

FROM ALEXANDRIA TO HARRAN: THE NEOPLATONIC AND SUFI WISDOM

Algis UŽDAVINYS

Institute of Culture, Philosophy and Art

The essay deals with the relationship between the Islamic philosophy and Hellenism. The influence of the Neoplatonic ideas on the early Islamic culture of spirituality is emphasized, while trying to reveal the common archetypal patterns of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean traditions.

Without philosophy it is impossible
to be perfectly pious.

Stobaei Hermetica II B.2

Islamic *Falsafah* in the Light of Hellenic *Sophia*

Plotinus used the term *sophia* (σοφία) simply as a synonym of “philosophy”, hence restoring its primordial meaning. But *falsafah* as the continuation of φιλοσοφία is not just Hellenic philosophy in Islamic guise. In line with Syrian and Mesopotamian translators (be they Sabians, Oriental Christians or Muslims) the Greek *sophia* (*sapientia*) has been connected with Arabic root *h-k-m*. Sometimes *sophia* is rendered as ‘ilm or even *falsafah*. Nevertheless, *hikmah* was chosen as the Arabic equivalent to the Greek term *philosophia*, as Franz Rosenthal pointed out¹. But philosophy for the Arabs meant the adherence to those philosophic doctrines which they learned chiefly from Neoplatonic commentators of Aristotle as well as Stagirit himself and Alexander Aphrodisias. The term *gnosis* usually is rendered as *ma’rifah*, but many Sufis maintained ‘ilm as their goal instead of *ma’rifah*. However, when Sufis spoke of the union (*ittihad*) they meant an ontic union, not only an epistemic one (*ittisal*). Therefore, Philip Merlan surmises that it could even be possible that Avicenna sometimes professed both kinds of mysticism, i.e. ecstasy as union with the ineffable One and ecstasy as union with the $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ ².

For Proclus and Plotinus *gnosis* is only a general term for cognition and has no specifically religious connotation. *Episteme* (*scientia*) is rendered by such Arabic terms as ‘ilm, ‘ilm al-

¹ Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant. The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1970.

² Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness. Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1963, 28.

yaqin, *'ilm al-haqq*, *ma'rifat al-yaqin*, *ma'rifat al-'aql*. *Nous* is rendered by *'aql* or *nafs*. Arabic *'ilm* was understood as *episteme*, *methodos*, *theoria*, *epignosis*, *theoremata*, *philosophia*; and *'ilm Allah* was treated as *dianoia theou*. According to A. J. Wensinck's bizarre assertion, which itself comes close to the famous "Oriental hyperbolism" with its frequent use of "disquise" (*kinayah*), in Islamic intellectual tradition 'Muhammad was shaded by Aristotle'. But for Muslims Muhammad is 'a torch which illumines' (*sirajan muniran*: *Qur'an*, XXIII.46). He is the initial paradigm of the Light metaphysics and of *Nur muhammadi* which irradiates itself as the light of knowledge – *phos gnoseos*. Here we must remember that Philo equates light (*phos*) and scientific knowledge (*episteme*), while *'ilm at-tasawwuf*, which presents itself as an "esoteric science" (*'ilm al-batin*), claims the light of essence (*nur adh-dhat*) as necessary in order to gain the knowledge of eternity (*'ilm al-azal*).

Islamic philosophy made its way through the Greek science, through the noetic doctrines of Aristotle and Plotinus, to concentrate upon the one divine principle whose first epiphany, according to 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Ahmad al-Jami, is 'a pure unity and a simple potentiality'³, viz. "unity" with the "truth" as being His image and mind, *logos endiathetos*. When evolved to view, it is *logos prophorikos*, as the channel of Being downwards, *wahidiyah*, or the unity of multiplicity, *wujud* with inner articulations as the realm of the eternal archetypes, instead of *ahadiyah*, absolute Oneness or *wujud* without any articulation. The sequence looks as follows: *dhat al-wujud* (interior) – *ahadiyah* (exterior) and *ahadiyah* (interior) – *wahidiyah* (exterior)⁴. The First Principle is paradoxically equated with *hen on*, or "One Being". The equation is in accordance with the metaphorical style of thought in the so-called "Iranian existentialism" investigated by Izutsu. This sort of ontological arrangement partly resembles the tendency of Pseudo-Dionysius who transforms of Neoplatonic theology by applying both the first and the second Hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides* to the First Principle so that what was originally an ineffable One followed by a co-ordinate series of Gods or henads becomes a Christian God with a plurality of divine attributes.

