THE EXPANSION
OF MOSLEM CULTURE

During the ninth and tenth centuries Moslem civilisation attained its full development and the whole world of Islam from Spain to Turkestan witnessed the most brilliant efflorescence of culture that it has ever known. But this culture was not purely Moslem, and still less Arabic, in origin. It was a cosmopolitan product, in the creation of which all the subject peoples and cultures, Syrian, Persian, Spanish, Berber and Turk, contributed their share. The foundations of the whole structure had been laid by conquests of the first four Khalifs and by the political organisation of the Umayyads at Damascus, but it was not until the fall of the house of Umayya, in 747, that the great age of cosmopolitan culture began.

The movement which installed the new dynasty of the House of Abbas was to a great extent due to the discontent of the eastern provinces with the purely Arab domination of the Syrian Khalifate. It was in the eastern provinces of the empire, in Khorasan, that the revolt against the Umayyads began, and its success marks the end of the purely Arabic period of Islamic culture. The Khalifate was transferred from Syria to Mesopotamia, which had been from time immemorial the centre of oriental civilisation and empire. Here the new capital of Baghdad was built by al Mansur in 752, and it inherited the prestige, and to a certain extent also the traditions of the Sassanian monarchy. The government was often in the hands of the viziers of Persian blood, such as the great family of
the Barmaeides under Harun ar Rashid, and Fadl ibn Sahl under Mamun, and the social life of the court and the capital during the whole period was profoundly affected by Persian influences. Persian or semi-Persian men of letters took a leading share in Moslem culture, as, for instance, Abu Nuwas (d. 810), the court poet of Harun ar Rashid, and al Kisa', the tutor of the Khalif al Mamun. The latter was himself the son of a Persian woman, and it was during his reign (813-33) that the predominance of Persian influence at court was most complete. Nevertheless this was only one element in the new cosmopolitan civilisation. Mesopotamia was essentially the meeting ground of different cultures, Syrian, Persian, Arab and Byzantine, and still more of different religions. Not only was it the centre of Judaism and of Nestorian Christianity; every kind of sect and heresy was represented there, from Monophysitism and Manichaenism to such strange relics of the Cynetic and pagan tradition as the Mandacans of Babylonia and the star-worshippers of Harran.

The country was a palimpsest on which every civilisation from the time of the Sumerians had left its trace.

In such an atmosphere it was difficult for the dominant people to retain the uncompromising orthodoxy and the puritan ethics of primitive Islam. The luxurious and sophisticated society of the Abbasid capital indulged not only in wine and music but in the pleasures of unbridled intellectual curiosity and free religious discussion. Al Mamun was called in jest "the commander of the Unbelievers," and according to the amusing epigram that von Kremer has cited, a man could not be in the fashion unless he professed himself a heretic.

"O Ibn Ziyad, father of Ja'far!
Thou professest outwardly another creed than that which thou hidest in thy heart.
Outwardly according to thy words thou art a Zindiq
(Manichaean),
But inwardly thou art a respectable Moslem.
Thou art no Zindiq, but thou desiriest to be regarded as in the fashion." 2

These conditions explain the peculiar character of the new civilisation of the Abbasid period. Although it was Arabic in language and Mohammedan in religion, its intellectual content was derived from the older civilisations which had been absorbed in the world-empire of the Khalifs. This is true above all in the case of the new Arabic philosophy and science
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which arose in this period, and which were to exert so great an influence on the whole mediaeval world. For more than four centuries the intellectual leadership of the world passed to the Islamic peoples, and it was from the Arabs that the scientific tradition in Western Europe derived its origin. Nevertheless, in spite of this, the scientific and philosophical achievements of Islamic culture owe little either to the Arabs or to Islam. It was not an original creation but a development of the Hellenistic tradition which was incorporated in Islamic culture by the work of men of Aramaean and Persian blood. With the single important exception of al Kindi, "the philosopher of the Arabs," the Arabs took little share in the movement. It produced its richest fruits on the very frontiers of Islam—in Central Asia with al Farabi and Avicenna and al Biruni, and in Spain and Morocco with Averroes and Ibn Tufayl.

