

WESTERN AND EASTERN ESOTERICISM

Timeless Tradition of Wisdom

Throughout history and across cultures men and women have reported similar mystical states of higher perception and understanding that transcend our normal states of consciousness:

If we try to compare descriptions of the mystical experiences of people of entirely different races, different periods and different religions, we shall find a striking resemblance among these descriptions, which can in no case be explained by similarity of preparation or by resemblance in ways of thinking and feeling. In mystical states utterly different people in utterly different conditions *learn* one and the same thing and, what is still more striking, in mystical states there is no difference of religions. All the experiences are absolutely identical; the difference can only be in the language and form of the description. In the mysticism of different countries and different peoples the same images, the same discoveries, are invariably repeated . . . In relation to the idea of hidden knowledge mysticism can be regarded as a breaking through of hidden knowledge into our consciousness. This does not however mean that all mystics invariably recognize the existence of hidden knowledge and the possibility of acquiring it through study and work. For many mystics their experiences are an act of grace, a gift of God, and from their point of view no knowledge can ever lead people to this grace or make the acquisition of it easier. (1)

The mystical current can be contacted by either a descending flow of higher energy (grace) or an ascending force (conscious effort). Paradoxically, these two possibilities are complementary in their action: "From one point of view, mysticism could not exist without hidden knowledge, and the ideas of hidden knowledge would not be known without mysticism."

In virtually every civilization and culture of the world, both past and present, there are hints and indications of a secret knowledge of inner development. "The idea of hidden knowledge and the possibility of finding it after a long and arduous search is the content of the legend of the Holy Grail. Many tales and myths, such as those of the Golden Fleece and Aladdin's Lamp, and those about secret riches and treasures guarded by dragons, serve to express the relation of man to hidden knowledge. The 'Philosopher's Stone' of alchemists also symbolizes hidden knowledge."

The idea of a knowledge which surpasses all ordinary human knowledge, and is inaccessible to ordinary people, but which exists somewhere and belongs to somebody, permeates the whole history of the thought of mankind from the most remote periods. And according to certain memorials of the past a knowledge quite different from ours formed the essence and content of human thought at those times when, according to other opinions, man differed very little, or did not differ at all, from the

animals . . . It must, however, be noted that all religions, all myths, all beliefs, all popular heroic legends of all peoples and all countries are based on the recognition of the existence sometime and somewhere of a knowledge far superior to the knowledge which we possess or can possess. And to a considerable degree the content of all religions and myths consists of symbolic forms which represent attempts to transmit the idea of this hidden knowledge. (2)

The word "esoteric" is derived from the Greek *esoterós* which means "inner." It refers to that which is hidden or secret, 'veiled' by coarser, outer, or "exoteric" impacts and perceptions. "From the developmental point of view, 'inner' means guidance, growth and work related to inner perception. Inner also means hidden, not necessarily deliberately, but because of its very *nature* – being accessible only to the inner faculties, and, by virtue of such nature, out of sight and thus inaccessible to outer or exoteric perception." The work of esoteric schools is sometimes referred to as the 'Initiatory Way' or 'Great Work.'

The practice or process known as 'initiation' is of common, central significance to all mystical schools and nothing is more surrounded by mystery, secrecy and misunderstanding. Initiation implies an inner human change that is 'secret' or esoteric by virtue of its very nature. The 'secret' of transformation cannot be told. It can only be experienced. There is no such thing as instantaneous initiation. It is always and only the result of long work on oneself, together with special help – the help of the 'initiator.' This is the superior being or teacher responsible, who not only guides the student or seeker in all manner of ways, empowering him or her to follow the path by virtue of a special power he possesses, but actually also elevates the seeker's very being and consciousness by some kind of direct spiritual transmission. (3)

For tens of thousands of years esoteric knowledge has been accumulated, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation by small circles of initiates. Traditionally, the four major vehicles for the dissemination of esoteric ideas were religion, philosophy, science and art. There were historical periods in ancient Egypt, Greece and India when the four ways constituted one unified whole:

According to tradition, the following historical personages belong to esoteric schools: Moses, Gautama the Buddha, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato; also the more mythical – Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, Krishna, Rama and certain other prophets and teachers of mankind. To esoteric schools belonged also the builders of the Pyramids and the Sphinx; the priests of the Mysteries in Egypt and Greece; many artists in Egypt and other ancient cultures; alchemists; the architects who built the medieval Gothic cathedrals; the founders of certain schools and orders of Sufis and dervishes; and also certain persons who appeared in history for brief moments and remain historical riddles. (4)

The meaning of the term “esoteric” is often misunderstood by the general populace and the uninitiated based on their uninformed preconceptions and opinions. “Esoteric schools have, on the whole, through the course of human history and depending on the nature of their cultural contexts, been secret in the usual sense. The main reason for this secrecy is protection.” Such secrecy was deemed necessary due to two main factors:

Firstly, it may be necessary to keep secret the nature or very existence of such a school in order to protect it from a surrounding culture which would normally be hostile to it through fear, ignorance and suspicion; in particular when a society contained a hierarchy or hierarchies which would regard the esoteric organization as a threat to their power, image and identity. Catholic Christendom presented just such a hostile environment to esoteric activity in Europe for many centuries. And there have been many other societies of this kind, religious or secular, throughout history. If it is accepted that an inner school could be engaged upon work of importance to humanity and perhaps beyond it, it is obvious that it may be obliged to protect itself in this way – for the good of all! Secondly, certain knowledge possessed by the esoteric schools may have to be kept secret by its members from outsiders for the simple reason that it could be wrongly or dangerously used if it was acquired by the wrong people with a wrong motive. Such misuse of the school’s knowledge could also interfere with the work of the school itself, which is always a highly sensitive operation. (5)

Western Esotericism

Western Mystery schools were the direct descendants of the ancient Egyptian and Greek Mysteries. The Eleusinian Mysteries of Greece are perhaps the best known of the historical esoteric schools, and include among their initiates Socrates and Plato. Their influence manifested in the extraordinary variety of creative expression in Greek art, architecture, sculpture, music and philosophy. “Behind this diversity we sense one informing source, some hidden centre of vitality which is suggested but never revealed by the strange role of the Eleusinian Mysteries.”