The Teachings of Hermes *al-muthallath*

Hermes, who is threefold (*al-muthallath*) in wisdom, is as an archetypal *auctoritas* and important imaginal figure in Islamic world. He is equated to pre-Islamic *nabi* Idris or Akhnukh (Enoch) and regarded as the prophet of philosophers and the entire ancient wisdom (*al-hikmat al-'atiqah*). Thanks to this mysterious figure 'it became possible for Muslims to integrate Greek science and philosophy into their world view without feeling that they were going anyway outside the Abrahamic tradition'⁵. Suhrawardi traced back to him the mystical *silsilah* of the primordial esoteric wisdom which transcends the ordinary space and time and includes, as members of this trans-historical *tariqah*, not only sages of the ancient Greece and Iran, but also certain famous Sufis (Abu Yazid Bastami and Hallaj, for instance). Notably this conception is

³ Nur al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Lawa'ih*, translated by E. H. Whinfield and Mizra Muhammad Kazvini, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1978, 16.

⁴ Toshihiko Izutsu, "Creation and the Timeless Order of Things", *Essays in Islamic Philosophy*, White Cloud Press, Ashland, Oregon, 1994, 90.

⁵ S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 112.

in accordance with many hieratic teachings of the Syrian Neoplatonist Iamblichus. As Damascius argues, Iamblichus traced his ancestry to Monimos and Sampsigeramos, the founder of the line of priest-kings of Emesa. However, Iamblichus regards the texts of *Hermetica* to be important not so much for their own sake, but for the reason they were part of the ostensibly Egyptian foundations of theurgy. Hence, he claims that the Egyptians ‘do not regard these [doctrines] as merely theoretical, but encourage one to ascend by hieratic theurgy to the higher and more universal regions that are placed above fate, to God the creator, without making use of anything material’ (*De mysteriis*, VIII. 4. 266 ff).

Among Iamblichus’ sources (obviously secondary sources in Greek) there are Manetho’s *Sacred Book*, the Hermetic collection called *Salmeschiniaka*, Chaeremon (the Egyptian priest and Stoic interpreter of Mysteries) and Seleucus the Theologian. He appeals to the book which ‘the prophetes Bitys (maybe the same as Tat, spiritual son of Hermes, mentioned in *Hermetica*) translated to King Ammon (pharaoh Amasis II from the line of Sais dynasty, ruled in 569–526 B. C. according to Manetho). The priest discovered this book inscribed in hieroglyphic characters in a sanctuary at Sais in Egypt’ (*De mysteriis* VIII. 5. 267–268). Bitys as a theurgical authority is mentioned by the Egyptian alchemist Zosimus, who speaks of ‘the tablet (πιναξ) that Bitys wrote, and Plato the trice-great (τρισμαγας), and Hermes the infinitely great (μυριομαγας)’⁶. Thus Zosimus maintains that Plato followed the teachings of Hermes and Bitys, while equating Thot or Thouthos to Adam, the first man as “the visible outer mould” in contrast with the inner man of light – *Phos* or Prometheus.

Hermetism was almost completely ignored if not neglected by other Neoplatonic theurgists who esteemed the *Oracula Chaldaica*. The Hermes these notorious Platonists had in view was not Trismegistus but the older, Hellenistic Hermes Logios. The highest praise they could bestow on a fellow-philosopher, according to Garth Fowden, was to call him ‘an image of Hermes learned’ (Ερμου λογιου τυπος), and they commonly associated themselves with the co-called “Hermaic chain” (Ερμαικη σειρα), by which they seem to have meant the divine reason (λογισμος) which emanates from God⁷. Nevertheless, many of Iamblichus’ intellectual heirs were fascinated by the religion of the Egyptians. Antoninus, the son of philosopher Eustathius and theurgist Sosipatra, settled in a temple in Canopus close to Alexandria and dedicated himself to the divine ritual. He delivered the famous prophecy of the collapse of the Sarapis cult in Egypt fulfilled very soon as the Alexandrian Serapeum was ruined by Christians in 391. Antoninus was followed by Hermeias, the mid-fifth century Alexandrian Platonist. In his scholia on Plato’s *Phaedrus* Hermeias makes a number of references to Hermes Trismegistus, like Theon linking Hermes with Orpheus⁸. Nevertheless, *Hermetica* which reached us through the Ficino’s circle, though based on certain Egyptian traditions and esoteric practices, is a blending of Platonism with Stoic physics written by Egyptian Platonists in the Nile Delta region, from just before the Christian era up to the Porphyry’s time. The orthodox Platonists preferred

