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CONTENTS

ANTI-RELIGIOUS VIEWS IN THE WORKS OF IBN AL-RĀWANDĪ AND ABŪ L-ʿALĀʾ AL-MAʿARRĪ

Ilkka Lindstedt

ABSTRACT

This article explores similarities in the anti-religious opinions of Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, for instance, their denial of the authenticity of prophecy and their shared assertion of the human origins of religion in general and Islam in particular.[1]

INTRODUCTION

The present paper discusses the anti-religious views found in the works of the theologian and thinker Ibn al-Rāwandī (*fl.* third/ninth century) and the belletrist Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (363/973–449/1058). The article endeavors to present a comparison between the two by pointing to similarities in their criticism of religion. Scholarly literature does not elaborate on how their views resemble one another, and no comparison of their thought has been made. Nonetheless, demonstrable similarities do exist. In this study, I proceed to trace the Fortleben of what might be called freethinking in the works of al-Maʿarrī.

Though critics of religion, the two men were not atheists.[2] They were Muslims, even if they attacked organized religion in general and Islam in particular. Being contra religion does not automatically mean being contra God. Al-Maʿarrī, for his part, was a firm believer in God and His omnipotence. There is, to be sure, a feeling of atheist about Ibn al-Rāwandī, principally when he sneers at the cruelty and stupidity of (Islam's) God. But his outright rejection of God is nowhere stated.

Ibn al-Rāwandī was, along with Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925 or 323/935),[3] the most important freethinker of early Islam. Over the course of time, approximately

1 Kind thanks to Prof. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila and Lic.Phil. Kaj Öhrnberg for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 On the question of atheism in the Medieval Arabic-Islamic world, see Daiber 1999; Crone 2009a.

3 Goodman 1995; Stroumsa 1999: 87–120. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's criticism of religion emerges mainly in Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's *Kitāb Aʿlām al-Nubuwwa*, the pertinent parts of which have been collected by Kraus (1936). Ibn al-Rāwandī used the language of *kalām*, while Abū Bakr al-Rāzī used that of the philosophers (Kraus 1936: 335–336).

during the fourth/tenth century, it became impossible to put forth such a severe criticism of religion in scholarly prose: Islam, with all its law schools, had matured to the point where overt criticism would have led to a charge of forfeiting Islam and, possibly, death. According to Sarah Stroumsa, the foremost scholar on the freethinking of Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, critics of religion (like al-Maʿarrī) after the fourth/tenth century had to resort to poetry or fictional prose.[4]

Similarities of the criticism of religion in the works of Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī will be treated below under the following four headings. The division could be made in several different ways and some of the passages could be organized under other headings as well:

1. Denying the truthfulness of prophecy and revelation (i.e. the Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth*), tantamount to wholesale rejection of organized religion.
2. Professing the human origin of religion.
3. Emphasizing the supremacy of reason over tradition.
4. Rejecting and parodying a corporeal representation of the afterlife.

Even though we lack a modern study comparing the theological and transcendental views of Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī, commonalities between them were already noted by Ibn al-Jawzī (510/1126–597/1200) in his *Talbīs Iblīs* in the context of *Barāhima* (Brahmins). The *Barāhima* were famous in the Islamic world as deniers of prophecy. Ibn al-Rāwandī attributed some of his views to them (see below).[5] Al-Maʿarrī is also associated with the *Barāhima*, mostly due to his vegetarian regime, but sometimes because of his rejection of prophecy.[6] Ibn al-Jawzī says of the two:

> Abū l-Wafā' ʿAlī b. ʿAqīl, God be pleased with him, has said: "The hearts of the heretics (*ahl al-ilḥād*),[7] for instance Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū l-ʿAlā' [al-Maʿarrī], became vexed at the spread of the word of truth and the establishment of the religious laws (*al-sharā'iʿ*) among the people and their obedience to the commandments. What is more, they found that their own doctrines did not gain any ground or influence [... For this reason,] some of them began to throw doubts on the transmitters of tradition and criticize the chains of authorities (*al-asānīd*)."[8]

4 Stroumsa 1999: 240–241.

5 The *Barāhima* are, in this connection, a totally fictitious group. On the *Barāhima*, see Stroumsa 1999: 145–162; Crone 2009b. See also Calder's article from 1994, which criticizes some interpretations of the Islamicists. His own suggestion for the identity of the group (pp. 45–51) is, however, highly fanciful and should be treated with caution.

6 Cf. Yāqūt 1923: I, 170, ll. 10–11. "He was accused of adopting the dogma of the *Barāhima* in his belief [...] for he did not eat meat or believe in the prophets or Resurrection."

7 On the term *ilḥād*, see Madelung 1993; Crone 2009a.

8 Ibn al-Jawzī 1367 AH: 67. Cf. the translation in Ibn al-Jawzī 2003 I: 77.

In the eyes of Abū l-Wafāʾ and Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī were deniers of prophecy akin to the *Barāhima*. The reason for such denial is explicitly identified as envy for the triumph of Islam. A link between their criticism of the *aḥādīth* (prophetic dicta) and rejection of prophecy is also assumed, not without grounds, as will be seen below.

IBN AL-RĀWANDĪ (*FL.* THIRD/NINTH CENTURY)

Our knowledge about the life and thought of Ibn al-Rāwandī is scanty, to say the least. Nonetheless, the situation has dramatically improved with recent scholarly work, especially the painstaking efforts of Sarah Stroumsa. We do not need to occupy ourselves with a detailed biography of Ibn al-Rāwandī, as other scholars have already provided plausible reconstructions;[9] it will suffice to briefly recapitulate some aspects of his life.

Abū l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Isḥāq al-Rāwandī was born in Khurāsān *c.*205/815. His name is variously spelled in the Arabic sources as Ibn al-Rāwandī, Ibn al-Rawandī or Ibn al-Rīwandī (the first spelling is the most usual one). Associated with the Muʿtazila in Baghdad, he acquired fame amongst them. At some point in his life, however, he broke from the Muʿtazilites and began to write against them. The reasons for this schism remain obscure.[10] Ibn al-Rāwandī then turned against Islam in its entirety. He seems to have suffered persecution of some sort for his fierce refutation of the Muslim tenets, although the accounts that he met a violent death are apocryphal.[11]

Ibn al-Rāwandī endeavored to refute the Muʿtazilites in his *Kitāb Faḍīḥat al-Muʿtazila* (The Disgrace of the Muʿtazila). More importantly, in other works he vehemently attacked Islam in general.[12] The hatred was mutual; for instance, the Muʿtazilite al-Khayyāṭ wrote refutations on many of Ibn al-Rāwandī's treatises. Ibn al-Rāwandī's works are not extant; they survive only in later citations.

Ibn al-Rāwandī's conversion from Muʿtazilism to freethinking is attributed in the sources to a mysterious figure called Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq (*fl.* third/ninth century).[13] As regards Ibn al-Rāwandī, it is important to note that in some of his

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9 See Nyberg's introduction in al-Khayyāṭ 1957: xxii–xxxv; Kraus 1971; *TG* IV: 295–349; Urvoy 1996: 117–133; Stroumsa 1999: 37–46.

10 *TG* IV: 299–304.

11 *TG* IV: 296.

12 In addition to writing refutations of Islamic dogma and schools, Ibn al-Rāwandī is said to have written refutations of his own works. For this extraordinary aspect of Ibn al-Rāwandī's career, see Stroumsa 1999: 72–74 and the notes therein. It remains an open question why he engaged in refuting his own works.