At the heart of many an ancient culture, in its most mysterious centre, was the Mystery Cult. This was its hidden house of power whose rays influenced and infused its art and thought, informing and shaping the surrounding cultural environment in ways unknown and unseen by the vast majority of its own inhabitants, and even less suspected by the remote researcher of today . . . In addition to the Eleusinian Mysteries there were a number of other Mystery Schools ranged like a chain of hidden fires secretly burning across the breadth of the ancient world. There were the Orphic Mysteries, the Phrygian Mysteries, the Mysteries of Samothrace, the Chaldean and Assyrian Mysteries, and the Mysteries of Mithras, whose centres spread from their origin in Persia to Babylonia, Greece and Rome. But the

oldest and probably the parent school of them all was the Egyptian Mystery Cult of Isis, and there was a tradition that the centre at Eleusis was founded by a group of Egyptian priestesses, the legendary Danaii, who were initiates of the Temple of Isis. (6)

In the Mystery schools the seeker was potentially 'reborn' into a deeper spiritual life and higher level of consciousness. The postulant who had been initiated into the Mysteries underwent a transformation of being that enabled him or her to activate latent inner perceptual abilities and understand esoteric truths.

Many of these esoteric schools used the symbolism of the four elements – earth, water, air and fire – to describe the development of consciousness and being. The elements represent a succession of states of ever-increasing refinement from the relatively coarse condition of earth to the highest and subtlest state of fire. Other allegorical formulations were also employed to guide the aspirant in the journey to spiritual awakening: "The letters of the Hebrew alphabet and various allegories in the Cabala; the names of metals, acids and salts in alchemy; the names of planets and constellations in astrology; the names of good and evil spirits in magic – all these were but a conventional hidden language for psychological ideas."

The true essence of Hermetic sciences was therefore hidden beneath the symbols of Alchemy, Astrology, the Cabala and Magic. Of these, alchemy took as its outer aim the preparation of gold, or the discovery of the elixir of life; Astrology and Cabala, divination; and Magic, the subjugation of spirits. But when the true alchemist spoke of the search for gold, he spoke of the search for gold in the soul of man. And when he spoke of the elixir of life, he spoke of the search for eternal life and the ways to immortality. In these cases he called "*gold*" what in the Gospels is called the Kingdom of Heaven, and what in Buddhism is called Nirvana. When the true astrologer spoke of constellations and planets, he spoke of the constellations and planets in the soul of man, i.e. of the properties of the human soul and its relation to God and the world. When the true Cabalist spoke of the *Name of God* he searched for this name in the soul of man and in Nature, and not in dead books, not in the Biblical text, as did the scholastic Cabalists. When the true Magician spoke of the subjugation of "spirits," elementals and the like to the will of man, he understood by this the subjugation to one single will of the different "I"s of man, his different desires and tendencies. The Cabala, Alchemy, Astrology and Magic are parallel symbolic systems of psychology and metaphysics. (7)

Each of the great esoteric schools were united across time and culture by a common purpose and pattern of activities as they created suitable conditions for the work of inner growth and transformation:

It appears that there was a communication and mutual understanding between the mystery schools of different cultures. They knew that they were all engaged in essentially the same activity, and recognised their inner identity. Their common

purpose was to provide, for those who truly sought it, access to a certain kind of esoteric education leading, through an ascending sequence of initiations, to the higher stages of consciousness possible for man. They shine across the ancient world, a constellation of centres for the cultivation of consciousness, offering ways of raising one's being to those adventurers of the heart seeking a level of life beyond the dimensions of ordinary existence. The common aim of the mystery cults was that transformation of being which they called 'rebirth' or 'resurrection,' a state in which he or she who followed the initiatory path could ultimately be 're-born' into a higher kind of life connected in some organic way with what could be called the 'divine.' (8)

P.D. Ouspensky described the symbolic nature of certain parables and rituals employed by the Mystery Schools and their correspondence to the teachings of Christ:

The "grain" played a very important part in the ancient Mysteries. The idea of the "burial" of the grain in the earth, its "death" and "resurrection" in the form of a green sprout symbolised the whole idea of the Mysteries . . . The grain allegorically represented "man." In the Eleusinian Mysteries every candidate for initiation carried in a particular procession a grain of wheat in a tiny earthenware bowl. The secret that was revealed to a man at the initiation was contained in the idea that man could die simply as a grain, or could rise again into some other life. This was the principal idea of the Mysteries which was expressed by many different symbols. Christ often makes use of the same idea, and there is enormous power in it. The idea contains a biological explanation of the whole series of the intricate and complex problems of life. Nature is extraordinarily generous, almost lavish, in her methods. She creates an enormous quantity of seeds in order that a few of them only may germinate and carry life further. (9)

Some commentators have suggested that for many seekers the initiation ceremonies embodied by the Mysteries were largely a conditioning and mind-manipulation process. "The historical evidence suggests that the devotees of the Mysteries were thoroughly conditioned to them and felt they were important in their lives. The real mystery of the Mysteries is how and when man first discovered the use of certain procedures to condition other men; and whether the discovery was instantaneous or gradual, or simultaneously or at different times and places."

