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Freethinking and Humanism: Abbasid Moods and Universal Motifs

Aziz AL-AZMEH

On 13 July 1856, Charles Darwin wrote to his friend Sir Joseph Hooker, wondering with pathos at “what a book a Devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature”¹. He was neither the first nor will he be the last to question the wisdom of creation as it stands, of nature and of human society. Not long thereafter, Bakunin spoke of a Creator acting on caprice and greedy for blood, sending forth Napoleon III and Alexander of Russia². Later still, he was even bettered by the Archbishop of Canterbury who, following the Daesh attacks in Paris in November 2015, declared his vexation with the wisdom of creation and querying the very existence of the Creator Himself³. The spread of atheism in Saudi Arabia today is correlated to the refusal to identify ethical behaviour with the absurdity of superstition and of petty religious observance⁴.

That claims for benign and intelligent design, or milder claims that our world be the best of all possible worlds, were an absurdity and a travesty, that theodicy in any of its forms is a sham, that divinity is arbitrary and irrational: these are thoughts that have been with us ever since humans persuaded themselves that the gods might be benign, and ever since this idea of benign divinity was examined by persons of discrimination. The idea that behaviour attributed to the gods is an embarrassing affront to both reason and morality is very old⁵. Long and profligate lines of comment, satire, polemic, and argument in this sense stretched from the likes of Xenophanes and Protagoras through

(1) Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 1924”, <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-1924> - accessed on 14 March 2016.

(2) Michael Bakunin, *God and the State*, New York, 1970, 10-11.

(3) www.bbc.com/news/uk-34893039 - accessed on 22 November 2015.

(4) For instance, www.delta-n-c-tpa.org - accessed on 29 January 2015.

(5) Barbara Graziosi, *The Gods of Olympus*, London 2013, ch. 3 and 6.

Euhemerus, Polybius and Varro onto the caliphal court in Baghdad and its provinces, and further on to *Theophrastus Redivivus* and the *La vie et l'esprit de M. Benoît de Spinoza* in Europe of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. Three historical moments, under the Roman Empire, during the central years of the Abbasids, and in the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, saw the conformation into a self-perpetuating critical mass of a common fund of interconnected critical motifs concerning religious belief and practice, sometimes but not always with an explicit accent on absurdity, phantasm, gullibility and political utility—what has been described in a more restricted context as the *lieux communs* of erudite libertinism⁶.

Taken together, and broadly characterised, this common fund of critical ideas and motifs yields arguments for a contrast between the beliefs and practices of religion on the one hand, and human reason on the other, on the assumption that the latter be the ultimate arbiter. Quite often and much as a general rule in these critical arguments, divinity was removed from the poetical and ritual registers and given natural-philosophical description⁷, theology being thereby deployed against religion⁸. Generally formulated by intellectual elites, these anthropocentric criteria of judgement of veracity, relevance and value were, in different measures, commonly shared by demotic enunciations, in forms of often burlesque blasphemy, delivered by the common run of people whose levels of credulity is very often exaggerated and whose robust sense of reality is often underestimated⁹.

(6) Françoise Charles-Daubert, 'La critique anti-théologique dans les dialogues de Vanini et le libertinage érudit,' *Kairos*, 12 (1998), 283-4.

(7) See for instance Simon Trépanier, 'Early Greek theology: god as nature and natural gods,' *The Gods of Ancient Greece. Identities and Transformations*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine, Edinburgh, 2010 (Edinburgh Leventis Studies 5), 273-317.

(8) This is the formulation of Hildegard Cancik-Lindmaier, "'Aus so großer Finsternis ein so helles Licht". Die Religionskritik des Lukrez im Rahmen der antiken Aufklärung,' *Aufklärung in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Richard Faber and Brunhilde Wehinger, Würzburg, 2010, 82

(9) For instance: Edwin D. Craun, 'Inordinata locutio: Blasphemy in pastoral literature, 1200-1500,' *Traditio*, 39 (1983), 135-162; Steven Justice, 'Did the Middle Ages believe in their miracles?' *Representations*, 103/1 (2008), 1-29; Dorothea Weltecke, *Der Narr Spricht: Es ist kein Gott. Atheismus, Unglauben und Glaubenszweifel vom 12. Jahrhundert bis zur Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main, 2010, 230-255.

