

Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation  
to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement  
and Medieval Islamic Esotericism  
Shahzad Bashir

Why be afraid of death when you have the essence of eternity?  
Where in the grave can you be contained when you have the light of god?

Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) 1

Around the year 1357, a wandering dervish's recitation of these verses fell upon the ears of a young man of about seventeen sitting in a religious college in Astarabad, Iran. Already given to religious pursuits, Fazlallah Astarabadi was exceedingly affected by the great mystical poet's message of parity between divinity and humanity and sought an explanation for the verse from his teacher in religious sciences. The latter replied that it reflected a sentiment produced from acquiring the goals of mystical exercises. As such, its meaning was beyond ordinary words and could be understood only by pursuing extreme piety and appropriate knowledge. Over the course of the following year, Fazlallah systematically decreased his interaction with the material world by withdrawing from social contact, fasting constantly, and spending all his time in prayer. By the end of the year, he was overtaken completely by mystical desire which led him to renounce all his belongings as well as family connections and don the coarse felt garment (namad) of a wandering mendicant in preparation for a journey to Mecca on foot to perform the hajj. 2 In due course, he became renowned among both elites and popular classes for his knowledge and mystical aptitude, and the strength of his influence and the general tenor of his teachings roused apprehension in the conqueror Timur (d. 1405). Condemned to death on grounds of heresy, he was imprisoned briefly and then allegedly beheaded personally by Timur's son Miranshah (d. 1408) in 1394.3 His movement, termed 'Hurufiyya' by this time due to

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Fazlallah's apparent emphasis on the letters of the Arabo-Persian alphabet (huruf ), was inherited by a number of talented disciples and continued to be a substantial presence on the religious scene (with occasional political involvement) over the next century.

Anchored in Fazlallah's status as the recipient of an extraordinary revelation, the story of the Hurufiyya replicates a pattern common in the history of millennialist religion. Fazlallah's personal sense of his mission stemmed from the general prophetological principle that the preordained time-line of the cosmos is punctuated by the births of chosen individuals entrusted with divine revelations. He and his followers thought of him as the initiator of a new religious dispensation in which the esoteric plan of the universe, alluded to symbolically in the teachings of earlier religions, had become explicit. The Hurufis' greatest achievement was to generate a sophisticated religious system, including both theoretical speculation and distinct rituals derived from normative Islamic practices, in a period of less than half a century. As befitted the revelation of ultimate cosmic mystery, the movement's followers anxiously awaited an imminent apocalypse and its corollaries like the day of judgment and eternal life in heaven and hell promised in previous scriptures. At first postponed and re-theorized over the course of the fifteenth century, the Hurufis' millennialist impulse eventually vanished along with their new rituals when Islamic history took its next turn with the establishment of the great empires in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, the movement's intellectual legacy was incorporated into other movements and mystical orders to survive to the modern period.

The lasting power of the theoretical side of Hurufism is attributable in great part to the fact that it derived its fundamental principles from strains of religious thought going back to the early Islamic or even pre-Islamic period. Fazlallah Astarabadi was a late medieval representative of an Islamic strand which combined mystical, messianic and sectarian ideas to generate zealous religious outlooks with political potential. Noticeable first in the milieu of the Shi'i imams in early Islamic history, proponents of this viewpoint saw themselves as bearers of a greater religious knowledge, usually emphasizing alternative interpretations of Islamic cosmogony and religious mythology, which could not be divulged publicly in the immediate present. 4 This basic principle, which I will refer to as 'Islamic esotericism' in the present chapter, divided the Muslim community into those satisfied with the apparent aspects (zahir) of things and others who considered surface appearances mere pointers to the far more significant inner or esoteric (batin) reality. This perspective later found its most widespread application in the development of Sufism which both stipulated systematic ways of explaining, acquiring and utilizing esoteric knowledge, and detailed its associated benefits and obligations.

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However, for Sufis through the ages, the knowledge was generally revealed only as a result of intense personal endeavour undertaken under the supervision of a mystical guide. The knowledge was thus available to all who were willing to expend the effort, and those successful on the path constituted a hierarchy of saints whose presence in the world guaranteed its existence. 5 In contrast with Sufism, a version of Islamic esoteric thought which emphasized the a priori personal authority of one who was endowed with such knowledge became the underpinning of Shi'ism. The various Shi'i sects believed that the infallible persons they proclaimed their imams had total access to the unseen world. They were, in fact, the only individuals to appreciate the full measure of things apprehended on the surface in the material sphere. 6 Under dominant juridical Shi'i traditions such as Fatimid Isma'ilism and Twelver jurisprudence, the power of the imam's personal knowledge was channelled into systematic applications of legal procedures. The ultimate open revelation of the knowledge was, consequently, either purported to have already taken place (such as in the proclamation of the Fatimid caliphate), or postponed to an indefinite future (foundational belief in Twelver Shi'ism). In both cases, actual religious authority came to rest in the hands of classes of jurists who regarded themselves as the imam's agents. 7 Against the institutionalized traditions, some minority Shi'i groups retained their intense focus on an imminent final revelation of cosmic mystery through the rise of an imam who would lead the group to religious as well as political triumph. The rhetorical appeal of such groups came from combining a strident sectarian identity with a rationalized and well-articulated discourse about esoteric knowledge. Under favourable socio-historical circumstances, the revolutionary potential of this ideology came out into the open in the form of movements either preparing in earnest for the imam or led by selfproclaimed pretenders. In both cases, the imam's appearance was to be followed by moral and military victory on a universal scale and the eventual apocalyptic dissolution of the universe.