⁶ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, Princeton University Press, 1993, 151.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 201–202.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

to accept the revealed or inspired scriptures of *Oracula*, *Chaldaica* and *Orphica* along with Plato, Homer and Hesiod rather than *Hermetica* which stood too close to various trends of Gnosticism rejected by Neoplatonists. 'For all that was acceptable to them in teaching of the *Hermetica* was to be found more fully worked out in Plotinus', as Walter Scott rightly observed⁹.

The Alexandrian Maze of Gnosis

For many centuries the 'holy city' of Alexandria¹⁰ had a reputation as the meeting place of Hellenism and the Oriental as well as Egyptian traditions and was regarded as the seat of universal learning and *athanor* for the alchemical fusion. Alexandria is a historical and cultural archetype which by no means was deprived of its meaning and importance after the conquest by the Arabs in 642 A. D. The gnosis in the Alexandrian world was represented not only by the Valentinian gnosticism but also by the type of theurgical Platonism cultivated by Antoninus and in the fifth century A. D. by two native Egyptian brothers, Heraiscus and Asclepiades, sons of Horapollo the Elder. As a vehicle for the expression of the hieratic doctrines they used a bewildering maze of mythology, while in Islam, according to Nasr, 'the intellective symbolism often becomes mathematical'¹¹. But one cannot forget that Ibn 'Arabi, otherwise known as the Shaykh al-Akbar or Ibn Aflatun, used to stay in Alexandria for a while on his route to the geographical and metaphysical East. The *shaykh al-akbar* also erected a bewildering maze of speculative theosophy based on the creative Imagination. As Nasr pointed out, it was probably the Pythagoreans who provided the link between the Hermetic tradition and certain aspects of the Islamic esoteric doctrines, since even Omar Khayyam described himself as both an orthodox Pythagorean and a Sufi. According to Nasr, in Islam, the Pythagorean doctrines were 'stabilized and restored almost according to their original pattern through the unitary religious idea', Most likely they were transmitted through the so-called Neopythagoreans such as Nicomachus of Gerasa. The Neopythagorean Moderatus who lived in the first century A. D. maintained that Plato 'following the Pythagoreans, declares that the first One is above Being and all essence, while the second One – which is the truly existent (*ontos on*) and the object of intellection (*noeton*) – he says is the Forms; the third, which is the soul-realm (*psuchikon*), participates (*metechei*) in the One and the Forms, while the lowest nature which comes after it, that of the sense-realm, does not even participate, but receives order by reflection from those others...'¹². Despite of a different multi-dimensional mythological framework, Iamblichus also preserved the unitary religious idea. The so-called Oriental Neopythagoreanism, along with the clear-cut geometry of Neoplatonic metaphysics and Perypathetic formalism, is partly responsible for the rise and development of Islamic art.

⁹ Walter Scott, "Corpus Hermeticum", "Hermetica", ed. and transl. by Walter Scott, Solos Press (undated), 244.

¹⁰ Eunapius, *V. Phil.* VI.10.8.

¹¹ S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, Cambridge, 1987, 26.

¹² Quoted by J. Dillon in General Introduction to *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, transl. by G. R. Morrow and J. M. Dillon, Princeton University Press, 1987, xxvi.

