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ESOTERICISM VERSUS HERESY:
‘ABD AL-RAHMÂN AL-BISTĀMĪ, AN AGENT OF THE SCIENCE OF LETTERS IN BURSA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 15TH CENTURY

Heresy is nothing but the rejection of beliefs and practices that a dominant and so-called orthodox group has judged to be unorthodox. The author whom we will discuss in this article belonged to an intellectual and spiritual elite that was associated with the ruling circles in 15th-century Bursa. It seems the general perception of him was that he was perfectly orthodox. However, his affiliation with the school of Ibn ‘Arabî and his declared interest in esoteric knowledge or even in the occult—such as the science of letters or the prediction of events to come—had certainly doomed him to condemnation by the ‘ulama’. Yet he himself did not hesitate to expose certain adherents of the science of letters to public contempt, classing them among the worst of the heretics. His works in and of themselves are worthy of study, but the case of Bistâmî also reminds us that heresy and heterodoxy remain relative.

The essential information that we know about ‘Abd al-Rahmân b. Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. Ahmad al-Hanafi al-Bistâmî is contained within the short report that Tâshköprüzâde devoted to him in his Šbaqâ ‘ıq al’nu’mânîyya.1 He was originally from Antioch. The name Bistâmî is not an Iranian name but rather indicates a spiritual affiliation, which we will discuss later. Trained in all the Islamic traditional sciences, he was especially knowledgeable in the science of letters and its practical applications, notably magic squares (khawâss al-hurûf wa ‘ilm al-waft wa l-taksîr), and in the practice of predicting events to come (al-jâfr wa l-jâmî’a) and of analyzing their history and their chronology (al-tawârîhk). His research into these “strange” or occult sciences (al-‘ulûm al’ghariba) compelled him to travel to Syria, Egypt, and up to the western Islamic border. Was it his reputation in this domain that brought him to Bursa, capital of the Ottomans? The scholars of the city undoubtedly gave him a warm welcome since, as

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the report tells us, Mollah Shams al-Din al-Fanari\(^2\) learned the occult sciences from Bistami. Bistami stayed in Bursa until his death in 858/1454, one year after Constantinople was taken. Tashtoprüzade (d. 968/1561) had the occasion to study a large part of his oeuvre; according him, most of the works were autographs, carefully composed in delicate calligraphy.

While laudatory, Tashtoprüzade’s report refers to the principal interest of our author as the “strange sciences.” This reserve with regards to the occult sciences without a doubt explains why, up until our times, Bistami’s work remained written in his own hand, rather than copied by scribes, with the exception of a little-known literary work.\(^3\) His most cited work, \(al\-Faw'âib al-miskiyya fi-l-fawâtib al-makkiyya\) (“The scent of musk during the Meccan overtures”), reflects Bistami’s literary, intellectual, and spiritual personality rather well, and it merits an in-depth study. We’ll content ourselves here with a brief outline, which will show us the marks of heresy, and how the author intended to denounce them. His other, more technical works mostly deal with the science of letters or the \(jafr\), though they still contain a good deal of useful information on the author and his oeuvre.

The \(Faw'âib\) is presented as a collection of short epistles (\(risâla\)) whose titles, like the introduction to the work, are written in a rather meticulously rhymed prose. The body of the epistle, sometimes interrupted by short poems, adopts a style that is generally plainer. Why this ornate style to start with? The author states that he is responding to the request of an important person whom he does not name, but who could not be the sultan, contrary to what Brockelmann claims. In any case, Bistami confirms his mastery of the Arabic language and displays great cultural knowledge. He continues in the tradition of the \(adab\), which is displayed in the elegance of his style, the richness of his vocabulary, and the knowledge he has inherited partly from civilizations that preceded Islam. It is clear that he hadn’t had any trouble integrating himself into the milieu of the ‘ulama’ and being introduced to the high dignitaries of the state.