The origins of the movement are to be found among the Syriac-speaking Christians of Babylonia and the "Sabaeans" pagans of Harran, who acted as the intermediaries between Greek and Islamic culture. The Nestorian school of Jundi-Shapur, near Ctesiphon, which was an offshoot of the school of Nisibis, had inherited the traditions of the Syriac scholars and translators of the sixth century and was a centre of scientific as well as theological studies. It was from here that the Arabic philologists of Basra first derived some knowledge of Aristotelian logic, and it was also renowned as a school of medicine. From the time of the foundation of Bagdad the position of court physician was held by Nestorian Christians, and these men were the authors of the first translations of Greek scientific works into Arabic. Al Mamun gave official support to their work by the foundation of the school and observatory known as "The House of Wisdom" at Bagdad in 832 under the direction of the Nestorian physician Yahyah ibn Masa'wah. The activity of the school reached its greatest development under the pupil of Yahyah, Hunayn ibn Ishak (809-877), who was not only the greatest of the Syrian translators but also the author of many original works. Through him and his school a large part of Greek scientific literature, including Galen, Euclid and much of Plato and Aristotle and his Neoplatonic commentators was made accessible to the Islamic world. During the same period the foundations of Arabic mathematics and astronomy were being laid by the writings of al Khwarizmi and the three brothers of the Banu
Musa family. Here, however, the dependence on the Hellenic tradition was less complete owing to the knowledge of Indian science which had reached Baghdad in the latter part of the eighth century. Al Khwarizmi, who wrote under the patronage of al Mamun, used this new knowledge in his works, above all the supremely important decimal system of numeration and the use of the zero; and it was from him that the mediaeval Europeans derived their name for the new numerical system (Algoritmus) as well as their first knowledge of the science of Algebra. Nevertheless, Arabic astronomy and mathematics were essentially based on the Greek tradition, and here also its transmission was mainly due to the labours of the Syrian translators, especially the Christians Hunayn ibn Ishak and Qusta ibn Luqa (c. 835), and the “Sabaeans” pagans, Thabit ibn Qurra (835-900) and at Battani (Albategnius) (c. 850-928), who were one of the greatest astronomers of the Islamic world.

This incorporation and reconstitution of the Hellenic tradition was of course one-sided and incomplete. It took no account of Greek poetry and drama. Its literary influence was limited to prose, and even so was not of the first importance, though it is easy to see traces of the Greek rhetorical tradition in Arabic literature, for example, in al Jahiz, the one-eyed mulatto, who was the greatest stylist and scholar of the ninth century. But from the point of view of science and philosophy, the recovery of the legacy of Greek culture was almost complete. Here the Moslem took up the tradition where it had been dropped by the schools of Athens and Alexandria in the sixth century, and they pursued the same ideal of a reconciliation or conflation of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism which had been the aim of the last Greek thinkers. But though the main elements of this synthesis were already provided, they carried it out with a vigour of thought and an intellectual ingenuity which render their work one of the most complete and symmetrical philosophical structures that have ever been created. The modern European mind is so accustomed to regard religion and metaphysics and the various natural sciences as independent and autonomous fields of knowledge that it is difficult for us to comprehend a system in which physics and metaphysics, cosmology and epistemology were all combined in a single organic unity. Nevertheless this was the ideal of the Arabic philosopher, and he succeeded to such a degree that the reconstitution of the Hellenic tradition resulted
CHRISTIAN-BARBARIAN ART: THE FRANKS CASKET
IRISH CHRISTIAN ART: THE ST. GALL GOSPELS
THE CAROLINGIAN EMPEROR: CHARLES THE BALD
THE CONVERSION OF THE NORTH: KING CANUTE
LEWIS THE PIous
THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE: OTTO III RECEIVING
not in a mass of miscellaneous fragments of information, but in a complete system of knowledge, each element of which was inseparable from the whole.