There was something strange about the classical mysteries; something which attracted people to them and having attracted them made their initiates with few exceptions permanent devotees. In Egypt, Greece, India, Rome and a dozen other places and countries, sacred initiations took place in specially prepared sanctuaries. Priests of the mysteries enjoyed the profound respect of the masses; as well as that of kings and counselors . . . Initiation ceremonies of secret cults of the mystery-type invariably involve tests, sometimes most severe ones. The effect of certain experiences was a carefully worked programme of mind training which is familiar in modern times, as that which is employed by certain totalitarian states

to 'condition' or reshape the thinking of an individual. This process produces a state in which the mind is pliant enough to have certain ideas implanted; ideas which resist a great deal of counter-influence. This was the secret of the mysteries, this and nothing else. Echoes of such training are to be seen in the rituals of certain secret societies without mystical pretensions which survive to this day. That this fact was known in the past is evidenced by the words of Aristotle, who was exiled because he was said to have revealed something about the mysteries; and he said: "Those who are being initiated do not so much learn anything, as experience certain emotions, and are thrown into a special state of mind." (10)

Another important influence on early Western Esotericism was the Kabbalah (or Cabbala), one of the traditional forms for the transmission of Jewish mysticism. It also has affinities with the esoteric teachings of Gnosticism and Neo-platonism. The Kabbalah is essentially a model or "blueprint" of the relationship between an eternal, unchanging Absolute or Ground of Being (*Ein Sof*) and the finite universe (the divine emanations of God's creation).

The origin of the Kabbalah is to some degree shrouded in mystery, but is usually traced to Old Testament times where it is linked with Abraham and Moses. It was then secretly passed down through the centuries: "It is believed that Jesus obtained it from some secret source which had preserved objective knowledge and that the survival of the Jews and their influence on the world derive from their mysterious inheritance of the Cabbala."

About the year 1000 the Cabbala became available in the West. There is no occult school, no mystic, no magician who has not been influenced by the Cabbala. It is the backdrop to every secret tradition in Europe. Its theory has influenced Western philosophy and its practice has been responsible for a whole range of mysterious people who flit in and out of history and folklore, all defying classification, but all causing a strange disturbing echo in the European subconscious . . . Modern Cabbalistic legend asserts that Abraham acquired a corpus of mysticism from Chaldea. When he arrived in Egypt he found that a similar but separate corpus already existed there, this deriving from the Egyptian archetype Hermes. Abraham's arrival in Egypt meant the reuniting of two separate elements of an originally integral system of mysticism and magic. Moses is held to have been an Initiate of an Egyptian school which combined both traditions, and the first man to take the combined corpus into the world. Later, Moses committed to writing the relatively open and exoteric part of the combined lore. This is the Pentateuch, Genesis being the most arcane of the five "open" books. The truly secret part, concerned with the nature of the universe and the practical techniques of individual evolution, remained a wholly oral tradition confined to seventy elders. (11)

The transmission of the Kabbalah through the ages was partly written and partly oral. One of the written forms which preserved the occult knowledge of the Kabbalah was the *Clavicles of Solomon*, parts of which have been identified with the trumps, or the 22 cards of the major arcana, of the Tarot.

When the Kabbalah was introduced to the West around 1000 A.D. in Italy and Spain, it may have been an amalgam of two esoteric streams. "Two separate though similar expressions of an ancient objective science came together, in a wholly oral transmission, later reluctantly written down in cipher." Author Ernest Scott speculates that one source was derived from ancient Jewish mystical teachings while the other originated from Basra, Iraq as one of the treatises composed by the "Brethren of the Faithful," a group associated with Sufism, and published in 980 A.D.

The Kabbalah represents a vast system of cosmological knowledge projected in symbolic form, which denote various levels of spiritual energy linking man (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm):

Perhaps the Cabbala could most crudely be regarded as a cross-sectional plan of the Universe from the Absolute (Ain Soph) down to – and perhaps sideways from – the level of man. Or as a cross-section of the Body of God, showing energy flows within it and the connections which exist – or may be made – between various terminals. The Cabbala sees the "matter" of the Absolute as filling the universe, and the Absolute for its own reasons projecting this universe from its own noumenal nature. The first such projection or emanation contains a number of others within it. Each of these in turn emanates from the one before and includes subsequent emanations within itself, thus giving rise to all the principles or gradations of energy in the manifested universe. These rays or Sephiroth are connected to each other by paths annotated by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The trumps of the Tarot pack also identify these paths. Given a knowledge of these energy levels and their lateral connections, a man may, beginning from his own level, ascend the whole diagram, identifying with, and *acquiring the properties of each*, so retracing the road along which he was projected from the Ain Soph. (12)

The aim of the Kabbalah is to study the nature of the universe by describing the relationship between the spiritual and physical dimensions of reality. The Kabbalah is based on the esoteric science of correspondences and serves as "an instrument for interpreting symbols by establishing a necessary connection between the essence of forms, sounds and numbers and their spiritual equivalents."

The foundation of the Kabbalah is the study of the Name of God. In Hebrew, this is expressed symbolically by four principles which reflect the four letters composing "*Jehovah*." The four are: active (initiative), passive (inertia), equilibrium (form) and latent energy (result). Every phenomenon and object in the universe is thus seen as a reflection of the Divine Name mediated by the four principles:

According to the Cabalists, the four principles permeate and compose each and every thing. Therefore, by finding these four principles in things and phenomena of quite different categories, between which he had previously seen nothing in common, a man begins to see the analogy between these things. And gradually he be-

comes convinced that everything in the world is constructed according to the same laws, according to the same plan. From a certain point of view the enriching of the intellect and its growth consists in the widening of its capacity for finding analogies. The study of the law of the four letters, or of the Name of Jehovah, can therefore constitute a means for widening consciousness. The idea is quite clear. If the Name of God is really in everything (if God is present in everything), then everything should be analogous to everything else, the smallest part should be analogous to the whole, the speck of dust analogous to the Universe and all analogous to God. "As above, so below." (13)

Another vehicle of esoteric teaching which impacted western culture was the Tarot. Legend suggests that the Tarot cards originated in ancient Egypt in the form of a hieroglyphic book consisting of 78 tablets. Archaeologists discovered that the images of the 22 cards of the major arcana were depicted in hieroglyphs on monuments of ancient Egypt. According to tradition, the composition of the major arcana can be attributed to Hermes and constitute a major component of the symbolism of the Egyptian Mysteries. Historical sources indicate that the Tarot was introduced to the West in 1379 A.D.

