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# The Influence of Hermetic Literature on Moslem Thought

By A. E. AFFIFI

STUDENTS of Moslem philosophy and mysticism have often observed the highly eclectic character of that type of human thought. All Moslem speculation, philosophical and theological, no less than the Şūfī literature of the more theosophical kind, as represented for instance by Ibn 'Arabī and Suhrawardī of Aleppo, displays this eclecticism. Yet no definite answer has been given to the question how or why the main current of Moslem thinking came to be of that type of mixture in which ideas from Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Philo Judæus, the Catholic thinkers of the Christian Church, the Gnostics, and the Neoplatonists are brought into one harmonious whole and mingled together in such an extraordinary manner. Certain attempts have been made in studying individual thinkers of Islam to trace their systems back to their respective sources, for no one source can satisfactorily explain such a diversity of doctrines as we find in Moslem literature. This was done by scholars who studied, e.g. al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, and was done by myself in studying the mystical philosophy of Muḥyid-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī. In each case the fundamental ideas of the Moslem thinker were traced to the special source or sources which were deemed to have influenced his thought.

One important question, however, has always been overlooked, whether it is possible that the Moslem thinkers were not themselves responsible for mixing together those irreconcilable elements of Greek philosophy with other ideas derived from the prevalent religions of the East. In other words, was the eclecticism of Moslem thought only a reappearance of another kind of eclecticism which existed long before? Some of the aspects of this problem will be dealt with in this paper.

The history of Greek philosophy gives us many examples of an attempt at reconciling the various systems of the old Masters. This tendency is particularly true of the late Hellenistic period and of the School of Alexandria.<sup>1</sup> The Peripatetic philosophy of the Aristotelian School was already mixed with Platonism; and Neoplatonism was reconciled with Stoicism and some elements of Aristotelian metaphysics in the writings of Plotinus, as Porphyry remarks. In the third century of the Christian era there was a particularly strong tendency towards syncretism both in religion and philosophy. The confusion of races on the one hand and of religions and philosophic ideas on the other made such syncretism not only possible but necessary. The result was a widespread toleration in the religious sphere and in speculative circles. Philosophy was looked upon as the intellectual expression of religious beliefs, and the great religions of the East, with their strong feeling for the spiritual world and their equally strong passion for the unseen world soon left their stamp on philosophic ideas. The group of religio-philosophic discourses known as the

<sup>1</sup> See Vacherot, *Hist. critique de l'école d'Alexandrie* (Paris, 1846), vol. i, p. 97.

Hermetic writings are a good example of the attempt to retain both philosophy and the pagan religions ; so also are the writings of the Neoplatonists and the Neopythagoreans.

It is evident, therefore, that the art of mixing together systems of thought and beliefs was known long before the Arabs, and that syncretism was a prominent feature of the late Hellenic period. When Greek philosophy was translated into Arabic many of the books of that period—the authors of which are unknown—must have been among its texts. The so-called “Theology of Aristotle” *أثولوجيا أرسطاطاليس*, “The Clarification of the Pure Good,” *الإيضاح في الخير المحض*, “The Hermetic Writings,” are typical examples. In my view, it is to such texts as these, which were definitely known in the Moslem world from the earliest times, that we must look for an explanation of the eclectic character of Moslem thought. Certainly the Arabs knew Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers in the original—at least so far as some of their books are concerned. But they must have also been acquainted with other forms of Greek philosophy such as are depicted in the texts just referred to. Their debt to such texts seems to be enormous, perhaps far greater than their debt to the original masters themselves. We know that they never troubled themselves about the authors of the books that came to them ; much less about the genuine attribution of such books to their authors. They were more concerned with the subject matter of philosophy, whatever quarter it came from. They did not know Plotinus except perhaps by name, but when Plotinus’ *Enneads* came to them under the guise of the *Theology of Aristotle* or some other form it played a tremendous rôle in the development of their thought. Similarly with the so-called *Hermetic Writings*. Every Moslem thinker set himself the task of reconciling Islamic dogma with the rational speculation which came to him under the name of Greek philosophy, whether it was genuinely Greek or Greco-Persian or Greco-Egyptian, or a mixture of all these and other elements. But nothing could have appealed to his heart more than the mixture of philosophy and religion known as the *Hermetic Writings*, which were probably designed for a purpose similar to his own. The authors of these writings, who flourished in the third century A.D., were dissatisfied with the traditional Greek philosophy as it was handed down to them from generation to generation. They found in Plato and Aristotle and their commentators much food for their minds but little or no food for their souls. They were anxious to know philosophy only as a means of knowing God and drawing near to Him. God, for them, was not the abstract incommunicable Prime Mover of Aristotle nor the Ideal Good of Plato, but the living and working Principle, both in the physical world without and in the human soul within. God, according to the *Poimander*, is Will, and His Being is in Willing things to be.

My object in what follows is to draw attention only to one of the groups of eclectic Greek writings which, in my opinion, have greatly influenced Moslem thought, i.e. the *Corpus Hermeticum*. I shall try to illustrate that influence by

parallel examples of leading ideas from both sides, and to indicate the possible channels through which the Hermetic ideas were transmitted to the Moslems.

