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**Michael James Fares**

**2012**

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**Letters from the Goodwill Brothers of Basra:**

**A Medieval Islamic Message of Tolerance and Pluralism**

**APPROVED BY**

**SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Samer Ali

\_\_\_\_\_  
Denise Spellberg

**Letters from the Goodwill Brothers of Basra:  
A Medieval Islamic Message of Tolerance and Pluralism**

by

**Michael James Fares, B.A.**

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2012

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Michael James Fares, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

SUPERVISOR: Samer Ali

“We would never accept the Japanese putting up a site next to Pearl Harbor. There's no reason for us to accept a mosque next to the World Trade Center.” Newt Gingrich said the above words in reference to the recent “ground-zero mosque debate”, a heated media controversy which surrounded plans for the Park 51 Islamic Community Center to open in downtown Manhattan on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Assuming a necessary enmity between America and Islam, Gingrich’s claims seem rooted in the theory of a “Clash of Civilizations”. This theory envisions “the West” and “Islam” as diametrically opposed entities with no common values, and has become widely pervasive in informing much of post-9/11 America’s political and academic discourse. When chalked up against the social, cultural, and literary history of Islam, however, the Clash of Civilizations theory is a poor fit. For medieval Arabo-Islamic culture saw a vast rise of humanistic literature bearing a clear multi-civilizational influence. The Letters of the Goodwill Brothers of Basra constitute one of the most overlooked of these works. Composed by a group of 10<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid

Muslim *littérateurs*, the 52 Letters draw parallels between the teachings of Islam and those of prior great wisdom traditions, including Indian and Ancient Greek wisdom, Judaism, and Christianity. Focusing on the way the Letters frame Islam in the context of perennial human wisdom, I show how this text is ultimately an irenic text aimed at promoting religious tolerance and cooperation in the tumultuous sectarian atmosphere of 10<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid Iraq. I argue ultimately that the irenic message of the Letters presents an alternative narrative to the Clash of Civilizations theory, a narrative of tolerance from the Islamic past by which our own society may benefit when it comes to the relationships between American Muslims and non-Muslims.

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## Introduction

“Nazis don't have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington. We would never accept the Japanese putting up a site next to Pearl Harbor. There's no reason for us to accept a mosque next to the World Trade Center.” (Woodward, par. 18).

The above words were said not too long ago by Republican congressman Newt Gingrich, currently a frontrunner in the 2012 presidential race. Somewhat ironically enough, they were said in response to plans for the construction of the Park 51 Islamic Community Center, a building that is neither a mosque nor located at the World Trade Center site. The New York Imam behind the Park 51 project, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, envisioned the center as a public recreational and educational space for the lower Manhattan population. He envisioned Park 51 as a means whereby New York City's long standing Muslim residents might be able to give back to the greater community, doing their part to help the latter heal beyond the tragic events of 9/11. ("Build That Mosque.", par. 5). Yet the goodwill expressed by Rauf did not stop a prominent American politician from offhandedly equating the world's second largest religion with Nazism. On what assumptions has Gingrich made this extreme comparison? In likening Islam to America's WWII military enemies, Gingrich's claims seem in part to assume that there exists and always has existed a necessary dichotomy and conflict of interest between "Islamic values" on the one hand and "American values" on the other. His claims appear to

involve the assumption that “Islamic culture” and “Western culture” are in necessary political, social, and ideological conflict. Further evidence of the presence of such an assumption in Gingrich’s thinking can be seen in some of his subsequent objections to the “ground-zero mosque”:

The folks who want to build this mosque — who are really radical Islamists who want to triumphally prove that they can build a mosque right next to a place where 3,000 Americans were killed by radical Islamists — those folks don't have any interest in reaching out to the community. They're trying to make a case about supremacy. (Woodward, par. 6)

Unfortunately, this problematic and misguided assumption of necessarily conflict between “America” and “Islam” is not limited to the claims of Gingrich alone, but rather misinforms a great deal of contemporary discourse surrounding the status of Muslims in the United States. In the final analysis, the assumption that Islam and “America” are fundamentally at odds appears to be based upon the theory of a “Clash of Civilizations”, a theory of human interaction which has become widely pervasive in political and academic circles. First formalized by Samuel Huntington in 1993, the “Clash of Civilizations” theory conceptualizes the global population as consisting of a handful of monolithic, rigid “civilizations”, each which has developed historically independent of the others in culture and values, and each “civilization” therefore by nature predisposed toward conflict with the others. Defining a civilization, Huntington writes:

Arabs, Chinese, and Westerners... are not part of any broader cultural entity.

They constitute civilizations. A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of



people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have *short of that which distinguishes humans from other species*.... Differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and, most important, religion.... These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear (24-25).

Based on the above observations, Huntington predicts that the principle source of conflict in the post-Cold War era will not be ideological or economic, but cultural. “The fault lines between civilizations,” He writes, “will be the battle lines of the future” (22).

In examining the intellectual and social history of Islam, however, one finds apparent counter-examples to the Clash of Civilizations theory which are so abundant that they strongly compel us to reject the later as uninformative, if not harmful altogether. For the Arabo-Islamic Middle Ages witnessed the production and widespread proliferation of various forms of humanistic literature.<sup>1</sup> Not only did this humanistic literature revitalize, incorporate and build upon the knowledge of civilizations which preceded Islam, such as that of the Ancient Greeks, the Persians, or the early Christians; but much of it also influenced the thought of the civilizations which came after Islam. Yet despite the breadth of humanistic literature from the Islamic Middle Ages which has survived until today, relatively very little of this literature has been translated from Arabic, and even less has received the critical engagement and analysis it deserves on the part of contemporary academic scholars. Of all of these largely overlooked works of

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<sup>1</sup>. For a comprehensive account of the various forms of humanist literature of the Islamic middle ages, and the different kinds of learning institutions which gave rise to this literature, see Makdisi, especially chapters 1 and 2.

humanistic literature from the Medieval Muslim world, one of the most significant in its dire need for greater engagement is a text known as *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* or *The Epistles of the Goodwill Brethren*.

*The Epistles of the Goodwill Brethren* form collectively one of the most fascinating, unique, and thought-provoking pieces of literature that came out of the early Islamic Middle Ages. Written in an Arabic whose style is at once clear and concise yet creative and poetic, the 52 Epistles treat subjects ranging from mathematics and music to ancient philosophy, Qur'anic exegesis, and the nature of God; a diversity of subject matter that has lead many scholars to refer to *The Epistles* as an Islamic Encyclopedia (Marquet 1073 ). As the Brethren themselves spell out in the introductory index, or *fihrist*, the 52 Epistles are divided into four general subsections, each with its own major theme. The first section, entitled “The Mathematical” (*al-riyāḍiyyah*), contains 14 Epistles dealing primarily with theoretical and abstract sciences, and appear to be strongly influenced by Pythagorean thought. The next 17 Epistles fall under a heading entitled “The Natural” (*al-ṭabī'iyah*). Bearing titles the likes of “Species of Animals” (*aṣnāf al-hayawān*) and “The Makeup of the Body” (*tarkīb al-jasad*), these Epistles seem to reflect the Aristotelian pursuit of the descriptive and empirical understanding of the natural world. The next 10 Epistles belong to a section entitled “*al-naḥsāniyyah al-'aqliyyah*”, which translates roughly to “The Psychological and Rational”. They seem to deal mainly with the sciences of logic, first causes and principles, and the characterization of the human intellect and the limits of its power. The final 11 Epistles fall under a section entitled “The Theological and Religious” (*al-nāmūsiyyah wal-ilāhiyyah wal-shar'iyah wal-*

*dīniyah*), and seem to deal mostly with metaphysical and spiritual questions pertaining to Islamic practice and religious interpretation.

Yet despite the Brethren's categorization of *The Epistles* under these four ostensibly distinct themes, it is important to note that the boundaries in content between each epistle are ultimately quite porous. The Ikhwān often speak about the same general themes several times in every epistle regardless of the specific heading under which the Epistle is said to fall. In this regard, the categorization of *The Epistles* into four sections is perhaps more misleading than it is informative. For the most common of the over-arching themes that appear to run throughout the work as a whole is the importance of the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom as a means for the betterment of the human condition and the salvation of the human soul. I read *The Epistles* therefore not so much an abstract philosophical treatise, but a practical integration of philosophical wisdom for the greater purpose of educating the reader about how to better himself. On this theme, more will be said shortly.

No less fascinating than the character of *The Epistles* is the character of the Goodwill Brethren themselves. For as a social organization based in 10<sup>th</sup> century Basra<sup>2</sup>, this collective of individuals labored to compose, copy, and circulate *The Epistles*, and

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<sup>2</sup> . The precise period of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in which the Ikhwān were active is to this day the subject of controversy among scholars. Some scholars, most notably F. Dieterici and Massignon, suggest that *The Epistles* date from around the 960's to the 980's. Marquet has suggested that *The Epistles* could have been written as early as 909. Paul Cassanova differs even further, and has actually placed the composition of *The Epistles* in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, between 1047-1051. For a more detailed and up to date discussion of the dating of *The Epistles*, see: Baffioni, "Ikhwan al-Safa", par. 1

they did so in anonymity.<sup>3</sup> As central as *The Epistles* are to Islamic intellectual and social history, however, relatively few thorough studies of this text exist in English.<sup>4</sup> Of those that do exist, few approach *The Epistles of the Goodwill Brethren* as a work of Islamic literature.

Much of secondary scholarship around the Ikhwān, in my view, has been concerned with issues ultimately peripheral and tangential to the content of *The Epistles* themselves, or guided by models of analysis which are entirely problematic when applied to the historical period in which the Ikhwān lived. These problems with the secondary scholarship are best understood via some concrete examples from some of the larger and more recent studies of the Ikhwān that have been published.

One problematic question which has informed recent scholarship is the question of the specific ideological location of the Ikhwān vis-a-vis “orthodox” Islam. In his book

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<sup>3</sup>. The question of the Brethren’s identities and the reasons behind their anonymity is one that has long puzzled scholars. This issue will be returned to shortly, and own my attempt to address it will form a substantial portion of this work.

<sup>4</sup>. Based on my own research, the two most readily available and current thorough books dealing exclusively with *The Epistles* seem to be the works of Neton and de Callatay, both which take a primarily historical approach. Some other works exist that mention the ideas of the Ikhwān in the greater context of Islamic philosophy and cosmology. See, for example, Nasr’s *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*. Besides works like the former, there exist only a few English translations of selected epistles with brief introductory remarks and commentary. See Baffioni, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Logic : an Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 10-14*. See also: van Reijn. Finally, there appears to exist a handful of scholarly articles on The Ikhwān, most of the former dating to the mid twentieth century. These articles mostly seem to be concerned with questions relatively tangential to the content of *The Epistles*, such as the proper dating of the work and the effort to uncover the identities of the *Ikhwān*. See: Stern, “The Authorship of the Epistles” and “New Information about the Authors”. See also: Tibawai “Ikhwān as-Safa” and “Further Studies”.

*Muslim Neoplatonists. An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity*<sup>5</sup>, Ian Richard Netton denies that the Ikhwān can be seen as “orthodox” Muslims in any real sense. Netton writes in his conclusion:

The Ikhwān appear, perhaps, reluctant Muslims. Yet they have been described as truly Islamic because of a belief that what was historically eclectic in the *Rasā'il* was gathered together with one Islamic end in mind, and that their aim was “to build a unified citadel”. According to this view the multiplicity of the Ikhwān’s source material was thus funneled to a unicity or single purpose which was the Islamic God and the Islamic exaltation of His oneness. This might have been an attractive way of viewing the Ikhwān were it not for the fact that, as has been shown, *the Ikhwān’s concept of God differed radically from that of orthodox Islam; and, indeed, many of their beliefs were entirely outside the pale of Islam.* A better way of considering the Ikhwān’s thought might be to see it as a series of lines radiating outwards and touching the circumference of world beliefs rather than as a variety of schools of thought and religious beliefs beamed inwards on the focus of Islam. It is true that the Ikhwān too had a single focus for which they derived inspiration and support from the many beliefs with which they came into contact, but that focus was the universal concept of purity, and not Islam. [My Emphasis] (107)

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<sup>5</sup>. The Brethren of “Purity” is a very common translation employed in the field by scholars who deal with Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’. A second commonly employed translation is that of “Sincere” Brethren. I will explain shortly why I think both translations are problematic.

Netton concludes further that the vast majority of subject matter covered in *The Epistles* is that which is “alien” to Islam:

One scholar has asked in what way the *Rasā'il* can be considered ‘a successful integration of Islam and Greek philosophy’ .... the *Rasā'il* cannot be described as successfully integrating either of these central features of the medieval Middle East though, of all the influences and alien strands which compose the woof of the *Rasā'il*, the Greek may be said to predominate. (107)

Yet who gets to decide which brand of Islam is “orthodox” and which is not? Who gets to decide what is “alien” to the religion and what is not? On what basis must we conclude *ipso facto* that Greek ideas are necessarily “alien” to Islam? In looking at the nature of Islam in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the answers to these questions are anything but clear and unequivocal as Netton seems to assume. For the 10<sup>th</sup> century was a period in which “orthodox” Islam as we understand it today had yet to crystallize and proliferate. The four Sunni *madhāhib* that today form the legal backbone of orthodox Sunni Islam were in the 10<sup>th</sup> century still inchoate in their formation at best, and these interpretive schools existed among and competed with hundreds of *other* schools of thought, each which had its own unique viewpoint to offer on the question of “proper” Islamic practice and piety.<sup>6</sup> The period in which the Ikhwān lived and worked, then, was a period in which the

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<sup>6</sup>. For a detailed discussion of the various and often conflicting notions of Islamic piety that existed during this period, See Hodgson 359 – 409.

question of what it means to be a Muslim and what it means to practice Islam was constantly and continually being negotiated and re-negotiated. This negotiation of the Islamic identity all too often took place violently in the form of civil strife or sectarian rebellion, and the 10<sup>th</sup> century in particular was a time in which the Muslim *ummah* saw serious threats to its political and social stability due to violent upheaval.

The early part of this century saw the rise of the revolutionary and esoteric Ismā‘īlī Shī‘īs (Hodgson 378-79). Named after Muhammad ibn Ismā‘īl, the seventh Imam whom they believed to have gone into occultation and who would one day return in order to rule supreme, some Ismā‘īlīs hoped to overthrow the Abbasid government and to establish a caliphate in line with their doctrines so as to make way for the final return of the seventh Imam (Berkey 138- 39). Under the guidance of their leader ‘Ubayd Allah, a group of Isma‘īlīs known as the Fatimids conquered Egypt in 969, establishing a rival caliphate centered in Cairo (Berkey 138). Through mainly clandestine means, Ismā‘īlī missionaries were active in several parts of the Muslim lands, spreading their *da‘wās*, or “callings” for revolutionary change in Islamic society (Berkey 137). A particularly radical branch of Ismā‘īlīs were known as the Qaramitians (*al-qarāmiṭah*). With a high presence in Iraq, they rejected the claims and approach of the Fatimid’s. The Qaramitians were known particularly for their violent attacks on Abbasid caravans passing through the desert on their way to the holy cities of the Arabian peninsula. In 930 they managed to besiege and conquer Mecca during the time of the pilgrimage, killing thousands of Muslim pilgrims and even stealing the Black Stone from the holy *ka‘bah*, which the Abbasids managed to reclaim only in 951 after paying a hefty sum in ransom

(Berkey 138-39). Moreover, In the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century the character of Abbasid society was significantly altered when Baghdad fell under the de facto control of the Buyid's, an Iranian dynasty which was Twelver Shī'ī in leaning (Hodgson 495). While the Abbasid caliph retained formal recognition as an abstract symbol of unity for the Islamic *ummah*, it was the Buyid kings that came to wield the actual political power, ruling in several internal provinces of the evermore fragmented Islamic empire (Hodgson 495; Mottahedeh 28). It was under the patronage of the Buyid's that the first comprehensive Shī'ī materials were composed and formalized, gradually carving out and expressing the first semblances of a formalized sectarian identity for Shī'ī Islam, and eventually provoking in response the first sectarian claims of Sunni Islam as a direct response to Shī'ism (Mottahedeh 22-24). Finally, in the later part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the southern part of Iraq saw a revolt of African slaves (called by the name *zanj*) which served to further the underlying instability in the Abbasid empire (Berkey 141). This revolt was spearheaded primarily by Muhammad ibn 'Alī, who was associated with a sectarian Islamic group known as the Kharijites, an obscure purist sect that emerged in the seventh century in harsh opposition to the Umayyads (Berkey 141). In the mid-seventh century, one group of Kharijites wreaked havoc upon the populations of southern Iraq and Iran. Their leader, Ibn al-Azraq, had held that any Muslim who refused to join the Kharijites could justifiably be murdered (Berkey 87).

Yet as much as the negotiation of Islamic identity and practice took place through violence, it also took place peacefully via intellectual exchange within a bustling and vibrant marketplace of ideas. The Ikhwān were just one of many segments of early



Medieval Islamic society who participated in this great interpretive struggle via the later means, putting forth their ideas to the public via the pen while shunning use of the sword. Questions about the “orthodoxy”, of the Ikhwān then, are entirely anachronistic, for they seek to analyze the work of the Ikhwān based on a concept of orthodoxy which in no clear sense really existed during their time. Such questions, then, form what I call the problematic **Discourse of Orthodoxy**. This “discourse of orthodoxy” is not only present in the work of Netton, but it is present in the work of other scholars as well.

On the issue of orthodoxy, Historian Godefroid de Callataÿ seems to give the Islamic character of the Ikhwān an overall more balanced and charitable treatment relative to his colleague Netton. In criticism of Netton’s idea that the Ikhwān only quote the Quran superficially in order to conceal their “unorthodoxies”, de Callataÿ writes the following:

Are we then to take it that the Brethren are using the Qur’an as a mere “cloak” or a “smoke-screen for doctrines which were entirely un-Qur’anic?” this is what Netton assumes (Netton 79). But it would imply that the Brethren were insincere, which does not ring true to me. (81)

Yet though the quote above indicates a more moderate treatment of the Ikhwān on the part of de Callataÿ, the very title of his book – *Ikhwān al-Safa’, A Brotherhood of Idealists on the Fringe of Orthodox Islam* - indicates that his work is ultimately informed by the very same problematic “discourse of orthodoxy”. For, as has been argued above,

the Ikhwān lived in a period in which the location of the “fringe” and the location of the “center” were the continual subject of interpretive negotiation. A clear-cut distinction between “fringe” and “center”, then, could not be so easily drawn.

Closely related to the Discourse of Orthodoxy is a second major problematic discourse which I see as informing much of the available secondary scholarship dealing with the Ikhwān. This second problematic I call the **Shī‘ī verses Sunni Discourse**. Just as in the case of the first problematic, I will explain what I mean by this second problematic via a review of some of its examples in secondary scholarship. In the introduction to his work, de Callataÿ writes:

There are two reasons why *The Epistles* were unacceptable to most Sunni Muslims (who constituted the majority then as now). First, they were clearly Shi‘ite in nature, and second, they were patently philosophical, more precisely Neoplatonist or, as the great theologian Ghazali (d. 1111) would have it, Pythagorean. (ix)

Yet I argue, in explicit disagreement with de Callataÿ, that because the concept of “orthodox” Sunni Islam was unclear during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, so too was the line between “Sunnism” and “Shī‘ism” not nearly as clear and distinct as it is in today’s Islamic world. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century when he wrote, Al-Ghazālī, was just one of many differing voices on the subject of Sunni orthodoxy. Even by in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the terms “Sunni” and “Shī‘ī” were not regularized terms of the everyday Arabic lexicon like they are now.

Further, that the Ikhwān were “clearly Shi‘ite in nature” is a claim which is scarcely supported by the text of *The Epistles* themselves, and seems to be more informed by an attempt on the part of scholars to frame the work of the Ikhwān within the context of a Sunni-Shi‘ah historical meta-narrative. For though *The Epistles* do mention the concept of the imams (*al-a‘imah*) in several places while employing the word *shī‘ah* occasionally, these terms are used in a manner which reflects at best a very protean notion of what we today might call “shī‘ism” versus “sunnism”. It is unclear whether the use of the word *al-a‘imah* within *The Epistles* explicitly refers to the bloodline of Muhammad instead of simply to referring in a more general way to the successors of *all* of the prophets in the plural sense (*al-a‘imah alladhīna hum khulafā’ al-anbiyā’*). Further, the word *shī‘ah* in the text seems most of the time to take on its non-technical Arabic meaning of “faction” or “party” rather than specifically referring to that particular faction which supports ‘Ali, known then as *shī‘at ‘Ali*, a phrase which subsequently became shortened to *al-shī‘ah* (the faction) in order to signify “the shī‘is” as a collective group. Though the word *shī‘ah* occurs a handful of times in the text of the Ikhwān, nowhere does the specific phrase *shī‘at ‘Ali* occur. During the time of the Ikhwān, the term most commonly used to refer to supporters of Ali was that of *‘Alawī*, a term which did not carry the large “Shī‘ī” sectarian connotation later imparted upon it.