The work is a continuation of another author’s, whose oeuvre, since the 13th century, had continued to influence the intellectual and spiritual elite of Bilad al-Rum: Ibn ‘Arabi, whom Bistami implicitly and explicitly cited often. The title, \(Faw'âib al-miskiyya fi-l-fawâtib al-makkiyya\) is somewhat reminiscent of \(Futûhât al-Makkiyya\),\(^4\) “The Meccan Revelations.” Following the model of these earlier books, this book takes for

\(^2\) al-Fanari died in Bursa in 834/1431 at the age of 83 (in lunar years).

\(^3\) \(Manâhib al-tawassul fi maâhib al-tarassul\), in the margin of \(Jinân al-jinâs\) from Salâh al-Din al-Safadi, Cairo, 1299/1882.

\(^4\) In reality, the title is drawn from the \(Fawâ'ib al-jamâ'î wa fawâtib al-jalâl\) by Najm al-Din Kubrâ (d. 618/1221), the grand master of the Khwârezm (cf. the study and the edition from Fritz Meier, Die \(Fawâ'ib al-jamâ'î wa fawâtib al-jalâl\) by Najm ad-Din al-Kubrâ, Wiesbaden, 1957, and the recent study and translation from Paul Ballanfat: Najm al-Din Kubrâ, \(Les écllosion de la beauté et les parfum de la majesté\), Nîmes 2001). Although Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrinal influence was predominant, it is necessary to see in this reference to Najm al-Din Kubrâ an allusion to the latter’s major influence on Anatolian Sufism as well as on one of the initiating paths to which the author was linked.
a starting point the Kaba, the place of revelation of the mysteries, the point of contact between the sky and the earth, and the center of the hierarchy of saints who live in the world.

The author, in the manner of Ibn ‘Arabi, announces his plan in detail; he has planned 100 chapters, whose titles reveal his comprehensive intentions. It seems that he had deliberately stopped at chapter 30, having reached the “old age” of 62, as he says to us. Thanks to this hint, we know that he was born in 782/1380.

The *Fawâ’îb al-miskiyya* pursues three principal topics:

- A Sufi influence, strongly but not exclusively inspired by Ibn ‘Arabi, penetrates the most esoteric knowledge, but at the same time the author is anxious to define the orthodox paths toward this knowledge and the knowledge of the saintliness, warning the reader about certain deviations and teachings in some initiatory practices, like the *dhikr*, in particular;
- Specific developments in the science of letters, present in various modalities— theoretical and spiritual, theurgical and practical, like its medical applications, for example;
- A constant interest, already noted by Tâshköprüzâdeh, for the history, the chronology, the ancient scientific heritage, and the classification of the sciences. An heir of the classic *adab*, this work also collects a number of traditions of Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Greek origin already integrated into Islamic learning.

The encyclopedic project of Bistâmi was too vast to be carried out within his lifetime. We must admit that the logic of his plan sometimes escapes us. The work gives the impression that it was written in intervals and drawn together from texts previously written. This suggests the comparison between *Fawâ’îb al-miskiyya* and other works from Bistâmi on the science of letters in particular. The originality of the work consists less of the contents than of the project to re-center the whole of knowledge around an essential core: the science of letters, the key to all knowledge, “the science of the saints” according to expression of al-Hakîm al-Tirmidhi⁶ and used by Ibn ‘Arabi, and thus the science is the heir to the interior of the prophecy. In effect, Bistâmi is registered in an esoteric-hermetic tradition that rests simultaneously within Sufism and within the science of letters. Consciously echoing the title of the Epistles of Ikhwân al-safâ, he several times speaks of his discourse on “the brothers of the purity between the Sufis and faithful friends, adept at the science

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⁵ In the colophon of the consulted example: BN arabe 6520 f. 164, the scribe says he has copied the text from the autograph example, in 1091 H.

of letters” (ikhwân al-safâ min al-sûfiyya wa khillân al-wajâ min al-hurûfiyya). The two categories of spiritual beings are distinguished from one another but united by their common inspiration, the direct revelation (kashf) prepared for by the initiatory progression.