The evidence I wish to put forward to prove that the Moslems were well acquainted with Hermetic writings is twofold. On the one hand, it is based on examination of some of the ideas and themes that are to be found in the writings of Moslem philosophers and mystics ; and on the other, it is derived from the historical study of the spread and development of the Hermetic writings in the East at a certain period and from references made to these writers by some leading Arabic writers such as al-Qiftī.<sup>1</sup> I shall speak of the internal and external evidence respectively, but prefer to deal with the external evidence first.

#### THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

The writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus continued to flourish in some centres of learning outside Alexandria, where they were first written. When their importance in the Hellenistic world diminished, after the middle of the sixth century, they continued to play a vital part in the intellectual life of the city of Harran, which retained its heathen religion until the second century of the Hijra. It was called by the Greeks *ἑλληνοπολις*, and it was the pagans of Ḥarrān more than anyone else, as Professor E. G. Browne says, who, under the Abbaside Khalifate, “imparted to the Moslems all the learning and wisdom of the Greeks. . . . Many of these attained positions of the greatest eminence as physicians, astronomers, mathematicians, geometricians, and philosophers.”<sup>2</sup>

Very little was known until the time of al-Ma'mūn about the mysterious religion of the Harranians, who were also called by their contemporaries “the Sabæans”. Chwolsson, in his *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*, distinguishes between the true Sabæans—also called Mandæans and al-Mughtasila—who lived in the marches between Wāsiṭ and al-Baṣra, and the Pseudo-Sabæans of Ḥarrān, who were a remnant of the old Syrian pagans of Mesopotamia. The story of their encounter with al-Ma'mūn, as related by Ibn al-Nadīm would, if true, throw some light on the history of Hermetic philosophy in the Moslem world, and would show us how that philosophy became a religion and how it crept, through the Arabic-speaking scholars of Ḥarrān and Baghdad, into Moslem thought. A certain Christian by the name of Abū Yūsuf Aysha' al Qaṭī'i, says Ibn al-Nadīm,<sup>3</sup> relates in his book entitled *الكشف عن مذاهب الحرائين المعروفين في عصرنا بالصائبة* that on one of his military campaigns in the lands of the Byzantines he was received by people who came to swear allegiance to him. Among them were the Ḥarrāniyyūn, who were clad in tightly fitting coats and wore their hair very long. Al-Ma'mūn objected to their strange appearance, and when he asked them whether they were Christians or

<sup>1</sup> p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> *Lit. Hist. of Persia*, 1909, p. 304.

<sup>3</sup> *Fihrist* (Cairo edn.), pp. 445-6.

Jews or Magians they replied that they were Ḥarrānians. On being asked further whether they had a prophet and a sacred book they mumbled something. Al-Ma'mūn said: "Then you must be heretics and worshippers of idols; your blood is lawful . . . you must choose either Islam or any of the religions which God has mentioned in His Book, otherwise you shall be exterminated." Some of the Ḥarrānians became Moslems or Christians, while others refused to give up the old religion of their fathers and tried to find a name of a religion mentioned in the Qu'rān to attach themselves to, a holy book to call their own, and a prophet to claim to be his followers. They called themselves the Ṣābi'ah, on the advice of a certain Moslem jurist, فقيمه, a name which was not known in Ḥarrān until that time.

Al-Ma'mūn never returned, because he died during the campaign, but the heathens of Ḥarrān, having called themselves by the new name of Ṣābi'ah, claimed the protection of the Moslems at all times. Their religion, which for a long time was kept a secret, they now openly declared. It seems that they were not satisfied to stop at that, but thought hard of a name of a prophet and a name of a sacred book. They declared that their religious teachings were to be found in the Hermetic writings, and that the prophets were Hermes Trismegistus and Agathodaimon, who are mentioned therein.

Now the heathens of Ḥarrān are never called by the Moslem authors Hermetists, but Sabæans, and any information we wish to get concerning them must be sought under that name. Nevertheless, most of the accounts we find in Arabic texts of these pseudo-Sabæans associate them with Hermes and the Hermetic literature.

Shahraṣṭānī, Kātibī, and others give a summary of their teachings, most of which seems to be contained in the Hermetica; and al-Kindī (d. A.D. 870) is reported by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah<sup>1</sup> to have said that he had seen a book from which the heathens of Ḥarrān derived their teaching and that it consisted of tractates written by Hermes for his son. In another place he is also supposed to have said: "I have seen some tractates of Hermes on the Unity of God which any philosopher finds inevitable to accept and cannot do otherwise, however much he tries." Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, in his *Nukhbat al-dahr*,<sup>2</sup> goes so far as to derive the name of Ṣābi'ah from Ṣābi which, he says, is the name of the son of Hermes, who is Idris.<sup>3</sup>

The religion of Ḥarrān in the third century of the Hijra was, as I have already remarked, the heathen religion of Syria, mixed with some Hellenic and Persian elements. It was a cult rather than a theoretical doctrine. We are not absolutely certain that the Hermetic writings formed a part of the sacred book of that religion, but all the external evidence derived from Qiftī's story and the

<sup>1</sup> *Ṭabaqāt al-aʿyibā*, vol. 1, pp. 16-17; cf. *Fihrist* (Leipzig edn.), p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Chwolsson, vol. ii, pp. 409-410.