13 Cf. al-Khayyāṭ 1957: 108, 110, 111. On Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, see the contrasting views of Urvoy

books, at least in the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq is quoted as arguing against prophecy. Stroumsa thinks that the statements cited were indeed voiced by Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq,[14] but I am more inclined to believe that they were written by Ibn al-Rāwandī himself and put into the mouth of Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq. This would tally with Ibn al-Rāwandī's treatment of the Muʿtazila in his *Kitāb Faḍīḥat al-Muʿtazila* (see below), where he, as often as not, quotes incorrectly. I readily admit that this is conjectural: the difficulty surrounding the interpretation of the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* does not disappear.

According to some, Ibn al-Rāwandī died around 245/860. Other sources state that he died later, about the year 298/912. It is possible that 245/860 is not his actual death date, but the year when Ibn al-Rāwandī left Baghdad, returned to his homeland, and faded into obscurity.[15]

The picture that emerges from the sources is contradictory – a problem that afflicts us also as to Ibn al-Rāwandī's religious-philosophical beliefs.[16] What is clear, however, is that Ibn al-Rāwandī's contemporaries (as well as later generations) regarded him as a vehement *zindīq*[17] and *dahrī*.[18] Over the course of time, he became known as the arch-heretic of Islam. Nevertheless, van Ess has suggested that Ibn al-Rāwandī was no heretic at all and that he was made a pariah by hostile sources.[19] All in all, van Ess's argumentation is not very convincing, since it is

1996: 102–117; *TG* IV: 289–294; Stroumsa 1999: 40–46; Thomas 2008; Thomas's introduction to Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq 1992: 9–30. No consensus on the thought of Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq has been reached and, in my opinion, all the presented reconstructions thereof are wanting in one way or another. Their most important shortcoming is their failure to notice that Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's anti-Islamic views are, in fact, with very few exceptions, only quoted in Ibn al-Rāwandī's *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*. I have serious doubts whether these citations are authentic. Later writers quoting Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq do so merely *apud* the works of Ibn al-Rāwandī, a trend which does not elucidate Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's own thought. (With this in mind, there really is no way of proving with any certainty *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*.)

It is remarkable that only the two anti-religious fragments cited in *TG* VI: 432–433 seem to be directly from Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's own works, rather than from Ibn al-Rāwandī's.

14 Stroumsa 1999: 71–73. Stroumsa does not dwell on the implications of this position. Yet it appears to me that if the statements recorded in the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* were, in fact, stated by Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, the core of the argument of Ibn al-Rāwandī as a genuine freethinker falls apart, since that work is the main source from which the image emerges.

Thomas, in his introduction to Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq (1992: 24–30), argues that Ibn al-Rāwandī was "gradually ascribed the authorship of Abū ʿĪsā's views" (p. 24). He suggests (p. 29) that the views in the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* ascribed to Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq ultimately stem from Abū ʿĪsā's work *al-Gharīb al-Mashriqī*. This is possible, but cannot be proven.

15 See the discussion in *TG* IV: 295–299. Nyberg in al-Khayyāṭ (1957: xxxi–xxxiv) espouses the later date as being the date of Ibn al-Rāwandī's death. Kraus (1934: 371–379) espouses the earlier date.

16 On the problematic nature of the Arabic sources on Ibn al-Rāwandī, see Stroumsa 1999: 16–18.

17 On this term, see Lewis 1973: 228–230; de Blois 2002. For a longer survey, see *TG* I: 416–436.

18 On this term, see Goldziher 1965; Gimaret 1993.

19 *TG* IV: 342–344. For criticism of this view, see Stroumsa 1999: 45–46, 65–71.

largely based on the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, where Ibn al-Rāwandī assumed the role of defending Islam and prophecy (which does not mean that he really agreed with this voice of the book; see below). I am inclined to follow Stroumsa's stance on Ibn al-Rāwandī's religious views.

Of Ibn al-Rāwandī's 50 or more works, only three can be reconstructed beyond a few short lines.[20] These are:

1) The aforementioned *Kitāb Faḍīḥat al-Muʿtazila*, most or all of which is contained in al-Khayyāṭ's refutation of it, the *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*. Ibn al-Rāwandī wrote this book as a response to al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb Faḍīlat al-Muʿtazila* (The Excellence of the Muʿtazila). As an attack against the Muʿtazila, in this book Ibn al-Rāwandī follows the arguments of the Muʿtazilites *ad absurdum*. The work was probably written soon after his rift with the Muʿtazila.[21]

It appears that at times Ibn al-Rāwandī incorrectly quoted the views of the Muʿtazilites. Al-Khayyāṭ says of this: "[Ibn al-Rāwandī] misattributed to [the Muʿtazila] sayings that are not theirs and censured some of them of tenets that he himself believes partly or wholly and which he follows."[22]

2) *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* (The Emerald), in which Ibn al-Rāwandī critiques prophecy and revelation. Al-Khayyāṭ's characterization of the book is apt:

> Among his books is the book known as *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, in which [Ibn al-Rāwandī] mentions the miraculous signs (*āyāt*) of the prophets, peace upon them, such as the signs of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, God bless them. He disputed the reality of these miraculous signs and claimed that they were fraudulent tricks (*makhārīq*) and that people who performed them were magicians and liars, that the Qurʾān is the speech of an unwise being (*kalām ghayr ḥakīm*), and that it contains contradictions, errors and absurdities. He included in it a chapter entitled: "Against the Muhammadans in particular", meaning the community of Muhammad, God bless him.[23]

The most important source for the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* is the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya*, written by the Ismāʿīlī al-Muʾayyad fī l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 480/1077).[24]

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20 For a complete list of his works, see *TG* VI: 433–443. For selected quotations (in German) from these works, see *TG* VI: 443–490.

21 Kraus 1934: 378.

22 Al-Khayyāṭ 1957: 11.

23 Al-Khayyāṭ 1957: 12. The translation follows, with minor alterations, Stroumsa 1999: 47.

24 The relevant parts of the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* have been edited, with German translation, by Kraus (1934). The *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* is, however, quite a problematical source; al-Muʾayyad fī l-Dīn admits that his source is a refutation of the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* by an Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*, not the work itself. As the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* already included pro-prophecy arguments, the unnamed *dāʿī* chose to replace them with statements of his own. Moreover, it appears that al-Muʾayyad fī l-Dīn summarizes the work rather than quoting from it verbatim. Fortunately, many of the

In this book, Ibn al-Rāwandī presents a number of arguments against prophecy, attributing them to Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq and to the *Barāhima*,[25] while he himself takes the other side.[26] This does not prove that Ibn al-Rāwandī was really a proponent of prophecy;[27] it was common for works treating *kalām* (speculative theology) to be written in the form of dialogue, and the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* was no exception. Although in this work Ibn al-Rāwandī advances arguments supporting prophecy, its real intent – refutation of the existence of prophecy and revelation – was easily understood by the readers, as the above-mentioned quote from *Kitāb al-Intiṣār* demonstrates.

The work was almost certainly written after the *Kitāb Faḍīḥat al-Muʿtazila*, that is, rather late in Ibn al-Rāwandī's life (or, alternatively, late in his career in Baghdad). This is also the case with the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh* (see directly below).

