

The Brethren of Purity: A Historical, Analytical Introduction

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I

The Muslims never knew an age quite like the fourth century of the Hijra, an age in which their public life was riven by the most extreme contradictions: wretched in the extreme, barren in the ugliest way, on the one hand; sound, precious, fertile, and productive, on the other. Their political life was corrupted in this age in the most visible way — the authority of the Caliphate in Baghdad dissolved, and the Caliphs themselves fell under the sway of those who controlled them, the men and women of the court, who toyed with them, held sway over them, and subjected them to every manner of humiliation and disgrace. The entire state fell into disorder; its distant provinces broke away in complete independence, while the closer provinces aspired to a measure of internal autonomy, varying in strength or weakness according to each province's own fortunes in economic and social life, and according to whichever ambitious leaders happened to rise up within it — until the Islamic world, in this age, became a battlefield of rival ambitions, a crush of appetites and passions, a race toward every appearance of chaos and disorder. And yet, in another respect, their intellectual life flourished as it had never flourished before: poetry and prose came into full bloom, scholarship and philosophy ripened, the linguistic sciences and their various arts reached maturity, and history and geography advanced — so that, looking at these two sides of Islamic life in this age, one can hardly rest easy in believing they represent one and the same nation: the Islamic nation, shaped by a single civilization, the civilization of Islam, and subject to a single authority, the authority of Islam.

This nation, in truth, was never really one nation at all, but a set of nations profoundly different from one another, deeply at variance, gathered by Islam beneath a single banner within a short span of time. Islam attempted to fuse them together and erase the differences between them, succeeding in this at times, and failing at other times.

While it might have seemed, to an observer of the Islamic nation in the days of Umayyad or Abbasid strength, that all these peoples would forge themselves into a single, powerful unity, nourished by a common

language, religion, and order, there were other forces at work preventing that unity of religion, language, and order from producing the natural results one might have expected. Chief among these forces were certain strong national identities the new order proved unable to digest or erase — indeed, unable even to weaken their ambition for a vigorous life of their own, or their inclination toward independence and power.

The Persians all embraced Islam, and many of them learned Arabic or became Arabized, but the Persian nation as a whole remained Persian; even where it did not retain its old religion, it retained its language, its literature, its customs, and a great deal of its social institutions. Nor did it stop there: it worked, to some degree, to bring the very conquerors themselves under the sway of the language, literature, and order it had retained. It then became entangled with Arab-Islamic politics, exerting the most profound influence upon it, seizing the opportunity of the dispute between the Umayyads and the Hashimites, siding with the latter, lending them strength, and seating their leaders upon the throne of the Caliphate; it then closed in around that throne, defending it, protecting it, monopolizing it in effect, appropriating it for itself, and gradually pushing the Arabs out of it altogether. Before even the second century had passed, and by the middle of the third, the bond between this throne and the Arab nation had been severed, or very nearly severed: the Arabs had retreated to their original homelands, the Caliphs had become prisoners of the very foreign elements the state had once conquered, and these elements had begun raising their heads and stretching out their hands toward power, seizing — as we have said — varying shares of strength, might, sovereignty, and independence.

The Persian nation was the first of these nations to carve out its own share of this power, and it took the largest, most abundant share of all — particularly in this fourth century of the Hijra.

II

Yet this powerful movement Islam had set loose across the whole ancient world produced what it could not help but produce: all these nations became intermingled, all these peoples grew close, each coming to know the other, and each eager to know still more. The souls of the Persians, the Byzantines, the Semitic peoples, the Copts, the Berbers, and the Spaniards were laid open to the Arabs, and the souls of the Arabs, in turn, were laid open to all of these. Alongside the political ties brought about by conquest and religion, intellectual bonds arose among

them too, much resembling what had happened in the ancient world, when Alexander swept into the East, and when Rome extended its power over East and West alike.

The Arabic language became the official language of these peoples, expressing the political and religious ties among them, and expressing, too, the psychological and intellectual bonds among them. Each of these peoples took care to leave its own visible mark upon it, and the Arabs themselves took care to make their language a faithful mirror of the very best these peoples' civilizations and lives had produced, in literature and art, in scholarship and philosophy. Translation flowed in from Persian, from Sanskrit, from Syriac, from Greek; this translation grew abundant, and the study, commentary, and interpretation of it grew abundant along with it, and the intellectual life of the Muslims had, since a very early period, already been shaped by all of this, its traces appearing in their philosophy, their theology, their scholarship, and their literature.