<sup>3</sup> Shahraṣṭānī (vol. ii, p. 76) holds a different view. He maintains that the name is derived from *Ṣabā'* which means inclined (*māla*), and contrasts the name Ṣābi'ah with the name Ḥanifiyyah—a term which he seems to use for all the people of revealed religions.

remarks made by the writers mentioned above points to one fact which seems to me to be certain, namely that the pseudo-Sabæans of Ḥarrān at that time were well acquainted with the Hermetic writings and that these writings did exist then and were widespread in that part of the Moslem world—either in the original Greek or in a Syriac translation from which they were translated into Arabic.

The activity of the Ḥarranians was all the more energetic when a party of them, under the leadership of Thābit b. Qurra (d. A.H. 288), who was excommunicated by his fellow-religionists, went to Baghdad and established a new Sabæan School with the approval of al-Mu‘taḍid. The Hermetic writings in which all interest was lost at the school of Athens flourished at Baghdad from that time until the end of the fifth century A.H. Such learned scholars and thinkers as Thābit b. Qurra and his son Sinān must have taken part in translating the Hermetic writings into Arabic and in expounding some of their leading ideas. Unfortunately, none of their books on this subject has come down to us. All that we know of Thābit's works are short treatises on geometry<sup>1</sup>; and there is a very short tract, preserved in a MS. in the British Museum,<sup>2</sup> by Sinān b. Thābit which seems to be an extract from the Hermetica.

It was from these two centres of learning, Ḥarrān and Baghdad, that the Hermetic literature spread throughout the Moslem world from as early as the second century of the Hijra; and when such thinkers as Ibn Sinā, Ibn Ṭufayl, al-Suhrawardī, and Ibn ‘Arabī came on the scene, the Hermetic ideas must have already been assimilated into the Moslem thought from which they derived their material.

#### THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE

The internal evidence of the influence of Hermetic literature on Moslem thought can only be obtained by a critical analysis of Arabic texts which show traces of such influence. A thorough examination of texts of this kind, whether they are translations of some parts of the Hermetica, or summaries of them, or books dealing with some of their leading ideas, or even passages inspired by them, would yield most fruitful results. It is a task which, so far as I am aware, has not yet been seriously undertaken by any scholar; yet fewer fields of research on the connection between Greek and Moslem cultures can be more promising.

There is no doubt that the Moslem writers were acquainted with the Hermetic writings and that their acquaintance with them was even greater than that of their Christian brethren. It is not improbable that they might have known some of the Hermetic tractates or discourses in the Greek or Latin originals which have been lost and in consequence not incorporated in the Hermetica as known to the West to-day. A comparative study of the Hermetic literature in Arabic, therefore, might throw some light on the obscure or lost parts of the European text.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brockelmann, i, 217; *Suppl.* i, 384–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Brit. Mus. Add.* 7473 (Rich), foll. 26–31.



So far only a few Arabic texts have attracted my attention where the Hermetic influence is most marked, and I shall attempt to give a very brief review of these later ; but the greater bulk of Arabic Hermetic literature still awaits investigation.

(a) *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*, by Ibn Sīnā.

In this philosophical romance we see a striking resemblance to the Hermetic idea underlying the first Libellus of the Hermetica *The Poimandres*.<sup>1</sup> It is no mere coincidence that the two epistles deal with the same theme and use the same symbolism and method of exposition. *The Poimandres* relates the story of the creation of the world, as revealed to the Prophet Hermes by the Divine Mind—Poimander. The mystery of creation and the wonderful aspects of the Godhead are explained ; also the hidden mysteries of the human soul : its divine nature through which it can soar up to the highest point of spiritual ascension and its animal nature through which it can sink down to the level of brute beasts. The way to salvation and elevation to the spiritual world is finally described. In other discourses of the Hermetica the scenes are slightly varied. The discourse may take place between Hermes and his son Thot, or between Hermes and the god of medicine—Æsculapius—or Hermes and King Amūn. In such cases the Divine Mind speaking is Hermes himself. Yet in other cases Hermes is described as the aspiring soul of a pupil listening to the Divine Mind, which is called Poimander in some discourses and Agathodaimon in others.

Whatever may be the details and the slight differences which distinguish the Hermetic discourses one from another, there are some predominant features in them all. Man is the ultimate aim of creation. Through knowledge of himself and of the world around him he can attain knowledge of God. The human soul when set free from the bondage of the body can get into direct contact with the Divine Mind, and thereby learn all the mysteries of existence.