But the universality and consistency of this synthesis rendered it impossible to avoid a conflict with the orthodox doctrine of Islam. The stern simplicity of the religion of the Koran, which taught that the duty of man was not to discuss the nature of God but to obey His Law, had nothing in common with the thorough-going intellectualism of the philosophers. The Hellenic vision of a universal cosmic law, intelligible to the human intellect, left no room for the Semitic belief in a personal God who governed the world and the fates of men with the arbitrary despotism of an oriental monarch. The latter ultimately led to the denial of the principle of causality and of the existence of any necessary order in the state of the universe, the former to the scientific determinism which found its classical expression in the Aristotelian cosmology. As Duhem writes: "Aristotle and his most exact commentators, such as Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroes, taught that every god is an eternally unmoving intelligence, the simple mover of a First Matter as eternal as itself, and the first and final cause of the necessary and perpetual celestial revolutions; they taught that these revolutions determine in unending cyclical recurrence all the events of the sublunary world; that man, inserted in the chain of this absolute determinism, has only the illusion of liberty; and that he has no immortal soul, or rather that he is momentarily animated by an intelligence that is indestructible, but at the same time is impersonal and common to the whole human race."  

But although this theory was irreconcilable alike with Christi
tinity and with Islam, it was not without its partisans in the Islamic world. The astral paganism of Western Asia was still a living tradition in the ninth century A.D., and its adherents were still proud of their ancient culture, as we see from the bold words of Thabit ibn Qurra: "We are the heirs and offspring of paganism which has spread gloriously over the world. Happy is he who for the sake of paganism bears his burden without growing weary. Who has civilised the world and built its cities, but the chieftains and kings of paganism? Who has made the ports and dug the canals? The glorious pagans have founded all these things. It is they who have discovered the art of healing souls, and they too have made known the art of curing the body and have filled the world
with civil institutions and with wisdom which is the greatest of goods. Without paganism the world would be empty and plunged in poverty.**

It was indeed the pagans who were the founders of science as it was known to the Arabs, and now they had brought back the tradition of ancient wisdom from its long sojourn among the Greeks to the sacred cities of Babylonia, from which it had first sprung. For Thabit was a man of Harran, the daughter of Ur of the Chaldees, and her temples still kept alive the tradition that reached back unbroken to the remote Sumerian past. It is impossible to understand the civilization of the Abbasid period without recognising that it was not a purely Islamic creation, but that it was the culminating phase of a process of cultural evolution that stretched over more than three thousand years. Empire after empire had risen and fallen, but again and again the ancient Mesopotamian culture had reasserted its power and had imposed its tradition on the minds of its conquerors.

It is true that orthodox Islam realised the danger with which it was faced and did all in its power to check the influence of this alien tradition. For the new philosophy was even more dangerous to mediaeval Islam than was Averroism to mediaeval Christendom, and in the East there was no Aquinas to reconcile the Aristotelian and the theological orthodoxies. For a time the liberal theologians of the Mutazilite school did indeed attempt to bridge the gulf between traditional orthodoxy and the philosophic thought. But this movement owed its origin to the influence of Christian theology rather than to Greek science, and it was the attempt of thinkers like al-Nazam to come to terms with Greek thought that did more than anything else to discredit the movement. The orthodox reaction under the Khalif al-Mutawakkil in 834 led to the downfall of the Mutazilites, who had enjoyed the favour of Mamun and his immediate successors, and to the persecution of philosophers like al-Kindi. Henceforth Islamic orthodoxy fell back on a strict traditionalism that refused to accommodate itself to philosophy and met all the objections of the rationalist with the formula—Bila kaf—"Believe without asking how."

Nevertheless the victory of the theologians was purely a theological victory. It was powerless to check the cosmopolitan tendency in Islamic culture that had destroyed the supremacy of the Arab element and had liberated the alien and
centrifugal forces of the oriental world. In the ninth century all these submerged forces of the older cultures—the Hellenism and paganism of the philosophers, the illuminism of the Gnostic sects, and the revolutionary socialism of the Mazda-kites—came to the surface and threatened to subvert the very foundations of Islam that were already shaken by the internal divisions of the Moslem community.