One passage reads:

The masters of the science of letters (al-sâdât al-hurûfiyya) are comparable to the sûfiyya in their mode of reception of the learning, but they are distinguished by their subtle knowledge, the noble secrets, their tastes, and their own terminologies. They receive the knowledge of the secrets of the Koran, of the augury (ja‘l), and of the relations between the letters, the numbers, the temperaments, and the astral conjunctions from the intermediary of the awfâq (“magic squares”). They also possess the science of divine names, prayers and their spiritual effects, the remedies....

The rest of this passage, which corresponds to the end of the book, enumerates the 68 sciences that come from the science of letters, which clearly shows that, for the author, the science of letters constitutes the origin and the conclusion of all the sciences.

How and by whom was Bistâmi initiated into the two paths here, that of Sufism and that of the letters? He tells us about the first, not in the Fawâ’îb al-miskiyya but in another document on the science of letters, the Kashf asrâr al-hurûf wa wasf ma’ânî al-zurûf. In a passage devoted to the masters of the Path, he mentions his affiliation with three initiatory chains. He was linked by a certain Abû l-Hasan ‘Alî al-Dûrî (or al-Dûzkî?) to the path of Najm al-Dîn Kubrâ, through Nûr al-Dîn al-Isfrâ’inî. His principal master seems to have been Shams al-Dîn Muhammad b. Ahmad al-At’âni, originally from Aleppo and who died in 807 AH, according to the author. This sheikh belonged to the Suhrawardiyya, through ‘Abdullah al-Balyânî (d. circa 686/1288) and through several masters carrying the nisba of Bistâmi up until

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7 He often employs this term, both positively and negatively, but he never uses the term hurûfiyya.
8 Fawâ’îb al-miskiyya f. 131b.
9 Ms BN Arab collection 2686, 216 f. The text was composed in 845 AH, one year after the Fawâ’îb.
10 In naming himself at the end of this chain, Bistâmi gives himself the nisba of Killizi. Killiz is a town under the authority of ‘Azâz, between Aleppo and Antioch, cf. Yâqût, Mu’jam al-Buldân, Beirut, 1957, IV, p. 476.
11 For more on him, see the introduction by Michel Chodkiewicz in Awhad al-Dîn Balyânî, Épître sur l’Unité Absolue, Paris 1982. It is interesting to note that a descendant of Balyânî in the 9th century AH was reputed for his knowledge of the occult sciences. On the family of
al-At‘âni. In effect, the initiatory chain of these masters was taken up again by Abû Yazîd al-Bistâmî, linked to the Imam Ja‘far al-Sâdiq in a direct and șuwaysî mode. This affiliation clearly explains why the name of Bistâmî is carried by the author and his masters. Lastly, Bistâmî had been initiated by a certain Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hâdî, who had been the master of At‘âni, to the path taken up by Shaykh Șafi al-Dîn al-Ardabilî, the ancestor of the Safavids (d. 735/1334). Thus in ‘Abd al-Rahmân al-Bistâmî several paths converge, and it is necessary to study the intermediaries in detail. Certain ones, like Balyânî or others associated with al-At‘âni, the author’s master, most likely broadcasted esoteric knowledge.

Concerning the science of letters, Bistâmî only mentions two principal inspirations: Ibn ‘Arabî and Shams al-Dîn al-Bûnî. As we have already noted, chapters three through seven of the Fawâ’îb al-miskiyya are modeled, in a different order, on chapters six through twelve of the Futûhât al-makkîyya, and other chapters that were planned but not written also borrowed their titles. Without a doubt, Bistâmî draws liberally from the works of Bûnî that he often cites; in regards to all his writing on the science of letters, Bistâmî owes everything to Bûnî. We must recall here the object of this science, which rests on a certain vision of the world. By their numeric value and their relations with the elements and the cosmos, the letters, whose pronunciation and writing are merely signs, constitute an intermediary reality between the world above and the world below. In the letters, the superior realities written in the celestial example of the Book, prototype of the Revelation, and the earthly realities meet. The combination of the letters from the names of beings and of things facilitates this meeting; thus these names can be bound to their superior principles, represented in particular by the divine and angelic names. The magic squares (awfâq) allow the properties and the senses, to which the letters refer, to be held in relation to each other and thus to serve as the superior or subtle principles for inferior beings or to reveal the hidden realities in the world that already exist in the

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12 Cf. Kashf asrâr al-hurîf f. 110-5. The composition of the text only complicates the reading of these chains, since it has been cut and rearranged several times, the text flowing in different directions.