In one sense the Tarot is an allegorical description of certain cosmic influences on humanity. "Outwardly the Tarot is a pack of cards, but in its inner meaning it is something altogether different. It is a 'book' of philosophical and psychological content which can be used in many different ways."

In *A New Model of the Universe*, Ouspensky described some of the inner content of the Tarot. According to Ouspensky the Tarot is a combination of the Kabbalah, Alchemy, Astrology and Magic:

In its purpose the Tarot is a kind of philosophical abacus.

- (a) It gives a possibility of setting out in different graphic forms (triangle, point and square) ideas which are difficult if not impossible to put into words.
- (b) It is an instrument of the mind, an instrument which can serve for training the capacity for combination and so on.
- (c) It is an appliance for exercising the mind, for accustoming it to new and wider concepts, to thinking in a world of higher dimensions, and to the understanding of symbols.

The system of the Tarot, in its deeper, wider and more varied sense, stands in the same relation to metaphysics and mysticism as a system of notation, decimal or other, stands in relation to mathematics. The Tarot may be only an attempt to create such a system, but even the attempt is interesting. In order to become acquainted with the Tarot it is necessary to be familiar with the ideas of the Cabala, Alchemy, Magic and Astrology. The Tarot is a synopsis of the Hermetic sciences

with their various subdivisions, or an attempt of such a synopsis. All these sciences constitute a single system of the psychological study of man in his relations to the world of noumena (to God, to the worlds of spirit) and to the world of phenomena (the visible physical world). (14)

Islam and Sufism

In the 7th century the rise of Islam transformed the world stage in dramatic fashion. This new world religion had a sublime, transcendental quality that reflected the mystical vision of Mohammed the Prophet.

Mohammed was born in 570 A.D. and, following the early deaths of his parents, was raised by his uncle Abu Talib. In his youth he was a shepherd and later became a caravan leader and merchant. His first marriage was to a wealthy widow, Khadidja, who bore him six children. Known as an honest trader and well respected for his character by his peers, he frequently prayed and meditated alone in the hills surrounding Mecca. But at age forty his life changed dramatically:

His first mystical experience occurred on Mount Hira about the year A.D. 610, five hundred and eighty years after Jesus began to teach and almost exactly twice that length of time after the illumination of Gautama Buddha. He was terrified by the experience, but being comforted and encouraged by Khadidja to believe that he had indeed received the Divine Afflatus and the mission of Prophet, he began to preach the simple message 'God is One and He alone is to be worshipped.' Soon after the revelation on Mount Hira, Mohammed began to receive trance communications which he uttered aloud. The entire Qur'an was revealed in this way over a period of some twenty years. (15)

Following his death in 632 A.D., Mohammed's direct descendants such as his son-in-law Ali and a close group of some 90 men and women, formed a nucleus of *Sahabah* or fraternity of 'Companions' in order to preserve his inner teachings of spiritual transformation and transmit them to future generations. In the following decades Moslem armies conquered surrounding empires and established centres of knowledge in Damascus and Baghdad. "The Moslem conquests had overrun in part or in whole, the cultural areas of Byzantium, Persia, Greece and Egypt and almost at once Arab scholars and their collaborators proceeded to collate, analyse and reissue the corpus of human knowledge which derived from all these sources. From an esoteric standpoint, 'the beads of Mercury' had been reunited." Islam spread rapidly, eventually encompassing lands from Spain and North Africa to India, China and Indonesia:

With the establishment of the great centre of Islamic culture in Baghdad, a new influence radiated into nearly all parts of the world: Europe, North and East Africa, India, the Far East and Central Asia were brought into trading and cultural relations

with a centre that was, in its turn, under the guidance of the Hidden Directorate. The development of responsibility comes with opportunities for exercising it. These were presented both to Christendom and to the Hindu world by the appearance on their boundaries of the new dynamic faith which proved to have an unusual power to assimilate and transform cultures into which it penetrated. So we find that before very long, Islam began to exercise a powerful influence upon Christendom, bringing new life to its philosophy, psychology and even its theology. The cultural explosion that made Baghdad, Balkh and Bokhara centres of science, art and literature was no ephemeral flower, for, as we are becoming increasingly aware, European science and literature owe more than they realize to the Arab culture. The revival of Christian spirituality in the Eastern Church was due to contact with Islamic spirituality in Asia Minor . . . The Islamic science, art and spirituality of Baghdad and Spain also drew very much from Jewish and Christian sources. There was a very fruitful interaction between the four streams of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that, until the end of the first millennium, mainly showed itself in the Islamic world: but soon afterwards spread widely throughout the inhabited world. (16)

After many tribulations and setbacks, the followers of Mohammed created a true Islamic state based on social reform and the spiritual teachings imparted to the Prophet. Societies were organized on the foundation of Islamic law and the Arabic language, and tolerance extended to Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

However, this "Golden Age" of Islam was relatively short-lived as the inevitable failings of human self-interest, jealousy, intrigue and aggression surfaced. The second, third and fourth Caliphs or supreme religious and political leaders (Umar, Uthman and Ali) were all murdered and later the successors of Mohammed split into the Shia and Sunni sects:

Islam in no way avoided its share of human shortcomings. On the one hand, there was a sublime reverence for man's highest aspirations. There was just law-giving, a surging expression of art and architecture. On the other hand, there was egoism, conflict and hatred in many of those who sought to serve the new ideas. At some point in its development, a religion begins to diverge from the impulse from which it derives; a departure which appears to be in the nature of things. At this point a religion elaborates dogma and ritual; it becomes obsessed with the letter and not the spirit of its own inner nature. Its outward expression becomes formalized, rigid and autocratic . . . From the external viewpoint it seems fair to say that the social and political body of Islam was showing advanced entropy within thirty years. (17)

Sufism is an esoteric teaching within Islam which, in its purest form, includes but also transcends the contours of any one religious form. Sufism has sometimes been called the "secret tradition," "the essence of all religions" and "Truth without form." It is said to represent "the stream of direct, evolutionary experience which has been the determining factor in all the great schools of mysticism."