By the eleventh century, the Nizari Isma'ili branch of Shi'ism in Persia and Syria (sometimes called the sect of the Assassins) was the greatest representative of the radical esoteric tradition in the eastern Islamic world. It was able to maintain its revolutionary fervour between approximately 1090 and 1256, a period whose apex came in the form of a Resurrection (qiyama) convened in 1164.8 At this event, the reigning overlord of the Nizari fortress at Alamut abrogated Islamic law, declared that he himself was the imam, and told his followers that, from this moment forward, they were in heaven and their enemies had been consigned to hell. Instead of their literal meanings, the everlasting reward and punishment promised in the Qur'an were to be understood as figurative descriptions of states of knowledge and ignorance.

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This ideology underwent cycles of reinterpretation in subsequent Nizari history, though the development of the tradition as a whole was curtailed severely when the Mongols carried out a total destruction of Nizari political power in the thirteenth century. Nizari Isma'ilism lost its dynamism for a number of centuries following this calamity and ceased for ever to be a viable alternative to Sunni (and later Twelver Shi'i) hegemony in central Iranian lands. 9

In opposition to its effect on the coherence of Nizari tradition, the breaking down of Nizari communities in the thirteenth century allowed the intellectual tradition to dissipate and become absorbed into the society at large. Combined with both the immense popularity of Sufism in the period and the disruption of social and cultural life under successive Turko-Mongol invasions, the Nizari legacy and other less prominent radical traditions became intellectual progenitors of the Hurufiyya and other messianic movements which gained prominence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the Islamic East. 10 Echoing earlier Sufi as well as Twelver, Nizari Isma'ili and Ghulat Shi'i motifs, the Hurufis were thus a part of the trend which also included the Shaykhiyya of Sarbadar domains, Musha'sha'iyya, Nurbakhshiyya and the Safavid Sufi order in its transformed state in the second half of the fifteenth century. Contextualized in their historical setting, therefore, Fazlallah Astarabadi and his Hurufi followers represented the socio-intellectual environment of their times.

My aim in the present chapter is to present Hurufi history and religious theory as an example of the esoteric strand in medieval Islamic millennialism. In particular, the intellectual side of the movement, available from a whole array of voluminous works by Fazlallah himself and his disciples, has so far not received adequate academic attention. 11 The chapter is divided into three parts: the circumstances of Fazlallah Astarabadi's life and death; an understanding of the Hurufi religious worldview; and the fate of Hurufism in the history of the Islamic East following Fazlallah's execution. A complete appraisal of materials relevant for the study of Hurufism is beyond the scope of a single essay, and my principal aim here is to outline the historical and philosophical universes the Hurufis inhabited and promoted. In addition, the discussion serves to highlight the role of messianic and esoteric traditions in the development of Islamic intellectual history.

Fazlallah Astarabadi (c. 1340? 96)

According to the traditional Hurufi biography, Fazlallah Astarabadi was born in the year 740 ah (1339 ?40 ce) in a family tracing its lineage to the seventh Shi'i Imam Musa al-Kazim. 12 In one source, his father was the grand judge

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(qazi al-quzat) in Astarabad, a city on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, and Fazlallah inherited the office as a child upon his father's death. His father's lieutenants continued to tend to judicial business during Fazlallah's traditional schooling which was eventually to render him capable of personally occupying the office. In 1357, at around the age of seventeen, Fazlallah heard the verse by Rumi with which I began this chapter and gradually severed all connections with the material world. His journey towards the realization of his special religious gift and mission then commenced with his decision to travel to Mecca.