It is at the confluence of normative and cognitive anthropocentrism that one might speak of Humanism in classical Arabic times and, specifically for the purposes of this essay, in the early and middle Abbasid periods of ca. 760-1050 BCE. Generally speaking, this was a humanism premised on abstract human rationality, but conjoined with a pessimistic attitude towards the prospects of overall human improvement, not least given the contempt for the multitude which were ever ready to follow any pied piper and are therefore grist to the mill of the instrumental use of religion: a use which was much elaborated in Arabic political writings, in much the same terms that came later to be associated with Machiavelli or with the relentless unsentimentality of Hobbes. Further, there are no indications that this was an atheistic humanism¹⁰, but rather one in which divinity, when at all addressed in its own right, tended to be given the character of a deistic concept, in at least one especially prominent case, that of al-Razi (the Latin Rhazes, d. 911), of a cosmogenic natural-scientific concept. This is not a deity which is in any recognisable way the God of scripture or of organised religion, and is a case in point for the deployment of theology against religion.

In all cases, what we have is a line of thinking and a body of motifs that are quite clearly counterposed to religious dogma and myth, to rituals, and to the institutional religion under the aegis of the *'ulama*, satirised by al-Razi as sporting beards like those of goats¹¹. To this extent, the religion-critical Abbasid phenomenon described in this essay has all the hallmarks of freethinking. We shall see that it shares many characteristics with what has come to be described commonly as erudite libertinism in seventeenth-century Europe, and, in some of its more explicitly priapic and often homoerotic inflections, with the libertinism of the French eighteenth century¹², facts often obscured in modern scholarship following the novel defensive prudery and general

(10) See the considerations of Hans Daiber, 'Rebellion gegen Gott. Formen atheistischen Denkens im frühen Islam,' in *Atheismus in Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, ed. Friedrich Niewöhner and Olaf Paluta, Wiesbaden, 1999, 23-44.

(11) Razi's writings are dispersed, with no standard collected edition, and many remain unpublished. A convenient anthology of texts is Azīz Al-'Azma, *Abū Bakr al-Rāzī*, Beirut 2001.

(12) Melhem Chokr, *Zandaqa et Zindīqs en Islam au second siècle de l'hégire*, Damascus 1993, 241-250.

Victorianisation of sexual attitudes witnessed among Muslims since the nineteenth century¹³. In speaking of humanism, therefore, the approach taken here is one which seeks to highlight a specific historical phenomenon as well as a generic conception¹⁴. It is a concept which seeks to signal that, during the period indicated and before the formal professionalisation of the *'ulama* and their long-term differentiation as a sodality under the Seljuqs, the Ayyubids and the Mamluks¹⁵, religious culture was not one that was in its own right predominant or necessarily central across the face of society.

Secular culture, called *adab*, sometimes translated as 'humanism' – *paidea* in a broad sense that includes urbane social manners – was cultivated centrally, at court and at the imitation courts down the line of provinces and social hierarchy¹⁶. Both religious and secular cultures received patronage, and neither predominated; formally declared central norms defined in religious terms need not be statistically predominant as behavioural patterns. With regard to religious culture itself, it needs to be noted that it was only infrequently and for very short periods of time the case that the state adopted a specific creed, and that the era under consideration was characterised by a highly contentious and viciously polemical competition between various theological trends, styles and in-groups, precluding a strong institutionalised notion of Orthodoxy and, in both legal and theological terms, making the Islam of the epoch a broad church with at times an objectively and decidedly latitudinarian aspect, with considerable difficulty in defining heresy and unbelief in much more than nominal terms that might be triggered politically¹⁷. This seems very much like the counterpart of

(13) Nadia Al-Bagdadi, 'Eros und Etikette – Reflexionen zum Bann eines zentralen Themas im arabischen 19. Jahrhundert,' *Verschleierter Orient – Entschleierter Okzident?* ed. Bettina Dennerlein, Elke Frietsch and Therese Steffen, Munich 2012, 117-135.

(14) On this theme in modern scholarship, and for fruitful reflections, see Marco Schöller, 'Zum Begriff des "islamischen Humanismus",' *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 15 (2001), 275-320.