The Survival of Hellenic Philosophy into the Arab Times

The Platonic Academy in Athens was probably closed to the edict of Justinianus in 529 A. D. Damascius, the Diadochus of the Neoplatonist school, along with Simplicius, Priscianus the Lydian, Hermias, Diogenes, Eulamius and Isidore of Gaza left for the court of Khosroes in Ctesiphon, (present-day Iraq) in 532 A. D. According to the recent hypothesis of Michel Tardieu, afterwards they moved to Harran, ancient Carrhae, now located in Turkey near the Iraq border. The Academy was at least partly restored in Harran where Simplicius probably wrote his commentary on Epictetus' *Encheiridion* and some other commentaries on Aristotle. On the other hand, in Alexandria Olympiodorus was still alive in 565 A. D., and it was only with his death that the Alexandrian school finally passed into Christian hands, under the Aristotle commentators Elias, David and Stephanus. Stephanus moved to Constantinople in 610 A. D. Some other philosophers were still alive at the time of Alexandria's capture by the Arabs in 642 A. D. and most likely became Muslims, since the philosopher should choose the best religion of the period, Averroes says. Later al-Farabi used to profess the doctrine of monopsychism and the doctrine of the unity of the human race in the sense in which it was assumed in Philoponus, Stephanus¹³ and earlier in Stoicism. The Stoic philosophers also accepted the non-Hellenic messengers of wisdom sent by God. Even Ibn 'Arabi sometimes follows the Stoic tradition. As Rundgren, who investigated the hermeneutical horizon of *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*, pointed out: 'Only God is "wise", *hakim*, it is true, but according to Stoic tradition God sometimes delegates parts, *fusus*, of his wisdom, *hikma*, to selected persons who then are regarded as messengers (*angeloi*) sent out by God. However, through hard training, ordinary men also can try to reach the perfection *par excellence*; namely, the faculty of being able to give the right judgement, *hukm*, in the ups and downs of life. It is in the light of this Stoic ideal that we have to look upon the use of the verb *hakama* here'¹⁴.

The legend connects Philoponus (who died already after the birth of the Islamic Prophet) with the conquest of Alexandria and has it that he asked the conqueror to grant him its library. 'The symbolic significance of this legend is too obvious to need explanation'. As Merlan maintains: 'Soon the Moslems were to take more than the physical possession of the Helleno-Christian world. But the position of the philosophers, Moslem, Jewish, and Christian, do hardly more than restate the positions which by the end of the 6th century Graeco-pagan and Graeco-Christian philosophers had established'¹⁵. Now it might be said that there was no Neoplatonic school in Alexandria whose doctrinal tendencies differed from those of the school at Athens which survived in Harran under the inventive guise of 'Sabians'. The Alexandrian school of a Neoplatonised Aristotelianism also survived into Arab times until about 720 A. D. it removed to Antioch.

According to Scott, when Syria and Mesopotamia were conquered by the Arabs (633–643 A. D.), a large part of the Harranians were still 'pagans'. And a certain tradition maintains that

¹³ Merlan, *ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴ F. Rundgren, *The Preface of the Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*, Muhyiddin Ibn' Arabi. A Commemorative Volume, ed. by S. Hürtenstein and M. Tiernan, Element, 1993, 346.

¹⁵ Merlan, *ibid.*, 56.

after the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun, son of Harun ar-Rashid, in 830 A. D. setting out from Baghdad visited Harran, its 'pagan' inhabitants chose to call themselves 'Sabians' in order to avoid persecution and hide themselves under the name of a religion of which God speaks in the *Qur'an*¹⁶. Nevertheless, we can discern two categories of the Harranians:

- 1) partisans of the 'pagan' religion of the city, i.e. the uneducated mass of worshippers of Sin and the planet-gods (the stars as receptacles and icons of the pure substances of the Light);
- 2) 'sages in the strict sense', the heirs of the Greek philosophers, i. e. the Platonists or rather Neoplatonists – a sort of Platonic Academy of Harran.

Living communally in their school, these Platonists could without hindrance devote themselves to the theurgic practices which their philosophy required¹⁷. We should remember that the Brethren of Purity identified *iman* – 'the inner ascent and conscious faith' – with the 'divine service of the Philosophers' (*al-ibadah al-falsafiyah*). It is important to point out the hypothetical synonymy of Hanif and Sabian: the second term was substituted for the first as elsewhere the term 'gnostics' replaced the designation 'Ἐλληνες', since the Sabians themselves came to be designated as Hunafa' in Ismaili historiography¹⁸.