Fazlallah's aptitude for mystical apprehension was confirmed first through momentous dreams seen soon after the experience of conversion. 13 Following the hajj in 1358, he made his way to Khwarazm and then decided to set off for the pilgrimage once again. However, an apparition of the Shi'i Imam Musa al-Rida appeared to him while passing through Fars and directed him towards his grave in Mashhad instead. He resumed his journey to Mecca after spending some time in Mashhad, and from there returned once again to Khwarazm where he experienced a series of three dreams which illustrate his growing sense of self-importance. 14 First, one night as he fell sleep after a supererogatory prayer (tahajjud), Jesus appeared to him and told him that only four Muslim scholars through the ages have ever achieved the highest degree of sincerity and self-abnegation. These four were then identified as the famous early sufis Ibrahim b. Adham, Bayazid Bastami, Sahl b. 'Abdallah Tustari (d. 896) and Bahlul. 15 In the second dream, the prophet Solomon appeared to him and asked if he was being harassed by a certain Qazi Taj al-Din. Upon receiving affirmation from Fazlallah, Solomon ordered a hoopoe (hudhud) to fetch this miscreant and put him to death after a severe reprimand. 16 While these two dreams gave Fazlallah special knowledge and a measure of prophetic protection, the third dream in Khwarazm was a premonition about his stature in universal spiritual hierarchy. He saw an extremely bright star rise in the east and emit a ray of light which entered his right eye upon reaching him. The light continued to flow until the whole star had poured into his eye, followed by a voice asking him if he knew the nature of this star. He confessed his ignorance and was told by the voice that this star rises once every few centuries. When he awakened, Fazlallah realized that, in another reference to Solomon, he could understand the language of birds and that the science of dream interpretation had become completely obvious to him. 17 Both these powers signified his growing ability to pierce surface appearances to get to ulterior greater meanings. The process would eventually lead to the point where the surrounding world was to him a conglomeration of signs which he could decipher based upon his knowledge of the unseen world ('alam-i ghayb). This capacity eventually garnered him the title Master of

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Esoteric Interpretation (sahib-i ta'vil), the most common epithet used for him in Hurufi literature. 18

The gift of dream interpretation received in the third dream was, in particular, the first quality to gain Fazlallah followers in Khwarazm. His success on this score continued when he moved first to Yazd and then to Tuqchi (or Tuqji or Tukhji), a suburb of Isfahan, where he headed a community of ascetics resident in a mosque. 19 Numerous nobles and army commanders now became his devotees, though the tradition maintains that neither he nor his retinue received any material benefit from such connections. After achieving considerable fame in Isfahan and its environs, Fazlallah decided to move to Tabriz. Here he gained popularity in Jalayir court circles again because of his dream interpretation, counting the reigning ruler Shaykh Uways (d. 1374) among his devotees at the hospice of Vali Dulaq. 20 In addition, the Sarbadar rulers of Sabzavar, themselves part of a religio-political messianic movement, now became frequent attendees at his gatherings. 21 The life-style followed by Fazlallah's community in Tabriz is evident from the story of his marriage to a young woman from the city's nobility. Khwaja Ishaq, one of Fazlallah's prominent successors, relates that the woman's parents, a Jalayir vizier and an Astarabadi woman, decided to arrange the marriage after becoming his devotees. Being aware of Fazlallah's commitment to an ascetic life, the woman's mother invited his close associate Kamal al-Din Hashimi to her house to say that she had a child (without specifying the gender) whom she wanted to attach to Fazlallah as a disciple. He replied that such a move would cause considerable hardship since the child would have to adjust from an opulent life-style to the poverty of a dervish. She persisted, however, and asked Hashimi to question Fazlallah himself about specific requirements. He was told that such an association would require the child to: forsake all personal belongings upon leaving the house; renounce any food or dress which could not be procured through the small means of a dervish; determine never to take a single step out of the hospice (zaviya) after entering it; adopt a bed made of sack, a pillow of felt, and a dress of cotton; respect the dervish community's practice of seclusion at night; and adopt the habit of daily repetitive prayers (avrad) at set times. The mother then approached her fourteen-year-old daughter with these conditions and was pleased to know that she was wholeheartedly willing to accept them. When Fazlallah was told that a woman wanted to join the group, he suggested that she first try out the restrictions to make sure that she would be able to withstand them. He then agreed to marry her and make her a part of the circle after she faithfully observed the conditions at a separate location for four months. Upon entry to the hospice, she put on the green dress of a dervish and learned to make caps like others to support herself. 22 It was also in Tabriz that Fazlallah experienced the zuhur-i kibriya or

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Manifestation of Divine Glory in Ramadan 775 ah (February? March 1374 ce).<sup>23</sup> At this his greatest revelatory moment, Fazlallah was made privy to monumental secrets such as the meanings of the separate letters in front of some Qur'anic chapters and the underlying logic behind Islamic rituals of daily prayer and fasting. Hurufis justified the prophetic quality of this revelation through a hadith report in which Muhammad was asked, 'How is a prophet (nabi) who he is?' He replied: 'Through a book that descends to him.' The inquisitor then asked what was the descended book, and he said the twenty-nine letters of the alphabet (huruf al-mu'jam), meaning the twentyeight Arabic letters and lam-alif. <sup>24</sup> The curious insistence on the lam-alif (a combination of two 'normal' Arabic letters) as a separate letter in this context has a crucial function in the Hurufi understanding of prophetic cycles. Hurufi ideas about cosmic history stipulate that each scripture-bearing prophet proclaims a truer version of divine wisdom than his predecessor. Muhammad's Arabic Qur'an, therefore, superseded earlier scriptures since it unveiled a more explicit version of the divine mystery. The Qur'an itself, however, is not a transparent text and requires interpretation by knowledgeable Muslims in all ages. The Qur'an's exoteric meaning is available to many through a literal reading, but its numerous esoteric levels were conveyed only to Fazlallah in the Manifestation. His own works, written in Persian rather than Arabic, constituted both the ultimate interpretation of the Qur'an and the most direct divine message conveyed to humanity.

