theologian Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), who also dismisses the exegesis of Sufis, and the jurist and historian Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064).⁷²

It is important to stress here that these are negotiations of a construct that existed since the early middle ages. It is historically deeper than “Western esotericism.” The most elaborate and systematic explanation of Islamic esotericism is found in *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (“Revitalising the Sciences of Religion”) by the theologian and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (c. 1056–1111). Here, he refers to *ʿilm al-bāṭin*, the science of the esoteric (esotericism), and *abl al-bāṭin*, the people of the esoteric (esotericists). The section wherein this explanation is found is concerned with how to teach ideology (*ʿaqīda*), and according to al-Ghazālī one must be aware that the adherence to the *ẓāhir* is the most important thing to instil because it is undoubtedly commanded, whereas the *bāṭin* is not. Rather, the *bāṭin* can be reached by occupying oneself with spiritual discipline (*riyāda*)

70. Ḥajjī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-zunūn*, 1:432.

71. Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, 1:504.

72. Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Ṣafadiyya*, 1:2, 88; see also Ibn Taymiyya, “al-Risāla fī ʿilm al-bāṭin wa ʿl-ẓāhir,” 1: 230; Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl fī al-milal*, 1:165, 1:33; 4:171.

and striving (*mujābada*), to attain secrets and divine light.⁷³ This is followed by a question posed by a hypothetical interrogator, who ponders the contradiction implied in positing that the religious sciences deal with *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*; namely that having a level that is esoteric contradicts The Law (*sharʿ*) since it should not have both evident and public elements and others that are non-evident and secret. Al-Ghazālī responds that this division is not denied by the people of true insight and that “they are indicated by The Law itself,” citing the hadith, “The Qurʾān has a *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*,” and ‘Alī’s statement as he points to his chest, “here are many sciences, if only I can find [enough people] to handle them.”⁷⁴ Al-Ghazālī supports this by also quoting the esotericist Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896): “The scholar may obtain three sciences: the knowledge of the *ẓāhir* which he grants to the people of the *ẓāhir*, the knowledge of *bāṭin* (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*, esotericism) that he may only reveal to its people (*ahl al-bāṭin*, esotericists), and a knowledge that is between him and God Almighty which he reveals to no one.”⁷⁵

The interrogator then addresses the possible implication of the separation of *ḥaqīqa* (truth) and *sharīʿa* (the Law). Al-Ghazālī’s answer is “whoever says that the *ḥaqīqa* contradicts the *sharīʿa* or that the *bāṭin* contradicts the *ẓāhir*, it is closer to apostasy (*kufr*) than to faith (*imān*).” Then, like Faivre dealing with Western esotericism in the twentieth century, al-Ghazālī in the twelfth provides five criteria to Islamic esotericism:

1. The matters involved are subtle and are not easily understandable save by the spiritual elite (*khamāṣṣ*), who must not divulge their findings to those who are not worthy.
2. It concerns things that prophets and righteous ones refrained from describing since the gravity of such knowledge might be harmful to the public but not to the elite, the way the sun can damage the eyes of bats.
3. The contemplation of a concept that can be expressed by means of allegories and symbols to have more effect on the heart of the listener and with much greater benefit.

73. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, 1:138–39.

74. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 139.

75. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 140.

4. The perception of a thing in its generality first, then perceiving it in its details through mystical realisation and intuition (*tahqiq* and *dhawq*), to such a degree that the whole and the details become one: “the first like the husk and the second like the kernel, the first as the *zābir* and the second as the *bātin*.”

5. Verbal language used to translate spiritual states (*lisān al-muqāl*, *lisān al-ḥāl*, literally “the language of states”), so that those deficient in understanding only understand the *zābir* and those with insight into the truths can perceive the *bātin*.⁷⁶

The first two criteria relate to concealment, the third to its allegorical form, the fourth to its epistemological stance – namely its wholistic approach – and the fifth refers to its translinguistic quality; all of which have been points of reformulation and negotiation throughout the history of Islamic esotericism.

One example of such reformulation is the Ismāʿīlī tradition of *taʾwīl*. Beyond the acrimony lurking behind the label *bāṭinīs*, the Ismāʿīlīs did not necessarily undermine the exoteric for the esoteric. Rather, they elevated the esoteric value of the Qurʾanic text by presenting it as a text that transitions between exoteric and esoteric realities and knowledge. For al-Ghazālī, the esoteric is supererogatory; for the Ismāʿīlīs it is the exegetical and cosmic obligation embodied by the six prophets – described as the enunciators (*nāṭiqs*) of the exoteric (*zābir*, *sharīʿa*), to whom is added al-Mahdī and the “silent ones” (*sāmīts*), spiritual legatees (*waṣṣs*) who deliver esoteric truths to the select.⁷⁷ In *Asās al-taʾwīl* (“The Foundation of Interpretation”) the Ismāʿīlī jurist al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 974) expounds on the esoteric obligation that he describes as complementing his other work, *Daʿāʾim al-islām* (“The Pillars of Islam”), concerned with exoteric obligations. From the outset, he explains that the exoteric obligation is the first to be taught to a child and perfected. The “sense of the *bāṭin*” is subtle and is perceived in codes and allusions which excite the growing child’s senses, leading them to wisdom. In support of this, al-Qāḍī cites the Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq – “We express in one word, seven aspects” – and many verses from the Qurʾan as well as the same hadith cited by al-Ghazālī, as noted above.⁷⁸

76. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 140–44.

77. Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʾwīl*, 40–42 ; Daftary, *Ismaili Literature*, 19.

78. Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʾwīl*, 23–30.

Scholars of Islam are generally hesitant to employ the term *bāṭiniyya* to describe Islamic “esotericism.” This is due to inheriting its pejorative identification, with the Ismā‘īlīs particularly. However, in addition to its etymological suitability, historically it has not been used exclusively in this sense, as shown in this section. Having demonstrated some historical uses, formulations, and rethinkings, we are justified in speaking of *‘ilm al-bāṭin* and *bāṭiniyya* as esotericism and of *bāṭinis* (or *ahl al-bāṭin*) as esotericists, to whom *al-bāṭin*, the esoteric, is the focal point of their exegesis and wisdom.

IV. Islamic esotericism of the Traditionalists and its Impact

It is hardly surprising to find an early instance of *bāṭin* and *zābir* translated as “esoteric” and “exoteric” in an article written by J. Leyden “On the Rosheniah Sect, and its Founder Báyezid Ansári” published in 1812 in the *Journal of Asiatic Researches*. The Rocheniyya are described as a heretical sect that, despite having been suppressed, held meetings at night in Peshawar. Its founder began as a Sufi but “diverged wider and wider from the pale of Islam.”⁷⁹ He would first convince his followers or aspirants to renounce *shari‘a* (religious laws of conduct) in order to embark on the path to perfection (in the Sufi sense, *ṭarīqa*), then he would prevail upon them to discard the *ṭarīqa* as a formal Sufi method in order to properly attain *ḥaqīqa*, that is Truth.⁸⁰ The author of one of Leyden’s sources, the Afghani Akhu’n Derwe’zeh, reminds his reader, that “it is expressly stated in the fundamental books of religion, that whoever asserts the *sheri’at* and *hak’ik’at*, the exoteric and the esoteric doctrines of the law, to be at variance, is an infidel.”⁸¹ This is similar, almost word for word, to al-Ghazālī’s statement discussed above.

As shown earlier, the correlation between *bāṭin/ḥaqīqa* and *zābir/shari‘a* is enunciated in *ta’wīl* discourse and Sufi doctrines. It became the nexus of what in the early twentieth century was understood and termed as “Islamic esotericism”

79. Leyden, “On the Rosheniah Sect,” 364, 373. I am grateful to Julian Strube for referring me to this.

80. Leyden, “On the Rosheniah Sect,” 374–75.

81. Leyden, “On the Rosheniah Sect,” 376

in Europe. The French Sufi and developer of Traditionalism, René Guénon (1886–1951) was the first to speak of “l’ésotérisme islamique” and it certainly became closely associated with his ideas about Sufism.⁸² In a treatise entitled “Islamic Esoterism,” Guénon begins his exposition with the above correlations:

Of all the traditional doctrines, perhaps Islamic doctrine most clearly distinguishes the two complementary parts, which can be labelled exoterism and esoterism. In Arabic terminology, these are the *shari‘ab*, literally “the great way,” common to all, and the *ḥaqiqah*, literally “the inward truth,” reserved to an elite . . . esoterism comprises not only *ḥaqiqah*, but also the specific means for reaching it, and taken as a whole, these means are called the *ṭarīqah*, the “way” or “path” leading from the *shari‘ab* to the *ḥaqiqah*.⁸³

Therefore, for Guénon esotericism is the same as *taṣawwuf* (Sufism). His construction of Islamic esotericism is probably the result of his belief in a rift between the primordial tradition of the Orient and the spiritually bereft Occident.⁸⁴ For Guénon, Islamic esotericism is a pure self-evolving tradition without “foreign” borrowings, while simultaneously being universal in the sense that all kinds of traditions and *ṭuruq* (paths) lead to the Truth.⁸⁵ Though he was initiated into the Shādhiliyya Arabiyya by Ivan Aguéli in 1910–1911, evidence lacks of an exclusive adherence to Islam before the 1930s. After his initiation, he and Aguéli were involved in Taoist and Masonic initiations.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the rootedness of Islamic esotericism in scriptural exegesis which is the foundation of esotericism in Islam, and the privilege of the Arabic language in the esoteric exegetical exercises essential to Sufism, meant that Guénon ultimately chose Islam and Sufism as his personal tools for navigating the quest for the universal truth.⁸⁷ For Guénon, Islamic esotericism, similar to all esotericisms and different from Christian “mysticism,” is active and initiatory. The esoteric aspiration is buttressed by the pursuit of “traditional sciences”: alchemy, astrology, the science of letters (*ilm al-ḥurūf*), numerology, and *jafr*. Guénon stresses the principle of “symbolic correspondences” applied in these sciences, which

82. Valsan, “Islam et la Fonction de René Guénon,” 14, 40.

83. Guénon, “Islamic Esoterism,” 1.

84. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 173; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 25–26.

85. Guénon, “Islamic Esoterism,” 1–2, 4.

86. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 155.

87. Guénon, “Islamic Esoterism,” 4–5.

“translate the same truths into the languages proper to different orders of reality, united among themselves by the law of universal analogy.” By their application, the initiatic process reproduces in all its phases the cosmological process itself. As a result, the material sense of alchemy is rejected, and astrology is described as “a cosmological science” rather than a “divining art.”⁸⁸ The science of *jafr* “exhibits all the rigor of an exact and mathematical science.” Modernity has eclipsed such sciences in the West despite their existence in the medieval period and antiquity.⁸⁹ In another article entitled “The Influence of the Islamic Civilisation in the West,” Guénon rues how the esoteric or traditional sciences are unknown to modern Westerners:

The Europe of our day no longer has anything that might recall these sciences; beyond this, the West is ignorant of the true knowledge represented by esoterism and its related sciences, although in the Middle Ages it was completely otherwise; and in this sphere, too, Islamic influence appeared in a most luminous and evident way.⁹⁰

Therefore, Guénon’s Islamic esotericism must be understood against the background of Western esotericism’s negotiation of the crisis of modernity and the post-Enlightenment destabilisation of the relationship of science and religion; as elaborated in his other works such as *The Crisis of the Modern World*.⁹¹ Islamic “esoteric” sciences afford Guénon an ideation of science enmeshed in religion, Islam imagined here; such sciences not only function on the level of “reality” as other exact sciences, but they sublimate awareness to the level of the macrocosm. Furthermore, Guénon’s Islamic esotericism shifts the emphasis within “oriental esotericism” – logically generated from the aforementioned nineteenth-century construction of an “occidental esotericism” – from Hindu and Buddhist traditions to Sufism. Thus, Islamic esotericism in this Guénonian/Traditionalist form is an inextricable development of the history of Western esotericism.

Traditionalist construction of Islamic esotericism is also represented by Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), who, following the recommendation of Guénon, was ini-

88. Guénon, “Islamic Esoterism,” 7

89. Guénon, “Islamic Esoterism,” 6–7.

90. Guénon, “The Influence of Islamic Civilisation in the West,” in *Insights*, 42.

91. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 25–28.

tiated into Sufism by Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī in 1933 and founded the Maryam-iyya path.⁹² Schuon’s universalist application of Islamic esotericism is even more pronounced than Guénon. When he was 25, before receiving initiation, he wrote,

Is the Nirvana of Mecca different from the Nirvana of Benares simply because it is called *fanāʾ* and not *nirvāna*? Either we are esotericists and metaphysicians who transcend forms . . . and do not distinguish between *Allāh* and *Brahman*, or else we are exotericists, “theologians,” or at best mystics, who consequently live in forms like fish in water and who do make a distinction between Mecca and Benares.⁹³

Later when he was 74, his attitude remained unchanged,

Our *ṭarīqah* is not a *ṭarīqah* like the others. . . . Our point of departure is the quest after esotericism and not after a particular religion – after the total Truth, not a sentimental mythology. To renounce and forget the religion of our [Christian] forefathers simply to immerse ourselves in another religion . . . could never be our perspective.⁹⁴

For Schuon, *sharīʿa*, the extrinsic aspect of religion, colours metaphysical truth (*ḥaqīqa*) – i.e. esotericism, which itself is universal and thus uncoloured.⁹⁵ In Islamic esotericism, esotericism comes first, Islam second, which is to be distinguished from “esoteric Islam,” thus reversing the order.⁹⁶ Elsewhere, he speaks of two esotericisms: strict, which is based on a particular ideology “linked to speculations offered *de facto* by traditional sources;” and universal, which “springs from the truly crucial elements of religion,” and these two are interconnected. The former, however, is connectable to the various degrees of the esoteric hermeneutics of the Qur’an itself.⁹⁷ Despite his universalism, the rootedness of Islamic esotericism in exegesis necessitates the interconnection, for he considers speaking of an esotericism not linked to a form as absurd, thus:

92. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 86–87.

93. Cited in Cutsinger, “Introduction,” xxix.

94. Cutsinger, “Introduction,” xxix.

95. Schuon, “Two Esotericisms,” 17.

96. Schuon, *The Book of Keys*, No. 1008, “Islamic Esotericism and Esoteric Islam”; Schuon, “The Quintessential Esoterism of Islam,” 102.

97. Schuon, “Two Esotericisms,” 18–19.

Islamic esotericism will never reject the fundamentals of Islam, even if it happens incidentally to contradict some particular exoteric position or interpretation; we can say that Sufism is orthodox thrice over, first because it takes wing from the Islamic form and not from anywhere else, secondly because its realisations and doctrines correspond to truth not to error, and thirdly because it always remains linked to Islam.⁹⁸

In addition to the universalist characteristic of Islamic esotericism and its exegetical basis, Schuon and Guénon employ it as an identity marker. For the former, embracing esotericism – Islamic in this case – is on the one hand a resuscitation of what the West once “worshipped” but in the modern age has “burnt,” and, on the other hand, is an elevation of the “worldliness of Easterners” and their excesses in body and soul. He laments “that it would be a mistake to conclude that the West possesses nothing in this respect and has everything to learn from the East. . . . *Grosso modo*, the West possesses everything essential, but it does not wish to hear of it, and in this consists its drama and absurdity.”⁹⁹

Guénon and Schuon thus cemented a Traditionalist and perennialist view of Sufism under the term “Islamic esotericism.” This view has become influential to such a degree that many non-Traditionalist scholars who became key authorities on Islamic esotericism and ‘spirituality’ wrote in similar terms. This is especially true of Henry Corbin, who is often described as a Traditionalist, despite his rejection of it.

For Corbin, Islamic esotericism refers to Islam’s interior world.¹⁰⁰ Whereas Guénon and Schuon apply it to Sufism, Corbin almost categorically refers it to *Shīʿī* esotericism, which he envisaged to be a Persian achievement.¹⁰¹ Corbin rejects the identification of Islamic “spirituality” with Sunnī Islam and Sufism, for *Shīʿī* esotericism and spirituality outrank (*déborder*) those of Sufism.¹⁰² This is reminiscent of the moment Alexander Wilder, a close associate of Blavatsky, cites Sir William Jones (1746–1794), who identified Sufism as “The primeval religion of Iran.”¹⁰³

98. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 167.

99. Schuon, “Two Esotericisms,” 20–21.

100. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, xiv

101. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 186–218, also see i, xiv.

102. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, iii.

103. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 144–45.

There are three reasons for this conceptualisation of Islamic esotericism. The first is doctrinal: the association of esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an is firmly understood in Twelver Shī'ism and Ismā'īlism to be knowledge stemming from the imams whose doctrines represent the *bāṭin* truth, while the Prophets' revelations constitute the *ẓāhir* form of religion. The second is the historical unease with, and sometimes hostility to, Sunnī Sufis in the Iranian Shī'ī milieu, which contrasted what it perceived as low, fake and malevolent *taṣawwuf* with a more philosophical, mystical, and inward-looking *ʿirfān*, often translated as “gnosis.”¹⁰⁴ The third reason is theoretical: the approach in the study of Islamic religious movements that adopts the binary of orthodoxy vs heterodoxy; for the most part, anachronistic colonial criteria imposed on the ideological systems of the colonised. The binary has proven to be tenacious:

Orthodoxy	Heterodoxy
Sunnī Islam	Shī'a Islam
traditionalists	rationalists
scripturalists	Sufis
Sufism	<i>ʿirfān</i>
revelation	philosophy

From this table one is able to see the over-simplification of the ideological topography of Islamic doctrine. Relevant to our case, pitting a scripturalist Islam against the hermeneutic methods of Sufis, rationalists, philosophers and Shī'a gnostics was associated with “non-Islamic” influences.¹⁰⁵ In the case of Corbin, it is these influences – Zoroastrian for example – in the “heterodoxy” of Shī'a Islam and its philosophical gnosis that elevated it over Sunnī Islam and Sufism. Despite problematising the dichotomy itself, John Taylor tries in a 1967 article to promote a history of Islam that is sympathetic to “heterodox” “sects.” There he

104. Knysh, *A New History*, 36–38.

105. Knysh, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy’ in Medieval Islam,” 48–67.

praises, among others, Corbin for sharing “the experiences and expressions of esoteric spirituality,” thus situating them as heterodoxy.¹⁰⁶ Corbin worked within a scholarly paradigm in which these dichotomies were entrenched, thus naturally what appears as non-conventional hermeneutics (esotericism) was aligned with what he perceived as heterodox religion (Shīʿa Islam).¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Iranian philosopher and Traditionalist, on whom Corbin had a big impact and vice versa, viewed Sufism and *ʿirfān* as forms of spirituality that make up Islamic esotericism.¹⁰⁸ This is likely the result of his direct affinity with the esotericism of Traditionalists such as Guénon and Schuon.

The same cannot be said about Mircea Eliade (1921–1986), also of a Traditionalist inclination. In the third volume of his *A History of Religious Ideas*, he discusses Islamic “mystical traditions” and views Sunnī Islam as exclusively exoteric: “it is characterized first of all by the importance accorded to a literalist interpretation of the Qur’an and the tradition, and by the primary role of the Law, the *shariʿat*.”¹⁰⁹ Sunnī Islam has developed its theology around the conviction of the existence of one “spiritual reality” which, according to Eliade, means that “it would be difficult to develop a spiritual exegesis of the Revelation by passing from the exoteric meaning to the esoteric.”¹¹⁰ Esoteric hermeneutics that reveal *ḥaqīqa* are exclusive to Shīʿa Islam, which he describes as “the Gnosis of Islam.”¹¹¹ The main source of this assertion and the rest of the discussion is Corbin.

106. Taylor, “An Approach to the Emergence of Heterodoxy,” 200.

107. Knysh asserts, “Thus, such distinctly Christian concepts as “orthodoxy” and “heresy” foster a tendency to disregard the intrinsic pluralism and complexity characteristic of the religious life of the Muslim community, leaving aside significant and sometimes critical “nuances.” In order to escape these shortcomings, one should try to let Islamic tradition speak on its own terms, to let it communicate its own concerns, its own ways of articulation and interpretation of religious phenomena” (Knysh, “ ‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy,’ ” 62–63). Several other scholars have problematised the use of this dichotomy; for example, see Wilson, “The Failure of Nomenclature,” 169–94; Yıldırım, “Sunni Orthodoxy vs Shiʿite Heterodoxy?,” 287–307; Langer and Simon, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy,” 273–88.

108. Abaza, “A Note on Henry Corbin,” 95–96; Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, 37–40.

109. Eliade, *A History*, 113.

110. Eliade, *A History*, 114–15.

111. Eliade, *A History*, 116–17.

Notwithstanding this, Eliade concedes that Sufism represents the most well-known “mystical dimensions of Islam, and one of the most important traditions of Islamic esotericism.”¹¹² For Eliade, however, Sufism is distinct from Sunnī Islam, with the former maintaining an esoteric dimension. The “unorthodox” nature of the esoteric dimensions of Shī’a Islam, Sufism, and Kabbalah made them amenable to “foreign conceptions (above all, Gnostic and Iranian).” However, he explains that “what one must account for in each case is not the fact in itself, and in particular the borrowing of foreign spiritual ideas and methods, but their reinterpretation and articulation within the systems that have assimilated them,” that is esoteric exegesis and *ta’wīl*.¹¹³ In this case, the imams of Shī’a Islam facilitated the revelation of the true sense of the Qur’an; furthermore, the esoteric comprehension of the Qur’an is after all “specific to Shī’ism.” He then asserts that Shī’i esotericism in fact saturated Sufism.¹¹⁴ In Eliade, then, we can discern Traditionalism’s privileging of the latter and Corbin’s partiality to the former.

In conclusion, the term “Islamic esotericism” originated in the early twentieth century, describing a construct developed by Traditionalists, as well as non-Traditionalists who had links to them on a personal or intellectual level. It is centred on the artificial separation between *bātin* and *zāhir*, and, as a result between *ḥaqīqa* and *sharī’a*. Traditionalists Islamicised universalist and perennial philosophies that permeated the Western esoteric world-view in earlier centuries. They sought to challenge the narratives that privilege modernity, its development from the Renaissance, and the bypassing of the medieval period and Islam. This “Islamic tradition” was Sufism par excellence to the establishers of Traditionalism, especially Guénon and Schuon. However, this Sufism was, theoretically at least, exfoliated to reveal a universal and ahistorical essence of Truth and the paths (*turuq*) leading to it. Initiation into Sufism served as a ges-

112. Eliade, *A History*, 122.

113. Eliade, *A History*, 118.

114. Eliade, *A History*, 123.

ture of consolidation rather than a commitment in the exclusive sense. Once Islamic esotericism was espoused with a kind of Persianophilia, it came to be Shī'i-oriented, as we see in Corbin and Eliade. In a way, the early Traditionalists' approach to Sufism seems to have dispensed with a denominational specification due to their ahistorical and even romanticised view. It was historians affiliated with the Traditionalists who introduced the denominational element, whether it was the result of academic nuancing or personal bias. In any case, the Traditionalist packaging of Islamic spiritual traditions has proved to be influential to this day and, to a large degree, has determined the style of their appropriation in the West and reabsorption in many parts of the Middle East today.

V: Paradigms and Orientation of Islamic Esotericism

To establish Islamic esotericism as a responsible methodological construct for the study of historical and contemporary currents, after recognizing its historical reality, a self-conscious systematic outline of its features is presented here, agreeing with Feras Hamza that

one possible way forward for arriving at an Islamic Studies definition of Muslim esotericism would be to combine the historical record with a typology that would not fall into the trap of Faivre's de-historicization of the concept. In the case of Islamic Studies, one is better placed to come up with such a definition, since Muslim "esoteric phenomena" could be connected through a direct historical record and thus justifiably be studied typologically given the common cultural setting.¹¹⁵

Admitting that setting criteria for this reformulation will make us direct actors in this discourse like al-Ghazālī and Faivre, this section seeks to construct a preliminary framework for the study of Islamic esotericism in terms of epistemological paradigms (revelatory vs intellectual) and social orientations (personal vs communal).

Beginning with orientations of Islamic esotericism, of great relevance to our investigation is Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*, particularly his discus-

115. Hamza, "Locating the 'Esoteric,'" 356.

sion of Muslim personal piety — “a person’s spiritual devotion” — which reacted against the glitz and glamour of the court and splendours of high culture, seeking the ultimate cosmic reality. One way this desire manifested was within religious communities and organisations that responded to these tendencies with distinctive styles of piety. Taking on “ritual” and “myths” or narratives within these structures, the spiritual incentive found itself situated relative to social, intellectual and political realities.¹¹⁶ From the late seventh century to the middle of the tenth — “The High Caliphal Period” — Islam as a religious allegiance was expanding rapidly, subsuming creatively different backgrounds, which contributed to the character of pious communities. Hodgson highlights two trends in that period, which he calls “mystical” and “kerygmatic.” Concerning the former Hodgson describes “the mystical component in personal piety, when objective ultimacy is sought in subjective inward awareness, in maturing *selfhood*: exploring or controlling his consciousness, the person may penetrate into or through his self to find ever more comprehensive meanings in the environment.” The other trend, however, reflects historical consciousness; in other words, a kerygmatic character comes to be when the symbolic/mythic/ritualistic component of personal piety, which articulates natural and cultural environment as cosmos, becomes sought in datable events “in history with its positive moral commitments.”¹¹⁷ In this early period, unlike the kerygmatic trend, the mystical was not yet dominant.

Distrust of the court and its opulence fostered a populism that complemented a “*sharʿī* spirit” which put trust in practical morality consistent with the Qur’an, regulated community life, and informed its idealisation. This was found in both Sunnī and Shīʿī communities.¹¹⁸ Here Hodgson implicitly associates non-*sharʿī* spirit with esotericism. I prefer to use “beyond-*sharʿī*,” as this extension of piety does not necessarily mean a complete departure from the Law, as I have demonstrated in the previous sections. Nevertheless, according to

116. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 359–61.

117. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 362–64.

118. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 369–70.

Hodgson, the first group to challenge the Shīʿī *sharʿī* spirit are the eighth-century *Ghulāt* – literally, “extremists” – who deified their contemporary imams, often via leaders who viewed themselves as their representatives, and were generally more concerned with inner symbolism and metaphorical interpretation than with legal applications, and believed in the transmigration of souls.¹¹⁹

Hodgson identifies so-called non-*sharʿī* movements within Shīʿa Islam as “kerygmatic esotericism,” a term which reflects members’ commitment to a vision of history according to which privilege is given to a designated imamate, forming the basis for a sectarian society. Their esoteric outlook is anchored in an “imamology” according to which secret and hidden wisdom is preserved and transmitted by imams whose very ontological reality embodies the esoteric truths of the Qur’an that are concealed under Muḥammad’s exoteric *sharʿa*, yet consolidate one true historical community. To this should be added the necessity for discretion for the sake of protecting the community and its guide, which involves a socio-political dimension in the esoteric dimensions of Shīʿī faith.¹²⁰ The associated millenarian hopes particularly encourage an esoteric mind-set.¹²¹ In this milieu, the Ismāʿīlīs have been most successful. The centrality and prominence of esoteric interests to the piety of Ismāʿīlīs has earned them the historical title *al-Bāṭiniyya*. Their esotericism is represented by the role of the imams to whom secrets of the Qur’an and the Cosmos are confided. It is also oriented towards the cyclical movements of human history that ultimately deliver salvation to the true historic community, gives importance to numerical parallelism, and a Neoplatonic hierarchical cosmic structure that is reworked into a Prophetic/Imamic cosmology.¹²²

Within the Jamāʿī-Sunnī fold, the less historically-oriented mystical movement is considered here to be Sufism. Sufism, according to Hodgson, was associated with the Ḥadīth folk rather than the Muʿtazila, most of them being Jamāʿī

119. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 370; Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam*.

120. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Introduction et Remerciements,” 3-7.

121. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 372-74.

122. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 378-83; Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus*, 45-51.

Sunnī. In the first generations of Islam it was a form of ascetic personal piety (*zuhd*), and until the tenth century it was arguably a minority movement. Its flourishing and institutionalisation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries caused it to dominate “the inner life of Islam.”¹²³ Sufism insisted on the incommunicable nature of the inner mystical experience since the revelation of hidden and ultimate truths is revelatory and experiential and never rational.¹²⁴ In that way, the rational theology of the Mu‘tazila is at odds with Sufism. For Hodgson then, Sufism represented a non-kerygmatic Jamā‘ī esotericism that contrasts with the Kerygmatic “Bāṭinī piety” in the Shī‘ī milieu, especially the Ismā‘īlīs.¹²⁵

Hodgson’s framing of Islamic esotericism as a consequence of the evolution of Islamic forms of piety is very illuminating and affords us a much needed historical perspective that is not found in Pierre Riffard’s dubious classification of Islamic esoteric trends, seen through a universalist lens that includes ambiguous concepts such as “prehistoric esotericism,” “primitive esotericism,” and “Muhammedan esotericism” that are somehow distinct from other Islamic forms such as those of Twelver Shī‘ism and others.¹²⁶ However, his terms are problematic. “Kerygmatic” is a Christian theological term referring to apostolic preaching which is based on a perceived historical narrative of the life of Jesus Christ.¹²⁷ I suggest replacing it with “collective.” “Mystical,” in the way Hodgson uses it, implies that the communal esoteric ideas and practices cannot be “mystical” and the term itself carries many ambiguities. I replace it with “personal.” These orientations must be understood as a spectrum of epistemological tendencies rather than as mutually exclusive.

The biggest shortcoming of Hodgson’s categorisation of kerygmatic and mystical esotericism – respectively represented by Ismā‘īlism and Sufism – is

123. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 393-94.

124. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 395.

125. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 393.

126. Riffard, *L’Ésotérisme*, 164-66, 186.

127. Lewis, “Kerygmatic Theology,” <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470670606.wbecc0752>.

its marginalisation of philosophical and intellectual esoteric forms which are seen later as developing, almost exclusively, only in Shī'i *irfān*. It resulted from the way whereby Hodgson begins his discussion of Jamā'i piety as a contest between Mu'tazalite rational theology and the textualism of the Ḥadīth folk. The Mu'tazila, active in Baghdad and Basra, were epistemologically in opposition to the textual piety and the "shar'ism" of the Ḥadīth folk, who were exponents of religious authority based on the transmitted reports about the Prophet. The Mu'tazila were concerned with doctrinal speculation through intellectualising belief. Their rational theology was occupied with divine justice and free will, the createdness of the Qur'an as a result of absolute divine unity, and the metaphorical interpretation of the passages of the Qur'an that give Him physical attributes.¹²⁸ Indeed, there was no esoteric orientation in the Mu'tazila, at least explicitly, and the Sufis may have found more resonance in the Ḥadīth folk; nevertheless, Mu'tazilite hermeneutics was congenial to forms that explored the *bātin* of the Qur'an, the natural world, and the cosmos intellectually.¹²⁹ If we allow Hodgson's view of the Mu'tazila's orientation as non-esoteric yet kerygmatic, "in which the historical development of the Islamic Ummah played a major role," their influence on Islamic philosophy and, by extension, philosophical/intellectual forms of esotericism falls through the cracks.¹³⁰ Natural philosophers of the medieval period cannot be easily fitted as exponents of Hodgson's "kerygmatic" or "mystical" esotericisms since their confessional backgrounds are subordinated to philosophy even when they are expressed. Thus, I introduce here two paradigms of Islamic esotericism: revelatory esotericism and intellectual esotericism. We shall first look at the latter, as it is overlooked in the usual discussions on Islamic esotericism.¹³¹

128. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 384-88.

129. For the Mu'tazila's ascetic trends, see Aidinli, "Ascetic and Devotional Elements," 174-89.

130. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 393.

131. Saif, "From Ġāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-ma'ārif," *passim*.

The earliest to systematically exhibit an intellectual form of esotericism is the tenth-century secret brotherhood known as Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, active in Iraq.¹³² Ibn Taymiyya counts them among the heretical *bāṭinīs* for attributing philosophical explications to revelation.¹³³ Their *Epistles* is an encyclopaedia of physical, metaphysical, divine and occult sciences with the ultimate objective of reaching the *bāṭin* through the *ẓāhir*, the cause through the effect, God through His creation, by means of the intellect. The success of this endeavour is conditioned and sustained by purification of the soul and sublimation of its intellectual faculty, which witnesses hidden and divine truths.¹³⁴ They explain that *dīn* (“religion”) is twofold: exoteric manifest (*ẓāhir jalīyy*), and esoteric hidden (*bāṭin khaṭīyy*). The public benefits from the first, which comprises obligations and traditions. The second is that of the *khawāṣṣ*, meaning the select or elite, who investigate “the secrets of religion and the interior (*bawāṭin*) of hidden things, and its concealed secrets that *are not touched save by the ones purified* from the filth of desire.” The italicised sentences reference verse 79 of sura 56. The elite are engaged in an exegesis that aims to unpack “the allusions [made] by the people of the Divine Secrets (*aṣḥāb al-nawāmīs*) in their symbols and subtle signs whose meanings are derived from the angels. [They seek to know] their interpretation and the truth of their significance placed in the Torah, the Bible, *al-Zabūr* (the book of David), *al-Furqān* (The Qur’an), and the books of the prophets.” They thus come to know the birth of the universe, the creation of the heavens and earth in seven days, the angels’ prostration to Adam, Lucifer’s rebellion, and other events and phenomena mentioned in these holy books.¹³⁵ This knowledge is directly revealed to the prophets, but for the rest their attainment is only possible through wisdom and

132. Their confessional identity is debated but largely thought to be affiliated to Ismāʿīlism. In a recently published article, I challenge this hypothesis. Saif, “Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ’s Religious Reform and Magic,” 34–68.

133. Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Ṣafādiyya*, 1: 2–3.

134. Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, 2:179–80; 3:174, 439.

135. Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, 3: 511–2.

philosophy, both words contained in the Arabic *ḥikma*. The Ikhwān contend that the Qur'an's "hidden and esoteric interpretation" is comprehended intellectually; once realised the elite achieve a high rank close to the prophets. Through this esoteric knowledge is the way to God.¹³⁶ We read:

The best among humankind are those of intellect (*‘uqalā*), and the finest among those of intellect are the people of knowledge (*al-‘ulamā*). The highest among the people of knowledge and most sublime in station are the prophets, followed in rank by the sage philosophers (*al-falāsifa al-ḥukamā*). Both teams agree that all things are caused and that the Creator – Sublime, Mighty, and Hallowed – is their cause, perfecter, creator, and completer.¹³⁷

The proximity of philosophers to prophets is reflected in the proximity of the esoteric realities of nature and the cosmos to the esoteric meanings of the Qur'an. The esoteric dimension of nature is to a large degree known through the occult sciences to which many sections are dedicated in the *Epistles*, including the last epistle on magic.¹³⁸ Ultimately, however, natural philosophy – which subsumes the occult sciences – and divine wisdom are sister salvific sciences.¹³⁹

Esoteric reading of texts and/as nature and the connection to the occult sciences is discernible in the famous magic treatise known as *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* ("The Goal of the Sage"), known in the Latin world as the *Picatrix*. Its author, the Andalusian Maslama al-Qurṭubī (d. 964), like the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' by whom he is deeply influenced and even sometimes quotes almost verbatim, views all natural phenomena including the planets and human beings to have a *zāhir* physical aspect and a *bāṭin* spiritual one. As microcosm, the human encompasses esoteric and exoteric realities and through the rational soul can gain knowledge of them.¹⁴⁰ Intellectual esotericism, or *bāṭinism*, is expressed in the following quotation; though long, it is worth citing in full:

136. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, 4: 69, 138.

137. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, 4: 124.

138. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. On Magic I*; Saif, "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'"s Religious Reform and Magic," 26–36; Saif, "A Study on *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*s Epistle on Magic, the Longer Version (52b)."

139. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, 1:41, 328–29.

140. al-Qurṭubī, *Picatrix*, 42–43.

The form of the universal human is enclosed in the form of the individual human and it is the simple [counterpart] of it and of its matter. The form of the individual human is enclosed in the body and it is the simple [counterpart] of it. The form of the body is the composite statue and husk of the form of the individual human. The form of the individual human is the composite statue and the husk of the form of the universal human. The form of the universal human is the statue and husk of the form of the universal soul. The universal soul is the statue and husk of the universal intellect. The universal intellect is the statue and husk of the light from which the intellect was created, and light is the prime matter of the universal intellect. The same [is found] in all that is beneath it. The highest is always the prime matter of what is beneath it and is simple in comparison. What is beneath is always the form of what is above and composite compared to it. The human, truly, is the pneumatic and composite form used [in the creation] of [celestial] bodies that are attached [to them] by nature. Whoever wants to learn this truly must be virtuous, pure in mind and body from filth, and [then] he shall see and witness this in an authentic revelation. . . . On this, Plato, excellent in sciences and advanced in virtue, based his book entitled *Timaeus* wherein he greatly elaborated on the forms and explicated this purpose; but he shrouded [his] words and obscured them, in the manner in which philosophers treat their wisdom, in order to protect and preserve it from the ignorant. So did Proclus.

To them, obscurity (*ghumūd*) in science is making concepts so subtle until they are hidden (*takbfā*) and become so obscure [to the point] that the extractor [of concepts] from obscurity would require contemplation, careful consideration, and thorough examination in order to distinguish them among all manifest and clear things they mixed with. For sciences are [divided into] two parts: some of it is clear and manifest and some of it is concealed and hidden (*khaḥfiyy baṭīn*). The concealed and hidden is the obscure (*ghāmīd*). The obscure concept needs either syllogisms and propositions that lead him (the seeker) to the obscure [concept], or study, inference, contemplation and thorough consideration until this concept makes itself known to him, and the intended [meaning] is thus clarified, what has been closed to him opens, and he attains his desire. Inference is [achieved] through many things: one of them is tracing the absent from the witness, or the origin from the branch by means of a common concept, or to build opinion based on accepted and approved statements from an approved individual or approved company, leading to a result through which the desired concept appears. Generally, to tread a path to knowledge, one [must] extend one's gaze all along this route, and with this gaze he shall obtain the essences of existents and their degrees will become elucidated.¹⁴¹

141. al-Qurṭubī, *Picatrix*, 49-51.

For Maslama al-Qurṭubī, the path to enlightenment is one of knowledge directed by the human intellect, which is the analogue of the universal intellect that mediates between the world of multiplication and that of divine simplicity. The celestial world, known through astrology, is an essential step towards encountering the divine light. Progress in this path is conditioned upon self-purification. The universe is not only ontologically linked to our very being but epistemologically accessible. The knowability of universal divine truths is ascertained by Plato, Plotinus, and all the philosophers cited in the *Ghāya*. Nevertheless, their words too have esoteric and esoteric meaning as they engaged in *igbmād* (to make obscure) since esoteric realities are accessible to the very few people of intellect. Just as the revelation of hidden truths is based on a discursive process of intellection – effects to causes, existents to God – so is the attainment of the esoteric meaning of philosophical texts.

Prophets and imams are completely absent in this narrative of epistemological and ontological ascent. However, in a chapter that departs from the style of the *Ghāya*, Maslama al-Qurṭubī refers to “The Treasured Book” (*al-Kitāb al-makḥzūn*) by a certain Ja‘far al-Baṣrī, who assigns a planet to each sura of the Qur’an. He claims that from this division one is able to extract “the treasured name that God deposits in the hearts of the *awliyā’* and the ‘*uqalā’* ‘gnostics’ (*‘arīfīn*).”¹⁴² Interestingly, this refers to the greatest name of Allah that cannot be known save by God’s Friends – *al-awliyā’* – a term which refers to Sufi saints – and *arīfīn* – meaning those who experience divine revelation. The greatest name is also a concept that developed within Sufi thought. Al-Qurṭubī’s knowledge of Sufism is further demonstrated by his reference to the science of letters that was developed within Sufi and non-Sufi mystic milieus.¹⁴³ He speaks of the centrality of letters to the practice of the Friends of God, including the mysterious letters – *al-muqatta‘āt* – at the beginning of 29 suras.¹⁴⁴

142. al-Qurṭubī, *Picatrix*, 169.

143. Knysh, *Sufism*, 53–57; Lory, “Soufisme et sciences occultes,” 186–89; Ebstein and Sviri, “The So-Called *Risālat al-ḥurūf*,” 227.

144. al-Qurṭubī, *Picatrix*, 169–70.

Al-Qurṭubī discusses the esoteric and exoteric levels of the Qur'an in the same chapter. For him esoteric exegesis remains a discursive process of intellection:

A code is a form of speech that is not [expressing] something manifest but has a meaningful interior (*batīn ma'navī*). Therefore, it is, in general, an expression with two aspects: announced and hidden, for the sake of a benefit (or an insight (*ḥikma* without the definitive)). This is why the Qur'an is said to have an exterior (*ẓābir*) and an interior (*batīn*). . . . Being manifest (*ẓuhūr*) or being hidden (*al-butūn*) is [to be understood] in relation to perceptions; this why God the Exalted is Concealed (if he is sought with the senses and the treasure house of the imagination, and Manifest if he is sought through the treasure house of the intellect by way of inference (*istidlāl*). So, when it is said that He is hidden with regards to sensory perception then He is manifest; being manifest by means of the intellect, He is mysterious (*ghāmiḍ*).¹⁴⁵

The Qur'an has an interior (*batīn*) and exterior (*ẓābir*), echoing God's attributes/divine names as Concealed (*al-Batīn*) and Manifest (*al-Ẓābir*). God's concealed nature, like the Qur'an, nature and the universe, is hidden to the senses but becomes manifest by the realisation of the intellect (*idrāk al-'aql*). Also expressed here is the correlative concept of codification and obfuscation that we saw in the criteria of al-Ghazālī and others.

Despite being a departure from the tone of the text, these references should not be surprising. In al-Andalus at that time a mystical tradition was developing centred on esoteric exegesis and the science of letters, exemplified by the thought of Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allah b. Masarra (883–931) who wrote *Kitāb al-ḥurūf* ("On letters"). It is a "private science between the heart of a human being and his Lord" according to which letters are the foundations of creation. The cosmos can be *revealed* to the soul and heart of an individual by approaching the letters, names, and *muqatta'āt* as symbols representing cosmological and cosmogonical principles that encapsulate God's direct powers of creation and generation.¹⁴⁶

The difference between the thought of Maslama al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Masarra should not be exaggerated. They were active during a transitional period in the history of Islamic mysticism just before the solidification and formalisation of

145. Clemente, "Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-I'tibār," 170.

146. Clemente, "Edición Crítica del *K. Jawāṣṣ al-Ḥurūf*," 61–63.

Sufism.¹⁴⁷ So, Ibn Masarra commences his *Kitāb al-I‘tibār* (“On Contemplation”) by extolling the intellect’s capacity:

You have mentioned, God have mercy on you, that you have read in some books that he who infers by contemplation (*al-mustadill bi al-i‘tibār*) [beginning] from the lower world to the higher finds nothing but that which the prophets indicated from the higher to the lower. I sought to verify and exemplify this. Know, may God grant you and us success, that the first [thing to elucidate in] this is that God – Mighty and Sublime – created for his servants intellects that are light, from His light, so that they perceive (*li yabsirū*) with them His authority and know his power, witnessing of God what He bears witness to Himself and what the angels and people of knowledge among his creation witness of Him. Then God, Mighty and Sublime, made the heavens and earth, he created signs that indicate Him and signify His divinity and beautiful attributes. For the entire world is a book whose letters make up its speech read by people of insight (*mustabshirun*).

Ibn Masarra refers to several passages from the Qur’ān to verify this including: “They contemplate (*yatafakkarūn*) the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], “Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly” (Q. 3: 191).¹⁴⁸ The rest of the treatise is concerned with the process of intellection that reveals “esoteric matters” (*al-umūr al-bāṭina*),¹⁴⁹ such as the nature of the hypostatic universe, the Throne, the Pedestal, the seven heavens, divine attributes, etc. This intellection is an engagement that involves a spiritual ascent (*taraqqā*).¹⁵⁰ Ibn Masarra believes that ancient philosophers were occupied with this process of reflection that reveals the nature of the creator from the created, yet it was without rectitude of intention (*niyya mustaqīma*) and so they were led astray.¹⁵¹

Maslama al-Qurṭubī was known as a *bāṭinī*, an esotericist,¹⁵² but no writings akin to those of Ibn Masarra are known to have been written by him. Ibn

147. Stroumsa, “Ibn Masarra,” 97-112; Stroumsa and Sviri, “The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus,” 201-53.

148. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-I‘tibār,” 90.

149. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-I‘tibār,” 91.

150. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-I‘tibār,” 92, 100.

151. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-I‘tibār,” 101.

152. Fierro, “Bāṭinism in al-Andalus,” 91-92, 103; Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 26, esp. n78.

Masarra's discourse is more God-centric, whereas al-Qurṭubī's is rather star-centric. The former cites the Qur'an consistently and his own vocabulary is more devotional and Qur'anic. Al-Qurṭubī studied in Basra where he came into contact with more mystics, but there the pull was stronger toward the intellectual esotericism that he knew intimately from the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', who were crucial to the development of his worldview.¹⁵³

The dissonance between intellectual and revelatory esotericisms is encapsulated in a letter written by the mystic Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240) to the prominent theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1150–1210). The Sufi milieu did not think highly of al-Rāzī, who at some point of his life pursued a mystical path. The anecdote goes that he was initiated into the Kubrawī path though was unable to renounce his book learning for experiential knowledge.¹⁵⁴ Al-Suhrawardī did, in fact, send a letter to al-Rāzī enjoining him to immerse himself in inner life. So did Ibn 'Arabī, written in an encouraging and loving tone. The Great Master denies the ability to know God through intellectual reflection, allowing only knowledge through revelation (*kashf*) of divine truths:

A person with lofty aspirations (*al-himma*) should not waste his life with contingent things (*muhḍathāt*) and their exposition, lest his share from his Lord escape him. He should also free himself from the authority of his reflection (*fiḳr*), for reflection can only know from its own point of reference; but the truth that is sought after is not that. Knowledge of God is contrary to knowledge of God's existence. For the intellect knows God insofar as He is existent and by way of negation (*salb*), not affirmation (*ithbāt*). . . . God (great and glorious) is too exalted to be known by the intellect's [powers of] reflection and rational consideration (*nazar*). An intelligent person should empty his heart of reflection when he wants to know God by way of witnessing (*mushāhada*). The one with high aspiration should not learn this [kind of knowledge] from the world of imagination (*ʿalam al-khayāl*), which contains embodied lights (*al-anwār al-mutajassada*) that point to meanings beyond them. For imagination causes intellectual meanings.¹⁵⁵

153. Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus," 88.

154. Rustom, "Ibn 'Arabī's Letter," 114–16.

155. Rustom, "Ibn 'Arabī's Letter," 128–29.

Therefore, searching for God through understanding effects and causes is futile. Only contemplation in the spiritual path can lead to Him.¹⁵⁶ This is a response to al-Rāzī's intellectual and philosophical tendencies in his interpretation of the Qur'an, which was criticised by Ḥajjī Khalīfa as demonstrated earlier. In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, al-Rāzī stresses that the rational faculty is able to perceive both exterior/exoteric and interior/esoteric levels of existence, the Qur'an itself, even God and all his actions.¹⁵⁷ The response to the intellectual search for true meaning involved underplaying discursive knowledge, causality and its Aristotelian underpinnings, and over-emphasising prophetic and letrist reworkings of the Neoplatonic hypostases.¹⁵⁸

This exchange demonstrates the contested claim to truth between natural philosophers and mystics that became more pronounced with the development and institutionalisation of Sufism in the twelfth century.¹⁵⁹ Both groups were concerned with comprehending the hidden, though the epistemological foundations of this process were debated. Awareness of the Divine and the perception of the entirety of the cosmos as God's shadow shuns logical deductions of causes – an intellectual engagement – and instead exhorts the adept to engage in soul-immersive exercises that result in revelations – localised in the heart – about the verities of the higher and lower worlds.

Furthermore, in addition to the paradigms and orientation discussed here, and based on analysing the way the term *bāṭiniyya* was understood and used in addition to these paradigms and orientations, we can begin to see four principles of Islamic esotericism:

1. Exegetical principle: Islamic esotericism is pivoted on Qur'anic exegesis.
2. Epistemological principle: Intellectual or revelatory reception, hidden natural and

156. Rustom, "Ibn 'Arabī's Letter," 132-33.

157. al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:381; See also Almond, "The Shackles of Reason," 22-38; for more on negotiating reason, inspiration, intuition in al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Kirmānī, al-Ghazālī, al-Suhrawardī, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and others see, Lawson, ed., *Reason and Inspiration in Islam*.

158. For this kind of reworking see, Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Tadbīrat*, 21-26. For the impact of this shift of emphasis on Islamic occult sciences, see Saif, "From Gāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-ma'ārif."

159. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 6-7; Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism," 12-13.

celestial phenomena, the Divine realm, and the nature of Qur'an.

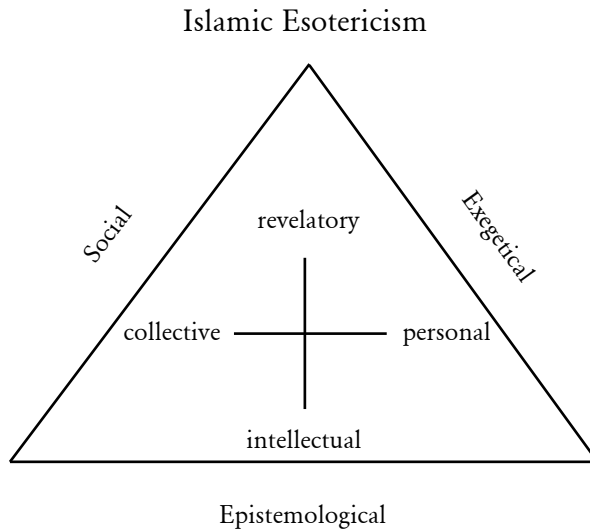
3. Social principle: personal or collective salvific investment through the enlightenment and perfection of the human soul and/or the restitution of a community.
4. Trans-linguistic principle that demands the use symbols and allegory.

For the sake of demonstration, we can look at the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* and conclude that their esotericism is intellectual as shown earlier, but that they differ in their social orientations. The Ikhwān message is explicitly collective as they frame their esoteric philosophy as a concern among themselves as "*jama'ā'*" who will guide the entire *umma* (Muslim community) towards its own sacralisation and sublimation into a utopia in which the individual and the collective and the intellectual and experiential are aligned.¹⁶⁰

It is important here to emphasise that according to this scheme two things usually associated with "esotericism" are not considered essential to it: discreet social presence and the occult sciences. Concerning the former, despite the claims of concealment of *bāṭini* knowledge, social discretion was not consistent historically among various esoteric groups. As for the occult sciences, despite having been practiced in some groups, as in the case of the science of letters among some Sufis, they are also not a criterion. In the early modern period (15th – 17th century), after the Mongol conquest of Asia, the occult sciences, especially the science of letters and *jafr*, were at the heart of an explicit scientific activity that aimed to secure the imperial power of the Safavids, the Mughals and the Ottomans.¹⁶¹ For Melvin-Koushki the open utilisation of the occult sciences as imperial tools in these empires "de-esotericised" them in accordance with a social meaning, as noted above. Nevertheless, the politicisation and pronounced Pythagoreanism of the early modern occult sciences are still reminiscent of their medieval Abbasid phase, spurred by the so-called Graeco-Arabic

160. Saif, "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' 's Religious Reform and Magic," *passim*.

161. Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamic Empire," 356–62; Melvin-Koushki, "Astrology, Lettrism, Geomancy," 142–50, Şen, "Reading the Stars," 557–608; Lelic, "Physiognomy (*ilm i-firāsa*) and Ottoman Statecraft," 609–46.



translation movement that stimulated thinking of the universe, the heavens, and human beings as knowable natural/celestial phenomena. However, an in-depth study on the characteristics of Islamic early modern esotericism, in the way it is defined in this article, is yet to be undertaken.

Another aspect that is potentially fruitful to investigate in the future is the extent to which Islamic esotericism is “rejected knowledge,” a notion that was developed by Wouter Hanegraaff, understanding it as the most defining feature of Western esotericism. Accordingly, Western esotericism becomes a “container concept” of currents and traditions from the early modern to the modern period that were renounced by various institutions from the Church to Academia.¹⁶² Is such a criterion applicable to the history of Islamic esotericism? This is a question worthy of investigation considering the different regulatory set-ups in the Islamic world, the lack of a central authority like the Church, and the non-existence of a comparable systematic project of censorship. It is also interesting to see how colonial and post-colonial criteria of rejection and censorship were exported to

162. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, *passim*. For a response on this criterion, see Pasi, “The Problems of Rejected Knowledge,” 201–2.

the Islamicate world, how they were internalised and possibly subjected to new and old forms of esotericism. These issues are beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

To answer the question “what is Islamic esotericism?” required first examining the dialogue of esotericism’s globalisation that has resulted from the problematisation of geographical and cultural categories in the field of Western esotericism. This theoretical and methodological re-examination led to a debate about the ontology of Western esotericism itself – whether it is a heuristic construct or a historical phenomenon. The arguments of this article rest on esotericism being both in the sense that real historical currents are analysed according to an ever-shifting conception. It is never transcendental since it is determined by particular and historical actors – from Renaissance humanists to Faivre and Hanegraaff, who ultimately legitimised a successful and important field.

I sought in this article to demonstrate the possibility of speaking about Islamic esotericism in similar terms. I looked first at the emergence of the term and concept “Islamic esotericism” in the Traditionalist works of Guénon, Schuon, Corbin, Nasr, and Mircea Eliade, in order to pinpoint its historicity and its entanglement with Western esotericism. The Traditionalist conceptualisation of Islamic esotericism was centred on a universalist version of Sufism or a Persophilic *ʿirfān*. However, due to its existence within the boundaries of Western esotericism, the Traditionalist take was adopted in the representation of Islam within the field. To understand it as part of the narrative of Islamic esotericism, it is not enough to rely on its own claims; one must relate it to a broader historical discourse about *bāṭin* and *bāṭiniyya*, esoteric and esotericism.

Generally speaking, the historical discussion of Islamic esotericism and its legitimacy hinged on the *bāṭinīs*’ adherence or departure from the *sharīʿa*, according to which it measured the esoteric exegetical approaches of philosophers, Sufis, Shīʿa and Ismāʿīlīs. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of *ẓāhir* as *sharīʿa* and *bāṭin* as

ḥaqīqa became an essential trope in the writings of the Traditionalists. However, to be able to identify Islamic esoteric currents, past, present, and future, this article posited two epistemological paradigms, based on the debate that emerged in the late medieval period between mystics and philosophers, contesting the ways hidden truths are reached; by revelation or by intellection. These paradigms were complemented by orientations of Islamic esotericism referred to here as the collective and personal orientations. The former is oriented towards a historical legitimisation of a community, and the latter is oriented towards the self. These should be thought of as tendencies since they are not necessarily contradictory.

Based on the proposed paradigms, orientations and principles of Islamic esotericism, we see Shīʿī esotericism/*ʿirfān* (intellectual and kerygmatic), Ismāʿīlī *bāṭiniyya* (intellectual and kerygmatic), Sufism (revelatory and personal), and Traditionalist Islamic esotericism (intellectual and personal) as currents of Islamic esotericism. Thus, both intellectual and revelatory modes of knowledge reception can be treated as paradigms of Islamic esotericism.

We must, however, be aware of the layers of interdependence and crosspollination among these currents; for example, some Muslim mystics and Sufis, such as al-Suhrawardī and al-Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), adopted a philosophical approach, and Sufī devotion was not always categorically antithetical to Shīʿa Islam.¹⁶³ Moreover, the list is expandable by future research that is supported by a cross-disciplinary approach within both Islamic studies and Western esotericism studies, allowing researchers to explore understudied topics and texts.

The intellectual vs revelatory paradigms are relevant to the post-Enlightenment tensions between science and religion. Rationality became the condition of legitimate and valid intellection, and revelation was shifted into the domain of ir- or non-rationality depending on the inclination of the observer and/or participant. This invites us to consider how Islamic esoteric currents of that

163. For examples, see Dakake, “Conceptions of a Spiritual Elect,” 327–44, and several other articles in this volume; Rizvi, “A Sufi Theology fit for a Shīʿī King,” 83–98; Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, 187–95; Rustom, “Philosophical Sufism,” 399–411.

period negotiated these shifts. This may include contemporary neo-Islamic esotericism that forged an alliance with Western esoteric traditions like occultism, spiritualism and the New Age.¹⁶⁴

In the special issue in which this article appears, specific groups are discussed that have either been bāṭinised, have adopted, that is, an esotericism inherent to the Islamic religious experience, or that have adopted Western esotericist frameworks, and it is often the case that bāṭinism itself attracts Western esotericist ideas and vice-versa. The former can be seen in Keith Cantu's discussion of the Fakir Bauls, who are inclined toward a personal orientation with a revelatory paradigm; it is also reflected in the communal/revelatory esotericism of pseudo-Ibn al-ʿArabī's *The Tree of Nu'mān (al-Šağarab al-nu'māniyyah)* analysed by Sasson Chahanovich. The westernisation of Islamic esotericism can be seen in Francesco Piraino's discussion of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya in Italy, who are inclined toward a personal orientation with an intellectual paradigm. Similarly, Michael Muhammad Knight highlights the influence of occultism and other Western esoteric groups on the Nation of Islam, communal in orientation with an intellectual paradigm. As emphasized in this article, these associations should be understood as strong inclinations rather than definitive, intractable traits. At times, a clear picture cannot be drawn based on these orientations and paradigms; this is made clear by Biko Gray's discussion of the traumatic mysticism of the Five Percenters. In his article he rejects the dichotomies and concepts that have determined the discussion of mysticism, esotericism, spirituality, transcendence, etc. since they do not have a place in the physical and metaphysical violence of the Middle Passage, which produced "undifferentiation" that itself is at the centre of the Five Percenters ideology. Although we can consider the Five Percenters to have a communal orientation, the paradigms of their belief system, which "cannot be gleaned from the darkness," are neither revelatory nor intellectual.