Sufis hold that their teachings are an immemorial tradition of wisdom, dating from Adam himself. "The seed of Sufism was sown in the time of Adam, germinated in the time of Noah, budded in the time of Abraham, began to develop in the time of Moses, reached maturity in the time of Jesus, produced pure wine in the time of Mohammed."

How did Sufism arise, and what is it rooted in? According to historical documents, it is attributed to three sources, which many Sufis themselves have stated are essentially different manifestations of the same, extra-dimensional, cosmic and divine impulse. They are:

1. Sufism has been known under many names, to all peoples, from the beginning of human times.
2. It was, for instance, transmitted by the Prophet Mohammed to his disciple and son-in-law Ali, and to others, as the inner component of all religion.
3. It also persisted, side by side with the Prophetic transmission, as, for instance, in the independent witness of the historical figure of Uways al-Qarni, a contemporary of the Prophet who, however, never met him. (18)

The Sufis view Islam as part of a continuum of religious expression linking ancient teachings with the Islamic period and afterwards. "Because the Sufis recognized Islam as a manifestation of the essential upsurge of transcendental teaching, there could be no interior conflict between Islam and Sufism. Sufism was taken to correspond to the inner reality of Islam, as with the equivalent aspect of every other religion and genuine tradition." The Sufis regard Mohammed as the embodiment of the 'Perfect Man.'

There is a widespread notion, especially among religious academics and traditional Moslems, that Sufism is "Islamic mysticism." But this is disputed by both classical and contemporary Sufis themselves. "This assumption has understandably arisen from the fact that for centuries there has been a clear and continuing Sufi presence within many Islamic countries. But Sufi teaching transcends all religions, and is not culture-bound. It addresses the spiritual element in all mankind."

Sufism is not 'Islamic mysticism.' It existed before the coming and outside the confines of Islam. It would be more correct to say that Islamic mysticism is simply a particular, culturally-oriented, projection of Sufism. 'Sufism has been known under many names to all peoples from the beginning of human times.' On the perennity and variety of the teaching's manifestations Sufis concur. The authority Suhrawardi of the twelfth century, in his colossal '*Wisdom of Illumination*,' specifically states: 'The Sufi philosophy is identical with the inner teaching of all the ancients – the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks – and is the Knowledge of Light and the deepest truth, through which man can attain to a status about which he can normally not even dream.' In the following century, the English Sufi Roger Bacon endorses this in his '*Philosophia Occulta*.' This knowledge, he says, 'was known to Noah and Abraham, to the Chaldean and Egyptian masters, to Zoroaster and Hermes, to certain

Greeks including Pythagoras, Anaxagoras and Socrates, and to the Sufis.' In this sense, he avers, they are all Sufis. (19)

According to the Sufis there is only one underlying truth within all religions. This essential unity among the inner, mystical teachings of all faiths is sometimes called "the confluence of essences" and denotes a universal, timeless spiritual understanding or 'gnosis' transcending all outer forms of belief. "The essential truth lies in the inner consciousness of man himself, not in external religious organizations."

In its purest form Sufism reflects a timeless stream of esoteric teaching which connects the mystics of all cultures and times through a higher-level unity of knowledge and perception. "All authentic expressions of human spiritual aspiration may be seen as having a single source, and that the differences are in appearance only, imposed by cultural and local conditions. Major religions are viewed as part of a continuum of perception of needs." This explains why Rumi had Christian, Zoroastrian and other disciples, why the Sufi 'invisible teacher' Khidr is said to be a Jew, why Pythagoras and Solomon as well as some alchemists are considered Sufi teachers, why the Hindu Vedas are equivalent, in many ways, to Sufi teachings and why Jesus stands, in a certain sense, as 'the head of the Sufis.'

In the classical period of Sufism various schools or 'Orders' were formed, each under the direction of a renowned Sufi master or their direct students. The four major Orders were the Chishti, Qadiri, Suhrawardi and Naqshbandi. "The dervish Orders were originally set up for the purpose of regulating and making available to selected candidates the special techniques developed by the Founder of each Order."

The Order, for the Sufi, is not a self-perpetuating entity with a fixed hierarchy and premises, forming a training system for the devotee. The nature of Sufism being evolutionary, it is by definition impossible for a Sufi body to take any permanent form as rigid as this. In certain places, and under individual masters, schools appear and carry out an activity designed to further the human need for completion of the individual. These schools (like that of Rumi, for example) attract very large numbers of people who are not Moslems, although Sufi schools have always, since the time of Islam, been presided over by people who originate in the Moslem tradition. Again, while Sufi Orders have specific rules and set forms of dress and ritual, these are not invariable, and the extent to which the Sufi adheres to these forms is determined by his need for them, as prescribed by his master. This is because the Way is being developed by means of an inner necessity, not piloted by the externals of its apparent organizational framework. (20)

The impact and influence of Sufism on Eastern and Western civilization during the last millennium has been attested to by multi-disciplinary scholars and religious experts:

Sufi thought was adopted, as scholars of the time have more than adequately demonstrated, by people from virtually all the cultures of a major portion of the

then known world. There is, indeed, no other system of mystical thought on record which has been able to attract and recruit devout and iconoclastic thinkers from the Jewish, Christian and Hindu dispensations, effectively transcending the barriers of misunderstanding and ideological hostility which have certainly been as great as any others known to humanity. Sufi ideas also penetrated the religious, secular and scientific writings and studies of the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as those of Europe, to an unprecedented extent . . . Up to the late Middle Ages, the Sufis, from Malaysia and the confines of China to Turkestan and India, and from Turkey to Arabia, Africa and Spain, continued their research and teaching in what we would nowadays call very many specialized fields. They worked and published in religion, in literature and poetry, in astronomy and physics, in community phenomena, and in psychological studies. (21)