14 His Durrat al-dîfâq fî șilm ak-hurîf wa l-awfâq is a commentary on the Lam’â nurâniyya fî l-awrâd al-rabbâniyya by Bûnî, cf. GAL suppl. I, p. 910, n. 7 (note by Michel Chodkiewicz).
Book where all things are written. The effects of this science might be physical 
(healing, protection, knowledge of the future) or they could be spiritual, all enabled 
by the invocation of divine names that raise the soul toward the superior worlds.

The science of letters is as inspired by the Koranic Revelation as by a wealth 
of cosmological knowledge, the heritage of previous traditions already largely mixed, 
gathered, and drawn on by specialists in occult sciences throughout the preceding 
centuries. This is most notably true in the tradition of alchemy.15 It was precisely Ibn 
‘Arabi who integrated a certain number of questions of a philosophical or hermetic 
nature into a universal vision of the Revelation in which the letters, by their phonetic, 
graphic, and numeric symbolisms, allow a recovery of the unseen principles of the 
universe. Büni, without neglecting the spiritual dimension that he often emphasizes, is 
above all devoted to developing the cosmological applications of this science.

Bistâmi, originally from one of the major cities of Antiquity, is inspired by both men 
and adds to theirs a new intention: to synthesize the science of letters not only with 
spiritual, hermetic, and scientific knowledge but also with historical and literary 
knowledge, taking up and adapting to his time the comprehensive and universalistic 
vocation of the adab. A particularly florid style in rhymed prose, used in the beginning 
chapters of the Fawâ’ih al-miskiyya, is the expression of this ambition.

Bistâmi is equally as florid in the apocalyptic narratives (jafr and malâhim),16 
another genre of esoteric literature tightly linked to the science of letters, especially 
when these texts announce, in the language of numbers, events such as the future, the 
vicissitudes of a certain dynasty, or the coming of the Mahdi. Upon his arrival in 
Anatolia, he applied his learning in this domain to his newly adopted land. While in 
Akshehir in 810 AH, he wrote: “The cry of the owl regarding the subject of the 
events of Rûm.”17 The author’s interest in this type of prediction falls in line with a 
vision of the story that progressively emerges from the background of the Fawâ’ih al-
miskiyya. Inspired by the first part of the Futûhât, the fasl al-ma’ârif (“the section 
of knowledge”),18 he exposes the beginnings and the ends, the origin of the world and 
its conclusion, adding to this the traditions regarding the taking of Constantinople 
and Rome (Qustantiniyya al-kubrâ wa Rûmiyya al-’uzmâ), events which, for the Muslims, 
needed to coincide with the coming of the Mahdi, the second coming of Jesus, and 
the invasion of Gog and Magog. This eschatological vision is tempered or held in 
wait by the prophetic tradition according to which “God sends to this community,