(15) Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, London 1997, 102-5.

(16) 'Adab, a and b,' *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd ed.; Zoltán Szombathy, Mujun. *Libertinism in Medieval Muslim Society and Literature*, London 2013, 248-271.

(17) Josef van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere. Beobachtungen an islamischen härsiographischen Texten*, Berlin and New York, 2011 (*Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients*, 23), 1:194-5, 2:1243-1244, 1270-1283, 1284-1303; James Montgomery, 'Abū Nuwās, the justified sinner?', *Oriens*, 39 (2011), 93-95. For the perhaps ultimately impossible

defining blasphemy actively in terms other than the operational, with blasphemy consisting really of two distinct types of categories, the one stable and very general, emblematic without extension or intension, the other historical and highly variable definable by the events to which it attaches¹⁸. Energy was directed more towards inner-Muslim polemics than towards freethinking, and a freethinker like Ibn al-Rawandi (d. after 860) was the object of vicious polemic precisely from former theological comrades against whom he had turned¹⁹. Persecution, more in the Roman and Byzantine than in the Medieval Latin inquisitorial style, was episodic and highly political. This was a society that was neither tolerant nor totalitarian according to criteria of today.

In light of these specifications, it is important to stress before continuing that Abbasid humanistic freethinking is by no means confined to formal anti-religious polemics²⁰ or to works of philosophy²¹.

theme of the precise doctrinal identification of groups that had been persecuted under titles involving various measures of freethinking and of materialism (including belief in the eternity of the world), see Georges Vajda, 'Les zindīqs en pays d'Islam au debut de la période abbaside,' *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 17 (1938), 191-220; 'Abd Allāh al-Khaṭīb, Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Abd al-Quddūs al-Baṣrī, Baghdad, 1967, 32-48; Chokr, Zandaqa, 45-53, 116-122; Said Amir Arjomand, "'Abd Allah Ibn al-Muqaffa' and the 'Abbasid revolution,' *Iranian Studies*, 27 (1994), 20-23; 'Dahrī,' in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd. ed. Cf. for comparable questions of definition, identification and nomenclature, Weltecke, *Der Narr Spricht*, 258-9, 293-4. For a corrective of common assumptions of theological uniformity in Byzantium, commonly taken for a theocentric polity, Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*, Princeton 2014, 89-110.

(18) Jacques Cheyronnaud and Gérard Lenclud, 'Le blasphème. D'un mot,' *Ethnologie Française*, N. S., 22 (1992), 264.

(19) This situation is, again, comparable to early Christianity: Harold Drake, 'Lambs into Lions: Explaining early Christian intolerance,' *Past and Present*, 153 (1996), 25-29.

(20) See 'Abd al-Majīd al-Sharfī, *Al-Fikr al-Islāmī fi-r-radd 'alā n-Naṣārā ilā nihāyat al-qarn ar-rābi'*, Tunis, 1986; Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds. Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, Princeton 1992; J. Tolan, *Saracens*, New York 2002; A.-T. Khoury, *Polémique Byzantine contre l'Islam (VIII^e-XIII^e s.)*. Leiden 1972; M. Steinschneider, 'Islam und Judentum. Kritik des Islam von Simon Duran,' *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 7 (1880), 1-48; D. J. Lasker, 'The Jewish critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages,' *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, 57 (1990-91), 121-153; S. Stroumsa, 'Jewish polemics against Islam and Christianity in the light of Judaeo-Arabic texts,' in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, ed. N. Golb, Australia etc., 1997 (*Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, 3), 241-250;

(21) On which: 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Min Tārīkh al-Ilḥād fi'l-Islām*, Cairo 1945; Paul Kraus, *Alchemie, Ketzerei, Apokryphen im frühen Islam*, ed. Rémi Brague, Hildesheim 1994; Dominique Urvoy, *Les penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique*, Paris 1996; Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawandi, Abu Bakr al-Razi and their Impact on Islamic Thought*, Leiden 1999.