164. For example, see Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*. Research on New Religious Movements in Turkey is carried out at the Orient-Institute Istanbul, led by Alexandre Toumarkine.

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Ottoman Eschatological Esotericism: Introducing Jafr in Ps. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *The Tree of Nu‘mān* (*al-Shajarah al-nu‘māniyyah*)*

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Abstract

This article addresses a desideratum in Islamic intellectual history concerning apocalyptic eschatology. I propose to focus on the Islamic revelatory genre *par excellence* known as *jafr* which as a textual tradition comprises the fusion of eschatology and esotericism. As a case study, I have chosen to examine an Ottoman apocalypse known as *The Tree of Nu‘mān Concerning the Ottoman Empire* (*al-Shajarah al-nu‘māniyya fi al-dawla al-‘uthmāniyya*). This complex revelatory text was composed at some point in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century and was pseudepigraphically attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), the “Great Doctor” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) of Sufism. Importantly, *The Tree of Nu‘mān* shows us that eschatological predictions were central to bolstering Ottoman imperial claims to universal sovereignty, this being an historical phenomenon that permeated Islamic dynasties following the collapse of the central Abbasid Caliphate in 1258. More specifically, end-of-times tractates like *The Tree of Nu‘mān* highlight the reliance of revelatory propaganda on the esoteric sciences of lettrism (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) and astrology (*‘ilm al-falak*). With these two esoteric pillars, I argue that Pseudo-Ibn al-‘Arabī secured the validity and appeal of his pseudepigraphic apocalypse. A further important contribution of this essay is a new, critical definition of *jafr* that expands on previous scholarly attempts at understanding this immanently Islamic eschatological genre.

Keywords: Eschatology; lettrism; astrology; Ottoman Empire; Sufism; Ibn al-‘Arabī; pseudepigraphy

* I thank Dr. Liana Saif for inviting me to submit this essay on Ottoman eschatological esotericism. I also thank Dr. Edhem Eldem and the Boğaziçi University History Department for sponsoring me as a visiting scholar and during which time I worked on this essay.

One lunatic tossed a stone into a well; forty scholars could not get it back out.

— Turkish saying¹

“With its predictions, this curious and spurious work places the Ottomans in the eschatological tradition of Islam, more particularly that of *jafr*.”² Here Denis Gril introduces what remains to date the only academic analysis of any length of the *The Tree of Nu‘mān Concerning the Ottoman Empire* (*Shajarah al-nu‘māniyyah fī al-dawlah al-‘uthmāniyyah*).³ This “curious and spurious” and even “enigmatic” text is a self-identified mystical revelation (*ru‘yā, kashf*) originally composed at some point during the late tenth AH/late sixteenth century CE by an anonymous—probably Egyptian—author claiming to be the (in)famous Sūfī master Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.637/1240). No holograph copy exists, however, from the sixteenth century. Many supposed copies of *The Tree of Nu‘mān* (hereafter *ToN*) cited in catalogues are, in fact, only commentaries, a key insight that points to the lasting popularity and appeal of *ToN* among scholarly communities across the Ottoman Empire down the centuries. I have identified, however, four copies as true exemplars of this esoteric eschatological apocalypse: Princeton University Garrett Collection Ms. Yah. 4497 (fols. 19a–49a), Süleymaniye Ktp. Ms. Beyazıt 4609 (entire manuscript), İstanbul Üniversitesi Ktp. Ms. A. 4484 (fols. 1a–49a), and Beyazıt Yazmsa Eserler Ktp. Ms. Veliyüddin Ms. 2292/2 (fols. 40a–65a).⁴ For the purpose of this

1. Tur.: *Bir deli kuyuya taş atmış, kırk akıllı onu çıkaramamış.*

2. Gril, “Enigma,” 51.

3. Ps.-Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Shajarah al-nu‘māniyyah*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi (hereafter: SK) Ms Beyazıt 4609. Hereafter, all citations from Ms Beyazıt 4609 will be indicated as *ToN* followed by the folio page. Ahmet Zildzic’s unpublished Ph.D. claims to present a chapter-length analysis on *ToN*. Zildzic’s primary text is not, however, the prophecy but rather one of the commentaries. There are other serious historiographical issues that disqualify Zildzic’s treatment as a critical contribution. See Ahmed Zildzic, “Friend and Foe,” 83–118.

4. Additional copies are possibly extant in Egypt’s Dār al-Kutub. Egyptian authorities at Dār al-Kutub have prevented me from examining these texts. Fleischer claims to have found “ten copies of [*al-Shajarah al-nu‘māniyyah*].” Nowhere does he indicate the codicological information, but he explicitly relies on Gril’s article“; in email correspondence, Fleischer has suggested that he was referring to copies of the commentaries, and not the primary apocalypse itself. See Fleischer, “Haydar-i Remmal,” 295, fn. 20. The same information is referenced in Fleischer, “Shadows,” 57, fn. 21. Gril, for his part, relies singularly on Princeton University’s Garrett

essay, the primary copy used and referred to is Süleymaniye Ktp. Ms. Beyazıd 4609. This manuscript is a nineteenth-century imperial copy sponsored by Bezmi‘alem Sultan, the mother of Sultan ‘Abdülme‘cīd (r. 1255–1277 AH/1839–1861 CE). Ms. Beyazıd 4609 has been chosen for three reasons. First, its text does not differ substantially from Ms. Yah. 4497, Ms. A. 4884 and Ms. Veliyüddin Ms. 2292. Second, it possesses an incipit that provides a precise dating of composition. And third, it was clearly composed for the Sublime Porte and with the intent of reviving Ottoman eschatological propaganda among the highest echelons of imperial power. Ms. Beyazıd 4609 is, in short, a reliable and good copy for purposes of this present introductory article on Ottoman eschatological esotericism.

Importantly, *ToN* is a *jafri*-esoteric prophecy of “salvific knowledge [reserved] for a select elite of initiated disciples.”⁵ This is true insofar as *ToN*’s cryptic prophecies can only be fully interpreted by those skilled in occult sciences like lettrism (*‘ilm al-hunūf*)—the Islamic equivalent to Kabbalistic gematria—and astrology (*‘ilm al-falak*).⁶ But *ToN* is also an esoteric text with a communal, that is to say public, orientation. As argued in the second section of this essay, esoteric texts in the Ottoman period did circulate and appeal to wider audiences. The plenary import of these puzzling auguries does not prohibit apprehension of this revelation’s general message *per se*: the End of the World is at hand and the Ottomans are its gatekeepers. We should be wary of limiting the history of Islamic esotericism to a constricting notion of hidden societies and hidden modes of knowledge.

Collection Ms Yah. 4497 (fols. 19a-49b) as his primary copy; Ms Yah 4535 only contains commentaries by Khalīl b. Aybak al-Şafadī, Ibn Ḥabīb al-Şafadī, and Ps.-Şadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. See Gril, “Enigma,” 52, fn. 3. For the catalogue information, see Mach, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts*, 442–43 (nos. 5131, 5133). The additional manuscripts Gril cites are reproductions of codicological lists given in the catalogues of Brockelmann, Osman Yahya, and one manuscript — based on second-hand information — supposedly extant in the private collection of one Père Paul S bath, there labeled as “SBath [*sic*] private library Ms 663.” See Gril, 72–74.

5. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” 337, second column. I rely on Hanegraaff’s typological definition of esotericism over and against the historical definition, the latter of which verges into the study of specific currents of esotericism in Western culture as it arose in the nineteenth century. See Hanegraaff, 337, first column.

6. Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 77–79.

With that said, the pseudonymous author (hereafter: Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī) is uniquely concerned with proving two things. First, Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī contends that with the close of the first Muslim millennium (1000 AH/1592 CE), the final “hour” (*al-sāʿah*) of creation was about to chime.⁷ Second, and consequently, he identifies the Ottomans as the exclusive gatekeepers of the cosmic *eschaton*. Islam’s final and supreme sovereigns are neither descendants of Muḥammad nor are they even Arabs, but Turks, a quandary that had to be solved. As proof of their election despite their genealogical shortcomings, Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī points to a conspicuous conjunction (*qirān*) of the planets Saturn and Mars (*kaḡwān* and *al-marikh*). This alignment was a most auspicious augury, visible proof of their investiture as *the* millennial Muslim monarchs. The writing was, so to say, not on the walls but in the skies.

Building on Gril’s introductory discussion of *ToN*, this essay proposes to introduce the eschatological esoteric genre of *jaf̄r* and its application in the apocalypse of Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī. First, given the dearth of any up-to-date discussion of *jaf̄r* in academic literature, I will outline the origins and define what *jaf̄r* is. Here one will observe that, in contrast to the previous cursory definitions of D. B. MacDonald, Toufic Fahd, and Armand Abel, the Islamic eschatological genre *par excellence* was not an exclusively Shīʿī Islamic intellectual tradition. Equally important, Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī’s use of *jaf̄r* rests on lettrism and astrology as occult tools for predicting the course of cosmic events; *jaf̄r* is not a subgenre of lettrism, however. Such a contention amounts to a confused phylogeny and inverted order of epistemological importance. Lettrism here is that occult-mathematical corpus of equating the letters of the Arabic alphabet (e.g. *bā-keāf-zā* → 2 + 20 + 900 = 922 AH/1516 CE) with transcendental-symbolic meaning, the calculation and decipherment of which in *ToN* points to the truth of the Otto-

7. For references to the impending eschaton of Muḥammad’s revelation in terms of “the Hour”, see Qur’ān (hereafter: Q) 6:31, 40; 7:187; 12:107; 15:85; 16:77; 18:21, 36; 19:75; 20:15; 21:49; 22:1, 7, 55; 25:11; 30:12, 14; 30:14, 55; 31:34; 33:63; 34:3; 40:46, 59; 41:47, 50; 42:17-18; 43:66, 85; 45:32; 47:18; 54:1; 54:46; 79:42. Arguably, Muḥammad’s mission was to proclaim the imminent End of Time.

mans' claims to supernatural election. Second, I contextualize *ToN* by looking at its pseudepigraphic authorship. Here, one will observe how Šūfī esoteric practices—especially Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings of “secrets” (*asrār*)—and eschatological speculation helped generate a unique, esoteric revelation. Third, I discuss the possible Egyptian-Coptic tradition that may help explain the shift of apocalyptic focus to Egypt away from the traditional Islamic End-Times battlegrounds like Jerusalem, Damascus, and Constantinople.

An additional question I propose to interrogate by examining the above is: what were the intellectual and cultural conditions that facilitated—or even called for—the composition of such a perplexing text? That is to say, what need was there for an apocalyptic work of pro-Ottoman propaganda when the Ottomans had already conquered Constantinople, toppled the Byzantine Empire, and defeated the Burjī Mamluk Dynasty (r. 792–923/1390–1517), the latter conquest resulting in the inclusion under the Ottoman aegis of such major capitals as Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo, Mecca, and Medina? A superficial answer would point to the encroaching millennium; this is not sufficient, however. Rather, a better response lies with the general trend in the Eastern Mediterranean of weaponising certain occult sciences in the imperial race to claim the crown of millennial cosmocracy.⁸ What is supreme Islamic sovereignty without an esoteric apocalypse with lettrist and astrological content to back it up?

8. Saif et al., “Introduction.” See also Fleischer, “A Mediterranean Apocalypse”; Artun, “Hearts of Gold”; Şen, “Astrology.” For the Persianate and Mogul world, the sentiment also applies. See Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 47, 53, 108, 112, 127, 132, 148–49, 189–90. Moin prefers the locution “sacred kingship” or “millennial sovereign” over cosmocratic imperialism. The meaning is the same, however. For an interesting identification of the biblical Daniel being a model for occult-based monarchy, see also Moin, 200. This article does not allow for a longer discussion of this Danielic tradition in the Ottoman Empire, but it bears remarking that the Ottomans as well were interested in this biblical figure. The textual tradition in question is known under the title *Miilbeme-yi Dānyāl*. For example, see SK Ms Ayasofya 3367; Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi (hereafter: TKSM) Ms H.491, fols. 1b–35b; Harvard University – Houghton Collection (hereafter: HHough) Ms Turk 13, fols. 1a–35b (incomplete, missing initial pages). I thank Maryam Patton for sharing with me the final text.

In this light, *ToN* emerges as a primary case study for the central importance of lettrism and astrological conjunctions (*qirān*), both of which serve as the primary pillars of the eschatological-prophetic genre of *jafr*. Specifically, lettrism functions as the toolbox by which Ps-Ibn al-ʿArabī both uncovers and obfuscates God’s teleological plan for Creation; after all, lettrism is the tradition of interpreting the Arabic alphabet as the building-blocks of universal creation.⁹ An imperial apocalypse without it would be seriously lacking. Astrology generally understood (i.e. *ʿilm al-falak*) aids in demonstrating that the conjunction of Saturn and Mars every 960 solar (990 lunar) years both signals the end of cosmic creation and proves that the Ottomans were God’s chosen millennial—and by extension universally ordained—dynasty above all other Islamic caliphs and sultans.¹⁰ *In nuce*, this is the best description of what Ottoman eschatological esotericism was.

I. *Jafr* as an Esoteric Genre: Origins and Definitions

Where does *jafr* come from and how should we define it? The answer to both questions is not straightforward. I herewith introduce a totally new definition for *jafr* that over the course of this section will be historically outlined and discussed: *Jafr* is a non-confessional, Islamic (i.e. neither exclusively Shīʿī nor Sunnī), and esoteric genre composed in a revelatory mode—usually phrased in terms of *kashf* or *ruʿyā*—that is primarily concerned with the “Final Hour” (*al-sāʿah*). As an esoteric genre, its otherwise inscrutable and preternatural content (*ghayb*) is generally presented in terms of gematria codes and symbols (*rumūz*) and therefore necessitates the inclusion of occult methodology, in particular lettrism, to divine its enigmatic content. Lastly, *jafr* overlaps with “dynastic destinies” literature (*hidhān al-dumal, malāhim*) insofar as it conceives salvation history as a teleological progression of Muslim dynasties towards an ideal end (*eschaton*).

9. Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 80.

10. This particular dynastic reading of planetary alignment in the history of Islamic science can be traced back to the work of al-Kindī (d. 259/873) and Abū Maʿshar al-Balkhī (d. 272/886).

Traditionally, the emergence of *jafr* has been attributed to several prominent names in the early history of Islam all of which suggest a sectarian (read: Shīʿī) origin and exclusivity. The genesis story of *jafr* follows several possible trajectories. First, the fourth Caliph ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭalib (d. 40/661) either composed or dictated a work which subsequently acquired the convenient title *The Book of ʿAlī* (*Kitāb ʿAlī*) or the *Big Book of Jafr* (*Kitāb al-jafr al-kabīr*).¹¹ Second, the *Codex of Fāṭimah* (*Muṣḥaf Fāṭimah*) is also identified as a potential urtext for the appearance of the post-prophetic eschatological genre of *jafr* on the historical stage.¹² Third, a work titled the *Book of Jafr* (*Kitāb al-jafr*) is attributed to ʿAlī's great-great-grandson and the sixth ʿAlid Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765).¹³ There is no evidence of conflicting claims for supremacy or historical primacy. That is to say, the later historical sources that cite these early progenitors of *jafr* do not seek to assert one text as the first or the only true beginning of *jafr*. As with most legends, the creation narrative here is fuzzy.

In the *Book of ʿAlī*, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet reveals information concerning the role his progeny has to play in the final phase of cosmic history.¹⁴ ʿAlid historiography would very much like this to be so. In the second oracular codex attributed to the prophet's daughter and ʿAlī's consort, one finds the titular Fāṭimah receiving revelations via the angel Gabriel pertaining to the fate of ʿAlī and Fāṭimah's offspring (*wa-yukhbiruhā bi-mā yakūnu baʿdubā fī dhurriyyatibā*), with the caveat that ʿAlī served as her scribe.¹⁵ *Jafr* in this light emerges as the brainchild of that inimitable Islamic cohort known elliptically as “the Family” (lit. “People of the House,” *ahl al-bayt*), the prophet's closest living relatives. In a community that still valued agnate relations, the appeal of such a

11. Fahd, *Divination*, 221 ff.

12. Atalan, “Şiî Kaynaklarda,” 107-9.

13. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, 550.

14. National Library of Israel (hereafter: NLI) Ms Yah. Ar. 125, fol. 1b. For additional citations of ʿAlī as the first author of an urtext of *jafr*, see Fahd, “Djafr.”

15. Al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, I: 291. See also Ignaz Goldziher, “Literaturgeschichte der Šīʿā,” 491, fn. 2.

legendary work can only be described correctly as numinous. In the final work attributed to Ja‘far al-Šādiq, one may observe a kind of proof-text for the notion of the inherited ‘Alid charismatic afflatus (*karāmah*), especially that of revelatory insight (*kashf*), which was designated (*naṣṣ*) by the prophet himself at Ghadīr Khumm.¹⁶ This point is reflected in a passage in the *Book of Guidance into the Lives of the Twelve Imāms* (*al-Irshād fī ma‘rifat al-ḥujaj wa-l-‘ibād*) by the Twelver-Shī‘ī theologian al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), wherein he records that Ja‘far said:

Our knowledge (*‘ilmuna*) is timeless (*ghābir*) and celestially inscribed (*maẓbūr*); it is engraved upon hearts and pierced into ears. We have in our possession the red *jafr*, the white *jafr*, the *Codex of Fāṭimah* and *Comprehensive Prognosticon* (*al-Jāmi‘ah*) in which all that Mankind needs is contained.¹⁷

Attributing the final iteration of the text to Ja‘far also imbues it with a simultaneously wide and yet esoteric (*bāṭinī*) appeal. Ja‘far was not only a well-received theologian (*mutakallim*), jurist (*faqīh*), and transmitter of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*) among both Sunnī and proto-Shī‘ī scholars, but he also came to be seen as the “master” of Shī‘ī esotericism, especially of the divinatory kind as observed

16. Toufic Fahd cites a copy of *Kitāb al-jafr al-saghīr al-mansūb li-Sayyidina ‘Alī* (*Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi* Ms Ahmet III; Revan 1764) and a copy of *Kitāb shaqq al-jayb fīmā yata‘alliqu bi-asrār al-ghayb* (Millet Kütüphanesi Ms Ali Emiri Ef. 2795) in which the chain of the genetic transferal of prognosticatory powers is explicitly given as proof of *jafr* as an inherited imāmī capacity from ‘Alī through Ja‘far and ultimately terminating with the and imām Muḥammad al-Mahdī: ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib → al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī → Zayn al-‘Abidīn → Muḥammad al-Bāqir → Ja‘far al-Šādiq → Mūsā al-Kāzim → al-Muttakī → Muḥammad al-Taḳī → Ḥasan al-‘Ala‘ī → Muḥammad al-Mahdī. See Fahd, *Divination*, 222, fn. 2. I have not been able to independently confirm these passages, but the same introduction is given in NLI Ms Yah. Ar. 125, fol. 3a. One should also note that in Fahd’s texts, this vatic gift is understood as an ‘Alid-imāmī reboot of a primordial text composed by Adam (*Kitāb Adam*). Thus, a parallel between Muḥammad’s prophecy as a final update of an ancient revelation stretching back to Adam is achieved. For the Adam → Muḥammad → ‘Alī lineage of vatic charisma conveyed symbolically as light (*nūr*), see Schaefer, “Islamische Lehre,” 214 ff. The Adamic narrative is not, however, always indicated in the introductory genealogies of later *jafr*ist texts, e.g. NLI Ms Yah. Ar. 125, Bibliothèque nationale du France (hereafter: BnF) Ms Ar. 2669, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (hereafter: SB) Ms Wetzstein II 1212. For the concept of *naṣṣ*, see al-Ḥillī, *Kashf al-murād*, 393–95.

17. al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād*, 186.

in the above texts concerning the fate of “the Family” *nonpareil*.¹⁸ In fact, as Jan Just Witkam has noted, the practice of attributing magic (*sihr*), predictions (e.g. hemerology, *ikhtiyyārāt*), and occult sciences (*‘ilm al-ghayb, al-‘ulūm al-khafīyyah*) to Ja‘far is a widespread phenomenon in the Arabic and Persian worlds.¹⁹

It would therefore seem that *jafr* originated within the prophet’s household and continued as an elite and inherited capacity of revelatory insight that was transmitted down the lineage of the Imāms to Ja‘far. Consequently, one finds modern scholars claiming *jafr* as an intrinsically confessional Shī‘ī genre. For example, D. B. MacDonald remarks that the first book of *jafr* came to be ascribed to ‘Alī due to the “very early” development of the uniquely Shī‘ī belief that the Imāms possessed “a body of religious and political esoteric knowledge covering all things to the end of the world.”²⁰ Toufic Fahd defined *jafr* simply as the “Shī‘ī science *par excellence*.”²¹ Armand Abel for his part further specified *jafr* as, above all, a propagandistic genre of the Ismā‘īlī-Shī‘ī dynasty of the Fātimids (r. 297–567/909–1171) who were known for their “esoteric” (*bāṭini*) techniques of interpretation.²² One must approach this matter more carefully.

Firstly, there is an archival question to answer: does any material evidence exist of these books? Reading various catalogues combined with work in the archival libraries in the Middle East (Egypt, Israel, Turkey), across Europe (Russia, Italy, Germany, France, UK), and the USA (Harvard’s Widener Library, Princeton’s Firestone Library) reveals a complete absence of any copy made of the *Book of ‘Alī, Codex Fātimah*, or *Book of Jafr*. Lack of paper trail does not, of course, necessarily mean that a text or group of texts did or does not still exist. Fragments in later texts could help reconstruct a *stemma codicum* of a hypothetical urtext or *codex optimus*.²³ But the textual

18. Hodgson, “Early Shi’a,” 9; Fahd, *Divination*, 222.

19. Witkam, “Treatise on Hemerology,” 102.

20. MacDonald, “Djafr.”

21. Fahd, *Divination*, 221, for entire entry 221–24.

22. Abel, “Le Khalife, présence sacrée,” 37–38.

23. New Philology would eschew the classical obsession with archetypes. See Lundhaug and Lied, “Snapshots,” 3–6. Contrast this with the traditional position in Maas, *Textual Criticism*, 19.

silence is conspicuous. Even Ibn Khaldūn makes note that, “no copy of the [*Book of Jaʿfar*] has reached us, nor is its source known.”²⁴ Thus, one may conclude provisorily along with Sean Anthony that, “[n]one of these books is genuinely extant, and it is exceedingly difficult, if not outright impossible, to prove they ever were.”²⁵

A lack of such evidence should not be surprising. The practice of locating ancient origins and attributing a wholly imagined authorship of prominent persons to later textual innovations is not new in the history of ideas. Creating textual authenticity and authority is an historical phenomenon well attested in classical Rome and Greece,²⁶ as much as it is in Judaism and Christianity.²⁷ Islam is not alien to the game either.²⁸ The attribution to ʿAlī, Fāṭimah, and Jaʿfar is equal to projecting a later textual genre into the earliest installments of Islamic history and, thereby, of all relevant history. Likewise, this trifecta of holy persons (ʿAlī, Fāṭimah, Jaʿfar) is comparable in popular religious weight with identifying Paul of Tarsus as the author of the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians (to name a couple) or John Zebedee as the composer of the Fourth Gospel. Maximum ancient authority and sacred appeal was the goal. One ought to revise therefore Ignaz Goldziher’s pejorative evaluation that, “the inclination for composing apocryphal and apocalyptic texts” was a practice “more pronounced among the heretic [Muslim] sects.”²⁹ Scribes, regardless of sectarian affiliation, were commonly

24. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, I:551, 555.

25. Anthony, “Legend,” 6.

26. Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.E. was already aware of the phenomenon of forgeries, and by extension of a form of authorial truth. Notably, he doubted the Homeric authorship of *Epigoni* and *Cypria*. See Herodotus, *Loeb Classical Library — Herodotus*, vol. I, 2.117 (p. 409); vol. II, 4.32 (p. 231). The volume *Fakes and Forgeries of Classical Literature* (ed. Javier Martínez) is especially broad and informative.

27. For example, of the twenty-seven writings that make up the New Testament, as few as ten and as many as thirteen are forgeries. For more on the topic, see Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*, *passim*. Cf. Brakke, “Early Christian Lies,” 378-90.

28. The number of studies dedicated to pseudepigrapha in Islamic studies is, however, comparatively meager. The following is a ‘comprehensive’ list of such work: Reynolds, “Scriptural Falsification”; Pregill, “Isra’illiyat”; Tottoli, “Muslim Eschatological Literature.”

29. Goldziher, “Literaturgeschichte der Šīʿā,” 490. Goldziher makes this remark both in reference to

inclined to attribute ancient origins and popular authorship for a single book or textual corpus so that their work may achieve a more august status and commanding reception among their contemporary readers.³⁰

Second, and consequently, one must ask the question why members of the *ahl al-bayt*, who are otherwise popularly conceived as belonging to the Shīʿī confessional tradition, were identified as the original sources for *jafr*. The answer depends on the analytical perspective of the scholar. If one accepts a rough understanding of the relationship between Sunnīs and Shīʿīs as a story of perpetual antagonism and animus, then the identification of ʿAlī, Fāṭimah, and Jaʿfar emerge as Shīʿī patrons in possession of supernatural powers. But such strict divisions are not historical fact. At best, one can trace the deterioration of relations on a political, theological, and cultural level to the classical Ottoman period. The uprisings of messianic-mystical Shīʿī Turkmen brethren known as the Kızılbaş (lit. “Redheads,” so named for their crimson-colored headgear) in the early tenth/sixteenth century in eastern Anatolia, the ascent of the Safavid Empire (906–1134/1501–1722) combined with their claims to superior charismatic power and imposition of Shīʿī Islam, and the Ottoman imperial policies of Selīm I (r. 918–926/1512–1520) are generally cited as the causes for a more fundamental splitting of ways.³¹ Nevertheless, prior to this point one is hard pressed to find clear dividing lines. One is reminded of Cemal Kafadar’s poignant remark that prior to the sixteenth-century, Muslim communities in the

jafr and the “destinies” (*malahim*) literature. Goldziher, 491. It is certainly interesting that Goldziher notes the propensity of apocalyptic authors to write pseudonymously, as is the case for *ToN*.

30. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 111. Laura Nasrallah describes this ancient practice as emerging out of an “idea of continuous tradition and enigmatic supplement of the author. . . .” Nasrallah, “Out of Love,” 75. Nasrallah’s thesis also complicates the notion of writing with the intention of deceiving.

31. For the importance of the Kızılbaş uprisings specifically, and the rise of the Shīʿī-Safavid generally, in forming “legalistic Sunnism” as part of Ottoman doctrine, see Dressler, “Inventing Orthodoxy.” For a general history of early Ottoman-Safavid power relations, see Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, *Les Ottomans*. A very enlightening discussion of the historiographical discourse among Ottoman historians around the question of “Sunnitization,” see Terzioğlu, “Ottoman Sunnitization,” especially 303–5.

frontier (i.e. the Balkans and Anatolia) were not a part of any set orthodoxy but rather existed in “metadoxy.”³² Extrapolating on this point, for the preceding centuries as well one can also argue for a fluid, ‘metadoxical’ sense of confessional division, a religious sense of self that was aware of difference but not dogmatically antagonistic in a systematic fashion.

From a theological perspective, it becomes clear that the *ahl al-bayt* were chosen for their broad Islamic appeal, charismatic authority, and proximity to the prophet. Sunnī scholars leading up to the sixteenth century had little reason to temper their admiration for the prophet’s household. ‘Alī was, after all, not only the prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, but the undisputed fourth and “rightly-guided” caliph. Fāṭimah, the prophet’s daughter and ‘Alī’s wife, was one of the most revered female figures in the sacred history of early Islam. And, as stated before, Ja‘far was far from a polemical figure for Muslim theologians. In addition to his reliable status as a transmitter of prophetic traditions, he was also widely accepted as an authority in the Ash‘arī school of theology (*kalām*), the leading theological school in Sunnī circles since the fifth/eleventh century.³³ Along with the Mātūrīdī-Ḥanafī theological tradition, Ash‘arism and its favorable attitude toward Ja‘far thus secured the Sixth Imām a comfortable position in the dominant religious trend in predominantly Sunnī environments prior to the sack of Baghdad in 656/1258 and, more specifically, in both Mamluk and Ottoman lands in the post-classical period.³⁴ Claims that the attributed authorship of the legendary beginnings of *jafr* is indicative of the essentially Shī‘ī nature of the genre is simply not acceptable.

Specifically, if such a narrative was plausible, how could it be so that starting in the seventh/thirteenth century and leading up to the eleventh/sixteenth century *jafr* appears in the hands of Sunnī Ṣūfīs like Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 637/1240) and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454) and, later, squarely Sunnī occult practitioners like

32. Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*, 26. Cf. Terzioğlu, “Ottoman Sunnitization,” 308.

33. Makdisi, “Ash‘arī I,” 37–38.

34. Berger, “Interpretations of Ash‘arism and Mātūrīdism.”

Sultan Süleymān's court geomancer (*rammāl*) Ḥaydar (d. unknown)?³⁵ A quick flick of Ockham's Razor cuts back the weeds of confusion. Simply put, it is true that the legendary origins of the genre belong to 'Alī, Fāṭimah, and/or Ja'far. Yet, contrary to the assertions of later Western academics with a predilection for sectarian categories, *jafr* did not remain a medium of prophecy belonging *only* to the Imāms.

Early proof of this non-confessional origins story may be identified in the once presumed lost *Epistle (Risālah)* of Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Kindī (d. ca. 260/873), tutor to the 'Abbāsīd Caliph al-Mu'taṣim's (r. 833-842) son Aḥmad. Al-Kindī was a specialist in sundry Greek sciences and posthumously knighted as the "philosopher of the Arabs" (*ḥaylasūf al-'arab*).³⁶ Such intellectual accolades signal the beginning of how occult sciences became incorporated into the esoteric-eschatological genre of *jafr*. In his *Epistle*, al-Kindī makes no appeal to genealogy as his fatidic calling card. Rather he relies solely on the two pillars of Islamic apocalyptic prophecy: astrology and the science of letters ('ilm al-ḥurūf), especially as derived from the "broken letters" (*ḥurūf muqatta'ab*) of the Qur'ān. The planets and the Arabic alphabet are the signs one can 'read' in order to predict the course of history and, importantly, identify the "calamities" (*fitan*) that are inseparable from eschatological discourse in Islam.³⁷ Similarly, we find al-Kindī's student Abū Ma'shar al-Balkhī (d. 272/886, known in the European tradition as Albumasar) also composing a *Book of Religions and Dynasties (Kitāb al-milal wa-l-dinawāl, a.k.a. the Book of Conjunctions, Kitāb al-qirānat)*, which is an astrological-based book of prophecies.³⁸ This evidence suggests that there was significant overlap between the various revelatory and prognosticatory sciences in early Islam.

35. Fleischer, "Haydar-i Remmal," 295-96; Fleischer, "A Mediterranean Apocalypse," 69-72.

36. Otto Loth, "Al-Kindi als Astrolog," 273-79. *De Radiis*, another work of al-Kindī's on magic and the occult, exists only in Latin. See d'Alverny and Hudry, "al-Kindi: *De Radiis*," 139-267.

37. Loth, "Al-Kindi Als Astrolog," 277. In fact, the language here is evocative of what one would term in English as an Armageddon scenario.

38. The line between *jafr* and astrology is difficult to delineate at this early stage. See Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 11-12.

Further evidence is identified in the complex network of texts known variably as *The Orderly Pearl Concerning the Secret of the Most Divine Name* (*al-Durr al-munazzam fi sirr al-ism al-ʿzam*, a.k.a. *Kitāb al-jafr*) by the seldom cited Sunnī scholar Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn Ṭalḥah (d. 652/1254).³⁹ This text seems to be the first comprehensive attestation of the vatic genre and it does not evince any sectarian tone. That is to say, Ibn Ṭalḥah identifies ʿAlī outright in the *proemium* as having appeared to an anonymous friend in a vision. Rather than receiving a copy of the legendary *Book of Jafr* composed by the first Imām, ʿAlī instead reveals a celestial tablet (*lawḥ*) upon which salvation history is encrypted in a diagram (*daʿirah*) and sacred names are conveyed in lettrist code, hence the title *The Orderly Pearl Concerning the Secret of the Most Divine Name*.⁴⁰ One can confidently conclude that the tablet in question pertains to the very same celestial tablet mentioned in the Qurʾān and with which Muḥammad’s revelation is equated. A kind of parallel process of renewed or updated prophecy—albeit of a different and subordinate type than that of Muḥammad’s—is observed. No specifically Shīʿī vocabulary or theological assertions are observed at all. In broad strokes, this is an Islamic visionary account written by a Sunnī simultaneously drawing on Qurʾānic symbolism (i.e. the tablet, *lawḥ*) as well as appealing to the numinous authority of the prophetic Family (*ahl al-bayt*). Taken together, sectarian lines of division are totally indiscernible. Based on this information, Bakri Aladdin concludes that, “It is necessary to note that the [*Orderly Pearl*] is a work of *jafr*, derived through divination based on the numerical value of letters and the divine

39. SK Mss Laleli 1532, Hafid Ef. 204; NLI Ms Yah. Ar. 482; BnF Mss Arab 2663, 2664, 2665, 2666, 2667, 2668, 2669, 4606; SB Ms Wetzstein II 1212. Regarding NLI Ms Yah. Ar. 482, see Wust, *Catalogue NLI*, I:750. The texts in question here are variously titled as either *The Comprehensive Prognosticon* (*Kitāb al-jafr al-jāmiʿ*) or *al-Durr al-munazzam fi sirr al-ism al-ʿzam*. Note: BnF Ms 2665 is wrongly identified as the *Key to the Comprehensive Prognosticon* (*Kitāb miftāḥ al-jafr al-jāmiʿ*) of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī. This is quickly ascertained as wrong on fol. 1b where Ibn Ṭalḥah is explicitly identified as the author and the same introductory text is given as in the other copies of the *Orderly Pearl*.

40. See also Aladdin, “Zāʾirğa,” 169–70.

names.”⁴¹ More precisely, it is not just that the *Orderly Pearl* is an example of *jafr*, it is the first such version that demonstrates at length the importance of ‘Alī as a key source and intermediary for apocalyptic visions and, in particular, regarding the destiny of Islamic dynasties. Among its many proclamations the following reflects the point: “And the Holy Name equals 693 and that is the year when a king will fall and the dynasties will vanish. . . .”⁴² But Aladdin does not impose any cultic classification on the text based on this information because the facts do not lead to such a taxonomic conclusion. We are thus on the right path for resurrecting *jafr* as a non-confessional revelatory genre.

The next famous *jafr*ist textual tradition is that by the Ottoman court Şūfī-cum-occult practitioner ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454), whose oeuvre includes the *Sun of the Horizons Concerning Lettrism and Magic Squares* (*Shams al-āfāq fī ‘ilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-awfāq*), *The Perfumed Scents on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Meccan Revelations* (*al-Fawā’ih al-miskīyyah fī-l-fawātih al-makkiyyah*), and the *Key to the Comprehensive Prognosticon* (*Kitāb miṣṭāḥ al-jafr al-jāmī*).⁴³ This latter text is an expansion on Ibn Ṭalḥah’s *Orderly Pearl* and, like its forerunner, portends the destiny of dynasties through *jafr*—as the title suggests—albeit with a more robust and innovative take on lettrism and symbols (*rumūz*).

Finally, Ibn Khaldūn’s analysis makes no mention of *jafr* as a down-and-out Shī‘ī science. The authors Ibn Khaldūn mentions are from various backgrounds. For example, Hārūn b. Sa‘d al-‘Ijlī is identified as the “head” (*ra’s*) of Fiver-Shī‘ī Zaydīs whereas Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī is mentioned to have been the astrologer (*munajjim*) to the Abbasid-Sunnī Caliphs Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 169–193/786–809)

41. Aladdin, “Zā’irgā,” 170.

42. BnF Ms 2669, fol. 8a.

43. Coulon, “Building Al-Būnī’s Legend,” *passim*, SK Ms Köprülü 926. One should note that the catalogue record, attribution, and titles of the texts variably identified as *Key to the Comprehensive Prognosticon* and attributed to either Ibn Ṭalḥah or al-Biṣṭāmī are confusing and, perhaps, overwhelmingly wrong. That is, Ibn Ṭalḥah is arguably the author and later title pages which identify authorship mistakenly attribute the texts to the more famous al-Biṣṭāmī. See the note in Wust, *Catalogue NLI*, I:751. I am currently working on an evaluation of this corpus.

and al-Mamūn (r. 197-218/813-833).⁴⁴ If one interprets Ibn Khaldūn's discussion of the dynastic destinies genre (*malāḥim*, *bidthān al-duwal*) as a tangential or even sub-class of *jafr*, then one can also add to this list of diverse characters a Western (*bi-l-maghrib*) Muslim scholar of revelatory predictions by the name of Ibn Mirānah and another Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī who is identified as the composer of the *Apocalyptic Battles according to Ibn al-ʿArabī* (*malḥamat Ibn al-ʿArabi*).⁴⁵ In this light, the Shīʿī claim that *jafr* singularly originated within, and is uniquely privy to, the Imāms was certainly an attempt at delineating an esoteric genre. Shīʿī apologists or propagandists sought to define *jafr* as an ineluctably ʿAlid understanding of cosmic and “salvific knowledge” that rests in the “elite” descendants of the *ahl al-bayt*, aside from whom only the Shīʿī clerics as “initiated disciples” could access and explain.⁴⁶ Certainly, *jafr* is esoteric by this definition, but it is not sectarian. As discussed above, the salvific knowledge with which *jafr* is ineluctably intertwined had another elite class of initiated disciples. Ṣūfīs like Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Biṣṭāmī, and several Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabīs—whom we might define as mystically aspiring authors—as well as occult scholars like Yaʿqūb b. Iṣḥāq al-Kindī, Ibn Ṭalḥah, and Ḥaydar-i Remmāl all dabbled in the revelatory genre of *jafr* and similar corpora (i.e. dynastic destinies literature) without any awareness of crossing denominational borders. Try as one might, Shīʿī claims of ownership over this revelatory practice of apprehending the “Unseen” (*ghayb*) through visions (*kashf*, *ruʾyā*) of God's grand plan of ultimate cosmic termination was, to the contrary, shared far and wide.

Having now provided a general history of the origins and broadly Islamic nature of this apocalyptic-eschatological genre, one may now assay a definition. Much has been made of terms like eschatological, salvific, revelatory, visionary, esoteric, and occasionally occult. One would be mistaken to construe these terms as being used here synonymously or as descriptors *sans* analytical backing. Rather, each term constitutes the polyphonic nature of a pre-modern Islamic

44. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, I:550, 555.

45. Ibn Khaldūn, I:556, 558.

46. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” 337, 2nd column, a.

tradition that has heretofore escaped scholarly classification. Let us now reintroduce the new definition of *jafr* provided at the outset of this section:

Jafr is a non-confessional, Islamic (i.e. neither exclusively Shīʿī nor Sunnī), and esoteric genre composed in a revelatory mode—usually phrased in terms of *kashf* or *ruʿyā*—that is primarily concerned with the “Final Hour” (*al-sāʿat*). As an esoteric genre, its otherwise inscrutable and preternatural content (*ghayb*) is generally presented in terms of gematria codes and symbols (*rumūz*) and therefore necessitates the inclusion of occult methodology, in particular lettrism, to divine its enigmatic content. Lastly, *jafr* overlaps with “dynastic destinies” literature (*hidtbān al-dumal, malāhim*) insofar as it conceives salvation history as a teleological progression of Muslim dynasties towards an ideal end (*eschaton*).⁴⁷

One is invited to compare this definition with previous attempts. For example, MacDonald offers the following characterization:

There developed very early in Shīʿite [*sic*] Islām a belief that the descendants of ʿAlī were in possession of a secret tradition, a body of religious and political esoteric knowledge covering all things to the end of the world.⁴⁸

Toufic Fahd’s opening description is thus:

The particular veneration which, among the Shīʿas [*sic*], the members of the Prophet’s family enjoy, is at the base of the belief that the descendants of Fāṭima have inherited certain privileges inherent in Prophethood; prediction of the future and of the destinies of nations and dynasties is one of these privileges. The Shīʿī conception of prophecy, closely connected with that of the ancient gnosis... made the prophetic afflatus pass from Adam to Muḥammad and from Muḥammad to the ʿAlids.⁴⁹

The definition proposed in the present article is distinct for two reasons. First, it shakes off the coil of confessional characterizations. Second, it is functionally precise because it identifies in descending order the goal (foreseeing the future in

47. For an early observation of occult sciences in service of deciphering esoteric *ghayb*, see MacDonald, “Al-Ghayb.”

48. MacDonald, “Djafr.”

49. Fahd, “Djafr.” And see also Fahd, *Divination*, 219–24.

relation to the End of Time), medium (esoteric initiation into or supernatural revelation of *ghayb*), and practical application (dynastic history/propaganda). All three of these elements are observed in *jafri* literature. The occult sciences used to decipher the actual content of the vatic visions should be understood of a second order and therefore not synonymous with the esoteric nature of *jafri*. To wit, lettrism is a tool used in decoding revelation; the revelation is not a function of lettrism.

In this regard, this new definition parallels nicely with, but is still distinct from, the common definition of eschatological apocalypses accepted in Jewish and Christian studies:

An apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.⁵⁰

Much like the eschatological visions in *Daniel* and *Revelation* and the extra-canonical apocalypses of *Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*—to name a few—, *jafri* is also a pseudonymous “scribal phenomenon.”⁵¹ What is more, it also shares the characteristic of being esoteric, by which I mean its divinatory and eschatological assertions are fundamentally concerned with *ghayb*, a preternatural body of knowledge that can only be apprehended by the spiritually exalted like Ṣūfīs and initiated adepts like occult scholars of lettrism and astrology.

Of course, dogmatically speaking, *ghayb* is understood as that divinely “Unseen” or “Ineffable” (hence *ghayb*) aspect of wisdom known only unto God. The Qurʾān reminds us that “[God] does not disclose His ineffability (*ghaybihi*) to anyone.”⁵² But one should distinguish between theoretical principle and historical practice. One may recall that Islam is also (in)famously aniconic, but that did not stop centuries of artists producing marvelous depictions of Muḥammad

50. Collins, “Morphology,” 9.

51. Smith, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic,” 140. For a fundamental work that discusses all these texts, see Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*.

52. Q 72:26.

and his companions. Thus, we can interpret the Qurʾānic description of *ghayb* not as a categorical prohibition but rather as a challenge for a community subject to a historical paradigm of teleological salvation history. The future is paradoxically known only unto God but still apprehensible through periodic tears in the transcendental tapestry. This proposition is observed as a historical reality when one examines the charismatic principle of *karāmah* endowed to the Imāms as well as unto the Ṣūfī “saints” (*awliyā*), such as Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Biṣṭāmī and many, many others.⁵³ This shared terminology is indicative of parallel tracks within a singular religious system (read: Islam). In tandem, both Shīʿī and Ṣūfī theoreticians articulated a lexicon of breaking a presumed ‘natural order.’ Thereby, they approximated a method of penetrating supernatural hierarchies of knowledge in a doxological context wherein the door of prophecy was ostensibly sealed shut.⁵⁴ The key both parties fashioned to unlock the doors of the inscrutable cosmos (*ghayb*) is necessarily a bicephalic esoteric-occult tool. *Jafr* as a mode of approximating revelation—that peculiar fissure God occasionally opened in the membrane separating the sublunar and celestial spheres—thus emerges as the esoteric paradigm *sui generis*. Conversely put, *jafr* is the mold from which that esoteric-occult key was forged. As such, this tool could be plausibly attributed to the Imāms and was in fact unproblematically employed by the Ṣūfīs. To better understand this aspect of *jafr* as an eschatological-mystical genre, let us now turn to *ToN*, the primary text at the focus of this article, and the historical context that generated its production.

53. The etymology of *karāmah* is not certain, but there is reason to believe that either it is a serendipitous phonological and semantic approximation of the Greek “charisma” (χάρισμα) or it is a direct calque that was later construed as the verbal noun of “to be generous” (*karuma*). See Gardet, “Karāma,” np. The *locus classicus* for the Shīʿī theology of the exclusive *karāmah* of the Imāms is al-Ḥillī’s *Minhaj al-karāmah*, *passim*. For an overview of *karāmah* in Ṣūfī discourse, see Gramlich, *Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, 19–58.

54. Ibn al-ʿArabī notably questioned the boundaries of man’s “rational capacity” (*al-quwwah al-aqliyyah*) to apprehend reality at all. Thus, the concept of a natural order is undermined. Similarly, the hierarchy of “truth” (*ḥaqīqah*) is one in which the seemingly “impossible in the sublunar plane” (*al-mustaḥīl fī al-dār al-dunyā*) is (simultaneously?) feasible and “happening” (*nāqīʿ*) in the “realm of truth” (*ard al-ḥaqīqah*). See Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, vol. II, 100, 273. Needless to say.

2. A Stranger Kind of Sufism: Ibn al-‘Arabī, Eschatological Expectation, and *ToN*

I now propose to demonstrate how Sufism came to produce a new style of *jafr* that was more explicitly linked with the idea of renewal and imperial propaganda. First, this process of developing a mystical articulation of Islam’s unique apocalyptic eschatological genre consequently led to the incorporation of the character known as the “renewer of the age” (*mujaddid al-ẓaman*) and, by extension, the concept of “renovation” (*tajdīd*) into *jafr* itself. The leading figures of this transformation are Aḥmad b. al-Būnī (d. 622/1225), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454). Though the connection may not be self-evident, the concept of a spiritual and cosmic renewer for the Islamic *ummah* served well for various dynasties’ aspirations in the post-classical (i.e. post-1258) context of Islamic imperial history.⁵⁵ This point of fact does not, however, dismiss *jafr* from remaining an esoteric genre. It would be myopic to dismiss esoteric practices for not fitting some idealized notion of hidden societies, hidden modes of knowledge, and limited personal applications.⁵⁶

Moreover, such a definition of esotericism for the Islamic context also ignores the historical conditions of sponsorship and/or attempts at circulating the texts themselves. Quite the contrary, esotericism is an epistemological category that rests on certain principles, paradigms, and authorial orientations. The communal orientation of Šūfī esoteric texts like al-Biṣṭāmī’s *Sun of the Horizons*,⁵⁷

55. Erika Glassen, “Krisenbewußtsein,” 167–69. This point is made most clearly for the Ottoman context in the introductory pages of Flemming, “Şāhib-Ḳirān,” 43–45. Here, one will note the theme of social catastrophes, disease, and unrest combined with the approaching millennium and Ottoman victories. For a trans-Islamic imperial analysis between the Timurids and Mughals in particular, see Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*.

56. Cornell H. Fleischer, “Lawgiver,” 159–77; Şen, “Astrology,” 168–69. Şen’s focus is on the use of occult sciences, especially astrology, for imperial ends. The principle is the same. An esoteric genre like *jafr* which relies on occult methods can and was employed to support the Ottomans’ claims to cosmic sovereignty. For a comparative study for the European context, see Westman, “Astronomer’s Role,” 121–27.

57. Coulon, “Building Al-Būnī’s Legend,” 4.

Ahmed Bīcān Yazıcıoğlu's *The Book of the End (Kitābū'l-müntebā)*,⁵⁸ Mevlanā 'Īsā's *Compendium of Secrets (Cāmi'ū'l-meknūnāt)*,⁵⁹ and, of course, Ps.-Ibn al-'Arabī's *Tree of Nu'mān*, to name a few, are all testaments to this functional aspect of esoteric texts in the Ottoman empire.

In fact, Ṣūfīs had begun to repackage eschatological prophecies early on. Its foremost representative was, at least for the Ottomans, the Andalusian Ṣūfī Ibn al-'Arabī, also known as “the Red Sulphur” (*al-kibrīt al-aṣfar*), an epithet that betokens his engagement with esoteric *and* occult topics. The mystical stamp imbued the fatidic pronouncements, like those in *ToN*, with greater appeal in an era that was awaiting redemption and, of course, spiritual renewal. As Gerald Elmore observes, “In the hands of the Ṣūfīs, eschatology became a potent device for rationalizing an immediate return to the original source of timeless truth.”⁶⁰ A further discussion of the link of Sufism and eschatological prophecy will help better contextualize *ToN*.

Ibn al-'Arabī was born in 560/1165 in Murcia, a city in southern Andalusia under Almohad (524–667/1130–1269) control. A precocious child of profound spirituality, Ibn al-'Arabī is known to have experienced visions in his youth. Equally important, he took up study with several prominent religious scholars of Andalusia.⁶¹ In particular, Abū Ja'far al-'Uraynī, Abū Ya'qūb al-Qaysī, and Ṣāliḥ al-'Adawī are mentioned in Ibn al-'Arabī's *The Book of Holiness (Kitāb ruḥ al-quds)* by name. Tellingly, Ṣāliḥ al-'Adawī, Ahmed Ateş notes, was “skilled at revealing the future.”⁶² Given this background, it may come as no surprise that Ibn al-'Arabī in his adulthood would continue to experience numerous visions (*ru'yā*), revelations (*kashf*), celestial journeys (*safar*), and even theophanies

58. SK Ms Kılıç Ali Paşa 630. See also Grenier, “Yazıcıoğlu,” 7–10.

59. Flemming, “Ġāmi' ūl-meknūnāt,” 79–92.

60. Elmore, “Millennial' Motif,” 412.

61. Addas, *Quest*, 20. Footnote 42 importantly indicates that the portion of text relevant to the childhood vision is missing in the Bulaq edition of 1329 AH, but occurs in a later edition and in a separate text as well.

62. Ateş, “Ibn Al-'Arabī.”

(*tajalliyāt*).⁶³ St. Teresa de Ávila (d. 1588) and St. John of the Cross (d. 1591) themselves could have only dreamed of such a constant barrage of encounters with the Divine. Essentially, one should define the information Ibn al-ʿArabī receives through his intimate communication with, and travels (*asfār*) in, the celestial sphere as attaining intimate knowledge of *ghayb* discussed in section I.

As Osman Yahya notes, Ibn al-ʿArabī in his magnum opus *The Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*) takes stock of his intellectual interests and divides them into a catalogue of topics spanning six major themes: 1) doctrines (*maʿārif*), 2) spiritual exercises (*muʿamalāt*), 3) Ṣūfī states (*aḥwāl*), 4) degrees of spiritual perfection (*manāzil*), 5) spiritual union with the Godhead (*munāzalāt*), 6) and (*maqāmāt*), which Yahya translates as “esoteric mansions” (*les demeures ésotériques*).⁶⁴ Perhaps an instance of *traduttore, traditore*, Yahya’s word choice is quite revealing. No doubt influenced by his own deep familiarity with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s work, Yahya here points to an aspect of the Great Master’s personal interests.

Yahya also makes reference to a work, the *Catalogue* (*Fibris al-muʿallafāt* or *Fibris al-muṣannaḥāt*), which figures as the second, and logically necessary, source for any historical analysis of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s work. Dictated nigh a decade before Ibn al-ʿArabī’s death in 638/1240, the *Fibris* is the Ṣūfī master’s personal list of authorial works, and therefore a handbook for discerning between canonical and pseudographical works up to the year 627 AH/1230 CE. Here, he provides a tripartite division of his *oeuvre* as follows: 1) prophetic sayings (*ḥadīth*), 2) “ésotérisme” (lit. “secrets”, *asrār*), and 3) metaphysics (*ḥaqāʾiq*).⁶⁵ At first one may, albeit wrongly, presume that the master Ṣūfī himself truly believed his vast intellectual output could be reduced to three simple categories. The complexity of his *muʿallafāt* does

63. For example, see Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Kitāb al-isrāʾ ilā maḥām al-asrā*, Istanbul, Bayezıt Kütüphanesi Ms Veliyüddin 1628; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Kitāb al-asfār*, Konya Yusuf Ağa Kütüphanesi Ms 4859.

64. Yahya, “Histoire et classification,” 108. The translation may be influenced by the concept of “mansions” (*moradas*) in St. Teresa de Ávila’s mystical treatise *Castillo interior*, a.k.a. *Las Moradas*, the latter title rendered in French translation as *Le livre des demeures*.

65. Yahya, 107. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fibrist*, HHough Ms 225 341v-342r. Yahya also approximates the above translations: *ésotérisme* for *ʿulūm al-asrār*, and *métaphysique* for *ʿulūm al-ḥaqāʾiq*.

not permit such a simple taxonomy. Yet the retrospective and didactic authorial stances Ibn al-ʿArabī takes in the *Catalogue* are two factors that illuminate this tripartite classification and help us discern how, or for what, this prodigious mind wanted to be remembered. Looking back on his own intellectual productivity, we can see Ibn al-ʿArabī sending a certain message about the nature of Sufism. The Islamic mystical tradition is, at its heart, a *mélange* of orthodox Sunnī sciences, such as *ḥadīth*, inscrutable secrets of the celestial sphere, and quintessentially Ṣūfī musings on intellectual-spiritual union with the ultimate Truth, *ḥaqīqah*, who is God. The centrality of secrets (*asrār*) should be read as a taxonomic marker for his profound interest in esoteric sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-gharibah*, *ʿilm al-ghayb*, *sīmyā*).

In addition to simply receiving communications from the realm of *ghayb*, Ibn al-ʿArabī also wrote extensively on lettrism, the occult toolbox used in *ToN* mentioned at the outset of this essay. In *The Meccan Revelations*, he lays out at length what is arguably one of the defining treatises of lettrism in Sufism.⁶⁶ He goes so far as to state that it is “a desideratum for the Ṣūfī” (*darūrah li-ṣ-ṣūfī*) who wishes to truly progress in his spiritual life.⁶⁷ This discussion is summarized again in volume III of the *Revelations* in the context of the eschatological concept of the mystical “pole” (*qutb*) and their “symbols” (*rumūz*).⁶⁸ What distinguishes Ibn al-ʿArabī’s treatise from previous Ṣūfī musings about the supernatural nature of the Arabic alphabet is that the Red Sulphur, much like his Andalusian predecessor Ibn Masarraḥ (d. 319/931), argues that knowledge and mastery of *ḥurūf* unlocks the building blocks of the universe and, by extension, the course of historical events. Ultimately, the renewer and the pole and the eschatological Hour should be understood as coetaneous phenomena. As Michael Ebstein succinctly puts it, Ibn al-ʿArabī created a Ṣūfī science of letters that penetrates the “cosmogonic-cosmological dimension” of God’s creation, an aspect that is

66. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, vol. I, 225–682, esp. 640–46.

67. *ibid.*, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, 30. For the specific sections dealing with lettrology, see *ibid.*, 232ff.

68. *Ibid.*, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, vol. III, 201–8.

quite similar to Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī letrist theories as well.⁶⁹ What connects Andalusian Ṣūfīs with Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī letrist cosmogony is essentially a shared reliance on “Neoplatonic schemes.”⁷⁰ Again we observe how the confessional division of esoteric sciences is difficult to maintain in light of the evidence. Consequently, and again in striking similarity with ʿAlid theology about the exclusive divinatory powers of the imams, Ibn al-ʿArabī divides the vast ocean of Ṣūfī knowledge (*maʿrifah*) into a *bāṭin-zāhir* dichotomy: there is general knowledge (*ʿammah*) for the masses and there is specialized knowledge (*ḥāṣṣah*) for the few elect. The latter category is especially dear to Ibn al-ʿArabī seeing as “divine esoteric knowledge” (*al-maʿrifah al-ilāhīyyah al-ghaybīyyah*) is synonymous with “prophetic” and “saintly” *gnosis* (*yakhtaṣṣ bihi al-nabī wa-l-walī*).⁷¹ Likewise, as the two evidently go hand in hand, Ibn al-ʿArabī provides a lengthy discussion of astrology, its effects, and its place as a science of the select few, of the pure initiates of a higher state of being, spirituality, and consciousness.⁷² One aspect of sublime, saintly consciousness is apprehension of the *eschaton* of universal salvation.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Ibn al-ʿArabī was inclined to prophesize about the Final Hour. One of the most illustrative examples thereof is his *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (*Kitāb ʿanqāʾ mughrib*).⁷³ The text is, foremost, a response to the End-Times expectations of an Islamic world in a state of (ostensible) decline, or at least a material existence in need of spiritual rebooting. According to a popular prophetic *ḥadīth*, “Verily, God will send to this community at the

69. Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 78.