During this period Sufi ideas, literature and practices intended to awaken higher human possibilities penetrated a wide range of cultures in many varied forms of expression:

- Phenomenon of the Troubadours of Europe
- Chivalry and the Knights Templar
- William Tell legend of Switzerland
- Tales of Hans Christian Andersen
- Prototype of the stories of Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote
- Writings of Dante (*Divine Comedy*), Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*) and Milton (*Paradise Lost*)
- Plays of Shakespeare (*King Lear*, *Hamlet*)
- Certain types of music, dances, clothing and games
- Symbolism and practices of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons
- Spiritual exercises and techniques adopted by Yoga, Zen and other traditions
- Founding of the Sikh and Baha'i religions

One of the most significant qualities of Sufi efforts to transmit esoteric ideas to various communities and societies was the disguised nature of much of their teachings, which were intended to operate in an indirect or oblique fashion for a limited period of time. "There are successive renewals, each new phase lasting a comparatively short time before being replaced by a different presentation, of the same basic nature but having a form which appears to be entirely new."

A large number of cultural traditions, which may be religious, humanitarian, literary, craft-oriented, artistic or psychological, are seemingly unconnected. They are in fact manifestations of a common activity which is certainly Sufic. This impulse, infusing widely separate national and racial streams, has a mode of action which grafts into existing elements and works with existing materials. There is probably no parallel for an inter-cultural influence working in this way. The action does not result from any identifiable teaching. It is indirect, a "provoking of action" tech-

nique depending for its effect on what would now be called subliminal response. Its real action is therefore unnoticed and the connection between its many forms in many countries is unsuspected. This applies alike to adherents and to outside observers. (22)

The classical Sufis were able to project their teachings in both religious contexts and hidden, indirect forms. They were also able to protect their activities from dangerous outside forces. For instance, when the Moguls invaded their lands they took preservative action along three lines: some Sufis emigrated; some remained and allowed themselves to be of assistance to the new regime; some remained and disguised the outward form of their activity.

Alchemy

Alchemy has a long history, and various forms of alchemical practice have existed throughout the world in many different cultures at different times. Traditionally, the origin of alchemy is attributed to the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus; hence the term "Hermetic Art" is often synonymous with alchemy and allied arts. References to alchemical ideas appear in the Hindu Vedas dating from 1000 B.C.; alchemy was also practised in China as early as the 5th century B.C. as an integral part of esoteric Taoism. The emphasis of Chinese alchemy was on producing a medicine or elixir to cure illness, prolong life and even, in its more esoteric forms, promise immortality. The alchemical knowledge is generally believed to have been passed down from Egypt to Greece to Islam to Europe:

It is now recognized that Alchemy was practised in all the great civilisations; and no matter whether in India, China or Greece, it was invariably called 'The Work' or 'The Great Work.' Furthermore, in whatever culture it manifested itself, there were always the same three elements: 'mercury,' 'sulphur' and 'salt,' which had to be combined for the production of the Philosopher's Stone. The consistency is significant. It indicates not haphazard experimentation, but a constant body of knowledge. Alchemical terminology thus appears to be the symbolic mode of expression adopted by an esoteric developmental school for the projection of its allegorised message. It contained concealed instructions for, and descriptions of, processes leading to the perfecting of the human being. This was technical material for the transformation of consciousness, a disguised spiritual path. (23)

In the Middle East alchemy became one of the cornerstones of Islamic science. Sufis often used the language of alchemy to describe the process of spiritual transformation. El-Ghazali (known in the West as Algazel) titled his masterwork *The Alchemy of Happiness*, and Rumi often made reference to alchemical terms in his written works. The founding father of Arabic alchemy was the Sufi master Jabir (known in the West as Geber), who learned the secrets of alchemy from his own teacher Jafaq Sadiq who lived in the 8th century A.D. Jabir's writings on alchemy were highly regarded in both the East and the West and eventually influenced the

development of experimental chemistry in 17th century Europe. Jabir, who was considered to be the greatest alchemist since Hermes, made most of his discoveries by the inductive rather than deductive method of observation. "Instead of observing the results of experiments and deducing the laws which apply, he observes the laws in operation at the noumenal level and induces their experimental application."

Jabir's ground plan of nature involved four basic elements (earth, air, fire and water), in line with Aristotelian belief, but he developed these in terms of hotness, coldness, dryness and moisture. In the presence of these qualities and under planetary influences, metals were formed in the earth by the action of sulphur and mercury . . . The combination of mercury and sulphur, absolutely pure, and in a certain proportion, give rise, Jabir believed, to gold. In various degrees of impurity and in various proportions they give rise to all the other metals. One of Jabir's apparent endeavours was to arrive at a formula which would give the various balances. One such table, which he published, turns out to be a "magic square" which was known to the Neo-Platonists and, says Professor Holmyard, "had associations for the Sufi mystical society of which he was a member." (24)

Alchemy was first transmitted to the West in 1144 A.D. by Robert of Chester, who studied the mystical arts in Saracen Spain and translated a number of Eastern alchemical texts. Albertus Magnus, who was one of the teachers of Thomas Aquinas, was another important figure in Western alchemy. He based his work on a rational approach to understanding natural phenomena and "insisted on the primacy of personal observation and experimentation."

Throughout history alchemy has been controversial and misunderstood. Some saw it as "a superstition among ignorant ancients." Others regarded it as a symbolic and disguised system of spiritual transformation and development: "Alchemy is the science of purifying man's inner nature and arriving at a spiritually refined individual. For political reasons, this exercise had to be concealed in a pseudo-science of metal refining to which the Church would have no reason to object."