We find an echo of all this in the epistle of Ibn Sīnā (d. A.H. 428), which is entitled *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*, and to a certain extent in the epistle which bears the same name by Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581).<sup>2</sup> What Ibn Sīnā calls the “ philosophy of illumination ” *الحكمة المشرقية* and sets against the philosophy of the Peripatetics is nothing but this mixture of the wisdom of the East and Greek philosophy, chiefly Platonism. He must have had—like Plotinus—a feeling of dislike for the barren and unspiritual speculation of Greek philosophy as presented by the thinkers of the late Hellenistic period ; then found some spiritual satisfaction in the same philosophy after it became tinged with the religious sentiment of the Orient. With his epistle of *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān* we may

<sup>1</sup> The resemblance is apparent even in the title of the two works, not verbally, but semantically. “ Poimandres ” has been compared to the Mandaean *Manda d'Hayye*, which is the nearest thing to *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*. On the derivation of the word, see Scott, ch. 1, 2 ; and Dodd's *The Bible and the Greeks*, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> The idea which underlies Ibn Ṭufayl's epistle, i.e. that the unaided human intellect can reach knowledge of the true nature of all things, is to be found in *Poimandres*, xiii, 15.

group his other short treatises, *Salamān and Absāl* and *Risālat al-ṭayr* as typical examples of the new philosophy.

Ibn Sīnā's *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān* is cast in the symbolic and shadowy style which is characteristic of the later Persian writers. Its symbolism is so difficult that even with the help of a commentary the meaning of some of its passages still remains obscure. When we translate it into ordinary simple language we obtain the following picture :—

The human soul wandered off one day into the boundless sphere of freedom. She had already rid herself of all the ties that bind her to the physical world, so that she became pure and capable of receiving the divine illumination. She met the Divine Mind, which appeared to her in the form of a magnificent old man ; so old, and yet so young and fresh. His old age only added to his dignity and comeliness, for he is not subject to the laws of corruption and generation which govern our world. She at once felt the affinity between herself and that Mind and realized her need of him. Moreover, she felt an urgent impulse to draw near him and discourse with him ; and he responded, thus revealing to her the inmost secrets of his heart. He disclosed to her his identity : who he is, whence he came, and what his business is. He is the “ Living ”, the son of the “ Awake ”. His father is the Mind of all Minds (God) ; his home is the Holy city مدينة القدس—the transcendental world. His business is pure intellection *تعقل محض* for he is pure intellect, and in comprehending himself he comprehends all things. He tells the soul that he had received from his father “ the keys of all the divine sciences ”, and when she questions him concerning these sciences he explains to her all the mysteries of creation and the extraordinary powers of the human soul. He also shows her the way to combat her evil passions and win her rightful place in the spiritual world. But Ḥayy insists that spiritual ascension is impossible so long as the soul is weighed down by the chains of the physical world, and unless she severs all relations with the body for ever she has no hope of attaining her goal. He points out to her that there are two sides to the realm of existence : the Western side ناحية المغرب which is the material, and the Eastern side, ناحية المشرق, which is the spiritual side wherein permanent light is for ever shining. Then he takes her up to the Planets and far beyond, showing her the inhabitants of each planet and explaining their specific characteristics. They go through the spheres one by one until they reach the “ sphere of the First Active Intellect ” (العقل الفعال) (الأول) whom Ḥayy describes as the father of all intellects and the king to whose services all other intellects are devoted, and whose command they all obey. This king, he says, is above all definition and description. His beauty surpasses all beauty and whoever gazes at his beauty is blinded by the radiance of his countenance. His beauty is its own Veil ; like the sun, its own light prevents those who gaze at it from seeing it. But he is a most generous king.



He loves those who seek him and those who obtain a glimpse of him abandon all the world and what it contains.

This is a rough outline of Ibn Sīnā's *Ḥayy b. Yaqzan*. A cursory glance is sufficient to show that it is a peculiar mixture of mythology, natural philosophy, metaphysics, religion, and mysticism. The fundamental idea round which the whole treatise turns is identical with that round which the Hermetic discourses turn. The resemblance is all the more remarkable between it and the *Poimandres*. The comely Shaykh whom Ibn Sīnā calls Ḥayy b. Yaqzān is a reproduction of the Greco-Egyptian god Hermes, and the soul that wandered away from the body, seeking inspiration, is nothing but Thot receiving revelation from his father. And the Eternal One whom Ibn Sīnā calls the King is the "Pure Good" of the Hermetic *Poimandres*. These are the main characters which Ibn Sīnā stages in his *Risālah* and, as we have seen, they have their exact parallels in the *Poimandres*. The rôles which they play in the two texts are extraordinarily similar and the language is almost identical if we leave out of account the symbolism of Ibn Sīnā. The religious sentiment in both works has all the characteristics of Oriental religious sentiment. A critical examination of the details of *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* and what corresponds to them in the Hermetic writings cannot be attempted here, but such an examination would certainly offer much stronger evidence of the close relation between the Moslem author and his Greek masters.