70. Ebstein, 92. I do not, however, agree with Ebstein that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s letrist mysticism is actually derived from Ismāʿīlī Neoplatonist theology. Comparative similarities do not generate clean genealogies of order. A shared Neoplatonic intellectual background among Ṣūfīs (east and west), Jewish mystics, the Sunnī philosophers and the Shīʿī theologians is well attested. It was in the intellectual drinking water. For example, see Saif, “From *Ġāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Shams al-maʿarīf*,” 312.

71. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. I, 140.

72. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *ibid.*, 52-58.

73. O. Yahya notes that the *Gryphon* especially appealed to Ottoman Damascene scholars. Out of the circa four known commentaries, two exegetes were Turkish jurists living in Damascus in the tenth/sixteenth century. See Yahya, “Histoire et classification,” 159-61.

outset of every hundred years one who shall renew its religion (*yujaddid laba dinabā*).⁷⁴ In the previous century, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), the “Proof of Islam” (*ḥujjat al-Islām*), had invoked the concept as part of his theological project of “reviving religious sciences” (*ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn*).⁷⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī, however, further developed al-Ghazālī’s notion of “renewal” (*tajdid*) as discussed above. In his own age beset with the problems of collapsing empires at both geographic extremes of the Islamic world—one in Andalusia and the other in Mesopotamia—Ibn al-‘Arabī reconceived it as a more explicitly eschatological term. That is, the continual reification of Islam as a religious system is no longer a process of unforeseeable iterations *ad infinitum*. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, it is evidently a hierophantic proclamation of limited renewal. The *eschaton* of Islamic revelation—i.e. the Hour, “the appointed time” (*al-ajl al-musammā*), the Day of Judgment, etc.—marks the logical arrival of a final, and supreme, renewer (*mujaddid*).⁷⁶ Enter the mystical pole who is a harbinger of the Mahdī, the latter being an ideal End-Times Islamic warrior-king.⁷⁷

74. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 469, no. 4291.

75. Gianotti, *Unspeakable Doctrine*. Of course, one should also recall the degree to which al-Ghazālī discussed eschatology in his *Book of Death* (*Kitāb al-mawt*). See al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-mawt*. Note that the *Precious Pearl* (*al-Durrab al-fākhirah*), another eschatological treatise, is pseudepigraphically attributed to al-Ghazālī. The text I have referenced, but which does not discuss the apocryphal authorship, is Ps.-al-Ghazālī, *al-Durrab al-fākhirah*. In fact, al-Ghazālī is also listed as one of the (many) pseudepigraphic authors of a text titled *Daqā’iq al-akhbār*, which is another variation for the same text more commonly known in Western scholarship as the *Conditions of Resurrection* (*Aḥwāl al-qiyāmah*). Tottoli, “Muslim Eschatological Literature,” 471.

76. For the additional concept of “the appointed time,” see Q 2:282.

77. See Cook, *Muslim Apocalyptic*, 226–27, 322. Please note that the Islamic Mahdī is distinct from both the Jewish Messiah and the Christian concept of the apocalyptic Jesus. The latter, with whom the Mahdī is often erroneously conflated, is an “all-conquering sovereign” (Χριστός Παντοκράτωρ, Christ Pantokrator) and, as per the *Revelation of John*, the Judge at the End of Time (19:10–12; 20:11–15). Though the Mahdī is an ideal human Muslim ruler, he is neither a supernatural king nor a heavenly judge. There are greater parallels between the Islamic concept of the Mahdī and the Jewish Messiah-as-*Melekh* (i.e. king). Gershom Scholem delineates the distinction between Jewish and Christian messianic ideas in his “Messianische Ideen,” *passim*. Perhaps the key distinction between Jewish and Islamic conceptions of a Messiah as warrior-king-renewer is the social and (material) historical emphasis over the Christian inclination

Conveniently, a final hundred-year cycle in the seventh century AH would align with the advent of a mystical *mujaddid* who also embodied the final “Seal of Saints” (*ḵbatm al-awliyā*), a mystical locution that intentionally mirrors the traditional identification of Muḥammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” (*ḵbatim al-nabiyyīn*).⁷⁸ In the *Fabulous Gryphon*, Ibn al-ʿArabī opens up the oracular tractate with a poem titled “The Sealed Vessel” (*al-Wiʿāʾ al-makbtūm*) in which he relies on a lettrist code—*ḵbā-fā-jīm* (600 + 3 + 80 = 683 AH)—to foretell the advent of the Mahdī in the 683 AH/1284 CE.⁷⁹ Thus, the seventh century is conceptualized as an eschatological age of rejuvenation and, conveniently, the eminent doctor of Islamic mysticism is the self-proclaimed herald; the Red Sulphur is the Seal of the Saints. Even though Ibn al-ʿArabī’s prophecy did not come to fruition, historical evidence is replete with visions that fail to come true yet remain perennially applicable, relevant, and appealing to later generations. It is, therefore, no wonder that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s fatidic pronouncements appealed to later Ottoman proponents of cosmic sovereignty. With this in mind, let us now turn to the *ToN*.

Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī begins *ToN*, in no unclear terms, with a vatic pronouncement concerning future events:

toward private and spiritual salvation (ibid., 193-94).

78. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. I, 64, vv. 9-11; Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 128-46; Elmore, “Millennial Motif,” 411. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, the third AH/tenth CE century “theosophy,” as Bernd Radtke prefers to refer to his Sūfi-esque writings, is the intellectual progenitor of the idea of the “Seal.” It appears in al-Tirmidhī’s *Book of Saintly Conduct* (*Kitāb sirat al-awliyā*). See Radtke, *Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī*, al-Tirmidhī, *Drei Schriften des Theosophen von Tirmid.* The first volume contains the Arabic texts, whereas the second volume contains the German translation and much valuable notation. Importantly, Ibn al-ʿArabī develops the concept well beyond what al-Tirmidhī himself ever had in mind. Radtke and O’Kane, *Sainthood*, 8. For the Qur’ānic origins of the title “Seal of the Prophets” (*ḵbatim al-nabiyyīn*), see Q 33:40. On the history of the locution “Seal of the Prophets/Prophethood” and of the development of the Islamic tradition of Muḥammad as the “Seal,” see Stroumsa, “Seal”; Rubin, “Seal of Prophets.” The distinction in vocabulary is crucial here. Though one may debate the semantic difference between prophecy and revelation in English, the semantic and theological weight of both terms is of serious weight for Islamic dogma. Muḥammad received both prophecy and revelation; all other recipients of information about the supernatural world could only claim revelation or vision.

79. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 233.

For we have seen into the future with regards to our own place in time about what shall be and [that which we have seen] comprises all events. We have limited [our epistle] to that which is the most important, such as the rise and fall of dynasties, the advent of wars, apocalyptic calamities (*fitan*), inflation, disease and the like.⁸⁰

Having the effect of immediately captivating the reader/audience, the text departs from the more typical style of the real Ibn al-^ʿArabī. Here, we are confronted both with simplicity of language and boldness of topic. One need not move through, say, a cryptic poem that obfuscates in turns the intent of its author as in the *Fabulous Gryphon*. The matter-of-fact opening is somewhat reminiscent of the other, more famous Apocalypse of biblical fame:

¹The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. . . .¹⁰ I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."⁸¹

There is power in brevity. Informing the audience outright about one's hierophantic credentials and exactly what one purports to reveal best ensures that a wider audience is reached. Esoteric eschatology need not always exclude at every line or on every folio. It can be negotiated based on the goals of the composer and the methods he employs. Again, esoteric texts are not just about hidden societies and hidden modes of knowledge, but they also belong to a network of orientations, both public and private, and their principles can vacillate between the extremely inscrutable to the moderately comprehensible depending on the author's motives and goals.

What is particularly relevant to note is that *ToN*'s apocalypse pertains to the fate of nations and the various calamities that may befall dynasties. It is practically impossible to mistake this text as anything other than a political apocalypse; its primary audience should be those with access to the Sublime Porte

80. *ToN*, fols. 2a-b. Ar. — *fa-raʿaynā al-mustaqbal bi-ʿtibār waqtinā al-ladhi nahnu fībi*.

81. Coogan et al., *Bible*, 2153-52, 1:1-2, 10-11.

for, in what follows, there is much those in power should know. To make this text more explicitly *jafr*-esque, the pseudonymous author also indicates *ab initio* that his text is doubly esoteric. Following the perfunctory praise of the prophet and God, the text lays out clearly what it is all about: “[the epistle, *al-risālah*] is comprised of the events of the age that are the result of the effect of celestial conjunction (*iqtirān*) and the movement of the planets.”⁸² This is an important detail for God has specified that each nation (*qatr*) is linked to a specific planet, the effects of that celestial body determining the course of historical events.⁸³ Much like Ibn al-‘Arabī who thought himself to be the harbinger of the Mahdī in the seventh century AH, our pseudepigraphic Ibn al-‘Arabī also touches on the advent of the Islamic End-Times super-Muslim. Now, however, his appearance will take place in the eleventh century AH. The reader/audience is herewith ferried across the chiliastic chasm and into the final phase of cosmic history.

More precisely, the “conjunction” of which the author speaks refers to that awesome tenth conjunction (*al-qirān al-‘āshir*) of the planets Saturn and Jupiter—or more curiously for *ToN*, Saturn and Mars—which was precisely calculated to occur every 960 solar (990 lunar) years,, a century after the Ottomans’ momentous conquest of Constantinople in 857/1453.⁸⁴ Thus the author, having done his astrological homework, specifically remarks that, “we have seen [the events that will happen in the eleventh century] beginning in the tenth century.”⁸⁵ This is a

82. *ToN*, fol. 1b. Ar. — *min dhiker ḥawādīth al-ḡamān al-munbā‘ūtibah min ta’thirāt al-iqtirān wa-ḥarakāt al-aftāk.*

83. *ToN*, fol. 2a. Ar. — *qad khaṣṣaṣ subḥānahu kull qatr min aqtār al-mamlakah al-imkāniyyah fi al-dawrah al-adamiyyah bi-ḥawādīth yakhtaṣṣ bibā dhālik al-qatr min ta’thirāt kam’kabihī.*

84. When two of the three (i.e. Saturn and Jupiter or Saturn and Mars) are in conjunction, they are also referred to as the “unlucky planets” (*al-naḥṣayn*). Loth, “Al-Kindi Als Astrolog,” 265, 271, and in Arabic on 273. Saturn and Jupiter, however, are more often cited in conjunction (*qirān*) as the “two high planets” (*al-uhūyān*). I have yet to come across the conjunction of Saturn and Mars as being referred to as such, even though Mars is a “high” planet, too. Further astrological research must be undertaken to better comprehend this innovation on the part of Ps.-Ibn al-‘Arabī. The corresponding three “low” (*al-saffīyah*) planets are Venus, Mercury, and the Moon (*ḡubrah*, *uṭārid*, *al-qamr*, respectively). See Loth, 268, fn. 1.

85. *ToN*, fol. 2b. Ar. — *fa-ra’aynā al-awlā dhiker mā yata‘alliq bi-l-qirān al-‘āshir li-ḡubūr mu‘ḡam al-ḥawādīth fūhimā wa nazarnā ilā ibtidā’ dhālik fi amwal al-qarn al-‘āshir.*

logical position to take. After all, the prophet himself had already specified what exactly takes place at the very end of history. There would be nothing particularly unique in recounting common knowledge. Yes, the Mahdī will come. Yes, the Dajjāl, Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj all make an appearance. Yes, Jesus, too, will reappear, the much anticipated *parousia* of the Christians, to battle the false messiah.⁸⁶

Yet, we are still not in the plenary mode of *jaf*r prophecy. One is first assured of the mantic mode of “I have seen...” because, as indicated above, Ibn al-ʿArabī was known for receiving revelation and also undertaking spiritual excursions into the world of *ghayb*. Next, the revelation is given the additional credential of being objectively verified by astrological knowledge, albeit with a mystical veil. What remains is introducing lettrism: “When the number of years *bā-kāf-zā* [$2 + 20 + 900 = 922/1516$] in the prophetic *hijrī* calendar has finished,” the author writes, “which is equivalent to *zā-bā-yā* according to *jaf*r. . . .”⁸⁷

Thus, the reader is confronted in the first two folios with a trinity of qualifications that secure the *jaf*r-icity, if one will permit the neologism, of eschatological prophecy. *Ṣūfī-bātini* access to *ghayb* is implicitly secured through affiliation with Ibn al-ʿArabī. Astrological references to the movement and influence of the celestial sphere is another calling card of legitimacy that links the text up with the scientific milieu regnant in Ottoman society and which appealed to the court. As such, the apocalyptic literature produced in the period, “comprehends in its various iterations everything from metaphysics, cosmogony to numerology, astrology and magic.”⁸⁸ Lettrism is of critical importance for identifying

86. Compare, for example, *ToN* with the non-prophetic Ottoman illustrated handbook for the End-Times called the *Conditions of Resurrection* (*Aḥwāl-i k̄yamet*, SK Ms Hafid Efendi 139; SB Ms Or.oct. 1596). This text is just an *enchiridion* of prophetic traditions sprinkled with Qurʾānic citation for good orthodox measure. It should not to be confused with the previously cited genre in Arabic titled commonly *Aḥwāl al-qiyamah*.

87. *ToN*, fols. 2b, 3a-b. Ar. — *idhā tamm ʿadad bā-kāf-zā sinin min tārikh al-hijrīyyah al-nabawīyyah wa-hiya ʿadad zā-bā-yā jafriyyah . . .*

88. Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, 31.

this text as a *jafrist* revelation.⁸⁹ The cryptic symbolism of the Arabic alphabet betokened an esoteric, and therefore true, source of universal knowledge beyond the ken of the average, carbon-based life form. Whoever the author was, he was a keen student of Ibn al-ʿArabī, Sufism, and the occult sciences of his time.

One can now use the above calculation $bā-kāf-zā [2 + 20 + 900 = 922/1516]$ to define the historical period in which this text was composed. That is, suspending one's potential belief in the legitimacy of prophecy, the text is clearly of the kind generally termed *vaticinium ex eventu*, a common mantic mode across religious traditions. Given the author's knowledge of Sultan Selīm I's (r. 918-926/1512-1520) conquest of Damascus in 1516, we can argue for a *terminus post quem*.⁹⁰ The author quite clearly knew of the event. Historical fact is, much like the esoteric credentials mentioned above, laid out explicitly for the reader. On folio 3a, the visionary pen writes, "When the days of *qāf jim* come to an end, the *mim Salim* will arise (*qāmat*)." At this and many other junctures throughout the text one finds the lettrist complexity compromised, either due to only a superficial apprehension of the science or simply because Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī wanted to water down the text enough to reach the target, non-specialist audience at the imperial court. Specifically, the *qāf jim* here, given the previous dating, indubitably refers to the Mamluk Sultan Qānṣūḥ al-Ghūrī al-Jarkasī (r. 907-922/1501-1516), the penultimate leader of the Circassian/Burjī Sultanate in Mamluk Egypt.⁹¹ Selīm I defeated Qānṣūḥ at the battle of Aleppo in 1516, thus paving the way for the final Ottoman expansion into North Africa.

What matters here, however, is that the ominous letter *mim* is conjoined with the verb *qām* (to arise). Given the eschatological orientation of the text, the author is clearly intimating *Mahdī-esque* attributes to Selīm's conquests. In fact, the

89. Melvin-Koushki, "Astrology," 144.

90. Gril, "Enigma," 52.

91. The scant biographical information on Qānṣūḥ is conflicting. Either he is an arbitrary despot or the pious patron of poetry with Sufi inclinations. Yalçın, "Dīvan-ī Qānṣūḥ Al-Ġūrī," 1-43. Though his body was never found, his mausoleum-*cum*-mosque complex in Cairo still remains to this date as one of the architectural landmarks of the City Victorious.

letter *mīm* is of key import, albeit with shifting symbolic reference. The context cited here quite clearly elevates Selīm to status of cosmic authority; it would be too much, however, to suggest that the Ottoman Sultan was the anticipated Mahdī. This point is made all the clearer further down folio 3a:

We have predicated our prophecy on the advent of the letter *sin* from the progeny of ‘Uthmān, who is descended from Nu‘mān. . . . And his dynasty shall endure until the appearance of the *mīm al-kbatm*.⁹²

Several remarks should be made here.

First, the *sin* is, obviously, Selīm. His name has already been written out in full; his lettrist designation here is made explicit via the genealogical tree. Second, Selīm’s conquests will push the boundaries of the empire into the Holy Land (i.e. Greater Syria), North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, the Ottomans under Selīm will take over stewardship not only of Damascus and Jerusalem, both also of Mecca and Medina. The entire sacred topography of Islamic eschatological imagination is herewith subsumed under one Sultan. Conflicting *ḥadīth* regarding where the End of Times will actually occur are no longer problematic. It is all under the authority of God’s chosen dynasty, Turks though they may be. Osman’s “imperial encampment” (Ot. *ordu*)—to borrow a metonym from Ottoman dynastic vocabulary—essentially covered all the relevant eschatological hotspots, thus rendering the borders of sacred space and cosmic time coterminous with the geo-political outline of the Ottomans’ terrestrial campsite. This fact was all the more obvious since the conquest of Constantinople, an event that set up a cosmic domino effect. No other competing empire—Umayyad, Abbasid, Seljuk, Timurid, Mamluk, Safavid, etc.—ever reached such awesome heights. Consequently, our apocalyptic visionary narrates at turns a fitting prophecy in a pseudo-lettrist fashion. These victories pave the way for the “*mīm* the Seal” (*mīm al-kbatm*). One should now distinguish between two apocalyptic *mīms*. First, there is the *mīm Salīm*, who emerges later

92. *TbN*, fol. 3a.

in the text as “*mīm* the Herald, the Lieutenant” (*mīm al-ṣadr al-qā’im maqām*). Second, with “*mīm* the Seal” Ps.-Ibn al-‘Arabī invokes the classic sense of *khatm*, the Mahdī of End-Times expectation and the counterpart to another Seal: the Prophet Muḥammad. We will return to this point shortly.

Similar to Jewish and Christian salvation history, Islamic anticipation of the much awaited Mahdī coincides with a “renewal of the earth” and a renewal of Abrahamic faith *tout court*.⁹³ Having already taken Constantinople, a new Catholic Rome (*Rumīyyah al-Kubrā*) fell within the scope of eschatological targets. The *ghāzī* sultanate thus, again, stood ready for a further *jihād* “in the path of God” (*fī sabīli -llāh*). Part of the consummation of this religious war is a key architectural project: “the Temple (*bayt al-maqdis*) will be restored as it was in the time of Solomon son of David.”⁹⁴ More research needs to be done on the place of Jerusalem in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work and Ottoman apocalyptic culture. For now, it is sufficient to remark that this undertaking was meant to solidify Islam’s—and by extension the Ottomans’—position as the one true faith. The Ottoman armies would build as a public service project the New Jerusalem that symbolized in stone their divine election.

Picking back up the discussion of the significance of the letter *mīm*, it is important to note that a further layer of religious meaning is herewith hinted at, albeit one that is somewhat denuded of any deep crypto-symbolism. By mentioning the *mīm al-khatm* the cosmic symmetry of Islamic religious history moves into view. Muḥammad, according to traditional interpretation, was the “Seal of Prophecy.” In a verse of cryptic portent, the revelatory voice declares: “Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men but he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets (*khātīm al-nabiyyīn*) and God knows all.” (Q 33:40)

93. Collins, “Morphology,” 10.

94. *TōN*, fol. 3b. Ar. — *wa-faḥ al-Rumīyyah al-Kubrā wa-hadm bay‘atihā wa-l-qiyām bi-‘arḍ al-jihād fī sabīli -llāh wa-‘imārat bayt al-maqdis ‘alā ḥukm mā kān ‘alayhi fī ‘ahd ḥaḍrat sayyidinā Sulaymān b. Dāwūd ‘alayhimā al-salām*.

The Arabian prophet's birth is traditionally dated to the April 20, 571. As is common enough in religious tradition, this date also coincides with a conspicuous event in the heavens. In the same year, a little more than a month after the prophet's birth, the major conjunction (*qirān*) of the planets Saturn and Jupiter was observed. Behold the birth of a new religion (*qirān al-millah*), which Otto Loth perfectly defines as the "conjunction of the Arabian theocracy *par excellence*."⁹⁵ Saturn and Jupiter are two "high planets" (*al-'ulwiyān*) that form part of a planetary trinity—the third planet being Mars, which figures more prominently in *ToN*. The conjunction of these spinning giants has the longest orbital period of revolution, which is sufficiently long for making astro-apocalyptic predictions. This requires some explanation. One can divide the various conjunctions in three types: small, middle, and great. Small conjunctions refer to the incidence of celestial orbit every twenty years that unites the revolving planets at 'minor' stations in the zodiac calendar. These smaller conjunctions generally are considered to influence—or predetermine—minor events relevant to political history, such as the death of a ruler, revolts, and other quotidian crises. Middle conjunctions occur on the order of every 240 solar years. In the astrological tradition, these are commonly referred to as uniting within a "triangle" (*mutballatha*, Loth's *Triplicität*, sic), this *terminus technicus* deriving from the diagrammatic division of the zodiacal calendar into four equilateral triangles.⁹⁶

The greatest conjunction within each of these four triangular subdivisions, Saturn and Jupiter (or Saturn and Mars) realign. The portent of this calendric division (quadratic triangulation) bespeaks a greater political significance, such as wars or dynastic coups. The greatest conjunction of them all, however, is on the order of 960 solar years, which is the sum of 4 x 240, i.e. an entire period of planetary revolution. Important to note is the fact that 960 solar years, i.e. the cosmically significant astrological conjunction, when converted into lunar years equals

95. Loth, "Al-Kindi Als Astrolog," 268.

96. Loth, 268-69.

approximately 990 years. Thus, the conjunction of Saturn and Mars for Ps.-Ibn al-‘Arabī is in accordance with the Islamic calendar year and critically brings one nigh a round millennium. Remember, the auspicious apocalyptic writing is not on the walls, but rather in the firmament of the night sky. If Islamic salvation history were drawn as a straight line between two points, a kind of salvific symmetry is achieved. Muḥammad is the beginning of God’s final revelation and the Ottomans are the antipodal fulfillment of Muḥammad’s prophecy. In short, the Ottomans will usher in the eschaton, hence the conjunction is not about the exact calendar year but rather about designating the final age as a broad phase and its guarantors. A chiliastic cycle of apocalyptic proportion is hereby achieved.

Consequently, Ps. Ibn al-‘Arabī addresses the astrological calendar of millennial events:

And of the cryptic signs (*rumūz*) of the tree, we have said that when the rule of *qāf al-jīm* concludes, *mim Salim* will arise, and we mean exactly that. And of the cryptic signs of the tree, the Land of the Quiver (*al-kanānah*, i.e. Egypt) is of exclusive importance due to its status as the site of the throne of kings and it is more worthy of mention than any other (land). And we composed the epistle about the events that take place there and we have indicated that it will come under the dominion (*fī yad*) of the letter *sīn* and will remain under the dominion of his successor until the Great Conjunction (*qirān kabīr*) occurs at the conclusion of the dynasty, when Mars faces Saturn in the final mansion of the constellation Libra (*ākhir darajah min al-miẓān*).⁹⁷

To drive the point home, the text ensures the reader/audience that this is a rejuvenating conjunction for the *ummah*. The text continues that the confluence of celestial bodies and cryptic characters—designated here as a *sīn* and there as a *mim* in a letrist year *bā-kāf-zā*—reestablishes a lasting age of justice (*ḵburij ‘adl la*

97. *ToN*, fols. 5b–6a. Ar. — *wa-min rumūz al-shajarah al-takḥṣīs bi-l-kanānah dun ghayribā li-kan-nihā mahall kursī al-mulūk wa-aḥaqq bi-l-dhīker min ghayribā wa-‘aqadnā al-risālah ‘alā dhīker ḥawādithihā wa-asharnā ilā dukhūlihā fī yad ḥarf sīn wa-biqā’ihā fī yad ‘aqbibi ilā qirān kabīr yaḥṣul fī ākhir darajah min al-miẓān*. See also *ToN*, fols. 7a ff. for some greater astrological explanation. Fol. 7a also contains a far more complex list of letrist codes for characters and events that will appear as part of the penultimate events of human history.

kehurij zāwāl).⁹⁸ This is salvation history *ipsissima verba*. Lest one also mistake *ToN* as a pedestrian apocalypse for the masses, the author reaffirms its *jaf*r credentials in esotericizing terms. In a moment of authorial admonition, Ps-Ibn al-ʿArabī reminds us that the method by which the details of the *eschaton* are derived is, of course, from an esoteric (*bāṭin*) science as derived from the preternatural, oracular value of the Arabic alphabet, the *abjad*.⁹⁹

Now, to return to the idea of cosmic symmetry, it may now become clear that Muḥammad’s birth signaled—both in the heavens as down here on earth—the advent of a new religion and, equally telling, the terminal phase of salvation history. Again, the great conjunction of two high planets—in *ToN* Saturn and Mars—is a boon for composing astro-apocalyptic schemes of history. Thus, at the antipodal end of the millennial spectrum, Ps-Ibn al-ʿArabī recognizes a conspicuous parallel. Just as the Ottomans were repeating the successes of their “righteous predecessors” in faith (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) through conquest, this too must necessarily bespeak God’s ultimate plan. Muḥammad’s prophetic counterpart, the other *mim* of salvation history, is likewise a “seal”; the Mahdī brings salvation through cosmic renewal as much as the Messenger of God, Muḥammad, brought salvation through religious reformation. Revelation and religion are ineluctably intertwined with, and predetermined by, the astrological influence of the planets. All of this is according to God’s plan, of course. The Qur’ān reminds us that God, “raised up the heavens and set it in balance.”¹⁰⁰ The firmament is akin to a well-calibrated mechanism, the adept student of which being capable of comprehending the ticking of its gears as it pertains to human history.

98. *ToN*, fol. 6a. Gril’s interpretation of this line cannot be correct. Nowhere does it say that Egypt will be “freed” from the Ottomans. Gril, “Enigma,” 53. Rather it should be properly understood that, naturally, human control over the course of events will *per force* give way to a divine dispensation. The Mahdī, not the Sultan in Constantinople, will take over.

99. *ToN*, fol. 6a. Ar. — *ḥaqqaqqnābā tadqiqān sbāfiyān wa-khadhafnā al-juḥūyyāt li-kuthratihā wa-li-kannihā takbruj min bāṭin kulliyātihā bi-tariqah makhṣūṣah fi ‘ilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-a dād*.

100. Ar. — *wa-s-samā’a rajā’ahā wa-waḍa’a —l-mizān*. Q 55:7. The Qur’ān repeatedly identifies God as setting the phenomena of the observable sky, both day and night. Thus, the planets are placeholders for some greater reality.

III. Why Egypt? A Provisional Answer

It is important to address the question “why” Egypt? The following is a provisional answer. As Denis Gril notes, the text employs the curious appellation of Egypt as the “Land of the Quiver” (*Miṣr kinānat Allāh fī ardihī*), which is evocative of a prophetic saying, albeit one not included in any of the canonical *ḥadīth*.¹⁰¹ More specifically, nowhere else in the eschatological *ḥadīth* is Egypt mentioned as a critical site of kick-starting the apocalypse.¹⁰² A *ḥadīth* cited by al-Sakhāwī (d. 903/1497) makes reference to an earlier, similar *ḥadīth* in which the “Land of Quiver” locution is cited. Al-Sakhāwī cites Ibn Zūlāq (d. ca. 387/997), one of the first historians of Egypt and author of *In Praise of Egypt (Fadāʾil Miṣr)*, to explain that the curious term “quiver” only suggests that Egypt is blessed by God, a land of riches and bounty. But Ibn Zūlāq makes no reference to Egypt as the “quiver.” The term he uses to refer to Egypt is “treasury” (*al-kaḥẓāʾin*). Thus, al-Sakhāwī is more or less glossing Ibn Zūlāq’s notion of Egypt as a “treasury” to be an approximate parallel for the obscure prophetic appellation of Egypt as the “Land of the Quiver.” One should note that no eschatological connotation is observed in either of these texts. Moreover, al-Sakhāwī notes that Kaʿb al-Aḥbar (or Kaʿb al-Ḥibr, lit. Rabbi Kaʿb, d. ca. 32/652), the (in)famous Yemeni Jewish convert to Islam and source of the so-called Isrāʾīliyyāt, claimed that Egypt is a land “spared from calamities (*al-fit-an*).” Such a statement further disqualifies Egypt from being the site of End-Times tribulations.¹⁰³ How, then, does Egypt become the site of an Islamic-Ottoman Armageddon? For now, there are two interpretations one can propose.

The first explanation is limited, yet historical and based on the prominence Egypt is given in the text. Specifically, one is told outright at the beginning of the apocalypse that Selīm I’s conquest of Mamluk Syria and Egypt is a key victory that will secure the advent of the seal of history: the Mahdī. One may,

101. Gril, “Enigma,” 52–53; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasinah*, 609, no. 1029.

102. The usual culprits are the Holy Land with Jerusalem and Damascus, Byzantium with Constantinople, and much less so Muḥammad’s homeland with Mecca and Medina.

103. Ar. — *Miṣr balad muʿāfāh min al-fitān*. Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Maqāṣid*, 609, no. 1029.

therefore, argue that the author sought to curry favor with the new Ottoman overlords, especially if he were an Egyptian local.¹⁰⁴ Describing Selīm’s victory as an act of liberation and a key piece in the puzzle of salvation history sounds much more ingratiating than a tractate about the advent of the godless and dictatorial Turk. Moreover, they were not quiet about their claims to universal sovereignty. It would not have been lost on a would-be political ally that buying into the propaganda *du jour* would appeal to the authorities. But this reading is overly deterministic and involves too much divination on the part of the contemporary scholar. One should be wary of playing the game of historical psychologist, especially when one lacks the necessary sources.

What seems far more likely, and needs a great deal more research, is that Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī is drawing on a known, albeit non-Islamic, tradition that positions Egypt, if not as the battlefield of Armageddon, then at least as a site of eschatological prophecy. Coptic scholars should be consulted. David Frankfurter, for example, has produced a remarkable study on the *Apocalypse of Elijah*—originally composed in Greek but extant in Sahidic and Achmimic renditions—which indicates that the early Coptic Christian communities saw their country as a fulcrum in cosmic history.¹⁰⁵ Frankfurter draws on the concept of *Chaosbeschreibung* in particular, a principle of older Egyptian religion incorporated into early Coptic Christianity.¹⁰⁶ This principle was used as a spiritual hermeneutic for interpreting historical events of distress, such as conquest and dynastic collapse.

Likewise, one should also take into account the Nag Hammadi corpus (discovered in 1945).¹⁰⁷ With eschatologically loaded texts like the *Melchizedek Apocalypse*

104. Gril believes the author is more likely to be a Syrian. I argue that the evidence in the text overwhelmingly suggests an Egyptian author. Gril, “Enigma,” 68. Otherwise, why would a Syrian dismiss his homeland as a well-established site of the Hour in favor of Egypt, the Mamluk dynasty who were once the Syrians’ overlords and an occupying force to boot?

105. Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 260–90.

106. Frankfurter, 159–240.

107. As Elaine Pagels notes, the Nag Hammadi corpus contains far more texts that are titled “apocalypse” than “gospel” and “apocryphon.” This does not, however, mean that they are apocalypses in the eschatological-revelatory sense proposed by Collins et al. Pagels, *Revelations*,

(NHC IX, 1) and Sethian gnostic prophecies abounding, a more robust picture of Egypt as an apocalyptic site of interest emerges.¹⁰⁸ This was a society keenly aware of its importance vis-à-vis God's cosmic plan. Taking these sources into consideration will help us better understand from what *fonds* Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī drew his inspiration. Islamic esoteric eschatology can be syncretic. Arguably, the centrality of the “Land of the Quiver” is a desideratum for further investigation, especially if one seeks to achieve a plenary understanding of the esoteric apocalyptic nature of *ToN*.

IV. Conclusion

Denis Gril observed a decade ago that *ToN* is a pure *jafr* apocalypse. In the foregoing essay, the historical and technical justifications for this claim have been laid out. First, the question of what *jafr* is and where it came from was provided. The confessional, ʿAlid-only concept of the prophetic genre was proven to be wrong. If *jafr* was an exclusive fatidic charisma (*karāmah*) of the Imāms, how could later Ṣūfī esoteric authors like ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī, Aḥmed Bīcān Yazıcıoğlu, or Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī writing for and working within the very Sunnī world of the Ottoman court and empire lay claim to this prophetic mode? *Jafr* was never just for the ʿAlids alone. Thus, it could be constantly reworked and appropriated.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Ṣūfīs were some of the principal *jafr*ists who employed this genre in their theosophic-supernatural tractates. Most of all, the real Ibn al-ʿArabī incorporated *jafr* into his mystical corpus. This mystical master not only received visions of the celestial sphere, but also he relied on lettrism and chiliastic historical schemes to legitimize his revelatory and eschatological claims. Apprehending *ghayb* is, ultimately, facilitated via a supernatural salmagundi of spiritual election that begets transcendental insight (i.e. revelation), comprehension of heavenly bodies and their auspicious alignments, and the power to decipher the Arabic alphabet which constitutes, one may recall, the building blocks of the cosmos.

180, fn. 6; Collins, “Morphology,” 9; Collins, “Genre Apocalypse.” Pagels also provides further relevant readings in the footnote cited.

108. Parton, “Melchizedek Apocalypse.”

As a Turkish saying has it, “One lunatic tossed a stone into a well; forty scholars could not get it back out” (*Bir deli kayıyaya taş atmış, kırk akıllı onu çıkaramamış*). One often feels like one of those scholars when studying the history of eschatological esotericism in the Ottoman Empire. It is a new and growing field that presents many obstacles and certainly poses many quandaries that may never be definitely answered. Nevertheless, one hopes that in light of the above analysis the present reader may comprehend the “how” and “why” an anonymous—presumably Egyptian—scribe appropriated the name of the Ottomans’ favored Şūfī, the “Red Sulphur” Ibn al-ʿArabī. By doing so, Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī not only stamped his prophecy with legitimacy, but he therefore emboldened the cosmic veracity of his oracular visions. *Jafr*, especially as practiced by the mystics—and their aspiring acolytes, pseudonymous or otherwise—from the seventh/thirteenth century onward increasingly came to be the eschatological esoteric medium *sine qua non* for bolstering cosmic imperial claims in the very Sunnī Ottoman world. In Ps.-Ibn al-ʿArabī, we clearly see the Sublime Porte emerging as a divinely elected office of universal Islamic authority. To wit, Ottoman history was salvation history. The *Tree of Nuʿmān* is one poignant case study thereof.

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Islamic Esotericism in the Bengali Bāul Songs of Lālan Fakir

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Abstract

This article makes use of the author’s field research as well as primary and secondary textual sources to examine Islamic esoteric content, as mediated by local forms of Bengali Sufism, in Bāul Fakiri songs. I provide a general summary of Bāul Fakiri poets, including their relationship to Islam as well as their departure from Islamic orthodoxy, and present critical annotated translations of five songs attributed to the nineteenth-century Bengali poet Lālan Fakir (popularly known as “Lalon”). I also examine the relationship of Bāul Fakiri sexual rites (*sādhanā*) and principles of embodiment (*dehatattva*), framed in Islamic terminology, to extant scholarship on Haṭhayoga and Tantra. In the final part of the article I emphasize how the content of these songs demonstrates the importance of esotericism as a salient category in a Bāul Fakiri context and offer an argument for its explanatory power outside of domains that are perceived to be exclusively Western.

Keywords: Sufism; Islam; Esotericism; Metaphysics; Traditionalism

The history of the Bāul Fakirs includes centuries of religious innovation in which various poets have gradually created a folk tradition highly unique to Bengal, that is, Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. While there have been several important works published on Bāul Fakirs in recent years,¹ in this article I aim to contribute specifically to scholarship on Islamic esoteric content in Bāul Fakiri songs, as mediated by local forms of Sufism.² Analyses in

1. In addition to numerous articles, a few of the most notable books over the past few decades include Salomon, *City of Mirrors*; Lorea, *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman*; Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*; Openshaw, *Writing the Self*; and Hanssen, *Women, Religion and the Body in South Asia*.

2. Terms like “heterodox,” “esoteric,” and even “Sufism” are of course often problematically applied in an Islamic context, but seem more than applicable when describing the Bāul Fakirs; their use will be clarified as relevant.

English-language scholarship of such content are often limited compared to the songs' more familiar references to Hindu (Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, or Śākta) lore. To emphasize the importance of the songs' Islamic esoteric symbolism, I will first provide a brief historical summary of Bengali Sufism and demonstrate how it has informed the Bāul Fakiri movement over the past few centuries. I will then highlight the significance of the title *darbeś*,³ or “dervish” in Bengali Sufi literature, comparing it with the title “dervish” in a Bāul Fakiri context. My aim in treating Bāul material from this perspective is to encourage scholars who are likely much more well-versed in Arabic, Persian, North African, or other Islamic contexts to become better acquainted with Bāul Fakiri source material in Bengali and to be able to more precisely connect it to their own work within a wider framework of Islamic esotericism. In the pages that follow and especially in the conclusion I will examine what I mean by Islamic esotericism, with reference to both scholars and their objects of study in the academic field of Western esotericism and its branch of modern occultism.

Throughout this article I have selectively interspersed annotated translations for five songs attributed⁴ to Lālan Fakir or Lālan Sāi⁵ (d. 1890 CE, most popularly transliterated as “Lalon” or “Lalon Shah”) that I gradually received during

3. All italicized terms are transliterations from Bengali unless otherwise noted as derived from Sanskrit (Skt.), Persian (Pers.) or Arabic (Ar.). Transliterations of Bengali follow the precedent set in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, with the exception being a reversal of *ya* and *ya* according to contemporary library standards. Proper names are usually transliterated with diacritics except in some cases where there is a popular or preferred roman variant.

4. These songs are only “attributed” to Lālan since they bear his signature or *bhāṇitā*, as well as in some cases that of Sirāj Sāi his guru. However, to my knowledge they are not found in the earliest diary compiled by Rabindranath Tagore. The songs I have selected are nevertheless considered by living Bāul Fakirs to be authentic compositions of Lālan, and bear the marks of his lyrical style. They have all been published as circulating Bāul Fakiri songs, regardless of actual authorship, and are performed today by Bāul Fakirs. Furthermore, they reflect Lālan's use of Islamic esoteric symbolism as understood and formulated by his disciples, regardless of whether he was indeed the composer. Cf. Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 3–5 for her opinion of what constitutes the core of Lālan's songs.

5. For the sake of consistency I have preferred rendering Bengali proper names with diacritics whenever possible. However, sometimes this is relaxed in cases where a spelling is generally recognized in English. I also have elected to transliterate Bengali *pha* as *fa* in the word “fakir” (*phakir*) and its derivatives for the sake of readability.

my travels and field work in Bangladesh, all of which to varying degrees contain references to what is perhaps best described as a wider Islamic esotericism. Each of these songs were received and written down in collaboration with Bāul Fakirs and artists in Bangladesh, with the lyrics cross-checked by the author during conversations and performances (see Acknowledgments). After returning from the field I have been afforded with the opportunity to compare these oral versions with published sources for all these songs. Although sources are scarce, the combined critical analysis of oral, handwritten, and published sources makes it possible to establish reliable translations of these songs based on critical Bengali recensions.⁶

Bengali Sufism and Bāul Fakirs

Bengali Sufi traditions have been extensively and variously documented in the scholarship of Richard Eaton, Ayesha Irani, David Cashin, and Hans Harder, not to mention several other scholars in India and Bangladesh who have published extensively on the subject, such as Āhmad Śarīph, Asim Roy, Enamul Hak, M. R. Tarafdar, Shashibhusan Dasgupta, and Kashshaf Ghani.⁷ Enamul Hak's own historical trajectory for the most part begins with the spread of Sufism to Bengal around the thirteenth century via the Chishtiyya and Suhrawardiyya orders (Ar. *ṭarīqa*, plural *ṭuruq*) and, a few centuries later, with the Naqshbandiyya, Madariyya, Adhamiyya, and Qadiriyya orders.⁸ "Sufism"

6. For philological issues surrounding the editing and analysis of Lālan Fakir's songs, which are extant in both oral and written (manuscript and printed) sources, see Salomon, "On Editing the Songs of Lālan Fakir using both Oral and Written Sources" in *City of Mirrors*, 3–11. For these translations I have mostly preferred the oral versions I committed to writing and cross-checked with Bāul Fakirs and Fakirānis, except in some instances where the published version is clearly superior and accords with the meaning of the song.

7. Irani, "The Prophetic Principle of Light and Love;" Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*; Harder, *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh*; Śarīph, *Bānglār Sūphī Sabītya*; Śarīph, *Bāul Tattva*; Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition*; Hak, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*; Tarafdar, "An Indigenous Source for Bengal Sufism;" and Tarafdar, *Husain Shabi Bengal, 1494–1538 A.D.*; Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*; Ghani, "Mystical Traditions and Voices of Dissent."

8. Enamul Hak, quoted in Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 168–69. Precise dates for each of these orders' presence in Bengal remain speculative, although Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi attempted to

(*suphibād*) and its adjective “Sufi” are of course highly polysemantic, but in this context can be used to define a sense of doctrinal cohesiveness that developed among these various orders that permeated the religious landscape of Bengal.

Long considered the far-flung eastern “frontier” of the Islamic world, to quote Eaton’s now classic study,⁹ it is important however to recognize that Sufism was not merely imposed from outside; Bengali actors also played a role in fostering centers of Islamic arts and learning that were closer to home, and these centers also produced Sufi literature in Persian and later Bengali. Thibaut d’Hubert has convincingly argued for the presence of one such center at Arakan (also known in sources as Mrauk-U or Roshang), a medieval coastal kingdom that flourished from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries in the regions between what are today the countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹⁰

Regardless of whether Bāul Fakirs ultimately derived their Islamic references from Arakanese traders or from Persian-speaking *pīrs* and other settlers entering Bengal from the northwest of India, however, an examination of the esoteric dimensions of these interactions provides important data for the broader question as to how Sufi mediators actually understood and interpreted their own teachings when engaging with extant local points of view. One such example is their interpretation of Sufi recitation (*jhikar*, < Ar. *dhikr*) as interchangeable with Tantric mantra-recitation (*jap*, < Skt. *japa*). This is perhaps best exemplified in “*Paṛo mukhe sadāi lā il lā hā il lā lā*,”¹¹ a song by Lālan Fakir that is centered on an esoteric interpretation of the Shahada (Ar. *al-shahada*) or “testimony” that “there is no God but Allah”:

situate each historically in a wider Indian context in his two volumes of *A History of Sufism in India*.

9. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*.

10. D’Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace*. See also Projit Bihari Mukharji, “The Flame and the Breeze.”

11. These songs are cited by the first line of their *sthāyi-antarā* “permanent verse” or “chorus,” as is customary for Lālan Fakir’s songs, which do not have separate titles.

Song One: “Pāro mukhe sadāi lā il lā hā il lā lā”¹²

“With your mouth¹³ always pray ‘lā il lā hā il lā lā.’”¹⁴
The messenger of Allah¹⁵ made this precept resound.

The negation¹⁶ is called “lā il lā hā.”
“Il lā lā hu”¹⁷ is the bountiful day.¹⁸
Whoever speaks this negation and affirmation¹⁹
is a devotee of Allah.²⁰

Keep invoking²¹ the name in meditation,²²
together with its form.²³
If you call out without visualizing,²⁴
will you know what form your Allah takes?

12. The author first received this song from the late Sādhu Humāyan Fakir of Narsingdi, Bangladesh. A published version of this song can be found in Āhamad, *Lālan gīti samagra*, song no. 584.

13. *mukh*. Lit. “mouth,” “face.” Alt. trans.: “voice.”

14. Lit. “There is no god but Allah” (< Ar. *lā ʾilāha ʾillā llāh*). This is of course the first part of the Shahada, the recitation of which is the “first pillar” of Islam.

15. *rasul ulla* (< Ar. *rasulu llāh*), i.e. the Prophet Muhammad. This is a pun on the second part of the Shahada.

16. *nafi* (likely < Pers. *nafi*).

17. This is the affirmation (*esbad*, < Pers. *esbāt*) to which “lā il lā hā” is the negation.

18. *din dayāmay*. Alt. trans.: “day filled with mercy.” In Bengali *din* is also a homonym of *dim* (< Ar. *dīm*), “religion,” “way of life,” which Lālan occasionally puns on.

19. *naphi esbad* (< Pers. *nafi esbāt*), i.e. the combined phrase “lā il lā hā il lā lā.”

20. Alt. trans.: “is a servant of God.”

21. *rākhile japa*. Lit. “cause the recitation to be kept up.” The term *jap* (< Skt. *japa*) implies the recitation of a mantra.

22. “In meditation” translates *dhīyāne* (< Hindustani *dhīyān*, < Skt. *dhīyāna*).

23. “Form” translates *rūp* (< Skt. *rūpa*).

24. “Without visualizing” translates *be-niśānā* (< Pers. neg. pfx. *bi* + *neshāna*). According to Ferdous Fakirani, the term implies thinking of something without envisioning it (*darśan chāyā*). This *antarā* is questioning whether *be-niśānā* is the best way to invoke him, given that Allah has a form (*rūp*) according to Lālan.

Knowing him who is
without a partner,²⁵
pray these words²⁶
in your heart²⁷ and with your voice.
You will be released
and remain in happiness.
You will see the manifesting light.²⁸

The Lord,²⁹ Allah, and the Light³⁰ have said
This invocation³¹ is a heavy door.
Sirāj Sāi says, “Oh disheveled³² Lālan,
listen to this heartfelt advice!”³³

Despite the explicit presence of such Bengali Sufi symbolism in their song lyrics, it is important to stress that Bāul Fakirs frame their tradition as *mānuṣ-bhakti* (literally “devotion to the human being”) and can be from any religious background or *jāt* (< Skt. *jāti*, “caste,” “birth-religion”) – they accordingly critique all forms of sectarian religion. Lālan Fakir’s lyrical output is especially characterized by a distinction between the exoteric, literal Qur’ān and the so-called

25. *lā śarik* (< Ar. *lā sharik*). For the use of this phrase see Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 6–8. This could also be a double entendre, since *lā* “without,” or “not” is also a reference to the primal Śakti (cf. Song Four below). If this is taken to be the meaning, the verse would instead be translated “knowing him who is the partner of the Śakti [...]”

26. “Words” translates *kālam* (< Pers. *kalām*).

27. *dele* (< Pers. *del*).

28. *nūr tajella* (possibly < Pers. *tajalli*).

29. “Lord” translates *sāi* (< Skt. *svāmi*).

30. “Light” translates *nūr* (< Ar. *nūr*).

31. *jhikar* (< Ar. *dhikar*), lit. “remembrance.” This refers to the Sufi practice of repeating various strings of text in prayer, and in this song equated with the practice of *jap* or mantra-recitation.

32. “Disheveled” translates *bel illā*, obscure in Bengali. According to Azim Sāi, it refers to someone who is *āulāno*, an endearing insult of sorts that implies someone’s unkempt hair and low status. Here Lālan, as he often does, is applying the descriptor to himself.

33. “Heartfelt advice” translates *phukāri*, an obscure word in Bengali (possibly < Pers. *feker*, “idea”). According to Azim Sāi, it connotes *maner kathā*, lit. “sayings of the heart.”

“book of the heart” (*del-korān*).³⁴ Carol Salomon describes this distinction as follows, based on her translations as well as her numerous ethnographic interviews in the field in the 1980s:

The Bāuls, like the Sufis, assert that the Prophet taught two types of doctrines, one exoteric (*ẓāhir*), recorded in the Qur’ān and meant for the general public, and the other esoteric (*bāṭin*), only hinted at in the Qur’ān and aimed at the select few who are able to grasp its meaning and who pass it down from heart to heart. Sharī’āt, Islamic law, is for followers of the exoteric path, while Ma’rifat, mystic knowledge, is for followers of the esoteric path.³⁵

Salomon’s mention of the latter two concepts, Islamic law (*śarīyat* < Pers. *sharī’at*; Ar. *sharī’a*) and gnosis (*mārapbat* < Ar. *ma’rifā*), reflects the Bāul Fakiri privileging of *mārapbat* over *śarīyat*, which is questioned as a dispensable “cover,” as in the following lyrics by Lālan (translated by Salomon):

sharī’a is a cover,
so it’s written;
ma’rifā is the stuff
that is hidden.
Do I save the cover
or throw it out?
It’s the stuff Lālan craves.³⁶

In her research, Salomon did note that one of Lālan’s songs appears to espouse *śarīyat*, but concluded that this is under the pretense that the esoteric meaning of *śarīyat* is to be interpreted in sexual terms, namely as the retention of semen

34. See also the reference to *del-korān* in the song “Nabi nā cine ki āllā pābe” (“Will you get Allah if you don’t know the Prophet?”) in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 344–47.

35. Salomon, “Bāul Songs,” 191. For the way in which a similar dynamic was expressed in Shiism, using “truth” (Ar. *ḥaqīqa*) instead of “gnosis” (Ar. *ma’rifā*), see Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 26–28.

36. *śarāke sarāpoś lekḥā yāy / bastu mārapbat se dhākā ābe tāy / sarāpoś thui tule o ki dūi phele / lālan bastu bhikāri*. These lyrics are found in the third *antarā* or “verse” of the song “E ki āin nabi karlo jāri” (“What kind of law did the Prophet preach?”), published and annotated in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 132–34. The song was also published in her paper “On the Concept of Sharīat in Baul Songs.” I am thankful to Carola Lorea for bringing this paper to my attention.

practiced during Bāul sexual rituals, which we will consider below.³⁷ In any event, Lālan does not limit his critiques to Islamic law but also critiques Hindu notions of *dharmā* and what he sees as blind adherence to the Vedas and other scriptures, calling into question a wide assortment of nineteenth-century religious mores prevailing in Bengal, including in Christianity.³⁸ The song “Āpni āpnār fānā hale” is a quintessential example of one such critique in song-form, universalizing the concept of *phānā* (< Ar. *fanā*) or the self’s “dissolution” or “annihilation” across religious and linguistic barriers:

Song Two: “Āpnār āpni fānā hale”³⁹

With your own self’s dissolution⁴⁰
you will realize him.⁴¹
What name will I call on
to raise my heart to the skies?

In Arabic they say “Allah.”
In Farsi they say “Khoda⁴² the exalted”⁴³
“God” say all the disciples of Jesus.
In different countries there are different ways.

37. Carol Salomon, “On the Concept of Sharīat in Baul Songs.”

38. For more on Lālan’s rejection of religious laws in general see Salomon, “Bāul Songs,” 191.

39. The author first received this song from Bidhān Śā, and subsequently cross-checked it with fakirs. A published version of this song can be found in Āhamad, *Lālan gīti samagra*, song no. 282. This song has also been popularized by Anusheh Anadil, who is known for her work in the fusion band “Bangla” as well as her solo work. She has performed this song in various styles, emphasizing its cross-cultural message.

40. *phānā* (< Ar. *fanā*): “annihilation,” “dissolution.” The term has a special significance in Sufi literature, where it often refers to annihilation in God. In Lālan’s songs the term instead seems to refer to annihilation in oneself.

41. Alt. trans. “him” or “her.” The gender of the pronoun *tāre* (i.e. *take*) is ambiguous.

42. *Khodā* (< Pers. *khudā*) is the Persian/Farsi name for God, often used in Bengali as well.

43. “Most-High” translates *tālā* (likely < Ar. *ta’ālā*).

Allah, Hari,⁴⁴ their worship and rites⁴⁵ —
these are all human creations.
When the unnamed is unknown,
it's impossible to speak.⁴⁶

Expressed from the heart's attitude,⁴⁷
language arises in the three worlds.
Yet the heart
in its primal, uncaught reflection⁴⁸
has neither language nor grammar.

Dissolve into yourself⁴⁹
and you'll become the realized one.⁵⁰
Sirāj Sāi says “Lālan, you're blind —
See for a moment⁵¹ the true form⁵² in forms.”⁵³

Who are the Bāul Fakirs of Bengal?

In an article such as this it is appropriate to first provide some general context for the Bāul Fakirs (*phakir*, male) and Fakirānis (*phakirāni*, female), especially since they are the chief inheritors of Lālan's songs.⁵⁴ However, in addressing this con-

44. Hari is another name for the god Viṣṇu or his avatar Kṛṣṇa.

45. *bbajan pūjan* (i.e. *bhakti* and *pūjā*).

46. *bāgendriya* (< Skt. *vāgendriya*) *nā sambhabe*, lit. “the faculty of speaking is not possible.”

47. *maner bhāb*. Alt. trans. “the heart's devotion.”

48. *adbar cinte*. Alt. trans. “uncatchable thought.”

49. *āpnāte āpani phānā*. The double use of the honorific second-person pronoun stresses the reflexivity of *phānā*.

50. Alt. trans. “and you will realize it.”

51. *saṅkṣepe*. Alt. trans. “briefly,” “momentarily.”

52. *svarūp* (< Skt. *svarūpa*). Alt. trans. “inherent form,” “essential nature.” For the technical importance of this term in Bāul Fakiri songs (as well as in Tantra more broadly) see Bhaṭṭācārya, *Bāṅlār Bāul o Bāul Gaṅ*, 357–68.

53. “Forms” translates *riṭe* (< Skt. *rūpa*), which here can either be singular or plural.

54. This brief account, while based on the author's own experiences in the field (spanning around two years in Bangladesh and to a lesser extent West Bengal), is far from exhaustive. The

text we are immediately faced with a problem of terminology. The category “Bāul” (possibly deriving from Skt. *vātula* “crazy,” “full of wind,” or *vyākula*, “bewildered”) remains unstable, as with the anthropologist Jeanne Openshaw’s use of the related category *bartamān-panthī*, or “follower of *bartamān*” (that is, the present reality at hand, in Bāul contexts the body).⁵⁵ Since a full analysis of the semantic range of potential categories is outside the scope of this article, I have preferred Bāul Fakir and its adjective Bāul Fakiri (as proposed by Sudhir Chakraborty) for the sake of simplicity and to stress that both identities (“Bāul” and “Fakir”) are interwoven in the tradition and songs I will describe and translate in this article, those of Lālan Fakir. However, it is important to consider the fact that some Bāul Fakirs may only emically identify with one or the other (i.e., either “Bāul” or “Fakir”), and in some cases may even see them as different categories altogether, as we will see below.

Bāul Fakirs of all stripes are distinguished by their great reverence for the songs of Lālan Fakir. However, respect is also accorded to other important Bāul Fakiri poets, the most significant of which for our purposes is Pāñju Khondakār (1851–1914, also known as Pāñju Śāh), an associate of Lālan who seems to have contributed to the latter’s understanding of Islamic esoteric themes as well as his musical style of *bhāb-saṅgīt*, or “music for reflection.”⁵⁶ The songs of Duddu Śāh (1841–1911),⁵⁷ one of Lālan’s direct disciples, as well as those of a wide variety of other artists as well as independent compositions are also commonly performed, but Lālan’s songs are often given preeminence at most festivals in Bangladesh, due in large part to his cultural status and familiarity. In West Bengal, however, the tradition appears to be more decentralized, and the songs of other Bāul poets

Anglophone reader is referred to the published works of Carol Salomon, Jeanne Openshaw, Carola Erika Lorea, and Charles Capwell for more ethnographic and historical information, including on Bāul performative contexts and instruments. Portions of this material have also been published in Cantú, “Bāuls.”

55. For Openshaw’s insightful conceptualization of *bartamān-panthī*, see Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 5 and 113–17.

56. Hak, *Marami Kabi Pañju Śāh*, 28–31 and 197–200.

57. See Jāhāngīr, *Bāul Gān o Duddu Śāh*.

such as Bhabā Pāglā (d. 1984) and Rāj Kṛṣṇa (1869–1946) as well as independent compositions are at least as prevalent as the songs of Lālan.⁵⁸

Exclusively focusing on or exoticizing the esoteric content of Bāul Fakiri songs runs the risk of overlooking their localized performative and cultural contexts, as Carola Erika Lorea has convincingly argued.⁵⁹ At the same time, I am convinced that it is nevertheless useful to delineate the interplay between esoteric and exoteric at work in the songs, especially since even some of the most popular songs' lyrical symbolism connects to broader discursive currents outside of local Bāul Fakiri tradition proper, and indeed even outside of the wider Bengal region. By “esoteric” I mean that their songs are primarily designed to be interpreted via one's understanding of the esoteric (*bātin* or *bātun*, < Ar. *bāṭin*) content of their lyrical symbolism rather than these lyrics' exoteric (*jāber* < Ar. *zāhir*) surface. This use of esoteric and exoteric is first and foremost a translation, especially since both *bātin* (lit. “hidden”) and *jāber* (lit. “available to all”) are used in Bāul Fakiri songs and conversational discourse as paired emic descriptors of knowledge or gnosis (*jñān*, < Skt. *jñāna*). Indeed, the role of *bātin* and *jāber* in Bāul Fakiri hermeneutics of Sufi symbolism is made abundantly clear in Carol Salomon's *City of Mirrors*, which is one of the most important inspirations for this article.⁶⁰ At the same time, I do not feel that etic usages of “esoteric” and “exoteric” would pose much of a problem in this context either, especially since Islamic currents outside of Bengal have been historically entangled with the field of Western esotericism, the nuances of which are eloquently described by Liana Saif in her contribution to this special issue.⁶¹ I will further

58. For the life and work of these other poets see respectively Lorea, *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman* and Jeanne Openshaw, *Writing the Self*.