Despite these simple observations, however, many scholars have gone even further than de Callatay in their uncritical assertions that the Ikhwān’s goals were merely synonymous with those of “Shi‘ism”. The Encyclopedia of Islam article on the Ikhwān, written by Y. Marquet, argues that the *Rasā’il* were Shī‘a Isma‘īlī political propaganda

designed to “rally men round the *imām*” (1074). Going even further, Abbas Hamdani has written a short article entitled: *Brethren of Purity, a Secret Society for the Establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate*. Yet I hold that conclusions such as these, which construe the Ikhwān as a politically subversive and clandestine propaganda organization, whose goals were synonymous with those of the Ismā‘īlī’s, are difficult to support via a direct reading of the text itself, and therefore appear strained at best. For while *The Epistles* perhaps might be loosely comparable to the writings of the great Isma’īlī *dā‘ī* Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 971) in so far as both works bear significant Neoplatonic themes, Paul Walker has suggested that the sheer eclecticism of the Ikhwān in approach makes it difficult and problematic to directly associate them with the philosophical and political aims of Ismā‘īlism (*Early Philosophical Shiism* 166). Elsewhere, Walker suggests that the receptive and integrative stance the Ikhwān took toward philosophy was different in nature from the stance of Ismā‘īlī writers, this latter view which Walker describes as “an ambiguous position that rejects and accepts philosophy, both at the same time” (*Early Philosophical Shiism* 189). Just as the Discourse of Orthodoxy is anachronistic to the text of *The Epistles*, then, so too is the Sunni versus Shi‘i discourse anachronistic to this text, and thereby can only obscure the purposes of the Ikhwān rather than clarify and elucidate them.

A third and final problem with secondary scholarship is that many of the articles written about the Ikhwān have been concerned only with superficial details such as the exact historical dating of *The Epistles*, or the specific identities of the authors; both,

again, at the expense of a deeper analysis of and engagement with the ideas in the text itself.

These ideas are indeed engaging, and they appear overall quite pluralistic in character and theme. Not only do the philosophical and theological ideas extant in *The Epistles* hail from a diverse array of cultures, but they also reflect a breadth of times and places, from ancient Greece and India to the times of Moses, Christ, and Muhammad. Further, all of these times and places are brought together in *The Epistles* according to one central unifying theme: that of the human being and the salvation of the human soul through knowledge. Based on my own reading of *The Epistles*, then, I propose that the most immediate aim of the Ikhwān in writing them was to integrate philosophical and religious wisdom for the purpose of bettering the essential human condition in this life and in the hereafter. For the Ikhwān seem to have recognized that the condition of being human is indeed a universal and divinely ordained condition – one necessarily shared among past ancestors and present peers regardless of more superficial differences in background, opinion, or ideology. The divine construal of the human being put forth time and time again in *The Epistles* is that of an innately rational being, who, through his will to use his intellect for the pursuit of knowledge, holds the keys to his own salvation both as a physical being in this world and as a spiritual being in the next world. I hold therefore that the goal of the Ikhwān in their composition and circulation of *The Epistles* was to employ perennial wisdom from the human past in order to remind their readers of the universality of the human condition and to thereby foster a dialogue of reconciliation among the varying religions, sects, and ideologies that made up the fabric of society

during their own time. **I propose, then, that The Epistles of the Goodwill Brethren is first and foremost an *irenic* text which, by appeal to perennial human wisdom, argues for the practice of an Islam grounded in the ideals of toleration, cooperation, and coexistence between differing denominations and faiths.**

Based on this thesis, several questions must be asked. First there is the issue of translation alluded to in an earlier footnote. Why have so many scholars translated the term *ṣafā'* in the name *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* as “purity” or “sincerity”? The linguistic basis upon which the term “sincerity” has been chosen as a translation for *ṣafā'* is, frankly, very unclear. While the term “purity” is indeed one of the possible lexical translations of *ṣafā'*, it is not immediately clear how this translation is supposed to be faithful to the notion of *ṣafā'* as it is related specifically to brotherhood. Moreover, use of term *ṣafā'* and its derivations seems to occur rather often in *The Epistles* in context with notions such as friendship (*ṣadāqah*), and beneficence (*karāmah*), which makes the translation of “purity” for the word *ṣafā'* seem even more out of place (*Rasā'il* 18,171, 188 ; vol. 4). The translation “Brethren of Purity”, then, is not only somewhat awkward, but it also appears to be inappropriate to context. Classical Arabic lexicons show us that several other possible definitions of *ṣafā'* exist that might yield a more context appropriate translation of the phrase *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. I have chosen my translation of “Goodwill” based on my consultation of Ibn Manẓūr’s 13<sup>th</sup> century lexicon *Lisān al-‘Arab*, in which one of the most common terms used to define *ṣafā'* is that of *takhlīṣ*, a the gerund of a transitive Arabic verb which refers to the act of redeeming, amending, or saving someone or something. *takhlīṣ* does not only refer to divine salvation by God, but it can simply

refer to one person's aiding another so as to rescue him from a difficult predicament or problem. ("ṣ-f-w", "kh-l-ṣ"). The term *takhlīṣ* therefore carries both divine and worldly overtones of liberation from hardship, trouble and strife. I am proposing that this *takhlīṣ* is the most clearly observable goal of *The Epistles*, for they place a strong emphasis throughout upon ridding 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic society of unnecessary suffering due to misguided sectarian conflict. As further evidence for the latter meaning of *ṣafā'*, Samer Ali has pointed out that the term has semantic origins in the rituals of atonement traditionally performed by Muslims during pilgrimage to the Black Stone of the Ka'ba, where one of the main rituals involves the pilgrims' running along a course that lies between the two hills of al-Ṣafā' and al-Marwa. Ali makes this observation in the context of analyzing a poem written for the caliph al-Muntaṣir by al-Buhtarī, in which the poet journeys to the Ka'ba and performs the atonement ritual in order to seek a sense of closure and reconciliation for the *ummah* after the murder of al-Mutawakkil which had plunged the community into a state of turmoil. Based on this analysis, Ali suggests that the term *ṣafā'* carries a meaning of making amends and a "clearing of debt", characteristic of goodwill (*Arabic Literary Salons* 145-48).

I propose based on my reading of *The Epistles*, then, that the most basic aim of the Ikhwān was not one of sincerity or purity, but one of *goodwill* toward their society. As I hope to show over the course of this thesis, the sentiment of goodwill put forward in *The Epistles* is multifaceted and multilayered, being at once social, political, and spiritual in character. For now, suffice it to say that based upon both textual and linguistic evidence, I see "goodwill" to be the best translation for *ṣafā'*.

The second question has to do with the anonymity of the Ikhwān. The desire of so many scholars to know the exact identities of the Ikhwān has produced a great deal of historical research and an even greater amount of controversy that ultimately seems to end in an inconclusive deadlock. Instead of treating the question of author anonymity as a historical question of identity, then, I will treat this question as a literary question of meaning. Instead of asking the question: “What were the identities of the Ikhwān?”, therefore, I find it far more important to ask the following question: Given that the authors of *The Epistles* are anonymous, and how might the fact of this anonymity reflect and support a message of goodwill within the text itself? Chapter One will take up this later question in detail.

Third, the question of the unique brand of humanism that develops in *The Epistles* has yet to be given sufficient attention. Why does a concern with defining the nature of the human being (*al-insān*) and the human soul (*al-nafs*) take such a central role in *The Epistles*, and how specifically does the Ikhwān’s conception of the human soul provide a framework whereby co-existence and greater tolerance among the disparate elements of their society might take place? This question will be the concern of Chapter Two.

Fourthly, in order to understand how the Ikhwān sought to foster tolerance interreligious tolerance, we must first attempt to understand the role which perennial wisdom plays over the course of *The Epistles*. How specifically do the Ikhwān employ perennial truth from ages past in order to support their view of the human soul? In what ways and according to what principles do *The Epistles* draw parallels between the Muslim experience on the one hand and the Jewish and Christian experiences on the



other? How do *The Epistles* place Islamic thought about the human being and his ultimate destiny into dialogue with the humanist ideas of the ancient Greeks? Chapter Three will deal with questions like the former.

In the conclusion, I will bring this thesis back full-circle to the issue which was raised at the very beginning. In doing so, I aim to answer the following question: How do *The Epistles of the Goodwill Brethren* as a piece irenic literature from the Islamic Middle Ages present a rebuttal to the Clash of Civilizations theory? In more concrete terms, how might the ideas of the Goodwill Brethren, though they came from a far away time, present an alternative to the highly prevalent “us verses them” language which informs so much of contemporary political discourse about the place of Muslims in American society? In answering these questions, I will argue for why I think *The Epistles* provide an excellent precedent from the Islamic past for the sort of co-existence, tolerance, and goodwill which is much needed today when it comes to the current state of relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States and in the world at large. I hope to support this argument by showing how *The Epistles* offer an alternative paradigm for viewing the assumed “clash” between Islam and the so-called “West”. This paradigm, contrary to the paradigm of deeply-rooted conflict and long-standing difference, is one based upon commonality, community, and shared historical experience.

## Chapter One

### Brotherhood, Friendship, and Community Through Anonymity:

#### The Anonymity of the Ikhwān and its Relationship to their Irenic Goals

The attempt of so many contemporary scholars of *The Epistles* to identify the proper names of the Ikhwān is highly ironic, for this attempt is driven by a modernist notion of authorship only. This contemporary notion of the “authorship” of a text is one which assumes that the author of that text is merely synonymous with the proper name of the individual who composed it.

A particularly typical treatment of the Ikhwān’s anonymity in contemporary scholarship according to the former notion of authorship can be seen in the work of A.L. Tibawi, who argues that the anonymity of the Ikhwān arises from the fact that *The Epistles* constitute a piece of “subtle and secret propaganda” characteristic of the Ismā‘īlī Shī‘a *da‘wā* for the overthrow of the Abbasid state. (“Further Studies” 58). Tibawi writes:

It was the Ismā‘īlī (sic) missionaries who made the movement [of propaganda] an educational instrument for achieving political and theological supremacy. By the fourth century A.H., the Sunni caliphate in Baghdad was in evident decline and Shī‘ī vassals were gaining power in its dominions. But the most powerful challenge was the Fatimid mission in North Africa which recaptured Cairo. In the

cultural field the triumph of Shī‘ism was marked by the establishment of al-Azhar in Cairo and the dissemination of Rasā’il Ikhwān as-Safā in Baghdad. (59).

Yet I hold that A.L. Tibawi’s treatment of the anonymity question is misguided. For in applying the contemporary notion of authorship and anonymity to his analysis of the medieval Epistles, A.L. Tibawi obscures their unique content by simply equating the goals of the Ikhwān with those of clandestine Isma‘īlī Shī‘ah “propagandists”. Because of a misguided approach to the anonymity question, then, A.L. Tibawi’s analysis ultimately falls prey to the problematic Sunni verses Shī‘ah discourse which I described in the introduction. What I am proposing ultimately, then, is that when it comes to the unique work of *The Epistles*, the anonymity question must be treated according to a more dynamic and flexible concept of authorship, rooted less so in the historical notion of personal identity and more so in the literary concept of the *functionality* of the text.

This need for an alternative understanding of authorship can best be elucidated by asking a couple of important questions. Should we really assume that the authorship of a text must necessarily be signified by a proper name? That is, does a proper name always signify “the author” of a text and as an imagined social and cultural being, or are the notions of “proper name” and “author” sometimes independent of one another? On closer contemplation there appears to be laden within the concept and role of “the author” a deeper complexity that far transcends the mere name of an individual. Consider, for example, the difference between the name “Samuel Clemens” and the name “Mark Twain”. Even though both of these names refer to the same “individual”, the latter name

carriers a cultural and literary signification which the former does not. Compared to the relatively lesser known name “Samuel Clemens”, the pen name “Mark Twain” conjures up thought of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, and the reverberating impact of these characters on American cultural discourse and memory. Michel Foucault’s critical re-evaluation of the concept of “authorship” can help us elucidate this latter idea. In his essay “What is an Author?” Foucault writes:

It would seem that the author’s name, unlike proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produces it; instead, the name seems always to be present, *marking off the edges of the text*, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. [My Emphasis] (107)

In drawing this critical distinction between the individual’s proper name and the author’s name, Foucault argues that the latter is uniquely significant when it comes to our effort to interpret the meaning of a given text and the relationship of its discourse to the social space with which it interacts. Based on the Foucauldian understanding of authorship, then, far more important than the proper *identity* of the author of a text is the *name* given for the author and how this name participates in the *formation* of the text and its meaning. It is this unique influence of the name of the author upon the meaning of a

text which Foucault goes on to call the **Author Function** of a text (108). The Author Function, elaborates Foucault,

does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals. (113)

If we take Foucault's idea of the Author Function as our new point of departure, then, we arrive at that suggestion that instead of trying to know the *identities* of the "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā", we ought to analyze *the name "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā" itself*. What is the relationship between the author name *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* and the content and meaning of *The Epistles*? What, to borrow Foucault's language, is the textual meaning of the name *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*, and how does this name define the functionality of *The Epistles*, characterizing their "mode of being" within the social and cultural space of 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic society? Furthermore, how does the name *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* operate within *The Epistles* so as to imagine a social space which may be occupied by a diversity of individuals from different classes and backgrounds? **Through my analysis of the Author Function of the name "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā" and how this function plays out in the text of *The Epistles*, I will argue ultimately that the Ikhwān's anonymity as authors of the text plays an important role in framing the irenic message of *The Epistles* themselves.**

The most immediate way in which the author-name *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* lends significance to the message of *The Epistles* can be seen in the ideal of brotherhood (*al-ukhūwah*). For this ideal is among the most ubiquitous themes that run throughout the text of *The Epistles* of as whole. Yet despite its recurrent thematic importance at virtually every level of textual discourse within *The Epistles*, few scholars have made a serious attempt to analyze this notion of brotherhood – some scholars, as we have seen, having ignored it all together in favor of simply branding the Ikhwān with the goals of Isma'īlī Shī'ism. Yet the thematic prominence of brotherhood in *The Epistles* cannot be avoided, for it begs the following question: Why did the authors of *The Epistles* place such an enormous emphasis on brotherhood, and how is this emphasis upon brotherhood supposed to frame the encounter of the reader with the text?

The beginning of the answer to this question can be seen in the fact that nearly every paragraph in the text of *The Epistles* is prefaced with the following statement:

أعلم يا أخي – أيدك الله وإيانا بروح منه – أن....

Know, O Brother – may God aid you and us with his mercy – that...(Rasā'il 53; vol. 1)

The immediate function of this recurring statement, I propose, is to break down potential barriers between reader and author. For the reader of *The Epistles* is addressed continually as a brother. He is addressed as though he himself belongs to the fraternity of the Ikhwān, the later inviting him openly to consider himself part of this fraternity. For upon our reading the aforementioned statement, the distinction between “us” the reader

and “them” the Ikhwān seems to fade out of existence. In Foucauldian terms, this elimination of the traditional barrier between reader and author, I argue, creates an open, public space of brotherhood in which a wide range of different individuals may theoretically participate. Moreover, I hold that the creation of this public space of brotherhood is the very Author Function of the Ikhwān’s anonymity over the course of *The Epistles*, for had the text bore their proper names, then the creation of such a diverse and pluralistic space would have been difficult if not impossible. In the paragraphs that follow, I will examine how this public space of brotherhood develops over the course of *The Epistles* via a close analysis of some concrete examples from the text.

The open invitation to a space of brotherhood can be seen most clearly in the *Fihrist*, the preface to *The Epistles* in which the Ikhwān summarize the overarching goals of their work. Immediately upon opening to the *Fihrist*, we see the Ikhwān make the following poetic introductory statement, again addressing their reader as a brother.

و أعلم يا أخي – أيدك الله وإيانا بروح منه – بأن مثل صاحب هذه الرسائل مع طالبي العلم ومؤثري  
الحكمة ومن أحب خلاصه، واختار نجاته، كمثل رجل حكيم جواد كريم، له بستان خضر نضر بهج مونق  
معجب طيب الثمرات، لذيق الفواكه، عطر الرياحين، أرجه الأوراد، فاتحة الأزهار، بهية المنظر، نزهة  
المرامي، مختلفة الأشكال والأصباغ، والألوان والمذاق والمشام، من بين رطب ويابس وحلو وحامض،  
وفيها من سائر الطيور المطربة الأصوات، الملهية الألحان، المستحسنة التغريد...

Know, O brother – may God aid you and us with his mercy – that the holder of  
these epistles, along with those who seek knowledge, love wisdom, and choose its

furtherance, is like a noble and virtuous wiseman who possesses a verdant, miraculous garden with fruits succulent, delicious, and ripe. The scents of its flowers are wonderful. The view in this garden is beautiful, its sights pure and unblemished. It is diverse in its colors, tastes, and scents, which fall between wet, dry, sweet, and sour. And in this garden are many birds whose voices sing beautifully to sonorous melodies... (*Rasā'il* 43; vol. 1)

The Ikhwān go on to describe this beautiful garden in great detail for several paragraphs, entreating the reader to strive to enter it through the betterment of himself and the seeking of knowledge and wisdom. The Ikhwān's invocation of a garden here is very significant, as it is more than likely a reference to salvation in *al-jannah* or The Garden of Paradise which is the Islamic equivalent to heaven. This beautiful garden which the wiseman enters, then, is not only a metaphor for the kind of world the Ikhwān wish to imagine, but ultimately a metaphor for the means to salvation. This means to salvation appears to be found in the virtue of a contemplative character, of one who devotes himself in this life to seeking wisdom while also acting in accord with what it dictates. The Ikhwān seem to be telling us early on, then, that a central purpose of *The Epistles* is to cultivate a value for knowledge in their society and thereby to guide their contemporaries toward the path to salvation. This thematic relationship between wisdom in this world and salvation in the next appears to be quite common over the course of *The Epistles*, and it will be revisited in more detail shortly. Moreover, Samer Ali has pointed out that references to beautiful heavenly gardens much like the one above were quite common in Medieval Arabic



accounts of *mujālasāt*, urban literary gatherings in which individuals from various social strata came together to edify, educate, and entertain one another through the performative sharing of humanistic literature (*adab*). (*Arabic Literary Salons* 18). The Ikhwān, then, appear to be inviting the reader to participate in a kind of public social discourse in which knowledge and wisdom is exchanged between peers.

In terms of rhetorical functionality, then, the Ikhwān's anonymity as authors of *The Epistles* does not seem to have the effect of informing the reader that the knowledge therein is private, clandestine, and esoteric. Rather something like the opposite seems to be true. For *The Epistles* seem to be characterizing knowledge and wisdom as common means for the betterment of society, a means which therefore will be of greater benefit if spread far and wide. Accordingly, in the closing paragraphs of the *Fihrist* the Ikhwān explicitly beseech the reader of *The Epistles* to kindly share them with other people:

كذلك الواجب على من حصلت عنده هذه الرسائل . . . أن يتقي الله تعالى فيها بأن يهتم ويعتني بها غاية العناية، ولا يخل بهذه الوصاية، ويتلطف في استعمالها وإيصالها، تلطف الأخ الشقيق، والأب الشفيق، والواد الصديق، والطيب الرفيق...

Furthermore, it is the duty of he who has found himself with these epistles . . . to take interest in them and to care for them with the utmost of care, and not to abandon this guardianship. In this endeavor he should be pious toward God and heedful against danger. He should be kind in using and transmitting these Epistles, and his kindness in doing so should be like that of a close brother, a

compassionate father, a dear friend, and a noble companion. (*Rasā'il* 45-46; vol. 1).

In the former statement we see the ideal of a public, open brotherhood taking shape in greater clarity. We learn that this is a brotherhood based in large part upon the cooperative sharing of wisdom between earnest and caring friends. This wisdom is thereby not the exclusive intellectual property of any one sect or ideological faction of society, but rather seems to be a kind of perennial or common wisdom, open to individuals by virtue of the fact that they pursue it. The essential message the Ikhwān seem to be trying to convey in the *Fihrist*, then, is that their Epistles are a recipe for the improvement of the human condition via a “pay it forward” approach, whereby he who encounters *The Epistles* is to show his gratitude for the wisdom therein by passing this wisdom onto others in his community, who will in turn pass it on to even more individuals.

The Ikhwān’s steadfast endorsement of the pay it forward approach to social altruism appears at its clearest in Epistle 44, entitled “A Statement of the Beliefs of The Goodwill Brethren” (*Bayān 'Itiqād Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*). The Ikhwān begin this Epistle by telling a story of a doctor who manages to cure an entire town of an illness despite the fact that its inhabitants are initially hostile towards him, denying that they have any illness in the first place. The Ikhwān write:

أعلم أنه كان في الزمان السالف ذكروا أنه كان رجل من الحكماء رفيقا بالطب، دخل إلى مدينة من المدن،  
فرأى عامة أهلها بهم مرض خفي لا يشعرون بعلتهم، ولا يحسون بدائهم الذي بهم، ففكر ذلك الحكيم في

أمرهم كيف يداويهم ليبرئهم من داءهم ويشفيهم من علتهم التي استمرت بهم، وعلم أنه إن أخبرهم بما هم فيه لا يستمعون قوله ولا يقبلون نصيحته، بل ربما ناصبوه بالعداوة، واستعجزوا رأيه، واستنقصوا آدابه، واسترذلوا عمله، فاحتال في ذلك لشدة شففته على أبناء جنسه، ورحمته لهم تحننه عليهم، وحرصه على مداواتهم طلبا لمرضاة الله، عز وجل، بأن طلب من أهل تلك المدينة رجلا من فضلائهم الذين كان بهم ذلك المرض، فأعطاه شربة من شربات كانت معه قد أعدها لمداواتهم، وسعطه بدخنه، فعطس ذلك الرجل من ساعته ووجد خفة في بدنه، وراحة في حواسه، وصحة في جسمه وقوة في نفسه، فشكر له جزاه خيرا وقال له: هل لك من حاجة أقضيها لك مكافأة لما اصطنعت إليّ من الإحسان مداواتك لي؟ فقال: نعم، تعيني على مداواة أخ من إخوانك. قال: سمعا وطاعة لك، فتوافقا على ذلك...