It encompasses Arabic literature more broadly, and cannot be restricted to deliberate reflection as distinct from the transmission of what have been termed ‘libertine philosophemes’ associated with particular forms of literary expression. These forms of expression were dependent more upon an aesthetic of discordance, paradox, derision, satire, profanation and the burlesque than on coherent doctrinal affirmation or disaffirmation or clear distinctions between impiety, unbelief, blasphemy, disbelief and atheism²². They operated, as is widely known, between the poles of ostentation and dissimulation, of the explicit and the unstated²³, in a manner far more complex that might be gathered from an uncritical and simplistic deployment of the views of Leo Strauss²⁴.

In the senses intended, therefore, it is worth repeating that the phenomenon under consideration was **not** in some way obscure, clandestine, furtively exercised on the margins of what might be seen as a religious *Leitkultur*. It is, rather, a chapter in a complex cultural and social history which encompassed theology as one of many elements, but was by no means circumscribed by it. Correlatively, we find in the freethinking humanist trends of thought, sentiment, and literary production no apologetic redaction of human reason and of value by reference to scriptural proof texts. Positive reference to the *Qur'an* was generally made by means of the general proposition that it had a deeper philosophical sense accessible to the initiate, while its literal form was conceived with the limited understanding of the common mass in mind.

(22) Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, ‘Libertinage, irréligion, incroyance, athéisme dans l’Europe de la première modernité (XVI^e-XVII^e siècles). Une approche critique des tendances actuelles de la recherche (1998-2002),’ Les Dossiers Grihl (en ligne) 2007-02: <http://dossiersgrihl.revues.org/279> (accessed on 5 June, 2015), §§ 52-60; Silvia Berti, ‘At the roots of unbelief,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56 (1995), 362 and passim.

(23) See Sophie Houdard, ‘Vie de scandale et écriture de l’obscène: Hypothèses sur le libertinage de moeurs au xvii^e siècle,’ *Tangence*, 66 (2001), 55-57; Cavaillé, ‘Libertinage,’ §§ 97, 111-114; David Berman, ‘Disclaimers as offence mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland,’ in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton, Oxford 1992, 256-272 (accessed online on 26 January, 2016: DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198227366.003.0010). For a classical Arabic description of appropriate rhetorical techniques, see Ibn Hija, *Khizānat al-adab*, Beirut, 1987, 126-8, 178-85, 215-7, 249-50.

(24) See the observations of Cavaillé, ‘Libertinage,’ §§ 40-48, and more generally Georges Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne. Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes*, Leiden, 2001.

This not uncommon position might be characterised as Averroistic or Voltairian, and was premised on a differentialist social epistemology. There was no attempt, before the apologetism of the modernist Islamist trends of the late 19th and 20th centuries²⁵, anachronistically to square the circle by asserting a concordance between Qur'anic text and humanism. Reformist discourse works invariably by a political rhetoric of concordance, asserting necessary agreement between scriptural fragments and whatever modernist or reformist thesis is desirable to the reformist, and then setting about to contrive an accommodation. Ultimately, although Muslim scripture does speak of humanity, it is humanity which is subject and is not sovereign.

Finally, it is especially noteworthy to indicate that the controversial character of Abbasid religious culture was not confined to inter-Muslim polemics. The Abbasids' was an ecumenical civilisation, which generated a considerable amount of ethnological knowledge and lore. In religious terms, it provided a universe for controversy between Karaites and Rabbinites, between Christian denominations vying for patronage and centrality as well as for political influence. It provided the setting for polemics between Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Manicheanism, and Zoroastrianism, for elaborations of the heritage of antiquity and Late Antiquity including Oriental wisdom. There existed a heresiological and controversial literature, and a literature on all religion and indeed on religion as such—later, the Jewish author Ibn Kammuna (d. 1284) of Baghdad was to compose a treatise detailing in systematic form the points held by the three monotheistic religions against each other²⁶. Unlike Byzantium or the Latin West, the cosmopolitan realm of the Abbasids was multi-confessional, entailing the facility for comparing religions regarded of equal validity albeit of unequal value²⁷.

(25) 'Aziz al-'Azma, *al-'Ilmāniyya min Manzūr Mukhtalif*, 3rd ed., Beirut 2008, 160-175.