15 Cf. Paul Kraus, Jabir Ibn Hayyan. Contribution à l’histoire des idées scientifiques dans l’islam, Paris, 
16 Cf. EI2 articles Djafr, Malbama, and Malâhim (T. Fahd) and T. Fahd, La divination arabe, p. 
219-28.
17 On this text, the origin of the title, and its attribution to Bistâmi, see D. Gril, “L’enigme de 
la Shajara al-nu’mâniyya fî l-dawla al-’uthmâniyya, attribuée à Ibn ‘Arabi,” in Les traditions 
apocalyptiques au tournant de la chute de Constantinople (ed. B. Lellouch and S. Yérasimos) Varia 
18 See the introduction by M. Chodkiewicz in Ibn ‘Arabi, Les Illuminations de La Mecque, p. 46- 
69.
every one hundred years, a man who reforms its religion.” Mixing exoteric, esoteric, and eschatological perspectives, Bistâmî identifies a few of these various reformers: ’Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, al-Shâfi‘î, Tabarî, Isfâ’înî, Ghazâlî, Fakhr al-Din al-Râzî, Ibn Daqîq al-‘Id, Ibn Jamâ‘a (d. 733 AH); carefully, without saying anything concerning the 9th century AH, he announces the coming of the Mahdî for the 10th century. At the same time, he recalls that each epoch’s true master of the times is the gûthb, “the Pole” or the chief of the hierarchy of saints, an emanation from the Spirit of Muhammad, the Pole of all of humanity. Thus he deliberately superimposes several of the official initiatory stories of Islam. To recall that the apocalyptic traditions need to be interiorized and applied to each initiate individually, he focuses on the traditions from one chapter regarding the posthumous future of the soul and the four initiatory deaths. The following chapter curiously addresses two subjects that bear no apparent relation to each other. One finds here a sort of mirror of the princes: exhortations regarding justice and knowledge necessary for a good government, all of which comprise the art of war. The author then draws a relation between this and marvelous stories about legendary cities. Is there any relation between these two things? Does the text suggest that from the cities which represent the occult centers of the hierarchy of saints, the true vicars of God keep watch on the sovereigns of the world in their capitals and direct, behind their backs, their politics according to divine will? Similarly, the specific developments on the science of letters are followed by two chapters that are quite different, yet complementary. The first concerns the spiritual fundamentals of this science: the Supreme Reed and the Preserved Tablet, its history in Islam and the knowledge of the supreme Name of God. The second chapter is a sort of history of the universal philosophy or, rather, the universal Wisdom. Beginning with Hermes Trismegistus, and even including Zoroaster, Bistâmî gathers the Greek philosophers under a title found elsewhere in the history of medicine: ‘Uyûn al-anbâ’ fi taba-qât al-atibbâ (“The sources of information on the

20 According to Sakhâwî (see the preceding note), Ahmad Ibn Hanbal indicates the names of the first two people on the list in order to illustrate this tradition. The following people are primarily jurists and shafi‘i and ash‘ari theologians. One can find a nearly identical list in Sakhâwî’s work, as he was himself a shafi‘ite. Without a doubt, Bistâmî was inspired by the same source as this last dude was. Our author, himself a hanafite, doesn’t show any bias for his own school of law, and he compiles a wide and diverse variety of sources.
21 The red, white, green, and black deaths symbolize, respectively, the matter of contradicting the weaknesses of the soul, enduring hunger, putting on the patched coat of the Sufis, and enduring humiliations, cf. f. 55b.
22 We learn here that the magic squares have 100 divisions, all conveniently particular to the preparation of battle. This is a good example of the application of the science of letters to more diverse domains.
generations of doctors.”\textsuperscript{23} In giving to one of the chapters of his book the title of a known work, Bistâmî signals that he is part of a certain literary and scholarly tradition. As before, Greek science is presented here as necessarily at the base of the science of letters. Bistâmî also draws attention to the importance of Antioch, his native city, in the transmission of this antique heritage.

This is a bit like the way he approached Sufism, its history, and its practices, the \textit{dhikr} in particular, which he linked back to the science of letters. Within this framework, he is interested in visions within dreams; he is especially concerned with the vision of the Prophet, emphasizing its truthful character and the differentiation between it and other visions in which the initiate deludes himself regarding his being and his spiritual level. He contends that this type of delusion, as well as the imperfect realization of certain spiritual states, is caused by any number of deviations. He also vehemently denounces certain reprehensible innovations (\textit{bid'a} pl. \textit{bida'} ) and deviant sects (\textit{firqa} , pl. \textit{firaq} ). This bias dealing with heresy is tempered, however, by other more subtle critiques, based within Sufism, that denounce deviations. Thus he reviews not only the different forms of Shiism but also the Sufi “extremists” (\textit{ghulât al-sîfsîyya}); this is to say that, like the similarly described Shiites, those who see in certain others a divine manifestation tend to see it in themselves. He also denounces the antinomians (\textit{al-ibâbiyya}), those who declare themselves beyond the interdictions or warnings of the Law, and who permit themselves, for example, to watch or even to hang about closely with beardless youths. The use of hashish by certain dervishes is equally abhorred. Some orders, like the Qalandariyya, Haydariyya, Haririyya, and even the Rifâ’iyya are charged with heterodoxy for their practices that do not quite conform to the Law. But above all he exposes to public contempt the “heretics of the imposters of the science of letters” (\textit{al-zanâdiqa min makhâriqat al-harfiyya}), or otherwise said: the Hurûfis.