Know that a long time ago it was mentioned that there was a wise doctor. He entered a city and saw that most of its people had an illness they were unaware of. They did not feel their sickness, and they did not feel the presence of the illness in their bodies. So the doctor thought about their condition and how he might best be able to medicate them so as to cure them from their illness which had festered in them. He knew that if he told them directly about their illness they would neither listen to him nor accept his advice, but rather they might respond in hostility, ignoring his opinions and calling him a fraud. So the doctor, because of his pity for his fellow man, his longing for their wellness, and his adamant will to cure them so as to please God – glory to him – resolved to seek out a man of high status from among the town's sick residents. He found this man and gave him a medicinal potion which he had prepared, and he also put some snuff in the man's nose. The man sneezed and immediately realized that he felt well and healthy.

The man thanked the doctor, praised him, and said to him: “Is there anything I can do for you in return for your curing me of this illness?” The doctor said: “Yes, help me to cure one of your brothers.” The man said: “very gladly I will do this for you”. So the two men agreed upon this.... (*Rasa'il* 14-15; vol. 4).

So the first man who was cured by the doctor brings him to a second man in the town who takes the potion and is himself cured. This second man, just as the first man did, thanks the doctor graciously and asks if there is anything he can do to repay the favor. In response, both the doctor and the first man ask the newly cured second man to pay it forward:

وقال لهما: هل لكما حاجة أقضيها لكما مكافأة لما صنعتما إليّ من الإحسان والمعروف، فقالا: تعيننا على مداواة أخ من إخوانك.

The second man said to both the doctor and the first man: “Is there anything I can do to repay you two for the good you have done for me?”. They replied: “help us to cure one of your brothers” (*Rasā'il* 15; vol. 4).

This pay it forward paradigm continues gradually, indirectly, and in secret until many people in the town have received the cure. It is only once this secret group of cured grows sufficiently large that it finally announces the cure to society at large, having gained the

numbers, power, and influence necessary to systematically cure the entire town of the disease, even though some might still try to resist this cure.

ثم تفرقوا في المدينة يداون الناس واحدا بعد آخر في السر، حتى أبرؤوا أناسا كثيرا، وكثر أنصارهم وإخوانهم ومعارفهم، ثم ظهروا للناس وكاشفوه بالمعالجة، وكابروهم بالمداداة قهرا، وكانوا يلقون واحدا واحدا من الناس فيأخذ منهم جماعة بيديه وجماعة برجليه، ويسعطه الآخرون كرها، ويسقونه جبرا حتى أبرؤوا أهل المدينة كلها.

So the group of cured dispersed throughout the city, medicating people on by one in secret, until they had cured many people. Their support and influence grew, so that finally they revealed the cure to the public. Now that they formed a majority, they went around medicating every person one by one, sometimes by force when needed. A group of them would grab a person's legs, another would grab his arms, and a third group would force him to take the potion. They did this until the entire town was cured of the disease (*Rasā'il* 15; vol. 4).

We learn from this story, then, that anonymity is the central factor behind the ability of the pay it forward paradigm to work successfully. For had the doctor not at first kept his identity and his purpose anonymous to the majority of the town, he would have diminished his chances of one day successfully curing the whole town. For the doctor knew that simply announcing his purpose in front of the entire town at an assembly likely

would have resulted in his being cast off and ignored as an imposter or a malevolent outsider. The role of anonymity in this story, then, I argue, is a microcosm of the role of anonymity seems to play throughout *The Epistles* as a whole. Just as the doctor decides to keep his identity anonymous so that his cure may ultimately reach the greatest number of townspeople, so too it appears that the anonymity of the Ikhwān as authors gives rise to the potential for the ideas in *The Epistles* to ultimately influence the greatest number of readers. Therefore, anonymity in both the case of the doctor and of the Ikhwān operates as a rhetorical and persuasive device rooted in a kind of intellectual humility and patience. This gentle type of persuasion, based upon goodwill, is a prerequisite for productive cooperation to occur between people of different backgrounds. This later idea seems to be the moral of the story of the doctor, for the Ikhwān conclude this story by making the following plea to the reader:

فكن أيها الأخ مساعدا لإخوانك وموافقا ومناصحا، وينفع الله بك العباد، ويصلح بك شأنهم، كما وعد الله فقال: "ابعثوا حكما من أهله وحكما من أهلها إن يريدوا إصلاحا يوفق الله بينهما" وقد سمعت في الخبر أن الحكمين يوم صفين لم يريدوا إصلاحا، بل خدع كل واحد صاحبه، ومكر، أضمر الحيلة والغل فيما يوفقوا في الصلح إلى طريق الرشاد، فرجع أمير المؤمنين غير راض بذلك الحكم.

So be – O Brother – a helper to your brothers. Be a source of counsel and benevolence for your brothers, and through you may God serve his children and better their affairs, as God promised when he said: “appoint (two) arbitrators, one from his family and the other from her’s; if they both wish for peace, God will

cause their reconciliation”. [Quran 4:35]<sup>7</sup> And you have heard the news that the two parties that fought on the day of the Battle of Şifḥīn did not *want* resolution of their conflict, but instead each party deceived the other, conniving a host of rancorous tricks and ruses under the guise of true compromise. So the Caliph returned home not having benefited from those proceedings (*Rasā’il* 17; vol. 4).

That the Ikhwān evoke the memory of the Battle of Şifḥīn (657 CE) and lament its failed resolution is very significant for our understanding of their social and political ideals. The Battle of Şifḥīn was just one reflection of an early Islamic community ravaged by what became remembered as the first Islamic Civil War, or the first “*fitnah*”, (lit. “temptation” toward violence), an Arabic term with many negative shades of meaning that refers to political and social chaos, struggle, troubles, and strife (Hodgson 214; Berkey 71).

Lasting from 656-661 CE, the first *fitnah* grew primarily out of the controversial and mysterious assassination of the third Islamic Caliph, ‘Uthmān, and the resultant disputes over the legitimacy of ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib as his successor to the caliphate (Hodgson 215). What is most important to note here however is that the Battle of Şifḥīn and its stalemate of a resolution went down in Islamic historical memory as one of the principle conflicts that served to define and perpetuate the primary divide in Muslim society, that between the proto *Shī’ah* and the proto *Sunnis* - a divide which first festered and solidified not so much via a theological conflict of ideology, but via the growth of mutual distrust and the subsequent breakdown of reconciliatory civil dialogue (Lecker 553). The memory of the

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<sup>7</sup> . For my translation of Quran this verse I have consulted the work of Mohsin Khan. See: Khan 4:35

*fitnah* and the gravity of the harm and trauma it caused to the early Muslim community remained burned into Islamic political consciousness for centuries to come (Lecker 555). The Ikhwān's appeal to troubled memory of Ṣiffīn, then, strongly suggests that they saw as imperative the embracing of peaceful dialogue for the prevention of further *fitnah* in Islamic society. Accordingly, it appears that the Ikhwān saw the encouragement of brotherhood, mutual assistance, and cooperation between members of their society as the best measure against the possibility of a new *fitnah* occurring. This measure for conflict prevention is the best measure possible specifically because it is preventative. For in making the concerted effort to form relationships of trust and mutual goodwill in the first place, the disparate members of a society enhance their abilities to resolve disputes by non-violent means. Moreover, in stating that the Caliph Ali did not benefit from the arbitration of Ṣiffīn, the Ikhwān are perhaps directing a criticism against the Kharijites, who abandoned Ali during Ṣiffīn specifically because he was trying to reach a compromise and political settlement with Mu'āwiyā in order to end the *fitnah* (Berkey 86). Relative to their own time, then, the Ikhwān's memory of Ṣiffīn might be best described as nonsectarian insofar as it was neither fully Shī'ī nor fully Sunni in sympathy. For while the proto-Shī'a of the 10<sup>th</sup> century tended to place most of the blame for Ṣiffīn on Mu'āwiyā's side, while the proto-Sunnis placed more of the blame on the side of Ali, the Ikhwān seem to be distributing the blame equally on both sides for failing to fully embrace the peaceful negotiation process.

The notion of brotherhood grounded in anonymity throughout *The Epistles*, then, seems to be closely related to notions of promoting the common good or the public



interest. In other words, anonymity seems to be the core rhetorical device by which *The Epistles* conjure up ideals of cooperation and consensus building among different classes of individuals. For unlike a finite list of proper names which might imply certain exclusive ownership for *The Epistles*, the anonymity of the name “Ikhwān” seems to suggest that *The Epistles* belong to the broader public itself, and that they might serve as a framework for the creation and preservation of productive social relationships grounded in the overarching ideal of *ukhūwah*. In the following passage from Epistle 2, for example, the Ikhwān characterize a well-functioning society as analogous to a household in which brothers cooperate well with one another, each doing his own part to maintain the welfare of the home. The Ikhwān write:

أعلم يا أخي – أيدك الله وإيانا بروح منه – بأن الإنسان الواحد لا يقدر أن يعيش وحده إلا عيشا نكدًا، لأنه محتاج إلى طيب العيش من إحكام صنائع شتى، ولا يمكن الإنسان الواحد أن يبلغها كلها، لأن العمر قصير، والصنائع كثيرة، فمن أجل هذا اجتمع في كل مدينة أو قرية أناس كثيرون لمعاونة بعضهم بعضا. وقد أوجبت الحكمة الإلهية والعناية الربانية بأن يشتغل جماعة منهم بإحكام الصنائع، وجماعة في التجارات، وجماعة بإحكام البنيان، وجماعة بتدبير السياسات، وجماعة بإحكام العلوم وتعليمها، وجماعة بالخدمة للجميع والسعي في حوائجهم، لأن مثلهم في كمثل أخوة من أب واحد في منزل واحد، متعاونين في أمر معيشتهم، كل منهم في وجه منها.

Know, O Brother – may God aid you and us with his mercy – that the individual human being cannot live by himself except a miserable existence. For he is in need of a good life which can only come from the precise knowledge of a

diversity of crafts. The single human being cannot learn all of these crafts, for life is short and crafts are many. So for this reason many people gathered in every city or countryside in order to cooperate with one another. Divine providence has determined that some of them shall work in perfecting manufactured goods, some shall work in trade, some in architecture and construction, some in service to the public and pursuing their interest, some in the teaching and learning of the sciences, and some in the civil service. For all of these people are like the brothers from one father in one household, cooperating with regard to their living, each one of them responsible for a different aspect of the latter. (*Rasā'il* 99-100; vol. 2).

The above discussion of cooperative division of labor as the key to a successful society seems to suggest that the idealized model of social and political interaction which the name “Ikhwān al-Ṣafā” carves out and imagines for 10<sup>th</sup> century Basran society is one which is grounded in the creation and maintenance of a healthy “public sphere” whereby problem-solving among a range of individuals of different occupations and social backgrounds may take place. Though it was J. Habermas who first described the notion of “a public sphere” in the context of 18<sup>th</sup> century European society, I am indebted for my use of this term here ultimately to Samer Ali, who tactfully retools the Habermasian notion of public sphere and applies it to the context of Medieval Islamic literary culture during the Abbasid era. Ali writes:

While some have taken Habermas's theory to explain a unique European experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, my assumption in using it as a humanistic paradigm falls into line with Habermas's own formulation that the public sphere is a *kind* or category of bourgeois society that can emerge and wane depending on favorable circumstances.... ("The Rise of the Abbasid Public Sphere" 469).

Ali goes on to enumerate a handful of "favorable circumstances" which fostered the emergence of a public sphere in the Abbasid Era, among the most important of which is the presence of a burgeoning literary culture which placed a high value upon the exchange and dissemination of humanistic knowledge (*adab*). This spread of humanistic knowledge took place most often via the medium of public gatherings, gatherings which Ali argues provided a space in which participants from many different walks of life could come together, debate one another, and ultimately seek to build consensus on important social and political issues of the day (475). Based on his discussion of *adab*, Ali comes to several important conclusions about the nature of the public sphere in the Abbasid period:

Members of the Abbasid bourgeoisie are assembling, not only to influence and edify one another, but also *to promote ideals that are of public benefit*.

Humanistic knowledge (*adab*) was the key to participating in a sphere of public concerns

. . .

Knowledge and oratory held a formidable persuasive power in “forging” social ties, which implied a savvy understanding of the goals of social influence. With these new forms of influence, otherwise middling people could redress questions of public concern. [My Emphasis] (475, 476).

I propose, then, that the public sphere of which Ali speaks is the very public sphere of which the discourse of the Ikhwān is a product, and the very public sphere to which *The Epistles* as *adab* contribute in return, imparting upon it the unique ideals of brotherhood and cooperation as a means to political consensus and problem-solving. This ideal of political and social cooperation through brotherhood in the public sphere develops even further in the following paragraph of *The Epistles*, taking on a spiritual aspect as well:

و أعلم يا أخي – أيدك الله وإيانا بروح منه – أنه ينبغي لك أن تتيقن بأنك لا تقدر أن تنجو وحدك مما وقعت فيه من محنة هذه الدنيا وآفاتهما بالجناية التي كانت من أبينا آدم – عليه السلام – لأنك محتاج في نجاتك وتخلصك من هذه الدنيا التي هي عالم الكون والفساد، ومن عذاب جهنم وجوار الشياطين وجنود إبليس أجمعين والصعود إلى عالما لأفلاك وسعة السماوات ومسكن العليين وجوار ملائكة الرحمن المقربين، إلى معاونة إخوان لك نصحاء وأصدقاء لك فضلاء متبصرين بأمر الدين علماء بحقائق الأمور ليعرفوك طرائق الآخرة وكيفية الوصول إليها، والنجاة من الورطة التي وقعنا فيها كلنا بجناية أبينا آدم، عليه السلام. فاعتبر بحديث الحمامة المطوقة المذكورة في كتاب "كليلة ودمنة" وكيف نجت من الشبكة لتعلم حقيقة ما قبلنا.

Know, O Brother – may God aid you and us with his mercy – that you must become certain of the fact that you cannot survive by yourself the challenges and ills of this world into which you have fallen due to the transgression of our father Adam – peace be upon him. For in order for your salvation from this world, which is the world of generation and corruption, and for your salvation from the pains of hell and the disciples of Satan so that you may rise to the cosmic heavens, home of the divine and the angelic – you are in need of the help of brothers. You need brothers who can be your friends and give you sound advice, brothers who are insightful about the issue of religion and who know the truth of things, so that they can show you the ways to paradise and how to get there. You need brothers who can show you how to survive the predicament which we have *all* fallen into through the transgression of our father Adam, peace be upon him. In order to realize the truth of what we have said, consider the Story of the Ringdove as told in *Kalīla wa Dimna*, and how the dove escaped from net. (*Rasā'il* 100; vol. 2).

The Story of the Ringdove from *Kalīla wa Dimna*<sup>8</sup> indeed does provide the perfect analogy for the kind of cooperation *The Epistles* envision. For this story tells the tale of several doves who become ensnared together in a hunter's net, and how they manage to

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<sup>8</sup>. *Kalīla wa Dimna* is a series of animal fables that originated in India and were translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa', a scholar who lived in Basra in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. By the time of the Ikhwān some three hundred years later, these stories had become very popular throughout the Arabic speaking world, where they still remain very popular today. For a more detailed explanation of this work and its transmission, see "Kalīla Wa-Dimna."

escape their predicament by cooperating with one another. After a few minutes of the doves' doing nothing but panicking and fluttering helplessly about in the net, the ringdove emerges as the leader among them and tells them that they all must stop individually panicking and instead work together in order for all to escape safely. She then proposes that all of the doves fly in together in unison (*naṭīr ka-ṭā'ir wāhid*) while each holds onto a different part of the net with its beak. By doing this, the doves as a collective group achieve what they could never do individually: they manage to lift the net off the ground and fly it to the roof of a nearby building, where a rat who is a close friend of the ringdove lives. The rat helps his friend by chewing apart the net, freeing her and each of her fellow doves (Ibn al-Muqaffa' 235-38).

In the context of Ali's public sphere thesis, then, the Ikhwān's appeal to the story of the ringdove is a prime example of the use of *adab* for the purposes of political persuasion and religious alliance formation. For just as the doves banded together and cooperated with one another in order to free themselves from the net, so too must human beings band together and cooperate in order to free themselves from the material world and move toward a higher spiritual plane. For in the Ikhwān's view, it seems to be the case that man cannot reach the paradise of the hereafter through living a life of isolation, wandering aimlessly in the world like the dove who flutters helplessly in the net. Rather, the Ikhwān appear to be suggesting that all of humankind *collectively* is on a journey toward the next world, the success of which requires both social and political cooperation in this world, the former guaranteed by the presence of a healthy public sphere in which ties of brotherhood across would-be social boundaries can take place.

In addition to engendering political, social, and spiritual notions of public good, the Ikhwān's anonymity in *The Epistles* also seems to function rhetorically so as to imagine a religious orthodoxy that is non-sectarian in character, one in which many differing denominations and ideologies may constructively participate and contribute. In Epistle 45, for instance, the Ikhwān explicitly state a belief in the universal value of wisdom as such regardless of what sect or ideology it may have come from:

وبالجملة ينبغي لإخواننا، أيدهم الله تعالى، أن لا يعادوا علما من العلوم، أو يهجروا كتابا من الكتب، ولا يتعصبوا على مذهب من المذاهب، لأن رأينا ومذهبنا يستغرق المذاهب كلها، ويجمع العلوم جميعها، وذلك أنه هو النظر في جميع الموجودات بأسرها الحسية والعقلية، ومن أولها إلى آخرها، ظاهرها وباطنها، جليها وخفيها، بعين الحقيقة من حيث هي كلها من مبدأ واحد، وعلة واحدة، وعالم واحد، ونفس واحدة، محيطه جواهرها المختلفة، وأجناسها المتباينة، وأنواعها المقتنة، وجزئياتها المتغايرة.

All and all it is imperative that our brothers, may God support them, do not show hostility to any one *madhhab*, or reject the teachings of any one book, or become fanatical followers of any single school of thought. For *our* school of thought encompasses *all* of the *madhāhib*, and gathers together all branches of knowledge. This is because our *madhhab* involves inquiry into all existing things from the tangible to the intelligible, from the plain and evident to the esoteric and subtle. This insofar as all of the former things are from a single First Principle, or single First Cause, or a single soul which pervades the different substances, their

different kinds, and their constituent parts. [My translation with some consultation of Eric van Reijn's translation] (*Rasā'il* 41-42; vol. 4).

To use Foucauldian language, the Ikhwān's claim that their *madhhab* is supposed to incorporate all of the *madhāhib* is a particularly strong evidence for how the anonymous author name Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' implies a space which may be occupied by a variety of different subjects who represent a diverse array of different religious schools of thought. Based upon this observation, the Ikhwān's use of the verb *istaghraqa* in describing their *madhhab* here is particularly significant. For the verb *istaghraqa* whose root in Arabic means "to drown" bears a connotation of many things being "engulfed" by a greater thing or becoming dissolved into that thing. Upon reading this passage then, the reader is left with an image of the social and intellectual boundaries between the many *madhāhib* of 10<sup>th</sup> century Iraq melting and dissolving away so that the greater commonalities between these *madhāhib* may become apparent. The anonymity of the Ikhwān, then, seems to serve as the catalyst within the text whereby this melding of many religious identities into one is able to take place. For the Ikhwān's claim that their *madhhab* encompasses all of the *madhāhib* implies that the *madhhab* of the Ikhwān itself depends ontologically upon the diversity of *madhāhib* represented by the readership of *The Epistles*, and is therefore a claim that might be read as further evidence for how *The Epistles* construe their audience not as passive readers, but also active participants in the discourse of the text.

A theme of non-sectarian religious orthodoxy grounded in *ukhūwah* sees further development in Epistle 22, where the Ikhwān write:



وأما الذي ذكرت بأن لكم أعيادا وجمعات وذهابا إلى بيوت العبادات وليس لنا شيء من ذلك، فأعلم أنكم لو كنتم مهذبي الأخلاق معاوني الإخوان عند المضايق والشدائد، وكنتم كنفس واحدة في مصالح أموركم، لما وجب عليكم الأعياد واجتماع الجمعات، لأن صاحب النواميس اقتضى هذا لتجمع الناس بعد غيبتهم بعضهم إلى بعض، حتى يحصل من اجتماعهم الصداقة، إذ الصداقة أس الأخوة، والأخوة أس المحبة، والمحبة أس إصلاح الأمور، وإصلاح الأمور صلاح البلاد، وصلاح البلاد بقاء العالم وبقاء النسل. فلهذا أمرت الشريعة أن يجتمع الخلائق في السنة مرتين إلى مواضع مخصوصة، وفي كل يوم خمس مرات في المساجد المحال والسوق ليحصل الغرض المطلوب.

And in regard to what you mentioned - that you have religious holidays and houses of worship to go to, we don't have any of those things. So know that if you were disciplined in morals and helpful to your brothers in times of difficulty and hardship, and if you were as one soul in the carrying out of your affairs – that religious holidays and gatherings would not be necessary for you. This is because the maker of the laws contrived these religious practices so that people could gather after long absences from one another and so that friendship could result from their gatherings. For friendship is the basis of brotherhood, brotherhood is the basis of love, love is the basis of mutual compromise, and mutual compromise is the soundness of nations, which in turn is the survival of the world and the preservation of human kind. It is for this reason why *sharī'ah* has mandated that God's children gather twice a year in specific locations, and five times a day in

their local mosques and marketplaces – so that the desired aim (of friendship) can occur. (*Rasā'il* 328; vol. 2).