59. Carola Erika Lorea, “Playing the Football of Love...,” 417.

60. See especially her translation and annotations to “Mursīder thāi ne nā re tār bhed bujhe” (“What message did the Prophet pass on to this world from one heart to another? Find out from a murshid”), 468–71; and “Nabi nā cinle kise khodār bhed pāy” (“How can you find out the mystery of Khodā without knowing the Prophet?”), 348–51.

61. Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism? Contouring a New Field,” in this present issue.

explore the benefit of clarifying such etic usages in the context of Western esotericism, including modern occultism, in the conclusion.

As an example of an emic mode of esotericism at work, however, consider the more general interplay between “esoteric” and “exoteric” hermeneutics as expressed in the song “Āleph he dāl āhād nūrī,” which not only engages alphabet symbolism or “the science of letters” (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) but also the concept of “Nūr Muḥammad,” or the “Light of Muhammad” as a cosmogonic principle, interpreted in a *bāṭin* mode according to the *dil korān*, the Qur’ān of the heart, rather than textual exegesis of the literal Qur’ān:

Song Three: “Āleph lām mim āhād nūrī”⁶²

Alif, lām, mīm⁶³ – one light.⁶⁴

These three glyphs⁶⁵ have profound⁶⁶ meaning.

Within alif is Allah the Guide.⁶⁷

Within mīm is Muhammad’s Light.⁶⁸

No one makes a meaning for lām.

I understand the dot⁶⁹ has been stolen.

62. The author first received this song from Sādhu Humāyan Fakir in September 2012 CE. A published version of this song can be found in Tālib, *Lālan Śah o Lālan Gītikā*, vol. 2, song no. 2.

63. These are the most common of the “abbreviated letters” (Ar. *muqatta’at*) found above some sūrah’s of the Qur’ān. Their use here is undoubtedly linked to the traditional “science of letters” (Ar. *jafr*), ascribed to the Imām Ja’far and developed by al-Būnī and Jābirian authors (Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 144–45). The version of the song preferred by Sādhu Humāyan Fakir instead gives the glyphs as “alif, he, and dāl,” Humāyan’s version, the *lectio difficilior*, may emphasize additional puns on the meaning of Ahad (see note below).

64. *ahād* (< Ar. *aḥād*) *nūrī*. This is a reference to the name Ahad, which along with its corollary Ahmad is well-attested in Bāul songs as a code to describe Muhammad (Ahmad) as an avatar of Allah (Ahad) with the addition of the Arabic glyph *mīm*. For examples of this see especially Salomon’s annotations in *City of Mirrors*, Song nos. 5, 22, 121, and elsewhere. For the way in which Saiyād Sultān also connected these cosmogonic syllables with the Upaniṣadic sacred syllable *aum*, see Irani, “The Prophetic Principle of Light and Love,” 414–18. According to Azim Sāi, these three letters are a description of the mother’s creation (*ṣṛṣṭi kathā*, cf. Song Four below).

65. *harāḥ* (< Ar. *ḥurūf*).

66. Lit. “heavy,” “weighted.”

67. *allāhādī* (< Ar. *Allah al-Hādī*). This is one of the so-called “ninety-nine names” of Allah.

68. *nūr mohammadi* (< Ar. Nūr Muḥammadī). For the cosmogonic connotations of this phrase in Bengali Sufi literature, see Irani, “The Prophetic Principle of Light and Love.”

69. “Dot” translates *nuktā* (< Pers. *noqta*, Ar. *nuqṭa*) throughout, which has a technical sense as a

This song can of course be interpreted through multiple lenses: literally as referring to letters above some *sīrah*s of the Qurʾān; mystically as describing revelations sealed in the heart of the Prophet; cosmogonically as reflecting the cosmic origin of creation; and even sexually since the word for “dot” (*nukṭā*, homologized with *bindu*) is a metaphor for semen. I would argue that only the framework “esotericism” allows for consideration of the fullest range of interpretations.

Bāul Fakiri tradition, despite its centuries-old roots, remains very much alive today, although of course there have been changes due to the educated urban “gentlefolk” (*bhadralok*) construction of the Bāul image as a wandering minstrel.⁷⁹ Indeed, there is often a tension, real or imaginary, between Bāuls as traveling artists and Bāul Fakirs as esoteric practitioners based in a rural *ākḥḥā* “hermitage,” but the two should not be seen as mutually exclusive since both types interact and perform together on a regular basis; indeed, in this context the line between “mere artistry” (*śilpi-tilpi*) and esoteric practice (*sādhanā*) is sometimes so blurry as to be nonexistent. Bāul Fakirs are typically very much aware of technological advances like the Internet, television, and mobile phones, but often have an ambivalent relationship to technology and find creative ways to use these media to their advantage.

As a society Bāul Fakirs are generally decentralized, and authority is organized according to various lines of descent from a guru or murshid (both guru and murshid are used synonymously among Bāul Fakirs). Gurus, their students, and their devotees (*bhaktas*) meet together during periodic gatherings called *sādhusaṅga*, “gathering of adepts,” where formal meals are held and decisions are often made on various issues of interest to the wider community of Fakirs (also called *sādhaks* or *sādhus*) and Fakirānis (also called *sādhikās*). These gatherings are often not only attended by Bāuls but also Hindu Tantric practitioners (*tāntrikās*) and followers of Sufi *pīrs*. More traditional (*āḍī*) adherents to the Lālan-panthī sect or *sampradāy* in Bangladesh – more colloquially called

79. See Urban, “The Politics of Madness,” for a historical overview of this image’s construction.

lalaner ghar, “Lālan’s House” often prefer the title Bāul Fakir or just Fakir (and/or Sāi) as opposed to Bāul in order to emphasize their adherence to only those practices of the Fakiri or Derveshi path that Lālan alludes to in his songs. Other practices, such as those outlined in Tantric literature, are accepted but are sometimes subject to criticism if they are perceived too far outside the scope of Lālan’s House. However, this seems to run contrary to Lālan’s own attitude on the subject, especially since Lālan in at least two songs encouraged devotees to read the Tantras, “whose essence is the Śakti [‘feminine power’],”⁸⁰ and he is believed to have known Śivacandra Vidyārṇava, the guru of John Woodroffe (1865–1936) who lived near Lālan’s *ākhyā* in Kumārkhāli, Kushtia.⁸¹

More senior or devout Bāul Fakirs typically devote themselves fully to memorizing and performing songs, engaging in ritualized prayer or meditation, and practicing techniques for physical and mental control. Poorer Bāul Fakirs often eke out a living through subsistence on alms or by singing popular Bāul songs at large festivals, while more established Bāul Fakirs are financially supported by students and devotees who desire to learn about the deeper aspects of the tradition. Many of the more popular Bāuls in Bangladesh, such as Tuntun Śāh, the late Sādhu Humāyan Fakir, Bidhān Śāh, Balāi Śāh, Bāul Najrul Islām Śāh, Anu Śāh, the late Maolā Baks, the late Badar Uddin Śāh, Bajlu Śāh and the late Abdur Rab Fakir,⁸² come from other vocations such as truck- or rickshaw-driv-

80. *Śakti sar tantra paṇḍo*. This line occurs in the song “Bhajaner nigūṛṅ kathā yāte āche,” published as song no. 376 of Dās and Mahāpātra (eds.), *Lālan-Gitikā*.

81. Carol Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 178. For more on Śivacandra Vidyārṇava see also Pāl, *Tantrācārya Śivacandra Bidyārṇab* and the forthcoming research of Julian Strube on John Woodroffe and collaborations under the alias Arthur Avalon.

82. The author first met each of these artists in early 2011, and has been to most of their houses. Tuntun Śāh at that time was living between Dhaka and Kushtia, to where he had migrated from West Bengal. Previously a lorry-driver, his fame has since skyrocketed and today he regularly performs on national television and is invited to cultural programs in China. Sādhu Humāyan Fakir fought in Bangladesh’s Liberation War (*muktijoddhā*) in 1971, and afterwards decided to live a life of peace as a Bāul Fakir. He was one of my main initial interlocutors for these songs, along with one of his students Bidhān Śāh, who is from Kumārkhāli and became interested in Lālan’s songs after Sādhu Humāyan Fakir paid a visit to Kushtia; he currently

ing, instrument-making, or even military service. Many Bāuls also work and some live a married life, although the nature of the marriage often differs somewhat from its correlate among adherents to the country's orthodox religious groups, especially since marriage among Bāul Fakirs can also be used to consecrate a couple to the practice of *yugal-sādbhanā*, lit. “pair-practices,” which usually refers to sexual rites.⁸³

Worldly attachment is often discouraged by more radical Bāul Fakirs who stress a literal conception of *jyānte-marā*, or “alive-while-dead” that refers to one's liminal relationship with their *saṃsār* (< Skt. *saṃsāra*), a Bengali word meaning “family” that also evokes the Buddhist wheel of worldly existence as it refers to one's household, productive work, reproductive sex, life in society, and so on.⁸⁴ Many senior Bāul Fakirs, such as Azim Sāi, emphasize that not everyone

spends more time in West Bengal. Balāi Śāh handcrafted some of the most wonderful *ektārās* (a one-stringed Bāul instrument, originally called a *gopī-yantra*), and also became a student of Sādhu Humāyan Fakir. He also performed harmonium regularly at Mośārraph Hosen Bhoṭan Guru's well-known “blue room” adjacent to Lālan's own *ākḥṛā* in Cheuriyā, Kushtia. Bāul Najrul Islām Śāh, from Kumārkhālī, is an incredibly talented Bāul artist who plays *dotāra* and *ektāra*; he lives in Jagannathpur near Kushtia but has also traveled to Germany for a cultural program. Anu Śāh's house is in the environs of Kushtia, and he is an ustad of *ektāra/duḡi*, harmonium, and the stringed violin-like *sarindā*. Maolā Baks's hometown (*deśer bari*) was Azampur, and he was known to emphasize a sort of “madman” (*pagal*) or even disruptive approach to the songs and their performative context. Badar Uddin Śāh (a.k.a. Badu Member) was also a veteran of the Liberation War who performed Lālan's songs with a deep voice and sometimes would stand and twirl when performing a song on *ektāra*; we became friends in Dhaka and I had the privilege of visiting his home in the environs of Kushtia. Bajlu Śāh lives in the environs of Lālan's *ākḥṛā* and is known for hosting Bāul artists at his house. Abdur Rab Fakir of Kushtia was deeply involved in Bāul artistry and was an especially formative figure in *dotāra* instrument culture; his student Śaphi Maṇḍal is a famous Bāul performer in Bangladesh and abroad.

83. The term *yugal*, “pair,” “companion,” derives from the same root (*yuj*) as the Sanskrit word *yoga*, lit. “yoking.” The implication seems to be that the companions are yoked together in body and mind. Indeed, according to Azim Sāi and Ferdochi Fakirāni (personal interview, August 2018), *yog sādbhanā* (Skt. *yoga sādbhana*) explicitly refers to *yugal sādbhanā*, not to the yoga of Patañjali or forms of Haṭṭhayoga (at least explicitly).

84. For the classic exemplar of a song treating on Bāul Fakiri initiation see “Ke tomāy e beś bhūṣaṇe” (“Tell me! Who dressed you in these clothes?”) in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 234–38 and Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 133. The song is often performed in Jhaptal, a 10-beat pattern.

is at a stage of life that is conducive to the Fakiri lifestyle (*jīban-dhārā*) or path of initiation (*bhek* or *kḥilāḥpat*, < Ar. *kḥilāfa* “succession”).⁸⁵ The gravity of taking initiation in this context is heightened due to the fact that a main condition of being a Bāul Fakir is usually to give up any intent to have future children. Adopting the Fakiri path with prior children, however, is generally acceptable; for example Sādhu Humāyan Fakir (March 12, 1958 – March 26, 2017, see Figure 1) is survived by at least two daughters, both of whom I had the privilege of meeting on one occasion.⁸⁶ Furthermore, some earlier Bāul Fakirs also seem to have dispensed with this practice altogether, such as Pāñju Śāh of Hariṣpur, Bangladesh, who is known for having children, and some of whose descendants still live at his shrine. Regardless of a given Bāul Fakir’s perspective on child-bearing, children once born are typically loved and highly valued; sometimes children are even cared for by Bāul Fakirs and encouraged to sing Bāul songs from an early age, regardless of their later pursuits in life.

As alluded to above, another feature of Bāul Fakirs is their blending of musical artistry with meditation, prayer, and often sexual rites (*yog-sādhanā*) in a context that seeks to overcome the confines of sectarian religion. The lyrics of Bāul songs accordingly contain Sufi themes or symbols that relate to striving for the attainment (*siddhi*) of embodied self-realization (see Song Four below), and to this end refer to practices as varied as reflecting on cosmology as expressed in terms of the Arabic alphabet (see Song One above) and privately practicing sexual rites derived from medieval Tantric literature and syncretic oral tradi-

85. According to Azim Sāi, an initiated Bāul Fakir, *kḥilāḥpat* can be considered as an advanced “degree” conferred upon the aspirant. The origin of this concept among Bāul Fakirs, however, is obscure, since nowhere in Lālan’s songs is there a mention of *kḥilāḥpat*, which can refer to a twelve-foot-long cloth worn as a turban among some Sufi *ṭariqas*. Instead, in the song “Ke tomāy e beś bhūṣaṇe” there is mention of *ḍor kopini* (or *ḍor kaupin*), a special loincloth that is bestowed to the renunciant; see Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 234–37. Cf. also Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 130–39 for an additional description of *bhek* and *kḥilāḥpat*. According to Carola Lorea (personal correspondence, May 18, 2018), *kḥelkei neojā* is a more common local expression to use than *kḥilāḥpat*.

86. I am grateful to Joyanta Howlader for forwarding me Sādhu Humāyan Fakir’s birth and death dates (*ābirbhāb* – *tiradhān*).

tion.⁸⁷ Lālan is especially known for his criticism of sectarian religion in his songs, early versions of which were later committed to writing and recorded in the notebooks of the celebrated poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).⁸⁸ It is clear from his songs — and the singers who interpret them today — that Lālan and other Bāuls envisioned a human race free from the social barriers of one’s *jāt*, whether Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, or any other religion.⁸⁹ This radical line of thinking at least partially contributed at the very beginning of the twentieth century to the anthropocentric and humanistic ideals of *bhadralok* intellectuals, particularly Kshitimohan Sen (1880–1960), Tagore, and others, who strove to cultivate an indigenous variety of humanism in the arts and literature of colonial Bengal.⁹⁰

Bāul Fakirs are especially known for their practices that resemble medieval Tantra and/or Haṭhayoga,⁹¹ including smoking cannabis and consuming related herbal substances like *bhām*,⁹² practicing esoteric sexual rites, and engaging

87. For more on Bāul sexual rites (*sādhanā*) see Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 203–40. Hers is probably the most developed treatment of this subject — as well as Bāul culture generally — and should be read alongside Salomon’s treatment in “The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lālan Fakir” and the research of Carola Erika Lorea. For a more dated but still relevant treatment see Das, “Problematic Aspects of the Sexual Rituals of the Bāuls of Bengal.”

88. Salomon, “The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lālan Fakir,” 277. A published version of such manuscript sources with an introduction on the relationship of Lālan Fakir to Rabindranath Tagore can be found in Mitra, *Lālan Phakir Kabi o Kābya*.

89. Cf. Lālan’s well-known song “Everyone asks Lālan, what’s your birth-religion” (*sab loke kay lālan ki jāt samsāre*), widely published and translated in a number of sources, including online.

90. See Tagore, *The Religion of Man*.

91. For prevailing scholarship on medieval Haṭhayoga, see the latest findings of the ERC-funded “Haṭha Yoga Project” as well as Birch, “The Meaning of Haṭha in Early Haṭhayoga.” For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Singleton, *Yoga Body*.

92. In Bangladesh, cannabis is not usually consumed directly but is precisely mixed with a tobacco-like dried leaf (*sādā pātā* or *alā pātā*) and ground using a special portable toolkit. The mixture is then placed into a chillum pipe (*bāśī*) and topped by a rolled-up ball of coconut hair (*nārkeler chubā*) that is ignited. This serves to keep the pipe lit as it is passed around. Music usually begins following the consumption of a pipe, the entire ritual of which is called *tāmak sebā* (< Skt. *sevā*, “service,” “serving”). In isolated cases datura and hashish are also consumed in a similar manner, but these are rarely if ever consumed during public performances.



Figure 1. A laminated, official invitation to a festival marking the one hundred and twenty-third year since Lālan Fakir’s (pictured right) death, sponsored by the late Sādhu Humāyan Fakir (pictured left). The large caption in green reads “Say Allah, oh bird of my heart” (*allā bal manre pākhi*) and the caption below the picture of Lālan’s *mājār* or “shrine” reads “Lālan says, “What is the form of (one’s) birth group? I don’t see it with my eyes” (*lālan kay jāter ki rūp dekhām nā ei najare*), which are both lyrics from songs by Lālan Fakir. From the author’s personal collection.

in techniques of *prāṇāyām* (< Skt. *prāṇāyāma*, “control of the vital breath”), more commonly referred to as *damer kāj*, “the work of breath”; *bātāser kāj*, “the work of wind”; and *śvās-niśvās*, “breathing in and out.” In Lālan’s songs a related technique is metaphorically referred to as trapping the *prāṇ-pākhi*, “the bird of the vital breath.”⁹³ Bāul Fakirs use *prāṇ-pākhi* and also other metaphors like *bātās*,

93. Cf. Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, song no. 137.

“wind,” to describe the vital breath (*prāṇ*, < Skt. *prāṇa*) in the body, which is homologized with semen (*bastu*, *bindu*, or *nuktā*), connecting their techniques of breath-control to sexual rites. Bāul Fakirs do not use the compound Haṭhayoga (Bengali *haṭha yog*) to describe such techniques, but Carol Salomon has argued that at least some of their sexual rites within the context of *yugal-sādhana* are connected to the practice of *vajrolīmudrā* or “urethral suction,” called *śoṣaṇ bān*, “suction arrow” by Bāul Fakirs, which has a complex history in both Haṭhayoga and Tantra.⁹⁴ James Mallinson has argued that this practice has been described in Tantric literature at least as early as the circa twelfth-century CE Sanskrit text *Amanaska*, where it refers to a technique of seminal retention, possibly using the aid of physical pipes (*nālas*),⁹⁵ but that the etymology of the word *vajrolī* seems to suggest a Tantric Buddhist origin.⁹⁶ In any event, by the time of the circa fourteenth- or fifteenth-century *Śivasāmbhitā*, *vajrolīmudrā* is described in verses 78–104 of the fourth chapter (Skt. *paṭala*) as restraining and reversing the flow of semen during intercourse with a menstruating female.⁹⁷

This usage of *vajrolīmudrā* is relevant to the Bāul Fakiri use of Islamic esoteric symbolism in that, as Salomon has demonstrated, Lālan and other Bāul poets have playfully referred to a strikingly similar practice as *śarīyat*, “Islamic

94. See the annotations to “Dharo cor hāoṃyār ghare phāḍ pete” (“Lay a trap in the house of wind to catch the thief”), in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 336–38. For the best general treatment of this subject, see Mallinson, “Yoga and Sex.” For this practice in the context of Kaula rites with special reference to Bāul Fakirs, see White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 82.

95. At the time of writing it is unclear whether Bāul Fakirs ever have used the aid of pipes in their practice of *śoṣaṇ bān*; no ethnographic treatment that I have read of their sexual rites mention such use nor have any of my informants mentioned this, but it is not impossible.

96. Mallinson, “Yoga and Sex,” 187, 198. Given the Bāul Fakiri roots in Buddhist Sahajiyā movements it is feasible that “Bāul *vajrolīmudrā*” was not mediated by Śaiva Tantras and instead were simply incorporated into Vaiṣṇava and Islamic frameworks via the Buddhist Sahajiyās, although this would require more research to conclusively sort out. The scholar Masahiko Togawa has written a Japanese article on Bāul songs in the context of Buddhist Tantra (“Baul Songs in Bengal and Indian Tantric Buddhism”); this unfortunately could not be consulted for this article but may provide further clues.

97. Maheshananda et al. (eds.), *Śiva Saṃhitā*, 160–67.

law.”⁹⁸ In other words, even *śarīyat* has both a *bātin* and *jāber* meaning, the *jāber* meaning being exoteric Islamic law and the *bātin* meaning something quite different: *śoṣaṇ bān*, a practice very similar to – if not identical with – *vajrolī mudrā* as expressed in some Tantric texts like the *Śivasamhitā*. This is made clear in the following song by Gosāi Cād, translated by Salomon:

Gosai Cad composed this song.
Community, don't forget –
The Prophet won't like it
if you abandon the Shariat...
So maintain the Shariat
and stop the flow of semen.⁹⁹

Salomon further quotes two lines from songs by other Bāul poets that clearly imply Gosāi Cād's lyrics are not an isolated plea for seminal retention but rather a referent to Bāul sexual *sādbanā* more generally. These other sources include the poet Hatem's assertion that “The Prophet [Muhammad] did not accept the Law without the dress of a woman,”¹⁰⁰ and Duddu Shah's injunction to “become a woman in *sādbanā*,”¹⁰¹ both of which indicate when taken together that maintaining the *śarīyat* also implies its correlate: the Bāul Fakiri practice of “becoming a woman” during sexual intercourse.¹⁰² The above lyrics seem to recast in Islamic esoteric terms Śaiva teachings like those expressed in the fourth chapter of *Śivasamhitā*, verse 82, which advocates restraining the *bindu* (semen) by

98. See Salomon's description of the song “Pāre ke yābi nabir naukāte āy” (“Who wants to go to the other shore?”), published in Salomon, “On the Concept of Sharīat in Baul Songs,” 7, and in *City of Mirrors*, 378–81.

99. “Yadi hote cāo āl-momin āge niṣṭhā karo muhammader dīn” by Gosāi Cād, quoted in Salomon, “On the Concept of Sharīat in Baul Songs,” 10.

100. *śarā kabul ney nā rasul meyer lebāj bine*.

101. *sādbane hājō prakṛti cehē puruṣ svabbāb sār*.

102. For more on the sexual aspects of the Bāul Fakiri practice of “becoming a woman,” see the annotations to “Ājab raṇ phakiri sādā sohāginī sāi” (“It's a strange show – the fakir ways of the Sādā Sohāgī saints”) in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 86–90 as well as the much more detailed and expanded treatment of this practice in Lorea, “Pregnant Males, Barren Mothers, and Religious Transvestism.”

means of the *yonimudrā*, “seal of the vagina.”¹⁰³ This includes a technique for the (male) yogin to meditate on the perineum as a vagina, somewhat similar to the Bāul Fakiri concept of “becoming a woman.” In verse 97 of the same chapter the *yonimudrā* is even mentioned in connection with *sabajolāmudrā*, meaning that — like the Bāul songs above — such a visualization is sometimes to be applied during sexual intercourse.¹⁰⁴

Bāul Fakirs are also known to consume bodily fluids, not only *rajas* “menstrual blood” and semen (both male or female),¹⁰⁵ but also urine and feces — or ritual substitutes for these latter two — as part of a separate practice called the “four moons” (*cāri candra*).¹⁰⁶ Unlike *śoṣaṇ bān*, this practice is not explicitly mentioned in *Śivasambhitā* and may instead be related to similar practices found in Buddhist Tantric or Kaula literature, or among Nāth Yogīs.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of origin, however, the practice as it exists today is inextricable from the songs’ Islamic esoteric symbolism. According to Salomon’s interpretation of Lālan Fakir’s song “Karo re kabul piyālā śuddha imāne,”¹⁰⁸ these four moons are also attributed to four cups (*cār piyālā*), which “represent the four excretions of

103. See Maheshananda et al., *Śiva Sambhitā*, 161 and Mallinson, *The Shiva Sambhita*, 96 for published translations of this verse along with the original Sanskrit.

104. The term *sabajoli* even seems to refer etymologically to the Buddhist concept of *sabaja*, a salient concept in Bāul Fakiri songs, so it is possible that these sexual techniques do not relate to Śaiva teachings at all but rather to Buddhist and (subsequently) Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā techniques, which themselves may have been appropriated by the authors of texts like *Śivasambhitā* and *Haṭhpradīpikā*. In any event, more work is still necessary to examine the precise relationship of Bāul Fakirs to Sanskrit and other vernacular traditions of Haṭhayoga, especially *amarolīmudrā* and *sabajolīmudrā*, which seem just as (if not more) relevant to Bāul *sādhana* than *vajrolīmudrā*.

105. In contrast to the contemporary usage of the English word “semen” as limited to male ejaculate, the words *bij* and *bastu* can also both refer to female “semen.” Cf. Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 65n14 and Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 216–24.

106. See especially Jhā, “Cāri-Candra Bhed: Use of the Four Moons.” I am grateful to Jeanne Openshaw for sharing her translation with me.

107. Cf. Mallinson, “Yoga and Sex,” 198–99. For examples of contemporary scholarship on the Nāth(a) Yogīs, see James Mallinson, “The Nāth Saṃpradāya,” *Brill Encyclopedia of Hinduism* 3 (2011): 407–28; David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Gordan Djurdjevic, “Masters of Magical Powers: The Nāth Siddhas in the Light of Esoteric Notions” (PhD Diss., The University of British Columbia, 2005).

108. Tālib, *Lālan Śāb o Lālan Gītikā vol. 1*, 313.

the body on the microcosmic level and the four elements on the macrocosmic level,”¹⁰⁹ and are further attributed to four angels, three states of “dissolution” or “annihilation” plus a state of “subsistence in God” (Ar. *fanā’*, *fanā’ fī l-shaykh*, *fanā’ fī l-rasūl*, *fanā’ fī llāh*, and *baqā’ bi-llāh*), four Sufi orders, and four drinks (milk, honey, water, and light).¹¹⁰ It is therefore possible that at least two different sets of practices, the Haṭhayogic “suction arrow” and the Tantric rubric of the “four moons,” were merged by Lālan’s time into the broader framework of what Bāul Fakirs call “yogic practice” (*yog sādhanā*) and were encoded into “secret” (*gōpan*) Islamic esoteric terminology that is still current today among some Bāul Fakiri communities.

Some celibate Bāul artists today – often inspired by Islamic teachings against *kām* (< Skt. *kāma*), “lust” – believe however that Bāul *sādhanā* implies complete seminal retention or even celibacy and will actively attempt to dissuade interested parties from seeking out couples that do practice sexual rituals. As Salomon and others have noted, much of this hinges on fears that the spilling of semen leads to physical decay and death, an assertion that has yet to be scientifically proven.¹¹¹ Such an attitude is also expressed in some Tantric or Haṭhayogic texts like the *Śivasambhitā* (cf. chapter four, verse 88) as well as Buddhist Tantras like the *Kālacakratantra*.¹¹² Other Bāul Fakirs, however, advocate that ejaculation in intercourse ought to be neither restricted nor uncontrolled – the right balance is somewhere in between (i.e. controlled, *suṭal*).¹¹³ It remains unclear therefore whether *śarīyat* implies complete seminal retention or this “controlled” state; perhaps seminal retention is a prerequisite for the “control” of semen, just as in exoteric Bengali Sufism *śarīyat* is seen to be a prerequisite for *mārāḥat*.

109. Salomon, “Cosmogonic Riddles of Lālan Fakir,” 291.

110. Ibid.

111. Cf. Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, song no. 33. For a more nuanced treatment of these rites, see *City of Mirrors*, song no. 103.

112. See Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratantra*, 63.

113. I am grateful to Azim Sāi for this insight (personal conversation). This accords with Openshaw’s excellent treatment of the triad *tal*, *atal*, and *suṭal* in the context of sexual *sādhanā* in her *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 214–16.

Finally, Bāul Fakirs are often considered heterodox or even “outside” (*bāhire*) all forms of society since they do not limit their songs’ content to any single religion’s doctrines; many of them actively utilize Buddhist Sahajiyā,¹¹⁴ Hindu (Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā,¹¹⁵ and to a lesser extent Śaiva and/or Śākta), Sufi,¹¹⁶ and indigenous metaphors to construct a path of embodied self-realization.¹¹⁷ This innovation, along with the songs’ celebration of human divinity and sexuality as we have seen — possibly rooted in materialist (*bastubādī*) Carvaka or Lokāyata beliefs¹¹⁸ — has brought Bāul Fakirs condemnation from both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders alike. Bāul Fakirs have been framed as *apasampradāy* or “heterodox sects” by some Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava (*baiṣṇab*) authors who see their

114. For the construction of this category see Dasgupta’s dated but still useful overview in *Obscure Religious Cults*, 3–109. The main literary corpus of the Buddhist Sahajiyās is the Caryāpad, believed by some scholars to be composed in Old Bengali. Buddhist Sahajiyās appear to have gradually converted to Vaiṣṇavism or Sufism, and it does not appear that any communities persist in Bengal any longer; cf. the legend of 1,200 Buddhist *nerās* or “shaveling” ascetics being initiated into Vaiṣṇavism quoted in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 227.

115. For excellent analyses of this tradition with references to its link to Bāul Fakiri songs see Hayes, “*The Necklace of Immortality*” and Hayes, “*Eroticism and Cosmic Transformation as Yoga*.” For an overview of the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā textual corpus see Czyżykowski, “Selected Aspects of the Textual Studies on the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Tradition in Medieval Bengal.” The classic text on the subject remains Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon*. Dasgupta in *Obscure Religious Cults*, 113–87 also connects Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā doctrines to the doctrines of Bāuls, who are problematically romanticized in the style promoted by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

116. One of the earliest attempts to connect the Bāul Fakirs to Sufism, problematically described as “essentially a cult of love-mysticism,” is found in Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 171–73.

117. This path is inextricably related to memorizing Bāul Fakiri songs, which also serves to establish seniority — the more songs one has memorized, the more one is able to participate in musical debates related to a given song’s religious or poetic “direction” (*dik*), debates which take the form of “question” (*praśna*) and “answer” (*uttar*). Some songs contain more meaning since they were composed for more advanced practitioners (the analogy given to me by Azim Sāi was comparing the subjects one would learn at primary school to those at a university), and thus there is some consideration of quantity versus quality. The *bhāb* or “attitude” with which one expresses these songs is also important since subtle gestures and vocal tones reveal the amount of time that one has spent in the *sādhū-saigha* or “company of aspirants.” For more on the performative aspects of Bāul songs see Lorea, *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman* and Capwell, *The Music of the Bāuls of Bengal*.

118. See Carola Erika Lorea’s mention of these historical movements being important to Bengali scholars like Śakti Nāth Jhā in her article “‘Playing the Football of Love...’”: 420–21.

teachings as corrupt understandings of the sixteenth-century reformer Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s teachings.¹¹⁹ Likewise, as early as 1926 an Islamic ruling (Ar. *fatwā*) was issued against the Bāuls which singled out Lālan Fakir, today considered to be Bengal’s greatest folk poet and even a national hero of sorts among Bangladeshis, as “the number one foe, a spy for the Ārya Samāj,”¹²⁰ and called for the destruction of the Bāul tradition.¹²¹ Conditions have been improving for Bāul Fakirs in recent years, but many obstacles to their free expression nevertheless remain. Their practices still face persecution in many regional contexts, especially in some areas of rural Bangladesh where Bāul Fakirs are sometimes still considered to be a threat to reformist Islamic groups. In extreme cases Bāul Fakirs have been known to unite in protest against the coercion of these groups, and in so doing often obtain support from urban intellectuals, artists, and university students.¹²²

As is evident from the above overview, then, Bāul Fakirs remain very difficult to categorize using traditional scholarly methods, and several lenses are required to adequately describe their teachings and practices. I would argue that the lens of Islamic esotericism — as well as esotericism more generally — offers one of the most important modes of making sense of their multifaceted identities, since it is clear that attempting to literally interpret their lyrics would lead to a superficial conception at best. In other words, the framework of esotericism allows for an appraisal of the songs’ Islamic Sufi content without Islamizing the

119. For the construction of Vaiṣṇava “normativity” against Sahajiyā traditions that also inform Bāul Fakiri songs see Lorea, “Sectarian Scissions, Vaiṣṇava Deviancy, and Trajectories of Oral Literature” and Wong, “Against Vaiṣṇava Deviance.”

120. This allegation is especially ironic given that the main leader of the Ārya Samāj, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, held a hardline vision of Hinduism that is entirely incompatible with the attitude toward religion as expressed in Lālan Fakir’s songs. For more on Dayānanda Sarasvatī see his numerous biographies and Scott, *Spiritual Despots*.

121. Salomon, “The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lālan Fakir,” 268. See also Caudhuri, *Bāul Dhvaṃśa Phatojā o Anyānya* and Jhā, *Bāul Dhvaṃśa-Andolaner Itibytta*.

122. See for example the article “Bauls unite to protest assault” published in the Bangladeshi newspaper *Daily Star*, April 30, 2011, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-183804>. I had the opportunity to attend this protest in the company of Sādhu Humāyan Fakir.

tradition on literal grounds. On the other hand, defining Bāul Fakirs only in relation to their Vaiṣṇava- or Buddhism-inflected lyrics (i.e., with only a thin veneer of Sufism) fails to do justice to the rich intercontinental history of the songs’ Islamic themes.

“Fakir,” “Dervish,” and the Outer Limits of Bengali Sufism

Since it has now been established that Bāul Fakirs do not limit their ranks to members of any single religious tradition, it is now necessary to analyze the way in which Sufi Islamic content should be interpreted within this broader non-sectarian framework. A great starting point to examine this is Lālan’s own relationship to Sufi mysticism through his own title “fakir” (*phakir*, < Ar. and Pers. *faqīr*, lit. “poor”), although this can be problematic since some Hindu singers are also known to use this title. The origin of Sufi fakirs in Bengal has been the subject of a book-length study by David Cashin, who is especially attentive to the presence of fakirs in Sufi literature composed in Middle Bengali and their interactions with other prevailing religious groups on the scene in medieval Bengal.¹²³ As Carol Salomon initially pointed out, the title “fakir” among Bāul Fakirs appears to be inextricably entangled with the history of Vaiṣṇava “shaveling” (*nerā*) fakirs.¹²⁴ Given such entanglement and the impossibility of separating Islamic aspects of Bengali fakirs from non-Islamic ones, it seems more productive to here devote more attention to examining the title of Lālan’s guru, Dervish Sirāj Sāi.¹²⁵

Lālan always referred to Sirāj Sāi as a dervish (*darbeś*, < Pers. *darvīsh*) in his songs, but to my knowledge never used the title to describe himself. Lālan’s

123. Cf. Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*.

124. See an analysis of Salomon’s treatment of the “shavelings” in Cantú, “Theurgy and the Snake,” 23–28.

125. Sources do not agree on the precise identity or dates of Dervish Sirāj Sāi, and there are multiple claims to his *samādhi* or final resting place. In 2015 I visited one such shrine in Harishpur, near the *samādhi* of Pāñju Shah. While not conclusive, it seems likely that Dervish Sirāj Sāi and Pāñju Shah were from the same general milieu of mystic poets and thus more work should be done to compare the two. While no songs of Sirāj Sāi appear to survive, many of Lālan’s Islamic esoteric ideas seem to accord with those expressed in the literature of Pāñju Shah.

bhaṇitā or “signature line,” if it even gives a title instead of a diminutive or humorous adjective, only ever has “fakir” or the honorific “sāi” (< Skt. *svāmī*, “swami”) before or after his name (e.g., Lālan Fakir or Lālan Sāi). From this it can be assumed that the title “dervish” connoted a specific level of attainment that is separate from — but at the same time somewhat linked to — “fakir,” especially since Sirāj Sāi is Lālan’s guru after all. Among some Bāul Fakirs there is a quadripartite division of *Āul-Bāul-Darbes-Sāi*, each referring to a different yet



Figure 2. Azim Sāi and Ferdochi Fakirāni, two contemporary Bāul Fakirs, originally from Muslim families, who regularly perform the songs of Lālan Fakir and other Bāul poets. Photograph by the author, taken in Santiniketan in August 2018, with Ferdochi’s consent to publish.

intersecting type of Bāul Fakiri community. According to Carola Erika Lorea, these may be connected in some contexts to the four stages of progress current among some Bāul Fakirs (e.g. *sthūl-prabarta-sādhak-siddha*), although nowhere does such a link appear to be systematized.¹²⁶ On the other hand, in a personal interview with Ferdochi Fakirāni (August 2018) this quadripartite scheme was used not to indicate a progression but to distinguish Bāul practice as separate from the path of Fakirs and Dervishes, yet such a distinction may reflect the success of Vaiṣṇava orthodox attempts to distinguish these as four different *apasampradāys*, especially if such an attitude is held even by Bāul Fakirs within the tradition. Although resolving this question of titles is outside the scope of this paper, we can be fairly certain that the title Sāi appears in all contexts to connote a more advanced status than the rest. At the same time, I would argue that its use in apposition to *darbeś* (as in Dervish Sirāj Sāi) warrants independent examination of what it means to be a *darbeś* in Bengali contexts.

While the title dervish in Persian contexts can refer more generally to any Sufi aspirant, it appears to have a much more technical connotation in Bengali that assists in our analysis. The scholar Enamul Hak wrote that Bengali “dervish-hood” (i.e., attaining the title of *darbeś*, or the variant spelling *darbbeś*) indicated an especially advanced stage of Sufi practice that emphasized “the practical aspect of gnosis” and required “knowledge in nine subjects.”¹²⁷ These subjects are outlined in a poem titled *Darbeśī Mahal* “Dervish Palace” in the *Talināmā / Śabdāulāpīranāma* of Śekh Cād, a poet who lived in Comilla (in modern Bangladesh) during the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries CE and who composed numerous mystical (*maramjya*) works with Islamic content.¹²⁸ The nine subjects are as follows:

126. Carola Erika Lorea, personal correspondence with the author, May 18, 2018.

127. Hak, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*, 414.

128. For a recension of *Talināmā* see Śarīph, *Bāṅglār Sūphī Sāhitya*, 41–86.

- 1) the discernment of the dervishes (*darbbeś*),
- 2) the worship of Khodā (God),
- 3) the discourses on subtle bodies (*tan*),
- 4) the essence (*tattva*) of the self,
- 5) the essence of mental examination (*dilere dekbhan*),
- 6) the subject of the subtle nerves (*nādi*),
- 7) the location of semen (*bindu*),
- 8) familiarity with the six subtle centers (*ṣaṭcakra*),
- 9) that which is called “Brahmatattva.”¹²⁹

Given the technical meaning attached to such a title, it is highly probable that Dervish Sirāj Sāi would have been assumed to be generally competent in the above nine forms of knowledge, engaging extensively in this “practical aspect of gnosis” that included an eclectic blending of Sufism with Hindu and Buddhist Tantric forms of meditation and yoga. Shaman Hatley has written an excellent survey of how some actors on the other end of this blend were likely Nāth Yogīs, and that more broadly “Bengali Sufis transform the technologies of body-centered *sādhana* into means for *tanḥid*, the egoless absorption into pure awareness of the presence of God.”¹³⁰ While Hatley’s overall thesis is well-grounded in primary sources and provides the best means available to understanding this historical exchange, he also appears to support David Cashin’s problematic assertion that it is possible to neatly separate Islamic texts as being of either “Nāthist” or Vaiṣṇava provenance.¹³¹ Salomon, approaching this question from the perspective of her scholarship on Bāul Fakirs, strongly disagrees with such an exclusivist approach in her own review of Cashin’s book, noting especially that it “for the most part discounts exogenous Sufi influence.”¹³² I would further argue that it is precisely by analyzing Islamic esoteric themes in Bāul Fakiri

129. Hak, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*, 415. This is my own personal translation with assistance from Nandini Abedin at the University of Washington. Enamul Hak had provided the original Bengali for this list, but did not state the source from which it came.

130. Hatley, “Mapping the Esoteric Body,” 367.

131. David Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*, 40.

132. Carol Salomon, “Review of ‘The Ocean of Love,’” 555.

lyrics that evidence for “exogenous Sufi influence,” predating Lālan’s lifetime, emerges; see for example the integration of Maṅṣur Hallāj — a figure who has no Tantric equivalent — into the song “Āmi ki tāi jānile sādhan siddhi hay,” which also introduces the concept of a “murshid” or “guide” and the idea that the locus of truth is the self:

Song Four: “Āmi ki tāi jānile sādhan siddhi hay”¹³³

What am “I”¹³⁴ — if that is known
then my striving will be complete.
The meaning of the word “I” is profound.
In me there is no more “I.”¹³⁵

In the endless market¹³⁶ of the city
they shout “I,” “I!”
Not thinking about my own “I,”
I read scripture almost like a madman.

This Mansur Hallaj Fakir¹³⁷
had said, “I am the truth!”¹³⁸
This is approved as the Lord’s¹³⁹ law,
but can its meaning be found in the Sharī’a?

133. The author first received this song from Sādhu Humāyan Fakir. Published versions of this song include: Tālib, *Lālan Śab o Lālan Gitikā*, vol. 1, song no. 101; Dās and Mahāpātra, *Lālan-Gitikā*, song no. 255.

134. *ami*. I have translated this first-person pronoun literally so as to preserve the original sense of the song in Bengali.

135. According to Azim Sāi, this phrase (*āmāte ar āmi nāi*) refers to *phānā* (< Ar. *fanā*), “dissolution,” “annihilation.” See Song Two above.

136. *ananta bajāre*. Alt. trans. “in the eternal marketplace,” “many marketplaces.”

137. This is Maṅṣur Hallāj, who was executed in 922 CE. He is famous for proclaiming in Arabic *anā l-ḥaqq*, “I am the Truth” (Bengali: *āmi satya*). See Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, song 107 for another reference to Hallāj in the songs of Lālan Fakir. It is notable that Lālan here refers to Hallāj as a fellow “fakir.”

138. *āmi satya*.

139. “Lord” translates *sāi*, which here as elsewhere is ambiguous since it could refer to the Supreme or to Dervish Sirāj Sāi, Lālan’s guru.

“By my will, arise.” “By God’s will, arise.”¹⁴⁰

The Lord’s command

is that these two “I”-s be partners.¹⁴¹

Lālan says this riddle is revealed

at the teacher’s abode.¹⁴²

Importantly, these considerations are not limited to a single text, i.e. the *Darbesī Mahal*. The wider scope of this “dervish-hood” is reflected in a relatively large corpus of surviving Middle Bengali texts (including, among many others, such works as the *Nabi-Baṁṣā* of Saiyad Sultān,¹⁴³ the anonymous *Yoga Kalandar*

140. *kumbe ejni kumbejnillā*. This line is a transliteration of Arabic according to Azim Sāi and Ābu Tālib. I have therefore translated this line from the Arabic phrases *qum bi’idhni* and *qum bi’idhnillah*, which appear to make the most sense in this context, and for which “will” seems to be a best translation. While obscure, Tālib supplies a helpful footnote in *Lālan Śāh o Lālan Gītikā*, vol. 1, 338 (translation my own): “*kum be ejni* – Arise and live at my command (*bukum*); *kum be-ijnillah* – Arise and live at Allah’s command. Here the poet wants to say that there is no difference between my command and Allah’s command. This is because the devotee (*bhakta*), when he has destroyed his ‘I’-ness (*phāna*) in unity (Ar. *waḥdanīyāt*), that is, when he is able to be merged with Allah’s essence (*baqā*), then there is no more duality.” Tālib in his interpretation seems to read too much of an orthodox Sufi opinion into Lālan’s lyrics, however, especially since he was known for his attempt to Islamize Lālan’s biographical details and lyrics (cf. Salomon, *Cosmogonic Riddles*, 269). Furthermore, Salomon in *City of Mirrors* notes that Lālan “rejects *nirvana*, total absorption in God, since complete non-duality would mean that the adept could not experience the bliss of union” (170). She goes on to explain that instances like these where he seems to have espoused a non-dualistic position are therefore probably more reflective of a position akin to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *acintyabhedabhedā*, “unimaginable difference and non-difference.” Cf. Holdredge, *Bhakti and Embodiment*, 305–6 for a philosophical comparison of this position with Vedānta and Pātañjalayoga.

141. *hīlā*. According to Azim Sāi, the word is synonymous with *sahakāri*, a “companion” (the precise relationship is undefined, and could be guru/disciple, lovers, parent/child). However, *hīlā* could also point to a legal rule that allows a divorced woman to enter into an interim marriage, known as a *hīlā* marriage. In any event, it seems to be used as a metaphor to describe the way in which the “I” of the fakir is paired with the “I” of Allah, as in the previous line.

142. *murśīder thāy*. “Murshid” (lit. “guide”) in Bāul songs is used synonymously with “Guru” and can refer to either a human teacher or an inward spiritual guide.

143. A version of this text was published in the two volumes of Śarīph, *Saiyad Sultān viracita Nabībaṁṣā*. Ayesha Irani has recently analyzed this text for her dissertation and in several illuminating articles on its historical and cosmogonic features.

(attributed to Saiyad Martujā),¹⁴⁴ the *Jñāna Sāgar* of Āli Rajā / Kānu Fakir,¹⁴⁵ the *Nūrnāmā* of Mīr Muhammad Saphī,¹⁴⁶ the *Jñāna Pradīp*,¹⁴⁷ and the *Ādya Paricaj* of Sekh Jāhid¹⁴⁸) that all reflect the historical interaction of Islamic esoteric teachings with Hindu and Buddhist yogic traditions in South Asia in previous centuries.¹⁴⁹ Śarīph in particular seems to have captured this syncretic process in Bengal most succinctly, and argues that it directly contributed to the very creation of the Bāul tradition:

It was not possible for all the Sufi adepts that entered India to avoid being swayed by India's spiritual doctrines (*tattva*) and practices (*sādhana*). The locals also who were initiated by them were unable to leave their previous traditions of non-dualist thought and yogic precepts. It is believed that at that time the now-diminished Buddhist society's "yogic-*kāya-sādhana*" doctrines were still current among these people. As a result, Sufi Islam was able to strike a compromise with the path of yoga and other prevailing paths of spiritual *sādhana*. As harmony with Sufism increased, in the course of time the Sahajiyā and Bāul traditions were also created as a result.¹⁵⁰

As Hatley puts it, Bengali Sufism "adapted to itself the basic template of the yogic body as formulated by the Nātha cult and reconfigured it within the parameters of Indo-Islamic thought."¹⁵¹ This template is most concisely expressed

144. For the most comprehensive study of this text to date that includes a French translation see Bhattacharya, "Un Texte Du Bengale Médiéval." See also Mukharji, "The Flame and the Breeze," 234–64. For a published MA thesis that includes an English translation and a comparative survey of the text see Cantú, *Theurgy and the Snake*. Versions of this text were also published by Enamul Hak and Āhmad Śarīph.

145. See Śarīph, *Bānglār Sūphī Sabītya*, 404–530 for an edited version of this text.

146. Cf. Irani, "The Prophetic Principle of Light and Love," 422–23 for a brief analysis of this text.

147. Śarīph attributes this text to Saiyad Sultān, but Ayesha Irani has expressed skepticism as to whether this is the case. Cf. Irani, "The Prophetic Principle of Light and Love," 420n107. A published version of the text is found in Śarīph, *Saiyad Sultān viracita Nabibāṇṣā*, vol. 2, 571–660.

148. See Jāhid, *Ādya Paricaj*.

149. For the wider scope of this interaction outside of Bengal the reader is referred to the scholarship of Carl Ernst, especially "Situating Sufism and Yoga," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series 15, no. 1 (April 2005): 15–33.

150. Śarīph, *Bānglār Sūphī Sabītya*, ā [Bengali notation for page ii] (personal translation from Bengali).

151. Hatley, "Mapping the Esoteric Body," 353.

in the Bāul Fakir concept of *debatattva*, “doctrine of the body,” which is summarized by their teaching “whatever is in the universe is in the receptacle of the body” (*yā āche brahmāṇḍe tāi āche ei deha bhāṇḍe*).¹⁵² Just as in early modern Hindu yogic literature of a Tantric provenance the external universe is seen to be embodied in *cakras*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and subtle physiology,¹⁵³ so in Bengali Sufi literature one finds the terms *mokām* (< Ar. *maqām*) “station” and *mañjil* (< Ar. *manzil*) “abode” that mark “the progressive passage of the wayfarer along the Sufi path (*tariqāh*),” and that are also attributed “to four cosmological spheres (*‘ālam*).”¹⁵⁴ There are also hybrid Sufi texts that explicitly refer to bodily *cakras* in relation to astrological zodiac signs, such as the poem “Wheel of the Signs” (*Rāṣī Cakra*) in the text *Jñāna Pradīp* (“Lamp of Gnosis,” for references see above). Yet the Sufi contribution to the Bāul Fakiri concept of *debatattva* is perhaps most strongly reflected in ritual manuals like the *Yoga Kalandar*, in which these internal *mokāms* (*nāsut*, *malakūt*, *jabarūt*, and *lābūt*) are further correlated with archangels (respectively Azrael, Israfil, Michael, and Gabriel) that rule the four quarters and cardinal directions.¹⁵⁵ In Bāul songs a fifth *mokām*, the *lā mokām*, is sometimes added to these four, which is described in Islamic esoteric terms as the abode of a feminine principle of light, attributed to Fatima as the primal mother (*ādya mātā*) and the Śakti.¹⁵⁶ This is made clear in the song “Bal re sei maner mānuṣ konjanā,” which alludes to the cosmogonic *mokām* of nothingness (*lā*) as the abode of a feminine principle of light:

152. Cf. Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 61 and Salomon, “Baul Songs,” 193.

153. Flood, *The Tantric Body*, 157–62. This is also discernible in the literature of Śrī Sabhāpati Swāmī (b. 1840), who ascribes astrological phenomena such as planets and zodiac signs to various *cakras*.

154. Hatley, “Mapping the Esoteric Body,” 355.

155. See Cantú, *Theurgy and the Snake*, 38–45 and the annotations to “Jān gā nūrer khabar” (“Go and learn about the light”) in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 288–91.

156. For Fatima’s role in Bāul cosmogony as synonymous with the Śakti see Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, song nos. 7, 9, 61, 90, 114, and 116. Cf. especially Salomon, “Cosmogonic Riddles,” 286–87 and Salomon *City of Mirrors*, 208–12 for her role in the context of the *pak pañjātan*, or “five holy people,” who are the “preexistent forms of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husain,” homologized with the five classical elements that surround a star or peacock.

Song Five: “Bal re sei maner mānuṣ konjanā”¹⁵⁷

Say, who is this person of the heart?¹⁵⁸
Mother adores her husband,^{159 160}
and the Master¹⁶¹ says to her, “Mother.”

Who is primal,¹⁶²
who is worthy,
in whose love will one be bound?
Who sends forth the supreme principle¹⁶³
that does not abide in scriptures?¹⁶⁴

When the two become as one,
Fruit is formed without a flower.
Again uniting,¹⁶⁵
they create the person of the heart.¹⁶⁶

157. The author first received this song from Farida Yasmin Ratna in Shahbagh, 2011 C.E., and it has been cross-checked by Bidhān Śā and several others since. A published version of this song can be found in Phakir Ānoyār Hosen, *Lālan-Saṅgīt*, vol. 1, song no. 26.

158. “Heart” translates *man* (< Skt. *manas*), which also can refer to the mind as situated in the region of the heart. According to Azim Śāī, there are three parts that come together to form the *maner mānuṣ*, which are the same as the three letter “glyphs” (*haraph*) in Song Two and the three “qualities” or Sanskrit *gūnas* that comprise Prakṛti or “primordial materiality” in Saṃkhyan, Vedāntic, and some schools of Hindu tantric metaphysics.

159. “Husband” translates *pati* (< Skt, lit. “lord,” often an epithet for Hindu male deities). This song and several others by Lālan seamlessly blend Hindu and Islamic vocabulary.

160. Alt. trans. “The husband adores the Mother,” “Mother and her husband adore each other.” The syntax is (perhaps purposefully) ambiguous.

161. “Master” translates *Mawla* (*maōlā*, < Pers. *mawla*, lit. “lord,” “master,” “judge”), here an epithet for the Supreme.

162. *ādya*, also an epithet for the Śakti.

163. *param tattva* (< Skt. *paramatattva*).

164. “Scriptures” translates *bed* (< Skt. *veda*). In Bāul songs *bed* can refer to either Hindu or Muslim religious texts.

165. *milan*, a term that is used widely in many of Lālan Fakir’s songs.

166. *man-janā*. Alt. trans. “person of the heart.”

In a station that is not,¹⁶⁷
 there is the Lady of Light.¹⁶⁸
 The first mother, the form of Zohura.¹⁶⁹
 Lālan says I yield in surrender¹⁷⁰ —
 my fortune has not yet unraveled.

Despite clear evidence of Islamic esoteric symbolism as mediated through Bengali Sufism, it must equally be stressed that these “cults” or “traditions” should never be seen as mutually exclusive, especially since all evidence points to great fluidity between “Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā,” “Nāth,” and “Sufi” identities in Bengal during the pre-modern period.¹⁷¹ Indeed, by the nineteenth century this fluidity reached such a climax that Lālan Fakir could assert that Bāul Fakirs were independent of mainline Sufism and entirely outside of the four main *ṭarīqas* (Chishtiyya, Qādiriyya, Suhrawardiyya, and Naqshbandiyya) that each lead in the “wrong direction.”¹⁷² Later Bāul Fakirs continued to broaden the scope of the titles “fakir” and “dervish” beyond their conventional attachment to either Sufi *ṭarīqas* or branches of the Nāth *sampradāy*. One main point of departure from Sufism is the assertion that Allah and Muhammad are both considered to be avatars (*avatārs*),¹⁷³ and another is that Allah created with the assistance of a feminine principle, the Ahlādiniśakti, who is homologized with Rādhā as

167. *lā mokām* (< Ar. *la maqām*), which in Bāul songs is often equated with the *sahasrār cakera* (< Skt. *sahasrārācakera*) or “thousand-petaled lotus.” See Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, song no. 61 for the role of the *mokāms* in Lālan Fakir’s songs. Here *lā mokām* is appended to the usual quadripartite set that includes *nāsūt* (< Ar. *nāsūt*, “human nature”), *mālkuūt* (< Ar. *malakūt*, “the heavenly world”), *jabrut* (Ar. *jabarūt*, “spiritual power”), and *lābut* (< Ar. *lābūt*, “divine nature”), and which are associated with four stages, elements, and angels according to their role in the *Yoga Kalandar*. Cf. Keith Cantú, *Theurgy and the Snake*, 38–54.

168. “Lady of Light” translates *nūrī*, which is here equated to the Śakti.

169. *jaburi* (< Ar. *al-ḡabrāʾ*), an epithet of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima.

170. *bināj kari*. Alt. trans. “remain humble,” “passively await.”

171. Cf. Salomon, “Review of ‘The Ocean of Love,’” 555.

172. Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, song no. 18: “Come on! Let’s follow the Prophet’s faith” (“Āy go yāi nabir dīne”), 108–11.

173. See the song “Apārer kāṇḍār nabiji āmār” (“My Prophet is the pilot to the other shore”) in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 40–43.

the *hlādinī-śakti*, the bliss that is intrinsic to Kṛṣṇa’s essential nature (*svarūpa*) in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava cosmology.¹⁷⁴ Their most remarkable point of departure, however, seems to be their continued rejection of any sectarian religious identity based on birth-group (*jāt*); while some Bāul Fakirs recognize the religion of their parents as a kind of cultural ethnicity, they themselves most often state their identity as “human” (*mānuṣ*) and their supreme guru as the human being (*mānuṣ-guru*). This position also marks a point of departure from contemporary Nāth leaders, such as Adityanāth of the Gorakhpur monastery in Uttar Pradesh,¹⁷⁵ as well as from Vaiṣṇava leaders of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, who seem to promote an explicitly Hindu identity.

Conclusion

As should be evident, Islamic esoteric content in Bāul Fakiri songs can be directly traced to a Sufi “Derveshi” milieu that existed for centuries prior to the lifetime of Lālan Fakir in the nineteenth century CE. As a result, it would be a mistake to assume that the presence of Sufi symbolism in Lālan Fakir’s lyrics is simply a mere veneer for Buddhist or Hindu Tantric ideas. More work is necessary to establish the relationship in particular of Pāñju Śāh with Lālan Fakir, since, as noted earlier, Pāñju’s writings and songs on Sufi themes seems to have at least partially informed the latter’s lyrics.

It has not been possible in this article, however, to give a comprehensive historical treatment of the full range of esoteric symbolism in Bāul Fakiri songs, the analysis of which spans numerous religious and linguistic groups and often defies sectarian categorization. At the same time, I think that the presence of readily identifiable referents in Bengali Bāul songs, especially those attributed

174. Barbara Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment*, 35; cf. 72–73. For the Ahlādinīśakti in Lālan Fakir’s songs see “Āche āllā āle rasul kale” (“Allah is in the original place, Muhammad is in the machine”) in Salomon, *City of Mirrors*, 60–61.

175. For the historical incorporation of Islamic ideas within the Nāth *sampradāy*, see the research of Simon Digby in general and in particular Véronique Bouillier, “Nāth Yogī’s Encounters with Islam.”

to Lālan Fakir, does allow such symbolism to be historicized and integrated into a broader framework in order to be made mutually intelligible to scholars across a range of disciplines and fields. Esotericism provides one of the best available frameworks given its *a priori* recognition — in the word “esotericism” itself — that there are exoteric and esoteric modes of interpreting texts and, in this case, songs in oral and manuscript form.