(b) *The book of Balīnūs the Philosopher.*

Another Arabic text which seems to have some relation to the Hermetic literature is a work entitled "the book of the mystery of creation" (كتاب سر الخليفة). It is attributed to a certain Balīnūs the Philosopher بلينوس الحكيم. There is an extant manuscript of the work in the Paris Library dated 12th of Jumāda al-Ākhira, A.H. 958, but it is said to have been copied from an older MS. dated Dhu'l-Qa'da A.H. 343, which shows that as early as the first part of the fourth century works which contained a great deal of material drawn from Hermetic writings were already in circulation in the Moslem world. The book is mentioned in Ḥājjī Khalifa (vol. i, p. 268, Cairo edn.).

Balīnūs or Balīnās of the Arabs seems to be the Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius, who flourished in the first century A.D. Some fragments of his writings are still extant and they show a tendency towards pantheism. The accounts which al-Ya'qūbī (vol. iii, pp. 134, 165), Ibn al-Nadīm (p. 314), and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah (p. 73) give of Balīnūs present a fair picture of the much idealized and almost legendary personality which the ancients made of Apollonius after his death. That the original text was written by him is certainly doubtful, but the Arabic text seems to have been translated from a Greek original of unknown authorship.

The following is a summary of the main points of the book :—

- (1) The first created thing is the "Word of God" (الكلمة), and by means

of the “ Word ” other things were created. God cannot be the cause of created beings since the cause of anything must in one respect resemble that of which it is a cause and in another respect be different from it. But there is no resemblance whatever between God and created beings. The “ Word ” of God cannot be perceived by the senses because it possesses nothing of the physical qualities, yet all things are created by it through the Will and Command of God. Created things do not apprehend the “ Word ”, because that which is not created is beyond apprehension.

(2) The first thing that was made manifest is the light of the “ Word ” of God. From it activity was generated, and from activity, movement ; and from movement, heat. This is how “ caused things ” began. From movement and heat, life was generated—namely plants, animals, then man.

The author goes on to explain how the four elements were formed and how the compounds of the elements and the heavenly bodies came into being. He concludes that the only part which the “ Word ” played in creation was to bring movement into being ; all other things issued forth in a purely natural manner without the intervention either of the “ Word ” or of the “ Will ” of God, except in so far as they were the primal causes of creation.

This is obviously an attempt at reconciling natural philosophy and metaphysics, and it has its exact parallel in the Hermetic writings. Hermes says : “ Every movement issues from the Power which moves all things ; for there are two kinds of movement, the potential and the actual. The former preserves all the parts of the world and moves them internally ; the latter encompasses the world and moves it externally. The two kinds are inseparable. Nature brings individual things into being ; it preserves them and sows the seeds of life in the moving matter. When matter becomes hot on account of movement it turns into fire and water, and when fire acts upon water it dries a part of it which becomes earth . . . When heat, cold, moisture, and dryness are mixed together in a certain proportion spirit is generated.”

(3) The author of our text goes on to say : “ When heat was generated from movement it accelerated it and matter became extremely agitated. This state lasted for twenty-six thousand five hundred years. Owing to this movement matter was divided into different kinds, according to weight, and twelve strata were formed. The lowest stratum was void of movement and heat, but acquired heat from the strata above it and was thus set in motion. The parts which became warm rose up and other strata were formed ; each consisted of seven parts. This was the beginning of the seven heavens and seven earths.”

All this seems to be influenced by the main physical theories in the Hermetic literature. The same strain can also be observed in the Moslem philosophers where they bring in theories incompatible with the Platonic and Aristotelian theories which constitute the greater part of their philosophy. Al-Fārābī, for instance, in speaking of Prima Materia المادّة الأولى and the simple elements الاسطقسات which issued therefrom says : “ In each one of these simple

elements and in everything that resembles them in kind or accompanies them—like vapour, etc.—there is a power قُوَّة in virtue of which it moves spontaneously towards other things, causally connected with it without an external agent. There are “forces” which act upon one another and from the sum total of their actions and interactions many kinds of mixtures and compounds are formed. The simple elements are first mixed with one another. This produces many bodies which are opposite in nature. Then these bodies are mixed again with one another or with one another and a simple element. This produces bodies opposite in form. In these also there are ‘forces’ which act upon one another and forces which receive the effects of other forces and forces which cause bodies to move without an external agent. The heavenly bodies have their effect on them and have their effect on one another and on the simple elements, and are affected by them. Out of these actions and interactions in different directions other mixtures are formed. Some bodies are formed at the first stage, others at the second, others at the third, and others at the last.”

Al Fārābī explains further the coming into being of minerals, plants, animals, and man. Man comes out of the last mixture. In every one of these species there are innate forces which cause its spontaneous movement and other forces which enable it to produce an effect on or receive an effect from another.<sup>1</sup> The same theory of innate “powers” or “forces” is held by Ibn Sīnā, who gives it a much wider range of application. According to him nothing moves unless it has in itself the power to effect movement. These “powers” are implanted in all bodies and may be classified under three categories :—

(a) Powers which involuntarily preserve all bodies and determine their shape, position, and actions, like a stone falling downward. Such powers are to be found in all bodies, and Ibn Sīnā puts them under the general name “Nature”.<sup>2</sup>

(b) Powers which cause their species to move and preserve it, etc., by means of organs أَدْوَات in a variety of ways. These are divided into three classes : (i) powers of plants which do all this involuntarily ; (ii) powers of animals which do it voluntarily ; (iii) powers of the human soul, which act with deliberation and complete knowledge.