The Ikhwān, then, do not view the carrying out of religious duties as mere ends in themselves, but as *means* to a greater end: that of promoting the interests of the public sphere by appeal to the values of friendship and political cooperation. They seem to be suggesting, then, that God mandated prayer five times daily not as a mere spiritual ritual, but because He recognized that a community whose members gather together in a mosque to pray five times daily is likely to be a community whose bonds of friendship and brotherhood will remain healthy and strong, able to persist in the face of the adversities of this world that may otherwise lead to the likes of *fitnah*. Not only, then, do the Ikhwān endorse communal cooperation as necessary by appeal to the laws of human nature, but they also endorse it as necessary by appeal to divine law.

To recap, I have up until now examined and analyzed an array of textual evidence for the critical emphasis the Ikhwān placed upon cooperation and brotherhood as ideals for the betterment of their society. In doing so, I have argued that the Ikhwān's appeal to brotherhood and community in *The Epistles* depends directly upon the anonymity of their identities. For based on the Foucauldian concept of the Author function, the very function of the author name "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'" performs is to create a communal and open space of brotherhood into which the reader begins to enter just by virtue of his reading *The Epistles*. I have argued further that the Ikhwān's notion of brotherhood as illustrated in *The Epistles* is not exclusive and sectarian, but one meant to apply to a

diverse range of individuals who hail from a variety of religious, political, and social backgrounds.

Yet at this point the skeptical reader will surely ask the following types of questions: First, how do we know that the Ikhwān were not merely endorsing brotherhood for their own selfish reasons, placing their own well-being and salvation against that of those who did not share their intellectual outlook on life? Are the notions of friendship and community in *The Epistles* really based upon any consistent first principles at all? These questions can begin to be answered by taking a look at one final excerpt from *The Epistles*, this one from Epistle 45, entitled “The Nature of Friendship among the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’” (*Kayfiyat Mu‘āsharat Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*). The Ikhwān write:

كل صداقة تكون لسبب ما، فإذا انقطع ذلك السبب بطلت تلك الصداقة، إلا صداقة إخوان الصفاء فإن صداقتهم قرابة رحم، ورحمهم أن يعيش بعضهم لبعض، ويرث بعضهم بعضا، وذلك أنهم يرون أنهم نفس واحد في أجساد متفرقة، فكيفما تغيرت حال أجساد بحقيقتها، فالنفس لا تتغير ولا تتبدل....

Every friendship is for one reason or another, and if the reason for the friendship ceases so too does the friendship itself cease. Yet the friendship of the Goodwill Brethren resembles the closeness of brothers in the same womb. They live for the sake of one another, and they pass on their belongings to one another.<sup>9</sup> This is

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<sup>9</sup>. The Ikhwān’s view of the friendship among one another as brothers here appears to strongly parallel Aristotle’s notion of the ideal kind of friendship, which he refers to in the “Nicomachean Ethics” as “perfect friendship.” (145; bk. 8 pt. 1) Aristotle suggests, much like the Ikhwān do here, that those in perfect friendship base their friendship not

because they see themselves as a single soul in many bodies. So however the state of their bodies may change, the soul does not change. [My translation with consultation of Eric van Reijn, p. 39.] (*Rasā'il* 48; vol. 4).

On the view of the Ikhwān, then, it appears that friendship based upon brotherhood between human beings is distinguished from mere utilitarian friendship in that the former is closely related to the nature of the *human soul*. For the Ikhwān's comparing the human soul to a womb which provides comfort and closeness for brothers perhaps suggests a belief that the human soul constitutes a core possession shared among otherwise different individuals, and thereby serves as a framework that might bring such individuals closer together into brotherhood. Contrary to what skeptical accusation may suggest, then, the Ikhwān's notions of brotherhood, cooperation, and friendship seem firmly rooted in first principles. Actually, they seem to be rooted in a single first principle. Quite simply, the first principle of human cooperation for the Ikhwān appears to be none other than the human soul itself. As we shall see later, the Ikhwān actually devote a significant portion of *The Epistles* toward examining and explaining the nature of the human soul and, more importantly, arguing that the human being's sound knowledge of his own soul is a prerequisite for his healthy coexistence with his peers. The Ikhwān's particular metaphysical view of the human soul and the practical normative implications that result from this view will be dealt with closely in the next chapter.

Yet skeptical questions remain about the practical extent of the Ikhwān's humanism. It is important to note here that the Ikhwān's brand of humanism has its

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upon pragmatic concerns of self-benefit and utility, but rather view friendship as an intrinsic good in and of itself (145; bk. 8 pt. 1)

limits. For the fact of the matter is that all forms of humanism have their limits, even our modern conceptions of humanism which tend to be celebrated as absolute. How inclusive in practice was this particular brotherhood the Ikhwān appear to be speaking of? Does the notion of *ukhūwah* grounded in anonymity leave room for the participation of women, or is *ukhūwah* in *The Epistles* limited to a masculine understanding only? While there seems to be a role for a reasonable diversity of men in the brotherhood of the Ikhwān, there are hardly any indications in *The Epistles* as to whether, if at all, this brotherhood might be open to women. Moreover, the Ikhwān's characterization of women and their spiritual and intellectual aptitude appears by today's standards plainly offensive at best and misogynistic at worst. Write Ikhwān on women:

فقد أنبأناك أن تلونهن كثير، وأن استفسادهن سهل يسير، إلا من عصمها الله تعالى منهن، وقليل ما هن.

We have warned you that their [womens'] mercurialness is great, and that they are easily corrupted, except for those whom God has prevented from vice, and indeed these are few (*Rasā'il* 259; vol 4).

The above description of women suggests that the Ikhwān saw them as somehow handicapped by a propensity for fickleness and deception, thereby far less likely than their male counterparts to ever achieve a degree of wisdom requisite for full-fledged participation in the brotherhood. Moreover, in some descriptions elsewhere in *The Epistles*, women are ranked as belonging to the same category as immature young men

and fools (*al-ṣabyān wal-ḥamaqā'*) in their intellectual ability (*Rasā'il* 349; vol. 2).

Perhaps the Ikhwān adopted such a negative view of women from Aristotle, who claimed quite similarly that the women by nature are more impulsive and more prone to irrationality than men.<sup>10</sup> So much, then, for *The Epistles'* view of women. It seems clear that any women who might participate fully in the Ikhwān's brotherhood were, at best, of a rare sort and very few in number. Although the Ikhwān's concept of brotherhood bears a non-sectarian and irenic component that seems to have been relatively inclusive, then, this brotherhood was not without its serious limits. At the very least, it seems in practice to have been by no means equally open and inclusive toward the female population.

In questioning the degree of openness of the brotherhood of the Ikhwān, we must also pose the question of who read *The Epistles*, and just how widespread they really were in Islamic society. If my argument that the Ikhwān's anonymity as authors of *The Epistles* facilitated the proliferation of their ideas among a wider and more diverse range of individuals is to hold water, then we should expect that *The Epistles* enjoyed a relatively extensive degree of transmission and reception beyond the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The best we can do to speculate on whether or not this actually was the case is to examine extant manuscript evidence. Baffioni, in the technical introduction to her work *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, points out that today a total of nineteen manuscripts of *The Epistles* exist in libraries of different parts of the world including Istanbul, Tehran, Madrid, Paris, and Oxford (xxii). Except for a few, she reports finding that most of these manuscripts are complete, some even fully vocalized (37-41). The oldest complete

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<sup>10</sup>. For more information on Aristotle's characterization of women, see: *The History of Animals*, bk. 9, pt. 1, par. 7

manuscript of the entire corpus of *The Epistles* is the ‘Aṭif Efendi 1681 manuscript, which dates back to 1182 C.E, and is found in Istanbul (Baffioni 35-36).<sup>11</sup> As to the question of whether *The Epistles* had a popular readership or whether they remained mostly the relatively underground concern of a scientific elite, we can ultimately only speculate. It appears, however, that some Epistles were more populist in their transmission and use than others. A particularly widespread Epistle seems to be Epistle 22, “On Animals” (*al-hayawānāt wa aṣnāfuhā*), which is a fascinating extended dialogue which details the story of a debate taking place between the community of humans and kingdom of animals about the fundamental differences between the two. This Epistle seems to have made it far and wide, for it was translated into Hebrew in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century by Kaylonymus Ben Kalonymus<sup>12</sup>, A European Jewish scholar of Arabic thought who appears to have lived and worked mostly in Salonica (Cassuto 749).

At the very least, then, we might conclude that the survival of *The Epistles* in various locations today via such a diversity of manuscripts, many intact and complete, suggests that the ideas of the Ikhwān saw a fair degree of circulation and reception throughout various parts of the Islamic world onward from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and that *The Epistles* were therefore were not as clandestine and secretive of a text as some scholars have tended to suggest. According to this line of argument, it seems that the anonymous Epistles have followed a trajectory of transmission and influence rather different from

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<sup>11</sup> . Baffioni provides in fact a very detailed overview and explanation of the extant manuscripts, for this explanation see: *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* 35-62.

<sup>12</sup> . Kaylonymus entitled his Hebrew translation *Iggeret Ba'alei Ḥayyim* or “The Epistle of Animals”.

that of the named Ismā‘īlī doctrinal sources written during the time of the Fatimid rule, for Paul Walker mentions that much of the latter sources exist today only in the sectarian libraries of the Tayyibī Ismā‘īlī’s (*Exploring an Islamic Empire* 9). Based on all of the former evidence, then, it seems fair to conclude that the Ikhwān’s anonymous request in *The Epistles* that their readers pass the text on to other “brothers” was relatively impactful and effective.

In conclusion to this chapter, suffice it to say that I have taken a literary approach to the anonymity of *The Epistles*, one which I think is ultimately more beneficial to analysis. Instead of considering anonymity as a historical question of personal identity independent of the content of the text produced, I have tried to consider the role of anonymity as a literary *function* of the text itself. For this task I have benefitted greatly from the theoretical apparatus provided by Michel Foucault’s concept of the Author Function. In applying Foucault’s Author Function to the author name “Ikhwān as-Şafā” I have argued that this name plays a significant role in framing the discourse of *The Epistles* within the public sphere of 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic society. Moreover, I have argued that this name also plays an important role in defining the audience of *The Epistles*, as well as characterizing and idealizing the sort of social, political, and religious interaction which ought to take place among the diverse members of that audience. Insofar as anonymity means the absence of a revealed identity, then, I conclude that the Ikhwān’s anonymity is very much part and parcel of the textual message of *The Epistles*. For had the author name of the text been given simply as a person’s name or a list of individuals, then the Author Function of this name doubtfully would play as active a role as the



Author Function played by the name Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. For it is unlikely that the Author Function of an individual's name would be able permit the same creation of an amorphous, dynamic public space of brotherhood as is permitted by the Author Function of the name Ikhwān al-Safā. Moreover, it is likewise difficult to see how the presence of an individual name given for the authorship of *The Epistles* would have allowed the same breaking down of identity barriers between author and audience, which, as we have seen, is an important feature of both the discourse and content of *The Epistles*. Moreover, it seems from extant manuscript evidence that the anonymity of the Ikhwān bore an important role in broadening the reception and transmission of *The Epistles*.

In sum, then, I have tried to argue in this chapter that reading the Ikhwān's anonymity as a positive textual feature of *The Epistles* can lend great elucidative understanding to the social, political, and religious ideals voiced in the latter. In taking this new direction, I hope I have set a precedent which future scholarship of *The Epistles* of the Goodwill Brethren might follow. For when applied to the question of anonymity, the Foucauldian notion of authorship suggests that the anonymity of the author need not necessarily be construed as a "negative feature" which hinders our interpretation of a given text, but rather that author anonymity may sometimes be read as a "positive feature" which can actually enhance and further our hermeneutic understanding of the text.

## Chapter Two

### Humanism in *The Epistles*: The Health of the Soul and its Practical Implications for Tolerance and Goodwill

The nature of the human soul forms one of the most apparent unifying themes of *The Epistles*. In numerous passages and in many different contexts, not only do the Ikhwān display an evident preoccupation with defining the human soul for their reader, but they also display an even greater preoccupation with imploring their reader to care about the state of his own soul. In other words, the Ikhwān appear very concerned that their reader seek to achieve a kind of “good health” for his soul. An especially revealing example of the importance the Ikhwān place upon the soul can be seen in the following excerpt from *The Epistles*:

وأعلم أن الجهالات التي غشيتنا، المانعة من الصداقة وصفوة الأخوة، هي أربع جهالات: إحداها أنهم لا يعرفون ما الفرق بين النفس والجسد، والثانية أنهم لا يدركون كيف رباط النفس بالجسد، والثالثة أنهم لا يدرون لمّ ربط بالجسد، والرابعة أنهم لا يدرون كيف تنبعث النفس من الجسد! فلا جرم أن النفس ما لم تنبعث من الجسد فلا تعرف الفوز والنجاة والخلود في النعيم، مخلدة في الجحيم في عذاب أليم.

Know the kinds of unawareness that have deceived us, those hindering friendship, goodwill, and brotherhood, are of four types. One of them is that our brothers do not know the difference between the soul and the body. The second is that they do not know how the soul is connected to the body. The third is that they do not know why the soul is connected to the body, and the fourth is that they do not

know how the soul rises from the body [after death]! It is no accident that the soul which does not rise from the body will not know victory, salvation, and eternal bliss, but rather lives eternally in hell and in painful suffering. (*Rasā'il* 171; vol. 4)

Based on this passage, it appears that the Ikhwān's concern for the soul formed a very important component of their overall vision of brotherhood and community. For this passage implies that the Ikhwān saw unawareness of the soul and its distinctness from the body to be among the most insidious of delusions which hamper friendship and goodwill in their society. Yet why do the Ikhwān consider the distinction between the soul and the body to be so important, and how is knowledge of this distinction supposed to lead to goodwill? Why, in the Ikhwān's view, might a soul fail to rise from the body after death, and why is the soul's departure from the body after death so critical to brotherhood in the practical sense?

In analyzing the practical implications of the Ikhwān's view of the soul, I will draw upon the work of psychiatrist and transpersonal psychologist Stanislav Grof. Grof describes in clear and lucid language a notion of spiritual self-exploration which, I will argue, nicely parallels the conception of the soul which is developed throughout *The Epistles*. In discussing the relationship between our bodily existence and our spiritual existence, Grof writes:

When our identification with the body-ego is absolute and our belief in the material world as the only reality unshatterable, it is impossible to fully enjoy our participation in creation. The specters of personal insignificance, impermanence,

and death can completely overshadow the positive side of life and rob it of its zest. We also have to add to it our frustration associated with repeated futile attempts to realize our full divine potential within the constraints imposed on us by the limitations of our bodies and the material world. To find the solution to this dilemma, we have to turn within. (216)

Grof raises several important universal issues here that will form the basis for my analysis of the discourse of *The Epistles* on the soul. First there is the problem of the specters of death and insignificance that perpetually loom over a person insofar as his body exists in a seemingly material and impermanent world. Moreover, there is one's need for "zest" in life, an inherent need for inner joy and fulfillment which often conflicts with the harsh realities of the superficial and fleeting material world. Since one cannot ultimately find this deeper zest by looking outward toward the material world, the solution is to be found by his "turning within" toward the soul so as to free himself from the painful over-identification with his physical body. I propose that Grof's notion of "turning within" as a solution to the problems of physical existence finds a close parallel in the Ikhwān's injunction that the reader come to know and care for his own soul. In the same way that Grof holds that "turning within" is a solution to the painful problems of one's existence in this material world, I argue that the Ikhwān saw the cultivation of the soul as critical to addressing the difficult problems which their own society faced, among the worst of which were rancor, violence, and religious fervor. **In taking the work of Grof on as a theoretical framework, then, I will argue in this chapter that a critical component of the Ikhwān's greater irenic vision and their overall effort to reconcile**

**the sectarian differences which were abundant in their society is their effort to cultivate among their contemporaries an inner knowledge and awareness of the soul.**

Just as Grof claims that a person's egotistic attachment to his physical body is quite harmful to his greater spiritual fulfillment in life, so too do the Ikhwān appear to adopt a similar view. In Epistle 38, the Ikhwān write:

وذلك أن كل إنسان لا يعرف نفسه، ولا يعلم ذاته، ولا يعلم ما الفرق بين النفس والجسد، تكون همّته كلها مصروفة إلى إصلاح أمر الجسد، ومرافق أمر البدن، من لذة العيش، والتمتع بنعيم الدنيا، وتمني الخلود فيها، مع نسيان أمر المَعاد وحقيقة الآخرة!

Every person who does not know his soul, and does not know his self, and does not know the difference between the soul and the body, will spend all of his effort trying to resolve the affairs of the body. He will be concerned with pleasurable living and enjoying the fruits of this world. He will desire immortality in this world, all the while forgetting the life to come and the truth of the hereafter (*al-ākhirah*) ! (*Rasā'il* 289; vol. 3)

This passage seems to give an initial answer for why the Ikhwān believed the soul may fail to rise from the body after death: that one's soul does not rise from his body after death appears to be a direct result of the his being overly concerned with bodily desires. The Ikhwān seem to be suggesting, therefore, that Hell for a person is not so much a physical place as it is the painful *state of existence* that results from his own misguided actions. For Hell, or the failure of the soul rise to the heavens, comes about when a person's bodily appetites cause him to aggressively seek self-preservation in a world

which is ultimately fleeting and impermanent. This latter observation appears to explain the Ikhwān's earlier statement that unconsciousness of the soul is "the principle source of malice". For if one is unaware about the existence of his soul, then he will desire immortality in this world. If he desires immortality in this world, then he will likely stop at nothing in order to defend his material well-being. The Ikhwān seem to be warning their reader, then, that he who becomes a mere slave to satisfying his physical desires will in turn become predisposed toward committing a litany of malicious acts toward others, acts by which he seeks to insure the survival of his body and his material comfort in this world at any cost. Given what we know about the tumultuous political atmosphere in which the Ikhwān lived, such acts of malice likely often included greed, theft, animosity, antagonism, provocation, political deception, and stoking violence.

After painting this bleak picture of a person who only cares about his bodily desires, the Ikhwān go on to contrast this individual with a far more level-headed kind of individual: he who knows about his soul and uses this knowledge as a guide for his actions. The Ikhwān write:

وإذا عرف الإنسان نفسه وحقيقة جوهرها، صارت همته، في أكثر الأحوال، في أمر النفس، وفكرته أكثرها في إصلاح شأنها، وكيفية حالها، بعد الموت، واليقين بأمر المعاد، والاستعداد للرحلة من الدنيا، والتزود للمعاد، والمسارعة في الخيرات، والتوبة وتجنب الشر والمنكر والمعاصي.

If the human being knows his soul and the truth of its essence, then his efforts, most of the time, will be directed toward the affairs of the soul. And most of his thought will be devoted to resolving the issues of the soul, and how the soul will

be after death. He will be certain of the return and will prepare his soul for leaving this world. He will rise quickly to virtuous deeds and repentance while steering clear of malice, vice, and rebelliousness. (*Rasā'il* 289; vol. 3)

The Ikhwān seem to be strongly suggesting here, then, that a particular reason why knowledge and care for the soul is important is because this knowledge allows one to free himself from the malicious desires of the body that result from the fear of death. Unlike the first individual who finds reassurance only in his fleeting body, the individual who finds reassurance in the existence of his soul and its survival beyond this world would seem less likely to respond to the problems of this world with anger and aggression. For the Ikhwān seem to be suggesting that he who is overly attached to his body will not want to part with that body, and will thereby experience an anxiety of separation which can lead him to rash and desperate acts of malice in response to those individuals and circumstances which might place his physical body or material wealth in harm's way. An awareness of the soul, on the other hand, will free a person from this separation anxiety. For a person who identifies more closely with his soul will be less anxious over the state of his body, and will thereby be more prepared to resist the destructive temptations that result from the body's egotistical desire for self-preservation. The deeply rooted knowledge which this latter individual has of his soul, and his concern for its ultimate destination, then, will cause him to take the day-to-day calamities of physical life less seriously, making him less likely to respond to these calamities with outward displays of physical angst. Rather, for a person in touch with his soul, the primary response to physical adversity will take place internally. His attachment to his soul and his need to

cultivate its character will provide an inner refuge from the painful realities of the physical world, thereby making him better able to bear these realities in a manner which is not hostile and outwardly aggressive. A deeply rooted knowledge of the soul and a value for its cultivation, in other words, will furnish the individual with a demeanor of patience and tolerance as he carries out his daily life. This proclivity for patience in turn will make him more likely to use restraint and prudence in dealing with those who are hostile toward him, instead of merely responding to such hostility with greater hostility.

This concern to prevent an escalation of hostility in society in fact seems to be a very important aspect of the Ikhwān's preoccupation with their reader's knowledge of his soul. That this is the case seems to be further evident based upon the following, taken from Epistle 9, entitled "On Morals" (*Bayān al-Akhlāq*) in which the Ikhwān speak about the different moral qualities which are most harmful to the soul. Here, the Ikhwān characterize envy (*al-ḥasad*) as among the worst characteristics which can undermine the moral integrity of the soul and intern lead one to malice . The Ikhwān write:

ومن أخوات الحسد وأشكاله الحقد والغل؛ والدغل؛ ثم تدعو هذه الخصال إلى المكاشفة بالعداوة، والبغضاء،  
والبغي، والغضب والحد، والتعدي والعدوان، وقساوة القلب وقلة الرحمة والفظاظة والغلظ، والطعن  
واللعن والفحشاء؛ وتكون سبباً للخصومة والشر والحرب والقتال.