In an Islamic context, at least, the fact that some Bāul Fakirs emically used Bengali derivatives of the Arabic terms *bātin* and *zāhir* should go a long way in combating pessimism as to the applicability of using “esoteric” and “exoteric” as a working model when analyzing Bāul Fakiri songs. This is especially the case since we know Lālan was aware of the tradition of *taphsīr* (Ar. *tafsīr*),¹⁷⁶ or commentaries on the Qur’ān, and appears to have extended such a system of hermeneutics to his own songs.¹⁷⁷ As we have seen, this esoteric symbolism extends to domains as diverse as Sufi recitation (*jbikar*, < Ar. *dhikr*) in Song One, the idea of “dissolution” or “annihilation” (*phānā*, < Ar. *fanā*) in Song Two, the “abbreviated letters” (Ar. *muqatta’āt*) of Song Three, deconstructing the pronoun “I” in Song Four, and cosmogonic speculation and the “Person of the Heart” in Song Five. The song lyrics also unabashedly blend this method of hermeneutics with referents to secret (*gupta*, *gopān*) Tantric and yogic sexual rites, as evident from Lālan’s aforementioned “espousal” of *śarīyat*, clearly proving that Islamic esoteric terminology could be and was utilized to conceal and interpret practices usually demarcated as Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, or even Tantric Buddhist.

In concluding this article, it is useful to further analyze the possibility of using esotericism as a discrete “-ism” that derives from the academic field of West-

176. In the song “Mursīder thāi ne nā re tār bhed bujhe” (“What message did the Prophet pass on to this world from one heart to another? Find out from a murshid”), Lālan mentions the mysterious *taphsīr boseni* (Tafsīr Hosnī), which Salomon (*City of Mirrors*, 470) speculates “may have been written in ‘code,’ that is, in a cryptic style termed *ishārāt* (pl. of *ishāra*, Bengali *isāra*) in order to veil the truth, which is too dangerous to express openly.”

177. See Feras Hamza, “Locating the ‘Esoteric’ in Islamic Studies,” for the importance of such a tradition to Islamic esotericism.

ern esotericism, which has its own historical roots and trajectories. There has been an ongoing discourse as to what constitutes this field ever since Antoine Faivre opened the floodgates with his landmark publication *Access to Western Esotericism*, itself a translation of two French volumes, the first of which appeared in 1986. Indeed the position, severe as it is, that there is no other form of esotericism apart from Western does appear to be historically viable if one squarely locates the origin of the academic field in Faivre's *l'ésoterisme occidentale*. At the same time, while recognizing this origin, I do not feel that future scholarship on esotericism need be unambiguously tethered to Western domains,¹⁷⁸ so long as reductive applications of the word “esotericism” are avoided and the rationale for such a use is justified. Indeed, the reader will already find an excellent analysis for Faivre's own allowance of Islamic esotericism in Liana Saif's aforementioned contribution to this volume, entitled “What is Islamic Esotericism?,” and her arguments for the creation of such a field need no repeating here.¹⁷⁹ In addition to Islamic esotericism, I see the conceptual framework of esotericism more broadly as a useful academic lens that could help to situate the doctrines of Bāul Fakirs in not just their Islamic but also their South Asia-specific contexts. Gordan Djurdjevic has already argued when considering other forms of South Asian traditions like the Nāth Yogīs and modern occultists that “esotericism and the occult should be treated as conceptual and regional rather than ontological and exclusively Western categories and that it consequently ... makes sense to operate with the concept of Indian esotericism.”¹⁸⁰ While my own methodology is primarily historical, I also think that this conceptual move makes sense as long as care is taken not to reduce the doctrines of Bāul Fakirs

178. This is a position argued by the recent piece by Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Editorial: Time to Drop the ‘Western.’”

179. The wider history of this discourse is outside the scope of this paper, and the reader is also referred to the published works of Wouter Hanegraaff, Henrik Bogdan, Marco Pasi, Olav Hammer, Gordan Djurdjevic, Egil Asprem, Manon Hedenborg-White, and Julian Strube for a taste of the varied conceptualizations at play.

180. Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*, 2.

to some kind of perennial esoteric “Tradition.”¹⁸¹ Keeping their cultural (anti-)specificity in mind, I am convinced that further analysis of Bāul Fakirs through the lenses of esotericism is productive for two overarching reasons.

The first reason is that the publication of an article like this is greatly assisted by the field’s commitment — if only partially realized — to producing non-essentializing, rigorous histories of “rejected” currents of knowledge,¹⁸² and I think that this commitment can be usefully extended beyond its explicitly Western focus. These rejected domains are often undermined in other mainstream disciplines, including Islamic Studies or South Asian Studies, yet are often deeply valued by adherents to these beliefs and practices. Until these more area- or religion-specific fields “catch up” to the importance of esotericism and the study of its rejected currents as a model, it can only increase the profile of Western Esotericism for it to adopt some of these movements as bedfellows, as awkward and sometimes historically convoluted as the fit may be.

The other, and perhaps more daring, reason that Bāul Fakirs could be profitably considered through the lenses of esotericism is that the universalizing tendencies of at least some modern occultists can potentially shed light on a similar tendency among Bāul Fakirs, especially Lālan Fakir. While acknowledging the brutal history of colonialism, its aftermath, and the Orientalizing — that is, “othering” in a Saidian sense — behavior of many Western actors, I would argue that Western identity can also be a two-edged sword that grooms its own dissidents. For example, the post-Saidian scholar Saree Makdisi portrays the anti-slavery Romantic poet William Blake (1757–1827) as one such dissident figure throughout his book.¹⁸³ I think this can be extended to other exceptional individuals, since acceptance of a Saidian kind of Orientalism — or indeed, of what Makdisi calls the Occidental Imperative that led

181. For the treatment of Traditionalism and its critique see Mark Sedgwick’s classic *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. Liana Saif in her contribution to this issue also deftly analyzes Traditionalism and its project as it pertains to twentieth-century authors on Sufism.

182. Cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

183. Makdisi, *Making England Western*.

to an orientalizing tendency — was not equally shared among all figures in the field of Western Esotericism. Indeed, the modern occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), himself a huge admirer of Blake, strongly critiqued the “Oriental” fascination of his day while at the same time incorporating Śaiva yoga, Sufism, Buddhism, Jewish and Christian Qabalah, and even Daoism into his all-encompassing curriculum of Thel-emic Magick.¹⁸⁴ The Bavarian occultist Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) also exhibited a similar tendency, even viewing Rosicrucian lore as a kind of “Yoga-Philosophy.”¹⁸⁵ While there is no evidence that the above occultists had any knowledge whatsoever of Lālan Fakir, there is still the glaring fact that such openness to eclectic categories of religious practice — what Faivre in his aforementioned work termed the “Praxis of the Concordance”¹⁸⁶ — is also typical of Bāul Fakirs, whose indigenous brand of anthropocentric universalism was made explicit in Lālan Fakir’s own songs but has yet to be as exhaustively studied as the former. As I have demonstrated above, Lālan, through the medium of written and oral song rather than published text, also incorporated religious symbols and practices from disparate traditions — not only Islamic Sufi but also Hindu Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Buddhist, Christian, and, as one Bengali scholar has even argued, Daoist¹⁸⁷ — into a dizzying web of interchangeable correspondences. The symbolism in these songs was intended to be applicable to all people (*sab loka*), with an allowance for different behaviors in different countries (*bhinna deśe bhinna bhābe*).¹⁸⁸ While it would be quite absurd to label Bāul Fakirs as “Eastern occultists,” I find it striking nevertheless that their overall approach does

184. For Crowley’s humorous swipe at Orientalism see his *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, 13. For a well-researched treatment of Crowley’s idiosyncratic views that defy categorization as either politically to the “left” or “right,” see Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*. For a collection of writings centered on his academic reception in the field of Western Esotericism, see Bogdan and Starr, *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*.

185. Hartmann, “The Principles of the Yoga-Philosophy,” 99–134.

186. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 14.

187. Bhaṭṭācārya, *Bāṅglār Bāul o Bāul Gān*, 523–28.

188. See Song Two above, as well as his classic “Sab loka kay lālan ki jāt saṁsāre” (“Everyone asks Lālan, ‘What in the world is your birth religion?’), published in almost every compilation of Lālan’s songs and widely performed.

approximate the cultural relativity espoused by many modern occultists as well as other adherents to new religious movements, whether explicitly or implicitly.

In any event, esotericism's sharp focus helps further ground such comparative analyses within the context of a received history of discrete religious practices without having to resort to problematic claims as to the existence of a perennial religion. For example, while keeping in mind obvious differences between occultists and Bāul Fakirs, who were operating worlds apart and in widely varying socio-economic classes, there is historical evidence of limited exchanges as early as 1929 via the journal *Kalpaka*.¹⁸⁹ Bāul Fakiri practices were also indirectly integrated into the discourse of modern occultism in 1973 with the publication of Kenneth Grant's (1924–2011) *Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God*, which cited both Manindra Mohan Bose's dated but groundbreaking analysis of the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyās,¹⁹⁰ as well as S. B. Dasgupta's classic *Obscure Religious Cults* in the context of Tantric sexual rites.¹⁹¹ While Grant's treatment does not appear to explicitly include any consideration of these rites' Islamic esoteric dimensions as articulated by Bāul Fakirs, it is notable that these two sources – both of Bengali provenance – have also been periodically consulted by academic scholars, including Salomon, who have subsequently recognized the inextricable interplay between Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā and Bengali Sufi movements with regard to sexual rites.¹⁹² The presence of such sources lurking in this type of occult literature underscores the important role that esotericism can play in helping scholars connect the historical dots between widely disparate traditions and their reception in literature across the world.¹⁹³

189. The journal *Kalpaka* (quoted in Bogdan, "Reception of Occultism in India," 184) described the "Vauls" or "aborigines of Bengal" as following the doctrine "do what thou wilt" as perceived to be the central teaching in both the Bhagavadgītā (Skt. *yathā icchasi tathā kuru*) and Crowley's writings.

190. Bose, *The Post-Caitanya Sabajiyā Cult of Bengal*.

191. Grant, *Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God*, 61 and 118. I am grateful to Zeke Swango for first bringing these references to my attention.

192. Both of these sources are found in the bibliography to Salomon, "Cosmogonic Riddles."

193. For example, see Hedenborg-White, "The Other Woman" for a thoughtful treatment on the impact of Tantric practices on gender in Grant's contemporary occultism. If her analysis is correct, however, it is notable that Grant did not perceive the fact that in a Bengali context

Finally, it was just prior to Grant’s publication that Bāul artists also entered the Western cultural orbit more broadly, even if most westerners in the 1960s did mistake them for Eastern hippies.¹⁹⁴ The exchange was circular; on the one hand, Pūrṇa Dās Bāul (b. 1933) was introduced by the band manager Albert Grossman (1926–1986) to Bob Dylan (b. 1941), Garth Hudson (b. 1937), and the Band at Bearsville in New York around 1967, and is reported to have considered Bob Dylan as “sort of a Bāul.”¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, the famous Beat poet Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) had met Pūrṇa Dās Bāul’s father while traveling in India in the early 1960s and was later even inspired to write a humorous poem entitled “After Lalon” that riffed on Lālan Fakir’s *bhāṇitā* or signature, replacing “Lālan says” for “Allen Ginsberg says.”¹⁹⁶ The extent to which these twentieth-century artists cared to recognize the Islamic esoteric dimensions of Bāul Fakiri songs is still an open question. Nevertheless, such exchanges more broadly illustrate these songs’ popular capacity to disrupt conventional definitions of Western and Eastern, including among their diverse audiences and supporters, who continue to be attracted to such openness.¹⁹⁷ Amid this cultural fluidity, the songs’ Islamic and other forms of esoteric content persist through time, simmering beneath their performative surface and lingering even when the music stops. Perhaps it is time to pay attention to the silence as well.

not only menstrual blood but also semen can be produced by biological females (see the above treatment on sexual fluids, especially note 105).

194. For mention of this see Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 3–4 and 86.

195. Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*, 86. For the details of this meeting see Macbeath, “Looking Up Dylan’s Sleeves.”

196. Ginsberg and Foley, “Same Multiple Identity: An Interview with Allen Ginsberg.” In a further example of circularity, Ginsberg was no stranger to at least some currents of modern occultism, either. Ginsberg appears to have attended a Gnostic Mass funeral organized for his friend and once roommate Harry Smith (1923–1991), a celebrated thelemite artist and collector of American folk music; see Wasserman, *In the Center of the Fire*, 20.

197. Consider Parvathy / Pārbaṭī Dās Bāul (b. 1976), a student of the late Sanātan Dās (a well-known Bāul from West Bengal, and a primary source for Carol Salomon), who holds international lectures and retreats in which participants around the world learn about Bāul Fakiri *sādhana*. Bāul Fakirs from Kushtia, Bangladesh also are given teaching roles in her retreats.

Acknowledgements

The initial fieldwork for this article was made possible by a Fulbright Student grant (English Teaching Assistantship) I received in 2010, enabling me to make first contact with Bāul Fakirs and artists in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India, initially for the purpose of learning the meaning behind their songs and how to perform them with musical instruments. I am grateful to the artist Zaid Islam for initially connecting me with Bidhān Śāh, a Bāul Fakiri artist, as well as to Jitu Jalil and Delu Bhai for their hospitality in Dhaka's Dhanmondi 27. I subsequently returned to Bangladesh and India for several more trips, including a month-long trip in 2012 with Zeke Swango, and both a six-month trip in 2013 and three-month trip in 2015 with my wife Madeline Cantú, who also has greatly assisted with the writing of this article in many ways, not least of which has been her love for Bāul Fakirs and Fakirānis. I returned to West Bengal in the summer of 2018 and interviewed Azim Fakir and Ferdochi Fakirāni, which clarified some perspectives in this article. I am especially grateful to Azim Śāi and Ferdochi Fakirāni for their assistance with the technical vocabulary of these songs as well as the broader theme of this paper. I express my gratitude to Saymon Zakaria, Assistant Director of Folklore at the Bangla Academy in Dhaka, who sent me published versions and references for Songs One, Two, and Three, and to Carola Erika Lorea for her interstitial suggestions that improved some of the translations. I am also very grateful to Carola for looking over an early draft of this article and offering numerous helpful suggestions and comments in its margins, to Liana Saif for sharing her groundbreaking ideas on Islamic esotericism and for her and Mark Sedgwick's useful edits, questions, and suggestions, and to Richard Salomon, Jeanne Openshaw, Juan Campo, Barbara Holdrege, and David Gordon White for supporting my academic work on Bāul Fakirs and related topics in countless ways. Finally, I express my thanks to Dwight Reynolds who cross-checked Arabic transliterations of key terms for *City of Mirrors*, some of which were used in this article.

Original Bengali Recensions

Song One:¹⁹⁸

পড় মুখে¹⁹⁹ সদাই²⁰⁰ লা ইল লা হা ইল লা লা²⁰¹
আইন বেজিলেন²⁰² রাসুল উল্লা²⁰³ ।।

লা ইল লা হা²⁰⁴ নফি সে হয়
ইল লা লা হু²⁰⁵ দিন²⁰⁶ দয়াময়
নফি এসবদ²⁰⁷ যাহারে²⁰⁸ কয়
সে²⁰⁹ তো এবাদত উল্লা²¹⁰ ।।²¹¹

নামের সহিত রূপ

ধিয়ানে²¹² রাখিলে²¹³ জপ

198. Witnesses: SHF: Oral version received from Sādhu Humāyan Fakir; LGS: Āhamad, *Lalan Gīti Samagra*, song no. 584; JHA: Jhā, *Lalan Sāi-er Gān*.

199. পড় মুখে] SHF; মুখে পড় রে LGS, JHA.

200. সদাই] SHF; সদা LGS; সদায় JHA.

201. লা ইল লা হা ইল লা লা] SHF; লাইলাহা ইল্লাল্লা LGS, JHA.

202. বেজিলেন] SHF; ভেজিলেন LGS, JHA.

203. রাসুল উল্লা] SHF, JHA; রাসুলুল্লা LGS.

204. লা ইল লা হা] SHF; লাইলাহা LGS; লা ইলাহা JHA.

205. ইল লা লা হু] SHF; ইল্লাল্লা সেই LGS; ইল্লাল্লাহু সে JHA.

206. দিন] SHF; দীন LGS, JHA.

207. এসবদ] SHF; এজবাত LGS; এসবাত JHA.

208. যাহারে] LGS; জাহারে SHF; এহারে JHA.

209. সে] SHF, JHA; সেই LGS.

210. এবাদত উল্লা] SHF, LGS; এবাদত-উল্লা JHA.

211. This antarā is the third antarā in LGS and the second in JHA. I have translated according to the order in SHF.

212. ধিয়ানে] LGS; দিয়া নিয়ে SHF; absent JHA.

213. রাখিলে] SHF; রাখিয়ে LGS; absent JHA.

বে-নিশানায়²¹⁴ যদি ডাক
চেনবি²¹⁵ কি রূপ কে²¹⁶ তোর²¹⁷ আল্লা ।।

লা-শরিক²¹⁸ জানিয়া তাকে²¹⁹
পড় কালাম²²⁰ দেলে মুখে²²¹
মুক্তি পাবি থাকবি²²² সুখে²²³
দেখবি রে²²⁴ নূর তাজেল্লা²²⁵ ।।

বলেছেন²²⁶ সাঁই আল্লা নূরি²²⁷
এই ঝিকর²²⁸ দরজা ভারি
সিরাজ সাঁই কয় এই²²⁹ ফুকারি
শুন²³⁰ রে লালন বেল ইল্লা²³¹ ।।

214. বে-নিশানায়] LGS; বে নিশানায় JHA; বেনি সানাই SHF.

215. চেনবি] SHF; চিনবি LGS, JHA.

216. কে] SHF, LGS; সে JHA.

217. তোর] SHF; absent LGS, JHA.

218. লা-শরিক] LGS, JHA; লা সরিক SHF.

219. তাকে] LGS; থাকি SHF.

220. কালাম] SHF, LGS; এ নাম JHA.

221. মুখে] LGS, JHA; মুখি SHF.

222. পাবি থাকবি] SHF, LGS; পাবে থাকবে JHA.

223. সুখে] LGS, JHA; সুখি SHF.

224. দেখবি রে] SHF, LGS; দেখতে পাবে JHA.

225. নূর তাজেল্লা] SHF, LGS; নূর-তাজেল্লা JHA.

226. বলেছেন] SHF; বলেছে LGS.

227. নূরি] SHF; নূরী LGS. Whole line absent JHA.

228. ঝিকর] SHF; জেকেরের LGS, JHA.

229. কয় এই] SHF;তাই কয় LGS, JHA.

230. শুন] SHF; শোন LGS, JHA.

231. বেল ইল্লা] SHF; বে-লিল্লা LGS; বেলেল্লা JHA.

Song Two:²³²

আপনার আপনি ফানা হলে
তারে ²³³ জানা যাবে
কোন নামে ডাকিলে তারে
হৃদাকাশে উদয় হবে ।।

আরাবি ²³⁴ ভাষায় বলে আল্লা
পারশিতে হয় খোদাতালা ²³⁵
গড বলেছে ²³⁶ যিশুর ²³⁷ চেলা
ভিন্ন দেশে ভিন্ন ²³⁸ ভাবে ।।

আল্লা হরি ভজন পূজন
এই ²³⁹ সকল মানুষের সৃজন
অনামক অচেনাই ²⁴⁰ কখন ²⁴¹
বাগেন্দ্রিয় না সম্ভবে ।।²⁴²

মনের ভাব প্রকাশিতে

232. Witnesses: BS: Oral version received from Bidhān Śā and cross-checked with fakirs. LGS: Āhamad, *Lālan giti samagra*, song no. 282.

233. তারে] BS; সে ভেদ LGS.

234. আরাবি] BS; আরবী LGS.

235. পারশিতে হয় খোদাতালা] BS; ফারসীতে কয় খোদাতালা LGS.

236. বলেছে] BS; বলিছে LGS.

237. যিশুর] BS; যীশুর LGS.

238. ভিন্ন] BS; ভিন LGS.

239. এই] BS; এ LGS.

240. অচেনাই] BS; অচিনায় LGS.

241. কখন] BS; বচন LGS.

242. LGS This *antarā* is switched with the third.

ভাষার উদয় ত্রিজগতে ²⁴³
মন আদিত্তে ²⁴⁴ অধর ²⁴⁵ চিনতে
ভাষা বাক্য নাহি পাবে ।।

আপনাতে আপনি ফানা
হইলে হবে তারে ²⁴⁶ জানা
সিরাজ সাঁই কয় লালন কানা
স্বরূপ রূপে ²⁴⁷ দেখ সংক্ষেপে ²⁴⁸ ।।

Song Three:²⁴⁹

আলেফ ²⁵⁰ লাম মিম ²⁵¹ আহাদ নূরী
আছে ²⁵² তিন হরফের মর্ম ভারী ।।

আলেফে ²⁵³ হয় আল্লা-হাদি ²⁵⁴
মীমেতে ²⁵⁵ নূর মোহাম্মদি ²⁵⁶

243. ত্রিজগতে] BS; এই জগতে LGS.

244. মন আদিত্তে] BS; মনাতীত LGS.

245. অধর] BS; অধরে LGS.

246. হইলে হবে তারে] BS; হলে তারে যাবে LGS.

247. রূপে] BS; রূপ LGS.

248. সংক্ষেপে] BS; সংসারে LGS.

249. *Witnesses*: SHF: Oral version received from Sādhu Humāyan Fakir; LSOLG: Tālib, *Lalan Śāh o Lalan Gitikā*, vol. 2, song no. 2; AS: Oral version preferred by Azim Sāi.

250. আলেফ] আছে আলিফ LSOLG.

251. লাম মিম] LSOLG, AS; হে দাল SHF.

252. আছে] SHF; absent LSOLG.

253. আলেফে] SHF; আলিফে LSOLG.

254. আল্লা-হাদি] SHF; আল্লা হাদী LSOLG.

255. মীমেতে] SHF; মিমে LSOLG.

256. মোহাম্মদি] SHF; মুহাম্মদী LSOLG.

লামের মানে কেউ করেনা ²⁵⁷

নূজা বুঝি হলো ²⁵⁸ চুরি ।।

নব্বই হাজার কল্‌মা ²⁵⁹ জারি ²⁶⁰

নবীর উপর ²⁶¹ করলেন বারি ²⁶²

তিরিশ ²⁶³ হাজার শরিয়ত ²⁶⁴ জারি ²⁶⁵

ষাট হাজার ভেদ বুঝতে ²⁶⁶ নারী ²⁶⁷ ।।

সিরাজ সাঁই বলে রে লালন

আগে নূজা ²⁶⁸ করো ²⁶⁹ নিরূপণ

নূজা নিরিখ না হলে ঠিক ²⁷⁰

থাকবে না আর কাট কাচারি ²⁷¹ ।।

257. করেনা] SHF; করলে না LSOLG.

258. হলো] SHF; হল LSOLG.

259. কল্‌মা] LSOLG, AS; কালাম SHF.

260. জারি] SHF; জারী LSOLG.

261. উপর] SHF; সংগে LSOLG.

262. বারি] SHF; বারী LSOLG.

263. তিরিশ] LSOLG; ত্রিশ SHF.

264. শরিয়ত] SHF; শরীয়ত SHF.

265. জারি] SHF; জারী LSOLG.

266. বুঝতে] SHF; বুঝাইতে LSOLG.

267. নারী] SHF; নারি LSOLG.

268. আগে নূজা] AS; নূজার আগে SHF, LSOLG.

269. করো] SHF; কর LSOLG.

270. না হলে ঠিক] AS; ঠিক হবে যখন LSOLG; সঠিক যখন SHF.

271. আর কাট কাচারি] SHF; তো কোট-কাছারী LSOLG.

Song Four:²⁷²

আমি কি তাই জানিলে²⁷³ সাধন সিদ্ধি হয়
আমি কথার²⁷⁴ অর্থ ভারি
আমাতে আর²⁷⁵ আমি নাই²⁷⁶ ।।

অনন্ত শহর বাজারে²⁷⁷
আমি আমি শব্দ করে
আমার আমি চিন্তা নারে²⁷⁸
বেদ পড়ি পাগলের প্রায়²⁷⁹ ।।

[যখন না²⁸⁰ ছিল স্বর্গ মর্ত্য²⁸¹
তখন কেবল আমি সত্য
পরেতে হইল²⁸² বর্ত
আমি হইতে তুমি কায়]²⁸³

মনছুর হাল্লাজ ফকির²⁸⁴ সে তো

272. Witnesses: SHF: Oral version received from Sādhu Humāyan Fakir; LSOLG: Tālib, *Lālan Śāb o Lālan Gitikā*, vol. 1, song no. 101; LG: Dāś and Mahāpātra, *Lālan-Gitikā*, song no. 255.

273. জানিলে] SHF; জানলে LG, LSOLG.

274. কথার] SHF; শব্দের LG, LSOLG.

275. আমাতে আর] SHF; আমি সে তো LG, LSOLG.

276. নাই] SHF; নয় LG, LSOLG.

277. শহর বাজারে] SHF, LG; শহর-বাজারে LSOLG.

278. আমি চিন্তা নারে] SHF; খবর নাই আমারে LG; কি তাই চিনলে পরে LSOLG.

279. বেদ পড়ি পাগলের প্রায়] SHF, LG; অচেনারে চেনা যায় LSOLG.

280. যখন না] LG; নাহি LSOLG.

281. স্বর্গ মর্ত্য] LG; স্বর্গ-র্তম LSOLG.

282. হইল] LG; হইলে LSOLG.

283. This *antarā* is omitted in SHF and was not translated for this article.

284. ফকির] SHF, LG; ফকীর LSOLG.

বলেছিল²⁸⁵ আমি সত্য
সই পেলো²⁸⁶ সাঁইর²⁸⁷ আইন মত
শরায় কি তার মর্ম পায় ।।

কুম বেইজনি কুম বেয়েজনিগ্লা²⁸⁸
সাঁইর হুকুম দুই আমি হীলা²⁸⁹
লালন বলে এ ভেদ খোলা
আছে রে মুর্শিদে²⁹⁰র ঠায় ।।

Song Five:²⁹¹

বল রে²⁹² সেই মনের মানুষ কোনজনা
মা করে পতি ভজনা
মাওলা²⁹³ তারে বলে মা ।।

কেবা আগ্য কেবা সাধ্য
কার প্রেমেতে হয়ে বাধ্য
কে পাঠাল²⁹⁴ পরম তত্ত্ব
বেদে নাই যার ঠিকানা ।।

285. বলেছিল] SHF, LG; জেনেছিল LSOLG.

286. সই পেলো] SHF; সেই প'লো LG; সেই পেল LSOLG.

287. সাঁইর] SHF, LSOLG; সাঁইয়ের LG.

288. কুম বেইজনি কুম বেয়েজনিগ্লা] SHF, LG; কুম বে-ইজনী, কুম বে-ইজনিগ্লা LSOLG.

289. হীলা] SHF, LG; হেগ্লা LSOLG.

290. মুর্শিদে²⁹⁰র] SHF; মুরশিদ LG, LSOLG.

291. Witnesses: FYR: Oral version received from Farida Yasmin Ratna and crosschecked with Bidhān Śā; LS: Hosen, *Lālan-Saṅgī*, vol. 1, song no. 26.

292. বল রে] FYR; বলরে LS.

293. মাওলা] FYR; মওলা LS.

294. পাঠাল] FYR; জানালো LS.

একেতে দুই হল যখন
ফুল ছাড়া হয় ফলের গঠন
আবার তারে করে মিলন
সৃষ্টি করলেন মনজনা²⁹⁵ ।।

লা মোকামে²⁹⁶ সেই যে নূরী
আগ্ন্য মাতা²⁹⁷ রূপ জহরী
লালন বলে বিনয় করি
আমার ভাগ্যে ঘটল না ।।

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295. মনজনা] FYR; মন্জনা LS.

296. লা মোকামে] FYR; লা-মোকামে LS.

297. আগ্ন্য মাতা] FYR; আগ্ন্যমাতা LS.

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“I am Sorry, Mr. White Man, These are Secrets that You are Not Permitted to Learn”: The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and Problem Book

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Abstract

This article examines the Supreme Wisdom Lessons, a neglected but foundational text in American Muslim histories. The Supreme Wisdom Lessons appear in Nation of Islam tradition as a series of question-and-answer examinations between Nation founder Fard Muhammad and his student, Elijah Muhammad. The Lessons were used as a process of initiation for new members, who committed excerpts to memory before receiving more of the text, eventually memorizing the entire document. As Nation tradition developed across the later twentieth century, the Lessons remained salient for diverse ends, including the “orthodox” reforms of Elijah’s son Warith Deen Mohammed, who relied on his personal mastery of the Lessons as authorization to lead the Nation away from his father’s teachings; Louis Farrakhan’s Nation revival, which broke from Warith Deen Mohammed and sought to preserve the Nation as conceived under Elijah’s forty years of leadership; and the Five Percenter community, whose members did not self-identity as Muslims but nonetheless maintained compelling investments in the Lessons for their own tradition.

The discussion that follows gives attention to the Lessons and a significant supplementary text, the Problem Book, within their context of 1930s U.S. esoteric movements, thinkers, and themes, demonstrating that these materials warrant more careful consideration not only within Islamic studies at large but also the study of Western esotericism.

When the RZA asks, “Can the Devil fool a Muslim nowadays?” in the Wu Tang Clan’s “A Better Tomorrow,” and “Who made the Holy Bible or Qur’an, how long ago?” in his solo work “The Birth,”¹ most listeners are probably unaware that his lyrical questions were drawn directly from a foundational text of American Islam, the Nation of Islam’s Supreme Wisdom Lessons. The former

1. The Wu Tang Clan, “A Better Tomorrow,” RZA, “The Birth.”

appears in the section designated “English Lesson C-1” as “Can the Devil fool a Muslim?” with the answer, “Not nowadays,” while the latter appears in the “Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2.”² Despite the Lessons’ significance for the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters, not to mention their citational salience in the American Islamic tradition of hip hop, the Lessons have received limited attention in academic literature.

The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and a companion text, often referred to as the Problem Book, operated as an extraordinarily important source for the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad’s leadership and remained salient as his son W.D. Muhammad (later Warith Deen Mohammed) later redirected the Nation towards greater conformity with a broader “Muslim world.” W.D. Muhammad did not simply announce in 1975 that the Lessons were no longer authoritative, but instead carefully located his reform project within the Lessons, claiming an esoteric mastery over the text—as an intuitively gifted imam, special son of the master teacher, and a prophetically foretold reformer—that supported his “Sunni turn.” The Lessons also underwent prolific citation in what has been termed “golden age” hip hop, which was profoundly informed by the Nation of Islam and Five Percenter traditions.³

While academic and popular conversations surrounding the Nation of Islam have often framed the community as a “political” rather than “religious” movement, an activist platform of “Black nationalism” disguised by a veneer of religion,⁴ early media representations dismissed the Nation with another troubled binary: the Nation was not a Muslim movement or even properly “religious,” but rather a “voodoo cult.”⁵ In 1932, when the movement faced charges of human sacrifice after a ritualized murder was linked to members of the commu-

2. The Supreme Wisdom Lessons are widely accessible via numerous online and print versions, not to mention the FBI files on figures such as Elijah Muhammad and Master Fard Muhammad, aka W.D. Fard. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

3. Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*.

4. Curtis, *Black Muslim*, 6–14.

5. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

nity, newspapers and law enforcement gave focused attention to the “voodoo cult’s” alleged textual sources. Detroit police claimed to have obtained an “official” community text, *The Bible of Islamism*, during a raid of Nation founder Master Fard Muhammad’s residence, and quoted page 354 as declaring, “God is liar. Ignore Him and do away with those who advocate His cause.” The excerpt was said to have been one of Fard’s favorite and most frequently recited passages. Unfortunately for researchers of the early Nation, including the FBI and the Nation itself, we have no access to this *Bible of Islamism* or evidence beyond police claims in *The Detroit Free Press* that it ever existed.⁶

Examining this alleged passage as possibly a legitimate citation, Patrick D. Bowen suggests that the words have a “Crowley ring” and speculates that Fard could have encountered Aleister Crowley’s publications and followers.⁷ However, scholars attempting an intellectual genealogy for the Nation of Islam do not have the “smoking gun” evidence that would confidently put specific esotericist sources in the hands of Fard or Elijah Muhammad. Their collaborative text of initiation, popularly known as *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons* or 120, nonetheless evinces a thriving marketplace of esotericist and occult thinkers that informed the movement’s early context. *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons* speak to this world, often drawing on intellectual trends, familiar themes, and imagery accessible within a context such as 1930s Detroit. While the significance of esotericist currents such as New Thought, Freemasonry, and the popular magic revival for Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple of America has been thoroughly documented,⁸ and this treatment has extended to a lesser degree to the Nation of Islam, the Nation’s key texts could still benefit from a closer reading with concern for themes of Western esotericism: the appearance of God not as a transcendent spirit incarnated into a body but rather as a self-perfected human

6. As Patrick D. Bowen notes, no Nation member has claimed to see it (*A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 2:251).

7. Ibid.

8. Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 238–50.

master (in this case, Master Fard Muhammad); a broader interest in self-deification and the limitless potential of the mind; the promise of uncovering secrets that had been concealed and suppressed by ruling elites and organized religion; privileged access to the hidden truths of scripture; and an archive of “rejected knowledge” intersecting with content such as Freemasonry,⁹ magic, the magnetic power of thought, racial mythologies, extraterrestrial civilizations, and notions of a mystical “East” as home to advanced metaphysical understanding. Master Fard Muhammad remains underexamined both in terms of American esotericism and American Islam. The discussion that follows examines the Lessons as a Muslim text that developed in conversation with American esotericist traditions, reflecting the complex milieu of 1930s Detroit as one in which transnational Muslim and esotericist networks intersected and overlapped.

The Lessons and Problem Book

The Lessons make for a relatively short text, consisting of brief statements and question-and-answer exchanges. The text is organized into five sections: the “Student Enrollment,” “English Lesson C-1,” two “Lost Found Muslim Lessons,” and “Actual Facts.” Each section’s statements or question-answer articles (popularly termed “degrees”) are numbered, totaling 120 items, for which reason the Five Percenters typically refer to the Lessons as “the 120.”

The Lessons are presented as Fard Muhammad’s examination of his student, Elijah Muhammad; while some sections are older than others, copies of Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2 date the exam as February 20, 1934. Beynon had accessed the Lessons (as *Secret Ritual of the Nation of Islam*) during his study of the movement, providing limited citations and emphasizing the text’s oral transmission.¹⁰ Beynon’s brief discussion of *Secret Ritual* does not mention the Student

9. For “rejected knowledge” as a marker of esotericist discourse, as well as more on the challenge of defining “esotericism,” see Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 13–14.

10. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

Enrollment or English Lesson C1; nor does the FBI present these texts as parts of the “original” Lessons. The FBI obtained the Lessons during its search of Elijah Muhammad’s home on September 20, 1942, when he was arrested on charges of draft evasion, and reproduced them in their entirety in an internal 2/21/57 memo that offered a fifty-page report concerning the “Muslim Cult of Islam.”¹¹ The report distinguishes the 1942 seized documents from the Student Enrollment and English Lesson C1, which it obtained during its 1957 surveillance.¹²

With slight differences in wording and punctuation, the FBI’s 1942 copy matches Beynon’s quotations, as well as the excerpts cited in *Detroit Free Press* articles from 1932, which establish the Lessons’ existence in some form prior to Fard’s disappearance.¹³ A possible departure between Beynon’s 1938 citations and the 1942 version appears in the eleventh item of Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2, which Beynon quotes without the statement, “No relief came to us until the son of man came to our aid, by the name of our Prophet, W.D. Fard.” Whether the difference is attributable to an abbreviation on Beynon’s part or elaboration from Elijah Muhammad is unclear. While I have heard urban legends suggesting that earlier, “non-Elijah” editions of the Lessons remain extant today, the text of the Lessons reaches us exclusively through Elijah’s mediation.

Based on information gathered in January–February 1957, the 2/21/57 FBI memo explains that the Lessons operated as a process of initiation for new Nation members. After attending meetings, writing the required letter to request the replacement of his/her slave name with X, and receiving notice that the letter had been accepted, a convert was assigned the Student Enrollment with instructions “to learn and memorize the questions and answers as he would be called upon to recite them.”¹⁴ The Student Enrollment consists of ten short questions and answers, including major doctrinal points—the first

11. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 2:252–53.

14. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

two questions ask, “Who is the original man?” and “Who is the colored man?,” establishing the Black Man as “God of the universe and father of civilization” and the Colored (white) Man as “Yacobs grafted devil, skunk of the Planet Earth”—as well as statistics concerning racial demographic and geographic data (“How much of the useful land is used by the original man?”). The short text concludes with questions regarding the “birth records” of the Nation of Islam and other nations: the Nation of Islam has “no birth record,” while Buddhism is 35,000 years old and Christianity is a mere 551 years old.¹⁵

The FBI report, drawing from a specific informant’s account, explains that after memorizing the Student Enrollment, the convert successfully recited the questions and answers and thereby became recognized as a full member of the Nation.¹⁶ The Student Enrollment was “the only printed material this individual was required to learn prior to becoming a member.”¹⁷ After successful mastery and recitation of the Student Enrollment, new members were “advanced to another class,” which required memorization of English Lesson C1.¹⁸

English Lesson C1, consisting of 36 numbered points, reads as a short monologue by Master Fard that an interlocutor (presumably Elijah) interrupts with questions for Fard to answer. Fard announces, “I came to North America by myself” and that his “uncle” had been brought here by “the Trader” 379 years ago. Fard explains, “My uncle can not talk his own language” and “does not know that he is my uncle.” His uncle likes the devil because “the devil gives him nothing,” “put fear in him when he was a little boy,” and “taught him to eat the wrong food,” which “makes him other than his ownself.” Fard’s interlocutor asks, “What is his ownself?” to which Fard answers, “His ownself is a Righteous Moslem.” The text goes on to explain that in North America, there are three million “Moslem Sons” and more than seventeen million “Original Moslems,” though

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

some of the Original Moslems—having been made “blind, deaf and dumb” by the devil—do not know that they are Moslems. Fard narrates that the devil fooled them 379 years ago when the Trader lured them away from their own country with promises of gold. The conclusion of the text depicts the predicament of a stranded, involuntary diaspora and the salvific promise of Master Fard’s arrival:

29. Then did they receive gold?
30. No, the Trader disappeared and there was no one that could speak their language.
31. Then what happened?
32. Well, they wanted to go to their own country, but they could not swim 9,000 miles.
33. Why didn’t their own people come and get them?
34. Because their own people did not know they were here.
35. When did their own people find out they were here?
36. Approximately sixty years ago.¹⁹

Speaking in the 1930s, the text’s reference to “approximately sixty years ago” would suggest that Fard’s birth (in Mecca in 1877, according to the Nation) was a strategic response by transcendent powers—unnamed in the Lessons, but later articulated as a council of scientists by Elijah Muhammad—to the plight of Black people in the Americas.

After memorization and recitation of English Lesson C1, the initiate moved on to the two Lost Found Muslim Lessons. The first lesson consists of fourteen questions and answers, ten of which focus on the devil and offer snapshots of the Nation’s demonology. The devil is settled on the “worst part” of the earth, rather than the “best part” (Arabia), because the original man, as “God and owner of the earth,” knows “every square inch” and kept the best part for himself; the original people expelled Yacob (Yakub) and “his made devil” from the “root of civilization” (Mecca) into the “cave of West Asia” (Europe); later, “half-original” prophet

19. Ibid.

Mossa (Moses) came to teach and civilize the devil; and roughly 750 years ago, original people took Jerusalem back from the devil because Jesus, “one of our righteous brothers,” was buried there. The devil uses the name of Jesus to “shield his dirty religion;” Jesus’s true message was not Christianity, but “Freedom, Justice and Equality.” Mohammed murders the devil because the devil “will not keep and obey the rules of Islam.” Every Moslem who brings four devils at one time will be rewarded with a lapel pin and “free transportation to the Holy City Mecca to see brother Mohammed.” Despite the requirement to murder the devil, the text also allows the devil to “clean himself up” by studying for thirty-five to fifty years “trying to learn and do like the original man;” after this process, the devil can call himself a “Moslem Son” and do trading among the original people.²⁰

Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2 consists of forty questions and answers; roughly speaking, the first half of the section gives focused attention to the nature and true identity of God, while the second half provides more detail regarding the devil’s origin and the end of the devil’s rule. Five Percenters have often termed this section the “Meat” of the Lessons, due to its overall length and detail concerning important concepts such as the character of Yacob and his eugenics project, the nature of God, hints of Nation cosmology, and the conspiracy by the ruling class to conceal this secret knowledge from the masses. Despite its substantive content in comparison to the other sections of the Lessons, Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2 remains sparse, its questions answered within a few paragraphs at most and often with a single sentence. Gaps in these bare discourses would have been filled by the interpretive activity of Elijah Muhammad during his career as the designated Messenger of Allah from Fard’s 1934 disappearance to his death in 1975.

In addition to the Lessons, Nation of Islam members studied a document of thirty-four math word problems, *Teaching for the Lost Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way*, which has become known as the Problem Book. Beynon quotes from the text in his 1938 article, and Bowen convincingly demonstrates

20. Ibid.

that the Problem Book has remained unchanged through the decades.²¹ In his 1951 master's thesis on the Nation, Hatim A. Sahib describes the text as a "very small pamphlet of seven pages" titled simply "the Book of Thirty-Four Problems," and suggests that the title *Teaching for the Lost Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way* was Beynon's own invention.²² According to Sahib, the Book of Thirty-Four Problems could be accessed only after a student passed the first two sections of the Lessons, and never by white people or "non-Negro Moslems" due to Fard's personal warnings.²³ The text's problems read as a straightforward math quiz delivered with frequent references to the Nation's rhetorical universe: questions refer to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, various physical illnesses suffered by Fard's "uncle" (i.e., Black people) due to living "other than himself," and a caged lion that has sought a way out of the cage for "nearly four centuries."²⁴ The seventeenth question makes casual reference to the consistent Nation of Islam position regarding extraterrestrial life:

Mars, the inhabited Planet, is one hundred forty-one million, five hundred thousand miles from the Sun, and she travels thirty-seven and one-third miles per hour. Her diameter is four thousand two hundred miles.

Then Mr. Ali wants to know how many days will it take Mars to make one complete circumference around the Sun?²⁵

The notion of Mars as an "inhabited planet" appears in the later works of Elijah Muhammad, who asserts that Fard had taught him about Martian civilization. Fard could communicate directly with Martians, being fluent in their language, and informed Elijah that "the Original Black Man" possessed pictures of Martian people. Elijah thus scoffs at the white world's hopes of exploring space: "I am sorry, Mr. White Man, these are secrets that you are not permitted to learn. You may be

21. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 2–252.

22. Sahib, *The Nation of Islam*, 147.

23. Ibid.

24. Melchisedek Shabazz Allah, *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons*, 27–37.

25. Ibid.

able to send a camera over the planets, but I advise you to stay away from them.”²⁶

The next question in the Problem Book refers to Mercury as “also an inhabited planet.” The text mirrors the privileged positions for Mars and Mercury in Theosophical imaginaries, which present these planets in a “chain” with Earth as respectively past and future homes for human incarnations; Leadbeater writes in his *Textbook of Theosophy* that Mars and Mercury are still inhabited.²⁷ Without a reductionist diffusionism that would claim the Nation of Islam as a straightforward “offshoot” of Western esotericist traditions such as the Theosophical Society, or speculating as to what sources “influenced” Master Fard and Elijah Muhammad, I hope to shed light on numerous points in the Lessons and Problem Book that place the text in conversation with a milieu that remained deeply informed by esotericist discourses and communities.

“Moslem Sons:” Masonic Esotericism

Beyond their content, the Lessons echo Masonic practices in their function as lodge catechisms to be memorized as a series of “degrees” by the new initiate, who undergoes an examination on each degree before proceeding to the next.²⁸ Scholarship has acknowledged Black Freemasonry as an important conduit through which Islam entered into African American public discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly setting a stage for the Moorish Science Temple (which in turn is treated as a lineal forerunner to the Nation of Islam). Moorish Science leader Noble Drew Ali, who claimed to have undergone initiation at a pyramid in Egypt to become a prophet of what he termed “Islamism,” understood Islamic tradition through a lens informed significantly by the Shriners, a Masonic order that made playful use of Islam and pre-Islamic Egypt in its aesthetics.²⁹ Remaining largely unexamined in academic conversations, however, has been the specific imaginary of

26. Berg, *Elijah Muhammad and Islam*, 79.

27. Leadbeater, *A Textbook of Theosophy*, 127.

28. Halleran, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 197.

29. Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 238–50.

Islam that emerged from Black Freemasonry, particularly the conceptions of Islam and Black godhood as guarded Masonic secrets.

In newspaper coverage of the Shriners near the end of the nineteenth century, we find treatments of the Shriners' playful Orientalism and appropriation of Islamic imagery as markers of a genuine historical connection to Muslim civilizations. An 1889 *Washington Post* article, for example, describes the Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine as having been founded in the "Hegira" year 25 (erroneously presented as the Gregorian year 356 CE) by "Kaliff Alee" as a "vigilance committee, to dispense justice and execute punishment upon criminals who escaped their just deserts" (sic) as well as "promote religious toleration among cultured men of all nations." For the immediate task of efficiently apprehending criminals with "precaution as to secrecy and security," Kaliff Alee needed to "form a band of men of sterling worth." The contemporary order counts "the best cultured and educated classes" among its members. The article also notes that while the order remains ostensibly dedicated to "increase the faith and fidelity of all true believers in Allah" and requires testimony that there is no god but Allah, it also accepts members from all religions. Specifically, "The order in America does not advocate Mohammedanism as a sect, but inculcates the same respect to deity here as in Arabia and elsewhere."³⁰

The *Washington Post* piece asserts that American Shriners use a ritual text that has been translated from the Arabic original, which apparently remains in the order's Aleppo archives.³¹ The 1890s saw the emergence of "Black Shriner" movements, starting with accounts that Arab visitors to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago had granted African Americans the initiation that white Shriners denied them. While white Shriners had famously appropriated Islamic imagery and claimed ancient Muslim lineages as an Orientalist jest, Black media treated the linkage to premodern Eastern orders as genuine and serious. Freemasonry's claims of ancient Egyptian origins and the specific Shriner claims of lineage

30. "A Crescent and Scimitar." *Washington Post* (October 8, 1889), 21.

31. *Ibid.*

from “Kaliff Alee” offered new connections to a world in which Europe was not the center, and new ways of imagining Blackness.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Black Freemasonry offered the most powerful representation of Islam in Black media and public life. When Noble Drew Ali presented his construction of “Islamism” as the true religion of Black people (Moors), he framed his Islamism largely in the aesthetic vocabulary of Shriners.³² Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple did not appear as an aberration or “syncretism” or blending of disparate parts from otherwise unrelated traditions; elsewhere in the U.S., Black intellectuals perceived a natural link between the two. In 1927, Abdul Hamid, who identified himself as coming from “the city of Khartum, Sudan, Egypt, a Mohammadan by birth, Master of the Koran, having pilgrimaged to Mecca three times and thus become an Eminent High Priest and head of all Masonic degrees in Mecca, from the first to the ninety-sixth degree,” made headlines in New York newspapers for declaring, “There is not a legitimate or real Noble of the Mystic Shrine, black or white, affiliated with American masonry.” The issue, Abdul Hamid explained, was that there could be no genuine Shriner oath without conversion to Islam; to become true Masons, the Black Shriners would have to join the “Mecca-Medina Temple” in Arabia.³³

The Ahmadiyya missionary project in the U.S. also perceived a possible connection between Muslims and Masons. In 1921, Ahmadiyya preacher Muhammad Sadiq mailed hundreds of invitations to Islam to Masonic lodges across the country.³⁴ Among the sources that Fard Muhammad used for teaching his community, Beynon mentions a collection of books on “Freemasonry and its symbolism.”³⁵ While we do not have their titles or a clear sense of how Fard himself personally related Freemasonry to Islam, the two would already have been connected for many in his audience. For Elijah Muhammad—himself

32. Nance, “Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple,” 123–66.

33. Bowen, “Abdul Hamid Suleiman and the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple.”

34. GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 200.

35. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

a former Freemason—it seems apparent that Islam and Freemasonry would not have been inherently separate histories and bodies of knowledge, but rather reflected a shared genealogy in the timeless knowledge of the Asiatic Black Man. Freemasonry’s presence would remain throughout his body of writings. As early as 1934, soon after Fard’s disappearance, Elijah’s editorials in *The Final Call to Islam* portrayed Freemasons as possessing true knowledge, though they controlled access to truth for their own financial gain:

They sell it to you after diluting and changing its name from Islam, Freedom, Justice and Equality to FREE MASONRY. . . . They changed the name Moslem to Mason and no one must be called Moslem under the Masonic law until he pays a great sum of money for the 32nd Degree. What would the price be for the 360th Degree, which is the whole circle?³⁶

Writing in later decades, Elijah declares, “A Mason cannot be a good Mason unless he knows the Holy Qur’an and follows its teaching. This book is the only book that will make a true Mason . . . I say, if you are a true Moslem friend, then alright, lets have it in the open and not in the secret.”³⁷ Elijah understood his assessment of Freemasonry to find support in the Lessons themselves, which describe the “Ten Percent” that actively conceals knowledge of God to maintain its control over the Eighty-Five Percent, the “slaves to mental death and power.”³⁸ Elijah’s commentary on Freemasons positions them as the Ten Percent. Shriners also appear in the Lessons, which describe the devil as capable of studying Islam from thirty-five to fifty years for the right to call himself a “Moslem Son;” upon reaching this stage, he must add a sword to the Flag of Islam (as seen in the Shriner emblem of a sword attached to the star and crescent) as symbolic of his oath to secrecy; he must protect his knowledge or lose his head.³⁹

36. Muhammad, *Final Call to Islam*, n.p.

37. Idem, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 3.

38. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

39. Ibid.

Theosophical Eugenics

The Lessons offer a narrative of racial difference (which undergoes elaboration in later works of Elijah Muhammad) that traces the origins of the white race—identified as “the Colored Man” in a reversal of U.S. racial vocabulary—to a eugenics regime led by the scientist Yacob (later spelled Yakub), whose name corresponds to the Arabic equivalent of Jacob. Yacob “manufactured the devil” on the island of Pelan, which the Lessons explain is Patmos, where John received the Book of Revelation. Yacob selected followers who were “healthy, strong and good breeders” and “gave his people the law on birth control to be enforced while manufacturing the devil.” This meant orders for his ministers to only allow marriage between his “unlike” (brown) followers, and for his doctors and nurses to save “unlike” babies while killing “alike” (black) babies. The nurses killed black babies by putting needles into their brains or feeding them to wild animals, after which they would tell the mothers that their “angel babies” had secured places for them in heaven. Yacob’s laws were followed, the Lessons tell us, under penalty of death.⁴⁰

Answering the question, “Tell us what and how the devil is made?,” the Lessons explain that a Black body contained two germs, one black and one brown. By privileging the brown germ for six hundred years, Yacob’s eugenic regime managed to create lighter skin with each generation until “the germ became white, and weak and was no more original.” This new devil possessed smaller brains, thinner blood, and weaker bones, and was beyond reform, even when the prophet Mossa (Moses) attempted to civilize him.⁴¹

At first glance, the Lessons express a basic logic of race and nation—that by controlled breeding, social engineers can determine the characteristics of a population for centuries to come—consistent with the discourse of eugenics. The connection between Jacob and projects of deliberate breeding would have been natural in

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

the early twentieth century, as contemporary eugenics literature made frequent reference to the biblical account in which Jacob manipulates his understanding of heredity to get the better of his father-in-law Laban. Having made a bargain with Laban that Jacob would receive the striped livestock, Jacob placed striped reeds in front of Laban's animals to ensure that Laban's next flock would be born with striped coats. The account is mentioned throughout eugenics literature,⁴² whether to affirm or dismiss ancient ideas of prenatal influence or to find a biblical precedent for eugenics with Jacob, "the first man that we have any account of, to take up the study of heredity in livestock breeding."⁴³ The prominence of Jacob as not only a controller of animal heredity but a selfish, scheming deceiver presents him as a natural candidate for the engineer of the white race, and Elijah Muhammad would make reference in his own later work to the Jacob and Laban story.⁴⁴ Nation newspapers from 1934, however, identify Yacob not as the biblical Jacob but rather as John, hence his location at Patmos. As a black man, Yacob was additionally a god in his own right. When God said, "Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness" in Genesis 1:26, Elijah Muhammad writes, "It was Mr. Yacob teaching his exiled followers." Genesis 6:6, which states, "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the Earth and it grieved him at his heart," similarly refers to Yacob repenting for his creation of white people.⁴⁵

In addition to the enormously popular and powerful ideology of eugenics, the Lessons' account of white origins also overlaps with Theosophical ideas about race and human evolution, while reading as an inversion of its trajectory. For Theosophists, humanity passed through a sequence of root races, each representing a stage of human advancement; from each root race, a sub-race would emerge to produce the next root race. While H.P. Blavatsky's narrative of racial

42. Schuster, *Eugenics*, 203–4; Jordan, *The Heredity of Richard Roe*, 39; Popenoe and Johnson, *Applied Eugenics*, 64; "The Bogey of Pre-Natal Influence," 466–68; Goldsmith, *The Laws of Life*, 359.

43. Cook, *Like Breeds Like*, 24–25.

44. Muhammad, *Yakub: the Father of Mankind*, 92.

45. "Dry Bones," 5.

origins privileges the Aryan race as the fifth—and presently highest—race in an evolutionary sequence that would conclude with the future sixth and seventh races, the Lessons present the emergence of white people as a mark of decline and decay. Humanity’s golden future is assured not with promise that another new race would come, but rather that the devils will be taken off the planet.⁴⁶

C.W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant elaborate on Blavatsky’s narrative of racial origins in their 1913 collaboration, *Man: Whence, How and Whither: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation*, that readily enters into conversation with the Lessons.⁴⁷ According to Leadbeater and Besant, Manu, “Lord of the Moon,” embarked on a deliberate breeding project to “shape for His Race”⁴⁸ on earth, which would become the Aryan people. To this end, he chose followers “like looking over a flock of sheep, and choosing the most suitable.”⁴⁹ Leadbeater and Besant unfold a complex account of Manu’s generations of followers and their respective fortunes until reaching the particularly successful fifth Atlantean sub-race, which was “quite isolated from the world in general by a belt of sand, which could only be crossed by caravans carrying with them plenty of water, and there was only one way across it with grass and water, about where Mecca now stands.”⁵⁰ Manu exiled his “least desirable types” and “preserved unmixed within His belt of desert the most promising.”⁵¹ Ultimately this population dispersed across the globe.⁵² The Lessons flip the narrative: Jacob does not monitor and regulate his followers’ breeding to create progressively superior generations and assist human spiritual evolution, but to achieve a regression in consciousness with the production of a “weak and wicked” devil. These devils are not created “about where Mecca now stands” but rather in the Aegean Sea, later coming to Mecca to disrupt its harmonious society with their tactics of deception

46. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25–20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

47. Leadbeater and Besant, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*.

48. *Ibid.*, 225.

49. *Ibid.*, 225.

