

Respect all Faiths. Respect all Sciences

The *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa* of Imam Ahmad al Mastur^{AS}

“To sum up, it is obligatory upon our brothers, may God aid them, that they not abhor any one of the sciences, or shun any one of the [available] books, and not be unduly biased against any religious denomination, for our philosophy and creed encompasses all creeds, and encompasses all knowledge and sciences. That is because our creed consists of studying all existing things in their entirety, the physical and the intellectual, from their beginning to their end, their apparent and their hidden, their manifest and their concealed, with an eye to getting to their Truth, with the understanding that they [existing things] all stem from one source, and one cause, and one world, and one soul, which encompasses their different essences, their diverse species, their various types and their changing forms.”

وَبِالْجُمْلَةِ يَنْبَغِي لِإِخْوَانِنَا، أَيْدَهُمُ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى، أَنْ لَا يُعَادُوا عِلْمًا مِنَ
الْعُلُومِ، أَوْ يَهْجُرُوا كِتَابًا مِنَ الْكُتُبِ، وَلَا يَتَعَصَّبُوا عَلَى مَذْهَبٍ مِنَ
الْمَذَاهِبِ، لِأَنَّ رَأْيَنَا وَمَذْهَبَنَا يَسْتَعْرِقُ الْمَذَاهِبَ كُلَّهَا، وَيَجْمَعُ الْعُلُومَ
جَمِيعَهَا، وَذَلِكَ أَنَّهُ هُوَ النَّظَرُ فِي جَمِيعِ الْمَوْجُودَاتِ بِأَسْرِهَا الْحِسِّيَّةِ
وَالْعَقْلِيَّةِ، وَمِنْ أَوَّلِهَا إِلَى آخِرِهَا، ظَاهِرِهَا وَبَاطِنِهَا، جَلِيَّهَا وَخَفِيِّهَا،
بَعْنِ الْحَقِيقَةِ مِنْ حَيْثُ هِيَ كُلُّهَا مِنْ مُبْدَأٍ وَاحِدٍ، وَعِلَّةٍ وَاحِدَةٍ،
وَعَالَمٍ وَاحِدٍ، وَنَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ، مُحِيطَةٌ جَوَاهِرُهَا الْمُخْتَلِفَةِ،
وَأَجْنَاسُهَا الْمُتَبَايِنَةِ، وَأَنْوَاعُهَا الْمُفْتَنَةِ، وَجُزْئِيَّاتُهَا الْمُتَغَايِرَةِ

The Ikhwan-al-Safa, The Brethren of Purity, warn their brothers to avoid *ta'assub* (prejudice) against any faith or any of the sciences in their intellectual pursuits as it blinds men to the truth. This open-mindedness, this willingness to see the good in all schools of thought, this spirit of understanding and learning, was unheard of at that time and place, and is one of the fundamentals that make the Rasail Ikhwan-al-Safa unique. They bridged the isolation and antagonism of human differences and demonstrated the larger truth behind fragmentations of race, culture, religion and country. The Ikhwan were dedicated to embracing all available knowledge and to shunning none of the sciences. In this they embodied and cultivated an attitude that made them not only unique at the time, but also forerunners of today's modern philosophy which idealises this unbiased and all-embracing approach to knowledge.

The sources used by the Ikhwan in the compilation of their Rasail illustrate this attitude and philosophy, which underlies all the chapters of the Rasail. The Rasail abound with examples taken from all faiths and fields of knowledge; it is evident that they took great care not to neglect any source of knowledge, nor any positive aspects of any religious doctrine.

They say our knowledge has been taken from 4 ‘books’.

Sources of Knowledge

- 1. Books written by the philosophers and sages.*
- 2. Divine books revealed to the prophets through wahye.*
- 3. Books based on studies of the natural sciences.*
- 4. Divine ‘books’ in the hearts of the Awliyah-ul-Allah.*

Let us briefly consider each of these four ‘books’.