(26) Moshe Perlmann (editor and translator), *Sa'd b. Manšūr Ibn Kammūna's Examination of the Inquiries into the Three Faiths*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967. See R. Pourjavady and S. Schmidtke, *A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad. 'Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammuna*, Leiden, 2006.

(27) This matter had already been noted by Ernest Renan: *Averroes et l'Averroisme*, Paris 1852, 201 ff.

All this made available a fund of religion-critical material that could, at the limit, be deployed against religion in general²⁸. It provided grounds for an overall concept of religion facilitating the comparatism we see in freethinking, and was comparable in many central and significant respects to the way in which currents radical Protestantism generated, through the critique of idolatry attributed to the Roman Catholic church, and often in conjunction with both antiquarianism and philo-Islamism, conceptions that made possible a comparative religion setting all religions on a par and facilitating a critique of religion associated with Deism and with more radical trends²⁹. Anti-religious, inter-religious and inter-denominational polemics in the Abbasid era provided the basic fund of motifs that were formative of European freethinking, with the Cordoban Ibn Hazm's (d. 1064) systematic treatise on religions, it is suggested, constituting the missing link between Celsus and Voltaire³⁰. General indications are now giving way to more concrete investigations of these pathways of transmission, including transmission to Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-philosophicus*³¹ in a field of research that is currently quite active.

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- (28) See David Thomas, 'Abū 'Isa al-Warraq and the history of religions,' *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 41 (1996), pp. 275-290; idem (translator), *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abu Isa al-Warraq's 'Against the Trinity'*, Cambridge 2002.
- (29) George Mosse, 'Puritan radicalism and the Enlightenment,' *Church History*, 29 (1960), 424-439; James R. Jacob, *Henry Stubbe, Radical Protestantism and the Early Enlightenment*, Cambridge 1983; Rienk Vermij, 'The English Deists and the *Traité*,' in *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe. Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, ed. Sylvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert and Richard H. Popkin, Dordrecht, 1996 (*International Archives of the History of Ideas*, 148), 241-254; Martin Mulso, 'John Seldens De Diis Syris: Idolatriekritik und vergleichende Religionsgeschichte im 17. Jahrhundert,' *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 3 (2001), 1-24; J. P. Rosenblatt, *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden*, Oxford 2006; Jonathan Sheehan, 'Sacred and profane: Idolatry, antiquarianism and the polemics of distinction in the seventeenth century,' *Past and Present*, 192 (2006), 35-66; Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an*, Oxford 2009; Martin Mulso, 'Socinianism, Islam and the radical uses of Arabic scholarship,' *Al-Qantara*, 31 (2010), 549-586; Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670-1840*, Baltimore, 2012; 'Introduction' to Nabil Matar (ed.), *Henry Stubbe and the Beginnings of Islam: The Original and Progress of Mahometanism*, New York 2014.
- (30) Mohammed El Kettani, 'Ibn Hazm et la question de son influence sur la pensée chrétienne,' *Hespéris Tamuda*, 4 (1963), 269-288. See T. Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse. Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*, Atlanta 1998 and A. Ljamai, *Ibn Hazm et la polémique islamo-chrétienne*, Leiden 2002.
- (31) Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, Philadelphia 1987, 48-61; Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 136-141; Samuel-Martin Behloul, *Ibn Hazm's Evangelienkritik. Eine methodische Untersuchung*, Leiden 2002 (*Islamic Philosophy Theology and Science*, L), 249 n. 10.

A thousand years before Darwin and two generations after Ibn Hazm, in eastern Iran at the other end of the then Islamicate oecumene, themes relating to theodicy and divine justice and reasonableness were addressed synoptically by the heresiographer and scholar of world religions al-Shahrastani (1086-1153). Wishing to account for doctrinal disorder and diversity, al-Shahrastani, referred to an archetypal event in the manner of heresiographers overall³², to an aetiological legend concerning Satan and a myth of the creation of God's good order. In doing so, he has Satan doubt the consistency and wisdom of God's own works.³³

Satan appears as the Arch-Freethinker, "the first accursed one, for he imposed the government of reason on that which cannot be governed by reason." Referring to the Qur'anic narratives of the creation of Adam and the banishment of Satan from the Garden of Eden (Qur'an 2:34, 7:11-13, 17:61-62), Al-Shahrastani put a soliloquy into Iblis' mouth which well encapsulates critical motifs pertaining to divine justice and wisdom:

Since God knew in advance what was to become of me, what was the wisdom behind Him creating me? Since He created me according to his wish and will, why did He command me to obey Him? What is the wisdom behind His Command since He neither benefits nor suffers from obedience and disobedience? Since He created me as I am, why did He drive me out of the Garden of Eden? Why did He allow me to tempt Adam and Eve? Why does He allow me to pester and mislead humanity? Finally, Satan wondered: 'Would it not have been better for Him to create a world free of evil?