The last three chapters summarize the doctrinal aspects of Bistâmî in a significant way. They contain, first of all, a defense of orthodox Sufism, represented, according to the author, by four spiritual paths which are in part his own paths: Bistâmîyya, Junaydiyya, Qādiriyya, Suhrawardiyya. The masters of these paths are bearers of an esoteric knowledge that is the spirit of all the exoteric sciences and that finds its attainment in the science of letters. The Sufi elite are not really all that set apart from the “Masters of Letters” (\textit{al-sâdât al-harfiyya}). This is why the heresy of the Hurûfis seemed to them to be particularly dangerous. Bistâmî devotes his last chapter, in part, to them. The title of this chapter is borrowed from a title by Ibn Taymiyya: \textit{al-Farq bayna awliyâ al-Rahmân wa awliyâ al-Shaytân} (“The difference between the allies of God and the allies of Satan”). The founder of the Hurûfis is for Bistâmî the very example of the diabolic inversion of the esoteric science, since he claims power to free himself from the Law and thus from the Revelation whose reality is at

\textsuperscript{23} From Ibn Abî Usaybi’a (d. 668/1270), cf. \textit{EI2}, III, p. 715-716.
the same time interior and exterior. He then expresses himself in this manner, taking up critiques, already formulated by Ghazâlî, against the Bâtiniyya Ismaelians:

So the lion from the forest of falsities and the hyena with fangs of error who turned its head to the servants of God and sowed corruption, the appointed Fâdl Allâh al-Astarâbâdî, who followed the path of the Khurramites and the religion of the Qarmates, said: “The interior significations of the interpretation excuse us from holding to the exterior meanings of the Revelation, and the intelligible ideas free us from the literal methods.” This is why Satan took him in the net of dubious doctrines before he had even surpassed the exterior meaning of the ambiguous verses. (f. 144)

One designates under the term of Khurramiyya a neo-Mazdaki movement that developed at the beginning of Islam in Iran within the circle of influence of the partisans of Abû Muslim. The activity of this anti-Arab sect that revolted against the Abbasid power reached its culminating point under the direction of Bâbak, finally embattled and executed in 213/838. In drawing the Hurûfis into this trend along with the Qarmates, a movement close to the Ismaelians that threatened the Abbasid caliphate, Bistâmî emphasizes the twofold danger of a sect founded on the rejection of exterior rites under the pretext of an esoteric interpretation and on an insurrectionary eschatological expectation. His critique is all the more violent since he is conscious of the seduction the Hurûfis could wield over certain minds. He also strongly warns the reader by citing, for example, this verse:

Putting a healthy camel next to a mangy camel doesn’t do anything other than contaminate the first.

After this diatribe, Bistâmî, by contrast, returns again to the authentic representatives of the science of letters, from the prophets up to the descendants of the Prophet—the holders of the Jafr and the highest heirs of this science, who wait for the coming the Mahdî. The last chapter is constructed on an analogous opposition between the true and false followers of Sufism: on the one side are the orthodox paths we’ve already seen, while on the other side are all the popular or marginal orders, already named in part, though he expands the list to include: Malâmiyya, Qalandariyya, Haydariyya, Harîriyya, Yûnusiyya, Jâkiriyya, ‘Adawiyya, Khurramiyya [sic], Rifâ’îyya, Hayrâniyya, Sistâniyya, Badawiyya, and all sorts of Sufî