Sabians and Neoplatonists in Harran

As al-Mas'udi who visited Harran in 943 A. D. bears testimony: 'I have seen in Harran, on the door knocker of the Sabians' meeting place, an inscription in Syriac characters, taken from Plato; it was explained to me by Malik b. 'Uqbun and other persons of the same sect: 'Whoever knows his nature becomes a god'. It was also Plato who said: 'Man is a celestial plant. Indeed, man resembles an upside-down tree, whose roots are turned towards the heaven and whose branches [plunge] into the earth'¹⁹. The first saying (*man 'arafa nafsahu ta'allaha*, as presented by Corbin) may be rendered also as follows: 'Who knows his own essence (who knows himself) becomes divine, resembling God'. This means the θεωσις, Nasir-i Khusraw's *khuda shudan*. We learnt from Hadot that Tardieu identified these two citations, of which one can be found in the *Timaeus* (90 ab) and the other is an allusion to the *Alcibiades I* (133 c)²⁰. Elsewhere al-Mas'udi returns once again to this axiom: 'And we have stated what they [the "Greek Sabians"] think of Plato's saying: "Whoever knows himself in truth becomes a god", and his other saying of the author of the *Logic*: "Whoever knows himself knows all things"²¹. The second saying cannot refer to Aristotle, but it occurs word for word in two Alexandrian Neoplatonists, namely

¹⁶ Scott, *ibid.*, 245.

¹⁷ Ilsetraut Hadot, "The Life and Work of Simplicius in Greek and Arabic Sources", *Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and their Influence*, ed. Richard Sorabji, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N. Y., 1990, 286.

¹⁸ Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, transl. by Philip Sherrard and Liadain Sherrard, KPI in association with Islamic Publications, London, 1986, 142–143.

¹⁹ Quoted by M. Tardieu in *Sabiens coraniques et "Sabiens" de Harran* and I. Hadot, *The Life and Work of Simplicius*, 281.

²⁰ Hadot, *ibid.*, 281–282.

²¹ Hadot, *ibid.*, 282.

in Hermeias' in *Phaedrum*: "Who understands himself knows everything" (*ho heauton gnous ta panta oiden*) and in Olympiodorus' in *Alcibiadem*: "Who knows himself knows all things" (*ho eidos heauton ta onta panta oiden*), which in both cases are juxtaposed with the Delphic precept *gnothi seauton*²².

The building whose front door knocker bore the central axiom of *Alcibiades I* engraved in Syriac was called '*magma* in Arabic and invited anyone who crossed the treshold to the philosophic life (*bios philosophicos*). However, 'Olympiodorus compares the *Alcibiades* to a propylaeum whose adytum is the *Parmenides*. It is the same in Harran', Tardieu claims. 'The *Alcibiades* is at the entrance, the *Parmenides* in the centre. In fact, according to the testimony of al-Kindi, whom Ibn al-Nadim cites from al-Sarahsi, the core of the metaphysical thought of the Harranian Sabians was summarized in the claim that 'in the world there is a cause which has never ceased: a monad, not a plurality, which does not take on the attributes of anything caused whatsoever'²³.

Scott was evidently on the wrong line when he thought this doctrine to belong to the *Hermetica*. It is purely Neoplatonic. And it is unlikely that Thabit ibn Qurra's departure for Baghdad circa 872 A. D. was the result of a 'schism'. But as a consequence 'the community thus established at Baghdad must have been a sort of school of Pagan Neoplatonism which had flourished at Athens until suppressed by Justinian about 350 years before'²⁴. Nevertheless, whereas the Neoplatonists at Athens ignored the *Hermetica*, the Harranian Neoplatonists of Baghdad recognized the writings attributed to an archetypal Thouth, Hermes, or Hirmis, like Iamblichus (partially, at least) and the entire Islamic tradition. The mythical hero Idris charmed the Near and Middle East imagination as a sort of esoteric *sol invictus*. Therefore no wonder that Sabians regarded the teachings of Hermes, or Tautos ('the first of all beings under the sun', as Philo of Byblos called him), as the source whence their perennial philosophy was derived.

