Islamic and Western Esotericism

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Abstract

The field of the study of Western esotericism, as developed by scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff, is growing in size and importance. Most scholars of Islam, however, have shown no interest in this field. As a result, there is little understanding of the relationship between Islamic esotericism and Western esotericism, and even doubt as to whether there is such a thing as Islamic esotericism in the first place. This article seeks to make an initial contribution to remedying this. It argues that there is indeed an Islamic esotericism that matches Western esotericism very closely. The article compares Islamic and Western esotericism in terms of discourse (both discourse on the exoteric and esoteric levels), as historical phenomena in terms of origins and later contacts, and in terms of structure, that is to say in relation to established religious and political power. It concludes that Islamic esotericism matches Western esotericism in terms of discourse and historical sources, but not in terms of structure, of relations with established religious and political power structures.

Keywords: Islam; Christianity; Judaism; esotericism; discourse; Neoplatonism

Islam has been somewhat marginal to the Western Study of Religion, which often seems to focus on Western Christianity, on Judaism, and on Greek and Roman antiquity. Islam was thus relatively neglected when the study of mysticism was at its height, and has also tended to be neglected in the study of Western esotericism, a field that is now growing in size and importance, drawing on the work of scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff. Scholars engaged in the study of Islam have only occasionally engaged in the more general study of mysticism, and have only very rarely shown any interest at all in the study of what has become known as Western esotericism, the newly emergent

field within the Study of Religion that is the focus, among others, of scholars belonging to the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) in America and the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE). There are exceptions, among whom Henry Corbin (1903–1978) is perhaps the most notable, but scholars of Islam generally pay even less attention to the study of Western esotericism than scholars of Western esotericism pay to the study of Islam. This is a pity, as the two studies have significant overlaps. Corbin was not always right, but he was more often right than wrong. As this article will show, there is an "Islamic esotericism" that matches Western esotericism very closely, but with some interesting differences.

The term "esotericism" is rarely used in Islamic studies. Alexander Knysh uses it to denote the Iranian '*irfān* (gnosis) tradition,[1] probably following Corbin, who used "esoteric" to translate the Arabic/Persian terms *bāṭin* and *ghayb*, discussed below.[2] Otherwise, most uses of the term are either popular and in French, or derived from the French esoteric philosopher René Guénon (1886–1951), also discussed below. In fact, the frequent use of the term by Seyyed Hossein Nasr derives from Guénon. This article will define the "Islamic esotericism" that is its focus as it proceeds, in parallel with its examination of the relationship between Islamic and Western esotericism.

Finding a satisfactory definition for "Western esotericism" is a long-established problem, well-known to those engaged in its study. There are three major approaches to this problem. One is to identify Western esotericism as a historical phenomenon, an approach favoured by the pioneering French scholar Antoine Faivre, who refers to "a group of specific historical currents."[3] This approach has much to recommend it. Rather than embarking on the difficult task of defining something from first principles, we can simply observe what it is

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1. Knysh, "'Irfan' Revisited," 639.
2. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, 8.
3. Faivre, *Western Esotericism*, 5. Faivre has also proposed understanding Western esotericism in terms of an *aire de famille* and of six fundamental characteristics; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10.

that we have before us. There is however, of course, also a certain risk of circularity: that we will observe what we have decided to observe. A second major approach is to treat Western esotericism as a distinct discursive tradition, looking at the content of this discourse, and perhaps also at the topics dealt with, as proposed among others by Kennet Granholm, who argues for looking at "discourse on the esoteric" rather than at "esoteric discourse,"[4] a useful distinction. A third major approach is to understand Western esotericism in terms of its relationship to hegemonic official orthodoxy, as "rejected knowledge," or as "a structural element in Western culture" as Kocku von Stuckrad has argued.[5] This article will use all three of these major approaches. It will start with the discursive approach, move to the historical approach, and end with the structural approach. It will argue that there is an Islamic esotericism that is closely related to what is understood as Western esotericism discursively and historically, but is very different structurally.