3) *Kitāb al-Dāmigh* (The Skull-crusher), in which Ibn al-Rāwandī endeavors to refute the Qur'ān. It was considered such a violent attack against revelation and God that few later writers dared quote it. Nonetheless, fragments of the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh* are preserved in Ibn al-Jawzī's *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Taʾrīkh*[28] and in the Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawḥīd*.[29]

It is important to remember that Ibn al-Rāwandī wrote these three works during different phases of his life and that the time period between them could be decades. While treating them in conjunction (as done below) is somewhat misleading, it

quotations also appear, though with different wording, in al-Māturīdī (1970: 186–202). This corroborates the fact that the citations in the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* are really from the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, even if in a paraphrased form.

Kraus (1934: 358–366) argues that the anonymous *dāʿī* was actually al-Muʾayyad fī l-Dīn himself. His interpretation has been revised by Stroumsa (1999: 46–64). The identity of the *dāʿī* is not, in fact, very important for the reading of the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*.

On Ismāʿīlī traits in the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya*, see De Smet 1995.

On similarities with the Muʿtazila, see Kraus 1934: 124–125, 128. Note that Ibn al-Rāwandī uses their vocabulary, even if his meaning is more radical.

25 Though the *Barāhima* is a totally fictional group, it is probable that they had the reputation of being critics of prophecy as early as Ibn al-Rāwandī's time. As to Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, it is impossible to tell whether he really voiced the vigorous attack against prophecy that is quoted in the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*. Stroumsa (1999: 71–76) contends he did. On the *Barāhima*, see the references in n. 5 above. As to the *Barāhima* in the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* in particular, see Kraus 1934: 341–357. Although Kraus contends that Ibn al-Rāwandī was the first to employ the trope of *Barāhima* in an anti-prophecy fashion, this is not at all certain. It is nevertheless clear that Ibn al-Rāwandī made them famous in this role.

26 On the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, see the substantial analysis in Stroumsa 1999: 46–86.

27 Although van Ess espouses this view, see *TG* IV: 319–320.

28 The pertinent parts of which have been edited, with German translation, by Ritter (1931).

29 Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī* XVI: 389–394, ed. A. al-Khūlī and printed in Cairo in 1960. Unfortunately, I do not have access to this work.

must be noted that reconstructing the development of Ibn al-Rāwandī's thought is impossible given the current lack of knowledge about him.

ABŪ L-'ALĀ' AL-MA'ARRĪ (363/973–449/1058)[30]

Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī, a poet and prosaist of great significance, was born in 363/973[31] in the town of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān in Syria.[32] His family, the Banū Sulaymān, occupied an important position there.

According to one of his letters, al-Ma'arrī lost his eyesight to smallpox at the age of four.[33] His phenomenal memory compensated for the lost sense, however. He studied with various sheiks in Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān and in Aleppo, completing religious as well as philological studies.[34] It is possible that he traveled during his youth to the Syrian coastal towns in search of knowledge and libraries.[35] He was thoroughly learned in literature and philology. Ibn Khallikān calls him "the great scholar of the age".[36]

Around 398/1007–1008, al-Ma'arrī left his hometown and journeyed to Baghdad, the capital of the 'Abbāsid caliphate, arriving there in the year 399.[37] He probably sought a position in the city, but due to his reluctance to compose panegyric poetry he did not win any patrons. A lack of resources is the most feasible reason why he did not stay in Baghdad but instead returned to Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān in 400/1010.[38]

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30 For a critical but now slightly outdated bibliography of the sources (both medieval and modern) treating al-Ma'arrī, see Saleh 1969; Saleh 1970. For al-Ma'arrī's biography, see Margoliouth's introduction in al-Ma'arrī 1898; Smoor 1986; 'Abd al-Rahman 1990. For a longer survey of Arabic sources on al-Ma'arrī's life, see al-Jundī 1964 I: 173–566.

While being an important contribution to our knowledge of al-Ma'arrī, al-Jundī's study suffers from an apologetic attempt to prove that he was an orthodox Muslim; for this reason, al-Jundī glosses over many aspects of al-Ma'arrī's works that may be considered freethinking. Overall, al-Jundī's work should be treated with caution.

31 The date is given in Ibn Khallikān n.d. I: 113 as "Friday the 28th of I Rabī', at the time of sunset".

32 On this town, see Elisséeff 1986.

33 Al-Ma'arrī in a letter to al-Mu'ayyad fī l-Dīn, see Margoliouth 1902: 317. The loss of al-Ma'arrī's eyesight was probably gradual, see Margoliouth's introduction in al-Ma'arrī 1898: xiv.

34 As for al-Ma'arrī's learning, see al-Jundī 1964 II: 581–684. Note, however, that al-Jundī 1964 I: 188–190 doubts that al-Ma'arrī traveled to Aleppo in search of knowledge.

35 On this debatable trip, see Margoliouth's introduction in al-Ma'arrī 1898: xvi–xvii; al-Jundī 1964 I: 191–205; Ghali 1981: 106–112; Smoor 1986: 927–928. It must be noted that Ghali's study is not very reliable.

36 Ibn Khallikān n.d. I: 113.

37 For his stay in Baghdad, see al-Jundī 1964 I: 207–292.

38 For other possible explanations, see Margoliouth's introduction in al-Ma'arrī 1898: xxvii–xxviii; al-Jundī 1964 I: 264–276.

In a letter to the people of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān, written before his return, al-Maʿarrī proclaims his intention to completely withdraw from the world and begin the lifelong pursuit of an ascetic hermit.[39] Fortunately for us, he did not stop writing (or rather dictating) poetry and prose. What is more, his seclusion was not at all complete; while he kept to his house and did not forfeit his ascetic habits (which included vegetarianism and celibacy), he received a number of students as well as notables.[40] In 449/1058, after an illness of a few days, he went the way of all flesh.[41]

Out of the myriad of al-Maʿarrī's works, a dozen or so are extant.[42] For the sake of brevity, I will concentrate on two works, which are important for al-Maʿarrī's stance on religion: 1) the *Luzūm mā lā yalzam* (or the *Luzūmiyyāt*) and 2) the *Risālat al-Ghufrān*.

1) The collection of poems called the *Luzūmiyyāt* (The Necessity of That Which Is Not Necessary) was written over a long period after al-Maʿarrī's return from Baghdad.[43] It is "unique in the history of Arabic poetry from the point of view of both content and form."[44] Its name refers to the work's rhyme-pattern, which is more demanding than that necessitated by Arabic poetics.[45]

The *Luzūmiyyāt* has aroused a great deal of debate, mainly due to what is seen as its self-contradictory nature: parts of it are totally anti-religious, even while al-Maʿarrī proclaims in his introduction that he has written the work in veneration of God. Furthermore, the tone of the speaker sometimes follows the orthodox convention of claiming that Islam is the best of religions.

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39 Al-Maʿarrī 1898: 34.

40 See Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1375 AH: 18–19 (transl. in Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1986: 11–12), even if the account is exaggerated. Arab writers also note the fame that al-Maʿarrī gained after his return to Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān, see for instance Ibn Khallikān n.d. I: 114. For criticism on Nāṣir-i Khusraw's view that al-Maʿarrī became wealthy late in his life, see al-Jundī 1964 I: 318–320, although al-Jundī does not have any convincing evidence to adduce.

The passage of the *Safar-Nāma* indicates that al-Maʿarrī's orthodox status was already doubted during his lifetime. It seems that he did not suffer any persecution, however.