...

ويصير ذلك سبباً لتشتيت الشمل، وتفريق الجميع . . . والبعد من الإخوان....

Among the sisters of envy are hatred and rancor, and spite. These qualities lead one to display enmity, loathing, oppression, anger, hostility, harshness of heart



and lack of mercy, rudeness and intimidation, slander and condemnation and indecency; these are the cause of antagonism and malice and war and killing

...

All this becomes a cause for the fragmentation of unity and divisions between everybody . . . and distance between brothers (*Rasā'il* 352; vol. 1).

That the Ikhwān single out envy as the worst of moral traits seems to further imply that they viewed the aggressive attachment to the body at the expense of the soul as a primary source of strife in their society. For envy can only occur when somebody wants something he does not have but somebody else does. Since the soul is something that everybody, at least in theory, might have access to should he apply himself, then it is difficult to see how the soul might be the object of envy. Rather, the goods of the material world seem to be the primary stuff of envy. One can be envious of another person's wealth, status, influence, or physical attractiveness, for example, yet it is less clear that somebody can be envious of another person's "soul". The Ikhwān might be suggesting, then, that the exclusive pursuit of material and worldly goods, will lead one to envy others who have a greater share of the former, and this envy thereby will result in the more visible and harmful acts of war and hostility. On the other hand, a person more closely tied to his soul will be less prone to envying other people's material status, and thereby less likely to be tempted to the malicious deeds which are the sisters of envy. This litany of "sisters" of envy to which the Ikhwān refer are most informative in that they paint a detailed picture of the kind of society which results when people start to

become overly attached to their physical existence at the expense of a deeper knowledge of their souls. Like a contagious disease in society, envy perpetuates peoples' aggressive identification with their bodily existence, resulting thereby in a cascade of malicious sentiments, which, if left unchecked by the greater awareness of the soul, will over time result in greater social disunity. Like a sibling rivalry that pushes the brothers of a household away from one another and diminishes their ability to cooperate productively with, the sisters of envy create entrenched divisions in society which heighten the possibility for mutual aggression while hindering the possibility for compromise and harmony. These sisters of envy, then, might be read as the Ikhwān's interpretation of the notion of *fitnah*, the compelling physical temptation that leads one toward the participation in violence and war.

That the Ikhwān viewed neglect of the soul as a primary source of hostility and ill-will in their society is evinced even further by the following passage, taken from Epistle 43. The Ikhwān write:

وفي الناس طائفة إذا سمعوا مثل هذه المسائل نفرت نفوسهم منها واشمأزوا عن ذكرها، وينسبون المتكلم أو السائل عنها إلى الكفر والزندقة والتكلف لما لا ينبغي. فأولئك أقوام قد استغرقت نفوسهم في نوم الجهالة...

Among people there is a group that, if they heard about these kinds of issues [issues of the soul], would close themselves off to them and disdain their mention. They would accuse him who mentions these issues or ponders them of apostasy,

atheism, or over-concern with extraneous matters. Peoples of this kind are such that their souls have drowned in a sleep of unconsciousness. (*Rasā'il* 11; vol. 4)

In this passage, the Ikhwān seem to be making a direct link between a denial of the soul and religious zealotry on the part of their contemporaries. For the Ikhwān tell us directly here that those who disdainfully call their peers heretics or atheists are none other than those who have in actuality lost touch with their own souls.<sup>13</sup> The language the Ikhwān use here to refer to unconsciousness of the soul as a “sleep” from which a person must awake re-occurs rather frequently throughout *The Epistles*. An especially recurrent phrase of this type, for instance, is the following one:

لعل نفسك تنتبه من نوم الغفلة ورقدة الجهالة.

May your soul be weary of the sleep of deception and the complacency of unconsciousness. (*Rasā'il* 103-04; vol. 1, 218; vol. 3, 185, 355; vol. 4).

The sheer frequency with which this plea to the reader appears in the text, then, is yet further evidence that the Ikhwān viewed awareness of the soul as essential to mitigating hostility. Moreover, that the Ikhwān liken unawareness of the soul to sleep seems to reflect a relatively broad notion of kindness. For the referral to one's removal from the soul as a sleep comes across far more gently than if the Ikhwān were to refer to this detachment as the result of stupidity, ineptitude, or incompetence. Not only is the temptation of sleep a daily and common temptation to which many readers might be able to relate easily, but the idea that a person unaware of his soul is “asleep” appears to de-

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<sup>13</sup> In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, both *kufir* (apostasy) and *zandaqa* (atheism) were highly aggressive terms used to harshly condemn as un-Islamic the beliefs of another. ( “Takfir.”, par. 1; “Zindīk.” par. 1. ) In contemporary language we might refer to these terms as “fighting words”.

emphasize his guilt and instead emphasize his need for help in staying awake. For sleep, unlike, stupidity or incompetence, is a feature of human existence over which at times people have little control, and to which even the most steadfast or intelligent individuals may succumb.

Yet how is a person whose soul has fallen into this sleep of unconsciousness supposed to be awoken? What do the Ikhwān have to tell us about the way in which their followers ought to deal with such a person? At the least, we would like to expect that such a person ought not to be castigated, berated, or punished, for if this were true, then the Ikhwān would appear to be hypocrites. The Ikhwān's answer to the question of how those who are unaware of their souls should be dealt with is in fact a very interesting one. Referring again to the group of people who call their peers atheists and heretics, the Ikhwān tell us that this group should be treated in the following manner:

فينبغي للمذكر لهم أن يكون طبيباً رفيقاً حسن أن يداويهم بأرفق ما يقدر عليه من التذكير له بآيات  
الكتب الإلهية وما في أيديهم من أخبار أنبيائهم، وما في أحكام شرائعهم من الحدود والرسوم  
والأمثلة، فإن ذلك كله إشارات للنفس بتذكيرها ما قد غفلت عنه من أمر معادها...

So it is incumbent upon him who speaks to them to be a like a friendly doctor to them, who medicates them in the kindest way possible through mentioning the verses of the holy books and pointing to the words which they possess from their own prophets. He should draw also upon the rulings of their laws in order to find teachings and examples. For all of the former things are reminders for the soul of what it has neglected about the life to come. (*Rasā'il* 11; vol. 4)

The Ikhwān's suggestion that their followers draw upon the words of multiple prophets and holy books in seeking to heal the soul reflects a view that all of these sources of spiritual literature, though they may differ in origin, ultimately lead to the same place. This latter idea, then, is further evidence of the irenic nature of the Ikhwān's understanding of the soul. Here, moreover, we see a very interesting parallel drawn between the Parable of the Doctor from chapter one and the concept of a healthy soul. For just as the doctor in the parable was kind and gentle in curing the physical illnesses of the townspeople, so too do the Ikhwān view it as their responsibility to be kind and gentle in trying to cure the "illnesses" of people's souls. Just as an awareness of the soul will mitigate aggression, then, so too does it appear that aggression is not the solution whereby to bring about awareness of the soul.

Additionally, the previous passage brings up a very significant question: Given that the notion of "psychological illness" is a relatively recent and modern phenomena, how can we explain the significance of the Ikhwān's "medicalization" of the soul in a medieval context? Why do the Ikhwān refer to one's disconnectedness from the soul for their readers as a kind of spiritual illness requiring "medication" in the same way that a physical illness would? More importantly, how does this medicalization of the soul create a shift in responsibility and blame? To begin answering these questions, it will help us to examine the following passage, in which the Ikhwān explicitly spell out their analogy between illnesses of the body and illnesses of the soul:

### فصل في مرض النفوس وعلاجها:

ثم اعلم أن لمرض النفوس علاجات وطباً تداوى بها، كما أن لمرض الأجساد طباً يعالج به، وعقاقير يداوى بها، ولها كتب وضعها الحكماء موصوف فيها علاجاتها؛ فهكذا أيضاً لمرض النفوس كتب وقوانين علمية جاءت بها الأنبياء والحكماء مذكور فيها علاجات الأمراض النفسية....

On the Illnesses of Souls and Their Treatments:

Know that for the illness of souls there are treatments and remedies by which these souls are medicated, just as there are treatments and pills to medicate the illnesses of bodies. For physical illnesses, there are books which wise men have written describing their treatments. In the same way, there are for illnesses of the soul books and laws which the prophets and the wise men have brought describing the treatments of these illnesses (*Rasā'il* 11; vol. 3).

Because we learn here that the medication for the soul is to be found in the books of the prophets, this passage does a great deal to further elucidate the way in which the Ikhwān viewed religion. While some in 10<sup>th</sup> century Basra would have understood religion as a kind of “mandate” to be imposed upon the masses by force, the Ikhwān, on the other hand, seem to construe religion as a “remedy” to be administered with care and tolerance. The Ikhwān’s likening of religion to medication for the soul, then, is a particularly strong piece of evidence to suggest that they saw religious violence and hostility as having little practical value to the public good. For just as it would be useless for a doctor to get angry

at his ill patient or treat him violently, it would be equally useless for a person to become angry and violent toward somebody who has fallen out of touch with his soul. In the same way that a physically ill person must be dealt with in tenderly in order for him to recover, so too must the spiritually ill person be treated with care and patience in order that his soul be able to awake from the sleep of unconsciousness.

The shift in responsibility and blame which results from the Ikhwān's medicalization of the soul, then, appears to be a very significant shift indeed. For while many of their contemporaries would conclude that those who are ignorant of religion deserve harsh rebuke or even physical punishment for their ignorance, the Ikhwān, in likening those unknowledgeable about religion to the sick patients of a doctor, appear to be lessening them of the blame for their condition. For in medicalizing the affairs of the soul, the Ikhwān appear to be arguing ultimately that one cannot be castigated for what he does not know. The unaware of the soul are not construed as maleficent heretics, then, but they are instead construed as relatively blameless victims.

In order to make the Ikhwān's comparison between religion and medicine more concrete, we need to ask the following question: what specific teachings from the holy books do the Ikhwān believe to be particularly effective "medicine" for the soul? The Ikhwān in part answer this question in the following passage. Continuing their discussion of spiritual illness, the Ikhwān write:

وهو الاقتداء بسنة الناموس، واجتناب المحارم والانتهاز عن المناهي، والأخذ بسنته الحسنة، والسير بسيرته العادلة، ولزوم طلب المعارف، والتخلق بالأخلاق الجميلة، ولزوم سنة الهدى على الطريقة الوسطى في طلب معيشة الحياة الدنيا والسعي بالأعمال الصالحة في طلب نعيم الآخرة، ومداواة النفوس المريضة،

بضروب الأمثال بالوعد والترغيب في جزيل الثواب بتذكيرها أمر مبدئها، وما قد نسيته من أمر معادها والمدح والثناء لمن تاب وأناب لعلمهم يذكرون.

It [the treatment of spiritual illnesses] means: avoiding and ceasing the forbidden while imitating the divine law, and taking up its good example, and walking in its just path of moderation, and talking up the injunction to seek knowledge, and acting with exemplary morals. It means taking up the injunction to follow the middle way between seeking a livelihood in this world and aspiring to honest and peaceful actions in seeking the hereafter. It means medicating those souls which are ill, by reminding them of their fundamental origin, and what they have forgotten about the issue of their afterlife. This shall be done by giving examples and by promising great reward and praise for those who repent and come back to God, so that they might remember. (*Rasā'il* 11; vol. 3).

The medicines of the sick soul mentioned in this passage further suggest that the Ikhwān saw care for the soul as an important means toward mitigating aggression and hostility in their society. For we learn here that among the most important medicines for the soul is that of moderation. We learn that the healthy soul requires a life of balance that comes about when one “follows the middle way” (*al-ṭarīqah al-wuṣṭá*) between material comfort on the one hand and spiritual pursuits on the other. Just as a life of material decadence cannot bring about a healthy soul, then, so too it is the case that a life of utter asceticism cannot bring about a healthy soul either. The individual, in order live a healthy spiritual life and prepare his soul for the next world, must have a livelihood in this world whereby he can reasonably sustain his physical existence. This echoes the significance



the Ikhwān place upon social and political cooperation as prerequisites for spiritual salvation. For, as we saw in Chapter One, the Ikhwān appear to hold the view that the human being cannot achieve spiritual salvation by living in separation from his peers. Rather, he must seek this spiritual salvation through active participation in a community of peers who are likewise concerned with the same end, a task which will unlikely be well served by aggression. Finally, the suggestion that the maintenance of the healthy soul requires that one work actively to medicate the illnesses of *other people's* souls is most informative. For this suggestion directly ties the Ikhwān's view of the soul to the pay it forward approach discussed in chapter one, thereby suggesting a necessary connection between the health of the individual soul and the health of the community as a whole. Just as the doctor in the parable employed the pay it forward approach to cure the townspeople, so too do the Ikhwān confirm for us here that a brother of goodwill must seek to pay it forward in treating people's spiritual illnesses, exemplifying for them the teachings of the religious books in a way that best accords with their understanding.

That the Ikhwān place such importance upon teaching by example here is also quite significant to their conception of the soul as a means toward the prevention of hostility. For it further suggests that they were not so much concerned with a person's intellectual and abstract knowledge of religious texts as they were with his ability to live practically in accord with this knowledge and achieve the tangible result of greater tolerance. It appears, in other words, that the Ikhwān viewed spiritual knowledge largely as a practical kind of wisdom with important implications for the preservation of peaceful coexistence in day-to-day life. The keen emphasis which the Ikhwān place

upon knowledge of the soul as a practical knowledge leading one away from hostile deeds can be seen especially in the way they define the pursuit of philosophy, *al-falsafah*. The Ikhwān define *al-falsafah* as follows:

الفلسفة أولها محبة العلوم، وأوسطها معرفة حقائق الموجودات، بحسب الطاقة الإنسانية، وآخرها القول والعمل ما يوافق العلم.

The beginning of philosophy is the love of knowledge, the middle of it is the knowledge of existence according to the power of human faculties, and the end of philosophy is speaking and acting in accord with knowledge. (*Rasā'il* 48; vol. 1).

This highly practical definition of philosophy, grounded first and foremost the tangible results of human action, suggests that the Ikhwān's aim to better the soul ultimately bears a strong political component. In propagating knowledge of the soul and stressing the importance of its health, it seems the Ikhwān were ultimately concerned with the beneficial changes that this knowledge will bring about in the words and deeds of their contemporaries. This might be further evidence to suggest that vision of the soul that develops in *The Epistles* does not merely boil down to the singular salvation of the individual, but to the collective salvation of *the community* as a whole. Insofar as salvation for the soul seems tied to cooperation, this implies once again that the temptation toward aggression is among the worst character traits when it comes to the health of the soul.

To further elucidate the political component of the Ikhwān's vision of the soul, it will help us to return briefly to the work of Grof. In speaking of the relationship between

a spiritual “turning within” and contemporary political problems of our own world, Grof writes the following:

In the last analysis, the current global crisis *is of a psychospiritual nature*. It is therefore hard to imagine that it could be resolved without a radical inner transformation of humanity and its rise to a higher level of emotional maturity and spiritual awareness. (220)

Just as Grof holds that the current global crisis is ultimately of a psychospiritual nature, so too do the Ikhwān appear to hold that the roots of violence in their society are ultimately to be found in the individual’s ignorance about his own soul and its connection to the divine world beyond. In the same way that Grof’s emphasis upon human spiritual transformation is related to the betterment of the planet, I hold that the Ikhwān’s emphasis upon healing illnesses of the soul is directly related to their political vision for the betterment of their society. Moreover, I propose that Grof’s emphasis upon the importance of emotional maturity finds a close parallel in the Ikhwān’s emphasis upon moderation and temperance of physical desires. Just as Grof holds that emotional maturity comes about from one’s turning his attention inward toward spiritual matters, so too do the Ikhwān seem to hold that virtues such as tolerance, patience, and moderation must come about by one’s striving to know his soul and seeking to maintain the health of the latter. In the final interpretation, then, the Ikhwān’s aim of treating illnesses of the soul via a pay it forward method is very much a political aim via which they strove to bring about an increase in religious tolerance and a consequent reduction in sectarian violence.

To use contemporary language, this political aim of healing souls might be best described as a kind of “grassroots” movement by which the Ikhwān tried to educate the diverse classes of individuals in their society about the centrality and care of the soul. The grassroots nature of the Ikhwān’s movement to raise awareness of the soul among the different ranks of society can be seen particularly clearly in the often very simple and accessible language the Ikhwān employ when they speak of the soul. A particularly informative example of this simple and accessible language comes from the following passage, taken from Epistle 48, in which the Ikhwān use a series of concrete and practical analogies in order to directly aid the reader in realizing the difference between his own body and his own soul. The Ikhwān write:

و أعلم أيها الأخ أن الإنسان الباحث عن أمر النفس، الطالب معرفة جوهرها، لو أنه أنصف عقله ورجع إلى حكمه، وقبل قضاياها، وفكر في نفسه، وتأمل بتمييزه،

...

لاستبان له أن مع هذا الجسد جوهر آخر هو أشرف منه، وأن هذا الجسد بالنسبة إليه ما هو إلا كدار مبنية فيها ساكن، أو كدكان فيه صانع، أو كسفينة فيها ملاح، أو كدابة عليها راكب، أو كقميص ملبوس، أو كروح في يد صبي في المكتب، أو كمدينة فيها ملك.

Know, O Brother, that for the person who inquires into the issues of the soul and asks for knowledge of its essence, the following is true: If he were to use his mind and accept its conclusions, thinking about himself and what makes him distinct

...

then it would become clear to him that with this body is another essence, greater than it, and that this body relative to this greater essence is nothing except for like a house in which a person dwells, or a shop in which there is a merchant, or a ship with a captain, or a donkey upon which there is a rider, or a shirt on someone's back, or like a writing tablet in the hand of a student, or like a city in which there is a king (*Rasā'il* 182; vol. 4).

This passage is significant because it construes knowledge of the soul not as the exclusive intellectual property of any one sect of *madhhab*, but rather as common knowledge open to the ordinary person who takes the initiative to ponder the matter. The Ikhwān's suggestion that the individual's knowledge of his soul is plainly accessible to him via rational contemplation is therefore highly indicative of the idea that they valued independent inquiry into religious matters, while they shunned religious coercion and extremism as ultimately harmful to the public good. Moreover, the series of analogies at the end of this passage, likening the body to a mere "shell" for the soul, are particularly interesting. The content for these analogies collectively seems to reflect a goal of reaching and appealing to a wide range of the social classes and professions which made up 10<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid society. For in comparing the body to "the house in which a person dwells", the Ikhwān seem to be addressing the ordinary masses. In comparing the body to the shop of a merchant, they appear to be addressing Iraq's burgeoning mercantile class. In speaking of the body as a "writing tablet" in the hand of a student, the Ikhwān are perhaps addressing the learned class of nobles, men of letters, and their children. Finally, in likening the body to the city in which a king dwells, the Ikhwān appear to

directly address the ruling classes. This diversity of analogies, then, reflects the Ikhwān's effort to make their vision of the soul practical, accessible, and achievable for members of the various social classes alike. Overall, therefore, this passage serves to re-emphasize the idea that the Ikhwān's vision of the soul is closely related to their political goal of increasing cooperation and reducing strife among individuals of different social backgrounds.

While I have up to now examined many of the practical implications of the Ikhwān's view of the soul in this world, I have paid relatively less attention to the practical implications of their view of the soul in the afterlife. How do the Ikhwān depict the destination of the healthy soul in the afterlife, and how might this depiction encourage tolerance in this life? This question will be addressed by examining the following passage, in which the Ikhwān relate their view of the soul to the final Day of Judgment in Islamic theology: *yawm al-qiyāmah*. The Ikhwān write:

فأما النفس، يعني الروح، فهي جوهرة سماوية، نورانية، حية، علامة فعّالة بالطبع، حساسة درّاسة لا تموت ولا تفني، بل تبقى مؤبدة؛ إما ملتدة وإما منتلمة. فأنفس المؤمنين، من أولياء الله وعباده الصالحين، يُعرج بها بعد الموت إلى ملكوت السموات، وفسحة الأفلاك، وتخلّى هناك، فهي تسبح في فضاء من الروح، وفسحة من النور، وروح وراحة إلى يوم القيامة، الكامة الكبرى. فإذا انتشرت أجسادها، ردت إليها، لتحاسب وتجاري بالإحسان إحسانا، والسيئات غفرانا.

The soul – which means the spirit – is an essence which is cosmic, alive, and bright. It is naturally active, sensitive, and aware. It does not die or perish, but it exists for all eternity – be this existence one of pleasure or one of pain. Therefore the souls of believers – those loyal to God and His just children – are carried up

after death to the celestial kingdom and the realm of the stars. There they stay, swimming in a void of pure spirit, and an expansive field of light, in comfort until the day of resurrection - the Great Reckoning. At this time they are returned to their bodies so they can be rewarded for their virtues and be forgiven for their sins.