The lam-alif as a single 'letter' in the Arabic alphabet was the crucial marker predicting the change of language between the Qur'an and Fazlallah's works. The four letters l? m? a? f necessary for writing out the phrase lam-alif had, in fact, been stand-ins for the four letters p? ch? zh? g added to the Arabic script to write Persian. The 'descended book' which, in Muhammad's saying, ratified the mission of a prophet was the linguistic transition in Fazlallah's case. His works written in Persian consequently superseded the literal meaning of the Qur'an in the same way that the Qur'an had earlier supplanted Jewish and Christian scriptures. <sup>25</sup>

Fazlallah returned from Tabriz to Isfahan after the Manifestation and initially did not intend to make a public proclamation. However, he changed his mind after meeting an ailing mystic nicknamed musafir (traveller) who urged him to publicize the responsibility placed upon him. <sup>26</sup> The initiation of eight close companions at this point marked the formal birth of the Hurufiyya as a religious group stemming from Fazlallah's revelation. The circle expanded to include a much larger number of people in subsequent years, though the community always remained divided between a small group of close companions and a much larger mass of lay associates. Fazlallah's vicegerents (khalifas) were all educated and talented people who first absorbed his

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plicated vision and then rearticulated it in their own works in the period following the master's execution. 27

Within his lifetime, Fazlallah's standing as a prophet and the revelator of ultimate mystery was made to coincide also with the notion that he was the Mahdi or Muslim messiah expected just before the world's final destruction. 28 His own Nawmnama contains a vision to this effect: 'I saw that my clothes were white, pure and extremely clean; these were both my clothes and those of the Mahdi, the Imam, meaning that I knew that I was (him).' 29 Works by his followers also allude to him as the Mahdi on occasion, 30 though it is likely that this signification acquired greater validity after he was executed and some of his followers began to expect a second coming followed by the apocalypse and the day of judgment. 31

Fazlallah spent the last fourteen years of his life propagating his mission. He describes a number of dreams that occurred in Tuqchi, Gilan and Damghan, indicating that the proselytizing endeavour was accompanied by considerable travel. His very last days were spent in Shamakhi where he was arrested on the orders of Timur's son Miranshah prior to execution. 32 One Hurufi source maintains that Fazlallah was in fact released from captivity soon thereafter and had a personal meeting with Timur near Bistam in which the conqueror was very respectful and had apologized for the inopportune incarceration. 33 Contrary to this, an external source contends that Fazlallah had invited Timur to accept his message but had been rebuffed, and that Fazlallah's execution had been sanctioned through juridical opinions pronounced by councils of prominent scholars in Gilan and Samarqand. 34 The Timurid administration had then arrested Fazlallah and he was executed in the fort of Alanjaq (also called Alanja) near Nakhchivan (now in the former Soviet republic of Azarbaijan) in the month of Zhu l-Qa'da, 796 ah (1394 ce). 35 He is said to have had premonitions about his death, including a dream recorded in the Nawmnama in which he saw his own execution on the orders of a cripple (shal-mard) later identified as Timur. 36 He was survived by at least six children, some of whom played a role in later political history. 37 His followers later turned the place of his execution into a pilgrimage site patterned on the Ka'ba which they saw as the true earthly home of the divine being. They congregated around it every year on the date of his execution to perform the hajj, some of them expecting him to come back to life and lead the community towards a universal victory. 38

Understanding the Hurufi Universe

From a historical vantage point, the internal Hurufi biography of Fazlallah conforms to a mould common in biographical collections of Muslim mystics. 39

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He is shown as a sayyid (descendant of Muhammad) and the son of a judge, indicating a high status by birth. 40 The early training consists of technical skills such as literacy, knowledge of Arabic, and familiarity with basic Islamic materials. This is followed by a transformative experience leading him to renounce worldly affairs and adopt the life-style of an itinerant mystic. He acquires fame for inspired qualities such as excellence in dream interpretation and undergoes further revelatory experiences. There is a kind of grand epiphany marking the full revelation of his status, and he agrees, after some persuasion, to assume the responsibilities incumbent upon him following the event. The articulation of his unique knowledge projects a distinct ideology preserved both in his writings and through the initiation of followers. Holders of political and religious authority find his teachings a threat to the status quo and he is consequently martyred at the hands of unjust forces. His message, however, is kept alive by his disciples beyond his death through the creation of a shrine and in their writings. Fazlallah's life, constituted and celebrated in Hurufi writings, thus comes to form the basis for a new Islamic sectarian identity. This plain narrative, rendered formulaic through pious selections and excisions of Hurufi authors, needs to be contextualized in the complex of the Hurufi worldview. What made Fazlallah an extraordinary being in the eyes of his followers was not the events of his life themselves but the way they fit into their overall understanding of human existence. To this end, it is necessary to provide a synopsis of Hurufism as a theoretical system.