Thabit ibn Qurra was forced to become a Muslim towards the end of his life, but his sons remained Sabians. Apart the famous translations from Greek (including a part of the so-called Proclus's commentary on the *Aurea carmina* of Pythagoras), among his writings on philosophy there were *Tractatus de argumento Socrati ascripto*, *Tractatus de solutione mysteriorum in Platonis Republica obviorum*. Thabit's son Sinan was a physician and had a thorough knowledge of metaphysics and 'the philosophic systems of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle'²⁵. The 'Sabians' continued to be known in Baghdad as a separate sect for about 150 years after the death of Thabit. And the eminent Sufi al-Junayd (born circa 910 A. D.), whose ancestors descended from the Persian town of Nihawand, had much in common with Plotinus. Both Plotinus and al-Junayd held that the soul may obtain the force of inner vision (*mushahada*) and ascent to its Origin: the stages of this mystical path are indicated in a very similar way by either. They use the symbolism of Light, and the relation between shaykh and murid becomes of high impor-

²² Hadot, *ibid.*, 282.

²³ Hadot, *ibid.*, 285.

²⁴ Scott, *ibid.*, 248.

²⁵ Scott, *ibid.*, 249.

tance, just as for Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus, Syrianus and Proclus, so also to the Sufis, though al-Junayd's piety and faith are purely Islamic. However, according to Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, 'the contact of the early Muslim mystics with Neoplatonic philosophy made possible the development of a mystical system in Islam, with its disciple and its terminology'²⁶.

The School of *arbab at-tawhid* in Baghdad

The Sufi school of Baghdad is distinguished by its symbolic expressions and by its discussions on the mystic states (*ahwal*) and stations (*maqamat*) reflecting not only the Neoplatonic idea of the noetic and psychic gradations, but also a common archetype of ontological, epistemological and social inequality in respect of preparedness and function. The school of *arbab at-tawhid*, the people of *tawhid*, was found by as-Saqati, the murid of the great Sufi master Ma'ruf al-Karkhi, whose parents were Sabians (of the *Qur'an*), or Mughtasilah (Washers), coming from the region of Basra, according to Abu'l-Mahasin Taghribardi²⁷. They developed their doctrine in secret and used to formulate their teachings and ideas in a special esoteric terminology (*isharat*), invented for this purpose. Certain Sufis of Baghdad went so far as to say that al-Halaj was killed because he revealed the divine mysteries to the unworthy crowd, thus betraying the esoteric teachings of the Sufis who held that none should reveal the ultimate religious and metaphysical truths to the uninitiated. Therefore no wonder that the Sufis of Baghdad were accused as being infidels and atheists. The accusation was that they discussed the love (*mahabba*) of God, while no love between God and man was possible according to the extremely exoteric jurists and theologians.

At the same time *Aristotalis Uthulujiya* was highly estimated among the intellectuals and mystics of Baghdad. This so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, rendered into Arabic by the Syrian Christian 'Abd al-Masih ibn 'Abd Ullah al-Himsi al-Na'imi and checked by al-Kindi for the Khalif al-Mu'tasim, is a deliberate forgery and really contains extracts from the *Enneads* IV–VI along with explanatory materials derived from Porphyry's lost commentary. As R. T. Wallis observes with anxiety²⁸, 'The confusion caused by such works can be imagined'. This work must have reached Baghdad in the generation before al-Junayd and was well known to the Sufis. Another important and influential treatise in Arabic was *Book Concerning the Pure Good*, or *Liber de causis*, a work based on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, which passed in medieval times for the work of Aristotle whose name itself contained almost a magic power and executed the supreme authority of *Nous*. Proclus' commentaries on the *Republic X*, the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo* and *Aurea carmina* (the last one may correspond to the commentary by Proclus of Laodicea mentioned in the *Suda*) are known to have been translated into Syriac, while fragmentary Arabic versions of the two last-named are also recorded, and the Arabic version of the *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* by Philoponus probably was widespread.

²⁶ Ali Hassan Abdul-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, ed. and transl., E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series, Luzac and Company, 1962, 115.

²⁷ Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, Gerald Duckworth, London, 1995, 163.