All these motifs representing Satan as a tragic figure rather than one of unmitigated evil, caught up in an impossible and unjust situation of God's making, was a fairly standard motif attendant upon Abbasid

(32) See most especially Jeremy Schott, 'Heresiology as universal history in Epiphanius' Panarion,' *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, 10 (2007), 546-563, and Averil Cameron, 'How to read heresiology,' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), 471-492.

(33) For what follows: Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, ed. W. Cureton, London 1846, 1:5-7.

discussions of theodicy in particular and of established religion in general; it was especially cultivated by mystics, and acts as a topos in contemporary Arab religion-critical thinking³⁴. The patent absurdity and incongruity, indeed the capricious character of God's demand that the archangel Satan, made of fire, prostrate himself before Adam, a creature made of the baser material of clay, was put into verse unforgettably by the blind, boistrously libertine free-thinking poet Bashshar bin Burd (d. 784). Much given to a jocular Satanism, the great libertine poet and courtier Abu Nuwas (d. 814) inverted the Faustian scheme, the poet imposing himself compellingly and sarcastically upon Satan, whom he habitually and familiarly referred to as his uncle, and to whom he pandered, the two toying with each other in a tango of exquisite complicity³⁵. Stories of Satan playing devil's advocate in discussions of religious issues, often very humourously, are legion in Arabic literature, including at least one lengthy theological dialogue³⁶.

The jocular, burlesque and casually blasphemous aspect of freethinking persisted demotically long after the professionalised 'ulama had come to occupy a central position in the cultural life of central Muslim lands in the Arab World. It persisted in shadow plays; that of the Egyptian Ibn Daniyal (d. 1320), *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* (Specter of the Shadow) was an elegy for Satan, ending with the repentance of the protagonist, once the point had been made³⁷. It persisted in anecdotal literature relating to madness³⁸, and in the transformation of major thinkers such as Ibn al-Rawandi into buffoons, set figures of anti-religious jokes relating to vexation and incongruity at God's apparent misunderstanding or malevolence, as in Egypt at the beginning of the

(34) Chokr, Zandaqa, 141, 279-81, 255; Peter J. Awn, Satan's Tragedy and Redemption. Iblīs in Sufi Psychology, Leiden, 1983, pp. 101-126; Khalil Shaikh, Der Teufel in der modernen arabischen Literatur, Berlin 1986; Ṣādiq al-'Azm, 'Ma'sāt Iblīs,' in idem., Naqd al-Fikr al-Dīnī, Beirut, 1970.

(35) On Abu Nuwas and his jest with Satan: Philip Kennedy, Abu Nuwas, Oxford 2005, 43-47.

(36) Al-Jishumī al-Bayhaqī, Risālat Iblīs ilā Ikhwanīhi al-manhīs, ed. Husayn al-Mudarrisī, Beirut 1995. The author lost his life as a result, but the circumstances by that time (1431) were appreciably different to those that prevailed in the Abbasid era.

(37) Three Shadow Plays by Muhammad Ibn Daniyal, ed. Paul Kahle, London 1992.

(38) Abdallah Cheikh-Moussa, 'Le fou glossateur,' Paroles, signes, mythes. Mélanges offerts à Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, ed. Floréal Sanagustin, Damascus 2001, 143-155; Szombathy, Mujun, 229, 231.

nineteenth century³⁹, Iran in the seventeenth century⁴⁰, and even as early as fourteenth-century Syria⁴¹.