But the new Islamic mind was not able to properly assimilate, or fully digest, all of this until after the third century had passed, and this fourth century had come to shadow the Muslims. In this century, and the one that followed it, a new intellectual life began appearing among the Muslims, coloured through and through with a purely Islamic hue; Muslim thinkers began appearing in the Islamic world whose thought was tinted neither by religious doctrine nor by foreign philosophical influence, as had been the case with the theologians of the second and third centuries — thinkers who were, rather, genuinely independent, attempting to give whatever had reached the Muslims from the legacy of other nations a purely, independently Islamic colour. Among the leading figures of this group were men like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, and other philosophers who appeared in this age. And the maturing of these sciences, arts, and philosophy in the Muslim mind left its own mark on art and literature as well: the poetry of al-Mutanabbi and Abu'l-'Ala' is nothing like the poetry of al-Buhturi and Abu Tammam, nor like the poetry of Abu Nuwas and Muslim, nor like the poetry of al-Farazdaq and Jarir; the prose of al-Sabi' and Ibn al-'Amid is nothing like the prose of al-Jahiz, nor like the prose of Ibn al-Muqaffa', nor like what is recorded of the prose of the Umayyad secretaries and orators. All of it is, rather, something genuinely new — neither Bedouin, nor close to Bedouin, nor foreign, nor close to foreign, but a distinctly Arab art, powerfully self-possessed, and deeply, firmly rooted in its own new Arabic character.

III

Out of the Muslims' subjection, in this age, to these two contradictory phenomena — political decline and intellectual flourishing — many different traces have survived to us; perhaps the most visible of them, the most powerful, and the most vivid in embodying this age, is this very book I am presenting to readers: the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. This book represents, more faithfully and more powerfully than any other, these two contradictory phenomena. It represents, on the one hand, the corruption of Islamic political life at that time, for those who wrote it were a group we can scarcely identify a single member of, since they worked from behind a veil, and worked, before anything else, toward a political end. They were opponents of the political order ruling in Baghdad, just as they were no sincere supporters of the political order ruling in Cairo; they took no comfort in the Abbasid Caliphate, nor did they love the Fatimid Caliphate — they had, rather, political aims of an extreme, indeed excessively extreme, kind. They belonged to the extremist Shi'a, and were quite possibly Isma'ilis — and there is a great deal to be said about the Isma'ilis' aims, their political methods, their aversion to the Fatimids, and their hatred of the Abbasid state.

These men, then, worked from behind a veil, forming a secret society, and the very constitution of this society — it appears — was at once political and intellectual: they wanted to overturn the political order then ruling the Islamic world, and sought to accomplish this by overturning the intellectual order ruling Muslim life as well. In this, they followed the path of societies that had gone before them in the ancient world — most visibly, the Pythagorean brotherhood in the Greek colonies of Italy. This brotherhood detested the customary Greek political order and wanted to overturn and transform it, seeking to do so chiefly by transforming the intellectual order, and establishing a new philosophy that would newly shape the intellectual and scientific life of the individual and the community alike, harmonizing that life with the new politics, and enabling this brotherhood to dominate public affairs. This Pythagorean brotherhood achieved some measure of success; Plato attempted something similar, and succeeded on the intellectual side, imagining a political order he laid out in the Republic and the Laws, and grounding it entirely in Platonic philosophy, just as the Pythagoreans grounded their own order in Pythagorean philosophy. But Plato achieved nothing at all in practical life, and his politics remained pure fantasy, nothing more; and the Greek philosophers were all agreed that any political order whatsoever is worthless unless it rests upon a system of education suited to it, one that prepares individuals and communities to uphold it and

defend it. Education is thus the chief concern of Plato in the Republic, and the chief concern of Aristotle in the Politics; both set out, as clearly as possible, the connection between the various kinds of upbringing and instruction and whatever systems of governance and politics exist, or can be imagined.

This secret society of ours, then, was without doubt influenced by these Greek-world attempts resembling its own political undertaking — influenced by the Pythagorean attempt, influenced by Plato's attempt. And its own measure of success matched that of the Pythagoreans: the Isma'ilis did succeed in establishing a political order that secured them a foothold over some portion of the earth, and spread terror through the Islamic world for a time.