Hurufi religion was, at its roots, an array of interrelated ideas about cosmogony, mythical history and hermeneutics, traceable eventually to Sufi and Shi'i antecedents. Their story of the cosmos begins with God's initial aloneness and his desire to be known which instigated him to create the world. 41 He first produced the heavens and the earth in six days and then, in the words of the Qur'an, "sat himself upon the Throne ('ala l-'arsh istiwa)". 42 Hurufis take this phrase to mean the creation of Adam, 43 explaining that "sitting" is a metaphor for God's imprinting a full image of himself upon clay, a mixture of the elements earth and water. The inanimate image was then taught the names (asma') of things, 44 meaning that God endowed him with knowledge, divinity's own paramount attribute. Adam in his completed form was thus both an image of God and the repository of his first epiphany or effusion of knowledge. His status as the apogee of the process of creation, a replica of God in both form and content, meant that he and his progeny had the potential to occupy any moral position in the universe. They could then, depending on their choices, be anything between God and Satan, the purely noble and the totally evil. 45

Crucially for both cosmology and hermeneutics, the "names" taught to Adam in the moment of creation were the thirty-two Letters (huruf ) which

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give the Hurufiyya its name. 46 The Letters as an aggregate represent the general intellectual principle in the cosmos, here perceived as the building blocks of a kind of meta-language through which all existent entities relate to each other. What Adam received at the moment of creation was the capacity for this meta-language through which he could comprehend the cosmos. All humans possess the potential for acquiring this meta-language by virtue of their descent from Adam, and this is the very thing that sets them apart from all other created beings. Ordinary human languages in spoken or written forms are built ultimately from the thirty-two Letters, and humans' ability to acquire them through normal socialization is an indication of the greater potential that lies within them. The truth of this idea is reflected in the facts that a normal human mouth has thirty-two teeth<sup>47</sup> and is capable of producing only thirty-two distinct sounds. 48 The Persian alphabet with its thirty-two letters comes closest to a parity between normal language and the metalanguage, an idea ratified also by Muhammad's saying that Arabic and Persian would be the only languages spoken in paradise. 49

Hurufi authors demonstrate the all-encompassing nature of language most frequently through the enigmatic maxim: the name is the essence of the thing itself (ism 'ayn-i musamma ast). This 'key to the door of practising the science of letters'<sup>50</sup> follows from the fact that, on one side of the equation, the names of all physical, imaginary and conceptual entities rest ultimately on the primordial meta-language. All things named are, therefore, predicated fundamentally on the set of thirty-two Letters as a whole. On the other side, the essence ('ayn) of a thing is that element whose absence necessitates a complete lack of the thing itself. The essence must be the meta-linguistic name of the entity since it is the only element unequivocally necessary for the entity to exist at all. If this were not so, the thing would fall outside the purview of the thirty-two Letters, which is impossible. The primacy of language for imaginary or conceptual entities is readily understandable since abstract thought cannot be divorced from language. Even the essence of physical things, however, lies in the linguistic concept encompassing them and not in their elemental presences. 51 The most crucial inference to be drawn from this argument is that the universe is most fundamentally a linguistic event. As the creator, God has complete mastery over the meta-language while he has endowed human beings with the possibility of acquiring it. The base potential for this to happen is discernible in humans' everyday ability to comprehend and vocalize ordinary languages and decipher various alphabets. 52 However, the truest appreciation of cosmic mystery requires transcending these languages and becoming aware of the meta-language and its thirty-two Letters. The inspiration of Fazlallah Astarabadi forms a pathway to this aim since he is the only person with the full ability to translate between ordinary languages

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and the meta-language. The task of a Hurufi student, then, is to master Fazlallah's works and utilize them for deciphering his own existence as well as the surrounding world.

As the only created entity capable of acquiring meta-language, the human being has a special place in propelling forward the aim of creation. In opposition to God's total and unchangeable perfection, the created world is said to undergo rotations and cycles exemplified in the movement of heavenly bodies and the march of seasons. 53 The principle of cycles is present in the development of cosmic history as well, so that the cycle of humanity began with Adam and will end in the day of judgment. This large span of time contains three smaller cycles whose boundaries are crucial markers on the procession of earthly time. These are: the cycle of prophethood (nubuvvat), from Adam to Muhammad; that of sainthood (valayat), from 'Ali, through the eleventh Shi'ilmam Hasan al-'Askari, to Fazlallah; and, beginning with Fazlallah, that of divinity (uluhiyyat).