For al-Maʿarrī's "practical philosophy" and ethics, al-Jundī's presentation 1964 III: 1493–1639 is rather good.

41 The date is given in Ibn Khallikān n.d. I: 114 as "the second or third Friday of I Rabīʿ, or, according to some, the 13th day of that month".

42 For a list of his works, including the lost ones, see Saleh 1970: 275–279.

43 For brevity's sake, I have used the selection of Nicholson 1921 and his translations.
For a dating of the *Luzūmiyyāt*, see ʿAzzām 1945. Note that it is possible that the collection includes also few earlier poems.

44 Friedmann 1979: 347.

45 While this technicality was not al-Maʿarrī's invention, no one prior had used it as widely as he did. On the matter of form of the work, see Friedmann 1979: 349–351; Sperl 1989: 100–115.

According to my understanding, the *Luzūmiyyāt* does deny the veracity of religions explicitly. Yet this does not lead the speaker to doubt the existence or the omnipotence of God. To the contrary, God is the only thing of which we can be sure. (It appears that al-Maʿarrī's God is not dissimilar to the God of the Muslim philosophers.) Although the speaker rejects the truth of Islam, it appears in his view to be better than other religions, especially Christianity (which, for instance, permits the consumption of wine – something that appalled al-Maʿarrī, because of its destructive effect on reason). The ethics of Islam, with emphasis put on modesty amongst other things, most likely appealed to al-Maʿarrī more than those of Judaism or Christianity.[46] Moreover, time and again he proclaims that besides religion, nothing else either will lead man to the absolute truth that only God knows (this is the greatest disagreement between al-Maʿarrī and the philosophers). Reason (*ʿaql*, *ḥujā*) can only advise man about ethical questions. Indeed, as far as al-Maʿarrī is concerned, ethics is a field of inquiry for reason, not for the heart or for religion. According to my reading, the point of the *Luzūmiyyāt* is not to dismiss religion or faith *in toto*, as is sometimes maintained, but to reconcile religion with reason in a subtle reforming of religion from within.[47] Thus, reason supplies moral precepts,[48] whereas religion supplies faith and praxis (like prayer). Of course, al-Maʿarrī was realistic (or pessimistic) enough to understand that his project was doomed to fail. But that did not prevent him from expressing his views.

On the other hand, the work *is* self-contradictory. For instance, some poems proclaim the eternity of the world, while others deny it. One could argue that such contradiction is due to the long period of the composition of the work, yet the fact that the finished work embraces opposing views remains something of a mystery.[49] It is obvious that al-Maʿarrī was a poet, not a philosopher or a systematical thinker.

It is interesting that when al-Maʿarrī comments on things that might result in harm, such as politics or religion, he does it by mean of rhetorical and poetical devices (e.g. *figura etymologica*). For example, he does not mention political actors

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46 For poems that proclaim the preference of Islam to Christianity, see for instance Nicholson 1921, poem no. 141; Smoor 1985: 140–144, 149–150.

47 Badran (1999: 83–84) reaches comparable conclusions in his study. For an opposing view – that al-Maʿarrī failed to conciliate reason and religion – see Amīn 1945. Note that neither of the studies is, properly speaking, critical or entirely reliable.

On this matter, see also Laoust 1945. Laoust (1945: 300) takes the view that *Bāṭiniyya* had a rather considerable impact on al-Maʿarrī. What he precisely means by this remains, however, equivocal.

48 In one poem, reason is called "a prophet". See Smoor 1985: 78.

49 For attempts to discern an organized philosophical system, see Ṭāhā Ḥusayn 1963: 232–276; Lacey 1995. Neither of the studies are wholly credible.

by name when criticizing them.[50] The purpose is twofold: first, and more importantly, it shows his erudition; second, it makes his comments less dangerous.

2) *Risālat al-Ghufrān* is a prose work that describes the fictional journey to Heaven and Hell of its protagonist, Ibn al-Qāriḥ. The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* belongs to a long tradition of literary descriptions of the afterlife, the first examples of which can be found in ancient Mesopotamia. The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* was written around 424/1033. In Heaven, Ibn al-Qāriḥ meets poets and literati whose sins, rather astonishingly, have been pardoned. Indeed, in the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* salvation is also granted to non-Muslims: those who lived before Islam, believed in One God and did good deeds. Moreover, it shows that salvation can be gained because of suffering (e.g. even animals can get to Heaven). Like Ibn al-Rāwandī, al-Maʿarrī pondered over the justice of God. It is interesting to speculate whether the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* may reflect al-Maʿarrī's view that God's mercy is in fact more embracing than traditional Islam concedes.

The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* can be read as a parody of the corporeal representation of the afterlife.[51] As such, the parody is based on the literal reading of promises found in the Qurʾān and the *aḥādīth*. The work is remarkable: while al-Maʿarrī is not guilty of distorting the traditional picture of Islam, and his representation is totally "orthodox", he is able to effectively make a jab at said orthodoxy by showing how comical a place the physical Heaven of Islam would be.

Was al-Maʿarrī, then, a freethinker? The answer depends on how we define the term. One should bear in mind that al-Maʿarrī "represented not only the fruit of rational speculation, but also of the skeptical tradition prevalent among poets on the one hand and Ṣūfī ascetics on the other".[52] Al-Maʿarrī's poetry has to be understood in a different context than the theological treatises of Ibn al-Rāwandī. Nevertheless there are conspicuous similarities between their opinions. Both presented a critique of religion, for example. A comparison of their views is attempted below.

Al-Maʿarrī is seen in the Medieval Arabic sources in two conflicting ways: either he was a *zindīq* who held heterodox views, or a pious, ascetic servant of God who practiced self-mortification.[53] This dichotomy is nothing but spurious, even if some modern scholars repeat it and then assert that one of these views must be true and the other false. My understanding is that al-Maʿarrī was indeed

50 A point noted by Smoor 1985: 213–214.

51 See Smoor 1986: 933–934; Schoeler 2002: 24–25. This is a view which ʿAbd al-Rahman 1990: 338 considers to be "naïve". That said, her objection, directed at Western Arabists, itself lacks rationale.

52 Stroumsa 1999: 15.

53 See Yāqūt 1923 I: 178, ll. 8–10.

both. He was an utterly devout servant of God, a pious ascetic. Yet his religion was not Islam, but rather some sort of rationalistic monotheism.

A note of admonition: Al-Maʿarrī was not, first and foremost, a critic of religion. Rather, he was a poet and prosaist whose works are infused with a moralizing, pessimistic and skeptical tone. When reading this paper, one should keep in mind that the picture of al-Maʿarrī that emerges will inevitably be one-sided, because of its focus on his views about religion and his criticism thereof.

THE FALSITY OF PROPHECY AND REVELATION

Both Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī denied the truth of the revelation of Islam. As Stroumsa notes, "the preoccupation of Muslim freethinkers with prophecy seems to reflect their own religious background".[54] Since prophecy is a central tenet in Islam, it was natural for freethinkers to reject just that. Basically, this meant rejecting the Qur'ān as the word of God.