(c) Powers which produce effects similar to what we have mentioned but produce them in a uniform manner and without organs. These are the powers of the souls of the spheres.

All these “powers” or “forms”—as he sometimes calls them—emanate uninterruptedly from a disembodied principle مبدأ مفارق to the physical world. The dynamic philosophy in which Ibn Sīnā tries to bring physics into line with metaphysics and ultimately arrives at a deterministic view of the nature of the world has its root in al-Fārābī and in the Hermetic philosophers before him.

<sup>1</sup> See *Arā' ahl al-Madīna al-fādila* (Cairo, 1906), pp. 38–9.

<sup>2</sup> *Najāh*, p. 162.

(c) *Muhyid-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī*.

Ibn 'Arabī also seems to have been very much under the influence of Hermetic thought. His books, perhaps more than those of any other Moslem writer, show those peculiar qualities which are characteristic of Hermetic literature. It is true that Ibn 'Arabī had a foot in every camp so to speak, and drew his material from various sources, most of which I have discussed in my book on his mystical philosophy.<sup>1</sup> I am convinced that the Hermetic literature referred to above must be counted among his main sources. Some of the fundamental ideas of his system have their parallels in the Hermetica, although, as usual, he interprets them in his own way to adapt them to his pantheistic doctrine; and many of his important terms, such as "chaos", "breath of God", "light", "darkness", "water", "the divine word", "spiritual ascension to the celestial spheres and the spheres beyond", "the presence of God", are to be found in the Hermetic texts. It will suffice to give only a few examples where the resemblance is most obvious:—

(i) Perhaps the most remarkable similarity is to be found between some parts of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and Libellus V, which is entitled "Discourse of Hermes to Tat: that God is hidden from sight yet is most manifest". This Libellus is the most mystical and pantheistic discourse in the Hermetica, hence the nearest to Ibn 'Arabī's ideas and manner of expression. The likeness is so great that practically every sentence in the Libellus has its equivalent in the *Fuṣūṣ*, a fact which cannot be put down to mere accident. Here is a summary of the main points:—

"God is everything that exists, for He is the creator of all existents, but He is also everything that does not exist (externally) for the non-existent is contained in His essence.<sup>2</sup> He can only be apprehended by the mind, yet can be seen with the naked eye (in the forms of the universe).<sup>3</sup> He is immaterial, yet is in every material thing. There is nothing in existence but He<sup>4</sup>; hence He is called by all the names of created beings.<sup>5</sup> He has no (special) name because He is the Father of All. How can I praise thee,<sup>6</sup> O God? And where can I praise thee? Do I look upward or downward?<sup>7</sup> To the external or the internal? For thou art the locus which embraces everything. There is no locus but thee. And what sacrifice can I offer thee, for everything comes from thee? . . . What time do I praise thee? There is no time, no instant of time that is far from thee. With what part of me can I praise thee? Do I belong to myself or does anything of myself belong to me?<sup>8</sup> Am I not thou? Thou art I; and thou art

<sup>1</sup> *Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid-Din Ibn 'Arabī* (1939), Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.* (Cairo 1946) on the question of the external and internal aspects of God, e.g. p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.*, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.* on the meaning of "other than God", e.g. pp. 101-3, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.*, p. 77, l. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.*, p. 83, the verse.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.*, p. 170, on "all directions are the same with regard to God".

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Fuṣ.*, p. 151, last line: God is the essence of all the faculties and organs of man and the actual doer of everything.

everything that I do or say. Nay, thou art everything and there is nothing besides thee . . . ” (Lib., v).

(ii) The “ Word ” of God, the divine Logos, as the fundamental principle of life and thought manifesting itself in the soul of men, and indeed in all created beings, is one of the basic ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy round which his celebrated *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* turns. Its metaphysical aspect, it is true, is largely influenced by Philo of Alexandria, at least as far as his terminology is concerned, yet one can see in that theory traces of the Hermetic logos, as explained particularly in Lib. i and xi. “ And the whole body (the universe) in which our bodies are contained is filled with soul ; soul, with mind ; mind, with God,” says the Hermetic author ; and the same idea is repeated over and over again in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*.

(iii) What Ibn ‘Arabī calls the *A’yān al-thābita*—the archetypal forms of the visible world which contain all things potentially in an ideal form prior to all actuality—are in some respects akin to Plato’s Ideas, but have also a great deal in common with what the Hermetic Poimander says on the subject.

(iv) It cannot be said that the Hermetic writings are in a strict sense pantheistic, but some of their seemingly pantheistic utterances have remarkable parallels in Ibn ‘Arabī. “ God’s work is this and this alone,” says the Hermetic philosopher, “ to bring all things into being ; and this is the good . . . For it is, so to speak, God’s very being to generate movement and life in all things . . . He works alone, and He is ever at His work, and is Himself that which He works. If what He works were separated from Him, all things would of necessity collapse and die, for there would be no life in them ” (Lib. xi, p. 217).