Nothing testifies more clearly to the corruption of political life than the rise of such secret societies, working earnestly and insistently toward its demolition and overthrow; and just as the philosophy of the Pythagoreans and Platonists testifies to the corruption of Greek political life, so too does the philosophy of the Brethren of Purity testify to the corruption of Islamic political life in that age. These men took great care to remain hidden and disguised, so that we can scarcely identify a single one of them, as we have said; only some five names, no more, have been recorded, and even these are not free of doubt. All we can really know of this society is that it arose in Basra in the middle of the fourth century, and that branches of it are known to have existed in Baghdad. I have no doubt whatsoever that Abu'l-'Ala' [al-Ma'arri] made contact with this Baghdad branch when he travelled to Baghdad toward the end of that century, and that he attended its weekly Friday gathering; we see this in Saqt al-Zand, and we even find some of the names of those who attended this branch's sessions, and can almost identify the place where they gathered each Friday. We can even glimpse, in these gatherings, a certain measure of restrained amusement that seems to have been necessary for the philosophers' own philosophy to hold together properly; I touched on something of this in Dhikra Abi'l-'Ala', though I am far more certain of it now, and I believe we find, in the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, the best possible key to unlocking many of the obscurities of the Luzumiyyat.

IV

These Epistles of the Brethren of Purity represent the intellectual life of that age just as they represent its political life — indeed, more

powerfully than they represent its political life, for they form a mirror in which intellectual life is reflected directly. We see this life clearly and plainly within them: we see that the Islamic mind of the fourth century had by then absorbed everything transmitted to it — Greek philosophy, Indian wisdom, Persian and Arabic literature, Islam and other revealed and non-revealed religions — and had gathered all of it together, arranged it, harmonized it, and attempted to fashion from it a single, coherent whole: the very sum of the culture a truly enlightened man ought to obtain and draw upon abundantly.

We notice, in reading the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, the very same thing we notice in reading the *Luzumiyyat* and the *Risalat al-Ghufran*: that ties between Muslims in Iraq and India had, in that age, grown numerous and firmly established, so that India's philosophical doctrines and popular legends passed over to the people of Iraq, mingling with the whole body of learning the Muslims had by then accumulated, and leaving a visible mark upon it. Perhaps the doctrine of metempsychosis was never discussed, explained, defended, and depicted in so many different forms, at any other time, as it was in this age.

We say nothing new in saying that these Epistles of the Brethren of Purity are much like an encyclopedia of philosophy and science, gathering together everything a truly cultured man of that age simply had to know — but gathering all of it according to a certain order, represented in the table of contents placed at its head. This order should be viewed from two angles. The first is the purely philosophical angle, in which respect it is shaped by what the Muslims knew of the philosophy of the ancient and later Pythagoreans, the Platonists, and Aristotle — shaped by all of this at once. It divides the book into four parts: the first, in fourteen epistles, deals with mathematics in all its branches — number, geometry, and astronomy — then with the practical arts, then with logic; this part is Pythagorean-Platonic at its opening, and shaped by Aristotle toward its close, since its logic is Aristotelian logic, in Aristotle's own order and terminology. The second part is Aristotelian in character, treating the whole of natural philosophy in the manner Aristotle himself treated it — beginning with matter, form, time, space, and motion, then moving to the celestial phenomena, then gradually descending through minerals, then plants, then animals, then man, and closing with psychology. The third part, in thirteen epistles, deals with metaphysics, and is visibly shaped by all three of these strands of Greek philosophy — something of the Pythagoreans in it, something of Plato, something of

Neoplatonism, something of Aristotle. The fourth part, finally, deals with theology and matters connected to religions, sacred law, and Sufism — the very blend in which every element that shaped Islamic philosophy comes together, whether Eastern or Western, philosophical or scientific, religious, literary, artistic, or even legendary. All four of these parts, and their fifty-two epistles altogether, are in truth nothing more than a preface and an introduction to a single comprehensive epistle — the very sum of knowledge, the ultimate goal the society was working toward — which was never to be shown to anyone until he had first obtained his share of all these other epistles. The society compared itself to a wise, generous, noble man possessing a garden containing every pleasure imaginable, a garden of unmatched delight; but he would not let people enter this garden until he had first shown them samples of what it contained, so that they might look upon them, draw near, taste, smell, and touch — until, having grown familiar and at ease, and having then desired and longed for more, they were finally admitted into the garden itself. They compared this comprehensive epistle of theirs to a medicine that heals if the body is prepared to receive it, and kills if the body is not so prepared. But this comprehensive epistle never reached us, and had it done so, we would know the true nature of this society, its aims, and its methods, clearly and conclusively.

V

Studying these epistles is useful to anyone who wishes to study the history of Islamic philosophy, for, as we have seen, they represent one of the most flourishing philosophical ages in Islam. And who knows — perhaps a careful, thorough reading of this book might reveal things not yet apparent. Is it really so far-fetched that a man like al-Ghazali might have been influenced, to some greater or lesser degree, by this society's philosophy — especially when we note that he began his life as a philosopher and ended it a Sufi, and that the Brethren of Purity themselves derive Sufism, and an extreme devotion to it, from pure philosophy? This study is useful, too, to those studying the political history of the Muslims, for it reveals to them things they may never find in the books of political history — since political history, as everyone knows, has been written under the influence of a whole set of factors that have, on many occasions, kept it from fairness, and many of those who wrote this political history looked only at the surface of events and the aims of public life. Who knows — perhaps these epistles, if read carefully and thoroughly by historians, might reveal historical secrets we do not

now appreciate, or even suspect.