This unstructured, playful, often frivolous impiety and blasphemy, often used the text of scripture—both *Qur'an* and hadith—parodistically, and often scatologically, to convey libertine moods related to sex, drinking, caricatures of prayer prostrations, and mockery of fasting, pilgrimage, and much else⁴². Abu Nuwas related in highly elevated poetical register a risqué repartee between himself and a handsome youth he fancied, conducting the flirtation throughout by using Qur'anic quotations, in a sustained play of lewd double entendre, a mode that persisted for very long in Arabic letters, illustrated by narrative material in al-Tifashi's (d. 1253) medico-anecdotal compendium of erotica and in many picaresque works⁴³, but also in the works of authors with a reputation for exemplary piety⁴⁴. This register, despite its playfulness, offered a generally fatalistic and wistfully pessimistic turn, sustained by an urbane scepticism of cultivated and sophisticated impious temperaments tending towards a situational humanism, set against the morbid and officious *ulama*, with vituperative derision and pitiless satire.

Muslim ideas of heaven were mercilessly mocked and parodied⁴⁵. Ibn al-Rawandi thought it fit only for rustics and their brides as they drink ginger⁴⁶. For all his morose pessimism and alternation between radical scepticism and the comforts of simple faith, we witness al-Ma'arri (d. 1057) shedding the worst of his perversely baroque prose and coming to a sprightly spring in the step as he proceeded to parody paradise in

(39) Ulrich Jasper von Seetzen at al., *Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, Phönicien, die Transjordan-länder, Arabia Patraea und Unter-Aegypten*, Berlin 1854-59, 3:171-2.

(40) al-Jazā'iri, *Zahr al-Rabī'*, Beirut 1994, 148 and passim; 'Abd al-Amīr al-A'sam, *Tārikh Ibn al-Rāwandī al-Mulhid*, Beirut 2010, 243-5.

(41) al-A'sam, *Tārikh*, 197.

(42) Szombathy, *Mujun*, 47-98; Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, Berlin 2011, 242-6.

(43) This repartee of Abu Nuwas is quoted in *Al-Tifāshī*, *Nuzhat al-Albāb fīmā lā yūjad fī kitāb* ed. Jamāl Jum'a, London 1992, 174-5, 181, 213.

(44) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār az-zirraf wa'l-mutamājīnīn*, al-Najaf, 1967, 147-8; al-Jazā'iri, *Zahr*, 421, 465-6, 484.

(45) Szombathy, *Mujun*, 97-102.

(46) Al-A'sam, *Tārikh*, 163.

his *Epistle of Forgiveness*, using Qur'anic quotations as he does so. On a journey to the afterlife, his friend Ibn al-Qarih is made to witness clueless angels, libertines, and heretics in paradise (but Bashshar b. Burd is consigned to hell), poets there conversing and coming to blows, savage satires of paradisaical banquets and gluttony, amplifications of scale, transmogrifications, pious snakes insinuating they might turn into seductive houris, and much else⁴⁷.

With mention of al-Ma'arri we find ourselves between the two modes of humanistic freethinking, the casual, humorous, parodistic, satirical, and unstructured mode of expression, and the high minded, controversialist, formally philosophical, and theological. Al-Ma'arri deployed both humour and bitter polemic against ideas of theodicy, with derision towards ritual, absurd beliefs, *'ulama* conceits and pretensions and the political instrumentalisation of the religion of the *idiotes*. These were shared concerns. A millennium before jokes about Ibn al-Rawandi were told in Cairo coffee-houses, the actual Ibn al-Rawandi had produced a theological and social criticism of religion in terms of invective criticism of theodicy: God cannot be wise, as he created the world as it is, permeated by inequalities and injustices, and created, in addition, snakes, scorpions and other nasty creatures harmful to humanity, all of which cannot be seen as part of a grand design with benign intent⁴⁸—in another setting, one celebrated litterateur at the turn of the tenth/eleventh centuries related the lampoon of a person in a poem which stated that his ugliness demonstrated the rightness of a *zindiq*, with reference to arguments against theodicy⁴⁹.