The following statements, aimed at refuting the Qur'ān, are from Ibn al-Rāwandī's *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*:

> He [Ibn al-Rāwandī] has said: "We have seen that He claims to know the Unseen (*al-ghayb*), for He says: *Not a leaf doth fall but He knows it* (Qur. 6:59). But then [in another place] He says: *We appointed the Qibla to which thou wast used only to know [those who followed the Messenger from those who would turn on their heels]* (Qur. 2:143)."[55]

> He [Ibn al-Rāwandī] has said: "[God] cannot count to six. He talks about six [days] in total[56] but when it comes to dividing it [to parts] we see that He makes a mistake by two, for He says: *He created the earth in two days* (Qur. 41:9), then He says: *He measured therein all things to give them nourishment in due proportion, in four days* (Qur. 41:10), and [finally] He says: *He completed the skies as seven firmaments in two days* (Qur. 41:12)."[57]

This passage has indeed puzzled the commentators of the Qur'ān, for the sum of days seems to be eight, not six. A conventional interpretation states that the four days in the verse 41:10 actually include the two days mentioned in 41:9.[58]

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54 Stroumsa 1999: 136.

55 Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Taʾrīkh* in Ritter 1931: 6. The citations from the Qur'ān are from Yūsuf ʿAlī's translation, but sometimes modified to suit the context. See *The Qur'ān* 1989.

56 Cf. Qur. 7:54.

57 Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Taʾrīkh* in Ritter 1931: 6.

58 As Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Taʾrīkh* in Ritter 1931: 6 says in his answer.

In his *Kitāb Faḍīḥat al-Muʿtazila*, Ibn al-Rāwandī searches for support for his own criticism of the Qur'ān:

> Then [Ibn al-Rāwandī] said: "[Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām] has asserted that the arrangement (*naẓm*) and the composition (*ta'līf*) of the Qur'ān are not a sign of the Prophet, God bless him, and that the human beings are capable of a similar thing."[59]

Indeed, Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām (d. between 220/835 and 230/845) shared such an opinion, but he did not mean it as a wholesale rejection of the Qur'ān (as Ibn al-Rāwandī presented it). Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām asserted that the eloquence of the Qur'ān is not a proof of prophecy, but its content is: no one could know such things without superhuman help.[60] In pre-Islamic times at least, Arabs were not incapable of composing poetry as beautiful as the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, God would prevent (*ṣarfa*) such an endeavor.[61]

Ibn al-Rāwandī also doubts the historicity of events in the Muslim salvation story:

> The *mulḥid* has said: "The angels that God – may He be exalted – sent to the help of the Prophet in the battle of Badr, as you claim (*bi-zaʿmikum*), must have been rather inefficient (*kānū maflūlī al-shawka*) and bestowed with insignificant amount of courage since they were able to kill no more than 70 men despite their great number and the fact that they fought alongside the Muslims [...] And where were the angels in the battle of Uḥud, when the Prophet hid, half-dead, between the corpses? What is the reason they did not help him in that situation?"[62]

Of the "pillars of Islam", he considers the pilgrimage to Mecca to be especially irrational:

> According to Ibn al-Rāwandī: "The Prophet brought with him things that are incompatible with reason, like prayer, ablution of major ritual impurity, throwing stones [during the pilgrimage], circumambulating a temple (*bayt*) that neither hears nor sees, and running between two hills that neither help nor harm. All these are things that reason does not necessitate. What is the difference of al-Ṣafā' and al-Marwa and Abū Qubays and Ḥirā?[63] What is the

59 Al-Khayyāṭ 1957: 29.
60 See *TG* III: 408–413.
61 See van Ess 1993: 1058.
62 *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 105, ll. 24–106, l. 3. Cf. the shorter quotation (a summary?) of this passage in al-Māturīdī 1970: 199, ll. 11–12.
In passing, it should be noted that al-Maʿarrī disputed the existence of the angels. See for instance, the poem quoted in von Kremer 1888: 100, poem no. 189.
63 Ḥirā: thus in the text (with *alif maqṣūra*). Usually it is spelled Ḥirā', see Yāqūt 1866–1873, s.v. Abū Qubays and Ḥirā' are hills in the vicinity of Mecca with no religious significance.

> difference of circulating the temple (*al-bayt*) [of Kaʿba] and that of circulating any other house (*ghayrihi min al-buyūt*)?"[64]

Ibn al-Rāwandī's criticism of the pilgrimage comes close to that of al-Maʿarrī, as well as some Ṣūfīs who tried to replace the pilgrimage to Mecca with a visit (*ziyāra*) to the grave of a Ṣūfī master. What is radical in Ibn al-Rāwandī's statement is that he also rejects the ritual prayer.

Al-Maʿarrī does not seem to have criticized any other rites of Islam than the pilgrimage. Nevertheless, these anti-*ḥajj* views, which are somewhat similar to those of Ibn al-Rāwandī since they emphasize the irrational and pagan nature of the rite, surface in many poems of the *Luzūmiyyāt*. An example is the following poem:

> Fortune is so strangely allotted, that rocks are visited and touched with hands and lips,
>
> Like the Holy Rock (at Jerusalem) or the two angles of Quraysh,[65] howbeit all of them are stones that once were kicked.[66]

In another poem, al-Maʿarrī proclaims: "Stay at home! No obligation I account the Pilgrimage!"[67]

Al-Maʿarrī seems at times to be as vehement a denier of revelation as Ibn al-Rāwandī.[68] The following poems can be quoted as evidence:

> Religion and infidelity, and stories that are related, and a Revelation[69] that is cited as authority, and a Pentateuch and a Gospel.
>
> Lies are believed amongst every race; and was any race ever the sole possessor of Truth?[70]

> If a man of sound judgment appeals to his intelligence, he will hold cheap the various creeds and despise them.

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64 *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 99, ll. 18–22.

65 The *rukn* and *maqām*. Calling them angles of "Quraysh" seems to emphasize what al-Maʿarrī sees as Kaʿba's worldly origins.

66 Nicholson 1921, poem no. 30. Parentheses, here as elsewhere, belong to Nicholson's translation (save for Arabic words added by me). For other examples of criticism of the pilgrimage, see Nicholson 1921: 191–193.

67 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 304, first verse.

68 See also the poems quoted in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn 1963: 269–273 and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's reading of them.

69 *Al-Furqān*, clearly meaning here the Qurʾān.

70 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 252. See al-Jundī 1964 III: 1395–1396 for an (unconvincing) attempt to explain away the heterodox notions of the poem. Al-Jundī is, in my opinion, completely unreliable regarding al-Maʿarrī's views on religion.

> Do thou take thereof so much as Reason delivered (to thee), and let not ignorance plunge thee in their stagnant pool.[71]

> They all err – Moslems [*al-ḥanīfa*], Christians, Jews, and Magians;
> Two make Humanity's universal sect:
> One man intelligent without religion,
> And one religious without intellect.[72]

The end of the poem has sometimes been interpreted as disavowing the possibility of any reconciliation between faith and reason, in which case religion must be discarded.[73] This is not the case. Rather, al-Maʿarrī laments the fact that no one succeeds in combining piety and intelligence. As I have argued above, the purpose of the *Luzūmiyyāt* is just that: reconciling religion with reason.