Ever since the seventh century, the question of the rightful law of succession to the Khalifate had not ceased to be a source of strife and schism in Islam. A large part had always remained faithful to the claims of ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed. They believed that he had been appointed by the Prophet himself at the Pool of Quum, in the last year of his life, to be his Trustee and successor, and consequently that all the Khalifs who were not descended from him and who did not belong to the Holy House of the Prophet were impostors who had no legitimate claim to the obedience of Moslems. This is the origin of the Shi‘at ‘Ali—the party of ‘Ali—that still numbers some 70 million adherents in Persia and India and Iraq, who recognise only the descendants of ‘Ali—the Twelve Imams—as true Khalifs. This Shia party found support above all among the descendants of the conquered peoples, who had brought with them into Islam the old oriental belief in the sacred character of royalty and its inalienable rights—the idea of the Divine Right of Kings as against that of the derivation of authority from the community which was the primitive Islamic theory. Moreover, this idea became blended with traditions and beliefs of a more transcendental character, such as the Gnostic or Manichaean doctrine of the manifestation in human form of the Divine Aeons and with the Iranian belief in the coming of a Saviour King—the Soshyant. Under the influence of these ideas the somewhat prosaic figure of ‘Ali became surrounded with a halo of religious emotion. He was transformed into a semi-divine saint and hero, the holiest and wisest of mankind and the light of God. Thus the house of ‘Ali became the object of a devotion which blended the romantic loyalty of the Jacobite with the Messianic faith of the religious fanatic.

Nevertheless their history is an unbroken record of undeserved misfortunes. Every attempt to assert their claims was a forlorn hope which ended in disaster, and even when they lived in obscurity they fell victims to poison and assassination. The Abbasids used them as catspaws to overthrow the Umay-
yads and then thrust them aside in the moment of victory. Finally, in 873, the main line of the Alids came to an end with the disappearance of the twelfth Imam Mohammed ibn Hassan, a boy of ten years of age, whom the Khalif al Mutamid sought to slay.

But even this did not extinguish the hopes of the Shi'ah. They refused to believe that the Imam had really perished, for if there were no true Imam they held that the "world could not endure for the twinkling of an eye." He was not dead, but only "hidden," and from his concealment he still watches over the world and guides the affairs of the faithful until the day when he will return in triumph to restore the state of Islam and to fill the earth with justice as now it is filled with injustice. Thus the unfortunate child who vanished so mysteriously more than a thousand years ago has become one of the most famous figures in the history of the world. In the eyes of more than seventy millions to-day he is the Mahdi, the Master of the Age, the Rightful Lord, the Plea, the Expected to Arise, and the Salvation of God. The rulers of Persia since the sixteenth century have held their power as his viceroyens and subordinates, and in token of their dependence they were accustomed to keep a horse always saddled and bridled in readiness for his expected return.

But though this is the faith of the vast majority of modern Shi'ah, it was by no means the only form which the movement took. There have been numberless other claimants to the succession of 'Ali, and many of the Moslem dynasties, including the Idrisids of Morocco and the Zaydite Imams of the Yemen to-day, trace their origin to this source. But the greatest of all these movements and the one which produced the most profound effects on the Islamic world was that of the Ismai'ili, "the sect of the Seven," which based itself on the claims of the descendants of the seventh Imam—Jafar as Sadiq.