Esotericism as discourse

The definition of esotericism in terms of discourse was the approach followed by Corbin, and will now be followed by this article somewhat more systematically. In Arabic, the key language of Islam, there is a discourse about the *ghayb* (literally, "hidden"), a term which maps the broad area that corresponds to the esoteric in Granholm's "discourse *on* the esoteric," and *bāṭini* discourse, a term which maps the broad area that corresponds to the esoteric in Granholm's "esoteric discourse." The usage of *ghayb* is well established in the Quran and thus relatively uncontroversial; the usage of *bāṭini* is only partly established in the Quran. In the case of the *bāṭini*, the discourse is restricted, if not rejected.

The word *ghayb* is substantive and literally means that which is hidden. It is used in this sense forty-nine times in the Quran, twenty-five times in connection with ʿ*ilm*, knowledge. It is placed most frequently in opposition to *shahāda*,

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4. Granholm, "Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes," 51.
5. Von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism," 80.

from the root verb *shahada* meaning to witness or to make, a pairing that occurs nine times, and is also placed seven times in conjunction with heaven and earth (*al-samawāt wa'l-arḍ*).[6] The *ghayb*, then, is established as something that is the opposite of the visible, is found both in the heavens and on earth, and is something of which knowledge may be had, or may not be had.

The term *ghayb* thus corresponds fairly closely to the term "esoteric" in the sense of Granholm's "discourse *on* the esoteric." There is, however, a difference. In ancient and modern Islamic usage, the *ghayb* included both what Western discourse would class as occult—for example, angels and demons—and what Western discourse would class as belonging to religion—for example, God himself. The distinction between religion and esotericism is harder to make in Islamic traditions than it is in Western thought. Angels (*malāʾika*) and demons (*jinn*), for example, are referred to explicitly and repeatedly in the Quran (eighty-eight times for angels and twenty-two times for demons), and belong to religion proper quite as much as the Day of Judgment does. In Islam, then, there are some *realities* whose existence "religion" confirms and dictates the obligation to believe in them. This is the *ghayb*, esoteric in the sense of hidden facts.

Human penetration into the *ghayb* can occur in two ways, legitimate and illegitimate. The legitimate way is through fulfilling religious obligations and worship; magic is mostly deemed as the illegitimate way. Quite where the line lies between the two is not always clear, with practitioners of magic often claiming, naturally enough, that their practices are in fact in line with Islam (religion), and thus legitimate.

Similar to the word *ghayb*, the word *bāṭin* means concealed, but is a verbal participle, and carries an implication of the inner; the grammatically related substantive *bāṭn* denotes the bowels. As *ghayb* is frequently placed in opposition to *shahāda* in the Quran, so *bāṭin* is contrasted with *ẓāhir*, the manifest,[7] a contrast well established by Quran 57:3, where God is famously described as

6. Quranic Arabic corpus.
7. Quranic Arabic corpus.

"the first and the last, and the outer (*ẓāhir*) and the inner (*bāṭin*)." Unlike *ghayb*, however, *bāṭin's* sense of "esoteric" is not established in the Quran, where it is used most frequently in connection with *fawāḥisha*, immoralities or indecencies.[8] Both hidden and manifest immoralities are to be avoided, we are told.

Bāṭin's sense of "esoteric" is of later origin but then became very well established. The pair of *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* has been applied especially in the interpretation of the Quran. Every verse of the Quran, it has often been maintained, and especially by the Shīʿa, has a plain *ẓāhir* meaning and a hidden *bāṭin* meaning. The pair is also taken beyond this to apply to more general understandings: there are outer *ẓāhir* truths and inner *bāṭin* truths.[9] *Bāṭin* thus corresponds fairly easily to the "esoteric" in the sense of Granholm's "esoteric discourse," and *ẓāhiri* equates easily with "exoteric." The main difference between the *bāṭin* and the *ghayb*, then, is that it is meanings and ideas that may be *bāṭin*, but it is realities that may be *ghayb*.

When applied to a group, the word *bāṭiniyya*, which can be translated as "esotericism," commonly designates the Ismāʿilis, a relatively small branch of Shīʿi Islam.[10] The Ismāʿilis do not describe themselves as *bāṭinis* but are often so described by others. They maintain that exoteric *ẓāhir* truths, as revealed to humanity by various prophets, have varied from prophet to prophet, as they varied for example between the teachings of Moses and the teachings of Jesus. Esoteric *bāṭin* truth, in contrast, is one, irrespective of the various exoteric *ẓāhir* systems. The tenth-century Ismāʿili theologian Muḥammad al-Nasafi (d. 943) held that the central, esoteric *bāṭin* truth is that the starting point of everything is an unknowable God beyond being and non-being, from whom emanated the Intellect, from which emanated the (universal) Soul, from which emanated the elements, and then also vegetative, animal, and rational souls.[11]

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8. Quranic Arabic corpus.

