

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.

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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 Islamic 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. *batīniyya*) 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.

Granhölm 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 Granhölm 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 Shī‘a 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 *taʾwīl* 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 (*ḵhawass*). 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, *ta'wīl* 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 *ta'wīl* is seen as reliant on foreign elements, mainly Greek, that colour the lens of the interpreter (*mu'awwil*). Abū Zayd calls for moving beyond this anachronistic distinction between *ta'wīl* 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, “*ta'wīl* 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-‘Arab* (*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-ta'wīl*, 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, *Sūfī 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 *ruhānī* (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 *bāṭinīs* 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’an*, 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 *mūhaqqiqīn* — 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 *Iḥyāʾ 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 (*riyāḍa*)

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’l-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 Maryamiyya 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 Qurʾan 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 problematized 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 *Timaëus* 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 exoteric 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 (*ẓāhir*) 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 (*ẓāhir*), echoing God's attributes/divine names as Concealed (*al-Batīn*) and Manifest (*al-Ẓāhir*). 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-Iʿtibār* (“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-iʿtibār*) [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 (*mustabṣirun*).

Ibn Masarra refers to several passages from the Qurʾān 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-Iʿtibār,” 90.

149. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-Iʿtibār,” 91.

150. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-Iʿtibār,” 92, 100.

151. Clemente “Edición Crítica de la Risālat al-Iʿtibār,” 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 (*fikr*), 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 lettrist 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.

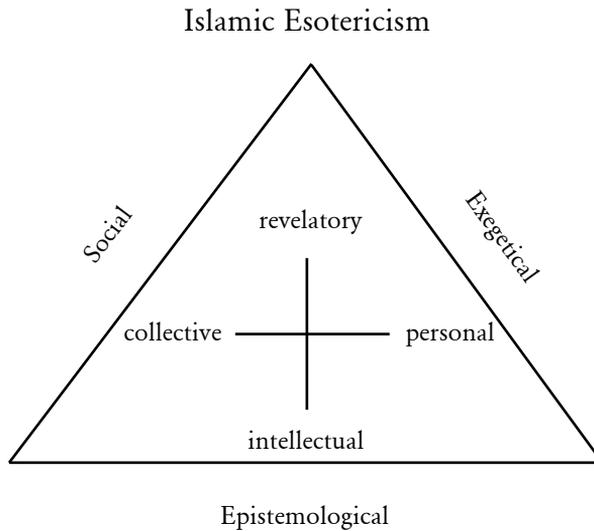
3. Social principle: personal or collective salvific investment through the enlightenment and perfection of the human soul and/or the restitution of a community.
4. Trans-linguistic principle that demands the use symbols and allegory.

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 *zāhir* 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 bāṭīnised, 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 bāṭīnism 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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