The founder of this sect, Abdullah ibn Maman, seems to have conceived the idea of combining all the forces of intellectual and social disaffection in a vast subterranean conspiracy against the Abbasid Khalifate and orthodox Islam. Its doctrines and its methods of propaganda are known chiefly from the reports of its adversaries, but it is clear that the movement was essentially syncretistic, and united the Neoplatonic ideas of the philosophers with the Gnostic traditions which had been preserved by the Manichaens and lesser sects such as
the Mandaens and the Bardeanians. Like the Gnostics, the Ismailians taught the evolution of the universe from the unknown and inaccessible Godhead through a hierarchy of successive emanations. These are seven in number and correspond to the seven aeons or cycles of the temporal process in each of which the Universal Intelligence manifests itself anew in human form. These seven manifestations are the seven Speakers (Natiq), Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and the Ismaili Messiah—the Master of the Age. Corresponding to these are seven manifestations of the Universal Soul—the Helpers or Bases—whose function it is to reveal to the elect the esoteric meaning of the Speakers’ teaching; thus Aaron supplements Moses, Peter Jesus, and Ali Mohammed.

All these revelations, embodied successively in the different world religions, are summed up and fulfilled in the Ismailian teaching in which all veils are removed. But this teaching was essentially esoteric and was imparted in full only to those who had passed through the seven degrees of initiation which made up the Ismailian hierarchy. Only when the disciple had given himself up body and soul to the Imam and to his representative—the da’i or missionary—was the secret doctrine, the Ta’lim, revealed. The adept was then emancipated from all positive doctrines and all moral and religious laws, for he had learnt the inner meaning that lies hidden under the veils of dogma and ritual in all the positive religions. For all religions are equally true and equally false to the “Gnostic”—the Ismailian initiate who alone understands the supreme secret of the Divine Unity: that God is One because God is All and that every form of reality is but an aspect of the Divine Being.

But this esoteric theosophy is only one side of the Ismailian movement. It also embodied a revolutionary social tendency similar to that which had inspired the earlier movements of Mazdak in the seventh century, and Babak the Khurramite, the famous leader of “the Reds” (al Muhammira) in the ninth century. It was, in fact, the reappearance in a new form of that mysterious “white religion” which had already caused so much bloodshed and social disturbance. On this occasion, however, the movement was directed not by ignorant fanatics like Babak and Al Muqanna, “the Veiled Prophet of Khorasan,” but by far-sighted and subtle minds. From their hiding place in an obscure Syrian town, the Grand Masters of the Ismailians controlled the workings of an immense se-
cret organisation and sent out their emissaries in every direc-
tion.

During the last thirty years of the ninth century the move-
ment spread far and wide through the Islamic world. One
branch of the sect, under the name of the Carmathians, es-

tablished a remarkable semi-communistic robber state in Bah-
rein, on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf, which exer-
cised a reign of terror throughout Arabia during the tenth cen-
tury. Basra was sacked by them in 924, Kufa in 930, and
finally they horrified the Islamic world by capturing Mecca,
massacring its inhabitants and carrying off a vast booty, in-
cluding the sacred Black Stone of the Kaaba itself.

Meanwhile the Grand Master, on the discovery of his head-
quartes, had transferred his activities in 907 to Tunisia, where
he proclaimed himself Mahdi, and established the Fatimid
Khalifate which gradually came to include the whole of
North Africa. In 967, after the conquest of Egypt and the
transference of the capital to Cairo, the Fatimid Empire had
become the richest and most powerful state in the Moslem
world. Its dependencies included Syria and Sicily, and owing
to the Ismailian propaganda it possessed adherents and secret
agents in every part of the Islamic world. The first two Fati-
mid rulers in Egypt, al Mi'izz (953-975) and al'Aziz (976-
996) were wise and far-sighted rulers who made Egypt the
most prosperous country in the East. But the most famous
member of the dynasty was the sinister al Hakim (990-
1021), at once a monster of cruelty and an enlightened
patron of learning. In spite of his atrocities, al Hakim espoused
the extreme Ismailian doctrine more whole-heartedly than any
other member of the dynasty. He proclaimed his own divinity
and his followers paid him divine honours. Even to-day he is
still worshipped by the Druze of Mount Lebanon as the su-
preme manifestation of the Divine Intelligence and the final
sum of revelation.11