50. *Ibid.*, 230.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 230–33.

and division; it is then that the devils are exiled from Mecca, forced to walk across the desert.⁵³ The devil cannot be reformed by any means other than a reversal of Yacob’s breeding project—“graft him back to the original man”—but because this process would take six hundred years, it has been decided that after the expiration of “the Devil’s civilization” in 1914, he would be taken off the planet.⁵⁴

Read in the context of 1930s Detroit, the Lessons reflect a setting in which the fundamental argument of eugenics discourses—that a nation’s intellectual and physical health could (and must) be protected through a rigorous vetting and regulation of its breeders—had enjoyed the privilege of mainstream science and presidential endorsement. While Yacob’s biblical identity could appear fluid for Elijah Muhammad, Fard Muhammad (claiming mastery of Arabic and the Qur’an) is likely to have named the ancient eugenicist after the biblical Jacob, who frequently appeared in eugenics literature. The Lessons speak to their era’s prominent assumptions about human societies as breeding labs. Moreover, these ideas of racial hygiene also informed esotericist discourses. Theosophist intellectuals such as Blavatsky, Besant, and Leadbeater integrated contemporary ideas about race and civilizational progress into their trajectories of human metaphysical advancement. The Lessons share Theosophical assumptions of meaningful linkages between racial essences, regulated breeding, and metaphysical destinies, while engaging these linkages from a starting point of Black godhood and Islam as a nation with no “birth record.”⁵⁵

Prophets and Scientists: Yacob, Mossa, and Jesus

In the short question-answer exchanges of the Lessons, Yacob does not receive a detailed biography. The fourth question in *Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1* asks, “Why did we run Yacob and his made devil from the root of civilization,

53. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25–20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

over the hot desert, into the cave of West Asia, as they now call it Europe?” The answer explains that Yacob was “an original black man, and the father of the devil.” Yacob taught the devils how to “do this devilishment,” which included “making trouble among the righteous people,” “telling lies,” and causing the righteous people to “fight and kill one another.” The text explains that “we ran the devils over the Arabian Desert,” making the devils walk every step of the way and taking everything from them except their language. Mossa came to the caves of Europe two thousand years later to teach the devils “how to live a respectful life, how to build a home for himself” and also “tricknollegy,” which was knowledge from Yacob—“the devilishment, telling lies, stealing, and how to master the original man.”⁵⁶

In *Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2*, questions 21–40 deal with the origins, nature, and promised end of Yacob’s grafted devil. This section includes the bulk of the Lessons’ content regarding Yacob, explaining the policies of his eugenics regime on the island of Pelan/Patmos. The text identifies Yacob as “an original man who was a scientist . . . born twenty miles from the holy city Mecca, in the year eight thousand four hundred” as an answer to the question, “Who was the founder of unlike attract and like repel?” The next question asks, “How old was the founder?” to which the text answers:

When Yacob was six years old, while playing with two pieces of steel, he discovered one piece had magnetic in it and the other piece did not. Then he learned that the piece with magnetic attracted the piece that did not have magnetic in it; then he told his people when he was old enough to make a nation that would be unlike and he would teach them tricknolledge and they would rule for six thousand years.⁵⁷

The Lessons state that in accordance with what was predicted for him 8,400 years before his birth, Yacob was born with “a determined idea to make a people to rule.”⁵⁸ His force of will reflects the superior mental power of Original people, as *Final Call to Islam* writer Ocier Zarrieff explains in 1934:

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

We find that the first telephone was known to the white man in 1861. But, my friends, this is not the beginning of distant communication. Your brother, Assia, whom you call Jesus, was able to receive messages from long distances without wires. How do you think he knew just when to run when he was dodging about in Herod's Government? Every Asiatic Scientist, or one Moslem out of every hundred is equipped with Wisdom in his head and he can receive messages anywhere on the Planet Earth. In fact, the radio, telephone, as well as all known inventions, came from the Original man's head, which first appeared as a thought.⁵⁹

What was the relationship between Yacob's "determined idea," his later vow at the age of six that he will someday create a devil, and his discovery of "alike attract and unlike repel?" By the early twentieth century, mesmerist ideas of the healing properties in magnets had informed esotericist thinkers who theorized the magnetic power of thought, as well as a thriving market for "lodestones" that promised good luck to their possessors. The Magnetic Mineral Company advertised "loadstones" (sic) in newspapers from 1911 to 1914, when proprietor Frederick Nugent—who doubled as head of the Irridescent Order of Iris and the Occult School of Sciences (with as many as 1,800 dues-paying members)—was arrested for mail fraud with charges that he sold twelve-cent stones for as much as twenty-five dollars a piece.⁶⁰ In addition to the stones themselves, Nugent promoted a book, *The Loadstone, Mother of Magnetism*, which provided ancient and modern philosophical and scientific knowledge concerning the stones' powers as well as their applications:

IS IT your desire to have that strange, mysterious power that charms and fascinates men and women, shape their thoughts, control their destinies, and make you supreme master of every situation? Do you wish to know the secrets of Magnetism? Learn how to win the friendship and love of others, gratify your ambitions, increase your income, dispense worry and trouble, banish domestic unhappiness, and develop a wonderful magnetic will-power that will enable you to overcome all obstacles to your success?⁶¹

59. Zarrieff, "Devil's Civilization Young," 6.

60. "One Born Every Minute," 28.

61. *The Freeman*, March 30, 1912, 2.

According to Nugent’s advertisements, *The Loadstone* reveals a long-guarded “dying message” from Toussaint L’Ouvverture, “noblest type of the African race,” “greatest general of history,” and leader of the 1791 Haitian revolution.⁶² A 1913 advertisement in *The Freeman*, presented as an article by a “special correspondent,” asserts that L’Ouvverture “rose from obscurity to the heights of fame” and defeated 30,000 European soldiers with the help of a stone that he always carried. The ad also locates knowledge of magnetic stones among Moses and the Israelites, Greek philosophers, and settings such as China, Bengal, and Ethiopia. In particular resonance with the Lessons, the ad explains that “there should be two stones, one positive and one negative, or two that attract each other. The idea is that the minerals will give to the person that personal magnetism, which is of such great importance to success in this world.”⁶³ While the Magnetic Mineral Company’s ad claims, “No one knows who discovered the lodestone,” the Lessons answer the question: magnetic attraction was discovered by six-year old Yacob, who then vowed that he would manifest his thought in reality.

Magnetism informed esoteric discussions of humans’ mental power in which thought itself became magnetic. Chicago-based occult publisher and entrepreneur William de Laurence, whose resonance with the Nation’s particular theology and Christology will be seen below, also writes in *The Immanence of God—Know Thyself*, “There is inherent in the human soul a certain magnetic virtue which is natural and proper, which acts in a very peculiar manner, i.e., magnetically or spiritually in a person or an object at a remote distance and that more effectively and powerful than by any corporal assistance” and turns to the story of Jacob and Laban for biblical evidence.⁶⁴ The successful manifestation of Yacob’s “determined idea” to create a race that, while physically and mentally weaker than original peoples, manages to rule the world becomes evidenced in modern white supremacy. Answering the question, “Then, why did God make devil?,” the Lessons explain that

62. Ibid.

63. “What are the Powers of the Loadstone?,” 2.

64. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, 35.

the devil’s creation, rise to power, and final annihilation all fulfill a divine plan to “show and prove that Allah is the God; always has been and always will be.”⁶⁵

De Laurence writes of Jacob as a “deceitful, selfish, crouching brother, and an unworthy man” who “succeeded by fraud and lying” and was “better versed in trickery and psychology than Godly affairs: and is he not represented as a *diviner* or *magician*?”⁶⁶ In the Lessons, Yacob’s grafted devils become masters of the world through tricknollegy, a science of power which apparently consists of using deception to create internal discord within communities, stealing, and an unexplained knowledge of “how to master the original man.” The science originates with Yacob himself, for which Yacob and his devils are exiled from Mecca and sent to Europe. Over the course of two thousand years spent in European exile, the devils “went savage and lived in the caves,” requiring the intervention of Mossa, who was “half-original” and a prophet that had been predicted in the year one, 15,019 years ago. Mossa came to the white devil and “taught him how to live a respectful life, how to build a home for himself and some of the tricknollegy that Yacob taught him.”⁶⁷ Sharing “the forgotten Tricknollegy,” Mossa revives the Yacobi-an archive and endows Yacob’s devils with the science that will enable them to enslave the world. Mossa’s own status as “half-original,” however, impaired his project. Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1 also asks, “Why did Mossa have a hard time to civilize the devil 2000 B.C.?” and gives the answer:

Because he was a savage. Savage means a person that has lost the knowledge of himself and who is living a beast life. Mossa was an half original man and a prophet. Two thousand B.C. means before Christ. In the Asiatic world it was in the eleven thousand year. Civilize means to teach the knowledge and wisdom of the human family of the planet Earth.⁶⁸

This image of Moses as a hybrid figure equipped with special knowledge would resonate with his depiction in popular occult representations. *The Sixth and*

65. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

66. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, lxvi-lxix.

67. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

68. *Ibid.*

Seventh Books of Moses, an English translation of a nineteenth-century German text, titled for its claim to offer a previously lost supplement to Moses's canonical five books in the Bible, had grown enormously popular among African American occultists by the early decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁹ *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* characterizes Moses as a figure of contradictions who struggles to become the self-perfected occult master:

We find in Moses the emotions of an inward psychological struggle with hopes and fears, with extreme weakness and supernatural strength of will; of submission, reverence and obedience; of confidence, and finally of an enthusiasm, that, regarding all earthly obstacles as nought, he overcame all things. While he was thus equipped with god-like powers, he subdued the elements of nature and compelled them to testify to the greatness and glory of God by the marvellous wonders which he performed.⁷⁰

The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses also describes Moses's powers and feats in terms of “magnetic occurrences,” particularly calling attention to Moses's use of the rod and highlighting magnetism among the later Israelite prophets such as Elisha.⁷¹ As a “remarkable instance of the magnetic influence in changing the nature and complexion of living objects,” the text points to the story of Jacob and Laban, attributing Jacob's influence over the animals' colors as “an application of the mysterious doctrine of magnetism.”⁷² Imprinting images on the cognition of Laban's livestock, Jacob causes them to transmit the same images upon their young, resulting in their striped coats; with his superior comprehension of the laws of attraction, he gets the upper hand over his father-in-law. De Laurence, who published his own edition of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, plagiarizes directly from this section of the text in his own theological work, *The Immanence of God*, to argue for Jacob's superior understanding of the ways in which the human mind can generate signs and images and imprint them upon

69. Polk, “Other Books, Other Powers.”

70. *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, 37–38.

71. *Ibid*, 37–44.

72. *Ibid*, 35.

material reality to make change in the world.⁷³ The story of Jacob using laws of attraction to manipulate the livestock's color, commonly referenced in eugenics literature to present Jacob as an ancient geneticist, appears in these prominent esoteric works to present Jacob as a master of occult magnetism.

The Lessons also make a claim on Jesus, arguing that one can reject Christianity without losing Jesus on the grounds that Jesus himself had no connection to the tradition that developed in his name. The fifth item in Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1, asking “Why did we take Jerusalem from the devil? How long ago?,” accuses the devil of exploiting Jesus and distorting his message to invent a false religion:

Because one of our righteous brothers, who was a prophet by the name of Jesus was buried there, and he uses his name to shield his dirty religion, which is called Christianity, also to deceive the people so they will believe in him. Jesus' teaching was not Christianity, it was Freedom, Justice and Equality.⁷⁴

The Student Enrollment supports this position by asserting that Christianity is only 551 years old, which would date its origins to roughly 1383 CE, less than two centuries prior to the start of the transatlantic slave trade (which the Nation dates to 379 years from the time of the Lessons, meaning roughly 1525). The Lessons' rejection of Christianity and denial of an unseen “mystery god” place the early Nation in conversation with esoteric Christologies popular in the period's occult marketplace. Of particular salience, de Laurence advocates an immanationist theology in which the notion of God as absolutely transcendent and separate from humanity—what de Laurence rejects as “an imaginary or a man-made God”⁷⁵ and the Lessons term a “mystery god”—represents an artificial construction and betrayal of the true teachings from “Master Jesus.” De Laurence draws from biblical citations to argue that the Master Jesus taught men and women “a knowledge of self,”⁷⁶ which meant the belief in themselves

73. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, 36.

74. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25–20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

75. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, 41.

76. *Ibid*, 40.

as gods, rather than devotion to a being perceived as outside themselves.⁷⁷ According to de Laurence, Jesus “knew that the man who has no knowledge of self (God) can never be a Master of self, or the events of life; that he will be the sport and prey of the forces and conditions surrounding him.”⁷⁸ Jesus was such a “Master” because he had been trained by masters, which de Laurence compares to popular ideas of “Mystics” and “Adepts.” Jesus had “trodden the path and received the instruction of the Masters in India and the Orient,” de Laurence explains. “This is a fact that is well known. It is also a matter of record that Christ did belong to the Ancient School of India, “The Wise Men of the East.”⁷⁹

De Laurence writes of a departure from the true teachings of the Master Jesus, centered upon a god immanent to the self, into historical Christian tradition as the work of corrupt and self-serving priests who deceive the masses for their own gain. “The history of priestism in all ages,” de Laurence writes, is to “flatter the prosperous, to support the powerful,” and get a share of the plunder.⁸⁰ These priests “distorted, counterfeited and destroyed the original teachings of ‘The Master Jesus’” to deny the location of God’s kingdom within the self and instead emphasize God’s transcendence in order to enforce their own control over the masses.⁸¹ As part of his polemic against Christian “priestism,” de Laurence also quotes the Qur’an’s account of Jesus as “no more than an apostle,” names Muḥammad as founder of an empire that “spread itself over a greater part of the world than the Romans were ever master of,” and gives a generally innocuous treatment of “Mohammedanism” in comparison to Christianity.⁸² Though the Bible provides a compelling resource for de Laurence, it remains an imperfect one, vulnerable to the subjectivities of human authorship as well as later ed-

77. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

78. *Ibid.*, 134.

79. *Ibid.*, 42.

80. *Ibid.*, xlvii.

81. *Ibid.*, 13.

82. *Ibid.*, 92–93.

itorial corruptions, thereby containing “errors of almost every description.”⁸³ De Laurence specifically devotes an appendix of *The Immanence of God—Know Thyself* to inconsistencies in biblical accounts of Christ’s resurrection, which is also denied in the Lessons’ assertion that “All the history of Islam never reveals anything that no man had ever been able to come back from a physical death.”⁸⁴

The critique of Christianity as fraudulent priestcraft, criticisms of the Bible, demythologization of Christ, denial of otherworldly resurrection, and reconstruction of God as inherent to the individual rather than an absolutely transcendent other, all prominent themes of esotericist discourses in the early twentieth century, appear in the Lessons as timeless truths of Islam. Jacob, Moses, and Jesus, all locatable in the Qur’an as Islamic prophets, appear in the Lessons’ construction of Islam with their unique esotericist representations as respectively a gifted discoverer of magnetism and eugenics, a master occultist-prophet, and an initiate of mystery schools.

Conclusions

While the significance of the Supreme Wisdom Lessons as a foundational text of American Islam has gone critically underexamined, the Problem Book’s importance for Five Percenter tradition remains even more neglected. Sahib’s 1951 thesis notes that while the Problem Book’s questions “do not make much sense,” its reader “tries ‘to get to the deep meanings of these problems’ because he believes that these ‘are symbols having great meanings and therefore their meanings have to be worked out.’”⁸⁵ There is more to Fard’s question of how many atoms exist in fifty square miles than simply teaching his disciples how to solve word problems: the Problem Book operated as an esoteric text that housed secrets from the Master. To properly understand the Problem Book could open

83. *Ibid.*, vi.

84. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

85. Sahib, *The Nation of Islam*, 147.

one to new comprehension of the Lessons, which themselves offer insights to its advanced students in terms of Master Fard Muhammad's teachings.

Esotericist engagements of the Problem Book provoked the rise of the Five Percenter movement, which originated after John 37X Brooks, an attritioned Nation of Islam member in 1960s Harlem, became preoccupied with the Problem Book's thirteenth problem:

After learning Mathematics, which is Islam, and Islam is Mathematics, it stands true. You can always prove it at no limit of time. Then you must learn to use it and secure some benefit while you are living, that is—luxury, money, good homes, friendship in all walks of life.

Sit yourself in Heaven at once! That is the greatest Desire of your Brother and Teachers.

Now you must speak the Language so you can use your Mathematical Theology in the proper term—otherwise you will not be successful unless you do speak well, for she knows all about you.

The Secretary of Islam offers a reward to the best and neatest worker of this Problem.

There are twenty-six letters in the Language and if a Student learns one letter per day, then how long will it take him to learn the twenty-six letters?

There are ten numbers in the Mathematic Language. Then how long will it take a Student to learn the whole ten numbers (at the above rate)?

The average man speaks four hundred words—considered well.⁸⁶

“Caught up in its science,” John 37X embarked on a project to decipher the Problem Book's thirteenth problem, master the relationships between letters and numbers, and learn the “Mathematic language.” His friend Clarence 13X Smith joined his project and sought to decode the text, leading to the construction of the Five Percenters' alpha-numeric systems of Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets. Though John 37X had initiated the endeavor, Clarence 13X appeared to take a more authoritative position, and began to share the

86. Melchisedek Shabazz Allah, *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons*, 30–31.

Lessons and his tools for mastering them with young men at Harlem’s underground gambling spots. “Dropping their Xs” to reflect their new status outside the Nation, Clarence 13X and John 37X took new names: Clarence 13X became Allah, expressing his station as the master knower; John 37X, bearing witness to Clarence’s position as Allah, became Shahid (“Witness”) and later Abu Shahid upon the birth of his son “Little Shahid.”⁸⁷

The Five Percenter tradition—so named for the former Clarence 13X’s identification with intellectual freedom fighters mentioned in the Lessons, who teach the masses (society’s “eighty-five percent”) and liberate their minds from the elite rulers (“ten percent”) who manipulate them with false religions—could be regarded as a *bātini* treatment of the Nation’s initiatory text. For the former Clarence 13X, the thirteenth problem became a key by which one could unlock the Lessons and recover their meanings. Teaching the Lessons to young men who had not registered as Muslims with Mosque No. 7, he presented his alpha-numeric codes as a means by which they could interpret the text. The number 1, for example, signifies the attribute of Knowledge; the first letter of the alphabet corresponds to Allah; the first question in the Student Enrollment asks, “Who is the Original Man?” To interpret this “degree” in the Lessons, a Five Percenter exegete could thus reflect on the Original Man, the Asiatic Black Man, as Allah, the doctrinal point critical to one’s “knowledge of self.” The seemingly endless possibilities for making connections between numbered degrees in the Lessons and their corresponding letters and numbers—especially considering the expansion of these possibilities by digit-summing—render the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets a dynamic technology through which readers of the Lessons explore layers of meanings to each question and answer.

Scholarship on the Five Percenter tradition has attempted to treat Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets as directly inspired or informed by premod-

87. Knight, *The Five Percenters*, 49–54.

ern Muslim science of letters.⁸⁸ Arguments for locating Five Percenter’s alpha-numeric tools in the “classical” tradition can claim no support other than the fact that the Five Percenter care about esoteric meanings of letters and numbers and have terms like Allah, Islam, and Mecca in their vocabulary. There is absolutely no evidence that Allah (the former Clarence 13X) had studied Arabic science of letters, though Five Percenter oral traditions report that Allah appreciated Yusuf Ali’s Qur’an commentary for Ali’s attention to the revelation’s “mystery letters.” Rather than trace genealogies to premodern traditions as source material for the Five Percenter’s alpha-numeric, we must first look to the text that provoked the Five Percenter project, the Nation of Islam’s Problem Book. Numerology had been significant in Elijah Muhammad’s writings, as well as for Malcolm X, who recalls in his *Autobiography* that he predicted the future Muhammad Ali’s victory over Sonny Liston due to his seat in the audience; because his seat was numbered 34, he digit-summed 3+4 to get the auspicious number 7, revealing a triumph for the Nation.⁸⁹ Examining what we can of Master Fard Muhammad’s ideas and methods, we still find no evidence of an interest in “classical” Arabic science of letters or numerology. It would be more intuitive to examine contemporary American engagements of numerology for a sense of the resources that proved meaningful for Fard and his student representative.

Nation of Islam intellectuals have also argued for connections between the Nation of Islam and Muslim traditions that more prominently claim the gravitas of “orthodoxy.” Wesley Muhammad, for example, has argued for the Islamic authenticity of Nation theology, which holds that Fard Muhammad was Allah, through

88. Miyakawa writes, “The Supreme Alphabet takes as its model the spiritual science *Hurūfa-ī-jay-Hurūfa-Ab-jay*, an Arabic science of interpreting mystical meanings from each letter of the Arabic alphabet; the Five Percent Nation’s version simply uses the Roman alphabet” (*Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, 29). Miyakawa supports these claims with a citation of Yusuf Nuruddin, “The Five Percenter: A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths.” In *Muslim Communities in North America*, 109–32, Nuruddin describes Five Percenter alpha-numeric as a “creative adaptation of Tasawwuf or Sufism” and the Kabbala, but provides no evidence whatsoever to establish a Sufi origin for the Supreme Alphabets or Supreme Mathematics.

89. Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 314.

reading premodern masters such Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal to demonstrate that a corporeally anthropomorphic god was not always as threatening to Islamic monotheism as modern sensibilities might assume.⁹⁰ While this approach can serve as a theological apologetics for the Nation, the problem for Wesley Muhammad’s “Nation Salafism” is that we have no evidence that Elijah Muhammad or Fard Muhammad themselves engaged those sources. Though Fard Muhammad did apparently boast fluency in Arabic and teach from an all Arabic Qur’an, performing as an embodied link of access between the revelation and his audience, the textual traces that his teachings have left behind are essentially devoid of Arabic vocabulary or references that could locate him within a particular interpretive genealogy. The Lessons refer to four biblical passages (Ezekiel 3:18, Luke 12:47, and Revelation 1:9 and 19:40) but make no references to the Qur’an, hadith literature, or any Muslim institutions or sources. The Lessons’ claim that the Devil’s civilization expired in 1914 could make reference to that year’s declaration of jihad by the Ottoman Empire,⁹¹ but is at least as likely a reference to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ belief in 1914 as the start of the end times; Fard had, after all, prescribed Jehovah’s Witnesses radio programs as required listening for his followers.⁹² That the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive—that Fard could very well have intertextually linked the Ottoman declaration of jihad and Jehovah’s Witnesses eschatology—serves as an illustrative example of the ways that local and transnational resources intersected within the Nation’s archive.

Though the Lessons do not come with a bibliography of named sources, they offer a number of thematic portals into currents of alternative religiosity available in 1930s Detroit: magnetism and the power of thought, rejections of a transcendent “mystery god” in favor of reconstructing divinity as limitless human potential, emphasis on a vegetarian diet as critical to building one’s personal

90. Williams, *Tajalli na-Ru’ya*. Also “Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse,” 441–63.

91. Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, 99.

92. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

divinity, Jesus redefined as a student of Eastern mysteries, the existence of civilizations on Mars and Mercury, communication with the dead, the development of distinct races as breeding projects by superior intellects, narratives of Moses as a master occultist, and portrayals of the Freemasons as a powerful ruling elite that withholds true knowledge from the masses. It is easy and perhaps intuitive to argue for the Lessons as an artifact of African American esotericism, reflecting the discursive field in which Fard and Elijah Muhammad operated to have been informed chiefly by movements such as Theosophy, New Thought, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and speculative Freemasonry. There is a price, however, to this treatment of the text in terms of sources, “influences,” and “borrowings,” in part for its question of authenticity. The study of African American Islam remains troubled by uncritical references to “orthodoxy,” as though orthodoxy is an historically stable and universally coherent entity that represents a unified “Muslim world” in clear distinction from local Black heterodoxies. Movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam have been frequently termed “quasi-Islamic” and “pseudo-Islamic” in scholarly literature. Sherman Jackson’s use of “proto-Islamic” in reference to these communities, while registering to some readers as an acknowledgment of historical significance, nonetheless retains the notion of authentic or complete Islam as occupying a higher rung on an evolutionary ladder. In Jackson’s language of “proto-Islam,” the Nation becomes historically valuable only insofar as it enables members to “graduate” and move up towards “classical” Islamic tradition.⁹³

In his discussion of the Moorish Science Temple, Edward E. Curtis IV resists the critical dangers of pronouncing judgment, due to Noble Drew Ali’s likely sources, that “the MST is not really Islamic and that Noble Drew was not a Muslim.”⁹⁴ Such treatments, Curtis argues, usually derive from a simplistic measurement of Moorish Science against what he calls “Textbook Islam,”

93. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*.

94. Curtis IV, “Debating the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple,” 70–90.

which would disqualify not only Moorish Science but also “folk Islam, antinomian Islam, and women’s Islam.”⁹⁵ In other words, Textbook Islam imagines a “universal” or “mainstream” Islam that denies the local and thereby excludes a substantial portion—even a majority—of historical Muslims. My intention in considering the Lessons’ likely non-Muslim sources and absence of references to “classical” materials or Arabic terms is not to deny the text’s Islamic credentials. To judge the Nation of Islam as insufficiently Islamic because it represents a “mixture” of Islamic and non-Islamic materials would provoke the critical problem of finding an unmixed Islam that stands outside history, unchanged by its local conversation partners. As Curtis notes in his discussion of Moorish Science, such an “imperious” approach would also require informing “literally millions of Muslims around the world . . . that they are not real Muslims” because their ideas of what counts as Islamic tradition don’t line up with Textbook Islam.⁹⁶ While the Lessons can and should be engaged as an artifact of twentieth-century U.S. esotericism, the text also merits attention in the study of Islamic esotericism, a subfield that itself struggles against the privilege accorded to “Textbook Islam” for inclusion in Islamic studies.

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95. Ibid.

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The Traumatic Mysticism of Othered Others: Blackness, Islam, and Esotericism in the Five Percenters

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Abstract

This article draws from black critical theory, Western esotericism studies, and scholarship in Islamic studies to articulate the Five Percenters as expressing what I call “traumatic mysticism.” I first articulate blackness as the esoteric secret of the West. Then, I show how this blackness can produce mystical forms of black life. With these constituents in mind, I see “traumatic mysticism” as “an undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions.” Traumatic mysticism owes its emergence to (the violence of) the Middle Passage, which resulted in what Hortense Spillers calls an “undifferentiated identity,” or what I label as a radical form of sociality that cannot maintain categorical distinctions. Examining Five Percenter history, thought, and life, I show that their understanding of Islamic terminology, the meaning of the word “god,” and their dissemination of their thought all articulate radical refusals of categorical distinctions—whether these be between transcendence and immanence, individual and collective, or even material (embodiment) and ethereal (divinity). Exhibiting these characteristics leads to a life of irrevocable immanence, manifested through radical democracy and rigorous communal ethics.

Keywords: Five Percenters; Blackness; Islam; Mysticism; Esotericism; Western

We made it/from slaves on a slave ship/Live from the cotton fields/straight into the spaceship.

– Jay Electronica¹

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the oceanic, if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy on undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captives, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all.

– Hortense Spillers²

Introduction: The Question of Otherness

We are told that the study of Western esotericism is a field of inquiry organized around and founded upon the investigation of alternate histories and non-normative frameworks. It is the realm of the kinds of transmissions—given orally, textually, or otherwise—whose contours defy generally accepted and tolerated norms regarding the emergence, development, and legitimacy of knowledge. Imagination and gnosis replace, or at least supplement, logical deduction and detached empirical observation. UFOs and strange coincidences populate the scholar’s source material; foreign beings and new languages are the esotericist’s domain. Exploring the history of Western esotericism, we find ourselves in a field of inquiry organized around those things and modes of knowing that have been, and continue to be, dismissed as merely foolish speculation or conspiratorial theorizing. While the rest of the world is caught up only in what they can see, feel, or read in the news, the scholar of Western esotericism investigates what has been ignored, overlooked, or devalued.

In other words (and maybe this is a pun, given what is about to happen at the end of this sentence), the study of Western esotericism is a study in and of

1. Jay Electronica and Jay-Z, “We Made It (Remix),” independently produced, 2014. You can find the song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaLlzQJLBz0>

2. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 72.

otherness, of alterity. As Wouter Hanegraaf suggests in numerous publications, but perhaps most recently in his essay “The Globalization of Esotericism,” esotericism—particularly Western esotericism—operates as “the logical counterpart, the rhetorical ‘Other,’ of what we might refer to as the ‘Enlightenment’ form of thought.”³ Articulated as rhetorical and epistemological alterity, esotericism often names that which remains outside of, and in opposition to, more dominant and accepted modalities of inquiry and engagement. Esotericism and otherness are, therefore, intertwined; to think about the history of esotericism in the West is to think about those movements, communities, and epistemological frameworks that have stood as distinct from, and in opposition to, the more generally accepted and celebrated ways of knowing in the world. To study esotericism is to study the other.

I am interested in this question of otherness. If Hanegraaff is correct—and, as of now, we have no reason to doubt him—then the otherness that is central to Western esotericism is a dialectical one. Which is to say, the otherness of Western esotericism—the otherness that is Western esotericism—is only other in relation to “Enlightenment thought,” and is therefore tethered to (it as) its constitutive counterpart. A problem arises because most—if not all—dialectics constitute what philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once described as a “totality.”⁴ In this regard, even the very otherness that Western esotericism purportedly embodies becomes a self-enclosed reality, bounded by, and bound to, its constitutive other—namely “Enlightenment” thought. This shouldn’t come as a surprise; after all, this etymology of esotericism is tethered to the idea of boundary—between “inner” and “outer”, between who is in and who is out, between who is deemed normative and who is deemed abnormal, non-normative, other.

Bounded by and—again—bound to its epistemological, logical, and rhetorical counterpart, the study of Western esotericism articulates itself as a form of alterity whose very otherness, which should be a path to perpetually new and

3. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 79. I refrain from using the exclamation mark in the quotation, as I do not share Hanegraaff’s excitement.

4. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35–39.

generative forms of openness, nevertheless closes in on itself, and therefore becomes total and totalizing. Instead of opening up and out onto the infinite ways in which alterity (which should be a signifier for that which has not yet risen to the level of disruptive visibility) manifests itself as an open space of engagement, the alterity of Western esotericism closes itself in, protecting and safeguarding its own sense of alterity—not, of course, from Enlightenment thought, with which it is happy and of which it may be even proud to be in relation to, but instead from those other forms of alterity, those “other others,” whose presence and potential touch would serve to disrupt and destabilize its own sense of otherness. This dialectical totality—between Enlightenment thought and Western esoteric currents, between normative and non-normative Western thought—struggles to acknowledge, let alone handle with nuance, other cultures and societies in the narrative of Western esotericism,⁵ which are essentialized, reduced to their Westernist attitudes, if not left out, ignored, and, at worst, discarded. These “othered others” account for little more than footnotes, peripheral acknowledgements, in the (grand) narrative of the development of Esotericism in the West. I will have more to say on this later in the essay.

The goal of this essay is to sit with othered others, particularly a black esoteric group called the Five Percenters, in order to hear the disruptive and generative potential of their epistemological and ontological claims. The Five Percenters draw from both their blackness and their reading of certain Islamic tenets in order to elide the distinction between humanity and divinity. Put simply, the Five Percenters’ central claim is that black men (and in some cases, black women) are gods. And it is precisely this claim to godhood that stands as a racialized and religious disruption to the notions of boundary and otherness that appear to be important, if not central, to the study of Western esotericism. By turning our attention to the Five Percenters, we are attuned to the reality of those “othered others” whose presence demands “nothing less than a complex recasting of the dialectic” itself.⁶

5. Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism?”

6. Moten, *Black and Blur*, 2.

In this essay, I argue that attention to the Five Percenters “recasts the dialectic” through their expression of what I call “traumatic mysticism,” which I consider to be *an undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions*. This mysticism is not (merely) a union of divine and mundane natures; instead, it is a disruption and denial of categorical forms of thinking that would necessitate a “union” in the first place.⁷ As I will show, the language and thought of the Five Percenters inheres divinity in the black bodies and social relationality of the gods themselves, exhibiting the negation of distinctions. Moreover, divinity is articulated not as a supernatural union, but instead a coming into “knowledge of self.” One “becomes” divine not by transcending the world—there is no “heaven” or otherworldly reality in Five Percenter cosmology, and therefore there is no “union” between divine and human, transcendent and immanent, realities—but by figuring out what they have always been and committing themselves to the uplift of themselves, their families, and their communities. The mysticism of the Five Percenters, therefore, is a form of life that has little patience for distinctions: this is not about “mystery gods” or otherworldly heavens, but instead about a form of life that is irrevocably immanent—and therefore fundamentally social, and radically democratized.

This article, then, seeks to fulfill what Liana Saif articulates as a methodological possibility—namely, “rethinking the paradigms of comparison.”⁸ And central to this rethinking is nothing less than a rigorous criticism of boundaries, of bounded and bound entities whose relations form enclosed totalities. The problem of the boundary is not simply at the level of West/non-West either: “The very idea of ‘self-contained’ traditions,” Saif writes, “is problematic,” indicating that, even within certain traditions, there is movement, change, dynamism, openness, and plasticity. Instead of adopting the comparative paradigms of prevalent scholarship

7. Warren, “Black Mysticism,” 221.

8. Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism?”

in Western esotericism, the Five Percenters' adoption and appropriation of Islamic concepts and terminology—refracted through the lens of their blackness—sets the problematic of self-containment in sharp relief. In so doing, the Five Percenters offer us a different way of understanding the relationship between blackness, esotericism, and mysticism. We begin with the relationship between blackness and esotericism; in the next section, I suggest that, based upon the Middle Passage and its aftermath, we can only conclude that blackness, in the West, is itself esoteric.

The West's (Marginalized, Impossible, and Pathological) Secret: Blackness and the Study of Western Esotericism

In order to think about the relationship between blackness and esotericism, it is necessary to begin with a book entitled *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: "There is a Mystery . . ."*⁹ The text is the first large-scale treatment of esotericism in Africana communities—particularly those in the United States. And, in the preface, the editors make their academic and conceptual commitments clear:

The essays in this collection destabilize dominant tendencies in multiple scholarly fields and disciplines including the Study of African American Religion, Western Esotericism, and other cognate arenas. More specifically, the contributors to this volume interrogate hidden, secretive, muted, and excluded religious discourses and practices that are located in persons and communities that posit direct access to secret knowledge, contact and interaction with some transcendent or invisible force that may pervade nature, and symbolic or actual correspondence between realms or worlds.¹⁰

The above quotation articulates, without defining, what esotericism could be and how it might be described: esotericism in black communities is situated within “hidden, secretive, muted, and excluded religious discourses and practices . . . that posit direct access to secret knowledge, contact, and interaction.” These movements, pushed to the “margins” and rendered “heretical,” “impossible,” or even “pathological,” are the realm of black esotericism. In

9. Finley et al., *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*.

10. Finley et al., xii.

other words, marginalization, impossibility, and pathology are central to understanding esotericism in black life. In this section, I will make clear that, through these three features, this blackness—which cannot be disentangled from the black bodies who exhibit it—is inherently (though not essentially) esoteric.

What is interesting about the editors' analysis is that they stray from defining Africana esotericism. As I read them, there is a significant reason for this—namely, the distinction between “inherent” and “essential.” There are features of Africana esoteric cultures that are shared and endemic to the vast array of different orientations, but these features are malleable and expansive, unlike “essential” structures, which speak to timeless and immutable conditions of possibility. The lack of definition, then, is an attempt to explore “Africana esotericism” as an expansive and dynamic constellation of orientations whose appearances are constantly shifting based upon contextual realities.

What this means, then, is that the following three dimensions of Africana esotericism are precisely that—mutable dimensions whose manifestation and presentation are expansive and open. The following three dimensions, then, serve as heuristic categories offered that serve to show how one might read Africana esotericism in the context of the West.

Marginalization

We begin with marginalization. As the co-editors say in their introduction, Africana Esoteric groups—and the scholars who study them—are “doubly marginalized.” They give two reasons for this double marginalization, but for our purposes here, I will stay with the first:

The first has to do with disciplinary shortsightedness—i.e., because these manifestations of the esoteric are “African American,” they tend not to be viewed as fully “American” or as part of the landscape of religion in America. What’s more, one could argue that the designation “Western” in the field devoted to the examination of Western Esotericism functions in a manner similar to “American,” which structures discourses and disciplinary boundaries.¹¹

11. *Ibid.*, 5.

The “structuring” attendant to the study of American religion and Western esotericism necessarily excludes the possibility of black esotericism; in other words, what is “hidden” from these fields is the presence of blackness itself. Due to the historical violence and erasure of the Middle Passage, blackness itself became the West’s secret. In other words, the West, figuratively and literally, hid blackness from itself through the reality and aftermath of the slave trade.

I wish I weren’t telling the truth here. But consider Wouter Hanegraaff’s essay, “The Globalization of Esotericism.” Discussing how the term “Western” has been rendered a problem in Western esotericism, Hanegraaff’s goal seems to be to interrogate whether or not the term “Western” should remain tethered to the term “esotericism.” If the term “Western” carries too much theoretical and methodological baggage, then there might be reason for our disavowal of its use in relation to esoteric movements and traditions.

Hanegraaff seems to agree with this line of logic—or at least the theoretical side of it. Making a (problematic) distinction between theory and method, Hanegraaff eventually suggests that the term “Western” can be reclaimed methodologically. I quote him at length:

Rather, our task consists in studying a wide range of quite specific and different, historically situated personalities, currents, ideas, practices, discourses, communities, or institutions. . . . If we choose to categorize all these different materials under the heading of “esotericism,” we do so simply because it is helpful to our research agendas to highlight certain things that they have in common and that make them stand out for us as somewhat “similar.” If we categorize them, more specifically, as *Western esotericism*, this is not in order to suggest that they are Western manifestations of “esotericism” in general . . . but simply because the only way in which they appear to us *at all* is as specific products of Western culture. . . . Seen from such a perspective, the theoretical baggage of “Western esotericism” is in fact quite light.¹²

According to Hanegraaff, the term “Western” determines a specific historical and geographic field of inquiry; as he tells us, “Western” forms of esotericism

12. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 81–82.

“appear to us . . . as specific products of Western culture.” For Hanegraaff, the problem arises when we turn the term “Western” into a conceptual frame, divested from any historical context. But if we specify that “Western” is a methodological term, then it is possible to reclaim the term to speak about those traditions that emerge from the development of the West.

The problem with this formulation, however, is precisely the disciplinary “structuring” that we noted above. Having structured “Western esotericism” as “specific products of Western culture,” Hanegraaff fails to interrogate the meaning of “Western” itself. In so doing, he totally denies that certain traditions in the West—particularly those in black and Africana communities—emerge from the underside of the West, let alone that the West itself, identifying itself as such, also emerged in a large degree from undersiding communities such as the aforementioned. Part of the problem with the distinction between “West” and “East” (or at least non-Western) is that, in drawing lines around what is understood as “Western,” we also miss those communities in the West that are not included in that very moniker. Though sometimes it is acknowledged that “East” and “West” are always shifting in boundary and meaning, I would add that part of this shifting has everything to do with a damningly real-yet-repressed history of violence, murder, enslavement, and degradation. Through the production of Western culture, blackness and black bodies were rendered marginal.

Impossibility

This marginalization entailed nothing less than an impossible existence (and we’ll say more about this impossibility in the next section). Even at a methodological level, the “West” names a constellation of political economies, sociocultural frameworks, and philosophical and theological orientations that were both animated and sustained by colonialism, racism, and violent forms of Atlantic capitalism. And these frameworks, as Stephanie Smallwood suggests, used a sociopolitical alchemy in order to change black people into commodified black bodies:

Buying people who had no evident social value was not a violation or an act of questionable morality but rather a keen and appropriate response to opportunity; for this was precisely what one was supposed to do in the market: create value by exchange, recycle someone else's cast-offs into objects of worth. . . . The alchemy of the market [was] derived from its effectiveness in producing a counterfeit representation; it had become plausible that human beings could be so drained of social value, so severed from the community, that their lives were no longer beyond price.¹³

I do not think Smallwood uses the term “alchemy” lightly or even metaphorically here. Indeed, the possibility of turning human beings into mere commodities was an alchemical operation, turning something into something else through a series of carefully calculated and specifically ritualized practices. Like fire gilding, the slave market made gold out of bodies—black bodies.¹⁴ Through this alchemical operation, black bodies are transmuted—one of Faivre's intrinsic characteristics of esotericism—into commodities to be bought and sold.¹⁵ People were impossibly turned into objects. We are already in the realm of Western esotericism, but we can't even see it.

The (esotericism of the) slave market was not an aberrant operation of the West; it was central to its constitution and continued existence. Tucked away in the holds of slave ships, and violently rendered silent through their trip over the Atlantic, enslaved Africans were the underside of the West's preoccupation with reason, individuality, and freedom; the literal placement of black bodies in secret holds produced hermetically sealed boundaries between the (inner) space of captivity in darkness and the (outer) space of freedom in the light. In this regard, blackness is already operative as an “other” to the same Enlightenment against which Western esotericism is situated; and it is also, already, and always steeped in a tradition that was forced to embody the results

13. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 63.

14. I found out about fire gilding through a podcast entitled *S-Town*, produced by the NPR Radio show *This American Life*, which aired in 2017. The particular episode is entitled “Chapter VII” and aired March 28, 2017.

15. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 13.

of the distinction between “inner” and “outer”—esoteric and exoteric—forms of experience. Enlightenment itself utilized its righteous sense of “reason” to posit an opposition with the “unreasoning” other; in the case of Africans, it was only reasonable and profitable to commodify black bodies to construct its gilded glory. In this sense, not only were black bodies themselves transmuted by commodification, but they fueled its own transmutation. Without Nigredo there is no Albedo, there is no gold.

Through the commodification of black bodies, the West gains epistemological, existential, economic, and political footing. Whether or not one owned slaves, one always benefitted from the chattel slavery that had become a significant economic engine in the emergence and development of the West. The production and refinement of sugar, cotton, textiles, and other commodities were only made possible through the human commodities whose trips to the West were hidden from plain sight. In other words, without the slave trade—amongst other forms of degradation—(the traditions of) the West would not have appeared to us in the same way. Seen from this perspective, the theoretical baggage of “Western esotericism” is more than heavy; it stands as an existential burden, an inescapable and almost unbearable toll placed upon those whose bodies stood (and, if we are to be honest, still stand) as the West’s other.

Pathology

Blackness is marginal, and impossible, articulating at least two of the three characteristics of esotericism described by the co-editors of *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*. But blackness is also pathological. In the aforementioned volume, I wrote a chapter entitled “Show and Prove,” and drew from Antoine Faivre’s fourfold classification to identify the esoteric dimensions in Five Percenter thought and life. They see correspondences between black women’s bodies and the earth itself; they use their hermeneutical numerology (which they call the Supreme Mathematics), amongst other tools, to discern liv-

ing nature; their imagination and mediation is articulated through their scientific paradigm—Five Percenters draw from their hermeneutical tools to further understand the deeper and esoteric significance of their manifold worlds; and, lastly, one’s induction into the group is nothing less than a transmutation—one becomes a god (*go[ld]*) upon being able to “show and prove” their godhood through their creative usage of the fundamental lessons of the group.¹⁶ In other words, if Faivre’s schema is useful for discerning esotericism in the West, then the Five Percenters certainly fit the bill. They were—and are—esoteric.

However, despite the clear esoteric elements present in groups like the Five Percenters and other communities (like Candomblé, Santeria, Vodoun, Hoodoo, and the Nation of Islam), we are still confronted with claims that the contributions of Africana esoteric scholars(hip) have “extremely problematic” approaches to esotericism.¹⁷ In other words, even if one uses the very tools of the field itself to articulate black esotericism, there remains a problem, a kind of “distortion”—a pathology. If Western esoteric thought is the “other” of Enlightenment thinking, then how do we think about the “other’s (problematic) other”?¹⁸ What does it mean to simultaneously sustain and be excluded from the epistemological and political relationship between same/other to the point where one’s ideas, practices, communities, and dispositions are discarded?¹⁹ Despite the language of alterity and the metaphor of the wastebin, the attachment to “Western” as a “methodologically light” umbrella term has simply rendered those forms of thought emerging from within the slave trade as the wastebin of the wastebin. These traditions, somehow birthed within the context of the West’s development, were nevertheless doubly discarded as expendable and dispensable in the Academy. Marginalized by disciplinary boundaries, impossibly constructed through the alchemy of the

16. Gray, “Show and Prove, 182–85.

17. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 61n22.

18. See Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 64–71, as well as Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

19. Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath*.

slave trade, and rendered pathological through a “problematization” of the way in which blackness exhibits even the esotericism in the West, blackness itself becomes esoteric—or it is at least esoteric in the sense that the co-editors of *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* articulate it.

Blackness: the Esoteric Secret of the West

What I want to add here is that secrecy is the conceptual, political, and social glue that holds the three aforementioned characteristics (marginalization, impossibility, pathology) together. In fact, secrecy is precisely what conditions the marginalization, impossibility, and pathological presence of blackness in the West in the first place. Africana esoteric groups are marginal, impossibly present, and pathological because they are doubly hidden. First, they are physically and phenomenologically hidden through the production of hermetically sealed boundaries between (inner) captivity and (outer) freedom through the slave ships themselves. In the dark depths of the hold of the ship, there is no room for the light—whether this light is reason or revelation, rationality or gnosis. There is nothing to be gleaned, thought about, or experienced in the darkness; as philosopher Achille Mbembe claims, “[the black] exists where [he or she] is not thought.”²⁰

The unthought space of the black has been theorized for quite some time, though maybe not as unthought. As Lewis Gordon and Frantz Fanon have pointed out, “the black” is a caricatured creature, a stereotyped and reductionist trope articulated in favor of the white gaze. This gaze cannot see anything other than its own projections; as such, the black—and his or her descendants—is reduced and reducible to their body, which takes the black beyond the scope of thought. The black, then, is hidden, tucked away, interior to the West—but only as its underside, which is to say, the tradition of blackness itself, of living as black, is so hidden that it cannot even enter into the dialectical interplay between normative rationality and othered esotericism.

20. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 28.

This physical and phenomenological hiddenness entailed a more longstanding ontological obscurity that has contemporary implications: the alchemical operations that transmuted blackness and black people into mere commodities, and eventually into pathological threats, stays with us through the various ways in which we approach, perceive, understand, and study blackness (especially in the field of Western esotericism). As literary theorist Hortense Spillers tells us, the mere presence of black bodies in the West is “so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.”²¹ Having become, or inherited the legacy of, objectified commodities, black bodies appear as other than they are; the people, the agents, buried beneath (the meanings of) these bodies struggle to show up “legitimately,” particularly as it relates to the archive.

Much of Western esotericism scholarship relies upon historiographical research; in turn, historical and historiographical research heavily relies upon archival engagement. The “West” is what it is because the archive articulates it as such; and blackness is only present in Western archives as an excluded entity, as the black matter upon which the archive, and therefore archival knowledge, is built. On one hand, this occurs through certain historical documents, like slave traders’ accounting books or the fantastical descriptions of Africans in missionary travelogues; the production of the black emerges as an object of inquiry and accounting, as that which needs to be accounted for only in the service of use or disparagement.²² On the other hand, this occurs through the leisure made possible through the displacement of the West’s violence and terror onto the black; buried away in holding cells at the bottom of slave castles, enslaved Africans-turned-blacks constitute what Fred Moten might speak of as the West’s “underground,” the “anti- and ante-foundation” of the West that animates the West’s emergence through its dismissal. Or, as Achille Mbembe suggests, “The

21. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 66.

22. See Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, particularly the introduction and first chapter; and see Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

historical experiences of Blacks did not necessarily leave traces, and where they were produced, they were not always preserved. How could one write history in the absence of the kinds of traces that serve as sources for historiographical fact?”²³

In a riff off of Mbembe, I claim that the “traces” left by black people were not non-existent, but instead operate as silent, as invisible in the Ralph Ellison sense.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.²⁴

Ellison’s point should be quite clear; black invisibility is the result of a practiced refusal, a choreographed aversion, to the reality of blackness.²⁵ As “invisible” in Ellison’s sense, blackness and black people trouble Western esotericism’s methodological comfort with historical and historiographical research—which heavily relies upon archives to substantiate and expand its conceptual, theoretical, and social claims. In other words, blackness exposes imperialism of historiography—an imperialism that Hanegraaff himself is troubled by. If blackness cannot leave an archival trace, then how could it even disrupt the historiographical specificity of the term “Western” in order to expand it? As Calvin Warren claims, “the neglect of black archives” is “a form of philosophical antiblackness.”²⁶ Although the study of Western esotericism is not necessarily limited to philosophical thinking, I think the principle remains: if we consider the Five Percenters, for example, “the 120 [the original lessons of the Five Percent nation] gives up its heart when translated to hypertext. Shared on a prison

23. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 28.

24. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

25. Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath*, 112.

26. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 20.

yard or a playground, the degrees become living things.”²⁷ As is the case with the Five Percenters, many black esoteric traditions rely on oral transmission, sidestepping the textual archive in order to disseminate their knowledge. Words are spoken, but not crystallized; the dissemination and transformation of many forms of black esoteric knowledge remain dynamic because they are spoken, because it is the conversation—the building, as the Five Percenters call it—that constitutes the emergence and development of esoteric thought.

Phenomenologically hidden, ontologically obscured, and archivally erased, blackness is the West’s secret. This is not the case because blackness does not speak, but instead because its marginalized, impossible, and pathological speech is articulated in whispers, breathed in, through, beneath, and beyond the more dominant claims and statements that supposedly constitute the West’s existence. Operating as such a secret, the “archive” of blackness first emerges through its invisibility, through what is not said, through what Charles Long might call the silence that makes speech possible.²⁸

Rendered silent and invisible through the slave trade and the lack and denial of a black archive, black Atlantic peoples are simultaneously “Western” and not Western; their geographic and cultural mores are birthed out of the violence of the West. But because they do not register as people with a trace in the West, they are excluded, discarded, and dispensed with. With this in mind, black people constitute an open secret; denied visibility and legitimacy, hidden behind the more visible archival materials produced by the West, blackness is already an esoteric horizon, constituting peoples, practices, and productions stemming from a reservoir of knowledge that larger and more dominant traditions don’t, won’t, and maybe even can’t understand. If this is the case for black people in general, then it stands to reason that black esoteric traditions, doubly secret because they are a secret knowledge that emerges from the West’s secret, would be twice removed from visibility.

Unless you know where to look.

27. Knight, *The Five Percenters*, location 5025–43.

28. Long, *Significations*, 61–69.

Poor Righteous Teachers: The Traumatic Black Mysticism of the Five Percenters

The above section sought to establish a relationship between blackness and esotericism. By paying attention to the ways in which the Middle Passage served to both exclude and occlude the presence and complexities of enslaved Africans and their descendants—in other words, by paying attention to how black people were placed in holds that made distinctions between (inner) captivity and (outer) freedom—we are attuned to the esoteric nature of blackness. Blackness is, in this regard, the West’s secret.

This section identifies the Five Percenters as an embodiment of traumatic mysticism. Up front, I must stress the wholly quotidian nature of this mysticism in Five Percenter life; though I have not engaged with them directly, all of their textual and oral sources suggest that they would be outraged at the suggestion of mysticism to characterize their way of life. This is the case because they do not understand themselves to be “religious” in any sense, and eschew any (claims to the) existence of supernatural and otherworldly “mystery gods.”

Their refusal is reasonable. Indeed, even a cursory examination of mysticism shows that the history of mysticism in the West has emphasized the necessity—or at least extreme importance—of a supernatural or transcendent element as part of the mystical life.²⁹ Or, as Amy Hollywood suggests—but does not fully affirm—much of the scholarship on mysticism is concerned with “the interplay between transcendence and immanence or between the community and the individual,” that also maps quite well onto the distinction between “God and humanity,” as they occur in history.³⁰ In this regard, mysticism is a problematic identifier for the Five Percenters; unconcerned with and allergic to the metaphysically supernatural, the Five Percenters’ eschewal of any (claims to) “mystery gods” appears to short circuit the possibility of mystical engagement

29. Hollywood, “Introduction,” 1–33.

30. *Ibid.*, “Introduction,” 7–9.

from the outset. In fact, as I will show later, even the distinction between immanence and transcendence is problematic for the Five Percenters—although the meaning of “transcendence” changes within the context of Five Percenter life.

But—and I guess there is always a “but”—mysticism need not be defined so narrowly. In *Sensible Ecstasy*, Hollywood offers a different description of mysticism, one that is affective and embodied in its presentation.³¹ Though much of the history of mysticism relies upon both the supernatural (and therefore the distinction between supernatural and natural realities), Hollywood’s consistent refrain is that there are other ways to theorize mysticism—many of which carry within them no need (or even desire) for supernatural realities and the distinction(s) such realities impose. Speaking of popular twentieth-century figures in the history of French thought, Hollywood suggests that thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Bataille turn to earlier mystical figures because they “[subvert] the very distinctions between action and contemplation, emotion and reason, and body and soul, effecting . . . a disruption of the boundaries between them.”³² Maybe there are other mystical possibilities. And maybe these possibilities (can) have nothing to do with mystery gods who dupe the masses into anesthetic inertia. I suggest traumatic mysticism as one such possibility.

Although I defined it in the introduction, it might be worth repeating here. Traumatic mysticism is *an undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions*. There are two central characteristics of traumatic mysticism: 1) the refusal of distinctions; and 2) the centrality of physicality. Drawing from literary theorists Fred Moten and Hortense Spillers, I articulate the two characteristics.

In “Blackness and Nothingness: Mysticism in the Flesh,” literary theorist Fred Moten claims that, due to the violence of modernity and the violent legacy of

31. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*.

32. *Ibid.*, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 6.

the slave trade, blackness remains groundless—worldless, we might say—because there is no place that would constitute a “home” for blackness. “It is terrible to have come from nothing but the sea,” Moten tells us, “Which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation.”³³ Drafted from the water, but simultaneously insulated from it, those who were birthed as black out of the hold of the ship announce a different relation to existence. Or, as Hortense Spillers puts it, the hold of the ship constitutes a Freudian sense of the “oceanic”:

Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic,’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all.³⁴

We have already seen how life in the hold has produced blackness as esoteric; the difference here is that mysticism is a mode of existence, a way of life. It is the legacy of the nothing and the nowhere, the groundlessness of black being whose inaugural moment was an “oceanic feeling” of loss and perpetual disorientation, which obliterates categorical distinctions. Because black people were “removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either,” they and their descendants were forced to live under violent conditions. But if the conditions were violent, black people and their descendants both inaugurated and maintain a form of engagement beyond this very violence that is radically social—to the point where distinctions (between god and humanity, transcendence and immanence) are not simply disrupted; they no longer hold. Traumatic mysticism unfolds, therefore, as a form of undifferentiated black life impossibly lived in the face of black death; it emerges as the impossible (and impossibly lived) reality of black life within in a Western world that sustains itself through the denial and destruction of blackness.³⁵

33. Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 744.

34. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 72.

35. Warren, “Black Mysticism,” 219–29.

“Undifferentiated” is central here. Hollywood’s critical engagement with the continental philosophical (and psychoanalytic) tradition articulates that the “disruption of boundaries” can be more than enough to constitute mystical engagement. What Moten and Spillers theorize is blackness itself not simply as the disruption, but the negation, of boundaries.

Moreover, the very medium through which this undifferentiated identity emerges is the physicality of black flesh. As Moten argues, the hold of the slave ship,

our subcubic thing, our block chapel, is a hard row of constant improvisational contact, a dispossessive intimacy of rubbing, whose mystic rehearsal is against the rules or, more precisely, is apposed to rule, and is, therefore, a concrete social logic often (mis)understood as nothing but foolishness, which is, on the other hand, exactly and absolutely what it is.³⁶

The “rubbing together” of black flesh in the hold of the ship highlights the centrality of physicality, of embodiment (though not quite the body), to the mysticism of blackness—indeed, the mysticism that is blackness. If blackness, as the West’s secret, is esoteric, then black life—the (after)life lived in and as the violent and traumatic secret of slavery during the Middle Passage—is mystical. And it is this “mystic rehearsal” of physical engagement in the holds of slave ships that continues to undifferentiate us. Black life, lived in the wake of the trauma of slavery, is mystical; no mystery gods required.

A Mystical Non-Mysticism: the History and Thought of the Five Percenters

Enfleshed and undifferentiated, traumatic mysticism is a modality of living that cannot maintain distinctions. In the case of the Five Percenters, this mode of living entails nothing less than a disruption of Islamic terminology, consequently demanding nothing less than the continued production of new forms of knowledge and language—or, more precisely, new forms of knowledge through

36. Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 754.

new forms of language.³⁷ Which is to say, the Five Percenters draw from, adapt, and transform certain forms of Islamic thought and practice in order to articulate new modes of thought and practice; from the ontology of Allah and the reversal of his “transcendence,” the ontological embodiment of the divinity and its multiplication in black bodies.

One of these new forms of thought is the meaning of Godhood. Although there are Islamic currents, such as Sufism, that offer the possibility of self-divinization (or at least coming near to God—the Five Percenters’ central claim is that one is already God—which is why they do not understand themselves as “Islamic”); positing a difference between the 85% of people who do not know “the meaning of who god is” and the 5% of people—the “poor righteous teachers” of the Five Percent nation—the Five Percenters claim that black people (particularly black men) are already gods. What is needed is not a process of becoming, but instead an expression and display of the self-knowledge of one’s own inherent and embodied divinity. In order to show this, we must turn to Five Percenter history.

Initially operating in the shadow and wake of the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters were birthed in 1964, due to the emphatic charisma and creativity of a man named Clarence 13X. Brought into the Nation of Islam (NOI) through his wife, he initially took quickly to the teachings of the Nation, eventually rising to the ranks of the NOI’s security force, the Advanced Fruit of Islam (AFOI). While becoming a member of the AFOI, Clarence 13X was catechized in the teaching of the Nation of Islam, and it was here where his thinking began to evolve. Although he would eventually be expelled for reasons that still remain shrouded in mystery—some attribute it to the fact that he bucked the restrictions against drug use and gambling in the NOI, while others claim that his expulsion was due to his reframing of NOI theology—what is clear is that his reframing of the NOI lessons became quite popular for young black men in New York in the early- to mid-sixties.³⁸

37. Warren, “Black Mysticism,” 221–22.

38. For two brilliant treatments of the historical emergence of the Five Percenters, please see

There are a host of peculiarities about the life of Clarence 13X, who assumed the name Allah, from multiple assassination attempts to the continued spread of his message while he was locked away at a mental institution—but this is not what leads to the conclusion that Clarence 13X’s movement has mystical elements. Instead, the first mystical dimension of the Five Percenters emerges from their rigorously social notion of black divinity. One particular lesson became the centerpiece of what would become the Five Percenters: in catechistic form, this lesson identifies the “Black Man” as God:

1. Who is the Original Man? The Original Man is the Asiatic Black Man, the Maker, the Owner, the Cream of the Planet Earth, the Father of Civilization, and the God of the Universe.³⁹

Although the Nation of Islam sought to understand this teaching in terms of the “black man” collectively—i.e. black men collectively were and are God—the NOI actually identified its founder, W. D. Fard, as the highest knower, and therefore the embodiment, of God. 13X found this to be rather counterintuitive, and therefore suggested that each black man was an embodiment of God in his own right (and the “he” is central here; the possibility of women becoming gods still remains contested terrain). Calling himself Allah—and I will call him Allah from here on out—Clarence 13X took to the streets and began to share his reframing of the lessons he learned in the NOI.