9. Poonawala, "Al-Ẓāhir wa ʾl-Bāṭin."

10. Hodgson, "Bāṭiniyya."

11. Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, 84–85.

Not only does the broad area mapped by the term *bāṭin* correspond to Western esoteric discourse in the fact that concealed meanings about the universe can be gleaned by individuals who contemplate the cosmogonic and ontological structure of the animated Universe, but a major part of the content of at least some *bāṭin* discourse—that of the Ismāʿīlis—is very familiar to those who know the Western esoteric discourse. For as well as resembling perennialism, with the exoteric varying but the esoteric remaining the same and universal, al-Nasafi's Ismāʿīli system is in fact much the same as the system articulated in late antiquity by the Hellenic-Egyptian philosopher Plotinus (c. 204–270).

The great achievements of Plotinus included the expansion and systematization of Plato, the presentation of a coherent and unified cosmology of emanation, and the incorporation into a philosophical framework of what is now called "the mystical experience," an experience with which Plotinus himself was evidently familiar.[12] The system of emanation from the One through Intelligence and Soul was derived by Plotinus from other sources, but Plotinus described it so clearly that it can be conveniently identified with him. Plotinus is the key philosopher of the school of Neoplatonism, and Neoplatonism, through Arabic philosophy, is one obvious and major component of the *bāṭin* esoteric discourse of al-Nasafi and the Ismāʿīlis,[13] as will be discussed further below. Neoplatonism is also a major component in *bāṭin* discourse outside Ismāʿīli circles, in majority Sunni Islam—and also, incidentally, in Judaism, in the early Kabbalah and in the work of Moses Maimonides,[14] and in what we call Western esotericism.

In Sunni Islam, Neoplatonic discourse is most visible in early Sufism, where the word *bāṭin* is much used. *Bāṭin* knowledge is understood as being suitable only for the *khāṣṣ* (particular persons, the elite), not for the ʿ*ām* (the generality). I do not mean to suggest that Neoplatonism was the only source of Sufism, especially

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12. He experienced it four times. Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus," 45.

13. Walker, "The Universal Soul," 153.

14. This, at least, is my own view. The arguments are complex, and the current article is not the place to rehearse them.

considering that Sufism itself is not an ideologically consistent homogenous system. There were other major sources. There was the Quran itself, sections of which lead themselves very easily to Neoplatonic readings such as the notion of multiple heavens and a stratified universal reality and the idea of divine light emanating,[15] and there were theological concerns which were indeed absorbed into Sufi doctrines such as the questions of the nature of God's attributes, the createdness of the Quran, and the eternity of the world, concerns that were central to the Muʿtazila and ashʿarīs, as is well known. There were also the ascetic practices that were found in early Islam. Early Sufism focused sometimes on ascetic practice and spiritual technique, sometimes on Islamic discourse, and sometimes on *bāṭin* discourse.[16] Of these, it is *bāṭin* discourse that is understood as most restricted. However, to Sufi *bāṭini* discourse Neoplatonism appears to be consistent, though sometimes expressed in Quranic terms. Muḥyi'l-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabi (1165–1240), for example, is difficult to read partly because of the way in which he slips easily between Quranic and philosophical terminology,[17] but familiarity with Plotinus makes Ibn al-ʿArabi much easier reading.

In terms of discourse, then, the esotericism of Sufis and Ismāʿīlīs seems closely related to what has become understood as Western esotericism, both in terms of the broad areas mapped by the terms *bāṭin* and *ghayb*, and in terms of some of the contents of those areas. Islamic *bāṭin* esoteric discourse includes Neoplatonism and something like perennialism, though less frequently, and Islamic discourse about the *ghayb* includes angels and demons.