The sequence of cycles is a graduated unfolding of the potential inscribed into the human form at the moment of creation. Adam's inceptive perfection is brought into the open piecemeal through the initiators of the three cycles, each of whom is a progressively more explicit form of God's self-manifestation. Fazlallah, of course, holds the most elevated position in this scheme since he begins the cycle of divinity and is a complete representation of the divine in human form. By virtue of this extraordinary designation, he is also what previous prophets and saints have referred to as the Seal of Sainthood (khatam-i valayat), the Perfect Man (insan-i kamil), 54 and the mahdi who, as promised in Hadith, will "fill the earth with equity and justice just as it was filled with tyranny and oppression".55

Fazlallah's status as the full realization of the divine principle in material form implies that he has complete mastery over the thirty-two Letters. The science of Letters ('ilm-i huruf) expounded in his works is the guide through which human beings can discover the true names of existent things. Fazlallah's knowledge therefore enables him and his followers to penetrate to the essences of things instead of being limited to their lesser outward appearances. 56 Fazlallah's title of Master of Esoteric Interpretation (Sahib-i ta'vil) means that for him all of existence is like an open book ready to be read and deciphered. 57

Fazlallah's arrival in the world also provides the connection between Hurufi theory and a particular apocalyptic expectation. His physical body is to be seen as a receptacle for the thirty-two Letters. These have descended upon him in the form of epiphanies, enabling him both to see himself in all of creation and project his power through all time and space. 58 As the real Adam, formed in God's image and endowed with all his essential attributes, he is the

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progenitor of all prophets, saints and other humans, and they are obligated to prostrate in front of him in recognition of his unmatched status. 59 The incorporation of all forms and knowledges in his person means that his coming denotes the Gathering (mahshar) of all beings which precedes the day of judgment in Islamic apocalyptic imagination. 60

Fazlallah's followers hold a special status at this moment since they have secured their salvation by accepting his knowledge. As evident from his exemplary moral life-style, he possesses the ability completely to deflect the carnal desires of his lower soul (hava-yi nafs). When transmitted to his followers, this quality makes them appear in exalted dreams (khwabha-yi buland) 61 which they themselves or others experience during sleep. 62 This is so because the suspension of sensory functions during sleep enables the soul (ruh) attached to a body to experience the world of essences ('alam-i ma'na). 63 The human soul is subject to pleasant and unpleasant experiences in this world in the same way that a body undergoes these sensations in the physical world. During sleep, the soul is temporarily freed from its bond with the body and is able to perceive the world of essences for a short period. What a particular soul sees during sleep awaits it after death, the final severing of the bond between body and soul. Good dreams indicate, therefore, an individual's accession to paradise, while bad dreams, such as those with snakes, scorpions and other deadly creatures, predict the impending tortures of hell. The Hurufi understanding of dreams makes it logical that a person who follows Fazlallah will attain paradise since his company induces pleasant dreams. Furthermore, as the interpreter par excellence, Fazlallah himself is the ultimate jury for deciding between auspicious and inauspicious dreams.

The extraordinary qualities attributed to Fazlallah show that his followers regarded him as an 'ultimate' figure on numerous fronts. Hurufi views of religious authority, history and the cosmos converged on his person, so that he was the Master of Esoteric Interpretation (Sahib-i ta'vil) and the initiator of the cycle of divinity after the prophetic and saintly cycles. Regarded as the image of divinity in both being and knowledge, he was worthy of the remarkable title Lord of All Being (rabb al-'alamin). Once contextualized in this theoretical superstructure, the story of a pious man from Astarabad turns out not to be an ordinary hagiography. It is, instead, the record of a concrete presence of the divine in the terrestrial world.

### Hurufism after Fazlallah's Death

Given the metaphysical significance of Fazlallah's person in Hurufi thought, it is natural that his untimely death caused his followers to renegotiate their beliefs. This was done mainly through extending the movement's historical

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and cosmological understandings to integrate his death and burial place into the overall picture. 64 Although drawing a detailed picture of the movement in this period is difficult because of scarcity of evidence, circumstantial evidence suggests that Fazlallah's followers split into two groups based on their views about the status of his mission in his absence. One faction believed that the benefits promised from his appearance had already become manifest while the other began to look forward to a future triumph realized through either his own second coming or the activist struggle of his descendants and followers. For the first viewpoint, a substantial group of Hurufis minimized the effect of Fazlallah's death by stating that seeing him in the flesh had been the face to face meeting with God promised for the day of judgment in the Qur'an. 65 Like Nizari Isma'ilis before them at the Resurrection in 1164, they now came to the remarkable conclusion that they were already in paradise, based upon their acceptance of Hurufi principles. In the words of Ghiyas alDin Astarabadi, these Hurufis stated that:

Paradise and hell consist of knowledge and ignorance respectively. Since we are cognizant of the thirty-two Letters, of our own being, and of all things, all things are paradise to us. There is no longer prayer, or fasting, or cleanliness, or things illicit ? everything is lawful. These things are all obligations, and there can be no obligations in paradise. Paradise denotes this world, (although only) with knowledge of the science of Letters ('ilm-i huruf ) and the explanations of the Master of Explanation (sahib-i bayan). 66