According to Idries Shah, the terminology of alchemy was employed by certain schools as an allegorized framework for inner development. "The first work of the true alchemist was to refine and transmute one's own very *self* from coarse to fine, from lower to higher; and then to help others to effect the same change."

The Seeker is given an enterprise to complete. It may be an alchemical problem, or it may be the effort to reach the conclusion of an enterprise just as unlikely of attainment. For the purposes of his self-development he has to carry that undertaking out with complete faith. In the process of planning and carrying through this effort, he attains his spiritual development. The alchemical or other undertaking may be impossible, but it is the framework within which his constancy and his application, his mental and moral development is carried out. To this extent it is secondary. Insofar as it is permanent for him and for his lifetime, perhaps, it is

not secondary at all, because it becomes his permanent anchor and frame of reference. It is something slightly like the spirit that all competitive undertakings are carried out in sport, or mountaineering, or even in physical culture, in other societies. The mountain or the muscular development are the fixed points, but they are not the element which is actually being transformed by the effort. They are the means, not the end. The whole concept may seem strange, but it is ultimately based on its own logic. It is not the framework which is altered by the effort, but the human being himself. And it is the development of the human being which counts, nothing else. (25)

Shah also provides a Sufi allegory of the real purpose of alchemy and how this spiritual aim is disguised in order to be truly effective:

There is a Sufi allegory about alchemy, which is interesting because of its connection with Western thought. A father has several idle sons. On his deathbed he tells them that they will find his treasure hidden in his field. They dig up the field but find nothing. So they plant wheat, which provides an abundant crop. For several years they do this. They find no gold, but indirectly they become both enriched and accustomed to constructive labour. Ultimately they become honest farmers, and forget the digging for gold. (26)

The fundamental working principle of alchemy is contained in the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*: "That which is above is as that which is below, and that which is below is as that which is above to accomplish the miracle of one thing." In practice, this is expressed in symbolic terms which allude to an inner process of human transformation. The great Medieval alchemist Paracelsus equates mercury with spirit, sulphur with the soul and salt with the body. "The methods of concentration, distillation, maturing and mixing, endowed with chemical names, is nothing other than an organization of the mind and body to produce a human, not a chemical effect."

The basis of the alchemical 'work' was the reconciliation of opposites and the creation of a harmony between heaven and earth following the dictum "as above, so below." The alchemists stressed that the 'Great Work' or 'Magnum Opus' depended on the proper conditions and circumstances, which included suitable celestial and astrological influences: "The transformation requires a particular cosmic situation in which extra-dimensional influences were focused on the place of work, helping to fire the alchemical furnaces."

Alchemical wisdom was considered to be organic and living, something that is absorbed rather than acquired. For the process to be successfully completed requires the presence of a master teacher to guide the efforts: "He acts like the Philosopher's Stone upon his disciples. The lower is transformed by contact with the higher. Through his spiritual power he directs and nourishes his pupils. His knowledge guides, his radiance refines them. And in his blessing their flower unfolds."

The Nature and Continuity of the Esoteric Stream

Throughout human history there have been intimations of a continuous stream of esoteric knowledge transmitted from generation to generation by spiritual adepts from many different cultures. Gurdjieff emphasized the timeless, universal nature of this transmission: "All the great genuine religions which have existed down to the present time, created, as history itself testifies, by men of equal attainment in regard to the perfecting of their Pure Reason, are always based on the same truths." He described this legacy as an ancient 'knowledge of being,' leading to self-knowledge and self-development:

Gurdjieff regarded knowledge of reality – which he called true "knowledge of being" – as a stream flowing from remote antiquity, passed on from age to age, from people to people, from race to race. He viewed this knowledge as the indispensable means to achieve inner freedom, liberation. For those who seek to understand the meaning of human life in the universe, he said, the aim of the search is to break through to this stream, to find it. Then there remains only "to know" in order "to be." But in order to know, he taught, it is necessary to find out "how to know." (27)

One of the purposes of esoteric activity is to inject a developmental stimulus into a certain community at a certain time. "They operate on a selected group for a particular purpose and for a certain time only. The impulse is then wholly withdrawn. So penetrating is the energy involved, however, that harmonics of the original excitation may continue for centuries."

In order to be maximally effective, a spiritual teaching may have to be "cloaked in a garment" that disguises its real intent. The effect, not the appearance, is the aim. Idries Shah provides a useful analogy: "Many aspects of higher human development can only take the form of communicating knowledge and experience in a disguised manner: rather as we teach our children by involving them in activities which they consider to be amusements rather than lessons in (say) counting, or coordination, or manners. One method of accustoming people to a 'higher pattern' is to involve them in activities and enterprises which are equivalents of higher things."

The variety of teachers is enormous in Sufism, partly because they consider themselves to be part of an organic process. This means that their impact upon humanity may be taking place without any consciousness on the part of humanity of the relationship. As one example, the Sufi of the Middle Ages might move from place to place dressed in a patchwork garment, and teach by signs, perhaps not speaking, perhaps saying cryptic words. He established no formal school himself, but made sure that the message of Sufihood was communicated to people in the countries through which he passed. This strange figure is known to have operated in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. (28)

The imprint of esoteric schools on a surrounding culture can take many varied and unexpected forms. A number of historical examples have been presented which illustrate this contention.