Ibn ‘Arabī expresses the same idea, using the word “ mercy ” instead of the word “ good ”. The mercy of God embraces all things : i.e. it brings them into being, “ for there is nothing that mercy does not ‘ remember ’ ; and mercy’s remembrance of things is the very act of its bringing them into being ” (*Fuṣ.*, p. 178). “ This is God’s Supreme work . . . He pervades the so-called created and fashioned beings, and were it not for this there would have been no existence, for He is the very Essence of existence, and He is the preserver of every thing by means of His Essence ” (*Fuṣ.*, p. 111 ; cf. also *Fuṣ.*, p. 55 : “ Were it not for the fact that God permeates all existent objects by means of (His) image the universe would have no existence ”).

The Hermetic philosopher goes on to say : “ God embraces all things, but things are not contained in Him as material objects are contained in a place, but as thoughts which He thinks. . . . And do you say : ‘ God is invisible ’ ? Speak not so ! Who is more visible than God ? For this very reason has He made all things that through all things you may see Him. This is God’s goodness ; that He manifests Himself through all things. Nothing is invisible, not even an incorporeal thing. Mind is seen through its thinking, and God, in His working ” (Lib., xi, p. 219). “ God is the All ; and there is nothing that is not included in the All. Hence, there is neither magnitude nor place nor quantity nor shape

nor time beside God. For God is the All and the All permeates all things and has to do with all things” (Lib., xii, pp. 238-9).

Both the *Fuṣūṣ* and *Futūḥāt* of Ibn ‘Arabī abound with such expressions. God, he also says, is the All-embracing Reality, the most visible of all things, for He is pure light (light = being) and light is visible in virtue of its own nature and makes other things visible. God was a hidden treasure and desired to be known, so He created all things that He might be known, etc.

The Hermetic expressions may not be regarded as strictly pantheistic, but they were readily absorbed into the pantheistic philosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī. The relation between God and the universe according to the Hermetists is somewhat analogous to the relation between an artist and his artistic creation. So in a certain sense they can say that God and the universe are one, just as one can say that the artistic production is identical with the artist, or that it is his mind or his knowledge ; and that knowledge of the creation is in reality knowledge of the creator. Ibn ‘Arabī’s point of view, however, is somewhat different. Not only do we see the mind of the artist exhibited in his art, but whenever we see an artistic production we see a particular form of the artist. The “ form ” is the external manifestation in which the essence of the artist is revealed. This is so with God, the greatest artist of all.

(v) On the idea of the all-pervading life and the negation of death, the Hermetic philosopher says :—

“ There is not anything in the Cosmos, nor has been through all time from the first foundation of the universe ; neither in the whole nor among the several things contained in it, that is not alive. There is not, and has never been, and never will be in the Cosmos anything that is dead ” (Lib., xii, p. 233).

The same idea has its exact parallel in Ibn ‘Arabī. Death, according to him, is no destruction, but “ dissolution of parts after which God takes Man into Himself . . . for He says : ‘ And unto Him the whole affair doth all return.’ And when God takes Man into Himself, He fashions for him a vehicle other than this present vehicle, and of the same nature as the world to which he is transferred. This is the world of everlastingness ” (*Fuṣ.*, p. 169). Life, on the other hand, is the most universal principle governing the universe. There is nothing that is not living, a fact which might not be known to those who are veiled from the truth, but it shall be revealed to every one in the after-world (الدار الآخرة) by which Ibn ‘Arabī means the purely spiritual world.<sup>1</sup> Even the figurative language used in describing the principle of life as “ the cosmic life-breath, working without intermission and conveying into the bodies a succession of qualities thus making the universe one mass of life ”<sup>2</sup> is to be found in describing what Ibn ‘Arabī calls “ the breath of the Merciful ”. It is, according to him, something like a *prima materia* in which all forms of existence are opened up, even the forms of the so-called material universe.

<sup>1</sup> See *Fuṣ.*, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Libellus, ix, p. 183.



Examples of this sort can be easily multiplied, but enough has been said to show the influence of Hermetic literature on Moslem mysticism as represented by the greatest of all Moslem mystical theosophists, Muḥyid-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī. That influence, it has been made clear, is no less profound and penetrating in the sphere of Ṣūfī speculations than in the sphere of Moslem philosophy of the more mystical type.

(d) *The book of the Chiding of the Soul.*

I conclude this section with a few remarks on the only Arabic text the author of which is said to be Hermes Trismegistus, although it has also been attributed to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, namely the work which is generally known as *Kitāb Zajr al-nafs* (A book on the chiding of the soul), or *Mu'ādhalat al-nafs*, or *Mu'ātabat al-nafs*, which mean the same thing. Its attribution to Hermes is obviously false, for the book has more in common with the ethical teaching of Plato and the Stoics, mixed to a considerable extent with Moslem moral ideas. Modern writers are divided as regards the authorship of this work. Fleischer, who published the first seven chapters of the work in 1870, held that it was written by an Egyptian Christian versed in Platonism and such other systems of philosophy as were popular in the East at his time. Bardenhauer, who published the rest of the work in 1872, maintains that it is a typically Arabic production in its style and content, probably written by a Moslem who was acquainted with Greek philosophy such as we find in the Epistles of the Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā; but the Moslem bibliographers never attributed a work of that description to an Arabic writer. Others think that the work is a translation from a Greek original, but we have no knowledge of a Greek text corresponding to this text. Thus the question of its authorship still remains obscure.