Hajji 'Isa Bidlisi who supported this view once questioned Fazlallah's disciple 'Ali al-A'la (d. 1419) 67 about it in the vicinity of Uludag (i. e. Bursa). He tried to dissipate the antinomian potential of the suggestion by referring to Fazlallah's statement in the Mahabbatnama that love for God means praising him perpetually through every part of one's body. He surmised that since the daily prayers are expressions of love, they remain applicable in paradise. 68 Even accepting the view, therefore, required continuing a life bound to rituals and social norms. 'Ali al-A'la's views failed to convince everyone, however, since adherents of the sect in Shirvan, Gilan, Khurasan, Luristan, Kurdistan and Iraq remained of the opinion that prayers should no longer be incumbent upon them. Some people in Tabriz even took the matter further and claimed: Whatever is in creation is the due of the knowledgeable person (insan-i-arif ). He should procure and utilize whatever is obtainable to him. As for what is beyond his reach, he ought to regard it as his by right and should strive to get it out of the other's hands to take possession of it. Prayer, worship, the greater and lesser ablutions, and all the likes of these things are abrogated. Prayer was instituted so that the reality (haqiqat) underlying it may become known. When

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that reality has become obvious, there is no more prayer or other similar obligations. 69

There is no historical evidence to suggest that the proponents of this view were ever able to carry out their threat of public disorder. 70 They were opposed by Fazlallah's major disciples since, as leaders, the main objective of the latter was to preserve the Hurufiyya as a cohesive community after Fazlallah's death. The antinomian viewpoint, nevertheless, took some of Fazlallah's own doctrines to their logical conclusion.

Against the idea that Fazlallah's mission had been fulfilled, the Hurufi faction which included his prominent vicegerents such as 'Ali al-A'la and Khwaja Sayyid Ishaq believed that the earthly victory of the chosen community was yet to materialize. Some in this group likened Fazlallah's first appearance to the work of a farmer planting the seed which would bear fruit at a later time. Based upon an allegorical reading of Qur'an 30: 4, they expected Fazlallah to rise up again in Khurasan, travel to Mecca to be proclaimed the messiah, and be rejoined with his followers at the site of his martyrdom in Alanjaq before proceeding to the conquest of Constantinople. 71 This itinerary was derived from a popular hadith report about the mahdi, and its Hurufi interpretation implied that Fazlallah was to fulfil messianic predictions only in his second coming. 72 This group's rationalization of Fazlallah's death split even his appearance in the world into esoteric and exoteric components. The knowledge he had imparted to his followers before his death at Alanjaq was the esoteric truth which had led to the formation of a loyal community. His second coming would then fulfil the exoteric part of the messianic tradition through an explicitly political triumph. Hurufis' annual hajj to Alanjaq with its elaborate symbolism was, therefore, both a commemoration of his earlier presence and an indication of their hopes for the future. 73

In parallel with views about his second coming, some Hurufis expected the worldly victory to come through the work of his descendants and followers. Among his children, the activities of his daughter Kalimatallah al-'Ulya in Tabriz were suppressed by the Karakoyunlu ruler Jahan Shah (d. 1467) in 1441? 42. Mentioned as Fazlallah's principal heir in a work by Khwaja Ishaq, 74 she and her husband had gathered a loyal following around themselves which provoked the suspicion of the local scholarly community. Jahan Shah was able to resist pressure from her enemies for some period but eventually gave in and issued the fatal order which led to both her death and the massacre of more than five hundred followers. 75

After Kalimatallah's demise, the Hurufi proselytization effort shifted from Iran to the strengthening Ottoman empire. 76 Their effort to enlist the allegiance of the Ottoman sultans is illustrated in a single report about an incident

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alleged to have taken place around 1450. A famous biographer of early Ottoman scholars states that at this time some followers of Fazlallah Astarabadi managed to enter the company of a very young Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror (r. 1451? 81) and make him take an interest in their doctrines. This caused great alarm to the vizier Mahmud Pasha who was, however, unable to intervene directly fearing the ruler's displeasure. He decided to elicit the aid of a certain Mawla Fakhr al-Din 'Ajami, a prominent scholar under the court's patronage, in investigating the matter. Mahmud Pasha then invited the leader of the Hurufi group to his house and pretended that he was inclined to their faith. Encouraged by this good news, the Hurufi began to list all the group's doctrines, but when he reached the topic of hulul (the idea that divinity can reside in a human body), Fakhr al-Din could not contain himself any longer and came out to curse the 'heretic' with great passion. He then pursued the offender to the palace where the latter went to seek refuge with Mehmet. However, the prince was cowed by the cleric's ferocity and did not rise to his companion's defence. He was then taken to the new mosque in Edirne where the muezzin gave out the call for a special prayer. Once people had gathered, Fakhr al-Din climbed the minbar and proclaimed a thorough denunciation of Hurufis' beliefs and the spiritual reward to be gained by participating in putting them to death. The order was given to prepare a fire to burn the leader of the group and, by that token, extinguish the dangerous fire of this heresy before it spread. Fakhr al-Din himself became so enthusiastic in fanning the flames that his large beard caught fire. The group's leader was then put in the fire by the others, followed by the execution of the remainder of the group. 77