By claiming that each black man was a god in his own right, Allah had also shifted the meaning of the terms “Islam” and “Allah.” Instead of tracing them back to their Arabic roots—whereby Islam signifies “the act of submission or surrender” and the term “Allah” is reserved for the God whom the Muslim serves—Allah reframed the terms as acronyms: Islam became an acronym for “I Self Lord And Master,” and Allah was rearticulated as the constitution of the

Wakeel Allah’s *In the Name of Allah: A History of the Five Percenters* and Michael Muhammad Knight’s *The Five Percenters*. I have also discussed the history in my chapter, “Show and Prove.”
39. Nuruddin, “A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths,” 116.

god’s body: Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head.⁴⁰ Both of these acronyms articulated the divinity and self-sufficiency of the black man, grounding an ethical and theological framing in the actual embodiment of the gods themselves.

We cannot say that this is a deliberate Qur’anic exegetical exercise, but it can be, must be, integrated into the historical theological discussion concerning the Qur’an’s anthropomorphic description of God; him having a face, eyes, hands, and speech (Q. 28:88, 55:26–27, 5:64). As is well known, this subject was central to the medieval theological school of the Mu‘tazila who took the view that God’s transcendence necessitates an allegorical interpretation. This was at odds with the position of the Hanbalite/Ash‘arī school: “If the Qur’ān speaks of God’s hands or God’s eyes, then what hermeneutic device can legitimize the denial of them? Which is not to say that God has hands and eyes in the way in which we normally understand these features; we must simply accept such aspects of God without asking how (*bi-lā kayfa*) and resign our claims to knowledge of their modality.”⁴¹ The anxiety then was about maintaining God’s unity and transcendence, an anxiety dropped by the Five Percenter; instead we have Allahs, multitudes of black bodies, rendering polytheism (*shirk*) irrelevant. By considering the Five Percenter’s understandings and including them in the historical tradition of exegesis, we exemplify our own stance against the anxiety we witness in academia concerning the inclusion of the Other-without-archive whose traumatic mystical orientation consciously subverts the tradition, here Islamic-Arabic, to sublimate blackness, an undifferentiated identity, the Asiatic Black Man. Furthermore, the position of the Five Percenter is in sharp contrast with the Sufi metaphysics of “ascent” exemplified by the mystical philosophy of the Grand Master (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*) Ibn ‘Arabī, who in a chapter of his *Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*) called “On the true knowledge of the alchemy of happiness”—to mention one instance—describes the process of the

40. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 126; Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 118.

41. Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts*, 3–4.

divinization of the soul as an ascent away from the mundane world, from bodies, from multiplication, from community.⁴² To come close to the divine, one has to escape the clutches of bodies and communities (*taraqqī*).⁴³

However, for the Five Percenters, I emphasize, the very claim to godhood already articulates a refusal of categorical distinctions—godhood is not articulated in (contra)distinction to quotidian humanity. Instead, godhood itself is quotidian. Reconfiguring the Islamic concept of the *Mahdi*, a salvific figure in Islamic thought, ethnographer and Five Percenter Michael Muhammad Knight recalls how one of the gods of the Five Percent nation broke down the meaning of Godhood:

For Five Percenters, there's no UFO coming down to save the day, no Great Mahdi, no holy redeemer outside the self. . . . It's you, the Mahdi of your own universe, with no one above you. This tenet's full significance was broken down for me by a god named I Majestic Allah at a parliament [a gathering of Five Percenters] in Pittsburgh. He told me that to be God, as opposed to what you might expect—the claim to be a “supernatural being”—simply means that you alone are responsible for uplifting yourself, your family, and your community. That's it. You can't save anyone in a church or mosque, praying for the Man in the Clouds to do your work; you have to hit the streets and build.⁴⁴

The term “God” doesn't articulate “transcendent elements”; to be a god is not to be “supernatural,” nor is it the result of apotheosis or a union between supernatural and merely natural realities. Though it is a form of transcendence, it is a transcendence into community, into the complexities of black social life, not to some otherworldly realm of eternal peace. To be a God is to be responsible to both oneself and the community, the social life, within which one finds oneself. “Make money, teach kids,” Knight tells us, continuing, “That's a god performing his duty.” If we were to use Heideggerian language, the Five Percenter maxim of “uplifting yourself . . . your family . . . and your community” could be understood as a mode of transcendence into relation, a transcendence

42. Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, Chapter 167.

43. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 219, 269.

44. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 1013.

into the social world of blackness.⁴⁵ Embodied and fundamentally quotidian, the Islamic godhood—articulated through the god’s body as Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head, and I, Self, Lord, And Master—of the Five Percenters is neither submission nor supernatural transcendence. It is ethical engagement, situated here and now.

This reframing of both of these terms set traditional Islamic theological concepts on a different ground. By claiming that Islam speaks to one’s selfhood and self-responsibility, and by grounding the term “Allah” in the body, the Five Percenters disrupt the categorical distinction between transcendent and immanent, between (disembodied) divinity and (enfleshed) humanity.

This claim to godhood can be understood to have mystical elements in the sense in that the divinity articulated is one that is “undifferentiated,” announcing an inextricable tether between the limitations of human existence and the power of transformation. But this isn’t a “union”; instead, it is a fact of existence. This form of mysticism is not birthed out of an attempt to reunite with a transcendent force, but instead out of the process of discerning and continually reestablishing who one is: the source of the divine is oneself. As multiple sources claim, the Five Percenters remain in line with the NOI in that they do not believe in a “mystery god”; there is no transcendent being operating as the metaphysical and ontological guarantor of existence and goodness.⁴⁶ One is a god because one is a black man (or in some cases, a black woman). As Knight writes, “The Five Percenter message was at once simple enough to be easily digested by anyone—the black man is God of the universe—and complex enough, through its call to rigorous study of the lessons and Supreme Mathematics, to promise a challenging life of study and inner growth.”⁴⁷

45. The world toward which Five Percenters transcend, however, is not Heidegger’s world of *Dasein*, for *Dasein*’s world—a world marked by the normativity and supremacy of whiteness—is a world that cannot incorporate blackness as anything other than the object or, as Calvin Warren says, the nothing against which *Dasein* secures the certainty of its own existence. It is against the backdrop and horizon of blackness as nothing that *Dasein* is able to face up to its own death. “Heideggerian anxiety transforms into antiblack violence,” Warren claims, “when *Dasein* flees the anxiety nothing stimulates and projects it as terror onto blacks” (*Ontological Terror*, 9).

46. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 102; Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 124–25.

47. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 165.

The process of recognizing one’s inherent divinity is called coming into “knowledge of self,” and it is here where the meaning of the nomenclature “Five Percenter” is also discerned. In the NOI’s Lost-Found Lesson No. 2 (another catechetical lesson), the world’s population is broken down into three groups, marked by percentages: 1) the “85%,” the masses of “uncivilized people” who are “slaves” that “do not know who the living God is, or their origin in this world and who worship that which they know not”; 2) the “10%” who are “the rich slave-makers of the poor, who teach the poor lies to believe that the Almighty True and Living God is a spook and cannot be seen by the physical eye”; and 3) the “5%,” the “poor righteous teachers” who “teach that the true and living God is the Son of Man, the Supreme Being, the Black Man of Asia.”⁴⁸ In this regard, the Five Percent are prophetic teachers, tasked with informing and educating the 85% about who the “true and living God is.” It is important to note here that these numbers are not empirical statistical realities. Instead, they serve as numeric heuristics: the “85%” speaks to the masses of people who do not know who they are, and who have believed in “mystery gods” for their sustenance and salvation.

In line with his reframing of the first lesson—namely, that the black man is god—Allah announced that the Five Percent’s knowledge of “the true and living God” is nothing more and nothing less than self-knowledge; divinity is not housed in a “mystery god,” but is instead just who the black man is. Even if Jay-Z is not a Five Percenter, consider his lines in the remix “We Made It”:

Showed up to the last supper in some brand new J’s/I’m the true and livin’/book of
Hov/New religion, 8th wonder of the world/alien superstition/you’re blind, baby/blind
to the fact of who you are maybe/my bloodline’s crazy/kings and queens and Michael
Jordan rings . . .

For Jay-Z, the blindness speaks to a lack of knowledge of self; being “blind to fact of who you are” is to be trapped in the mindset of the 85%, who do not know who God is—which means that they do not know who they are.

48. Cited in Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 122.

It is one thing to simply claim one’s divinity; indeed, the Five Percenters are not the first to make such a claim. As Lewis Gordon tells us, the history of Western philosophical thinking might also be understood as a deification of whiteness; in an antiblack world, whiteness has already been reconfigured as divine while blackness is understood as beneath human.⁴⁹ Disrupting this logic, the Five Percenters claim that blackness is divine, but such a claim needs to be substantiated. One is not only tasked with knowing that one is god, but also showing and proving one’s divinity.

Elsewhere, I have claimed that this process of showing and proving spoke to a demonstrative phenomenological position that blurs the line between epistemology and ontology; one’s being as a God is connected to what one knows—despite the factual realities of white supremacist antiblackness.⁵⁰ The demonstrative disposition, however, is only possible through a rigorous catechism. In the same way that Allah trained to become an AFOI, each Five Percenter-in-training must be able to recite, from memory, a series of 120 lessons, as well as memorize a complex numerological and alphabetical system called the “Supreme Mathematics” and the “Supreme Alphabets.” These numerological and alphabetical systems constitute(d), among other tools, a critical hermeneutical device used for “sciencing out” or discerning deeper meanings of the universe.

It is also here that we see a comparative moment in Islamic esotericism. The Supreme Alphabets are immediately reminiscent of the esoteric “science of letters,” *‘ilm al-ḥurūf*, which developed within esoteric and Sufi milieus especially from the twelfth century onwards. Arabic letters were claimed to have divine significance, especially those known as “the disconnected ones” (*al-muqatta‘āt*) which appear at the beginning of some Qur’anic chapters. The interpretation of these letters occupied esotericists but were generally considered to “constitute the spiritual forms that emerge from God’s engendering fiat, ‘Be!’,” become

49. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*.

50. Gray, “Show and Prove.”

understood as “the true essence of the thing that comes into being.” They are the building blocks of the cosmos, the realization and understanding of which reveals wisdom and transforms the internal and external reality of the one who pursues them. They can be steps on the ladder of *taraqqi*.⁵¹ For our purposes here, we can see strong similarities—and possibly even stronger differences—between the two alphabetical systems, particularly the anti-quotidian orientation of the science of letters. We emphasize though that there is no evidence that the Supreme Alphabet is directly derived from the science of letters.

Similar to the science of letters, the Supreme Alphabet of the Five Percenters articulates significant correspondences between each letter and a larger conceptual reality. Moreover, the correspondence that each letter signifies can “[generate] an effect according to a purpose.”⁵² This is, however, where the similarities stop, as the correspondences of the Supreme Alphabet are not supernatural; the “Allah” to which the letters (particularly the letter A itself) refer is simply the flesh-and-bone reality of the black (wo)men who are able to creatively use the letters to discern deeper meanings about the concrete natural and social worlds within which they find themselves.

Analogical resonances remain, however, between medieval and early modern Sufism and the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets, one of which is the centrality of meditation—by which I mean consistent and rigorous intellectual engagement. Though the forms of meditation differ between Sufism and Five Percenter life, they share a similarity in that, like the science of letters, the Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics emerged after long and rigorous textual study—particularly of the NOI’s “Lost-Found Lesson No. 13,” which is a series of riddles that asks about the meaning of numbers and letters.

I quote part of the text here:

After learning Mathematics, which is Islam, and Islam is Mathematics, it stands true.
You can always prove it at no limit of time. Then you must learn to use it and secure

51. Liana Saif, “From *Gayat al-bakim* to *Sams al ma’arif*,” 311.

52. *Ibid.*, 312.

some benefits while you are living—that is luxury, money, good homes, friendships in all walks of life . . .

The Secretary of Islam offers a reward to the best and neatest worker of this problem.

There are twenty-six letters in the Language and if a Student learns one letter per day, then how long will it take to learn the twenty-six letters?

There are ten numbers in the Mathematical Language. Then how long will it take a Student to learn the whole ten numbers (at the above rate)?⁵³

According to Wakeel Allah, “the Elders of the Five Percent Nation began to dissect the problem,” and eventually developed the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets, wherein each letter or number is given a “mystical meaning” that one can use to further understand the nature of the world around himself or herself. The Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme Alphabets are as follows:⁵⁴

(1) Knowledge	(A) Allah	(N) Now, Nation, or End
(2) Wisdom	(B) Be or Born	(O) Cipher
(3) Understanding	(C) See	(P) Power
(4) Culture or Freedom	(D) Divine	(Q) Queen
(5) Power or Refinement	(E) Equality	(R) Rule, Righteous
(6) Equality	(F) Father	(S) Self, Savior
(7) God	(G) God	(T) Truth or Square
(8) Build or Destroy	(H) He or Her	(U) You or Universe
(9) Born	(I) I, Islam	(V) Victory
(0) Cipher	(J) Justice	(W) Wisdom, Woman
	(K) King	(X) Unknown
	(L) Love, Hell or Right	(Y) Why
	(M) Master	(Z) Zig Zag Zig

53. Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 117.

54. *Ibid.*, 118–19. It is important to know that other sources (from whom I’ve heard orally) may not agree with the meanings of the numbers 5 and 8.

Drawing from both of these systems, one is able to “science out” or discern new and different meanings about one’s existence in relation to the world. In the song “On and On,” for example, Erykah Badu sings: “I was born underwater/with three dollars and six dimes/oh you may laugh/’cause you didn’t do your math.” One may actually laugh if one actually took the line to actually mean that Badu was born with \$3.60. But consider the math: 3.60 might mean that Badu was born with understanding (3) and equality (6), and this became her cipher (0), the key through which she could further understand the world. Or, the 3.60 might mean 360, as in 360 degrees, which is a perfect circle, which would, again, be a cipher (0), which would still be a key to knowledge. Or, further still, 360 adds up to 9 ($3+6+0=9$), which would be the number for “born,” which would speak to her actual birth or her womb—the roundness of which would resemble the number zero, which would again be a cipher for unlocking new forms of knowledge.

Womb, understanding, equality, circle: in this single line, there are at least three different meanings that could be deciphered, and there are far more possibilities—because I am not a Five Percenter, my application of the Supreme Mathematics does not carry the same depth or breadth of understanding as an actual god’s analysis would. And this is why the chorus to her song is “on and on/my cipher keeps moving like a rolling stone”: the new knowledge keeps growing, so the cipher keeps moving, like a rolling stone—but only if one is attuned to the mystical meanings of the numbers themselves. You may laugh, but it’s because you didn’t do your math—which means you do not have knowledge of self. As Badu sings in the chorus: “If we were made in His image, then call us by our name/most intellects do not believe in God/but they fear us just the same.” To be able to do the math is to show and prove one’s divinity; it is to demonstrate one’s existence as God by proving one’s access to the hidden dimensions of existence made possible by the Supreme Mathematics.

From the reconfigured meanings of traditional Islamic terminology to the development and application of the Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme

Alphabets, the Five Percenters demonstrate an esoteric knowledge, known to the few, but delivered orally and in plain sight. What makes these teachings mystical, however, is the fact that the demonstration of one's divinity is only done in community; the term "cipher" also takes on a social meaning, as ciphers are often informal circles where the gods come together to "build," to "science out" new meanings in community with one another. Showing and proving is a social reality. The impossibility of showing and proving on one's own—that is, by oneself—speaks to an "undifferentiated identity," a blurred line between the individual and social, such that even if the gods emphasize individual identity (which they do), such an identity is only legitimated, only recognized, in the space of the social, in the hold of the community.⁵⁵

One final point about this sociality is that it is fiercely egalitarian. Each god has his own right to understand the lessons how he pleases. One god can, for example, endorse marijuana, while another might condemn its use. This egalitarianism also speaks to the social; with no hierarchical structure, the Five Percenters allow the development of knowledge to be an ongoing affair, grounded in nothing but the communal sharing of various perspectives—yet another dimension of the undifferentiated identity I have been tracing up to this point.

Lastly, the traumatic mysticism of the Five Percenters is refracted through the lens of a black tradition whose most forceful announcement occurs within the slave ship and the plantation. In the song "We Made it," rapper Jay Electronica (who is associated with, but not fully a part of, the Five Percenters) raps:

The devil, the haters, the bloggers, the papers, the labels, they labeled me; but they can't relate to our struggle . . . we came up from slavery . . . this one is for all of the lost and forgotten black angels who prayed for me.⁵⁶

55. On the social versus individual orientations of Islamic esotericism see, Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?," in this issue.

56. Jay Electronica, "We Made It."

Later on, rapper Jay-Z will pepper in Five Percenter references, claiming that “G is the seventh letter made/so with my arms and feet shackled, I still get paid.” Though neither of them is fully incorporated into the Five Percenter way of life, both rappers articulate the mystical power and promise of the Five Percenters’ lifeworld. Even when one isn’t a Five Percenter—which is to say, even when one stands “outside” of the “boundaries” between who is in and who is out—the potency of Five Percenter thought is palpable, offering non-gods the possibility of at least resonating with divine knowledge. And, as I said before, this form of divinity is concrete and mundane—it’s about the here and now.

Jay Electronica’s and Jay-Z’s references to the Five Percenters’ worldview articulate a mystical possibility of non-relation, the refusal—or at least the transcendence—of the validity of the world (the bloggers, the papers, the labels . . .) that is occasioned by a tradition inaugurated in slavery, in the “cotton fields” where black life emerged in and through the perpetual threat of various forms of black death. This kind of life beyond the social death conferred to black people in the United States is consistent with the life lived in the hold of the ship, the life developed in the darkness of social death that could not be contained or restrained through various forms of repression and violence. The Five Percenters’ emergence came at a time of racial upheaval in the ‘60s, and Allah was continually surveilled by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies; indeed, at one point, Allah was committed to the violent Matteawan Institute for the Criminally Insane in New York because he claimed to be god and because his followers were understood as a street gang.⁵⁷ And yet, despite his committal, various sources tell us that the Five Percent Nation grew during Allah’s stay upstate. Though Jay Electronica may not be a Five Percenter, his song “We Made It” is an ode to the beyond of blackness, to the story of making it “from slaves on a slave ship, live from the cotton fields,” and “straight into the spaceship.”

57. Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 165–80.

However, in typical Five Percenter fashion, we would do well not to understand the spaceship literally. Jay Electronica’s invocation of the “spaceship” is likely a reference to the “mothership” of the NOI: in NOI mythology and cosmology, the “Mothership” is a large military spacecraft that will contribute to, if not completely inaugurate, an apocalyptic era in which the United States will be razed to the ground and black people will rise up to lead in its ashes.⁵⁸ It will at once destroy this evil age and regenerate the world in a “millennial” era. However, Allah interpreted “mothership” as “mother’s hip,” reconnecting it back to the concrete world of en fleshed social engagement. In this regard, the growth of Allah’s Five Percent nation had everything to do with hitting the streets and building; it was the mystical commitment to blackness—not the mysticism of a mystery god—that occasioned the growth of Allah’s movement. And this growth offered nothing less than a new and different way of engaging in community. “Peace, God!” is as much a greeting as it is a communal identification.

From the violent context of antiblackness to the production and development of new forms of knowledge and sociality, the Five Percenters speak to a (non-)mystical tradition, one birthed out of the blackness that is the West’s secret and sustained by the continued attempts to live lives of communal uplift. This is not to say that the Five Percenters are perfect; I do not want to romanticize the group. There are gendered and sexual distinctions that can be and often are quite troubling. But I am saying that their community—birthed from an esoteric blackness and generative of esoteric and mystical forms of knowledge—speaks to a kind of relation that is a non-relation, a transcendence of the violence of this world in order to speak to an inherent unity, an “undifferentiated” identity that continues to preserve and enable black people—usually men—to live with dignity. Jay Electronica tells us that the story of blackness is “the greatest story ever told,” and I’m inclined to agree, with a slight modifica-

58. For more on the NOI’s Ufology, see “The Meaning of ‘Mother’ in Louis Farrakhan’s ‘Mother Wheel,’” 434–65.

tion: maybe this is the greatest story never told—or at least not told sufficiently. The 5% remain the 5% precisely because they know most of the world won't listen. And while this might be a problem, it does not stop the Five Percenters from living their lives and continuing to build in community.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I want to highlight a significant implication that, until this point, has been implicit throughout the essay. Part of refusing distinctions is the refusal of the boundary between secret and public; though they are “poor righteous teachers,” Five Percenters have become notorious because of their ability to disseminate their knowledge through one of the most innovative forms of American popular culture: hip hop. Throughout this article, I've referenced hip hop and neo-soul music in order to signal how music has been a considerable medium for the sharing of Five Percenter thought. Indeed, many people who have been associated with Five Percent thought, life, and culture—from the Wu Tang Clan to Jay Electronica and Erykah Badu—have shown that the emphasis on lyricism in hip hop can be used as a powerful tool for sharing the knowledge of the gods. It may be the case that such dissemination is coincidental, but I don't think that this is actually the case; hip hop's emphasis on verbal mastery and improvisation makes it a critical and productive outlet, a musical archive, that allows for esoteric thought to be developed and transmitted. Not all Five Percenters are rappers, neither are all rappers Five Percenters. But what hip hop does, what the Emcee can do, is leave traces of one's heritage in one's musical production.

Leaving such a trace does not simply allow for many Five Percenters to take care of themselves and their families; it also allows for them to continue their tradition, as they continue to apply their knowledge of the Lessons to the world of white supremacist antiblackness. The language and knowledge of the gods offers the possibility of turning one's shackles into one's adornments, of transforming languages of constraint into discourses of prosperity. Birthed out of

the secret of blackness, and maintained through the continued mystical practice of undifferentiated identity, “making it” signals the possibility of a life lived beyond the purview of antiblack violence; it names a life that is fiercely individual, but only substantiated in community. It names the impossibility of distinguishing between the ethereal and the material, between the human and the divine.

To be a god is to deny the violence of the white supremacist and antiblack world of the West (including the study of Western esotericism) its legitimacy; godhood is the announcement of the perpetual attempt to transcend (the violence of) the “Western” world in favor of those who have been denied access to the world. It is to transcend downward and inward to the social life of social death, to live beyond the constraints of the death imposed upon blackness from the outside. In this regard, even if Western esotericism carries the heavy existential baggage of its own dialectical and totalizing alterity; even if the language and thought of the gods is “extremely problematic”; and even if the only esotericism that emerges in the West are the forms that are recognized as the “specific products of Western culture,” the Five Percenters will still persist. Or, as Allah himself once said, “Even if the whole world denies you, never deny yourself, because it’s your own doubt that can stop you from being Allah.”⁵⁹ Maybe self-denial is the hindrance, not the portal, to the mystical life—a life lived in undifferentiated identity, where the lines between the individual and the social, between the esoteric and the exoteric, between the divine and the human, are blurred—or at least rendered permeable.

Or at least it seems this way for the gods of the Five Percent Nation.

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59. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 165.

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Esotericisation and De-esotericisation of Sufism: The Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya in Italy

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Abstract

In this article I will analyse the Sufi order Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya based in Milan, established by Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini in the 1980s. This is one of the most important Sufi orders in Italy, and it is engaged in interreligious dialogue activities and institutional relations with Italian political actors. I will argue that this Sufi order has experienced a process of esotericisation, “Western”-style, in the sense that: 1) it was shaped by the “forms of thought” of the French esotericist René Guénon; 2) following Hanegraaff’s and von Stuckrad’s definitions, it embodies both a rejected and an absolute knowledge; and 3) it is characterised by a sectarian organisational structure, which has distanced it from other Islamic communities. Starting from the 2010s, this Sufi order has been living through a process of “de-esotericisation,” following the same sense outlined before, in that the absolute knowledge is gradually opening up to other forms of esoteric knowledge and the sectarian dimensions are gradually fading, allowing a dialogue with other Islamic communities.

Keywords: Sufism; Islam; Esotericism; Metaphysics; Traditionalism

Introduction

In this article I will analyse the Sufi order Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya (from now on AIS) based in Milan, established by Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini in the 1980s. Forming part of a broader socio-anthropological research project in which I examined five Sufi orders in Paris and Milan, the data leading to the present article were collected between 2013 and 2014, when I participated in the AIS weekly religious meetings in Milan (six months in total). Furthermore, I attended a one-week spiritual retreat and interviewed fourteen disciples, focusing on life-story narratives.

I will argue that this Sufi order, like other Sufi orders in Europe and North America,¹ experienced a process of esotericisation, which entails a reconfiguration of doctrines, rituals, and organisational structures. Sufi and Islamic practices have been inscribed by these actors within the frame of Western esotericism, implying an estrangement between the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya and other Islamic and Sufi communities.

I will also argue that, starting from the 2010s, this Sufi order has been living through a process of de-esotericisation. Before addressing these processes, I will clarify my use of the term esotericism, and I will briefly present the work of René Guénon, a French esotericist and intellectual who deeply influenced this autonomous Italian branch of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya.

Esotericism(s) and Sufism(s)

The heterogeneity of Sufism throughout its history discourages the use of a single descriptive category such as mysticism, esotericism, asceticism, spirituality, popular religion, or intellectual religion. All these categories could be either useful or misleading, depending on the specific context. Therefore, as has been argued by Simon Sorgenfrei, Sufism cannot be exclusively equated with esotericism.² Nonetheless, we cannot deny the existence and the peculiarity of Islamic exotericism, which is discussed in this special issue by Liana Saif, who shows its historical origins in *bāṭinism* and its intertwining with global esotericism.

But how does esotericism in the Western context map onto an Italian Sufi *ṭarīqa*? First, we must revisit some arguments concerning the meaning of esotericism in this context. As pointed out by Antoine Faivre,³ “esotericism” did not come into use until the eighteenth century. Faivre offers a very broad definition of Western esotericism: “a set of currents” that have strong similarities

1. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected,” 154–57; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World, passim*.

2. Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected,” 5.

3. Faivre, *L'ésotérisme*, 4.

and are historically connected.⁴ In other words, esotericism is a group of specific “forms of thought” (*forms de pensée*) that are identified by “four fundamental elements,” namely, correspondence, living nature, imagination and mediation, and experience of transmission.⁵ This approach has been considered as functionalist by Wouter Hanegraaff, who challenged Faivre’s analysis, proposing instead an historical and genealogical examination.⁶

According to Hanegraaff, esotericism is a “waste-basket category” which gathers together different fields of knowledge and practices perceived as “incompatible with normative concepts of religion, rationality and science”⁷ as they were defined firstly by early Protestant religious thinkers and later by Enlightenment thinkers. This process of othering, which created a sharp divide between rational, scientific, true, and irrational, archaic, superstitious, is at the heart of Western esotericism.⁸ Hanegraaff’s ground-breaking interpretation shed new light not only on Western esotericism, but more broadly on the history of Western societies.

On the other hand, Hanegraaff’s work created a heated debate that is still ongoing. For example, Marco Pasi stressed that esotericism as an “historiographical concept” has to sacrifice consistency and effectiveness in the analysis of esoteric contents. Furthermore, according to Pasi, the focus on rejection – on the process of othering – cannot represent the only perspective on esoteric themes, because “this tradition existed independently of the rejection and of the stigma.”⁹ Pasi and Olav Hammer prefer a substantive definition of esotericism, bringing back and elaborating Faivre’s approach to the field.¹⁰

Completely different is the critique of Kocku von Stuckrad, who took Hanegraaff’s deconstruction of esotericism to its extreme conclusion. Even if

4. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

5. *Ibid.*, 19–21.

6. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 337.

7. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 13.

8. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” 79.

9. Pasi, “The Problems of Rejected Knowledge,” 210.

10. Hammer, “Deconstructing ‘Western Esotericism’.”

these authors share the same genealogy of the category of esotericism, as a form of othering rooted in modern history, for von Stuckrad “esoteric” became an adjective qualifying a discourse claiming a higher or perfect knowledge: “a vision of truth as a master-key for answering all questions of humankind.”¹¹ Von Stuckrad’s esoteric discourse is inscribed in Western culture as a counter-discourse in opposition to mainstream religious narratives; this is possible thanks to the rhetoric of secrecy, capable of bestowing status, prestige, and symbolic capital on those who possess the perfect knowledge.¹² As has been argued by Michael Stausberg, the merit of this approach is to move away from the perspective of a normative Christianity that defines and rejects esoteric phenomena towards a broad religious field where different actors intermingle.¹³ This shift entailed another heated debate about the possible and necessary expansion of the category esotericism beyond the Christian European context.¹⁴

These debates inform my intellectual treatment of the construct as an heuristic tool and a historical phenomenon; however, as an anthropologist-sociologist of religion, I am, similar to Brannon Ingram’s analysis, more interested in what “‘esoteric’ does rather than what it is,”¹⁵ that is, how “esoteric” is understood and its implication in specific social and political spheres. I use esotericism in this context as a heuristic device that sheds light on socio-political activities.¹⁶ My purpose in this article is to analyse how the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya

11. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 61.

12. *Ibid.*, x, 51–59.

13. Stausberg, “What Is *It* All About?”

14. Discussion of this expansion can be found in Stausberg “What Is *It* All About?,” *passim*; Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *passim*; Stuckrad, “Ancient Esotericism, Problematic Assumptions, and Conceptual Trouble,” *passim*; Faivre, “Kocku von Stuckrad et la Notion D’Esoterisme,” *passim*.

15. Ingram, “René Guénon And The Traditionalist Polemic,” 203.

16. A method employed by Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism,” 4; see Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 3–33 for an approach in comparative analysis that favours a typology “constructed along two axes: a homological-analogical axis distinguishes between comparison based on shared genealogy (homology) versus purely structural or functional comparisons (analogy), while a synchronic-diachronic axis picks out a temporal dimension.”

has been negotiating Islamic, Sufi, and Western esoteric references, and how these ideas have influenced practices, rituals, and organisational structures. I will also argue that both Hanegraaff's "rejected knowledge" and von Stuckrad's "absolute knowledge" are useful instruments in describing this Sufi order.

René Guénon's Legacy in Contemporary Sufism

René Guénon is a key figure of twentieth-century Western esotericism. It would even be possible to advance the idea that his work possesses a particular form of charismatic authority which would be neither related to the author in person, since he lived a very reserved life, nor to a specific associated religious group, which has never existed as such. His popularity is, rather, rooted in his writings. I refer here to what PierLuigi Zoccatelli describes as the "charisma of the book."¹⁷ His intellectual disciples, from different religious and intellectual backgrounds, gave life to the heterogeneous school of thought known as "traditionalism."¹⁸

René Guénon was born in Blois, France in 1886, and grew up in a bourgeois Catholic family. In 1904 he moved to Paris, where he attended university and began to frequent the local esoteric milieu. In the course of a few years, he came into contact with occultism, Freemasonry, and the Gnostic Church. The encounter with the "East," including Hinduism and Islamic esotericism, was an important turning point in his life. Hinduism was the subject of his doctoral thesis and his first book, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* and thanks to the mediation of the Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli he joined the Sufi order Shādiliyya and later moved to Cairo, where he lived until his death in 1951.¹⁹ Guénon took the Muslim name of Abd al-Wahid Yahya.

Guénon's area of study was notably vast: he studied and wrote commentaries on Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Christianity, Celtic religion, Judaism and Kab-

17. Zoccatelli, "AAA. Sociologia Dell'esoterismo Cercasi," 84.

18. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, *passim*; Bisson, *René Guénon*; Laurant, *René Guénon*, *passim*.

19. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 59.

balah, Islamic esotericism, Freemasonry, Hinduism, Alchemy, and Taoism. This all-embracing approach, including religious, spiritual, metaphysical, and also social phenomena, allowed him to write a new history of the world, focused on the sacred, and challenging twentieth-century mainstream European narratives, tackling the supposed superiority of a Western civilisation destined to inexorable progress.²⁰

According to Guénon's interpretation, religions are composed of two dimensions, one exoteric, expressed by rituals, dogmas, and cosmologies, and one esoteric/metaphysical, which conveys hidden supranational and universal truths: "Metaphysics is the knowledge of universal principles, upon which all things necessarily depend, directly or indirectly."²¹ These truths or universal metaphysical principles are the reflection of a single "primordial tradition," the essence of all religions.²²

Following Guénon's approach, all religions share the same metaphysical truth and differ only in their outward forms. Among religions, some have better preserved the connection with the primordial source, while others have almost totally lost it, becoming "simulacra." Of course, Guénon was not the first to conceptualise a common religious source for all humanity. The *philosophia perennis* has been one of the hallmarks of Western esotericism since the Renaissance;²³ Guénon's peculiarity was to connect this conceptualisation of religions with the critique of modernity and Western societies.

Guénon elaborates Hindu eschatology, borrowing the idea of cyclical evolutions. The cycle in which modern and contemporary societies are inscribed is the *Kali Yuga*, the age of discord, or "the Iron Age" marked by spiritual corruption, violence, and destruction.²⁴ Western modernity is a "perpetual carnival" where all values are reversed.²⁵ Guénon addresses his criticism to materialist and scientific

20. Bisson, *René Guénon*, 29; Accart, *Guénon ou le renversement des clartés*, *passim*.

21. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 51 (my translation from French).

22. Guénon, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*, 32; Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 97.

23. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 7.

24. Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, 11–14; similar ideas are found in Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, *passim*, and *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps*, *passim*.

25. Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, 113.

rationalism,²⁶ but also to new religious forms, such as spiritualism, occultism, the Theosophical Society, and Jungian interpretation of religions, which he considered to be not only innovations but the “invisible engine” of the corruption of Western societies.²⁷ According to Guénon’s critique of modernity, modern political phenomena such as human rights conventions and liberal democracies are the fruit of the “deification of the human being,”²⁸ which challenged traditional hierarchies: “it is the negation of all-natural hierarchies, and is the lowering of all knowledge to the level of the limited mind of the vulgar.”²⁹

In order to counter this spiritual and material decadence and corruption, Guénon looked at the East, where, he believed, religions preserved a deeper relation with the primordial tradition. For Guénon, the East possesses “the awareness of eternity,”³⁰ which protects it from the nefarious effects of modernity: “even if people from the East, to a certain extent, are forced to accept material progress, this will never entail a profound change for them.”³¹ Ingram aptly describes how Guénon creates “a polarity between East and West that resonates with the Orientalist tradition; the East is anti-modern, medieval, feudal, static, unified, and monolithic, while the West is modern, democratic, always changing, always divided.”³²

René Guénon and his intellectual work are inscribed in the frame of Western esotericism for several reasons: first of all, because of his intellectual background and relations with occultism and Freemasonry,³³ secondly, because of the content of his work, or “forms of thought” using Faivre’s category,³⁴ that are identified with *philosophia perennis*, the esoteric initiation transmitted from master to

26. Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps*, 65–69, 89–92.

27. Ibid. Ch. 36: “Pseudo Initiation.”

28. Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, 322.

29. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 59.

30. Ibid., 95.

31. Ibid., 122.

32. Ingram, “René Guénon And The Traditionalist Polemic,” 205.

33. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*.

34. Faivre, *L’ésotérisme*, 22,31; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 15.

disciple, and the existence of subtle correspondences that resonate with several esoteric phenomena.³⁵ Furthermore, as has been argued by Ingram, following Stuckrad's approach, Guénon is esoteric in his claim for a totalising absolute knowledge in opposition to a profane understanding of reality. Finally, Guénon could be labelled esoteric also following Hanegraaff's conceptualisation; in fact, Guénon reclaims a metaphysical knowledge that has been rejected by Western societies, and like other esotericists he "refuse[s] to accept the disappearance of incalculable mystery from the world."³⁶

Guénon is an essential figure in the development of Sufism in Europe, since many Europeans, especially in France, Belgium, Spain, and Italy, discovered Sufism through his books.³⁷ Nowadays, his legacy reaches beyond the Western esoteric milieu: in fact, his works are also influential in the New Age milieu,³⁸ and among many lifelong Muslims in Turkey and in North Africa.³⁹ Due to Guénon's prolific career covering a variety of subjects, and due also to the heterogeneity of Sufism in Europe, it is difficult to grasp what the nucleus of Guénon's legacy in contemporary Sufism may be. Some Sufi leaders and intellectuals stressed the concept of primordial tradition, as in the case of Khaled Bentounes and the 'Alāwiyya and the Būdshīshīyya, engaged in interreligious dialogue and promoting an inclusive and Islamic universalism.⁴⁰ On the other hand, other Sufi masters stressed the anti-modernist narratives within Guénon's legacy.⁴¹

35. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 7.

36. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254.

37. This is explored in detail in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, *passim*; Bisson, "Soufisme et Tradition. L'influence de René Guénon sur l'islam soufi européen," *passim*; Piraino, "René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle," *passim*.

38. Piraino, "René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle," *passim*.

39. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 241–62.

40. Piraino, "René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle," 40; Piraino, "Les Politiques Du Soufisme En France," 142; Piraino, "Pilgrimages in Western European Sufism," 168; Piraino, "Who Is the Infidel?" 77.

41. See for example Claudio Mutti in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 260.

Guénon's ideas merged with other cultural and religious influences, such as Sufism in North Africa, the academic interpretation of Sufism,⁴² and New Age culture. Notwithstanding, starting from the 1930s, a specific kind of Sufism based on Guénon's ideas, and reproducing doctrines, practices, and organisational structures of Western esotericism, started to develop, in a process of (Western) esotericisation of Sufism.⁴³ This is the case with the Mariamiyya (Frithjof Schuon), the Darqāwiyya (Roger Maridort), and the Aḥmadiyya Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya (Abd Al-Wahid Pallavicini), which is probably the last Guénonian-inspired Sufi order to be growing both in numbers and in political relevance.

The esotericisation of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya

Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, born in 1926, converted to Islam on January 7, 1951, the same year his spiritual master, Guénon, died. He took Guénon's first Muslim name "Abd Al-Wahid." Pallavicini stressed the continuity between his Christian and Islamic practices in the name of a perennial religion, root of every traditional religious form. Furthermore, he stressed his aristocratic lineage, because according to Guénon the aristocracy reflected spiritual and social hierarchies in pre-modern societies.⁴⁴ This aristocratic spirit was confirmed in his youth by his participation in the Second World War as a supporter of monarchism.

It's the question of "monism" which led me from Monarchy to Monotheism, always in the respect of the hierarchical order between the two principles of Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power, to recall an important work by René Guénon.⁴⁵

42. Cf. Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, *passim*; Griffith, "Sharing the Faith of Abraham," *passim*.

43. Zarcone and Vale, "Rereadings and Transformations of Sufism in the West," 115.

44. Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, 60.

45. Nesti, "Da Partigiano Monarchico Durante La Resistenza All'opzione Monoteista Islamica. Un Intervista Allo Shaykh Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini," 95. The cited work of René Guénon is Guénon, *Autorité Spirituelle et Pouvoir Temporel*.

Pallavicini, through the mediation of Julius Evola⁴⁶ and Titus Burckhardt,⁴⁷ joined the Swiss “Alāwiyya order led by Frithjof Schuon.⁴⁸ For doctrinal reasons — Pallavicini considered the Swiss *ṭarīqa* not orthodox enough — he left for Asia in search of a spiritual guide.⁴⁹ In 1971, he joined Abd al-Rashid ibn Muhammad Said’s *ṭarīqa* Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya.⁵⁰

In 1980, Pallavicini returned to Milan to write the book *In memoriam René Guénon*, thanks to which he became well-known and welcomed his first disciples. Shortly afterwards, he founded the “Centre of Metaphysical Studies,” which brought together many Italian traditionalists. At the beginning of the 1990s, the AIS experienced an important turning point: intellectual debates, focused on “metaphysics,” gave way to political action focused on interreligious relations. In 1993, Pallavicini founded the *Associazione Internazionale per l’Informazione sull’Islam* (International Association for Information on Islam), which in 1997 became the COREIS (*Comunità Religiosa Islamica* [Islamic Religious Community]). Over the past fifteen years, the COREIS has been recognised by several Italian institutions and become a key partner. Despite this high visibility, the COREIS does not have more than one hundred followers. In 2017, Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini died in Milan at the age of ninety-two, and his son Yahya has been leading the Sufi order since then.

46. Julius Evola (1898–1974) was an Italian philosopher, painter, and esotericist. He is one of the key figures of European extreme right thought. For an introduction to his thought, see Furlong, *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*.

47. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) was a German Swiss Traditionalist, converted to Islam and Sufism, and an important author on Sufism.

48. Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) was a German Swiss, one of the first European disciples of the “Alāwiyya, founder of the Mariamiyya, and in the last years of his life he practiced Native American rituals; cf. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 147–60.

49. Pallavicini did not explain how and why Schuon’s Sufi order was not orthodox; as Sedgwick suggested, the disagreement could be also related to personal reasons (*ibid.*, 137).

50. *Ibid.*

Doctrines: Rejected and Absolute Knowledge

We can grasp the process of esotericisation of the AIS, showing how Guénonian “form of thought” shaped the AIS. Guénon’s pivotal role is evident when we read Abd Al-Wahid Pallavicini’s book *L’Islam interieur* (Inner Islam), where Guénon is quoted sixty-six times against twenty-eight for the prophet Muhammad. This Guénonisation of Islam is also evident when Yahya Pallavicini forces the Qur’anic translation, transforming “*dīn al-qaiyyama*” (Quran 98, 5), generally translated as “the correct [or upright] religion,” into the “Primordial Tradition.”⁵¹

Shaykh Abd Al-Wahid stressed that his mission was to bear witness to the metaphysical message: the “primordial tradition,” which is the metahistorical essence of religion. But what is metaphysics for Pallavicini? It is not the philosophy of Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger, or Catholic or Protestant theology; it is not Islamic theology, which is rarely mentioned in his works. It is mainly epitomised by Guénon, “whose work represents a true intellectual miracle, and fills six centuries of absence of metaphysical perspective in the West, since the dissolution of the order of the Temple in 1313.”⁵²

Drawing from Guénon’s works, Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini and his followers created a metaphysical language, fundamental in the construction of his own religious orthodoxy. In Pallavicini’s discourses, “Tradition,” “Metaphysics,” and “Esotericism” have overlapping meanings and are often interchangeable; all of them evoke a transcendental dimension that at the same time surpasses religious exoteric forms.

Metaphysics is beyond philosophy. Metaphysics is even beyond theology. In our inter-religious encounters we notice that the true possibility of encounter between religions is in metaphysics, because theologies must be different by definition.⁵³

51. Pallavicini, *L’Islam in Europa*, 97.

52. Pallavicini, *L’Islam interieur*, 147–48.

53. Nesti, “Da Partigiano Monarchico Durante La Resistenza All’opzione Monoteista Islamica. Un Intervista Allo Shaykh Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini,” 98.

Metaphysics is therefore a much more fruitful stratum that reaches beyond the theological and dogmatic limits of each religion. Metaphysics can be embodying, grasping and witnessing the primordial tradition. This perennial interpretation of religions does not entail that all religious actors are equal in understanding and living the metaphysical essence. In fact, the conceptualisation of Pallavicini/Guénon of esoteric and exoteric orthodoxies, that define how the primordial tradition may be understood, are normative and strict. Finally, in this context the doctrine of primordial tradition is not at all universal, but is restricted to specific interpretations and practices that I will describe in the next paragraphs.

For Pallavicini, exoteric orthodoxy, following Guénon's anti-modernism,⁵⁴ implies that every religious innovation is an estrangement from tradition. This is the case with Protestantism, which represents an innovation, challenging the traditional authority of the Catholic Church, and promoting individualism,⁵⁵ but it is even more relevant for new religious movements, alternative spiritualities, and psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations of religious phenomena, which are not only regarded as an innovation but as "counter-initiatic," the action of the anti-Christ,⁵⁶ because they embody a parody of religion.

Furthermore, according to Pallavicini, traditional and orthodox behaviour also concerns everyday life: "Tradition" is the set of doctrines, values, rituals, religious rules, behaviours, and institutions that make up religious life. "Traditional" becomes the antithesis of modern: for example the peasants who lead a simple life become "the defenders of the tradition."⁵⁷ Any social innovation is anti-traditional: for example, feminism, and LGBTQ rights are anti-traditional and the expression of Western corruption.

According to Guénon and Pallavicini, not all religions which have conserved the exoteric orthodoxy have also preserved the esoteric dimension. The most

54. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 263–68.

55. Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, 47.

56. Pallavicini, *In memoriam René Guénon*, 17.

57. Leila, fieldwork notes 2013, Milan.

important example is the Catholic Church, which lost the transmission of esoteric knowledge due to the suppression of the Templar order at the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵⁸ Hence, Catholics have access to salvation, but they cannot be initiated into the esoteric and metaphysical knowledge.

It is not always easy to understand what esoteric or metaphysical orthodoxy does entail, or the distinction between traditional and anti-traditional, orthodox and un-orthodox described by Pallavicini and his disciples. These categories are not clear-cut in the AIS and they could appear quite discretionary. In fact, these differences cannot be grasped by sociological analysis alone, rather an esoteric/metaphysical insight is needed. Furthermore, these categories are malleable instruments in the hands of the AIS, which legitimises its own existence and delegitimises those of other competing groups.

Following the Traditionalist heritage of harsh internal confrontations among small factions competing for Guénon's legacy,⁵⁹ AIS is particularly severe towards other Guénonians and other European Sufi orders, while being quite open towards religious groups in Asia and the Middle East. During my fieldwork with the AIS, I heard many solemn condemnations of the Sufi orders I was studying for my research in Europe, who were accused of being anti-traditional: Shaykh Bentounes ("Alāwiyya) for his liberal and progressive views and for his desire to change Western societies;⁶⁰ Shaykh Nazim (Naqshbandiyya) for the New Age influence on his order;⁶¹ Shaykh Mandel Khan (Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya) for being a psychoanalyst;⁶² and Shaykh Hamza Al-Būdshish (Budshishiyya) for

58. Guénon, *Autorité Spirituelle et Pouvoir Temporel*, 42.

59. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 123–31.

60. Piraino, "Pilgrimages in Western European Sufism," 158.

61. As regards the possible entanglements between New Age culture and the Naqshbandiyya Hāqqaniyya Sufi order, see Nielsen, Draper, and Yemelianova, "Transnational Sufism"; Damrel, "Aspects of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order in North America," 115–26; Piraino, "Between Real and Virtual Communities," 93–108.

62. Piraino, "The Sufi Shaykh and His Patients: Merging Islam, Psychoanalysis, and Western Esotericism," forthcoming.

problems regarding the solidity of the *silsila* (Sufi spiritual genealogy).⁶³ Other critiques concerned Guénonian intellectuals who were accused of abandoning Guénon’s work in favour of studying Ibn Arabī: “they are not only against the work of René Guénon, but it is an attack of the anti-Christ against the *taṣawwuf*, against the Primordial Tradition itself,” commented a young AIS disciple.⁶⁴

AIS represents itself as one of the few religious groups that still respects the metaphysical (Guénonian) orthodoxy. Similarly to Guénon’s work, Pallavicini describes a sense of encirclement and solitude in the quest for esoteric knowledge in contemporary society: the spiritual crisis of the modern human being has become the “most denied of all the conspiracies.”⁶⁵ This is comprehensible only if we address the eschatological issue, and the consequent role of the AIS as the spiritual élite that could restore to balance the corrupted West.

AIS’s eschatology is one of the most important themes in this Sufi order, although it is complex and blurred. The only certainty is “the acceleration of eschatological time,” that is to say, the awareness that the end of this world is getting nearer.⁶⁶ The blurriness is probably due to the overlapping of Islamic and Guénonian cosmologies. The Guénonian eschatology, drawing from Hindu doctrines, describes different cosmic cycles,⁶⁷ and we are at the end of the “cycle of iron,” which will soon give way to another cycle, to another world.⁶⁸

63. To my knowledge there are no ongoing discussions on the legitimacy of the Budshishi *silsila*. For further information about this order, see Chih, “Sufism, Education and Politics in Contemporary Morocco,” 24–46; Dominguez-Diaz, *Women in Sufism, passim*; Piraino, “Les Politiques Du Soufisme En France,” 134–46.

64. Fieldwork note, 2014, Milan.

65. Pallavicini, *In memoriam René Guénon*, 14. Similar ideas can be found in Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps, passim*.

66. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes, 2014.

67. I have to underline that in Isma’ili doctrine there is an elaborate cyclical cosmology, that could recall Guénon’s and Pallavicini’s interpretations; on the other hand, Guénon wrote his theories of eschatology before exploring Islamic doctrines, and to my knowledge Pallavicini referred only to mainstream Islamic theology and Guénon’s thought. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*. First part, ch. III, “*La superstition de la vie*”, 36–46.

68. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*. First part, ch. III, “*La superstition de la vie*”, 36–46.

According to Guénon, Europe could restore its metaphysical sources thanks to a spiritual élite, who will either guide people to salvation or postpone it.⁶⁹ In this perspective, the AIS proposes itself as the root of the European spiritual élite, whose aim is to guide not only the initiates but also other Europeans: “this work is the living demonstration that the intellectual élite⁷⁰ has taken root in the West and works to thwart the anti-spiritual hardened forces.”⁷¹ AIS is the last bastion against modernisation, the only religious movement capable of fulfilling the Guénonian prophecy of a spiritual élite saving the corrupt West.

We have to help our [Catholic] brothers in recognising the Christ, when he will come, but above all to recognise the Anti-Christ. . . . In other words, we should try to straighten this West, this Church, favouring the awareness that we are at the end, and if we do not get back on track we are going to die.⁷²

The critique of modernity and the rehabilitation of a rejected metaphysical knowledge lost in European societies resonates with Wouter Hanegraaff’s definition of esotericism as “rejected knowledge.” AIS claims the re-appropriation of a lost metaphysical knowledge, inverting the stigma: rejecting the rejection. Furthermore, AIS metaphysical knowledge is absolute à la von Stuckrad: “a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history . . . a vision of truth as a master key for answering all questions of humankind.”⁷³ Absolute knowledge that justifies, as I will show, the metapolitical engagement, a certain elitism, and the consequent sectarian organisational structures.

69. Ibid. Second part ch. III, “Constitution et rôle de l’élite”, 85–95.

70. It must be noted that Pallavicini/Guénon, in this context, used the term “intellectual” to express a metaphysical dimension, stemming from the perspective that mystically-oriented discursive process can reveal “metaphysical” truth..

71. Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master’s Message*, 17.

72. Fieldwork note, 2014, Milan.

73. Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism,” 88.

Activities: Metapolitics, Interfaith Dialogue, and Relations with Islamic communities

AIS politics, defined by David Bisson as “metapolitics,” are strictly connected to these doctrines.⁷⁴ AIS metapolitics is a political and spiritual project that aims to influence society through the testimony of the “primordial tradition.” Similar to the category of the spiritual élite, metapolitics oscillates between the idea of educating and that of inspiring but is never interested in directly changing society. For the only possible means of improving the world cannot be implemented at the level of society, of the population, of politics, not even of religion, but only by aiming at the correction of the metaphysical imbalance, through the re-establishment of the metaphysical truth. This approach has been defined as “ecumenism from above,” because it is not interested in influencing the general public but is reserved for a selected few.⁷⁵ This metapolitics corresponds perfectly with Hugh Urban’s analysis of esoteric movements as an elitist phenomenon, composed of highly educated disciples, “who wish, not to undermine existing social structures, but rather subtly to reinforce them, or else to bend and reshape them according to their own interests.”⁷⁶

Pallavicini’s metapolitics only makes sense if we look at history through a Guénonian lens, that is, if we understand history not as a succession of political events and social developments, but as sacred history. The sacred order cannot be restored with the old political and social forms because “sacred history does not repeat.”⁷⁷ This implies that, according to Pallavicini, all claims of a return to the monarchy or the sultanate, representative of a traditional world, are today only infantile pretensions. The second goal of Pallavicini’s metapolitics is the construction of alliances among cultural, religious, and political élites in opposition to anti-traditional forces — the influence of the anti-Christ.

74. Bisson, *René Guénon*, 10.

75. Bisson, “Soufisme et Tradition,” 40.

76. Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism,” 1.

77. Guiderdoni, fieldwork notes 2013.

As for AIS's activities to disseminate its metapolitics and metaphysics, they take place within the fields of 1) cultural activity, 2) dialogue with institutions, and 3) interreligious dialogue. These activities are only possible thanks to commercial enterprises which provide the necessary resources. These enterprises, staffed only by disciples, are: a real estate agency, a graphic company, and "Halal Italia" which guarantees the *halal label* for food products.⁷⁸

The activities pertaining to the interreligious dialogue, especially involving the Jewish and Catholic communities, are the most important. The Islamic public-engagement association affiliated with AIS known as the *Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana* (COREIS) initiates interreligious meetings, despite its small number of members, that are on a national and international scale. In contrast and unsurprisingly, AIS's interreligious dialogue is rather theoretical: no meeting takes place without debating the unity of religions, and without condemnation of relativism-atheism and religious syncretisms.

"The only true interreligious dialogue is the monologue, where the only voice is that of God," where the only voice resembles that of Guénon, who provides the framework and the fabric of the dialogue.⁷⁹ This explains the tension within the *ṭarīqa*, between a dialogue that seeks to inspire and one that seeks to teach. To use a disciple's words: "We are here on a razor's edge. We must not fall into the presumption of teaching to the Church the metaphysics, our task is to guide and inspire."⁸⁰

A good example of this "ecumenism from above,"⁸¹ interested in influencing a selected few rather than the general public, is an interreligious event I attended in Milan in January 2014: "The Temple of Abraham." In a beautiful public building in the centre of Milan, prominent figures such as the American Consul Kyle Scott, Rabbi Rav Marc Schneier from New York, and the President of

78. Complying with Islamic dietary laws.

79. W. Pallavicini, 2013 fieldwork notes.

80. Jebiril, 2013 fieldwork notes.

81. Bisson, "Soufisme et Tradition," 40.

Milan district Guido Podestà, engaged in interfaith dialogue. However, despite an extensive and expensive publicity campaign (they bought an entire page of the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most important Italian newspapers), an audience was almost absent.

During the last thirty years, the AIS, despite limited economic resources and few disciples, has been creating important relations with national and international institutions (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education), with the Catholic Church, and with the Jewish community. Just to give an idea, during my fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, the AIS organised interreligious dialogue events at the Italian and French parliaments. Considering the small number of disciples, fewer than one hundred, AIS's efficiency is impressive.

A certain distance from the general public is not problematic *per se*, in fact interreligious and intercultural dialogue can be promoted at many levels. On the other hand, it is counterproductive for the AIS to present itself – as the COREIS – to the Italian government as the main representative of the Italian Islamic community, proposing legal agreements in the name of all Italian Muslims.⁸² COREIS claims to represent more than five thousand Muslims living in Italy,⁸³ but when I discussed this number with Yahya Pallavicini, underlining that in six months of fieldwork with the AIS and the COREIS I kept on meeting the same eighty disciples, Yahya replied that the five thousand Muslims are not directly affiliated to the COREIS, but are those who collaborate in some activities with the COREIS without other affiliations.⁸⁴

AIS's elitism has produced strong tensions in the relationship with other Italian Islamic organisations, such as the UCOII,⁸⁵ aggravated by AIS's Guénonian language. Pallavicini was perceived not only as distant from the

82. Bombardieri, *Moschee d'Italia*, 16.

83. Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master's Message*, 17.

84. Interview with Yahya Pallavicini, Milan 2014.

85. Unione delle comunità e organizzazioni islamiche in Italia (Union of Islamic communities and organisations in Italy).

problems of Muslim migrants, but also as non-orthodox due to his (Western) esoteric language.⁸⁶ Finally, the separation between the AIS and other Islamic communities is evident in the management of the Al Wahid Mosque in Milan. This mosque, the property of the Pallavicini family, is formally open to Muslims of all nationalities,⁸⁷ but despite that, in six months of fieldwork I witnessed the participation of non-AIS Muslims in the Friday prayer only once, the week after I pointed out to an AIS disciple the absence of other, non-AIS, Muslims.

The tension between the AIS and other Italian Muslim communities clearly has a doctrinal dimension, since both Guénonian esotericism and Sufism are regarded by some Muslims as heterodox, but it has also a political dimension; in fact, discrediting political opponents could be a strategy to gain authority in the representation of Islam with Italian political institutions.⁸⁸ As mentioned before, Pallavicini's son and the current Shaykh, Yahya, is experiencing a turning point — Islamising the Sufi order, and patching up relations with other Italian Islamic communities.