After al Hakim the history of the Fatimid dynasty is one of
mogovernment and decline. Nevertheless, its external prestige
was never higher than in the reign of the weak al Mustansir
(1030-1094), who was recognised as Khalif in the Holy Cities
of Arabia, and for a time even at Bagdad, the Abbasid capital
itself. The devotion which the dynasty inspired amongst many
of the Shiah is shown by the lines of the great Persian poet
Nasir i Khusraw, who spent a life of labour and hardship in
the service of the Fatimid cause:
"God, to Whose Name be Glory! me hath exempted and freed
In this troubled life of transit from the things that most
men need.
I thank the Lord Almighty Who plainly for me did trace
The way to Faith and Wisdom, and opened the Door of
Grace.
And Who in His boundless mercy in this world hath made
me one
Whose love for the Holy Household [the Fatimids] is clear
as the noonday sun." 12

No less devoted to the Fatimid cause was the famous
Hasan-i-Sabah, who captured the rock fortress of Alamut in
Persia in 1090, and organised the "New Propaganda" of
methodical assassination in the name of al Mustansir's eldest
son Nizar. This branch of the Isma'ilians attained considerable
notoriety owing to the terrorism which the Old Man of the
Mountain and his emissaries, the Fidais, exercised in Syria
during the crusading period. It outlived the main branch of
the Fatimids and still exists as the Khoja sect whose head,
the Aga Khan, a well-known figure in English society, is a
lineal descendant of the last of the Grand Masters of Ala-
mut and of the Fatimid dynasty itself.

Meanwhile the Abbasid Caliphate was undergoing a pro-
cess of political dissolution. Since the middle of the ninth cen-
tury the Khalifs had become more and more dependent on
the Turkish slaves and mercenaries who formed their body-
guard, while the outlying provinces were asserting their in-
dependence under the rule of local dynasties. Spain had declared
its independence under a survivor of the Umayyads as early as
755, and the same process took place by degrees in every region
of Islam, until the Khalifate had lost all real power and re-
tained only a kind of religious primacy as the representative
of the unity of orthodox Sunni Islam. In the tenth century,
however, even this nominal hegemony was endangered by the
growth of the Shi'ites who included the most important of the
Eastern dynasties—the Samanids who ruled Khorasan (includ-
ing modern Turkestan) from their capital at Bokhara, the Zai-
dites and Ziyarids of the Caspian provinces and the Buwayids
of Western Persia and Mosul. In 945 the Buwayids even
made themselves masters of Bagdad, and for more than a cen-
tury the Khalifs were little more than puppets in the hands of
a Persian and Shi'ah dynasty. The same century saw not only
the establishment of the Fatimid power in North Africa, but the rise of yet a third Khalifate in Spain, which was founded in 929 by the greatest of the Western Umayyads, 'Abdulrahman III of Cordova.

Nevertheless, this loss of political unity did not affect the progress of Moslem culture, and the period of the decline of the Khalifate was also the golden age of literature and science. The rise of the new dynasties favoured the development of local centres of culture, and the tenth century saw the beginnings of the Persian renaissance at the Samanid court of Bokhara and the rise of the new Spanish-Arabic culture in the West, while the court of the Hamdanids at Aleppo was the centre of a still more brilliant development of Arabic culture in Syria. Philosophy and science, which had been discouraged by the orthodox reaction in the Abbasid Khalifate, flourished under the liberal patronage of the Shia Bahrain. It was the age of al Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1037), the greatest of all the oriental philosophers, of al Razi (Rhazes) (865-923), the physician, and al Biruni (973-1048), the astronomer and chronologist, whose works on Indian culture and on the Chronology of Ancient Nations are the most remarkable scientific achievements of the age. It is a curious fact that the mediaeval revival of Hellenistic thought should have had its centre in the ancient Greek kingdom of Bactria, for, with the exception of al Razi, all the writers that we have mentioned were natives of the lands about the Oxus, the region of Bokhara and Khiva and Samarkand. It was here too that the union of the Neoplatonic tradition with the religion of Islam produced its noblest expression in the great Persian poets of the late Middle Ages, Jalalu'ddin of Balkh and Jamil of Herat.