(*Rasā'il* 290; vol. 3)

In mentioning the ultimate rewards and forgiveness that God will provide to the just soul in the afterlife, as well as the pleasurable comfort this just soul will enjoy, the Ikhwān seem to be further stressing for their reader the importance that one prioritize the cultivation of his soul over the pleasures of his body. For the mention here of the eternal comfort and expansive field of light in which the just soul shall swim has the rhetorical effect of suggesting that any material comfort the temporal world may have to offer for the body is ultimately irrelevant in comparison to the bliss and freedom which the just soul shall enjoy in the afterlife. A similar observation might be made about the Ikhwān's hinting at a belief that the soul, if judged by God to be unjust, might experience an eternity of pain. For this language might suggest that any pains a person may face in this bodily world are ultimately insignificant in comparison to the eternal pain which the unjust soul may face in the afterlife. The upshot of this idea seems to be that it is better for one to bear the pains of this world with inward patience than to respond to them with outward anger and hostility. For while the pains of this world in the end only harm the body, reactions of malice and aggression harm the integrity of the soul itself, and thereby make the latter susceptible to an eternity of far greater pain than the material body may

face. The Ikhwān's dichotomous language of eternal pleasure or pain, then, might be read as stressing the importance of delayed gratification when it comes to the individual's pursuit of his worldly desires. This delayed gratification will in turn lead to less aggression and greater tolerance. For an individual who primarily looks to the next life for eternal gratification will be less likely to seek temporary gratification in the material world, and therefore less likely to be a slave to desires that may tempt him toward aggression. To speak more concretely, this ethos of delayed gratification might mean the difference between one's answering violence with greater violence and his answering that violence by tolerantly turning the other cheek, steering clear of the enticement for physical revenge. It could mean the difference between angrily imparting religious judgment on somebody else by accusing him of *kufṛ* on the one hand, and on the other hand waiting patiently for God Himself to make this judgment in the afterlife. This latter idea of withholding judgment appears to gain further support in the Ikhwān's mention of the Great Reckoning (*al-kāmah al-kubrā*), for this phrase stresses the idea that it is God and not human who holds final judgment over the destination of the soul. The implied sense of delayed gratification that results from the Ikhwān's characterization of the afterlife, then, seems to be accompanied by a parallel emphasis upon the importance of *withholding judgment*. This idea that human beings should withhold judging others appears to fall in line with the Ikhwān's medicalization of the soul discussed earlier. For in the same way that it would not make sense for a doctor to blame and rebuke his patient for being sick, so too would someone's imparting judgment on his peers do little to advance to pursuit of religion as a whole. Overall, then, the Ikhwān's account of the



afterlife as a great reward for the just soul seems to reflect the idea that the human being, rather than behaving as a religious fanatic and judging the souls of others, would be much better suited to spend his time in this world by seeking to better his *own* soul, while gently and peacefully encouraging his peers to do the same.

Just as the idea that religious knowledge leads the soul toward goodwill forms a common theme of *The Epistles*, so too does the *inverse* of this idea appear to be a common theme in the text. In other words, to the same degree that *The Epistles* construe religious knowledge as the cause of a goodwill in the soul, they likewise construe goodwill in the soul as the cause of religious knowledge. The construal of the goodwill-soul as facilitative of religious knowledge is particularly evident in the following passage.

The Ikhwān write:

النفس . . . إن مثلها في إدراكها صور الموجودات من المحسوسات والمعقولات كمثل المرأة، فإن  
المرأة إذا كانت مستوية الشكل مجلوة الوجه، تتراءى فيها صور الأشياء الجسمانية على حقيقتها  
...

فهكذا أيضا حال النفس، فإنها إذا كانت عالمة ولم تتراكم عليها الجهالات، طاهرة الجوهر لم  
تتدنس بالأعمال السيئة صافية الذات لم تتصدأ بالأخلاق الرديئة وكانت صحيحة الهمة لم تعوج بالآراء  
الفاسدة، فإنها تتراءى في ذاتها صور الأشياء الروحانية التي في عالمها، فتدركها النفس بحقائقها

The soul . . . in knowing the forms of all things from the tangible to the  
intelligible, is like a mirror. For if the mirror were evenly shaped and had a clear  
face, then it would reflect things in the material world according to their true  
form.

...

The case of the soul is the exact same. For if the soul were conscientious, and free of towering ignorance - good of essence and devoid of malicious deeds and ill morals – true in purpose while unscathed by beliefs of discord, then it will reflect the forms of the divine which are in its world. Such a soul will know these things truthfully as they are. (*Rasā'il* 6; vol. 4)

The Ikhwān's suggestion that the preservation of the soul's amity is like the act of polishing a mirror is not only another example of simple and concrete analogy employed to teach their readers about how to care for their own souls, but more importantly, this mirror analogy implies that the presence of discord and malice within the soul will prevent the reader from being able to know God for himself. For in making this analogy the Ikhwān seem to be suggesting something like the following idea: In the same way that blotches or blemishes on a mirror prevent it from properly reflecting physical images, so too does the absence of goodwill in the soul prevent the believer from knowing God truthfully. For just as a physical object cannot appear properly in a mirror which has been soiled or distorted, so too can the divine image of God not fully appear in the soul of a person who has become malicious or contentious toward his peers. The Ikhwān confirm this idea for us by completing the analogy of the mirror in the following manner:

وأما إذا كان النفس جاهلة غير صافية الجوهر، وقد تدنست بالأعمال السيئة أو صدنت بالأخلاق  
الرديئة أو أعوجت بالآراء الفاسدة واستمرت على تلك الحال، بقيت محجوبة عن إدراك حقائق الأشياء  
الروحانية، وعاجزة عن الوصول إلى الله تعالى، ويفوتها نعيم الآخرة كما قال الله تعالى: "كلا إنهم عن ربهم  
يومئذ لمحبوبون"

But if the soul is unaware and in essence lacks goodwill, having been debased by malicious deeds or scathed by beliefs of discord - all the while continuing to exist in such a state, then it will remain veiled from true knowledge of divine things, and incapable of reaching God – glory to him. The bliss of the hereafter passes this soul by, just as God - glory to him - said: “No. They are on that day veiled from their Lord.” [Quran 83:15] (*Rasā'il* 6; vol. 4)

This latter passage, then, is particularly strong in confirming the idea that, just as religious knowledge leads the soul toward the virtues of goodwill, so too do the virtues of goodwill in turn lead the soul to greater religious knowledge. For the Ikhwān tell us here that the presence of goodwill and the absence of malice in the soul are necessary in order for the soul to achieve knowledge of the divine. Overall, then, this analogy of the mirror serves as even further evidence that the Ikhwān viewed the practice of religion as going hand-in-hand with tolerance and goodwill. For just as we learned earlier that religious knowledge is a medicine which brings about goodwill in the soul, so too do we learn here that goodwill of the soul is a virtue necessary for attaining religious knowledge: a divine knowledge of God and ultimately the means toward salvation.

In this chapter, I have argued that the Ikhwān's emphasis upon the inner health of the soul constitutes their solution to the problems of aggression and hostility stemming from over-identification with material existence, problems in which they saw the primary roots of the prevalent sectarian tensions within their society. If considered in the context of the many ideological alternatives that were present in the intellectual space of 10<sup>th</sup> century Baṣra, then, I believe we can conclude that the Ikhwān's humanistic view of the

soul ultimately fell toward the more inclusive and irenic side of the spectrum. For while some in 10<sup>th</sup> century Basra were concerned with issues such as which particular *madhhab* a believer belonged to or which family or social class he came from, the Ikhwān saw such issues as ultimately peripheral to what it really means to seek God and the afterlife. The humanistic view of the soul which *The Epistles* put forth for the taking, then, can in many regards be seen as an effort on the part of the Ikhwān to shift public discourse in their society away from a focus upon the superficial differences between the *madhāhib* and toward a focus upon their far more important and far deeper similarities. For when it comes to the question of religion and spiritual practice, *The Epistles* in the final analysis seem less concerned with the *what* and more concerned with the *how*. That is to say that the ultimate concern of *The Epistles* is not so much the particular prophet or holy book upon which a believer may base his religious practice, but rather the degree to which this religious practice causes him to eschew violence, extremism, and malice while embracing ideals of patience, moderation, tolerance, and goodwill. Moreover, many of the passages covered in this chapter hint at the idea that the Ikhwān believed that the need for cultivation of the soul was at its core a common, perennial truth, a truth which the great monotheistic religions and the great philosophers alike have all arrived at independently, albeit in different times, places, and historical circumstances. The Ikhwān's argument that their doctrine of the soul is a perennial truth, supported by centuries of human experience, in fact constitutes one of the more visible irenic themes of *The Epistles*. The way the Ikhwān go about arguing for the former belief will be the subject of the next chapter.

In conclusion to this chapter, let us examine some final words from Grof which I think somewhat echo the Ikhwān's irenic vision of the soul. In discussing the relationship between inward spiritual practice and the betterment of our world, Grof has the following words to say:

It is essential to complement everyday practical activities with some form of systematic spiritual practice that provides essential access to the transcendental realms

...

*The potential benefits of this approach to existence transcend the narrow interests of the individuals who practice it.* This strategy applied on a sufficiently large scale could have important implications for human society and our future....

(218, 220)

Grof goes on to refer to this widespread practical application of spirituality as “planetary healing” (220). I propose that Grof's vision of planetary healing is quite similar to what the Ikhwān envisioned for their society in undertaking to spread awareness of the soul. Just as the ultimate aim Grof foresees for spiritual practice is a planetary healing, so too does it seem that the ultimate aim of the Ikhwān in medicating souls was not only to heal the individual, but also to heal their society. For the Ikhwān appear to view diseases of the soul not only as afflicting the individual, but ultimately afflicting society as a whole. We have seen that the worst of these spiritual illnesses included the likes of malice, rancor, and religious fervor – illnesses which the Ikhwān viewed as fanning the flames of the sectarianism of their time.

In conclusion, then, the Ikhwān's preoccupation with the cultivation of the human soul over the course of *The Epistles* reflects not an esoteric, abstract, and theoretical fascination, but rather a concrete social and political effort to cool the polarizing hostilities they saw in their society, hostilities they believed to be the primary result of excessive attachment to the physical world. If we are to follow many previous scholars in referring to the Ikhwān as "philosophers", then we must do so with the full realization that their interest in philosophy did not stop at the theoretical, but rather continued very far into the realms of the politically and socially practical. In seeking to heal the soul, the Ikhwān were really seeking to cure their society from the pernicious and contagious diseases of intolerance and sectarianism.

### Chapter Three

#### Pre-Islamic Wisdom in *The Epistles*:

##### Evidence for The Ikhwān's Cultivation of the Soul as a Perennial Truth

Among the most noticeable features of *The Epistles* as a piece of Medieval Islamic literature is the manner in which the work incorporates wisdom from a variety of traditions that came prior to Islam. Yet despite the discernible role which pre-Islamic traditions appear to play in much of the discourse of *The Epistles*, this role has had little analytical treatment from scholarship. Although scholars make an interesting observation when they describe the diversity of knowledge in *The Epistles* as “encyclopedic” or “eclectic”, this description ultimately does little to shed light on the function which diversity of knowledge performs in framing the message and meaning of *The Epistles* as a piece of literature directed at a medieval Islamic audience. Moreover, some scholars have gone so far as to view the diversity of wisdom traditions in *The Epistles* as evidence that the Ikhwān were not Muslims. Recall, for instance, Ian Richard Netton's suggestion that much of the knowledge strands in *The Epistles* are “alien” to Islam and thereby indicative of the idea that the Ikhwān were “reluctant Muslims” (107).

The conclusion that the presence of pre-Islamic knowledge strands in *The Epistles* serves to deny that the Ikhwān were Muslims, however, is not only unfruitful to analysis of the text, but is also somewhat presentist. This conclusion is presentist because it seems in part to be overly informed by today's prevailing standards of truth, standards of truth which differ in important ways from those by which a medieval Islamic audience would

have likely received a text like *The Epistles*. By “standards of truth” I mean those standards by which something is understood to be true or false – confirmed or denied – for a given audience. In comparing modernist standards of truth to those prevalent in the Islamic middle ages, one of the most important differences has to do with the apparent role played by diversity and variation. As far as modernist standards are concerned, diversity and variation in accounts are often viewed to be in conflict with the idea of “one truth”. When it comes to the issue of religion, for example, many modern audiences have a tendency to construe the differences between the Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their respective accounts of God as evidence for the view either that only one of these religions can be the “right” one, or that all must be wrong and that in actuality no one God exists. In other words, there exists a prevailing tendency in modern discourse, perhaps related to the rise of empirical science, to view truth as necessitating *absolute unity* and *absolute consistency* in account. Any variation in account or observation is thereby taken either as evidence against a given truth, or evidence that simply no truth exists at all. A tendency somewhat like this one seems to be informing Netton’s skeptical claims about the Ikhwān’s Muslim identity. For in suggesting that the Ikhwān were reluctant Muslims because pre-Islamic knowledge traditions are “alien” to Islam, Netton seems to be implying that the presence of these diverse traditions in *The Epistles* serves to deny the possibility that the text sends any kind of consistent and unified Islamic message.

Yet the relationship between variation on the one hand and truth and unity on the other hand was understood quite differently according to medieval Islamic standards of



knowledge. While the contemporary tendency is often to view variation as debunking truth, in the Islamic Middle Ages variation was actually understood to a large degree as crediting truth. This latter understanding can be seen most readily in the medieval legal concept of *tawātur*, an Arabic term translating approximately to “corroboration through recurrence”.<sup>14</sup> Embedded in the notion of *tawātur* is the idea that historical diversity and multiplicity of accounts about one event or concept serve to strengthen the veracity of the later.<sup>15</sup> The notion of *tawātur* is thereby a concept of truth formation that recognizes diversity while at the same time recognizing underlying unity and commonality.

Given the importance of *tawātur* in the medieval Islamic context, then, it will be most fruitful to our reading of *The Epistles* to employ a framework of analysis that recognizes the interplay between diversity and unity in the formation and perpetuation of truth. M.M. Bakhtin’s dialogic criticism provides just such a framework. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel”, Bakhtin characterizes all literary discourse as shaped by two dynamic kinds of forces: “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces. While centripetal forces are reflective of an absolute and abstract language of unity, centrifugal forces are found in the divergent historical and social circumstances in which the language of unity is uniquely experienced and concretely played out in daily life. Bakhtin writes:

The centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a “unitary language”, operate in the midst of heteroglossia. At any given moment in its evolution,

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<sup>14</sup> . I have based this translation off of Chase Robinsons discussion of *tawātur* in his book *Islamic Historiography*. See: Robinson 87.

<sup>15</sup> . For an excellent investigation and analysis of the concept of *tawātur*, see Weiss.

language is stratified into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups... languages of generations and so forth.... Every utterance participates in the “unitary language” (in its centripetal forces and tendencies), and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces). (271-72)

The central upshot of Bakhtin’s observations appears to be that notions of unity in literature cannot be analyzed independently of notions of diversity. For insofar as literary discourse partakes in an idealized “unitary language” while at the same time partaking in the distinct voices of different social groups, ideologies, and historical periods, this means that unity and diversity in literature form a mutually interdependent and perpetual dialectic. According to Bakhtin’s framework, then, unity and diversity are not contradictory properties, but rather interrelated realities of language. As human language perpetually evolves, unity embeds itself in diversity, while diversity in turn feeds back toward unity. In Applying Bakhtin’s dialogic criticism to the Ikhwān’s prioritization of the soul as developed in *The Epistles*, I argue that this view of the soul is a unitary language which at once reflects a diversity of historical voices. In *The Epistles*, these historical voices are not only those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam but also those of the philosophers of Ancient Greece. Based upon Bakhtin’s dialogic criticism, then, **I will argue in this chapter that the view of spiritual truth put forth in *The Epistles* is a perennial truth, which, reflecting an irenic aim on the part of the Ikhwān to promote greater religious harmony in their own society, envisions a fundamental unity**

**between Islam and its spiritual predecessors while at the same time honoring the historical and social differences which underlie that unity.**

In numerous places in *The Epistles*, the Ikhwān argue for a common unity in purpose shared between Islam and the prior religious traditions. A particularly informative example of the unitary language the Ikhwān employ in describing commonality between the religions can be seen in the following passage. The Ikhwān write:

وأعلم يا أخي أنك إذا تأملت سير الأنبياء وصاياهم . . . وجدت أن غرضهم كلها مما شرعوه هو  
تأديب النفوس الإنسانية...

Know, O Brother, that if you contemplated the doings of the prophets and their advice, . . . you will find that the purpose behind all of the laws they decreed is the cultivation of human souls... (*Rasā'il* 118; vol. 4)

In Bakhtinian terms, then, the notion of the betterment of the human soul forms the core of the unitary language present in *The Epistles* – this notion is a centripetal force which draws together and unites the different religions under a common fundamental end. Yet just as there exists this unitary language in *The Epistles*, so too must this unitary language be subject to the centrifugal forces of social and historical heteroglossia – this which lies in the different historical and social circumstances in which each of the prophets and his followers found themselves. These differences are not only differences of time, but of place. They are not only differences of language, but of culture. Much of the discourse in *The Epistles* appears to acknowledge the presence of important centrifugal forces which underlie the common unity of religions. A particularly

interesting passage, for example, is the following, in which the Ikhwān attempt to explain to their reader the reason why the rulings and laws of the prophets have varied over time.

The Ikhwān write:

وأما اختلافهم في الطرق المؤدية إليها فمن أجل الطبائع المختلفة والأغراض المتغايرة التي  
عرضت للنفس، وبذلك اختلفت موضوعات النواميس، وسنن الديانات، مفروضات الشرائع، كما  
اختلفت عقاير الأطباء وعلاجاتها، وبحسب اختلاف الأمراض العارضة للأجساد

...

وبحسب اختلاف الأزمنة والأمكنة.

But their [the religions of the prophets] difference in their approach to this [the betterment of human souls] is due to the differing and varying circumstances which souls have experienced, and based on this the subjects of religious laws have differed – just as the pills of doctors and their treatments have differed based upon the different illnesses which bodies undergo.

...

[This] is based upon a difference of times and places. (*Rasā'il* 30; vol. 3)

While the Ikhwān advocate for a common unity between the religions, then, they also appear to recognize that the religions bear important differences which deserve recognition and explication in their own right. The Ikhwān make their point by once again drawing upon the analogy of the doctor, which seems to their reader something like the following syllogism:

1. Just as the common purpose of doctors is to heal bodies, so too is the common purpose of the prophets and their religions to heal souls.

2. However, just as doctors differ in their methods of treatment based upon difference in the nature of the illness treated, so too have the prophets differed in their approach to healing souls based upon the different historical and social circumstances in which those souls existed.

These statements, I propose, form the key to the interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces as concerns the recurrent theme of human salvation in *The Epistles*. These two statements are therefore my best attempt to illustrate the way in which *The Epistles* frame the language of the soul as a unitary language, while at the same time making room for and acknowledging the concrete heteroglossia to which this concept of unity has been continually subject as it has played out in the different religious traditions. For statements 1 and 2 do not directly contradict each other, but on close examination appear to mutually reinforce one another. Diversity of approach does not deny the existence of a common unitary purpose, but rather feeds back toward the practical accomplishment and furtherance of the former. In the same way that statement 1 and statement 2 do not directly contradict one another, then, so too does the presence of a notion of unity not rule out the possibility of diversity and variance. When it comes to religion, then, diversity and variance of approach do not undermine unity, but they rather reinforce and ultimately strengthen unity. This latter idea is the core of *tawātur*.

This mutual interplay between diversity and unity in the discourse of the Ikhwān on the human soul can be most readily seen in Epistle 44, which I will analyze through the remainder of this chapter. The particular section of Epistle 44 with which I will be concerned is entitled: “Those Who Devoted Themselves to Ignoring the Issue of Bodies” (*Faṣl Bunnā’ Amrihim ‘alā al-Tahāwun bi-’Amr al-’Ajsād*). In this section, the Ikhwān give a linear account of the lives of each of the three major prophets and some of the Greek philosophers, explaining how the life of each represents the unitary theme of turning away from the affairs of the body so as to better the soul. In this account, the Ikhwān argue that each prophet and philosopher in his own way believed in the eternal existence of the human soul, while each was likewise concerned with the common goal of raising human consciousness toward the importance of the soul and its existence beyond this world. In analyzing this section of Epistle 44, I will first give a general overview and commentary on each of the individual stories the Ikhwān tell about the respective prophets and philosophers. I will then conclude this chapter by raising some critical questions that might be posed about this section as a unified whole.

The Ikhwān begin by speaking of Moses. They write:

ومما يدل على ذلك أن الأنبياء، صلوات الله عليهم، يرون ويعقدون بقاء النفوس وصلاح حالها بعد تلف الأجساد، ما فعل موسى وعيسى وغيرهما من الأنبياء، عليهم السلام . . . أن موسى، عليه السلام، قال لأصحابه ولإخوانه: "توبوا إلى بارئكم فاقتلوا أنفسكم ذلكم خير لكم عند بارئكم". يعني هذه الأجساد بالسيف، لأن جوهر النفس لا يناله الحديد.