Traditional Cosmology as a Symbol and Metaphor

It is well known that the three Neoplatonic Hypostases combined the One of the *Parmenides* (identified with the Form of the Good), the demiurge of the *Timaeus* (identified with Aristotle's $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$) and the world-soul of the *Timaeus* and *Laws* X. The entire hierarchy of reality which the Ikhwan al-Safa (circa tenth or eleventh cent. A.D. in Basra) erected was 'a much more elaborate structure than the simple triad of Plotinus'²⁹ and comprised nine numbers, thus resembling eight, or sometimes nine, Hypotheses based on the metaphysical exegesis of Plato's *Parmenides*. These Hypotheses of *Parmenides*, or dialectical levels of the divine dramaturgy, varied slightly from Porphyry to Proclus and Damascius, reflecting at the same time the unceasing efforts to clarify the mysterious dialectic of the One and many as a sort of theophany. However, the *schema* of the Ikhwan was less metaphysical, or dialectical, and more cosmological:

- 1) the Creator (*al-Bari*), as *protistos theos* in Porphyry who tended to equate Beyond-Being and Being at the expense of Beyond-Being as religiously unnecessary;
- 2) the Intellect (*al-'Aql*);
- 3) the Soul (*al-Nafs*);
- 4) Prime Matter (*al-Hayula 'l-lila*);
- 5) Nature (*al-Tabi'a*);
- 6) the Absolute Body (*al-Jism al-Mutlaq*);
- 7) the Sphere (*al-Falak*);
- 8) the Four Elements (*al-Arkan*);
- 9) the Beings which live in this world (*al-Muwalladat*).

This scheme, however, is already a simplification pushed into the Neoaristotelian direction in comparison with the Iamblichean divisions of mytho-ontological strata.

W. H. T. Gairdner declared once, with a deliberate bitterness, that since the Seven Planetary Heavens played a great part in Platonic (e. g. *Rep.* X), Neoplatonic, and Gnostic schemes, 'the naive adoption by Mohammed (in the Koran) of the Ptolemaic celestial construction was one of the things which added picturesqueness to early Mohammedan tradition and theology' and 'made it easier for Neoplatonic ideas to graft themselves on to Islam', while, in addition, 'the allusions of the Koran were heavily reinforced by the legend of *Mi'raj*'³⁰. It seems difficult enough for Gairdner to suppose that the *Qur'an* is not fabricated or created by the Prophet as the 'naive' collection of frightening figures of speech, as well as to perceive the symbolic meaning of the Ptolemaic cosmology and other ancient *schemata*. These, nevertheless, are tantamount in their essence to the spiritual mandalas leading our contemplative vision to the Beyond. 'The objective structure of the cosmos is only the mechanism of a symbol-reality willed by Providence for the sake of man and consequently proportioned to the demands of his nature', as Schuon rightly observes³¹.

²⁹ Ianā Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists. An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safa')*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1982, 35.

³⁰ W. H. T. Gairdner, *Introduction to Mishkat al-anwar* by al-Ghazzali, Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, 1994, 26.

³¹ Frithjof Schuon, "Between East and West", *Sophia. A Journal of Traditional Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 1995, 14.

Within the hermeneutical horizon of any traditional culture based on the first principles and exodus-like exegesis, the *meta-cosmos* itself becomes a gigantic *meta-phora*, a sort of *temenos* for any hieratic or simply pious imagination (may it be 'plainly' human or 'too mysteriously' divine), while even the accidental shortcomings and misunderstandings, mistranslations (*contresens*) and creative mistakes are invited to play their positive role. A person must avoid pretending or producing any excessive perfection in order to prevent the inevitable vengeance of Gods, as the ancients would say along with Anaximandrus. The same holds true with such items as the pseudo-Empedoclean philosophy of Ibn'Masarra which Affifi could not refrain from describing as 'a collection of distorted Neoplatonic ideas'³². But even Neoplatonism as a name without reality is dead, since what really counts for the traditional metaphysician or mystic is never to forget to mention God between each of the two woofs while remaining at the weaving loom year after year as Abu Sa'id al-Kharaz did.

**NUO ALEKSANDRIJOS IKI HARANO:
IŠMINTIES SAMPRATA NEOPLATONIZME IR SUFIZME**

Algis Uždavinys

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje kalbama apie ankstyvosios islamo filosofijos ryšį su antikos filosofija ir hermetizmu aptariant įvairius graikiškus bei arabiškus filosofinius terminus. Autoriaus parodoma, kokiais keliais transformuota antikos kultūra pasiekė islamo pasaulį ir kaip buvo integruota į naują kontekstą.

Įteikta 2002 m. lapkričio 18 d.

³² A. E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din-Ibnul 'Arabi*, Cambridge, 1939, 182. See the more objective approach by Peter Kingsley in his excellent book *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic. Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995.