Nevertheless, the tenth and eleventh centuries were, above all, a cosmopolitan age, in which the rivalry of the local dynasties in their patronage of literature and learning, the number of schools and libraries, the activities of trade, and the rise of the great Sufi confraternities, like the religious orders of mediaeval Christendom, contributed to the inter-communion and the variety in unity of Islamic culture. Scholars and men of letters travelled through every part of the oriental world, like al Biruni, who was the first to make a scientific study of Indian religion and culture, and Mas'udi, whose thirst for knowledge led him from the Caspian to Zanzibar and from Ceylon to the Mediterranean.
The encyclopaedic character of the culture of the age can be realised not only from the great world histories of Tabari (838-923) and Mas'udi (d. 956), but best of all from the Fihrist of Ibn al-Nadim (d. 955), "an index of the books of all nations on every branch of knowledge with biographical particulars concerning their authors and compilers, since the beginning of every science that has been invented down to the present epoch." This is a striking proof, not only of the literary riches of Arabic culture during its highest development, but also of the impoverishment and degeneration which it has since undergone.

Even more interesting from the historical point of view is the encyclopaedic collection of some fifty treatises on philosophy and science known as the Tracts of the Brethren of Purity, which were composed at Basra about the end of the tenth century; for they seem to represent the esoteric teachings of the higher grades of the Isma'ili sect which are otherwise known to us chiefly from the reports of their opponents. Although from the scientific point of view they are very inferior to the writings of Avicenna and the other great philosophers, they show an even more complete fusion of Hellenistic thought and oriental religion. It was their deliberate aim to purify Islam from superstition and irrationality and to unveil the esoteric meaning which lies hidden behind the veil of orthodox dogma. According to their teaching all things are due to the action of the Universal Soul, which through the agency of the celestial spheres exercises its power on all earthly beings. "This power is named Nature by the philosophers, but Religion gives it the name of 'Angel.' The Universal Soul is one, but it possesses many powers which are diffused in every planet, in every animal, in every plant, in every mineral, in the four elements and in everything which exists in the universe." What we call the individual soul is simply the power of the Universal Soul which informs and directs the individual, and consequently the Resurrection of which the theologians speak is nothing but the separation of the Universal Soul from its temporary connection with a material body: in other words, the death of that body; and in the same way the General Resurrection is the separation of the Universal Soul from its connection with the material universe, i.e., the death of the world. And with these doctrines they combined the belief in the cyclical movement by which the world follows the circular movement of the heavens, and returns in 36,000
years to the point from which it started. Only for the wise there is no return, save for the Brethren, whose mission it is to guide men to this final deliverance. "Know," they write, "that we are the society of the Brethren of Purity, sincere, pure and generous; we have been aforesaid in the cavern of our Father; then the times have changed, the periods have revolved, and the time of the promise has come. We have awakened after the sleepers have finished their cycle, and after having been dispersed in the lands we have reassembled together according to the promise in the kingdom of the Great Master of the Law. And we have seen our spiritual city, hanging in the air, whence our parents and their descendants were driven out by the deceit of the ancient enemy." And they quote the words of Pythagoras, "If thou accomplish that which I counsel then when thou art separated from thy body, thou shalt subsist in the air, seeking no more to return to humanity nor to undergo death once more." 13

These ideas were widely diffused in the Islamic world in the tenth and eleventh centuries and form the esoteric or religious background of the higher philosophical and scientific culture. They occur in Avicenna's noble Ode on the Soul, and in the Diwan of Nasir-i-Khusraw, and there are even traces of them to be found in the work of the blind poet Abu'l-'Ala al Ma'arri (973-1057), who combined the Pythagorean ideas and the scientific fatalism of the Brethren of Purity with a profound pessimism and scepticism that have no parallel in Arabic literature.

In the West the school of Ibn Masarra (882-931), the mystic of Cordova, represents a similar tendency of thought, while the treatises of the Brethren of Purity themselves reached Spain at a very early period through the medium of the Spanish traveller and astronomer Maslama of Madrid (d. 1004) and al Kirmani of Saragossa, thanks to whom they had a considerable influence on mediaeval Spanish thought.