This study is also useful to those who wish to cultivate themselves, and to draw their own share from our Arabic heritage. The prevailing idea, at present, among those who champion the old ways and cling fanatically to them, is that this heritage consists, or very nearly consists, of poetry and prose alone, along with the linguistic sciences and literary arts connected to them; they scarcely give a thought to philosophy or science, because they sense, clearly and plainly, the superiority of modern philosophy and modern science over whatever philosophy and science the ancients possessed. In this, they are simply pragmatists, guided by their own immediate interests, subject to minds keener than their own taste: they appreciate the advancement of science and philosophy in this age, and so look down on whatever science and philosophy the ancient ages possessed; but they fail to appreciate the advancement of literature, their own taste having grown dull, and so they fuss over ancient literature and lavish excessive praise upon it. Had they been fair to themselves — had God only harmonized their minds with their taste — they would appreciate ancient literature, ancient science, and ancient philosophy all equally, with a measure of justice and fairness; for the literature of the ancients is no more delightful or satisfying to the soul than the science and philosophy of the ancients. If the science and philosophy of the ancients no longer suit our minds today, then the literature of the ancients ought equally to fail to suit our taste today — unless God has somehow disfigured these souls, shrinking their minds and all but erasing their taste.

Those who champion the old ways and cling fanatically to them, those who wish to acquire a sound culture grounded in our heritage, and those who wish to properly understand the old so as to truly understand the new — all of these would do well to read ancient philosophy, just as they read ancient literature. Not everyone, indeed not every educated person, can readily handle the philosophy of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina; that philosophy remains the province of specialists, having been written for specialists, whereas the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity were written for the educated public at large, and were meant to provide a sound philosophical culture — being closer to ordinary minds, easier on the spirit, and a fine introduction for anyone going on to study the specialist philosophers.

It is only fair, however, to point out to readers that these Epistles were never intended as philosophy for its own sake, nor as science for its

own sake; they were meant, rather, to build a particular kind of culture, one designed to prepare the way for a particular kind of politics. There is a good deal of interpretation and evasion in them, a good deal of contrivance and fancy well worth taking note of, and guarding against. The Brethren of Purity themselves, sincere as they were, were fully aware of this, and drew attention to it, urging — and urging insistently — that these Epistles never be given to people except in careful measure. That restriction was easy enough to maintain in the ancient world, when learning was acquired nowhere but in schools and from scholars, and when obtaining and owning books came only through real hardship and effort. But now that the printing press exists, and books offer themselves up to people, pressing themselves upon them and tempting them at every turn, we stand between two choices: either we restrict the publication of books except in careful measure, and only after trial, testing, and scrutiny — which amounts to ignorance, stagnation, and a failure to gather collective effort toward the business of life — or we circulate and publish books freely, restricting the freedom of the press only insofar as is strictly necessary to protect morals and safeguard the social order. This latter is the very path the nations have followed up to now, and the path we ourselves follow, whether we like it or not; and all that is required of us, for our own sake and for the sake of our youth, is simply to draw attention to, and warn of, whatever caution is needed when certain particular books are placed before them, so that these are not read carelessly, nor taken up without discernment and good sense — lest their harm outweigh their good, and their benefit be less than their damage.

The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity possess yet another value I have not yet mentioned — their own purely literary worth. Precisely because they were addressed to the wider public, for instruction and cultivation, they set aside philosophical difficulty in favour of literary ease, and their authors took special literary care over their diction and style; they are rich in imagery, skilful in their similes, careful in their choice of words, and clear in their meanings. It is no exaggeration to say they come close to the very ideal of making the Arabic language supple and receptive to every variety of learning. Had we a body of scholars devoted to literary study who applied themselves seriously to studying, analysing, and critiquing the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, we might be able to discern the various distinct literary personalities at work within them — indeed, we might even be able to identify some of these figures. Who knows — perhaps some of them are already well-known figures, men who wrote on literature, philosophy, and science under their

own names, and who took secret part in these Epistles, a participation still unrecognized to this day.

In sum, these Epistles are a treasure not yet properly valued, simply because they are not yet properly known; and once known, they may well illuminate a whole portion of the Islamic nation's life in one of its most important and most consequential ages. Perhaps the publication of these Epistles, and making them more readily accessible, will bring us closer to this goal, and nearer to this very ideal.