This is almost as true today as it was in the tenth century. Esoteric *bāṭini* discourse thrives among Ismāʿīlis and Sufis as it does among Kabbalists, and Muslims everywhere remain aware of the *ghayb*. The *ghayb*, however, was relegated to religious circles in some Muslim countries as the modern model of education adopted in them favours "scientific" explanations just as in the West;

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15. Quran, 65:12 and 24:35.
16. Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 2007.
17. Morris, Introduction, 12.

and the "scientific" privileges the visible/the exoteric. Sufism too is the victim of changes in intellectual fashion. Salafi readings of Islam, which are now in the ascendant, insist on the exoteric *ẓāhir* and deplore the esoteric *bāṭin*.[18] Similar readings of Islam have been around from the beginning, of course, but exoteric *ẓāhir* readings are especially popular today, partly because of the very considerable support they receive from the Saudi establishment, and partly, perhaps, because they appeal to Muslims with primarily technical and scientific training.

By translating both *bāṭin* and *ghayb* as "esoteric," Corbin was understandably negotiating a space for esotericism in Islam. Having considered here these two terms and the Neoplatonic foundations of Sufi and Ismāʿīlī esotericism which will be unpacked further in the next section, it becomes useful to speak of an "Islamic esotericism" in this sense, one that shares fundamental similarities with what have been perceived as an essential trait of Western esotericism, supporting the call for the cultivation of a discussion about Islam in the field of Western esotericism.

Islamic and Western esotericism as historical phenomena: Common origins and contacts

Accepting that each Western and Islamic esotericism is "a group of specific historical currents," they can be compared in terms of their historical origins as well as in terms of their content. In both cases, late antique or Hellenistic philosophy was of great importance, determining the shape of what then developed.

Origins

The importance of late antique philosophy as the crucial basis of Western esotericism is recognized by many scholars of Western esotericism. A recent standard history, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, thus opens with a chapter on "Ancient Hellenistic Sources of Western Esotericism," looking at Hermetism, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism, before moving on to the reception

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18. Meijer, *Global Salafism*.

of these currents in the Italian Renaissance.[19] Of the three, Neoplatonism was probably most important, most relevant to our argument and less problematic as a term. Recent scholarship tends to conclude that Gnosticism never really existed as a distinct current, save in the imaginations of those who were establishing their understandings of Christianity as the orthodox norm,[20] and the meaning of "Hermeticism" has also been questioned.[21] Other recent work, including Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy,* also demonstrates the importance of antique philosophy.[22] Antique philosophy, and especially Neoplatonism, was also important for the development of a major historical body of Islamic *bāṭin* discourse including the *ghayb* that may, on that basis, be called "Islamic esotericism," and which made a more important contribution than is often recognized to the development of the historical phenomenon known as Western esotericism.

The key philosopher of Neoplatonism is Plotinus, and one of the key works of Neoplatonism is the *Enneads*, in which Plotinus's teachings were recorded and arranged by his pupil Porphyry (c. 234–c. 305). Plotinus saw himself as a philosopher, not what we would now call an esotericist, but for Plotinus and his contemporaries, "philosophy" meant something other than what it means today. For Plotinus, philosophy was the tools of the individual for comprehending the hidden realities of the cosmos and the means whereby s/he is able to detect the signs in nature and the cosmos that indicate those realities and assist him/her in their return to the Pure and ascent to the One, "All teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another."[23] This is despite the fact that he showed little enthusiasm for ritual, famously if cryptically responding to a suggestion that he should attend the sacrifices that it would be more fitting for the gods to visit him, than for him to visit the gods.[24]

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19. Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 15–33.
20. King, *What is Gnosticism?*
21. Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 4–22.
22. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 12–28.
23. Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.3.7, 80–81.
24. Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus," 21.

The *Enneads* were lost to the Latin West at the end of Antiquity, but were not lost in the Greek East, which escaped much of the destruction that the Latin West suffered. From the Greek East, the Enneads were adapted into Arabic during the ninth century under the patronage of Yaʿqūb al-Kindi (c. 801–866), a philosopher who edited the Arabic version of the *Enneads*.[25] An Arabic version was also made at about the same time of the *Stoicheiosis theologike* (*Elements of Theology*) of Proclus (412–485), a later Neoplatonic philosopher who developed and elaborated Plotinus's system.[26]