Rituals: Intellectualisation and Verbalisation

Every week AIS disciples gather at the mosque-*ḥāmiyya* for the Friday prayer. Depending on the availability of the disciples, between twenty and forty people participate. The heart of the meeting is the *khutba*, the speech of the imam in Italian, including a short formula in Arabic. Imams take turns, and every week a new imam leads the prayer; even the youngest are called to perform the role of imam. Guiding the prayer and making the sacred speech is indeed envisaged as a kind of *rite de passage* for Pallavicini's disciples. Usually the imam reads a text rich with Qur'anic, Sufi, and Guénonian quotations. The speech is very solemn

86. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 139.

87. <http://www.coreis.it/wp/moschea-al-wahid/>, accessed March 22, 2019.

88. A similar case is the American Naqshbandiyya Hāqqaniyya, which in order to reinforce its political role accused other Muslim communities of radicalism. Dickson, “An American Sufism: The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order as a Public Religion,” *passim*.

and precise, there is no room for improvisation or errors. Most imams also give bibliographic references. After the *keḥḥba* there is a debate or discussion and updates on the metaphysical doctrines and metapolitical activities, which usually lasts in total between two and four hours.

A monthly meeting brings together all Italian and French disciples; it starts on Saturday night with a dinner and a *dhiker* (repetition of the names of God), and ends on Sunday afternoon. Once a year, the AIS organises a nine-day spiritual retreat in the Alps between France and Italy. AIS leaders gave me the opportunity to attend weekly meetings and participate in the annual spiritual retreat; however, I was not permitted to participate in the monthly meetings, where the community *dhiker* is practiced. The community *dhiker*, which I attended only on the occasion of the spiritual retreat, is “protected” by disciples because it is considered a very intimate moment.

The intellectual dimension of AIS is preponderant, and all rituals are performed solemnly. Enthusiasm, joy, and spontaneity are frowned upon. Even at the end of the prayer or at the end of the *dhiker*, when the disciples greet each other, formulaic greetings are solemnly repeated while shaking hands. The most important feature of the European *ṭarīqa* Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya is undoubtedly the intellectual nature of its ritualistic conduct: talking, debating, discussing are the most important rituals. This is also emphasised by the choice of clothing, since the traditional clothing, such as *djellaba*,⁸⁹ is worn both for rituals (*dhiker*, prayer) and for metaphysical discussions. During the nine days of spiritual retreat there was only one community *dhiker*, the rest of the time being dedicated to debates. On some occasions, the speeches became almost academic: for example, during the spiritual retreat a disciple described all the various possible etymologies of the word Sufism, which can be easily found in any introductory book on Sufism; furthermore, other disciples studied, displayed, and discussed newly published books on Sufism and esoteric literature.

89. A long, loose-fitting unisex outer robe.

The intellectualisation and verbalisation of Sufism is evident also when looking at the induction of new disciples into this order. The future disciple must read René Guénon's books, as well as texts by the founding master of the order, Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs. Subsequently, the teachers, through a discussion, will check whether the disciple has intellectually and spiritually assimilated the Sufi metaphysical principles. Intellectual and spiritual verification through discussion is the main instrument that Sufi masters use to understand the spiritual state of disciples. During community meetings, disciples are invited to speak, comment, and reflect. Amina, a 50-year-old disciple, explains:

I think we do not realise... it happened to me too... I realised that maybe I repeated the same concept forty times... Unfortunately, when you are invited to speak, you cannot be excused. Nobody is going to kill you obviously, but the principle is that in a certain way you should favour the circulation of a blessing, a *baraka*, and so when you are invited to speak, the Master wants to test you. It's to check your inner state. So, if you do not say anything... it's worse. Because we should always have this connection with the principle.⁹⁰

The intellectual/verbal approach is predominant not only because the majority of disciples graduated in philosophy or human sciences, or because they became Sufis thanks to Guénon's interpretation of reality, but because it constitutes the main ritual itself. As Amina explained, the circulation of the *baraka* (spiritual blessing) passes through the intellectual and metaphysical discussion.

Organisational Structures: Homogeneity, Solidity and Tension

We can describe AIS's organisational structure by noting their homogeneity, opacity, solidity, and strong internal and external tensions. At the socio-biographical level, AIS is particularly homogeneous: disciples have a middle-class background and most of them are well educated. All of them are white Europeans (either Italian or French), with the exception of Pallavicini's wife who is Japanese.

90. Amina, interview 2013.

The opacity of this Sufi order is evident in the relation between the “stage” (official narratives) and the “backstage” (informal narratives). AIS tries to manage its image and to hide its informal narratives — or, using Goffmanian categories,⁹¹ AIS aims at “maintaining expressive control,” that is, to strictly control the impressions it gives to others. A good example of this control is that over smoking. Generally, smoking cigarettes is frowned upon and disciples are discouraged from smoking. Yet there was always a small group of unrepentant smokers in every Sufi order I visited in Europe.⁹² Hence, a small group of disciples looked for a “hidden” place where they could smoke unobserved, and I joined them. In these backstage places, informal narratives took place, which in the case of other orders provided me with a different perspective on the formal and official narratives. Despite knowing for sure that there were a few smokers in the AIS, however, I never had access to this kind of backstage area in the way I did with other orders, because interacting with me, even backstage, was always an initiatic test. Using Pallavicini’s language, AIS disciples were afraid to “fall into psychologism,” that is the tendency to discuss personal emotions and interpretations, rather than embodying the “primordial tradition.” That is why AIS disciples have homogenous and opaque narratives, maintaining expressive control, in order to “witness the metaphysical message.”⁹³

Another organisational characteristic is solidity, which is due to strong tensions with the surrounding society. Good behaviour is exalted and bad behaviour severely condemned. Disciples control and criticise each other. Even the private lives of the disciples are examined by all other disciples during the community’s ritual discussions. The good disciple must live according to principles that organise his/her entire existence around the *ṭarīqa*. AIS’s activities are usually considered initiatic tests by its disciples.

91. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 111.

92. During my PhD fieldwork I worked with the Sufi orders ‘Alāwiyya, Būdshīshīyya and Naqshbandiyya Hāqqaniyya. Piraino, “Le Développement Du Soufisme En Europe. Au-Delà de l’antinomie Tradition et Modernité,” *passim*.

93. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes 2014.

A good example of this control and internal tension is the regulation of marriage. The disciple cannot marry whoever he/she wants. The husband/wife of the disciple must share the metaphysical vision (not the religious confession) of the *ṭarīqa* as well as the political and economic commitment to it. I knew two disciples who divorced because of the pressure from the *ṭarīqa*. One of them, Abdel, explained to me that there are rules to respect, a coherence to follow, for example “one cannot marry a psychoanalyst”; indeed, in the Guénonian interpretation, psychoanalysis is considered to be anti-traditional / counter-initiatic, and thus a diabolical parody of spirituality.⁹⁴ Hussein, meanwhile, did not want to leave his wife and consequently had to abandon the AIS. Anyone who threatens the strength of the *ṭarīqa*, including wives and husbands, is ostracised.

The intense atmosphere is actually a *modus operandi* of this *ṭarīqa*. Internal tensions unite disciples as a whole. In several months of ethnographic fieldwork, I witnessed many public reprimands from Pallavicini towards disciples. Some of them were relatively trivial, for example, Mansour was publicly criticised for scolding a teammate after losing the interfaith football game and Fatih for excessive use of his smartphone. Others’ reprimands were harsher, for example some of them were accused of being a failure in the spiritual sense. “You have already done the pilgrimage to Mecca, but you behave as if you have never been there. You’re not worthy of this spiritual level.”⁹⁵ External tension is due to the eschatological mission, previously described, which counteracts the forces of the Anti-Christ that are at play.

From a sociological point of view, the AIS conforms perfectly to the sect ideal-type. It is composed of a voluntary group which is coherent and strives to be homogeneous,⁹⁶ it possesses an aristocratic spirit,⁹⁷ and it is in tension with

94. Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps*, 227–34.

95. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes 2014.

96. Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*. Ch. 9: “Das Absolute Gottens und naturrecht und die sekten,” 621–53.

97. Weber, *Sociologie des religions*, 410.

the surrounding environment;⁹⁸ finally, the AIS represents for its disciples the primary source of identification.⁹⁹ These characteristics of the sect ideal-type are closely connected to the “absolute” and “rejected” knowledge that explains the tension with the surrounding society, favours homogeneity and solidity, and justifies both the sense of encirclement and the aristocratic spirit in opposition to a decadent world.

The De-esotericisation of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya

As I have shown, Guénonian “form of thought” shaped the AIS, which could be described as an esoteric religious movement, using different definitions from Hanegraaff’s “rejected knowledge” to Stuckrad’s “absolute knowledge.” Furthermore, I argued that these categories could be perceived also in AIS’s rituals and organisational structures.

Starting from the 2010s, the AIS has been living through an important change: a gradual opening to the currents and sources of knowledge. “De-esotericisation” here is understood as the process of expanding the Guénonian contours that set the framework discussed in the previous sections, since Guénon’s notion of esotericism had strictly defined the AIS’s forms of thought and practice. The metaphysical “absolute knowledge” is gradually opening up to other forms of perspectives drawn from, for example, more traditional Sufi and Islamic knowledge, but is also shifting toward social and natural sciences. Finally, the sectarian dimensions described above, such as the tension with the surrounding societies, are slowly diminishing. This gradual opening up started with Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini, but it was boosted by Shaykh Yahya (Pallavicini’s son) and Bruno Guiderdoni, *kehalifa* (local spiritual leader) in France. Shaykh Yahya Pallavicini was born in 1965 and spent part of his youth between Switzerland, Japan (his mother’s country) and Italy, where he studied. Bruno Guiderdoni is

98. Stark and Bainbridge, “Of Churches, Sects, and Cults,” 123.

99. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, 1–2.

one of the most important Muslim scientists working on the dialogue between Islam and science.¹⁰⁰

On several occasions AIS disciples stressed the extraordinary importance of my presence — as a researcher — among them, which would have been unimaginable a few years ago.¹⁰¹ In fact, according to Guénon's interpretations, social and human sciences dealing with religious phenomena are an instrument of the war against the traditional spirit.¹⁰² Shaykh Yahya emphasised that the AIS is formed by “hawks and doves,” the first would prefer to stick to the Guénonian esoteric message and to continue the intellectual debates (the vertical dimension), while the latter would prefer an opening outward in order to perform / embody the esoteric message through activities in society, such as interreligious and intra-religious dialogues (the horizontal dimension).¹⁰³

I ask myself if it's not necessary to insist on the horizontal dimension, after having insisted for years on the metaphysical dimension. I wonder also ... if a change of pace is not necessary. Hence, I am asking you to help us in translating our esoteric language into something lower — sociological — that allows us to improve our horizontal communication.¹⁰⁴

This opening does not concern only social sciences and communication with a wider public, but involves also the natural sciences. For Guiderdoni the dialogue between science and religion is now not only possible but also fruitful and serves the desire

to deepen the mystery of God, to make it even bigger through the dialogue between science and religion. The purpose of this dialogue for me is to increase our astonishment with God. It is here, the spiritual goal.¹⁰⁵

100. For his thought, see Bigliardi, “The Contemporary Debate on the Harmony between Islam and Science,” 167–86; Piraino, “Bruno Guiderdoni—Among Sufism, Traditionalism and Science,” 21–24.

101. For example, until the 2010s prominent scholars working on contemporary Islam complained about the difficulty of giving a lecture without AIS's metaphysical interruptions — personal communication with Professor Massimo Campanini and Professor Stefano Allievi.

102. Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, 5.

103. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes July 2013.

104. Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini, fieldwork notes July 2013.

105. Guiderdoni 2013, interview.

Guiderdoni is not interested in building a new theoretical system in order to describe the relationship between science and religion.¹⁰⁶ On the contrary, Guiderdoni is trying to develop a discussion within the scientific Islamic community in order to allow the exposure of different perspectives, which can transcend scientific or religious simplifications. This is an approach that differs from the absolute knowledge previously described. The book *Science et Islam* which he edited in 2012 is a perfect example of different Islamic voices on the subject of natural sciences.¹⁰⁷

Unlike his father, Shaykh Yahya is very familiar with Arabic and Islamic doctrines. Guénon's thought remains in the background, but is no longer the first reference, since the Quran and scholars of classical Sufism, such as Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs, al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī, are cited more often.¹⁰⁸ During the interview, Shaykh Yahya told me that “we have to free ourselves from the presumption of going on with a Guénonian checklist.”¹⁰⁹

Following this gradual opening up, AIS's approach to modernity is changing, the accent is on the project of rebuilding, restoration and resistance, rather than opposition to modernity. Both Yahya Pallavicini and Guiderdoni prefer to define themselves as “ante-modern” or “post-post modern” rather than “anti-modern.”

Guénon had to face the modernity, modernity [that was] really proud, colonialist, positivist. It had colonised the whole reality. . . . We are in a different situation where the ideological modernity has even declined and we are interacting with postmodernism, which is more open to dialogue. . . . We are rather “ante,” that is to say, we try to find the great metaphysical synthesis, which is the Primordial Tradition, which existed in the Christian and Muslim worlds of the Middle Ages. . . . We have a rebuilding project. There is the postmodern deconstruction and we are in a “post-post-modern” or “ante-modern” reconstruction.¹¹⁰

106. Bigliardi, “The Contemporary Debate on the Harmony between Islam and Science,” 167–86; Piraino, “Bruno Guiderdoni—Among Sufism, Traditionalism and Science,” 21–24.

107. Guiderdoni, *Science et religion en islam, passim*.

108. Pallavicini, *Dentro la moschea*; Pallavicini, *L'Islām in Europa*, 133, 136, 144.

109. Yahya Pallavicini, interview 2014.

110. Guiderdoni, interview 2013.

This process of openness and de-Westernizing the esotericism of the AIS concerns also the social dimension. Yahya Pallavicini is a member of the Mosque of Rome and has established the conditions for dialogue with other Italian Islamic communities that were alienated during the 1990s and 2000s.¹¹¹ Guiderdoni is not only a renewed scientist, he is engaged both in disseminating Islam for a non-Muslim public and natural sciences for a Muslim public, activities which have been honoured with the title of *Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite*.¹¹² This entails that AIS disciples and spokespersons are gradually engaging in social and cultural activities, not only in the name of the Italian Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya, but generally in the name of the Islamic community.

This process of the de-Westernisation of the AIS's esotericism — a de-esotericisation understood in terms of a Western heuristic and historical conceptualisation of esotericism — and gradual opening up is not homogenous and some AIS disciples confessed to me that they would prefer to focus on the metaphysical debate, rather than this new openness to Islamic doctrines and communities. The tension between hawks' elitism and doves' reaching out is far from being resolved. In the following words of an AIS disciple, we can read both the aristocratic and elitist spirit, and the diffidence towards the Italian Islamic community that still characterises the AIS.

We try to do this intra-religious dialogue [with other Muslims] in order to let our [Muslim] brothers understand, that Islam, it's not only to eat couscous in the mosque or the kebab, but it concerns also the effort to read about sacred books, to interpret them, to write, to take part in the cultural, religious and public debate. . . . They exist [Muslim migrants] only as a problem for the state. At this moment the [Italian] citizens are right to be afraid, to be afraid of immigration, and of Islam.¹¹³

111. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 140.

112. <https://www.ihei-asso.org/cérémonie-de-remise-des-insignes/>, accessed March 22, 2019.

113. Fieldwork notes, 2014.

Final Remarks

In this article I showed how Guénonian forms of esoteric thought shaped the AIS, in particular the concepts of “primordial tradition” and “spiritual élite.” Furthermore, I argued that these doctrines form an “absolute knowledge” — “a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history”¹¹⁴ — that justifies the metapolitical engagement, the sense of superiority, and the sectarian organisational structures. Finally, the AIS claims the re-appropriation of the metaphysical rejected knowledge, inverting the stigma, rejecting the rejection, “refu[sing] to accept the disappearance of incalculable mystery from the world.”¹¹⁵

Starting from the 2010s, the AIS has been living through a process that we can define as “de-esotericisation”: the Guénonian “form of esoteric thought” is still of fundamental importance, but other Sufi and Islamic references are more present. The “absolute knowledge” is softening and opening up to other forms of knowledge, such as social, human, and natural sciences. The anti-modernist spirit implicit in the conception of a “rejected knowledge” is less central, with a growing focus on the concept of reconciliation and rebuilding. This process affects also the social dimensions; hence the sectarian aspects are gradually diminishing and AIS disciples and spokespersons are engaged in activities for the wider Islamic community, and not only focused on the AIS. It has to be stressed that these tensions are still at play.

To conclude, I would like to frame the AIS in the context of contemporary Sufism in European and North American countries. Several categorisations have been tried to describe these Sufi orders. The most important are Marcia Hermansen’s categories “hybrid, transplanted, and perennial,”¹¹⁶ Olav Hammer’s

114. Stuckrad, “Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion,” 230.

115. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254.

116. Hermansen, “Literary Productions of Western Sufi Movements,” 29; Hermansen, “What’s American about American Sufi Movements?,” 39.

“neo-Sufism and Islamic Sufism,”¹¹⁷ and Gisela Webb’s “three waves.”¹¹⁸ I adopt a similar approach to that employed for esotericism, preferring its efficacy in specific cases, rather than using broad concepts for different and heterogeneous phenomena and contexts.

The case of the AIS challenges many conceptualisations of Sufi orders in Europe and North America. First of all, even if, as I argued, it reproduces some Orientalist stereotypes (such as the presupposed better resistance of non-Europeans to the processes of modernisation and secularisation), Pallavicini and the AIS, in contrast to many Orientalists,¹¹⁹ do not conceptualise Sufism as being in opposition to Islam, nor in opposition to the *shari‘a*. On the contrary, following Pallavicini’s teachings, the primordial tradition can be grasped only by living and respecting a specific religious orthodoxy, and in this case following (his interpretation of) the Islamic orthodoxy.

AIS should not be categorised as “perennial” or “universal,”¹²⁰ along with the Sufi Order International and Idries Shah’s movements,¹²¹ because these Sufi orders have completely different doctrines, rituals, organisational structures and relations with Islam. The most important differences concern the process of de-Islamisation that the aforementioned Sufi orders experienced, while as I showed in this article, the Islamic orthodoxy and practices are fundamental narratives in the AIS.

Secondly, it has to be stressed that there are several interpretations of the universal and religious pluralism, and they have been debated issues throughout the whole history of Islam and Sufism.¹²² These themes, even if they are

117. Hammer, “Sufism for Westerners,” 138.

118. Webb, “Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” 190.

119. Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West,” 126–27.

120. Hermansen, “Literary Productions of Western Sufi Movements,” 28; Webb, “Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” 95.

121. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 203.

122. Geoffroy, *Un éblouissement sans fin: la poésie dans le soufisme*, 285; Geoffroy, *L’islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*, 119–31.

particularly relevant in contemporary global Sufism,¹²³ do not belong only to modernity or to Western societies. The category “universal” could be misleading, simplifying complex relations between Islam and religious otherness. In the specific case of the AIS, even if there is a conceptualisation of a primordial tradition that transcends religious forms, it would be difficult to describe them as “universal” because, as I showed in this article, their interpretations of esoteric and exoteric orthodoxies are quite normative and strict: only a few – a small élite – could grasp the primordial tradition. The majority of European believers do not know the metaphysical/esoteric knowledge and many of them are considered to be living anti-traditional lives. Finally, there are other Sufi orders both in Europe and in North America, such as the Būdshīshiyya and the ‘Alāwiyya, that claim an “inclusive universalism” without undergoing a process of de-Islamisation and claiming the Islamic-ness of universalism.¹²⁴ These Sufi orders differ both from the AIS and de-Islamised Sufism; further research is needed to compare these different forms of universalism.

AIS also challenges Hammer’s categorisation of Neo-Sufism,¹²⁵ and the similar definition of the “second wave of Sufism” characterised by the counter-culture,¹²⁶ which, in contrast to Islamic Sufism, fosters an individual quest rather than a collective action, implies a combination of different religious beliefs, adopts a more liberal gender roles, and stresses the importance of experience rather than the importance of orthodox practices.

If these categories are not effective in describing the AIS, what words should we use? I consider that the most effective category is “hybrid,” a concept that should be considered as a starting point for the analysis and not as the final re-

123. Piraino and Sedgwick, *Global Sufism*, *passim*.

124. Piraino, “René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle,” 40; Piraino, “Les Politiques Du Soufisme En France,” 142; Piraino, “Pilgrimages in Western European Sufism,” 168; Piraino, “Who Is the Infidel? Religious Boundaries and Social Change in the Shadhiliyya Darqawiyya Alawiyya,” 77.

125. Hammer, “Sufism for Westerners,” 138.

126. Webb, “Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” 90.

sult,¹²⁷ because there are several forms of hybridisation and the majority of Sufi orders in Europe are influenced by local cultural and religious trends. The specificity of AIS hybridity in Italy is the negotiation between Western esotericism and Sufism (understood as a current of Islamic esotericism, though not exclusively).

I would like to draw attention to the resemblances and resonances between AIS's process of esotericisation and de-esotericisation in the sense described here, and the process of de-Islamisation and re-Islamisation of Sufism in North America and Europe described by Mark Sedgwick and Alix Philippon.¹²⁸ Exogenous doctrines from Sufism and Islam, coming from the Theosophical Society and the Guénonian heritage, shaped some Sufi orders in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, producing peculiar Sufi phenomena in Europe and North America, with specific doctrines, rituals, and organisational structures. With the passage of time these exogenous doctrines are gradually fading, and the new generation of these Sufi orders are increasingly focusing on Sufi and Islamic references and engaging with other Islamic communities.

To conclude, I consider that the case of AIS could give us some concrete insights in the debate about the conceptual and geographical borders of esotericism, which have been subjects of discussion in recent years. If several authors have called for abandoning the application of the label “Western” to esotericism, stressing the intrinsic risks of Orientalism¹²⁹ and of ignoring subjects outside the Western frame,¹³⁰ other scholars have stressed how the use of esotericism in other linguistic, cultural and religious frames could be a form of semantic violence: a “terminological imperialism.”¹³¹

127. Werbner, “The Limits of Cultural Hybridity,” *passim*.

128. Sedgwick, “The Islamization of Western Sufism after the Early New Age,” 35–53; Philippon, “De l’occidentalisation Du Soufisme à La Réislamisation Du New Age? Sufi Order International et La Globalisation Du Religieux,” 209–26.

129. Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Editorial: Time to Drop the ‘Western,’” 112.

130. Aspren, “Beyond the West,” 11.

131. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” 86.

AIS is liminal — a hybrid phenomenon between Western esotericism and Sufism. Using Egil Asprem’s categories,¹³² we could infer that genealogically the AIS belongs to Western esotericism, due to the Guénonian and Orientalist influences. On the other hand, this process of hybridisation has been possible only because there are some analogies between Western esotericism and Islamic esotericism generally and Sufism specifically.

Resemblances and resonances that we could grasp in the forms of thought informing AIS: the metaphysical knowledge could be compared with *maʿrifa* — intuitive and spiritual knowledge; the primordial tradition could be compared to the *fiṭra*, the innate nature or original disposition that is present before birth, or the *dīn qaīyyama* — the correct religion; the intellectual élite could be compared with *kehamās*, the spiritual élite; the esoteric initiation with the initiatory pact *bayʿa*; the esoteric transmission with the *silsila*, the chain of transmission of sacred knowledge from master to master (which goes back to the Prophet Muhammad); the inner transmutation with the *fanāʾ* — the annihilation of the ego in God. Finally, the difference between esoteric and exoteric can be compared to the difference between *zābir* and *bāṭin*, respectively visible and hidden teachings. Furthermore, resonances could also be perceived using von Stuckrad’s and Urban’s approaches,¹³³ in fact there have been several Sufi leaders claiming an absolute knowledge that implies elitism and sectarian organisational structures.¹³⁴

As I stated in the introduction of this article, I do not consider the category of esotericism sufficient to describe Sufism exclusively; which is true also for all the other categories, such as mysticism and spirituality, because the complexity and heterogeneity of Sufism (as with many cultural and religious phenomena) implies a certain elusiveness. Having said that, I consider that the paradigms of

132. Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 12.

133. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 3; Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry,” 1.

134. Sedgwick, “Sects in the Islamic World,” 195–240.

Western and Islamic esotericisms are particularly helpful in analysing the specific phenomena of AIS, its Guénonian foundations, and doctrinal shifts, via a pragmatic approach focused on the adopted heuristic values of the historically conceptualised categories, rather than on their ahistorical absolute values, could help us in overcoming the impasse of the supposed borders of esotericism(s).

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Islamic and Western Esotericism

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Abstract

The field of the study of Western esotericism, as developed by scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff, is growing in size and importance. Most scholars of Islam, however, have shown no interest in this field. As a result, there is little understanding of the relationship between Islamic esotericism and Western esotericism, and even doubt as to whether there is such a thing as Islamic esotericism in the first place. This article seeks to make an initial contribution to remedying this. It argues that there is indeed an Islamic esotericism that matches Western esotericism very closely. The article compares Islamic and Western esotericism in terms of discourse (both discourse on the exoteric and esoteric levels), as historical phenomena in terms of origins and later contacts, and in terms of structure, that is to say in relation to established religious and political power. It concludes that Islamic esotericism matches Western esotericism in terms of discourse and historical sources, but not in terms of structure, of relations with established religious and political power structures.

Keywords: Islam; Christianity; Judaism; esotericism; discourse; Neoplatonism

Islam has been somewhat marginal to the Western Study of Religion, which often seems to focus on Western Christianity, on Judaism, and on Greek and Roman antiquity. Islam was thus relatively neglected when the study of mysticism was at its height, and has also tended to be neglected in the study of Western esotericism, a field that is now growing in size and importance, drawing on the work of scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff. Scholars engaged in the study of Islam have only occasionally engaged in the more general study of mysticism, and have only very rarely shown any interest at all in the study of what has become known as Western esotericism, the newly emergent

field within the Study of Religion that is the focus, among others, of scholars belonging to the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) in America and the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE). There are exceptions, among whom Henry Corbin (1903–1978) is perhaps the most notable, but scholars of Islam generally pay even less attention to the study of Western esotericism than scholars of Western esotericism pay to the study of Islam. This is a pity, as the two studies have significant overlaps. Corbin was not always right, but he was more often right than wrong. As this article will show, there is an “Islamic esotericism” that matches Western esotericism very closely, but with some interesting differences.

The term “esotericism” is rarely used in Islamic studies. Alexander Knysh uses it to denote the Iranian ‘*irfān*’ (gnosis) tradition,¹ probably following Corbin, who used “esoteric” to translate the Arabic/Persian terms *bāṭin* and *ghayb*, discussed below.² Otherwise, most uses of the term are either popular and in French, or derived from the French esoteric philosopher René Guénon (1886–1951), also discussed below. In fact, the frequent use of the term by Seyyed Hossein Nasr derives from Guénon. This article will define the “Islamic esotericism” that is its focus as it proceeds, in parallel with its examination of the relationship between Islamic and Western esotericism.

Finding a satisfactory definition for “Western esotericism” is a long-established problem, well-known to those engaged in its study. There are three major approaches to this problem. One is to identify Western esotericism as a historical phenomenon, an approach favoured by the pioneering French scholar Antoine Faivre, who refers to “a group of specific historical currents.”³ This approach has much to recommend it. Rather than embarking on the difficult task of defining something from first principles, we can simply observe what it is

1. Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited,” 639.

2. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, 8.

3. Faivre, *Western Esotericism*, 5. Faivre has also proposed understanding Western esotericism in terms of an *aire de famille* and of six fundamental characteristics; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10.

that we have before us. There is however, of course, also a certain risk of circularity: that we will observe what we have decided to observe. A second major approach is to treat Western esotericism as a distinct discursive tradition, looking at the content of this discourse, and perhaps also at the topics dealt with, as proposed among others by Kennet Granholm, who argues for looking at “discourse on the esoteric” rather than at “esoteric discourse,”⁴ a useful distinction. A third major approach is to understand Western esotericism in terms of its relationship to hegemonic official orthodoxy, as “rejected knowledge,” or as “a structural element in Western culture” as Kocku von Stuckrad has argued.⁵ This article will use all three of these major approaches. It will start with the discursive approach, move to the historical approach, and end with the structural approach. It will argue that there is an Islamic esotericism that is closely related to what is understood as Western esotericism discursively and historically, but is very different structurally.

Esotericism as discourse

The definition of esotericism in terms of discourse was the approach followed by Corbin, and will now be followed by this article somewhat more systematically. In Arabic, the key language of Islam, there is a discourse about the *ghayb* (literally, “hidden”), a term which maps the broad area that corresponds to the esoteric in Granholm’s “discourse *on* the esoteric,” and *bāṭini* discourse, a term which maps the broad area that corresponds to the esoteric in Granholm’s “esoteric discourse.” The usage of *ghayb* is well established in the Quran and thus relatively uncontroversial; the usage of *bāṭini* is only partly established in the Quran. In the case of the *bāṭini*, the discourse is restricted, if not rejected.

The word *ghayb* is substantive and literally means that which is hidden. It is used in this sense forty-nine times in the Quran, twenty-five times in connection with *‘ilm*, knowledge. It is placed most frequently in opposition to *shahāda*,

4. Granholm, “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes,” 51.

5. Von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism,” 80.

from the root verb *shahada* meaning to witness or to make, a pairing that occurs nine times, and is also placed seven times in conjunction with heaven and earth (*al-samawāt wa'l-ard*).⁶ The *ghayb*, then, is established as something that is the opposite of the visible, is found both in the heavens and on earth, and is something of which knowledge may be had, or may not be had.

The term *ghayb* thus corresponds fairly closely to the term “esoteric” in the sense of Granholm’s “discourse on the esoteric.” There is, however, a difference. In ancient and modern Islamic usage, the *ghayb* included both what Western discourse would class as occult—for example, angels and demons—and what Western discourse would class as belonging to religion—for example, God himself. The distinction between religion and esotericism is harder to make in Islamic traditions than it is in Western thought. Angels (*malā'ika*) and demons (*jinn*), for example, are referred to explicitly and repeatedly in the Quran (eighty-eight times for angels and twenty-two times for demons), and belong to religion proper quite as much as the Day of Judgment does. In Islam, then, there are some *realities* whose existence “religion” confirms and dictates the obligation to believe in them. This is the *ghayb*, esoteric in the sense of hidden facts.

Human penetration into the *ghayb* can occur in two ways, legitimate and illegitimate. The legitimate way is through fulfilling religious obligations and worship; magic is mostly deemed as the illegitimate way. Quite where the line lies between the two is not always clear, with practitioners of magic often claiming, naturally enough, that their practices are in fact in line with Islam (religion), and thus legitimate.

Similar to the word *ghayb*, the word *bāṭin* means concealed, but is a verbal participle, and carries an implication of the inner; the grammatically related substantive *bāṭn* denotes the bowels. As *ghayb* is frequently placed in opposition to *shahāda* in the Quran, so *bāṭin* is contrasted with *ẓāhir*, the manifest,⁷ a contrast well established by Quran 57:3, where God is famously described as

6. Quranic Arabic corpus.

7. Quranic Arabic corpus.

“the first and the last, and the outer (*zāhir*) and the inner (*bāṭin*).” Unlike *ghayb*, however, *bāṭin*’s sense of “esoteric” is not established in the Quran, where it is used most frequently in connection with *fanāhishba*, immoralities or indecencies.⁸ Both hidden and manifest immoralities are to be avoided, we are told.

Bāṭin’s sense of “esoteric” is of later origin but then became very well established. The pair of *bāṭin* and *zāhir* has been applied especially in the interpretation of the Quran. Every verse of the Quran, it has often been maintained, and especially by the Shī‘a, has a plain *zāhir* meaning and a hidden *bāṭin* meaning. The pair is also taken beyond this to apply to more general understandings: there are outer *zāhir* truths and inner *bāṭin* truths.⁹ *Bāṭin* thus corresponds fairly easily to the “esoteric” in the sense of Granholm’s “esoteric discourse,” and *zāhiri* equates easily with “exoteric.” The main difference between the *bāṭin* and the *ghayb*, then, is that it is meanings and ideas that may be *bāṭin*, but it is realities that may be *ghayb*.

When applied to a group, the word *bāṭiniyya*, which can be translated as “esotericism,” commonly designates the Ismā‘īlis, a relatively small branch of Shī‘ī Islam.¹⁰ The Ismā‘īlis do not describe themselves as *bāṭinis* but are often so described by others. They maintain that exoteric *zāhir* truths, as revealed to humanity by various prophets, have varied from prophet to prophet, as they varied for example between the teachings of Moses and the teachings of Jesus. Esoteric *bāṭin* truth, in contrast, is one, irrespective of the various exoteric *zāhir* systems. The tenth-century Ismā‘īli theologian Muḥammad al-Nasafi (d. 943) held that the central, esoteric *bāṭin* truth is that the starting point of everything is an unknowable God beyond being and non-being, from whom emanated the Intellect, from which emanated the (universal) Soul, from which emanated the elements, and then also vegetative, animal, and rational souls.¹¹

8. Quranic Arabic corpus.

9. Poonawala, “Al-Zāhir wa ‘l-Bāṭin.”

10. Hodgson, “Bāṭiniyya.”

11. Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, 84–85.

Not only does the broad area mapped by the term *bāṭin* correspond to Western esoteric discourse in the fact that concealed meanings about the universe can be gleaned by individuals who contemplate the cosmogonic and ontological structure of the animated Universe, but a major part of the content of at least some *bāṭin* discourse—that of the Ismāʿīlis—is very familiar to those who know the Western esoteric discourse. For as well as resembling perennialism, with the exoteric varying but the esoteric remaining the same and universal, al-Nasafi’s Ismāʿīli system is in fact much the same as the system articulated in late antiquity by the Hellenic-Egyptian philosopher Plotinus (c. 204–270).

The great achievements of Plotinus included the expansion and systematization of Plato, the presentation of a coherent and unified cosmology of emanation, and the incorporation into a philosophical framework of what is now called “the mystical experience,” an experience with which Plotinus himself was evidently familiar.¹² The system of emanation from the One through Intelligence and Soul was derived by Plotinus from other sources, but Plotinus described it so clearly that it can be conveniently identified with him. Plotinus is the key philosopher of the school of Neoplatonism, and Neoplatonism, through Arabic philosophy, is one obvious and major component of the *bāṭin* esoteric discourse of al-Nasafi and the Ismāʿīlis,¹³ as will be discussed further below. Neoplatonism is also a major component in *bāṭin* discourse outside Ismāʿīli circles, in majority Sunni Islam—and also, incidentally, in Judaism, in the early Kabbalah and in the work of Moses Maimonides,¹⁴ and in what we call Western esotericism.

In Sunni Islam, Neoplatonic discourse is most visible in early Sufism, where the word *bāṭin* is much used. *Bāṭin* knowledge is understood as being suitable only for the *khāṣṣ* (particular persons, the elite), not for the *ʿām* (the generality). I do not mean to suggest that Neoplatonism was the only source of Sufism, especially

12. He experienced it four times. Porphyry, “On the Life of Plotinus,” 45.

13. Walker, “The Universal Soul,” 153.

14. This, at least, is my own view. The arguments are complex, and the current article is not the place to rehearse them.

considering that Sufism itself is not an ideologically consistent homogenous system. There were other major sources. There was the Quran itself, sections of which lead themselves very easily to Neoplatonic readings such as the notion of multiple heavens and a stratified universal reality and the idea of divine light emanating,¹⁵ and there were theological concerns which were indeed absorbed into Sufi doctrines such as the questions of the nature of God’s attributes, the createdness of the Quran, and the eternity of the world, concerns that were central to the Mu‘tazila and ash‘arīs, as is well known. There were also the ascetic practices that were found in early Islam. Early Sufism focused sometimes on ascetic practice and spiritual technique, sometimes on Islamic discourse, and sometimes on *bāṭin* discourse.¹⁶ Of these, it is *bāṭin* discourse that is understood as most restricted. However, to Sufi *bāṭini* discourse Neoplatonism appears to be consistent, though sometimes expressed in Quranic terms. Muḥyi’l-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabi (1165–1240), for example, is difficult to read partly because of the way in which he slips easily between Quranic and philosophical terminology,¹⁷ but familiarity with Plotinus makes Ibn al-‘Arabi much easier reading.

In terms of discourse, then, the esotericism of Sufis and Ismā‘īlīs seems closely related to what has become understood as Western esotericism, both in terms of the broad areas mapped by the terms *bāṭin* and *ghayb*, and in terms of some of the contents of those areas. Islamic *bāṭin* esoteric discourse includes Neoplatonism and something like perennialism, though less frequently, and Islamic discourse about the *ghayb* includes angels and demons.

This is almost as true today as it was in the tenth century. Esoteric *bāṭini* discourse thrives among Ismā‘īlīs and Sufis as it does among Kabbalists, and Muslims everywhere remain aware of the *ghayb*. The *ghayb*, however, was relegated to religious circles in some Muslim countries as the modern model of education adopted in them favours “scientific” explanations just as in the West;

15. Quran, 65:12 and 24:35.

16. Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 2007.

17. Morris, Introduction, 12.

and the “scientific” privileges the visible/the exoteric. Sufism too is the victim of changes in intellectual fashion. Salafi readings of Islam, which are now in the ascendant, insist on the exoteric *ẓāhir* and deplore the esoteric *bāṭin*.¹⁸ Similar readings of Islam have been around from the beginning, of course, but exoteric *ẓāhir* readings are especially popular today, partly because of the very considerable support they receive from the Saudi establishment, and partly, perhaps, because they appeal to Muslims with primarily technical and scientific training.

By translating both *bāṭin* and *ghayb* as “esoteric,” Corbin was understandably negotiating a space for esotericism in Islam. Having considered here these two terms and the Neoplatonic foundations of Sufi and Ismāʿīlī esotericism which will be unpacked further in the next section, it becomes useful to speak of an “Islamic esotericism” in this sense, one that shares fundamental similarities with what have been perceived as an essential trait of Western esotericism, supporting the call for the cultivation of a discussion about Islam in the field of Western esotericism.

Islamic and Western esotericism as historical phenomena: Common origins and contacts

Accepting that each Western and Islamic esotericism is “a group of specific historical currents,” they can be compared in terms of their historical origins as well as in terms of their content. In both cases, late antique or Hellenistic philosophy was of great importance, determining the shape of what then developed.

Origins

The importance of late antique philosophy as the crucial basis of Western esotericism is recognized by many scholars of Western esotericism. A recent standard history, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, thus opens with a chapter on “Ancient Hellenistic Sources of Western Esotericism,” looking at Hermetism, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism, before moving on to the reception

18. Meijer, *Global Salafism*.

of these currents in the Italian Renaissance.¹⁹ Of the three, Neoplatonism was probably most important, most relevant to our argument and less problematic as a term. Recent scholarship tends to conclude that Gnosticism never really existed as a distinct current, save in the imaginations of those who were establishing their understandings of Christianity as the orthodox norm,²⁰ and the meaning of “Hermeticism” has also been questioned.²¹ Other recent work, including Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*, also demonstrates the importance of antique philosophy.²² Antique philosophy, and especially Neoplatonism, was also important for the development of a major historical body of Islamic *bāṭin* discourse including the *ghayb* that may, on that basis, be called “Islamic esotericism,” and which made a more important contribution than is often recognized to the development of the historical phenomenon known as Western esotericism.

The key philosopher of Neoplatonism is Plotinus, and one of the key works of Neoplatonism is the *Enneads*, in which Plotinus’s teachings were recorded and arranged by his pupil Porphyry (c. 234–c. 305). Plotinus saw himself as a philosopher, not what we would now call an esotericist, but for Plotinus and his contemporaries, “philosophy” meant something other than what it means today. For Plotinus, philosophy was the tools of the individual for comprehending the hidden realities of the cosmos and the means whereby s/he is able to detect the signs in nature and the cosmos that indicate those realities and assist him/her in their return to the Pure and ascent to the One, “All teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another.”²³ This is despite the fact that he showed little enthusiasm for ritual, famously if cryptically responding to a suggestion that he should attend the sacrifices that it would be more fitting for the gods to visit him, than for him to visit the gods.²⁴

19. Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 15–33.

20. King, *What is Gnosticism?*

21. Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 4–22.

22. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 12–28.

23. Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.3.7, 80–81.

24. Porphyry, “On the Life of Plotinus,” 21.

The *Enneads* were lost to the Latin West at the end of Antiquity, but were not lost in the Greek East, which escaped much of the destruction that the Latin West suffered. From the Greek East, the *Enneads* were adapted into Arabic during the ninth century under the patronage of Ya‘qūb al-Kindi (c. 801–866), a philosopher who edited the Arabic version of the *Enneads*.²⁵ An Arabic version was also made at about the same time of the *Stoicheiosis theologike* (*Elements of Theology*) of Proclus (412–485), a later Neoplatonic philosopher who developed and elaborated Plotinus’s system.²⁶

Al-Kindi was the first major philosopher to write in Arabic, and drew on Aristotle and Plato, as well as Plotinus.²⁷ From these beginnings developed an independent tradition of Arabic philosophy, including Al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā, which saw itself as primarily Aristotelian, but in fact drew its cosmology more from the Neoplatonists, notably Plotinus and Proclus. This was partly because Neoplatonic philosophy was relatively easily combined with the Quranic narrative of one God, creation and judgment. It was also partly the result of accident. For reasons that are unknown, the original Arabic version of Plotinus’s *Enneads* was somehow lost, and then recovered. When it was recovered, it was partly mutilated. One mutilation was the loss of its original attribution. It was instead misattributed to Aristotle, and the Arabic version of Plotinus thus came to be known for many centuries as *Kitāb uthūlūjīyya Aristūṭālīs* (*The Theology of Aristotle*).²⁸ The Arabic version of Proclus also somehow became misattributed to Aristotle, as *Kitāb al-ūdāh fī’l-khayr al-mahd* (*The Explanation of Pure Good*),²⁹ which however confirms the fact that the Arabs adopted “a Neoplatonised form of Aristotelianism that reconciles semiological, causal, and volitional modes of knowledge.”³⁰

25. Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus*, 8, 18–19.

26. Dodds, Introduction, x.

27. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, 51–52, 64.

28. Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus*, 5.

29. Dodds, Introduction, x.

30. Saif, “From Ġāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-ma‘ārif,” 309.

In historical terms, then, much Arabic philosophy, and consequently much Sufi theology, which draws heavily on Arabic philosophy, is—like Western esotericism—a development of late antique philosophy, notably Neoplatonism. Jewish esotericism also draws extensively on Neoplatonism and Arabic philosophy, since, especially in the eleventh century and in Arab Spain, some Jews participated with Muslims in a common intellectual world expressed in Arabic, just as some Jews today participate with Christians in a common intellectual world expressed in English. A common Neoplatonic heritage, then, explains why the historical phenomenon of this Islamic esotericism—that is, of *bātini* discourse about the *ghayb*, in Arabic philosophy, in Sufism, and in Ismāʿīlism—has much in common with the historical phenomenon identified as Western esotericism.

Early contacts

There is, however, more than this common heritage. Islamic esotericism also had a direct impact on the development of Western esotericism that is not generally recognized in the standard accounts, which—like that of Goodrick-Clarke—pass from Late Antiquity to the Italian Renaissance. There was also an earlier Western (or rather Latin) reception of Neoplatonism before the Renaissance, with the translation of Arabic texts into Latin during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Two developments seem to have driven a surge in both translation and study of these texts. One was the flowering of the early universities, notably the schools of Paris and Chartres, that resulted from growing political stability and wealth, and from an increased demand for administrators trained in the arts of grammar and logic.³¹ This flowering meant more scholars interested in logic and philosophy, and so increased demand for new philosophical texts.

Scholars in thirteenth-century Paris and Oxford were interested primarily in the philosophy of Aristotle, but they also read other texts, sometimes accidentally because of misattribution, but more often deliberately. These Christian

31. Baldwin, “Masters at Paris,” 156–58; Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 46–69.

scholars, as adherents of a basically monotheistic revealed religion, confronted precisely the same problems that Muslim and Jewish scholars had when it came to making antique philosophy compatible with the narrative of one God, creation, and judgment. In many ways, Arabic philosophy was closer to the needs of thirteenth-century Christian scholars than was antique philosophy.³² *The Theology of Aristotle* after Plotinus thus began to circulate in Latin, as did *The Explanation of Pure Good* after Proclus, known in Latin as the *Liber de causis* (*Book on Causes*).³³ The translated works of Arab philosophers, including those who dealt with the occult sciences, became influential on many philosophers and even theologians who dealt with religious, philosophical, esoteric and occult subjects, from Albertus Magnus to Thomas Aquinas.³⁴ Therefore, it was not only Neoplatonism that passed into Latin scholarship in this period. Christian scholars were also interested in texts dealing with the natural world: medicine, astronomy (which was not then clearly distinguished from astrology), and chemistry (which was not then clearly distinguished from alchemy). Some scholars were also interested in less distinguished texts, notably the *Secretum secretorum* (*Secret of Secrets*), a translation of the *Kitāb sirr al-asrār* (*Secret of Secrets*) attributed, rather surprisingly, to Aristotle, allegedly consisting of Aristotle's letters of advice to Alexander the Great. The *Secret of Secrets* was in fact a miscellaneous collection of writings on topics ranging from ethics and alchemy to numerology and magic.³⁵

Through these and other texts, much that would later be classed as esoteric entered Latin scholarship. One consequence was the preaching and writings of Meister Eckhart (1260–c. 1328). The similarities between Meister Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabi have often been noted,³⁶ and have sometimes been explained in terms of the nature of the mystical experience, which Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabi

32. Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 60–61.

33. Taylor, “Critical Analysis,” 13.

34. Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 70–94.

35. Williams, “Defining the Corpus Aristotelicum,” 30.

36. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*; Almond, “Divine Needs, Divine Illusions;” Dobie, *Logos & Revelation*.

are thought to have had in common.³⁷ Beyond this, a further explanation is their common debt to Arabic philosophy, though neither could have been aware of the Neoplatonic origins of the works they read and found so meaningful.

Arabic sources, then, contributed to the early development of a form of Western esotericism even before the Renaissance, as some texts that had provided an important basis for Islamic esotericism had a similar impact on the Latin world. They continued to have an impact during the next chapter in the history of the Latin reception of Neoplatonism and esotericism, for in the Renaissance, thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) were influenced by Arabic philosophical and occult ideas and the works that contained them.³⁸ However, Ficino worked primarily from Latin and then Greek texts, and although Corbin argued for an Islamic influence through the Byzantine philosopher Plethon (c. 1355-c. 1454), an argument that others have accepted,³⁹ this influence is unproven, and Plethon's work can easily be explained without reference to it. After Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) still thought it worthwhile to learn some Arabic, but he relied much more on Hebrew than Arabic sources, and such Arabic sources as he did use seem to have been interpreted for him by his Jewish collaborator Yohanan Alemanno (1435-1504).⁴⁰ As time passed, however, new and better translations into Latin from Greek originals began to replace the earlier translations from Arabic, and pseudo-Aristotelian works were identified and excluded from the Aristotelian canon. Philosophy and the study of Arabic became separated. Islamic esoteric currents such as Sufism and Arabic philosophy thus had a much-reduced impact on the subsequent "grand tradition" of Western esotericism.

37. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, 294; Dobie, *Logos & Revelation*, 5-9.

38. Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 96-143.

39. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 34-35, 39-40, 43.

40. Lelli, "'Prisca Philosophia' and 'Docta Religio,'" 64-67.

Later contacts

Later Western esotericism has also been periodically affected by Islamic esotericism, specifically Sufism. One of these encounters, that involving Guénon and thus Nasr, gave rise to the other frequent use of the term “Islamic esotericism,” noted at the start of this article. It emerged out of their perennialist take on Sufism and *irfān*. It and others are discussed very briefly below: a fuller treatment is available.⁴¹

The first significant impact of Sufism after the Renaissance came when in 1671 the English scholar Edward Pococke published the *Philosophus Autodidactus* or *Self-Taught Philosopher*, a Latin translation of an Arabic philosophical tale, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, written in Spain by Muḥammad ibn Ṭufayl (c. 1105–1185), a near contemporary of Ibn al-ʿArabi and a Neoplatonist who was at least familiar with Sufi practice, and may also have been a Sufi. The self-taught philosopher of the *Philosophus Autodidactus* grows up in isolation on a desert island, and arrives at mystical illumination independently of revelation.⁴² Since this can be read as coming to an understanding of the chief truths of religion by a process of rational enquiry, the *Philosophus Autodidactus* was extremely popular amongst those in early modern Europe who were searching for rational alternatives to Christian revelation. It was translated repeatedly into English, Dutch, and German. As well as probably providing the inspiration for Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*,⁴³ it provided support for the growth of European Deism,⁴⁴ which generally accepts truths such as the existence of a Creator that are understood to be knowable by reason, while limiting or even rejecting the authority of revelation. Deism is not itself part of the historical phenomenon of Western esotericism, but it contributed to the growth of alternative approaches to religion and spirituality in the West, and thus indirectly fostered the subsequent growth of Western esotericism. The *Philosophus Autodidactus* also had an indirect impact on the development of Quaker-

41. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*.

42. Sedgwick, “Sufism and the Western Construction of Mysticism.”

43. Daiber, “The Reception of Islamic Philosophy,” 76.

44. Daiber, “The Reception of Islamic Philosophy,” 77–78.

ism.⁴⁵ The Quakers are not normally understood as part of the Western esoteric tradition either, but there are perhaps arguments for including them.

The next impact of Islamic esotericism on Western esotericism comes in the eighteenth century, when scholars such as William Jones (1746–1794) and James Graham, both employed in British India, began to investigate the various religions and practices found there, including Sufism. Jones identified Sufism as a form of Deism,⁴⁶ but Graham identified Sufism as a form of esotericism, using that word for the first time in this connection.⁴⁷ He also described Sufism as Islamic mysticism, and was the first to identify Sufism’s Neoplatonic content.⁴⁸ This work was ground-breaking at an empirical level. It was also very influential outside the academic study of Islam. Graham’s influence can be seen in such popular nineteenth-century works as Charles King’s *The Gnostics and their Remains*,⁴⁹ and when Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of the Theosophical Society and thus a central figure in the development of modern Western esotericism, wrote about Sufism, she drew heavily on King and so on Graham.⁵⁰

The understanding of Sufism as Islamic esotericism by practitioners of Western esotericism had an impact on the development of one branch of modern Western esotericism, that known as Western Sufism. Two instances will be given as examples of this. One is the Sufi Movement of Inayat Khan (1882–1927); the other is the Traditionalist movement of Guénon, already mentioned.

The Sufi Movement, as the first significant Sufi organization in the modern West, prepared the way for all other instances of Western Sufism and in so doing defined certain parameters for their nature and development. It arose in England and then the Netherlands during and after the First World War, taking

45. Russell, “The Impact of the *Philosophus autodidactus*.”

46. Jones, “On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus”, 211, 216.

47. Graham, “A Treatise on Sufiism,” 105.

48. Graham, “A Treatise on Sufiism.”

49. King, *Gnostics and their Remains*, 185.

50. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, 306.

over some of the legacy of the Theosophical Society, which was then in decline, and reproducing certain elements in Theosophical and Western esoteric discourse and even practice as a result.⁵¹ In many ways, the Sufi Movement became in reality what the late nineteenth-century Western esoteric imagination had understood Sufism to be. The Sufi Movement thus belongs as much or more within the history of Western esotericism as it does within the history of Sufism.

The Sufi Movement was a formal organization, with a head office, a council, and a logo that is still in widespread use today. The Traditionalist movement, in contrast, was a movement of thought, not an organization, though various organizations were established at various points by various followers. Just as the Sufi Movement arose on the legacy of Theosophy and absorbed and reproduced elements of Theosophical discourse and practice, so Traditionalism arose on the legacy of late nineteenth-century French esotericism, and reproduced elements of that strand of esoteric discourse.⁵² As a result, like the Sufi Movement, the Traditionalist movement is part of the history of Western esotericism. It is also part of the history of Islam.

Roots and fertilization

If we understand Western esotericism as a historical phenomenon, then, we find that Islamic esotericism had much the same historical origins. Islamic esotericism played an important part in the development of Western esotericism during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, providing translations of the key texts of Arabic philosophy and of other texts such as the *Secret of Secrets*. Islamic esotericism again played a part on the development of Western esotericism during the seventeenth century with the *Philosophus Autodidactus*, with Graham in India, and then in the twentieth century with the Sufi Movement and the Traditionalist movement.

51. Inayat-Khan, “Hybrid Sufi Order,” 85–97, 109.

52. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 21–69.

Esotericism as structure

It is only when we understand Western esotericism in terms of its relationship to officially constructed “orthodoxy,” the third major approach to the definition of Western esotericism, that a clear difference between Western—or at least Christian—esotericism and Islamic esotericism emerges, as it does between these two and Jewish esotericism. In the West, esotericism has generally been highly controversial, far more often rejected and repressed than promoted by the dominant culture and by religious authority. In Islam, esotericism in the form of Sufism has been controversial from time to time, sometimes repressed by the dominant culture and religious authority, but has far more often been promoted by them. At the same time, truly esoteric discourse has remained restricted. In Judaism, esotericism in the form of Kabbalah has not been particularly controversial,⁵³ and there have been no significant attempts by the dominant culture and religious authority to repress it.

Why this should be—why esotericism has been viewed so differently in three very similar religions—is not yet clear. It may be in part because of the overlap between religion and the esoteric *ghayb* that we have noted in the case of Islam. Alternatively, it may tell us more about the natures of the religions in question than it does about any variety of esotericism. “Orthodoxy” in Christianity can be defined in terms of the official doctrine of a papacy, or a patriarchate, or an established state church in Protestant countries. Orthodoxy cannot be defined in this way when it comes to Islam or Judaism, however, where the distributed and non-hierarchical nature of religious authority means that it *is* possible to identify positions that are generally agreed to be entirely *unacceptable*, but very hard to identify any truly “orthodox” positions. The esoteric, like the mystical, promotes the authority of the individual subjective religious experience, and thus inevitably challenges the authority of religious power structures.⁵⁴

53. There has of course been occasional controversy, for example the probable banning of Abraham Abulafia, but these are very much the exception rather than the rule.

54. Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 98.

Christian ecclesiastical structures may be better able to suppress what this article has been terming “esotericism” than Islamic or Jewish structures.

In these structural terms, then, it makes sense to talk of Christian esotericism as something distinct from Islamic or Jewish esotericism.

Conclusion: Esotericism, one or many?

Faivre, of course, never suggested that Western esotericism was *purely and exclusively* Western. Writing with Karen-Claire Voss in 1995, he defined the West as “the medieval and modern Greco-Latin world in which the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity have coexisted for centuries, periodically coming into contact with those of Islam.”⁵⁵ The core of the West *is* Latin and Christian, with Greek knowledge assuming great importance at certain points. It might be argued that Arabic sources were more important than Greek ones during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and that Hebrew was also sometimes important, but over a longer period Latin and Greek works clearly overwhelmed Arabic and Hebrew ones. The weakness in this definition of the West, however, is the identification of contact with Islam as only periodic, in contrast to contact with Judaism, which is understood as constant. Borrowings from Judaism by the Latin Christian majority culture still seem to have been periodic more than constant. As the language of the Old Testament, Hebrew has been more widely read in Europe than Arabic, but even so Hebrew does not really come much closer than Arabic to rivalling Greek as the second language of the West. Islam and Judaism have been consistently present in the West as understood by Faivre; however, contact with both Jewish and Islamic esotericism has been irregular. More research needs to be done to look into the interaction between Islamic esotericism (as it is understood here) and the West, particularly after the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the instances when they did come into contact have been important.

55. Faivre and Voss, “Western Esotericism,” 50.

Historically speaking, then, there is a trinity of Christian esotericism, Jewish esotericism, and Islamic esotericism, united and yet separate. Just as Christian and post-Christian esotericism periodically comes into contact with Islamic and Jewish esotericism, more so in some periods—including the present—than in others, so Islamic esotericism periodically comes into contact with Jewish esotericism, Jewish esotericism periodically comes into contact with Islamic esotericism, and so on. When it comes to discourse, we can also find a trinity, united and yet separate. We can speak of Christian and post-Christian esotericism, Islamic esotericism, and Jewish esotericism. Although all these discourses have much in common, both in their subjects and in how they handle them, they have generally been conducted in different languages: Latin and modern European languages for Christian and post-Christian esotericism, Arabic and Persian for Islamic esotericism, and Hebrew and Arabic for Jewish esotericism. They also have distinctive elements. Sometimes these apparently distinctive elements derive from common elements, often Neoplatonic ones. In the case of earlier and later manifestations of Islamic esotericism, one of the main conduits for esoteric ideas was Arabic philosophy (defined by language), which articulated Plotinian ideas, the same ideas that were adopted as a framework for Western esotericism first through the Arabic sources then independently. This is, for example, the case with the concept of “Muhammadan light,” which at first sight seems exclusive to Sufism, but on closer inspection turns out to be an Islamic version of Plotinus’s *nous*. There are, however, probably enough distinctive elements to talk of separate discursive traditions.

Islamic and Western esotericism, then, do have an important relationship. What we call Western esotericism is generally Christian or post-Christian, but Islamic esotericism is also part of the *longue durée* history of Western esotericism, just as Jewish esotericism is. Western esotericism is predominantly Latin and Christian, but is not *only* Latin and Christian. Islamic and Jewish esotericism are also part of Western esotericism. There is indeed an Islamic esotericism that matches Western esotericism very closely, though with certain differences.

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