Among the evidence that points to the fact that the prophets, may God bless them, recognize and believe in the survival of the soul and the betterment of its state after the perishing of the body are the things that Moses, Jesus, and the other prophets did, peace be upon them . . . Moses, for instance, said to his companions and brothers: “Repent to your Lord and kill yourselves. This is best for you in front of your Lord” [Quran 2:54] – he meant kill these bodies with the sword, for the essence of the soul is such that steel cannot harm it (*Rasā’il* 26; vol. 4)

The Quran verse the Ikhwān cite here is uttered by Moses upon his return from the mount when he finds that some of his people have disobeyed his commandments and taken to worshipping the calf *al-‘ajal* (*Rasā’il* 26; vol. 4). In speaking of killing the body with a sword, The Ikhwān seem at first glance to be taking a quite literal interpretation of Moses’ command in the Quran that the calf worshipers kill themselves (*uqtulū anfusakum*). Yet it is somewhat bizarre to assume that Moses’ only solution for the Israelites’ disobedience was to order them to literally take their own lives. However, based upon the general theme of repentance in Quran 2:54, Quran scholar Muhammad Asad has suggested that a more reasonable translation of *uqtulū anfusakum* is not the literal “kill yourselves”, but the symbolic meaning of “mortify yourselves” (Asad 10; ch.2 note 45). Based on this translation, I hold that Moses’ command *uqtulū anfusakum* is best understood as a plea to the Israelites for self-denial of the body. This translation also seems to make sense in the context of *The Epistles*’ subsequent description of Moses and the Israelites. For the Ikhwān continue their description of Moses’ prophecy by discussing a series of acts Moses tells the Israelites to perform in seeking to repent to God

for their idol worship. Among the repentant acts Moses commands is for his followers to “dress themselves in shrouds” (*ilbisū al-akfān*) and to “go to the place of prayer” (*ukhrujū ilā al-muṣallā*), which is strongly suggestive of a denial of the physical body in order that one may focus on the soul. The Ikhwān go on to clarify that an aim like this one was indeed the subject of the repentant acts Moses commanded for the Israelites. Ending their account of the calf, The Ikhwān write:

ففعلوا ذلك طوعا وكرها، فأما الطائع فهو الذي علم أن في تلف جسده صلاحا لنفسه وخيرا لها، وأم الكاره  
فهو الذي جهل ذلك وعميت عليه الأنباء.

So they [the Israelites] did those things – some doing them obediently, and some doing them resentfully. The obedient was he who knew that in the perishing of his body is the betterment of the soul and its wellbeing, whereas the resentful was he who was ignorant of this fact, blind to the prophets (*Rasā'il* 26-27; vol. 4).

That the Ikhwān viewed the distinction between body and soul as a central aim of Moses' religion becomes further evident by examining the following passage, in which they discuss the Pharaoh and his failure to recognize said distinction:

وكذلك رضى نفوس تلك السحرة بتلف أجسادهم قتلا أو صلبا، إذا قال لهم فرعون: "أمنتم له قبل أن آذن  
لكم" فقالوا "لن نؤثر على ما جاءنا من البينات والذي فطرنا فاقض ما أنت قاض إنما تقضي هذه الحياة  
الدنيا، إنا أنا برئنا ليغفر لنا خطايانا وما أكرهتنا عليه من السحر" فصلبهم كلهم، ولم يهابوه، وسمحت  
نفوسهم بتلف أجسادهم، لما علمت أن في ذلك حياة لها وفوزا ونجاة، ونصرة للدين، وصلاح الإخوان،  
وطاعة لموسى، ورضا للرب.



Likewise the souls those sorcerers [of the Pharaoh] benefited by the destruction of their bodies through killing or crucifixion. For when the Pharaoh said to them: "How have you believed [in the God of Moses] before I have given you my permission!?" they replied: "We won't be persuaded by your word of the statements that have come to us [from our God] and which we have come to realize in our hearts. So decree what you will decree, for your power is limited to this world and this life only, but our time is with our Lord, may he forgive us for our trespasses and for the magic to which you have compelled us." [Quran 20:71-73 and 26:49-51] At this, the Pharaoh crucified all of the sorcerers. They did not suffer, and their souls allowed their bodies to perish once they realized that in the perishing of the body there is for the soul life, redemption, victory, and triumph for religion, the betterment brothers, obedience to Moses and goodness for the Lord. (*Rasā'il* 26-27; vol. 4)

The Quran verses upon which the Ikhwān draw in here tell the story of how some of the Pharaoh's sorcerers, after interacting with some of the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, are persuaded to take up the religion of Moses and to rescind their allegiance to their corrupt ruler. Angered that the sorcerers have disobeyed his authority by not even asking his permission to believe in the religion of Moses, the Pharaoh decrees that their bodies be mutilated and crucified.<sup>16</sup> The words with which the sorcerers respond to the Pharaoh's threat reflect their newfound grasp of the distinction between body and soul. For having

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<sup>16</sup>. This decree forms the entirety of Quran 20:71, which the Ikhwān have truncated here.

realized that their souls will ultimately depart their bodies and move into the divine world of God their true Lord, the sorcerers no longer fear the power of the Pharaoh which, in the final analysis, extends only to the temporal world of bodies. The Ikhwān's final comment that the sorcerers saw in the surrender of their bodies "the betterment of brothers" (*ṣalāḥ al-ikhwān*) is particularly interesting, for this comment suggests that the Ikhwān saw in the religion of Moses a paradigm of brotherhood very much parallel to their own paradigm of brotherhood, based upon cooperation and social altruism.

This parallel which the Ikhwān seem to be drawing between their own model of brotherhood and the model upon which prior religions were built becomes even clearer once we examine *The Epistles'* characterization of the Christian religion and the goals of Christ as a prophet. Introducing Christ as the second great prophet after Moses, the Ikhwān write:

ومما يدل على أن الأنبياء، عليهم السلام، يرون ويعتقدون بقاء النفس وصلاحها بعد مفارقة الجسد، فعل  
المسيح، عليه السلام، بناسوته، ووصيته للحواريين بمثل ذلك.

Among the evidence that points to the fact that the prophets - peace be upon them - realize and believe in the permanence of the soul and its betterment after it leaves the body, are the actions of Christ – peace be upon him – such as his advice and guidance to the disciples, and the like. (*Rasā'il* 29; vol. 4)

The Ikhwān go on to describe the purpose of Christ's prophecy as necessary to remind the Israelites of what they have ultimately forgotten about the teachings of Moses. They

describe Christ as finding a nation of people who have neglected the teachings of Moses and who have become overly concerned with their bodily and worldly pursuits. The Ikhwān tell us that Christ found the Israelites “holding superficially to the religion of Moses” (*muntaḥilīn dīn Mūsā*), “reading the Torah but not rising to its mandates” (*yaqra’ūn al-tawrāh ghayr qā’imīn bi-wājibihā*) (*Rasā’il* 30; vol. 4).

In characterizing Christ’s response to this situation, the Ikhwān draw a direct analogy between the story of Christ and the Parable of the Doctor that I discussed earlier in Chapter One (29-30). Just as the accomplishment of the doctor in the parable was to heal the bodies of the townspeople by adopting a pay it forward approach, so too do the Ikhwān argue that Christ’s accomplishment as a prophet was to heal the souls of his contemporaries by likewise adopting the pay it forward approach. Of Christ’s relationship with the Israelites, the Ikhwān write:

فرأى أن يظهر لهم بزي الطبيب المداوي، وجعل يطوف في محال بني إسرائيل يلقي واحداً يعظه ويذكره  
ويضرب له الأمثال، ويبهه من الجهالة، ويزهده في الدنيا، ويرغبه في الآخرة ونعيمها

So Christ saw it best to appear to them like the doctor who cures the sick. He began to circulate in the land of the Israelites. He would meet one and then preach to him, remind him, and give him examples. He would warn this person of ignorance, cause him to eschew this world, and turn his desires toward the hereafter and its bliss (*Rasā’il* 30; vol. 4).

The Ikhwān go on to give an account of Christ's encounter during his travels with a nation of people called *al-Qaṣṣāriyyīn*, literally, "the people who don white robes" (*Rasā'il* 30; vol. 4). Speaking in parable, Christ asks the people if it would make sense for them to wear their clean, white robes upon their bodies if their bodies were soiled with dirt and filth. Responding in bewilderment to the apparent pointlessness of the question, the Qaṣṣāriyyīn tell Christ that the answer is of course "no", and that anybody who does this is a fool (*wa man fa'la dhālika kāna safīhan*). Christ then responds in irony by telling the Qaṣṣāriyyīn that they themselves have done this (*fa'altumūhā antum*). When the Qaṣṣāriyyīn respond again by asking how this is possible, Christ explains that they have become overly preoccupied with the appearance and comfort of their bodies while their souls have become soiled by the likes of ill-will (*sū' al-ẓann*), and that somebody who allows this to happen is by analogy just like somebody who would foolishly don clean clothing upon a soiled and unclean body. Somewhat miffed by Christ's observations about their way of life, the Qaṣṣāriyyīn respond by asking him what else they are supposed to do but to try and secure their livelihood (*hal lanā budd min ṭalab al-ma'āsh?*) (*Rasā'il* 30; vol. 4).

The Ikhwān report that Christ responds to this existential question in the following manner:

قال: فهل لكم أن ترغبوا في ملكوت السماء حيث لا موت، ولا هرم، ولا وجع، ولا سقم، ولا جوع، ولا عطش، ولا خوف، ولا حزن، ولا فقر ولا حاجة، ولا تعب ولا عناء، ولا غم، ولا حسد بين أهلها، ولا

بغض، ولا تفاخر ولا خيلاء، بل إخوان على سرر مقابلين فرحين مسرورين، في روح الريحان، ونعمة  
ورضوان، وبهجة ونزهة....

Christ said: Wouldn't you like to seek after the Kingdom of Heaven where there  
is no death, no anger, no pain, no despair, no hunger, no thirst, no fear, no  
sadness, no poverty nor want, no tiring nor trouble, no grief, no envy among its  
people, no unpleasantness, no pride nor vanity? Rather this kingdom is a place  
where there are joyful and delighted brothers on thrones sitting beside one another  
in the mercy of the divine, in the delight of goodness, in joy and pleasure....  
(*Rasā'il* 30; vol. 4).

In style and in lexicon, the Arabic language of the above passage is very biblical in  
nature, and the Ikhwān appear to be borrowing the language of the Arabic bible (Ar. *al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas*) which would likely have been extant in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Christian  
community of Iraq.<sup>17</sup> A particularly close relationship in theme and in language can be  
seen when we compare the above Arabic passage to verse 4 of Rev. 21 from the Arabic  
bible. Speaking of God's promise in the Kingdom of Heaven, Rev. 21:4 reads:

و سيمسح الله كل دمعاً من عيونهم و الموت لا يكون فيما بعد و لا يكون حزن و لا صراخ و لا وجع فيما  
بعد لان الامور الاولى قد مضت.

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<sup>17</sup>. The oldest full manuscript of the bible in Arabic dates from 867 C.E. It is called the Mt. Sinai Codex 151. See: Griffith 131-132.

God will wipe away the tears from their eyes. There will be no more death. There will not be sadness, nor crying, nor pain anymore, because the old way of things has passed. (*al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas* Rev. 21:4).

Grammatically and stylistically, the most important commonality between Rev 21:4 and Christ's dialogue in *The Epistles* can be seen in the common use of the Arabic structure negation particle *lā*. A particularly significant use of *lā* which appears in both texts is of the type called *lā nāfiyah lil-jins*, which, translating roughly to “negator of the entire kind”, is the strongest form of negation in Arabic. Hence the most literal understanding of a phrase like *lā waja* ‘, which occurs in both texts, would not be simply “no pain” but rather something like: “categorically no pain whatsoever”, or “the complete non-existence of pain”.

Using Christ as a historical voice, the Ikhwān appear to creatively employ and expand upon this biblical language in promising the pious soul a far better existence in the afterlife than it enjoys in this world of the body. Not only is the Kingdom of Heaven a place where there is absolutely no pain and sadness (*ḥuzn*), but also a place completely devoid of sentiments like envy (*ḥasad*) and vanity (*khilā'*), the harsh desires and emotions which the Ikhwān see as leading to violence and discord in this world.

Ultimately, then, Christ's voice in *The Epistles* seems to echo the same theme of delayed gratification and self-restraint which we saw develop in the Ikhwān's characterization of the afterlife in Chapter Two. For the promises of spiritual pleasure and joy Christ mentions, compounded with the promises of an absolute absence of all painful

aspects of bodily existence, provide a strong incentive for the believer to hold out patiently for the afterlife, living a life of moderation and tolerance in this world while refusing to succumb to the temptations of emotions which drive one to ill-will and ultimately fuel social discord.

Having finished with Christ, the Ikhwān turn next to the experiences of Muhammad and his followers. They write:

مما يدل على أن أهل بيت نبينا، عليهم السلام، كانوا يرون هذا الرأي تسليمهم أجسادهم إلى القتل يوم كربلاء، ولم يرضوا أن يتولوا على حكم يزيد وزيد، وصبروا على العطش، والطعن والضرب، حتى فارقت نفوسهم أجسادهم، ورفعت إلى ملكوت السماء، ولقوا آباءهم الطاهرين محمداً وعلياً والمهاجرين والأنصار الذين اتبعوهم في ساعة العسرة، الذي رضي الله عنهم ورضوا عنه، ولو لم يكن القوم مستيقنين ببقاء نفوسهم بعد مفارقة أجسادهم، لما تعجلوا الهلاك أجسادهم، وتسليمها إلى القتل والضرب والطعن....

Among the evidence that points to the fact that the people of the house of our prophet, peace be upon them, were of this opinion [that the soul survives the body after death] is their surrendering of their bodies to the killing on the day of Karbalā'. They did not see it fit to recognize the rule of Yazīd and Ziyād.<sup>18</sup> They endured thirst, stabbings, and beatings, until their souls left their bodies and rose to the Kingdom of Heaven. There they met their virtuous ancestors whom God was pleased with – Muhammad, Ali, and the immigrants and supporters who followed them in the times of hardship. If these people had not been certain of the fact that their souls would survive after leaving their bodies, then they would not

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<sup>18</sup>. Appointed governor of Iraq by the second Umayyad Caliph Yazīd, Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyād was responsible for dispatching the Umayyad forces to Karbalā' (Hawting 310).

have been so steadfast in surrendering their bodies to killings, beatings, and stabbings.... (*Rasā'il* 33; vol. 4)

The Ikhwān's mention of the Day of Karbalā' (680 C.E.) here, on which Ali's son Ḥusayn and his followers were martyred at the hands of the Umayyads<sup>19</sup>, serves to provide further support for the prioritization of the soul over the body as a key aspect of religion. For the immediate reasons behind the events at Karbalā' had to do with the Umayyad Caliph Mu'āwiyah's decision to appoint his son Yazīd as his successor, thereby for the first time implying a precedent of secular dynastic succession in Islam (Hodgson 200; Berkey 76). Yet many in the early Muslim community, among whom were Ḥusayn and his followers, known as *ahl al-bayt*, were against the idea that the Caliphate ought to function as a mere dynasty (Berkey 88). For the vision of the early Muslim community was that the Caliph would have a certain spiritual aptitude, able to not merely rule as a secular political leader, but also to ensure that the community maintain and carry forward the religion that God had sent down through Muhammad (Berkey 88). Mu'āwiyah's ambitions to establish a dynasty in his own bloodline, then, were viewed by Ḥusayn and his followers as a distortion and abuse of the power originally meant for the office of Caliph by *ahl al-bayt* (Berkey 88). Faced with an army of Umayyads at Karbalā' compelling him to swear allegiance to Yazīd, Ḥusayn adamantly refused, and the fighting thereby broke out (Hodgson 219). The massacre at Karbalā' was remembered and mourned in Iraq for generations not only by the proto-Shī'ah, but also by many of the

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<sup>19</sup>. For a concise discussion of the events of Karbalā', see Hodgson 218



proto-Sunni's as a sign of barbaric injustice and corruption on the part of the Umayyad state (Berkey 78-79). The Ikhwān, then, situated geographically close by in Basra, are likely mentioning Karbalā' because it is an event with which the immediate population would have been closely familiar, and would have been able to associate with the theme of spiritual triumph of the soul over worldly oppression.

More specifically, it seems that the Ikhwān might be implying a parallel between the experience of Ḥusayn in facing Yazīd and the experience of Moses in facing the Pharaoh. For in the same way that the Pharaoh is depicted as a corrupt ruler whose mandate extends only to this world of bodies, so too might we draw the conclusion that the Ikhwān saw Yazīd as a decadent ruler who had lived according to the desires of his body rather than out of an awareness of his soul. In the same way that Pharaoh's sorcerers who converted to Judaism fearlessly submit their bodies to execution by their corrupt ruler rather than forgo their new found convictions in the one God, so too do the followers of Ḥusayn do a very similar thing when they sacrifice their bodies rather than agree to compromise their souls to the coercive rule of Yazīd. Likewise, the Ikhwān's use of the Christian terminology *malkūt al-samā'* in describing the Karbalā' martyrs' ascent to heaven is perhaps a suggestion that the martyrs' submission of their bodies to harm in order to live according to the greater principles of the soul finds a kind of parallel in Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross.

Finally, it should be pointed out that even though the memory of Karbalā' served to heighten sentiments of mutual hostility and division between the *ahl al-bayt* and the

Umayyads,<sup>20</sup> the Ikhwān's language in remembering the event seems to be very non-sectarian and moderate nature. The Ikhwān do not seem to extend the blame for Karbalā' to anybody except for Yazīd and Zīyad, and even in this case the language is relatively mild compared to what many in 10<sup>th</sup> century Iraq would have been inclined to say about the Umayyads. Likewise, the *ahl al-bayt* in this passage are depicted not as an antagonistic faction with a pre-conceived political agenda, but as peaceful conscientious objectors, their conscience rooted in their spiritual conviction. It is only once they have no other option that they engage in fighting, not to vanquish the Umayyads, but because they would rather die than to live under a ruler who does not know the difference between the body and the soul.

Having finished giving accounts of the three prophets and their followers, the Ikhwān turn next to the Greek philosophers, explaining how the beliefs and actions of each reflect ultimately the same basic concern with the soul to be found in the monotheistic religions. I will focus here specifically on the accounts the Ikhwān give of Socrates and Plato. Starting with Socrates, the Ikhwān write:

ومما يدل على أن الفلاسفة الحكماء المتألهين كانوا يرون هذا الرأي ويعتقدونه تسليم سقراط جسده  
للتلف، وتناوله شربة السم اختياراً منه: وذلك أن هذا الرجل كان حكيماً من حكماء بلاد يونان  
وفلاسفتها، وكان قد أظهر الزهد في الدنيا ونعيمها ولذاتها، ورغب في سرور عالم الأرواح  
وروحها وريحانها ودعا الناس إليها ورغبهم فيها، وزهدهم في المقام في عالم الكون الفساده،

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<sup>20</sup>. See Berkey 88 for a concise but useful discussion of the political ramifications of Karbalā'.

فأجابه إلى ذلك جماعة من أولاد الملوك وكبار الناس . . . يسمعون حكمته وغرائب نوادر  
كلامه....

And the among the evidence that points to the fact that the wise philosophers were of this opinion and believed in it is Socrates' surrendering his body to harm, and his choosing willfully to take the drink of poison. This man was a Wiseman from among the wise men of his Greece and its philosophers. He had shown self-restraint from this world, its delights, and its pleasures, and desired instead to know the secrets of the world of spirits and its essence. He called people to this latter world and caused them to desire it likewise. He caused them to renounce residing in the world of generation and corruption.<sup>21</sup> A group consisting of the sons of kings and high noblemen answered Socrates' call, . . . listening to his wisdom and the curiosities of his stories (*Rasā'il* 34-35; vol. 4).

The Ikhwān's characterization of Socrates here is analogous especially to their characterization of Christ. For just as Christ gained his following of disciples via a pay it forward method of kindness and gentle persuasion, so too did Socrates take the same approach in gaining the respect and loyalty of the citizens of Athens. Further, in speaking of Socrates' willingly drinking the poison which has been prescribed as his death sentence, the Ikhwān seem to be arguing that a central commonality between Socrates and the prophets is that none of the former showed any fear in the face of corrupt rulers who tried to crush their influence. For this passage seems to suggest that Socrates, like

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<sup>21</sup>. This is the direct translation of the Arabic phrase “‘ālam al-kawn wal-fasād”, which is a Greek philosophical term referring to the impermanent and fleeting physical world. This term was likely borrowed from Aristotle, who wrote a work entitled “On Generation and Corruption”.

the prophets, was aware that only the body can be harmed by the decrees of kings. Like the prophets, Socrates in the final analysis looked not to the rulers of this world for his liberation, but to the world beyond in which the soul ultimately resides.

That the Ikhwān hold something like this to be the case is further implied by the below passage, which more greatly details the moment of Socrates' death. The Ikhwān write:

ولما تناول شربة السم ليشربها بكى من حوله الحكماء والفلاسفة حزناً عليه، فقال لهم: لا تبكوا،  
فإني وإن كنت مفارقاً لكم إخواناً حكماء فضلاء فإني أذهب إلى إخوان لنا حكماء فضلاء كرماء،  
وقد تقدمنا فلان وفلان، وعد جماعة من الفلاسفة الحكماء الذين كانوا قد ماتوا قبله، فقالوا: إنما  
نبكي على أنفسنا حين نفقد أباً حكيماً مثلك.

When he went to drink the poison, the wise men and philosophers around him cried in sadness for him, so he said to them: “Do not cry. For even though I am leaving you, wise and brave brothers, *I am going to our brothers [up there] who are wise, brave, and charitable*. We have advanced person by person.” And he counted all the wise philosophers who had died before him. So they said to Socrates: “We cry for our own sake when we lose a wise father like you.”