The book contains very little on the speculative side of philosophy and much on the practical side, especially the question of the discipline of the soul. It brings out the Neoplatonic idea of the difference between God and His Word. The Word (or *nous*) is the intermediate agent between God and the universe: between the intelligible world of fixed prototypes and the sensible world of ever-fleeting and changing phenomena. The lower world is a proof of the existence of the higher world in the same sense in which a picture painted on a wall is a proof of the existence of the painter, and the movements and mysterious lines of a hand are an indication of the subtle ideas that go through a man's mind.<sup>1</sup>

The major part of the book is devoted to the soul and the means of delivering her from the evils of lusts and passions, so that she may live her true life and experience the real delights which are in store for her in the spiritual world. This can only be attained by the realization that the soul is not of this world; that it belongs to the world of true being and everlasting happiness; and that her ultimate aim should be to purge herself of all the defilements of the world of

<sup>1</sup> *Risālat Zajr al-nafs* (Bairut, 1903), p. 8.

nature and plunge unhesitatingly into the “ fountain of the good ” wherein true and permanent life can be enjoyed. Here the author of the *Zajr al-nafs* is very much under the influence of Platonism and Stoicism on the theoretical side, and Moslem asceticism on the practical side.

#### HERMES AND THE MOSLEMS

Whereas the Moslems seem to have possessed a fairly sound knowledge of the writings generally attributed to Hermes, perhaps far more than we know of these writings now, their ideas about Hermes himself are rather mixed and altogether unreliable. It is true that a great deal of myth had been fabricated round the personality of the Greek god, particularly after he had become identified with the Egyptian god Thot ; but when the Hermetic legend came to the Arabs it seems to have already undergone some further elaboration and modification at the hands of Jewish and other Oriental writers. The identification of Hermes and Idrīs or Enoch *أخنوخ* is certainly of Jewish origin, and most of the writers who make this identification, such as al-Qiftī (vol. 1, p. 2), Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah (vol. 1, p. 16), and Ya‘qūbī (vol. 1, p. 166), must have drawn their information from such authors as Abū Ma‘shar, the famous Jewish astrologer who was a contemporary of al-Kindī the philosopher.

The Moslems were certainly acquainted with the main attributes of Hermes, but to them he was only a man of extraordinary powers and great prophetic genius, not a god. He was associated with occult sciences such as magic, alchemy, talismans, and astrology ; in fact, with everything that had to do with miraculous powers and wisdom. They called him “ the three-times wise ” (*الملك بالحكمة*) instead of “ the three-times great ” (trismegistus), which was the epithet conferred on him by the Greeks. This seems to have led them, or rather misled them, into the belief that there were three persons with the name Hermes instead of one : namely, (a) Hermes of Hermes’s (*هرمس الهرامسة*) who is supposed to have lived before the Flood. He is identified with the Prophet Idrīs (= Enoch) and described as the first man to discourse on celestial substances and medicine. He, they say, was born in Egypt—in Memphis—and after a journey round the world, returned thither. When he died God took him to Himself. (b) The Babylonian Hermes, who is said to have flourished after the Flood. He was conversant with alchemy, medicine, philosophy, and the science of number. According to them he was a pupil of Pythagoras,<sup>1</sup> and Ibn al-Nadīm adds that “ he was one of the custodians of the Seven Houses (of the Planets), and to him was given the custody of the House of Mercury, after whose name he was called. At one time he became the king of Egypt and when he died he was buried in the village of Abī Hermes, commonly known as al-Haramayn (the two Pyramids). He had many sons, including Thot, Ashmon, and Qift.” (c) The Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus is so called, says Qiftī, because he was the third Hermes ; the second being the Babylonian

<sup>1</sup> Qiftī, p. 43, and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah, p. 17.

Hermes. This Hermes also, according to the Arab authors, lived after the Flood, and was renowned for his wisdom and knowledge of alchemy.

Apart from some historical inaccuracies the picture which the Arabs give of Hermes corresponds pretty well with that outlined in Greek legend. Other elements certainly crept in from Jewish and Moslem quarters which account for the multiplicity of the Hermes's, and for regarding them as actual men and prophets instead of mythical and legendary figures. The Greek and Arab accounts agree in associating Hermes with occult sciences and philosophy in general and particularly with Egypt in one way or another. It seems to me fair to conclude that the first Hermes was a creation of the Jewish mind; the second perhaps invented by the heathen people of Ḥarrān; and the third the real Egyptian or Greco-Egyptian Hermes whom the Arabs knew tolerably well and whose writings (or those attributed to him) they knew much better.