Al-Kindi was the first major philosopher to write in Arabic, and drew on Aristotle and Plato, as well as Plotinus.[27] From these beginnings developed an independent tradition of Arabic philosophy, including Al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā, which saw itself as primarily Aristotelian, but in fact drew its cosmology more from the Neoplatonists, notably Plotinus and Proclus. This was partly because Neoplatonic philosophy was relatively easily combined with the Quranic narrative of one God, creation and judgment. It was also partly the result of accident. For reasons that are unknown, the original Arabic version of Plotinus's *Enneads* was somehow lost, and then recovered. When it was recovered, it was partly mutilated. One mutilation was the loss of its original attribution. It was instead misattributed to Aristotle, and the Arabic version of Plotinus thus came to be known for many centuries as *Kitāb uthūlūjiyya Arisṭūṭālīs* (*The Theology of Aristotle*).[28] The Arabic version of Proclus also somehow became misattributed to Aristotle, as *Kitāb al-īḍāḥ fī'l-khayr al-maḥḍ* (*The Explanation of Pure Good*),[29] which however confirms the fact that the Arabs adopted "a Neoplatonised form of Aristotelianism that reconciles semiological, causal, and volitional modes of knowledge."[30]

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25. Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus*, 8, 18–19.
26. Dodds, Introduction, x.
27. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, 51–52, 64.
28. Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus*, 5.
29. Dodds, Introduction, x.
30. Saif, "From Ġāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-maʿārif," 309.

In historical terms, then, much Arabic philosophy, and consequently much Sufi theology, which draws heavily on Arabic philosophy, is—like Western esotericism—a development of late antique philosophy, notably Neoplatonism. Jewish esotericism also draws extensively on Neoplatonism and Arabic philosophy, since, especially in the eleventh century and in Arab Spain, some Jews participated with Muslims in a common intellectual world expressed in Arabic, just as some Jews today participate with Christians in a common intellectual world expressed in English. A common Neoplatonic heritage, then, explains why the historical phenomenon of this Islamic esotericism—that is, of *bāṭini* discourse about the *ghayb*, in Arabic philosophy, in Sufism, and in Ismāʿīlism—has much in common with the historical phenomenon identified as Western esotericism.

Early contacts

There is, however, more than this common heritage. Islamic esotericism also had a direct impact on the development of Western esotericism that is not generally recognized in the standard accounts, which—like that of Goodrick-Clarke—pass from Late Antiquity to the Italian Renaissance. There was also an earlier Western (or rather Latin) reception of Neoplatonism before the Renaissance, with the translation of Arabic texts into Latin during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Two developments seem to have driven a surge in both translation and study of these texts. One was the flowering of the early universities, notably the schools of Paris and Chartres, that resulted from growing political stability and wealth, and from an increased demand for administrators trained in the arts of grammar and logic.[31] This flowering meant more scholars interested in logic and philosophy, and so increased demand for new philosophical texts.

Scholars in thirteenth-century Paris and Oxford were interested primarily in the philosophy of Aristotle, but they also read other texts, sometimes accidentally because of misattribution, but more often deliberately. These Christian

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31. Baldwin, "Masters at Paris," 156–58; Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 46–69.

scholars, as adherents of a basically monotheistic revealed religion, confronted precisely the same problems that Muslim and Jewish scholars had when it came to making antique philosophy compatible with the narrative of one God, creation, and judgment. In many ways, Arabic philosophy was closer to the needs of thirteenth-century Christian scholars than was antique philosophy.[32] *The Theology of Aristotle* after Plotinus thus began to circulate in Latin, as did *The Explanation of Pure Good* after Proclus, known in Latin as the *Liber de causis* (*Book on Causes*).[33] The translated works of Arab philosophers, including those who dealt with the occult sciences, became influential on many philosophers and even theologians who dealt with religious, philosophical, esoteric and occult subjects, from Albertus Magnus to Thomas Aquinas.[34] Therefore, it was not only Neoplatonism that passed into Latin scholarship in this period. Christian scholars were also interested in texts dealing with the natural world: medicine, astronomy (which was not then clearly distinguished from astrology), and chemistry (which was not then clearly distinguished from alchemy). Some scholars were also interested in less distinguished texts, notably the *Secretum secretorum* (*Secret of Secrets*), a translation of the *Kitāb sirr al-asrār* (*Secret of Secrets*) attributed, rather surprisingly, to Aristotle, allegedly consisting of Aristotle's letters of advice to Alexander the Great. The *Secret of Secrets* was in fact a miscellaneous collection of writings on topics ranging from ethics and alchemy to numerology and magic.[35]