(*Rasā'il* 34-35; vol. 4) [My Emphasis]

The Ikhwān's characterization of Socrates' last words in this passage raises a very important question. For unlike in the case of the Prophets, the Ikhwān do not suggest an explicit destination for Socrates' soul in the afterlife. I have inserted the phrase “up there” parenthetically into Socrates' words on the implicit assumption that on his death his soul indeed departed this world to go “up there” somewhere. Yet the line unaltered itself

simply reads: *I am going to our brothers*. Where exactly, then, do the Ikhwān think Socrates' soul going in the afterlife, and where do they think the brothers he speaks of are located? It seems fair enough to assume that this place might be the “world of spirits” (*‘ālam al-arwāḥ*), to which the Ikhwān give direct mention in speaking of Socrates earlier. Should we assume, however, that this *‘ālam al-arwāḥ* is synonymous with *malkūt al-samā*? Should we expect that the martyrs at Karablā also met Socrates when they ascended to heaven? The Ikhwān seem to purposely leave the answer to these questions ambiguous. Perhaps we might conclude that they were afraid to come out on the public record with an explicit statement that Socrates ascended to the same heaven as the followers of the prophets, as such a statement would likely have stirred up a great deal of bitter rebuke and may have even placed their lives in danger. Or perhaps we may conclude that this passage indicates a belief that Socrates, despite his merits, did not achieve the full salvation characteristic of the monotheistic religions.

Yet in speculation, I lean toward the conclusion that the Ikhwān did indeed see for Socrates a kind of salvation quite similar to that which the Abrahamic religions came later to envision for the soul. For if we follow Bakhtin's framework of the interplay between unitary and heteroglossic language, we are lead to the conclusion that the Ikhwān's use of the term “*‘ālam al-arwāḥ*” in the case of Socrates does not likely suggest a belief in his spiritual inferiority, but rather an acknowledgment of the way in which his language, though superficially different from the language of the Abrahamic religions, nonetheless embodied the same underlying unity to be found in the prioritization of the soul over the body. For not only does Socrates' death in this account seem to involve the

same core moral to be found in the stories of the prophets - that of eventual triumph for spiritual awareness over worldly corruption and deception – but furthermore, shortly after this account the Ikhwān go on to make a statement strongly suggesting that the pursuit of *al-falsafah* and the pursuit of *al-sharī‘ah*, though they may appear to speak different languages, are in effect one and the same pursuit. This statement comes in the context of a criticism directed by the Ikhwān against the philosophers and men of *sharī‘ah* in their own society who argue and disagree with one another to no end, failing to realize that their respective pursuits are ultimately of a common end. The Ikhwān write:

يناقضون تارة الفلسفة بالشريعة، وتارة الشريعة بالفلسفة، فيقعون في الحيرة والشكوك، فيضلون ويضلون.

Sometimes they contradict philosophy by appeal to *sharī‘ah*, and sometimes they contradict *sharī‘ah* by appeal to philosophy. So they fall into confusion and doubt, and they become misguided and misguide others (*Rasā’il* 36; vol. 4).

This lament of the perpetual bickering between the philosophers and the more traditionally minded men of *sharī‘ah*, then, seems to imply that the Ikhwān were of the view that philosophy and *sharī‘ah* ought not to be understood as rival modes of thinking, but as complementary pursuits mutually beneficial and enriching to one another and likewise mutually beneficial to the aim of salvation for the soul. At the very least, the above statement might be read as further evidence of the Ikhwān’s aim to resolve perpetual conflict in their society by suggesting underlying compatibility between ostensibly conflicting ideas and beliefs.

What the Ikhwān say about Plato raises even more questions about the their view of salvation for the philosophers than the passage on Socrates. On Plato, the Ikhwān write:

ومما يدل على أن أفلاطون حكيم اليونانيين كان يرى هذا الرأي ويعتقده، يعني بقاء النفوس وصلاح حالها بعد مفارقة الجسد، قوله في بعض حكمته: لو لم يكن لنا معاد نرجو فيه الخير، لكانت الدنيا فرصة الأشرار، وقال أيضاً: نحن هاهنا غرباء في أسر الطبيعة وجوار الشياطين، أخرجنا من عالمنا بجناية كانت من أبينا آدم، وكلام نحو هذا.

Among the evidence that points to the fact Plato, the great Wiseman of the Greeks, was of this opinion – we mean the survival of souls and their betterment after leaving the body – is his saying that “If there were no afterlife in which we seek the good, then this world would be opportune for all evils.” He also said: “We here in this world are estranged in the prison of nature and the company of devils. We were expelled from our [true] world because of the transgression of our father Adam”, and other sayings like this. (*Rasā'il* 35; vol. 4)

In this passage, the exact phrase used to refer to the “afterlife” which Plato speaks of is *al-ma'ād*. Meaning literally “the return”, *al-ma'ād* is a common Islamic synonym for *al-ākhirah*, which refers to the afterlife in Islamic theology (Ibn Manẓūr, “-w-d.”). Why do the Ikhwān place this Islamic term in the historical mouth of Plato? Just as in the case of Socrates, I propose that this language be read in the Bakhtinian sense, as the result of an effort to imply that the Greek philosophers were able to achieve salvation for the soul much in the same way that the prophets were. Yet the effect seems to be slightly different here in the case of Plato. For while the use of the more Greek sounding term *'ālam al-*

*arwah* in the case of Socrates seems to acknowledge the presence of different historical circumstances as centrifugal forces which underlie the unitary Islamic understanding of the soul, the emphasis here upon the term *ma'ād* as spoken by Plato seems to place the stress in the opposite direction: it instead more greatly emphasizes the common unity that transcends through different historical circumstances. For in uttering the common Islamic term *al-ma'ād*, Plato appears to function in the discourse of the *The Epistles* as a historically corroborative anchor for the Ikhwān's belief that the human soul will eventually "return" to its Creator. A similar observation might be made regarding Plato's claim to have been expelled from the Garden of Eden via the transgression of Adam. For this remark suggests that the Ikhwān saw Plato's wisdom as early corroboration for their belief that the eternal human soul, because of its embodiment in this impermanent world, finds itself in a predicament from which it must strive to redeem itself. The Ikhwān's grounding of Islamic language in the historical voice of Plato, then, seems to be somewhat the result of an effort to characterize Plato as having been aware, if only tacitly, of the same basic truth that the religion of Islam came to later.

Perhaps the most informative part of all in the Ikhwān's discourse on the prophets and the philosophers is the conclusion to this discourse. The Ikhwān write:

أفتري أن أهل الديانات كلها اتفقوا على شيء لا حقيقة له؟ كلا....

Can you possibly imagine it to be the case that people of all of the religions have agreed upon on something that has no truth whatsoever? Of course not. (*Rasā'il* 37; vol. 4).



This concluding rhetorical question suggests that one of the strongest reasons the Ikhwān saw for the need to cultivate the human soul was found in their view that the survival of the soul beyond the body is a perennial truth. For the line of argument which the Ikhwān appear to be adopting here might be couched and illustrated in terms of the following statements:

1. If many different parties from different historical times and places all arrive at the same basic conclusion C, then C must be true.
2. The philosophers, the prophets, and their respective followers are different parties that came from different historical times and places.
3. The philosophers, the prophets, and their respective followers each arrived at the conclusion C: that the body is ultimately impermanent while the soul is ultimately real and eternal.

- 
4. Therefore, C must be true.

In other words, the Ikhwān here are citing their belief that the religions and their followers have independently arrived at conclusion C to be *in itself* evidence for the consequent truth of C, and very strong evidence at that. This concluding argument, then, reflects at its core the corroborative spirit of *tawātur*.

Up to now, I have drawn upon Bakhtin's dialogic criticism in order to argue that the Ikhwān envision their view of the soul as a perennial truth. To use Bakhtin's language, this perennial truth is such that it is grounded in a common metaphysical unity while at the same time expressed and re-confirmed via a diversity of concrete historical voices found in the differing respective experiences of the prophets and the philosophers. By grounding the language of the soul in the heteroglossic experiences of different spiritual traditions, *The Epistles* appear ultimately to carve out a space in which dialogue and coexistence between Islam and other religions is rendered possible.

A characterization of the Ikhwān's irenic view of religion cannot be complete, however, without a consideration of its limits. The most serious question that must be asked is regarding the practical limits of the Ikhwān's discourse on the soul is that which pertains to salvation. Although the Ikhwān acknowledge the experiences of Moses and Christ in Epistle 44, does this necessarily mean that they viewed Jews and Christians in practice as equally capable of attaining the same salvation which the Quran promises for pious Muslims? Although it may initially seem easy to interpret Epistle 44 as a message of universal salvation for those who have awareness of the soul, this argument appears to run into certain obstacles. For Epistle 44 seems to impose a hierarchical characterization upon the pre-Islamic religions as means toward salvation of the soul, placing Christianity over Judaism. The clearest suggestion of such a hierarchical characterization can be found in the Ikhwān's quite critical claims that the Israelites were superficially impersonating the true religion of their prophet Moses, and therefore were in need of Christ's assistance in order to turn them again toward the right path. Relative to the

language used to describe the followers of the other religions, the language used to describe the Jews seems to be quite harsh. Perhaps, however, the Ikhwān's characterization of Christ's prophecy as a kind of reform to the religion of Judaism was not so much a criticism of 10<sup>th</sup> century Jews as it was the result of the effort to be faithful to prevailing perceptions of history. In fact, on a closer look the presence of Christian themes might be said to disproportionately dominate in Epistle 44. Why for instance does the account of Christ's words seem to be based more upon extant Christian sources, while the account of Moses comes mostly from the Quran? Does this feature of Epistle 44 then suggest that the Ikhwān were more sympathetic to the Christian religion as a means to salvation than they were to the Jewish religion? In the end, we can only speculate.

Although it is difficult to be sure about whether Epistle 44 reflects belief in the possibility of equal salvation for Jews and Christians alike, it seems at the very least to reflect a belief in peaceful coexistence among the different faiths as necessary for the greater public welfare. That the Ikhwān saw such coexistence as necessary is particularly apparent in the following earlier commentary on the hostility among different denominations and religions in their society. In Epistle 31, The Ikhwān write:

وأهل الشرائع المختلفة يقتل بعضهم بعضاً، ويلعن بعضهم بعضاً، كما يفعل النواصب والروافض والجبرية  
والقدرية والخوارج والأشاعرة وغير ذلك. وكذلك في الملة العبرانية مثل العينية والسمعية، وفي الملة  
السريانية كالنسطورية واليعقوبية وما بينهما من الخلاف.

. . .

ثم اعلم أنه لا يصلح بين أهل الديانات ولا يؤلف بين المتعاديات . . . إلا المعرفة بالحق الذي يجمعهم على  
كلمة التقوى.

...  
فمن رأى نفسه معادية لطائفة من الطوائف . . . فهو لا يزدرع الحق في قلبه....

The people of the different religions kill each other, and they condemn each other, just as the Nawāṣib<sup>22</sup> and the Rawāfiḍ<sup>23</sup> and the Jabarīyah<sup>24</sup> and the Qadarīyah<sup>25</sup> and the Kharijites and the ‘Asha‘rites<sup>26</sup> do. And likewise in the Hebrew religion there are the Karaites and the Rabbinites, and in the Syraic religion there are the Nestorians and the Jacobites and the differences between them

...

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<sup>22</sup>. This is a sectarian and pejorative Islamic term used by Shi‘is to refer to those who allegedly condemn Ali ibn Abi Talib and the *ahl al-bayt*. Ibn Manẓūr defines the term in the following way: *qawmun yatadayyinūna bi-baghḍat ‘Ali*. (A group that bases their religion off of hating Ali) See “n-ṣ-b”.

<sup>23</sup>. *rawāfiḍ*, meaning “deserters” is a sectarian term used by Sunni leaning Muslims to refer to the Shi‘is and *ahl al-bayt* as deserters of the Islamic community due to their alleged refusal to recognize the first four *rashidūn* caliphs as legitimate rulers. (Kohlberg, 387)

<sup>24</sup>. A theological sect of Islam that believed that God controls all human actions though determinism and that free will does not really exist (“Al-Jabarīyah”, par. 1).

<sup>25</sup>. Against the determinist position of the Jabarīyah, the Qadarīyah were proponents of human free will (Hodgson 264).

<sup>26</sup>. Named after the founder Abu al-Ḥasan al-‘Ash‘arī (d. 935-6), the Ash‘arites were an Islamic interpretive school that tried to accomplish a synthesis between the very traditionalist approach of the Hanbalī school and the more rationalist approach of the Mu‘atazli school. (Berkey 148).

Know that there is nothing that makes amends between the people of different religions, and nothing that brings together enemies, . . . except for knowledge of the truth which unites them in heedfulness of God.

. . .

So he who sees himself as an enemy to any particular religious group . . . has not planted in his heart the truth that binds them all together. (*Rasā'il* 161; vol. 3).

The common unifying truth the Ikhwān are referring to in this passage seems to be the same perpetually corroborated doctrine of the permanence of the soul which they speak of in Epistle 44. We might conclude, then, that the Ikhwān are appealing to the common unity which underlies the diversity of religious practices in order to tell us that each religion bears a means toward reconciliatory dialogue with the others by appeal to the basic kernel of truth which they all share. This kernel of truth, as is spelled out in Epistle 44, is found in the fundamental concern for realizing the distinction between the body and the soul, as well as the need to carry out one's actions in a manner that accords with knowledge of that distinction.

Therefore, although the apparent message of religious harmony in Epistle 44 likely had its limits in practice, I am still inclined to argue that the language of the Ikhwān on the different religions is relatively tolerant and irenic for its time, especially when compared to some of the very harsh and more close-minded sectarian language which can be found in other sources from around the same period. Consider, for instance, the following words from a letter which the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn wrote during the

*mihnah*<sup>27</sup> to his governor in Baghdad concerning the way in which those who denied the Caliph's official doctrinal stance on the Quran should be dealt with.

فأما ما قال المغرور بشر بن الوليد . . . وما أمسك عنه من أنَّ القرآن مخلوق . . . فقد كذب بشر  
في ذلك وكفر، وقال الزور والمنكر.

. . .

وأنصصه عن قوله في القرآن واستتبه منه

. . .

إذ كانت تلك المقالة الكفر الصراح

. . .

وإن أصر على شركه ودفع أن يكون القرآن مخلوقا بكفره وإلحاده، فاضرب عنقه، وابعث إلى  
أمير المؤمنين برأسه.

As far as what the Bishr bin al-Walīd<sup>28</sup> the deluded has said . . . in his refusal to  
recognize that the Quran is created, . . . he has lied and committed blasphemy. He  
has said the words of falsehood and that which God condemns.

. . .

I command him to rescind what he has said about the Quran,

. . .

---

<sup>27</sup>. Begun by al-Ma'mūn in 833 C.E., and ended by al-Mutawakkil in 848 C.E., the *mihna* was a public inquisition which required all religious judges, or *qadis*, to swear an oath acknowledging the rationalist Mu'tazilī doctrine that the Quran was the created word of God rather than the eternal word of God (Berkey 126). Al-Ma'mūn sanctioned the torture, imprisonment, and in some cases even the killing of those religious judges who refused to swear the oath (Nawas 705) .

<sup>28</sup>. Bishr ibn al-Walīd was among several of the judges who refused to swear the oath that the Quran was created (Nawas 700).

for those statements are blatant heresy

...

And if he insists upon this idolatry of his idolatry and refuses via his heresy and atheism that the Quran is created, then chop off his head and bring it to the Caliph (al-Tabari 640-41; vol. 8).

In his letter, Al-Ma'mūn goes on to criticize other dissenting religious judges in a similar manner, accusing them of atheism and unbelief due to their difference of opinion about the Quran. In contrast to the language of al-Ma'mūn, then, the language of the Ikhwān on religious piety appears quite inclusive indeed. For while al-Ma'mūn took a single religious doctrine espoused by one ideological sect (the Mu'tazilah), and tried to impose this doctrine on the religious judges by intimidation and force, it is reasonably apparent that the language of the Ikhwān bears no such impulse. Moreover, al-Ma'mūn's use of judgmental words like *kufr* and *ilhād* in describing religious scholars who did not believe in the createdness of the Quran seems to be reduce the concept of piety to contingency upon a very narrow and ultimately somewhat pedantic debate. In contrast, the Ikhwān's language of the eternal soul and the temporal body appears to ground the notion of piety in a far more fluid and timeless paradigm, a more flexible paradigm that allows for differences of opinion and practice so long as they result from the same underlying spiritual concern.

In this regard, I think we ought to do more than simply write off Epistle 44 as a clumsy attempt at syncretism or a bizarre effort to justify Greek philosophical ideas by

cloaking them in the guise of Islamic terminology. Surely many fair arguments might exist for reading the Epistle in the former way. Yet the formalized argumentative structure that the Ikhwān employ in order to frame Epistle 44 suggests that their aim was not so much an aim of sheer eclecticism as it was an aim of purposeful persuasion. In writing Epistle 44, it seems that the Ikhwān aimed to persuade their contemporaries that there exists a common spiritual truth in which each of the different religions have had some facilitative and contributive role to play. That the Ikhwān mention such a diversity of religions in the 10<sup>th</sup> century is in itself indicative of a relatively far-reaching vision of practical goodwill. For the Middle East until the 13<sup>th</sup> century had a population that was majority non-Muslim. Any 10<sup>th</sup> century effort to further the public good in the Muslim lands, then, would be amiss not to acknowledge the importance of pre-Islamic religious traditions. Though it is hard to say whether the Ikhwān believed in the same possibility of salvation for non-Muslims, then, it seems that they, as Muslims, tended toward a fairly broad conception of human spirituality ultimately indebted to and enriched by the existence of religious pluralism. While the irenic nature of the Ikhwān's message was not "absolute" according to the way we are inclined to idealize the term "irenic" today, and while it likely had its limits in practice, I think we ought not to shy away from the conclusion that the Ikhwān's message was nonetheless irenic for its time. At a time when the stability of the Islamic society was becoming ever more threatened by the polarizing influences of emerging sectarian consciousness between and among different religions, *The Epistles* can be read as a concerted attempt to mitigate these polarizing influences



through a re-emphasis upon and re-articulation of the common spiritual end to which each religious identity in its own way strives.

## Conclusion:

### *The Epistles* as a Response to the Clash of Civilizations

Over the course of this Thesis, I have argued for the presence of a noteworthy irenic message in *The Epistles* of the Goodwill Brethren of Basra. In chapter one, I examined the question of the Brethren's anonymity as authors of *The Epistles*, and how this anonymity functions within the text in order to carve out and envision a public sphere of brotherhood in which a range of individuals may participate in voice and in action so as to increase social cooperation and mitigate strife. Chapter two took up the question of the Brethren's humanist view of the soul, and how this view is closely related to their efforts to promote practices of goodwill and tolerance among the disparate social classes and religious identities which formed the patchwork of 10th century Arabo-Islamic society. Chapter three examined the corroborative character of pre-Islamic wisdom in *The Epistles*, showing how the Brethren argue that the priority of the soul over the body is shared and confirmed by the teachings and experiences of Judaism and Christianity, as well as those of the ancient philosophers.

How might *The Epistles* as an irenic text from the Islamic middle ages present a framework whereby we might respond to the Clash of Civilizations narrative which has been applied so widely and vigorously in the conversations of the post 9/11 world? While the Clash of Civilization's theory places an emphasis upon a historical separation and isolation between "Islamic civilization" and "Western civilization", *The Epistles* appear to place an emphasis instead on exchange, interaction, and ultimately interdependency

between Islam and the Judeo-Christian and Hellenistic traditions which came prior to it. To a large degree, the Clash of Civilizations theory radicalizes Islam, framing the religion as necessarily opposed to celebrated “Western” cultural values like intellectual openness, free inquiry, and pluralism. Yet *The Epistles* show us a conception of Islamic practice that in fact seems to bear many points in common with the latter “Western” values. For the Islam *The Epistles* show us is one that is not rigid and literalist, but fluid, dynamic, and grounded in the ever-evolving human pursuit of wisdom, self-understanding and self-betterment.

The view of *The Epistles* I have taken in this thesis is quite different from and even contrary to that which many prior scholars of the Ikhwān have taken. I have argued that the Brethren’s conception of Islam is not so much the product of a clandestine organization that stood on the fringes of society, but rather that of a cooperative brotherhood which sought by its own means to actively engage the social and political spheres at the center stage of the medieval Islamic world, spreading religious and philosophical wisdom with the ultimate aim of creating a more enlightened and tolerant society.

There is an Islamic organization in our own society that is trying to promote an irenic vision of tolerance similar to that which the Ikhwān tried to promote. This organization is trying to foster a sense of community and mutual dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in America, so that this country may begin to heal beyond the language of “us versus them” which so feeds the attitudes of political and religious extremism. Yet unfortunately, this is the very same organization which Newt Gingrich

has likened to Islamic radicalism. This organization is Feisal Abdul Rauf's Cordoba Initiative, of which the Park 51 Islamic Community Center is just one integral part. Rauf hoped for Park 51 to be a place where inter-faith dialogue could take place (Higgins, par. 4). He envisioned Park 51 as contributing to the community in the same way that the Jewish Community Centers and the YMCA have, providing a public space of recreation, education, and civic engagement (Hernandez, par. 10). As if to respond directly to the Clash of Civilizations narrative, Abdul Rauf said in a video interview with ABC News that the real conflict is not between Islam and America, but between "the moderates of all religions and the radicals of all religions." His words might be said to echo the essential message of the Brethren – that the success of radicalism and the perpetuation of religious violence feed off of nothing other than the failure of moderation, the absence of tolerance, and the lack of goodwill.

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