1. The first category of books include works by classical **Greek philosophers and ancient Indian sages**. This category also includes ancient Arabian, Persian, and Indian literature.

i) The spirit of *Pythagoras* (famous Greek mathematician and philosopher, (6 BC) is found throughout the Rasail. Numbers are given prime importance and it is stressed that a good knowledge of the Mathematical sciences – including arithmetic and numerology, geometry, astronomy and astrology– is necessary before proceeding to the study of the higher sciences.

ii) Great reverence is expressed for Socrates, the famous classical Greek philosopher (5 BC), and what he stood for - belief in the eternal life of the soul. Immense admiration is expressed for his courageous attitude in the face of death, as portrayed by his star pupil, Plato (classical Greek philosopher, lived in c.5-4 BC). The metaphysics of the Ikhwan as-Safa are largely expressed in the language of Platonism and Neoplatonism, the philosophy expounded by Plato and his disciples. Their doctrines of hierarchy and emanation are given prime importance in the Rasail.

iii) Books by Aristotle (pupil of Plato and mentor of Alexander the Great, (4 BC) and his disciples are featured extensively in the Rasail. It is the persona of *Aristotle* as the Father of Logic which primarily interests the Ikhwan since the science of Logic is one of their main concerns. A hadith of Rasulullah ^{SA} is quoted as saying that had Aristotle lived and known the message of Islam he would without doubt have accepted and followed it.

iv) The legendary Egyptian figure Hermes, known in the Arab world as Akhnukh, is the Nabi Idris, the first person who is said to have pursued the thorough study of philosophy. A large corpus of philosophical knowledge, called the Hermetticum, has been attributed to him and his disciples and successors. This corpus is incorporated in the astrological and alchemical Rasail.

v) Ancient Arab, Indian and Persian literature manifests itself in the form of stories and anecdotes told throughout the Rasail. These stories are introduced to explain particular doctrines and concepts in a simple and accessible manner, which conveys

the message in a way that even a common person benefits from it. These tales are divided into epics of kings and animal fables. We find a large corpus of stories from the collection of the Indian fables *Kalila wa Dimna* translated by Ibn Muqaffa into Arabic, the origins of which are found in Sanskrit in the Panchatantra.

The most well-known of the king epics in the Rasail are taken from the legend of Bilawher the Hermit and Budhasef the Prince. The origin of this legend is found in the story of a prince named Budhasef, brought up in the confines of a palace and ignorant of human distress and pain. He meets a hermit (sadhu) from Sri Lanka called Bilawhar, who convinces Budhasef to become a sadhu himself. Bilawher and Budhasef are held in very high esteem by the Ikhwan, and considered along with the Buddha as among the wise men of India.

2. The second source of the Rasail are ***the Holy Scriptures***. These include the Torah (the Holy Book revealed to Musa nabi^{SA}), the Injeel (the Holy Book revealed to Isa nabi), as well as other divine books (*suhuf*) of the prophets, and most of all the Quran (the Holy Book revealed to Rasulullah^{SA}).

The Rasail are saturated with the Holy Book of Islam. The Ikhwan use the Quran as a source of proof for many of their concepts, beliefs and doctrines. Aayats are quoted comprehensively; they are occasionally commented upon or briefly explained, but mostly they are simply allowed to speak for themselves. The extensive use of the Quran underlines the Ikhwan's belief, that what they were propounding in their Rasail was to be found in the Quran, albeit more in its *batin* form than in the *zahir*. The hadith of the Prophet Muhammad^{SA} have also been quoted frequently.

Historic information about the lives of the prophets and their parables and wise sayings are scattered throughout the Rasail. These are drawn mainly from the Quran, but also extensively from the Torah (*Tawraat*) and the Bible (*Injeel*). The message of the previous prophets is conceived as being complemented by the Quranic message, thereby completing the 'body' of religion.

3. The third source is ***books about the Physical and Natural Sciences***. These are described as: "the knowledge of the forms of all existing things, as they are known today, including the structure of the universe, the divisions of the zodiac, the movement of stars and their relative sizes, the changing seasons, the transfiguration of the elements, the species of creation of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms, and all types of man-made things." The Ikhwan's chapters on the physical sciences draw their evidence to a great extent from existing books based on the current studies and investigations, leaving open the possibility of further discovery and indeed revision.

4. The fourth source is simply fascinating. The Ikhwan describe it as "***divine books***" which none other than the sanctified can touch. These books are revealed at the hands of honourable angelic messengers to the minds of Awliya-ul-Allah. This is what we know as *wahye*, *ta'yeed*, *ilhaam*, or *fayz*. These are forms of spiritual communication from Allah to His Awliya in this world. The barakat of this *fayz* is in turn transmitted by the Awliya to the mumineen according to their merit.