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24 In particular in the Mustazhirî or Fadâ’îh al-bâtiniyya, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahmân Badawi, Cairo, 1964, p. 46-8, or in the Munqîdh min al-dalâl, trans. Farid Jabre: Erreur et deliverance, Beirut, 1959, p. 28-34.
25 See EI2, V. p. 65-77, Khurramiyya.
incarnationists (al-sūfiyya al-hulūliyya). He adds to this the false masters, imposters (almuddâ‘yya), and alleged doctors of the heart who are sick themselves, as well as the hereditary sheikhs whose mastery rests only on the reputations of their fathers or ancestors and who haven’t even attained the level of engaged disciple on the path. He describes these false spiritual guides as “highwaymen” (quttâ‘ al-tarîq), literally “Path cutters,” since they obstruct sincere aspirants from attaining a true initiatory development. Bistâmî’s esotericism is thus coupled with a merciless critique of all forms of affiliation to a Sufism that is not strictly anchored in the tradition of the grand and well-known masters. He has no sympathy for or leniency toward the people of the dervishes who are taking refuge in the monasteries or traveling the roads of Iran, Syria, and Anatolia.

How does Bistâmî allow us to better understand the phenomenon of heresy, or even of syncretism? He situates himself at first in opposition to these movements. His final critique, worthy of a study of heresy, has the advantage of making us feel the tension that was able reign in 15th century Anatolia between, on one side, a careful Sufism of equilibrium between the exterior and the interior and which is approved by the ‘ulama’ and the ruling circles and, on the other side, either less strict or ultra-esoteric movements that are attractive to people disinclined to asceticism of the body and of the soul as well as to those from more intellectual climates who are researching a compromise between intellectualism and spirituality.

If he mounts such a critique regarding the Hurûfis, the model for all other deviations, it is because the esoteric and hermetic dimension of his philosophy makes him very aware of the points in common between his own convictions and learning and those of the Hurûfis. According to the doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabî, to which he plainly adheres, the world is the site of a theophany of which man is the perfect expression. The Prophet is found at the center, at the origin, and at the base of this theophany, where he (the Prophet) separates by the two sides of his reality the two existential presences, divine and human. The prophetology, hagiography, and cosmology that follow from this teaching rest on the principle of a profound unity between the manifest forms, particularly the Sacred Law that governs men, and their superior principles. All laxity in regard to the Law is thus rejected. Also, the belief in the hidden government of saints relegates and legitimates temporal power. Thus the masters who completely shy away from the sultanate or from counseling the prince are unconstrained. Identifying, as apparently the Hurûfis do, the theophany with a particular man—someone who is understandable on an interior level—in order to name an imam, is to confound the individual and the spiritual functions and jeopardizes the unity of the community of believers around their prophet. So on the political level as on the spiritual and dogmatic level, Bistâmî saw the danger of hurûfism well.

And what are we to think of Bistâmî’s organization of all the branches of knowledge and of culture, Islamic and pre-Islamic, around the science of letters? Doesn’t his systematic compilation of more or less old material constitute a form of

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syncretic learning? Two dimensions in his work must be distinguished from each other, even if they are linked in spirit. The first, the cultural dimension, is situated in the continuation of the tradition of the *adab*, the vast enterprise of recasting in an Arab mold diverse cultural elements, from now on drawn together under a common language and a classicist style. Bistâmî does not break with this tradition and responds to the expectation of a public cultivated in the service of the Ottoman dynasty. The other dimension, the spiritual one, is the product of multiple traditions. Using the medium of the science of letters, as Ibn ‘Arabî had done before him, this master brings together the Islamic spirituality issue of the Revelation with currents of thought and heretical practices in Antiquity. To be spiritually functional, this science needs to be received according to the prophetic mode of inspiration, since it takes its source from the Preserved Tablet in which the superior Letters from the Book and from the Cosmos are written. Bistâmî acknowledges speaking of synthesis and integration rather than of syncretism. If Bistâmî, in spite of the somewhat “strange” character of the sciences he writes about, is so well accepted in the milieu of Bursa, it is because his oeuvre remarkably reflects, in its own way, the Ottoman idea. On the religious level, orthodoxy and heterodoxy clash, above all when political cohesion is threatened, but they still comprise the two sides of a complex religious and spiritual reality, whether Bistâmî wants it that way or not. The orders that he condemns and the others that were developing during his era, play, on another level, a role of integration comparable to the role his own order played.