Through these and other texts, much that would later be classed as esoteric entered Latin scholarship. One consequence was the preaching and writings of Meister Eckhart (1260–c. 1328). The similarities between Meister Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabi have often been noted,[36] and have sometimes been explained in terms of the nature of the mystical experience, which Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabi

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32. Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 60–61.
33. Taylor, "Critical Analysis," 13.
34. Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 70–94.
35. Williams, "Defining the Corpus Aristotelicum," 30.
36. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*; Almond, "Divine Needs, Divine Illusions;" Dobie, *Logos & Revelation*.

are thought to have had in common.[37] Beyond this, a further explanation is their common debt to Arabic philosophy, though neither could have been aware of the Neoplatonic origins of the works they read and found so meaningful.

Arabic sources, then, contributed to the early development of a form of Western esotericism even before the Renaissance, as some texts that had provided an important basis for Islamic esotericism had a similar impact on the Latin world. They continued to have an impact during the next chapter in the history of the Latin reception of Neoplatonism and esotericism, for in the Renaissance, thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) were influenced by Arabic philosophical and occult ideas and the works that contained them.[38] However, Ficino worked primarily from Latin and then Greek texts, and although Corbin argued for an Islamic influence through the Byzantine philosopher Plethon (c. 1355–c. 1454), an argument that others have accepted,[39] this influence is unproven, and Plethon's work can easily be explained without reference to it. After Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) still thought it worthwhile to learn some Arabic, but he relied much more on Hebrew than Arabic sources, and such Arabic sources as he did use seem to have been interpreted for him by his Jewish collaborator Yohanan Alemanno (1435–1504).[40] As time passed, however, new and better translations into Latin from Greek originals began to replace the earlier translations from Arabic, and pseudo-Aristotelian works were identified and excluded from the Aristotelian canon. Philosophy and the study of Arabic became separated. Islamic esoteric currents such as Sufism and Arabic philosophy thus had a much-reduced impact on the subsequent "grand tradition" of Western esotericism.

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37. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, 294; Dobie, *Logos & Revelation*, 5–9.
38. Saif, *Arabic Influences*, 96–143.
39. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 34–35, 39–40, 43.
40. Lelli, "'Prisca Philosophia' and 'Docta Religio,'" 64–67.

Later contacts

Later Western esotericism has also been periodically affected by Islamic esotericism, specifically Sufism. One of these encounters, that involving Guénon and thus Nasr, gave rise to the other frequent use of the term "Islamic esotericism," noted at the start of this article. It emerged out of their perennialist take on Sufism and *ʿirfān*. It and others are discussed very briefly below: a fuller treatment is available.[41]

The first significant impact of Sufism after the Renaissance came when in 1671 the English scholar Edward Pococke published the *Philosophus Autodidactus* or *Self-Taught Philosopher*, a Latin translation of an Arabic philosophical tale, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, written in Spain by Muḥammad ibn Ṭufayl (c. 1105–1185), a near contemporary of Ibn al-ʿArabi and a Neoplatonist who was at least familiar with Sufi practice, and may also have been a Sufi. The self-taught philosopher of the *Philosophus Autodidactus* grows up in isolation on a desert island, and arrives at mystical illumination independently of revelation.[42] Since this can be read as coming to an understanding of the chief truths of religion by a process of rational enquiry, the *Philosophus Autodidactus* was extremely popular amongst those in early modern Europe who were searching for rational alternatives to Christian revelation. It was translated repeatedly into English, Dutch, and German. As well as probably providing the inspiration for Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*,[43] it provided support for the growth of European Deism,[44] which generally accepts truths such as the existence of a Creator that are understood to be knowable by reason, while limiting or even rejecting the authority of revelation. Deism is not itself part of the historical phenomenon of Western esotericism, but it contributed to the growth of alternative approaches to religion and spirituality in the West, and thus indirectly fostered the subsequent growth of Western esotericism. The *Philosophus Autodidactus* also had an indirect impact on the development of Quaker-

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41. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*.
42. Sedgwick, "Sufism and the Western Construction of Mysticism."
43. Daiber, "The Reception of Islamic Philosophy," 76.
44. Daiber, "The Reception of Islamic Philosophy," 77–78.

ism.[45] The Quakers are not normally understood as part of the Western esoteric tradition either, but there are perhaps arguments for including them.