In fact, religions have spread only with the help of violence:

> Had they been left alone with Reason, they would not have accepted a spoken lie; but the whips were raised (to strike them).
> Traditions were brought to them and they were bidden say, "We have been told the truth"; and if they refused, the sword was drenched (in their blood).
> They were terrified by scabbards full of calamities, and tempted by great bowls brimming over with food for largesse.[74]

THE HUMAN ORIGIN OF RELIGION

In his *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, Ibn al-Rāwandī asserts that the Prophets are deceivers and that their miracles are actually sleights of hand:

> The *mulḥid* has said on miracles, attempting to refute them: "There are various types of legerdemain (*makẖārīq*). Among them are those that are hard to understand because of their subtlety. Since the accounts of them is transmitted by a small group [of early Muslims], it is possible that they agree on a lie."[75]

According to Ibn al-Rāwandī, traditions about the miracles are highly questionable, since only a small number of people have claimed to have witnessed them. Furthermore, it is possible that the prophets used sleights of hand to

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71 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 261.
72 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 239, last two verses.
73 Nicholson 1921: 167.
74 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 262. This poem brings to mind Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, who argued the same; see the quotation in Stroumsa 1999: 97–98.
75 *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 101, ll. 11–13.

conduct the miracles. In *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Ta'rīkh*, one reads that according to the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* the prophets used talismans "that attract like magnets" to trick people.[76] All this indicates the human origin of religion.

The next fragment claims the human origin of the Qur'ān, the greatest of Muhammad's miracles:

> It is possible that a tribe of Arabs would be more eloquent [than the other tribes], and that in this tribe there would be a group more eloquent than [the rest of] the tribe, and one individual in this group would be more eloquent than [the rest of] the group ... Even assuming that his [Muhammad's] eloquence surpassed other Arabs, what is the wisdom and the proof in it for the non-Arabs (*al-'ajam*), who do not know the [Arabic] tongue?[77]

Granted that the Qur'ān can be beautiful, but this does not, according to Ibn al-Rāwandī, testify to the miraculousness of it. And, furthermore, this aspect of the Qur'ān is not guaranteed to impress non-Arabs.

Already von Kremer has stated that, according to al-Ma'arrī, religions are man-made.[78] This is shown unambiguously in the following poems from the *Luzūmiyyāt:*

> O fools, awake! The rites ye sacred hold [*diyānātukum*]
> Are but a cheat contrived by men of old,
> Who lusted after wealth and gained their lust
> And died in baseness – and their law is dust.[79]

> Our young man grows up in the belief to which his father has accustomed him.
> It is not Reason that makes him religious, but he is taught religion by his next of kin.
> The Persian's child had guardians who trained him in the rites of Magianism.[80]

The same argument resurfaces in the *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, where it is stated:

> Devotion to God is natural to human disposition (*al-ta'alluh mawjūd fī al-gharā'iz*). It is considered a refuge fortified. A growing child learns fully

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76 Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Ta'rīkh* in Ritter 1931: 4. Cf. the similar passage in al-Māturīdī 1970: 186 where the statement is attributed to al-Warrāq. This is in accordance with what is said earlier, namely that the anti-prophecy stance in the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* is ascribed to al-Warrāq. As stated above, these statements cannot be attributed to al-Warrāq with certainty; it is fully possible that the real author is Ibn al-Rāwandī.

77 *Majālis Mu'ayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 102, ll. 5–8. Cf. the somewhat similar passage in al-Māturīdī 1970: 191–192.

78 See von Kremer 1888: 10, 13.

79 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 249, last two verses.

80 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 257.

> (*yalqanu*) what he hears from his parents and it remains with him [always] in this world (*al-dahr al-ghābir*). Those who live in the hermitages and those who serve God in the mosques deem that in which they believe (*mā hum ʿalayh*) a transmitted tradition, without distinguishing between a true interpreter and a false. If one is born into a Zoroastrian family (*al-usra min al-majūs*) he will be brought up Zoroastrian, and if into a Ṣābian family he will become akin to them (*qarīnan siyyan*) [... On the other hand] when reason is made guide (*hādiyan*), it will quench the thirst of the one who thirsts vehemently. But where are those who obey patiently the judgments of reason and polish their understanding to an utmost degree? They are few and far between![81]

Al-Maʿarrī explicitly mentions Muslims in the passage quoted above. Statements like this are a clear example of his belief in the supremacy of reason and the human origin of religion.

He points to revelations falsely attributed to God, while in fact they are the speech of man:

> The Jews went astray: their Torah is an invention of the doctors and rabbis,
>
> Who pretended to have derived it from one (a prophet) like themselves; then traced it further back to the Almighty.
>
> Whenever you discomfit a man who argues for his religion, he hands over its keys (the task of defending it) to the traditions (by which it is attested).[82]

Often al-Maʿarrī criticizes other religions (Judaism or Christianity) while, actually, ridicule is aimed at Islam. This literary habit is, to some extent, a matter of prudence. Consider the following poem:

> They recite their sacred books [*asfārahum*], although the fact [*al-ḥaqq*] informs me that these are a fiction from first to last.
>
> O Reason, thou speakest the truth. Then perish the fools who forged the traditions [*al-aḥādīth*] or interpreted them!
>
> A Rabbi is no heretic [lit. does nothing new, *laysa ḥabrun bi-bidʿin*] amongst his disciples, if he sets a high price on stories which he invented.
>
> He only desired to marry women and amass riches by his lies.[83]

According to al-Maʿarrī, the human origin of religions in general and Islam in particular are quite obvious. The Muslim tradition and even the Qurʾān are nothing but falsehoods fabricated by the '*ulamā*'.

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81 Al-Maʿarrī n.d.: 464. Cf. the translation in Nicholson 1902: 351, although it must be noted that Nicholson was working with a defective manuscript.

82 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 243.

83 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 129.

THE SUPREMACY OF REASON OVER TRADITION

Both Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī asserted that it is possible to arrange the society as well as to form an ethical edifice without the help of revelation. This is contrary to Islam which states that the law and morality are impossible without the Qur'ān and the *sunna* of the Prophet (contained in the *aḥādīth*), even if reason is needed to infer the law (*sharīʿa*) from these sources.[84]

In his *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, Ibn al-Rāwandī states the following, attributing the pro-reason, anti-prophecy argument to the *Barāhima*:

> [Ibn al-Rāwandī has said:] The *Barāhima* say: "Among us as well as among our adversaries it is considered proven (*qad thabata*) that reason is the greatest of God's, may He be exalted, blessings on His creation; and that it is reason by which the Lord and His blessings can be known and by which the commandment (*al-amr*) and prohibition (*al-nahy*), the admonition (*al-targhīb*) and intimidation (*al-tarhīb*) become firm. And if the Prophet comes ascertaining what is considered good and evil (*al-taḥsīn wa-l-taqbīḥ*), obligated (*al-ījāb*) and forbidden (*al-ḥaẓr*), our belief in the weight of his proof (*ḥujjatih*) and in responding to his call crumbles. Since what reason says is enough for us, we have no use for him, and sending prophets (*al-irsāl*) is in this sense a mistake (*khaṭā'*). If he [scil. the Prophet] contradicts what reason says as to good and evil, permission (*al-iṭlāq*) and forbiddance (*al-ḥaẓr*), we must not acknowledge his prophecy." This is the essence of their [scil. the *Barāhima*] tenet.[85]

The sciences and culture are also mentioned as evidence for the supremacy of reason:

> As for [Ibn al-Rāwandī's] statement about the stars: "It was the people [not the prophets], who began to observe the stars until they knew their times/places of rising and setting. In this matter they had no need for the prophets."[86]
>
> Intending to mock, Ibn al-Rāwandī has said: "Those who advocate prophecy must say that their Lord ordered the Prophet to teach the sound of the lutes. Were it not for that, how could it be known that the intestines of a sheep, when dried and stretched upon a piece of wood, can produce pleasant sounds?"[87]

