



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Brethren of Purity”

Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia

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Ikhwan al-Safa' (the Brethren of Purity) were the affiliates of an esoteric coterie that was based in Basra and Baghdad around the last quarter of the tenth century CE. The learned adepts of this fraternity authored a compendium, *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'* (*The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*), which was structured in the form of an encyclopaedia. This voluminous work grouped fifty-two tracts that treated themes in mathematics, music, logic, astronomy, and the physical cum natural sciences, as well as exploring the nature of the soul and investigating associated matters in ethics, revelation, and spirituality. This series offered synoptic elucidations of the classical traditions in philosophy and science of the ancients and the moderns of the age. It was also accompanied by a dense treatise titled *al-Risala al-jami'a* (*The Comprehensive Epistle*) and further complemented by an appendage known as *Risalat jami'at al-jami'a* (*The Condensed Comprehensive Epistle*).

The precise identity of the authors of this monumental corpus and the exact chronology of its composition, remain unsettled matters of scholarly debate in the field of Islamic studies. Although the Ikhwan's writings have been described as being affiliated to Sufi, Sunni, or Mu'tazilite teachings, it is more generally accepted that their line in literature belonged to a Shi'ite legacy that had strong connections with the Ismaili tradition. While some scholars assert that the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'* are attributable to early Fatimid sources, others maintain that this textual legacy transcended sectarian divisions in Islam and, in its spirit of openness, should consequently lead us to treat its authors as free-thinkers who were not bound within the doctrinal confines of a specific creed. Moreover, besides founding their views on the Qur'an and the teachings of Islam, the Ikhwan did not hesitate to appeal in their *Rasa'il* to the other scriptures of Abrahamic monotheism, such as the *Torah* of Judaism and the *Canonical Gospels* of Christianity.

The Ikhwan were also implicitly influenced by Ancient Indian and Persian classics, and they were enthusiastically inspired by the Greek legacies of the likes of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Euclid, Ptolemy, Porphyry, and Iamblichus. Finding “truth in every religion” and seeing knowledge as the pure “nourishment for the soul,” the Ikhwan associated the pursuit of happiness and the hope of salvation with the scrupulous unfolding of rational and intellectual quests. They furthermore promoted a friendship of virtue among their companions and gave a venerable expression to the liberal spirit in Islam. Their syncretism, which is not reducible to a mere form of eclecticism that may have been partly influenced by Mesopotamian Sabaeen practices and beliefs, did

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ultimately ground their eschatological aspiration to found a spiritual sanctuary that would prudently assist their co-religionists in overcoming the sectarian discords that plagued their era.

Oriented by a literal interpretation of the classical microcosm and macrocosm analogy, as it was primarily noted in their conception of the human being as a microcosm and of the universe as a macroanthropon, the Ikhwan did avidly attempt to restore the sense of harmony and equipoise between the psychical order and its correlative cosmological shaping forces. Their analogical thinking was furthermore inspired by a Pythagorean arithmetic grasp of the structuring orderliness of the visible universe, and they moreover adopted a Neoplatonist explication of creation by way of emanation in a creditable attempt to reconcile philosophy with religion.

Drafted in an eloquent classical Arabic style, the Ikhwan's epistles displayed a remarkable lexical adaptability that elegantly covered the language of mathematics, logic, and natural philosophy, as well as encompassing the intricacies of theological deliberation and occultist speculation, while also giving expression to a poetic taste that was ingeniously embodied in resourceful fables and edifying parables. In terms of the scholarly significance of the *Rasa'il* and the cognitive merits of the Ikhwan's views, it must be stated that, despite being supplemented by oral teachings in seminaries, their textual heritage was not representative of the most decisive of achievements made in the domains of mathematics, and the natural and psychical sciences of their epoch.

Nonetheless, the Ikhwan's intellectual acumen becomes most evident in their original and sophisticated reflections on matters related to spirituality and revelation, which did compensate the ostensible scholarly limitations that may have resulted from the diluted nature of their investigations in classical philosophy and science. However, in spite of these traceable shortcomings, their corpus remains exemplary of medieval masterpieces that represented erudite popular adaptations of proto-scientific knowledge. Assimilated by many scholars across a variety of Muslim schools and doctrines, the Ikhwan's textual heritage acted as an important intellectual catalyst in the course of development of the history of ideas in Islam, rightfully deserving the station that it has been assigned amid the Arabic classics that constituted the high literature of the medieval Muslim civilisation.

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