The next impact of Islamic esotericism on Western esotericism comes in the eighteenth century, when scholars such as William Jones (1746–1794) and James Graham, both employed in British India, began to investigate the various religions and practices found there, including Sufism. Jones identified Sufism as a form of Deism,[46] but Graham identified Sufism as a form of esotericism, using that word for the first time in this connection.[47] He also described Sufism as Islamic mysticism, and was the first to identify Sufism's Neoplatonic content.[48] This work was ground-breaking at an empirical level. It was also very influential outside the academic study of Islam. Graham's influence can be seen in such popular nineteenth-century works as Charles King's *The Gnostics and their Remains*,[49] and when Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of the Theosophical Society and thus a central figure in the development of modern Western esotericism, wrote about Sufism, she drew heavily on King and so on Graham.[50]

The understanding of Sufism as Islamic esotericism by practitioners of Western esotericism had an impact on the development of one branch of modern Western esotericism, that known as Western Sufism. Two instances will be given as examples of this. One is the Sufi Movement of Inayat Khan (1882–1927); the other is the Traditionalist movement of Guénon, already mentioned.

The Sufi Movement, as the first significant Sufi organization in the modern West, prepared the way for all other instances of Western Sufism and in so doing defined certain parameters for their nature and development. It arose in England and then the Netherlands during and after the First World War, taking

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45. Russell, "The Impact of the *Philosophus autodidactus.*"
46. Jones, "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus", 211, 216.
47. Graham, "A Treatise on Sufiism," 105.
48. Graham, "A Treatise on Sufiism."
49. King, *Gnostics and their Remains*, 185.
50. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, 306.

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over some of the legacy of the Theosophical Society, which was then in decline, and reproducing certain elements in Theosophical and Western esoteric discourse and even practice as a result.[51] In many ways, the Sufi Movement became in reality what the late nineteenth-century Western esoteric imagination had understood Sufism to be. The Sufi Movement thus belongs as much or more within the history of Western esotericism as it does within the history of Sufism.

The Sufi Movement was a formal organization, with a head office, a council, and a logo that is still in widespread use today. The Traditionalist movement, in contrast, was a movement of thought, not an organization, though various organizations were established at various points by various followers. Just as the Sufi Movement arose on the legacy of Theosophy and absorbed and reproduced elements of Theosophical discourse and practice, so Traditionalism arose on the legacy of late nineteenth-century French esotericism, and reproduced elements of that strand of esoteric discourse.[52] As a result, like the Sufi Movement, the Traditionalist movement is part of the history of Western esotericism. It is also part of the history of Islam.

Roots and fertilization

If we understand Western esotericism as a historical phenomenon, then, we find that Islamic esotericism had much the same historical origins. Islamic esotericism played an important part in the development of Western esotericism during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, providing translations of the key texts of Arabic philosophy and of other texts such as the *Secret of Secrets*. Islamic esotericism again played a part on the development of Western esotericism during the seventeenth century with the *Philosophus Autodidactus*, with Graham in India, and then in the twentieth century with the Sufi Movement and the Traditionalist movement.

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51. Inayat-Khan, "Hybrid Sufi Order," 85–97, 109.

52. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 21–69.

Esotericism as structure

It is only when we understand Western esotericism in terms of its relationship to officially constructed "orthodoxy," the third major approach to the definition of Western esotericism, that a clear difference between Western—or at least Christian—esotericism and Islamic esotericism emerges, as it does between these two and Jewish esotericism. In the West, esotericism has generally been highly controversial, far more often rejected and repressed than promoted by the dominant culture and by religious authority. In Islam, esotericism in the form of Sufism has been controversial from time to time, sometimes repressed by the dominant culture and religious authority, but has far more often been promoted by them. At the same time, truly esoteric discourse has remained restricted. In Judaism, esotericism in the form of Kabbalah has not been particularly controversial,[53] and there have been no significant attempts by the dominant culture and religious authority to repress it.