Also, al-Maʿarrī denies the veracity of the traditions. As Ibn al-Jawzī stated in the passage quoted above, doubting the chains of authorities of the *aḥādīth*

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84 Abd-Allah 2008: 237–238, 248–250; Hallaq 2009: 82–83.
85 *Majālis Mu'ayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 97, ll. 1–7.
86 *Majālis Mu'ayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 107, ll. 4–5.
87 *Majālis Mu'ayyadiyya* in Kraus 1934: 108, ll. 25–27.

was considered tantamount to denying their validity.[88] According to al-Maʿarrī, however, reason is a better guide than the traditions:

> Traditions [*aḥādīth*] come from the past, of high import if they be
> True; ay, but weak is the chain [*isnād*] of those who warrant their truth.
> Consult thy reason and let perdition take others all:
> Of all the conference reason best will counsel and guide.[89]

A plethora of pro-reason statements can be found in the poems of al-Maʿarrī. The following can be quoted:

> Oh, cleave ye to Reason's path that rightly ye may be led[90]

> Is any tale true that we should credit him that relates,
> Or are not all of them worthless fables told in the night?
> As for our reason, it questions not, but swears they are lies;
> And reason's tree ever hath veracity for its fruit.[91]

> Follow Reason and do what it deems good, for it gathers the honey of counsel,
> And accept not a commandment from the Torah, for verily the truth is hidden from it.[92]

Yet al-Maʿarrī is willing to admit the limitations of reason. First and foremost, he is a skeptic:

> Bewildered, searching how things stand with me,
> I ask to-day, "To-morrow what shall be?"
> There is no certainty: my mind but tries
> Its utmost in conjecture and surmise.[93]

88 See also Friedmann 1979: 364.
89 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 209.
90 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 208, first hemistich.
91 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 213.
92 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 242. It is quite clear that "the Torah" means revelation and holy book in general.
93 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 216.

REJECTING AND PARODYING THE CORPOREAL REPRESENTATION OF THE AFTERLIFE

Ibn al-Rāwandī made a number of statements rejecting physical punishment in the hereafter. In his view, the God of Islam is neither compassionate nor just. Indeed, Kraemer notes that the Muslim freethinkers – as well as pagan philosophers before them – argued that "God, as depicted by religion, is unwise, unjust and incompassionate".[94] The following passages are from the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*:

> [God] says: *Verily We have set veils over their hears [lest they should understand this, and over their ears, deafness. If thou callest them to guidance, even then will they never accept guidance]* (Qur. 18:57). Then [in the next verse] He says: *But your Lord is Most Forgiving, [full of Mercy]* (Qur. 18:58). The most appalling thing is that He should mention mercy in juxtaposition with the destruction of them [scil. the people].[95]

Ibn al-Rāwandī is aghast at the fact that in the Qur'ān God boasts of His trickery (*yaftakhir bi-l-makr wa-l-khidā'*).[96] Clearly the picture of God in the Qur'ān is contradictory, for mercy cannot exist in conjunction with the predetermined damnation of the people (mentioned in verse 18:57). There are incongruities in the Qur'ān. Because God cannot, by definition, be self-contradictory, the Qur'ān is not the word of God. This seems to be Ibn al-Rāwandī's main argument in the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*.

Like al-Ma'arrī (see below), Ibn al-Rāwandī argued against predetermination, stating that such a picture of God in Islam is horrid. It emerges quite clearly that Ibn al-Rāwandī believed God's mercy to be more encompassing than Islam would allow.[97] His criticism against Islam's God continues in the same vein:

> [Ibn al-Rāwandī] has said: "An example of His gruesome tyranny (*min fāḥish ẓulmihi*) is His words: *[Those who reject Our Signs, We shall soon cast into the Fire;] as often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins, [that they may taste the Penalty: for God is Exalted in Power, Wise]* (Qur. 4:56). So He torments skins that have not disobeyed Him."[98]

94 Kraemer 1982: 175.
95 Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Ta'rīkh* in Ritter 1931: 7.
96 Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Ta'rīkh* in Ritter 1931: 7.
97 See also *TG* IV: 304–306.
98 Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī l-Ta'rīkh* in Ritter 1931: 7.

According to al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935–936), Ibn al-Rāwandī thought it inconceivable that God could damn any Muslim[99] eternally to Hell. If God put anyone to Hell, s/he must certainly get to Heaven after a while.[100]

In Ibn al-Rāwandī's works, we find only few instances of what appears to be parody (rather than outright rejection) of physical embodiment in the afterlife. These are found in the *Kitāb Faḍīḥat al-Muʿtazila*. In these passages, Ibn al-Rāwandī builds upon the views of Abū l-Hudhayl (d. *c*.227/841),[101] but develops them *ad absurdum*. Abū l-Hudhayl claimed that the inhabitants of Heaven do not have free will,[102] for if they had, dissension and discord would ensue just like on Earth. Ibn al-Rāwandī jests:

> Then the impudent fool [Ibn al-Rāwandī] said: "Abū l-Hudhayl claims that the inhabitants of Heaven are not able to do anything, in spite of the cessation of their afflictions and the well-being of their intellects and bodies; that they are – inasmuch as they do these deeds – forced to move, stop, stand, sit, look, listen, smell, eat, give, talk or be silent [...]; that they are in the state of the stones (*bi-manzilat al-ḥijāra*): they move [only] if they are moved."[103]

Ibn al-Rāwandī also tells a story ridiculing the Prophet (in relation to his physical portrayal in the afterlife) which he attributes to Abū l-Hudhayl. After Muhammad dies and rises to Heaven, into his hands is passed a goblet full of heavenly drink. When the moment of the eternal rest (*al-sukūn al-dāʾim*)[104] comes, however, the Prophet assumes a cruciform position with his arms stretched to his sides (*ka-haiat al-maṣlūb*).[105]

I am assuming that the account is Ibn al-Rāwandī's own parody of the corporeal representation of Heaven, attributed falsely to Abū l-Hudhayl. Abū l-Hudhayl was also known, however, for making polemical attacks against what he saw as the anthropomorphism of popular Islam and the traditionalists. Perhaps Abū l-Hudhayl, if he is indeed the source of the statement, intended it as a criticism of the physical portrayal of the afterlife. In either case, Ibn al-Rāwandī's clear

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99 Note the wording of the original: *min ahl al-qibla*, which is the broadest term for the Muslim community, encompassing also the *khawārij* and other sects. This could be interpreted as further proof for Ibn al-Rāwandī's stance that God's compassion is more extensive.
100 Al-Ashʿarī 1963: 149.
101 On whom, see *TG* III: 209–296.
102 *TG* III: 255.
103 Al-Khayyāṭ 1957: 56.
104 The concept is Abū l-Hudhayl's, see *TG* III: 245–246, but otherwise I suspect that the story is Ibn al-Rāwandī's own jesting.
105 Al-Khayyāṭ 1957: 57.

intention here is a wholesale derision of Islam. In passing, the similarity between Muhammad's final bodily position and the crucifixion of Jesus should be noted.