But this brilliant and sophisticated civilisation already contained the germs of decay. Its luxury and scepticism were fatal to the spirit of militant puritanism that had been the strength of the early Moslems, and its centrifugal tendencies weakened the political solidarity of Islam. The leaders of Islamic culture, the Arabs and the Persians, were relinquishing their power to ruder and more virile peoples, such as the Turks, who founded the kingdom of Ghazna in Afghanistan at the close of the tenth century and the great Seljuk sul-
The Expansion of Moslem Culture

The expansion of Persia and Asia Minor in the following century. This was not altogether a misfortune, since the new peoples infused fresh vigour into the failing forces of Islam and set in motion a new wave of conquest which spread eastward over Northern India and westward to Asia Minor. But this external expansion was accompanied by a lowering and narrowing of Islamic culture. The jealous despotism and rigid orthodoxy of barbarian potentates like Mahmud, "the Idol-Breaker" of Khwarazm, consorted ill with the free thought and cosmopolitan culture of the Persian scholars, such as Avicenna and al-Biruni, who were their dependents. Thus the coming of Turkish hegemony in Islam was followed by the victory of Sunni orthodoxy over the religious syncretism of the Shiah and by the gradual decline of the scientific and philosophic movement. Persian culture still flourished for a time under the Seljuq sultans owing to the enlightened policy of their Persian viziers, such as the famous Nizam-ul-Mulk (1017-1092), the founder of the Nizamiyya College at Bagdad, and the patron of the poet and astronomer Omar Khayyam. But the creative period of oriental thought was over. Only in the far West, in Spain and Morocco, did Moslem philosophy and science enjoy a brief period of brilliant expansion before its final eclipse in the thirteenth century.

Nevertheless, Islamic culture retained its pre-eminence throughout the early Middle Ages, and not only in the East, but in Western Europe also. At the very moment when Christendom seemed about to succumb to the simultaneous attacks of Saracens, Vikings and Magyars, the Moslem culture of the Western Mediterranean was entering on the most brilliant phase of its development. In the tenth century, under the Khalifate of Cordova, Southern Spain was the richest and most populous region of Western Europe. Its cities, with their palaces and colleges and public baths, resembled the towns of the Roman Empire rather than the miserable groups of wooden hovels that were growing up in France and Germany under the shelter of an abbey or a feudal stronghold. Cordova itself was the largest city in Europe after Constantinople, and is said to have contained 200,000 houses, 700 public baths, and workshops that employed 13,000 weavers, as well as armourers and leather workers whose skill was famous throughout the civilised world. And the intellectual culture of Moslem Spain was no less advanced. Moslem princes and governors rivalled one another in their patronage of scholars, poets and
musicians, and the Khalif’s library at Cordova is said to have contained 400,000 manuscripts.

We are so accustomed to regard our culture as essentially that of the West that it is difficult for us to realise that there was an age when the most civilised region of Western Europe was the province of an alien culture, and when the Mediterranean, the cradle of our civilisation, was in danger of becoming an Arabic sea. It is, in fact, hardly accurate to identify Christendom with the West and Islam with the East, at a time when Asia Minor was still a Christian land and Spain and Portugal and Sicily were the home of a flourishing Moslem culture. This, however, was the situation in the tenth century, and it had a profound effect on the development of the mediæval world. Western culture grew up under the shadow of the more advanced civilisation of Islam, and it was from the latter rather than from the Byzantine world that mediæval Christendom recovered its share in the inheritance of Greek science and philosophy. It was not until the thirteenth century, after the age of the Crusades and the great catastrophe of the Mongol invasions, that the civilisation of Western Christendom began to attain a position of relative equality with that of Islam, and even then it remained permeated with oriental influences. Only in the fifteenth century, with the Renaissance and the great maritime expansion of the European states, did the Christian West acquire that leadership of civilisation which we regard to-day as a kind of law of nature.