Why this should be—why esotericism has been viewed so differently in three very similar religions—is not yet clear. It may be in part because of the overlap between religion and the esoteric *ghayb* that we have noted in the case of Islam. Alternatively, it may tell us more about the natures of the religions in question than it does about any variety of esotericism. "Orthodoxy" in Christianity can be defined in terms of the official doctrine of a papacy, or a patriarchate, or an established state church in Protestant countries. Orthodoxy cannot be defined in this way when it comes to Islam or Judaism, however, where the distributed and non-hierarchical nature of religious authority means that it *is* possible to identify positions that are generally agreed to be entirely *un*acceptable, but very hard to identify any truly "orthodox" positions. The esoteric, like the mystical, promotes the authority of the individual subjective religious experience, and thus inevitably challenges the authority of religious power structures.[54]

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53. There has of course been occasional controversy, for example the probable banning of Abraham Abulafia, but these are very much the exception rather than the rule.

54. Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 98.

Christian ecclesiastical structures may be better able to suppress what this article has been terming "esotericism" than Islamic or Jewish structures.

In these structural terms, then, it makes sense to talk of Christian esotericism as something distinct from Islamic or Jewish esotericism.

Conclusion: Esotericism, one or many?

Faivre, of course, never suggested that Western esotericism was *purely and exclusively* Western. Writing with Karen-Claire Voss in 1995, he defined the West as "the medieval and modern Greco-Latin world in which the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity have coexisted for centuries, periodically coming into contact with those of Islam."[55] The core of the West *is* Latin and Christian, with Greek knowledge assuming great importance at certain points. It might be argued that Arabic sources were more important than Greek ones during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and that Hebrew was also sometimes important, but over a longer period Latin and Greek works clearly overwhelmed Arabic and Hebrew ones. The weakness in this definition of the West, however, is the identification of contact with Islam as only periodic, in contrast to contact with Judaism, which is understood as constant. Borrowings from Judaism by the Latin Christian majority culture still seem to have been periodic more than constant. As the language of the Old Testament, Hebrew has been more widely read in Europe than Arabic, but even so Hebrew does not really come much closer than Arabic to rivalling Greek as the second language of the West. Islam and Judaism have been consistently present in the West as understood by Faivre; however, contact with both Jewish and Islamic esotericism has been irregular. More research needs to be done to look into the interaction between Islamic esotericism (as it is understood here) and the West, particularly after the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the instances when they did come into contact have been important.

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55. Faivre and Voss, "Western Esotericism," 50.

Historically speaking, then, there is a trinity of Christian esotericism, Jewish esotericism, and Islamic esotericism, united and yet separate. Just as Christian and post-Christian esotericism periodically comes into contact with Islamic and Jewish esotericism, more so in some periods—including the present—than in others, so Islamic esotericism periodically comes into contact with Jewish esotericism, Jewish esotericism periodically comes into contact with Islamic esotericism, and so on. When it comes to discourse, we can also find a trinity, united and yet separate. We can speak of Christian and post-Christian esotericism, Islamic esotericism, and Jewish esotericism. Although all these discourses have much in common, both in their subjects and in how they handle them, they have generally been conducted in different languages: Latin and modern European languages for Christian and post-Christian esotericism, Arabic and Persian for Islamic esotericism, and Hebrew and Arabic for Jewish esotericism. They also have distinctive elements. Sometimes these apparently distinctive elements derive from common elements, often Neo-platonic ones. In the case of earlier and later manifestations of Islamic esotericism, one of the main conduits for esoteric ideas was Arabic philosophy (defined by language), which articulated Plotinian ideas, the same ideas that were adopted as a framework for Western esotericism first through the Arabic sources then independently. This is, for example, the case with the concept of "Muhammadan light," which at first sight seems exclusive to Sufism, but on closer inspection turns out to be an Islamic version of Plotinus's *nous*. There are, however, probably enough distinctive elements to talk of separate discursive traditions.

Islamic and Western esotericism, then, do have an important relationship. What we call Western esotericism is generally Christian or post-Christian, but Islamic esotericism is also part of the *longue durée* history of Western esotericism, just as Jewish esotericism is. Western esotericism is predominantly Latin and Christian, but is not *only* Latin and Christian. Islamic and Jewish esotericism are also part of Western esotericism. There is indeed an Islamic esotericism that matches Western esotericism very closely, though with certain differences.

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