The acquisition of knowledge for the Ikhwan is like climbing a ladder, from the nearest and most accessible to the farthest and most difficult, from the physical to the metaphysical. To get to the top of the ladder you will have to start climbing from the bottom. If you have not acquired a firm foothold on the lower steps of the ladder, the higher steps will be shaky and unattainable in their essential depth. The Rasail are presented in the order in which they are meant to be studied:

The Knowledge ‘Ladder’

- 1. Mathematical and educational sciences (Rasail Riyadiyah Taalimiyah)*
- 2. Physical and Natural Sciences (Rasail Jismaniyah Tabi’iyah)*
- 3. Psychological and Rational Sciences (Rasail Nafsaniyah Aqliya)*
- 4. Theological Sciences (Rasail Namusiyah Ilahiya and Shar’iyah Diniyah)*

Using this division of knowledge as their base, the Ikhwan have aspired to include in their 52 Rasail all fields of knowledge, from the mathematical and logical sciences, to the natural and corporeal, to the psychological and finally the theological. What is most important in the study of any science or field of knowledge is the niyat and the approach. The fundamental aim of knowledge is to gain a recognition of the spirituality of one’s soul and its Divine Creator.

Although the final goal of the Ikhwan is purely spiritual, they have a very realistic view towards the material needs of man and lay equal emphasis on worldly life. They include in their curriculum of subjects sciences pertaining to agriculture, economic and political organization. The immediate practical purpose of learning skills and sciences is also to organise and pursue a prosperous and fulfilling life. As Amirul-Mumineen has said:

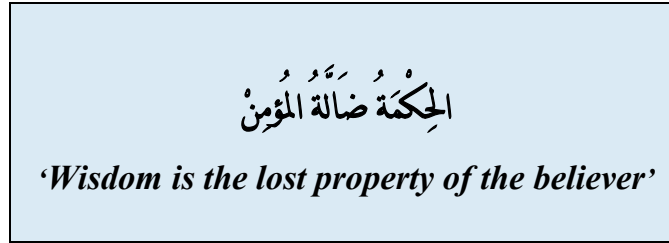
*Religion is not only fasting and prayers,
rather it is living a full life here and
preparing for the hereafter.*

لَيْسَ الدِّينُ صَوْمًا وَصَلَاةً فَقَطُّ
بَلِ الدِّينُ عِمَارَةُ الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ

Thus we see that the Ikhwan also include in their curriculum those sciences that are today seen as ‘secular’ and not related to theology. This holistic approach is the beauty of the Ikhwan’s conception of knowledge and philosophy, an approach which intrinsically assumes a respect for all sources and forms of knowledge.

In conclusion, we see that the Ikhwan demonstrate a deeply conceived respect towards all creeds and religions, and indeed all theories and schools of knowledge. It is different from tolerance based on complete lack of faith in anything; in fact it is based on their belief that Truth is one and its origin is one - the Dawat-ul-Haq. From Adam Nabi AS to Muhammad Rasulullah SA it has been the same Dawat, the Dawat of Truth, which has been the original source of all religions, philosophies and knowledge throughout the ages. However, various degrees of distortions and deviations from this original source have occurred throughout the ages. Some groups today are not recognizable in any way as being connected to the Dawat al-Haq at one time, while other religions and schools of thought retain their similarity.

The scale or measure for the Truth is Dawat al-Haq and its Ilm, as personified today in Islam through the Qur'an and the Shariat. If anything contradicts these touchstones, it is false. If it is in harmony with them then it is true and so should be embraced wholeheartedly. Maulana Ali ^{SA} has said,



May Alla Ta'al give our Maula Syedna Khuzaima Qutbuddin long life till qiyamat. He is the link for us today with Imam-uz-Zaman ^{SA} and through him with the Imams ^{SA}, Panjetan Paak ^{SA} and all Awliya' Kiraam ^{SA} till Adam Nabi ^{SA}.

اللهم صل على محمد وآل محمد كما صليت وسلمت على إبراهيم وآل إبراهيم انك حميد مجيد
وآخر دعوانا ان الحمد لله رب العالمين