In the *Luzūmiyyāt*, al-Maʿarrī denies predestination: "If criminals are fated, 'tis wrong to punish crime."[106]

Al-Maʿarrī also doubts bodily resurrection, but does not deny it outright.[107] If God wanted, al-Maʿarrī presumes, He would certainly be able to raise the dead. The following poems are nevertheless more skeptical:

> The body, which gives thee during life a form,
> Is but thy vase: be not deceived, my soul!
> Cheap is the bowl thou storest honey in,
> But precious for the contents of the bowl.[108]

> We laugh, but inept is our laughter,
> We should weep, and weep sore,
> Who are shattered like glass and thereafter
> Remoulded no more.[109]

> Were thy body left after death in the state which it was in before, we might have hoped for its restoration (to life),
> Even as wine returned once again to the emptied jar that was not broken in pieces;
> But it became parts divided, and then atoms of dust ever being swept away in the wind-blasts.[110]

Al-Maʿarrī's parody of the physical image of Heaven comes forth in his *Risālat al-Ghufrān*. In this work, Heaven is seen to include – among other things – *ḥūr*, beautiful virgins for the pleasure of the righteous. The literal (and ironic) understanding of the Qur'ān's promises is clear here. When the Qur'ān (56:35–36) says: "We have grown them (*ansha'nāhunna inshā'an*) and made them virgins", in the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* the *ḥūr* are described as growing like the fruits of the trees. The scene is satirical in other ways, too. When the protagonist Ibn al-Qāriḥ has picked a fruit and a stunningly beautiful maiden hatches from it, Ibn al-Qāriḥ throws himself on the ground and praises God for His wisdom. Nevertheless, he

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106 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 237, first verse. On predestination and al-Maʿarrī, see also Nicholson 1921: 161–164; al-Jundī 1964 I: 404–406.

107 On resurrection, see also Ṭāhā Ḥusayn 1963: 274–276.

108 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 266. Note the similarity of this and the following poems to the later Persian poet ʿUmar Khayyām.

109 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 288.

110 Nicholson 1921: poem no. 289.

cannot help from thinking that the maiden is perhaps too slim. And so it happens that when he rises from his prostration, the maiden's bottom has grown to the size of a sand dune. Appalled, Ibn al-Qāriḥ asks God to return the maiden to more regular proportions, which happens.[111]

In some instances, the Qur'ān is cited in an ironic manner. For instance, in the scene where Ibn al-Qāriḥ meets Nābigha al-Ja'dī, the former asks Nābigha to recite one of his poems. Nābigha does not recognize the poem to be his own, which leads Ibn al-Qāriḥ to remark:

> O Abū Laylā! Wine has occupied your attention (*shaghalaka sharāb*) [...] and the meat of plump birds has nourished you in the gardens of Heaven, so that you have forgotten what you knew. No reproach to you although you have forgotten that [since the Qur'ān 36:55 says:] *Verily the Companions of the Garden shall that day have joy in all that they do (inna aṣḥāba al-jannati l-yawma fī shughulin fākihūna)*.[112]

The key word here is the verb *shaghala*, which brings to the mind of the reader a verse of the Qur'ān containing the plural noun *shughul*. The irony of the passage is derived from the interpretation of *shughul* as "things that divert attention". The juxtaposition of Nābigha's favorite hobbies in Heaven – drinking wine and indulging in gluttony – with a verse that describes the joys of the Paradise is rather satirical.

The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* is interesting also for the reason that it mentions Ibn al-Rāwandī. He is condemned as a vehement *zindīq*. His following works are mentioned: *Kitāb al-Tāj*, *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*, *Kitāb al-Qaḍīb*, *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, *Kitāb al-Farīd* and *Kitāb al-Marjān*. It appears that al-Ma'arrī does not know the works very well, since he does not describe their contents. The sole work which he seems familiar with to any extent is the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*. The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* mentions that Ibn al-Rāwandī wrote this text in order to refute the Qur'ān. As for the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh* (as is the case with the other works mentioned), al-Ma'arrī focuses mainly on wordplays used to revile Ibn al-Rāwandī.[113]

Nicholson confesses grave doubts whether al-Ma'arrī's condemnations of the *zindīqs* are entirely genuine.[114] The doubt is justified, since al-Ma'arrī held views akin to Ibn al-Rāwandī (as has been shown above). On the other hand, if the criticism

111 Al-Ma'arrī n.d.: 287–289.
112 Al-Ma'arrī n.d.: 209–210.
113 Al-Ma'arrī treats Ibn al-Rāwandī in al-Ma'arrī n.d.: 469–476. As it happens, also al-Jundī 1964 III: 1254 proffers the idea that al-Ma'arrī had read some of Ibn al-Rāwandī's works and learned from them information concerning religions and sects. However, according to al-Jundī's interpretation al-Ma'arrī was fully orthodox Muslim.
114 Nicholson 1902: 78, n. 1. See also Nicholson 1900: 638–639.

were genuine, it could be based on al-Maʿarrī's reluctance to completely denounce faith and "religiousness". Furthermore, it is worth noting that it would have been sheer madness for al-Maʿarrī to present views favourable to Ibn al-Rāwandī, given his dreadful reputation. It is also possible that al-Maʿarrī knew Ibn al-Rāwandī only as a heretic, not as a thinker holding similar opinions to his own.

CONCLUSIONS

Our understanding of al-Maʿarrī the thinker remains rather vague. This is due to wide discrepancies between his different works – and even between his different poems. Ibn al-Rāwandī, on the other hand, emerges clearly as a genuine freethinker.

Al-Maʿarrī was only a part-time freethinker, but a full-time servant of God. Al-Maʿarrī's genuine piety explains why he did not suffer any persecution during his lifetime, notwithstanding his peculiar lifestyle and heterodox views. Ibn al-Rāwandī was almost certainly persecuted for his views and works, although it seems that he did not suffer physically.

Furthermore, al-Maʿarrī's criticism of religion mainly stems from his poems in the *Luzūmiyyā*. His views must be set against the tradition of Arabic poetry, which includes poems with pessimistic and skeptical ideas, albeit in the periphery (for instance, the *zuhdiyyāt*). What makes the comparison between these two writers even more difficult is the fact that in one moment al-Maʿarrī embraces an idea and in the next embraces its opposite, overturning conflicting beliefs, occasionally reaching a synthesis, but more often than not, admitting his skepticism about whether any final truth about the matter can be attained. That said, this paper does reveal certain clear similarities between Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī, the most notable of which are their common rejection of prophecy and organized religion in general; stressing the superiority of reason; discarding the ethics of Islam while constructing an edifice of their own; and doubting or denying the physical resurrection, instead emphasizing the all-encompassing mercy of God.

Another person with whom al-Maʿarrī could be compared is the philosopher and physician al-Rāzī. Already Nicholson noted that there are similarities between the cosmogonical views of al-Maʿarrī and al-Rāzī.[115] Another similar stance between the two would naturally be their criticism of religion. Such a comparison would certainly merit a study of its own.

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115 Nicholson 1921: 158–159. See also Lacey 1995: 140. Al-Maʿarrī does not mention al-Rāzī in the works that have come down to us. See al-Jundī 1964 II: 653–695 for an interesting list of books, poets and scholars mentioned by al-Maʿarrī.

One question remains. Was al-Maʿarrī influenced by Ibn al-Rāwandī's theological views? And was the stimulus direct or indirect? It is, of course, impossible to know for certain, since al-Maʿarrī does not admit such an influence. As the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* has shown above, it seems that whether or not he had read Ibn al-Rāwandī's works, al-Maʿarrī was at least vaguely aware of Ibn al-Rāwandī's thinking. Direct influence is, in any case, not impossible.

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