In Europe between the 12th and 14th centuries, an unusual phenomenon emerged in the form of wandering minstrels or Troubadours. "The Troubadours were a mystery, even in their own day. The movement seemed to spring from nowhere, without any apparent ancestry, and when it appeared it was ready-made in its final form. The most notable feature of the Troubadour love poetry was the idealization of woman and the concept of courtly love, both symbolizing a certain spiritual quality." The Troubadours were also linked to the court jesters of Europe, the Irish and Welsh bards and the legend of King Arthur and the Holy Grail:

Like most such experiments it was concerned to operate by manipulating environment so as to effect a change in a small selected section of a population. Over the century and a half during which it was active, the Troubadour movement achieved a refinement of life and a standard of culture which probably went unequalled for 500 years . . . It seems possible to detect a number of aims behind the Troubadour movement. The first was to suggest by a subtle symbolism the existence of a kind of love which could not be realized in human terms. "Within mankind there is an element activated by love which provides the means of attaining to true reality." Secondly, perhaps, the reinstatement of a passive, recessive feminine element into the stream of European life. This element was primary in the Great Mother impulse and has probably been defective in the entire history of the West. Whether the ingrafting of the Cult of the Virgin into Christianity was part of the intention or whether this crept into dogma by osmosis from the Troubadour impulse, it is impossible to say. (29)

Certain examples of European and American literature, especially poetry, which were composed between the 15th and 19th centuries, also show evidence of possible higher-order influences from esoteric sources. "Among all these poets there is a common ground not only of doctrine and myth, but also a common morality. This includes a remarkable idea: *the election of a certain number of beings in a further stage of evolution*. All of these poets without exception have been influenced by the Cabbala."

One of the most curious phenomena of modern literature, from the Renaissance to the 19th century, is the existence among a certain number of great poets between whom there is often but a slight connection, of a common, non-Christian stock of myths and ideas. Spenser, Blake, Milton, Shelley, Emerson and Whitman in Anglo-Saxon literature; Goethe, Heine, Wagner, Nietzsche in Germany; Hugo, Vigny, Lamartine and Leconte de Lisle in France, would seem, after a close study of their religious ideas, to be like branches of the same tree. Still more curious than the existence of ideas in common is the recurrence of certain myths and symbols which seem to have a certain fascination for these poets . . . The philosophical poets remain more than any other order of minds best qualified to represent the entire aspirations of

their race, the very soul of their humanity. All the great philosophical poets of the West are concerned with the idea of man's possible evolution and the existence among men of more highly developed individuals. (30)

Ernest Scott suggests that certain people and events may be influenced through a form of telepathy. "If such an influence exists, it clears many 'coincidences' which prove intractable to ordinary explanation. There are many examples of inventions, individually improbable, being arrived at simultaneously, by different people." A further example of this possible extrasensory intervention in human affairs is the case of writers whose extraordinary fantasies later turn out to be prophetic. For instance, in the *Divine Comedy* Dante provides a precise description of the Southern Cross, a constellation which is invisible in the Northern hemisphere and unknown to Europeans at the time of the writing. And, Jonathan Swift in *The Journey to Laputa* gives both the distance and periods of rotation of the two small moons of Mars, at a time when their existence was completely unsuspected. Scott also points to the writings of modern science fiction as a medium for expressing ideas far in advance of their time:

It may be that coming events are deliberately foreshadowed to prepare a mental climate for the event that lies on a line of probable actualization. There are reasons to suppose that almost the whole of science fiction belongs to this category. Space travel and atomic energy came as only minimal surprises to world populations which were barely emerging from the steam age. Verne and Wells and a whole host of later writers like Asimov and Clarke envisaged coming developments of science so concretely that they were able to present their "fantasies" as virtual realities. Thus the ideas became acceptable mental currency *in advance of their actualization*. (31)

The intervention of esoteric schools in the life of a community or culture is typically sophisticated, effective and varied in expression. Historically, the prevailing secular or religious order was suspicious of any individual or group which attempted to introduce new ideas and practices which they deemed a challenge to their authority. Thus it was necessary, in a practical sense, to present esoteric teachings in a way that was both developmentally effective and immune from resistance and attack by the established hierarchy. It appears that at least four methods were employed:

1. The use of some form of advanced mental capacity such as telepathy to communicate directly with selected individuals of the community
2. An approach within the society itself which is invisible or 'hidden' and therefore unsuspected by the powers in authority
3. In a form that operates openly but appears to the official regime to be a wholly innocuous activity
4. Working undetected within the structure of the prevailing authority itself.

Ernest Scott, who studied the historical manifestations of esotericism in depth, describes some of the salient characteristics of such esoteric interventions, providing examples of each:

- They cross the normal boundaries of nations, race and religion (alchemy).
- They are concerned with the benefit of humanity (International Red Cross).
- They have a leadership (St. Francis, head of the Franciscans).
- They have the support and sponsorship of important personages in the host community (the British Royal families for the Order of Chivalry).
- They may work within the framework of conventional religions (the builders of the Gothic cathedrals).
- They stress development by stages and degrees (craft guilds).
- They practice specific spiritual exercises and techniques (dance of the whirling dervishes).
- They use symbols and a unique language (Freemasonry).
- They have a myth that symbolizes the spiritual development of individuals or the community (legend of King Arthur and the Round table).
- They employ the metaphor of a journey and search (navigating a labyrinth at the end of a pilgrimage).

The ultimate aim and purpose of all these varied, precisely calibrated esoteric activities is the purification and transmutation of the human soul and the realization of our highest spiritual potential. Real esoteric teachings show a seeker how to harmonize their inner and outer worlds, following the dictum: 'Be *in* the world, but not *of* the world.' In the words of Gurdjieff's student Jeanne de Salzmann: "The first way, work on our essence, is outside life, wholly concentrated on inner action. The second, work on our functions (body, mind and feelings), is in life itself and through life."

Esoteric knowledge is the science of man's relation with God and the universe. Its transmission requires an engagement with others – so-called "schools" – because a certain energy can only be produced in conditions where people work together. Schools may differ in their knowledge and their approach – their way – but they have the same aim in common, to see reality. The knowledge is passed on theoretically and through direct experience, that is, by living a drama which follows the particular way of the school. This creates a relation, the link without which it would not be possible to live in two worlds of different levels at the same time. (32)

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