This account of Hurufi activities at the Ottoman court is, in all likelihood, an abbreviated version of the actual incident which must have involved religious as well as political factors. As is evident from the discussion above, Hurufi thought could justifiably be charged with accepting the principle of divinity residing in a human body. However, this is not the way the Hurufis directly articulated their beliefs, and a prosecutor would have to have considerable knowledge of the system as a whole to argue the point. It is likely that the job of denouncing the Hurufis fell upon Fakhr al-Din 'Ajami because he was of Iranian origin and was already aware of their ideas based upon their activity in his homeland. His background as a mainstream scholar predetermined his hostility towards the Hurufis, and political forces fearful that the young Sultan might deviate from the control of the viziers utilized him to justify the movement's suppression. Despite this setback, Hurufism managed to find a congenial home in the environment of the Bektashi Sufi order in Ottoman domains where it survived as a separate syllabus for advanced students from medieval times to the modern period. 78 In addition,

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Hurufi religious ideas seeped into Ottoman society at large where they provided the inspiration for various later heterodox movements. 79

Conclusion

Representing the ethos of Islamic esotericism, Fazlallah Astarabadi and his Hurufi followers understood their surrounding universe to be a matrix of signs pointing to a greater reality. Their ontological hierarchy assigned the esoteric realm a higher status, but knowledge of this world could be attained only by deciphering their own lesser terrestrial existence. Although prophets and saints appointed by God had guided humans towards esoteric truth in all periods, the Hurufis felt themselves the ultimate chosen people since their community had been host to the presence of Fazlallah Astarabadi. The unveiling of cosmic mystery in his person and through his inspiration had fulfilled the ultimate aim of creation, and it was now time for the physical world to come to its destined end. Those living in the age could choose either to gain paradise by accepting Fazlallah's message, or reject him and ready themselves for the tortures of hell. The battle between good and evil played on the grand tableau of cosmic history had reached its zenith and all present were to prepare themselves for its conclusion.

The apocalyptic scenario outlined in this summary of the Hurufi worldview was underpinned by a theoretical system remarkable for its thoroughness and complexity. Hurufi authors took the claim of a final unveiling of existence quite literally, laying out in great detail the exact meanings behind ritual actions and parts of the human body. 80 Fazlallah once told his disciples that he could relate the conditions of every member of a Friday congregation by just observing them praying and hearing one dream from a single person among them. 81 For most Hurufis, the ability to understand rituals did not mean that they were no longer requisite acts. However, Hurufis performing their daily prayers or fasting in the month of Ramadan considered the rituals rational rather than symbolic actions.

Hurufis' claims about their superiority over others rested ultimately on their knowledge of the thirty-two Letters which formed the source code at the base of all creation. These Letters constituted the language in which God had articulated the cosmos. He had conferred a special status on humans, the only created beings formed in his own image, by entrusting them with the capacity to acquire the Letters. A full revelation of the Letters had occurred at only two points in human history: once at the moment of creation when God had taught Adam the 'names', and next during Fazlallah's experience of the Manifestation of Divine Glory in Tabriz in 1374. The initial revelation had inscribed all humans with the potential for acquiring the Letters, and the

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last indicated that it was time to lay open the game of creation and determine its winners and losers. Formed in God's image like all humans and given perfect knowledge of the Letters, Fazlallah was a complete manifestation of the divine in terrestrial form. The aim of his followers, troops of God in the most literal sense, was to absorb Fazlallah's knowledge through his personal guidance and written works, thereby ensuring themselves everlasting salvation. Although completely confident of its belief in Fazlallah's revelation, the Hurufiyya did not possess the means to control its worldly circumstances. Fazlallah's disciples expected that the all-important spiritual side of the millennial moment would compel the world to behave according to the predictions of Islamic messianic and apocalyptic traditions. Fazlallah's death before an obvious worldly triumph meant that the doctrine had to be adjusted to fit the new circumstances. Some of his followers accomplished this by interpreting the promised physical reward as a metaphor for their status as the possessors of ultimate knowledge. Others, however, continued to hope for a physical materialization through either Fazlallah's second coming or the efforts of those who had inherited his mission. Neither of these reinterpretations of tradition was able to withstand continuing adverse circumstances and the erosion of time, causing the movement eventually to dissolve away into the folds of history, leaving only traces in the intellectual outlooks of other traditions.

The history of the Hurufiyya contains the typical cycle of expectation and disappointment familiar to us from other millennialist movements. While the Hurufis certainly failed to actualize their ultimate vision, the efflorescence of activity sparked by Fazlallah's pronouncements represents an uncommonly innovative exploration of religious ideas in the Islamic East in late medieval times. Like other millennialist movements before and after it, the themes emphasized by the Hurufiyya resonated strongly with the inhabitants of its surroundings. Only a minority may have actively supported the Hurufis, but the intellectual vision their writings gave voice to represented a continuous tradition which both preceded and succeeded the momentary flash of their activity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In deciphering the signs of creation and apocalypse, the Hurufis considered their effort a vindication of the ultimate principle underlying the perspective of Islamic esotericism.

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