Ibn al-Rawandi moved during the course of his life from inter-Muslim theological disputes, on to the criticism of theology overall, and finally on to the almost nihilistic scepticism recorded in his *Kitab al-*

(47) Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri, *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, ed. and tr. Geert van Gelder and Gregor Schoeler, 2 vols., New York, 2013, 8.2, 9.2, 9.4, 9.31-9.4, 11.1-11.3, 13.1.1-13.8, 14.4, 19.2.3-19.2.6. On this remarkable author, see still Henri Laoust, "La vie et la philosophie d'Abu-l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, 10 (1944), 119-156, and Muhammad Badran, "denn die Vernunft ist ein Prophet – Zweifel bei Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri," in *Atheismus*, ed. Niewöhner, 61-84.

(48) See the selections from Ibn al-Rawandi in 'Azīz al-'Aẓma, *Ibn al-Rīwandī*, Beirut 2002.

(49) Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Risāla al-Bagdādiyya*, ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālījī, Cologne, 1997, 221.

Zumurrud—Book of the Emerald, the title itself announcing a lacerating, corrosive intent: emeralds were then thought to have a blinding effect on snakes. The use of the snake metaphor for religion already announces his view that religion was a particularly harmful institution for human societies, a source of enmity and bloodshed, and a bane on the rationality inherent in cultivated humans. He, much like his erstwhile friend al-Warraq, is perhaps one author who embodies the phenomenon where inter- and intra-theological polemic yields arguments critical of religion overall. This was of course much facilitated by his use, like the use by many others, of arguments of *isotheneia*, equipollence, known in Arabic as ‘the equivalence of arguments’, *takafu’al-adilla*⁵⁰.

Commonly mentioned with Ibn al-Rawandi is Abu Bakr Al-Razi. He applied to religion a naturalistic and inductive epistemology and a belief in the progress of science in the same way as he applied this to medicine, mineralogy, alchemy and magnetism; his critique of the Galenic traditions was built upon a physicalist physiology, in which humours were reduced to more elementary dynamics of purely physical interactive force between three-dimensional atoms of different shapes irrespective of the qualities of the five elementary substances, and vacuum⁵¹. His positivistic disposition, and valuation of reason, together with his epicurean ethics combined with a utilitarian view of politics to yield a critique of religion⁵².

Al-Razi, though a rationalist, was no sceptic. Unlike many others, he sought to think outside the aporias of theological reason, and did not take cognitive dissonance between equally plausible yet mutually contradictory positions to be a charter for scepticism. He developed, in line with certain trends in Muslim theology, an atomistic physical theory, believed in metempsychosis, and proposed that the cosmos be composed of what he called the Five Eternals: God, the Spirit, matter, space and time. Though averse to religious myth, he proposed his

(50) Systematically: Ibn Ḥazm, al-Fiṣal, 303-310. See Josef van Ess, ‘Skepticism in Islamic religious thought,’ *Al-Abhath*, 21 (1968), 7.

(51) Shlomo Pines, ‘Razi critique de Galien,’ *Actes du VIIe Congrès International d’Histoire des Sciences*, Paris 1953, 480-487.

(52) Paul E. Walker, ‘The political implications of al-Rāzī’s philosophy,’ in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Charles Butterworth, Cambridge, Mass. 1992, pp. 61-94; Daiber, ‘Rebellion,’ 36-7.

own cosmogonic myth: the Spirit desired matter, and God allowed it to couple with it, as a pedagogical exercise which will end with the Spirit learning that such coupling can yield only the desire for liberation from matter. There are here elements of Deism, with no need for prophecy or organised religion (although he thought this appropriate to the common run of humanity); indeed, al-Razi is credited with a book against prophecy whose title—there are three alternative titles in the sources—is echoed later in the first full and systematic statement of atheism in Europe, *De tribus importoribus/La vie et l'esprit de M. Benoit de Spinoza*.

The points shared by the persons mentioned above, and many unmentioned, are many, and I shall highlight the most salient in the form of a number of theses. Let it also be repeated that theirs was a cosmopolite critique of all religion, and not of Islam only:

Thesis 1. Religion, at least organised religion, is despite its political utility not necessary. From this some but not all explicitly derived as a consequence that prophecy is neither necessary nor credible. This is because humans are endowed by the Creator with natural reason which is the ultimate key at once to the secrets of nature and to the management of human sociality. The facts of nature, with its violence, and the facts of human history, ‘clumsy’ wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel,’ both militate against presumptions of theodicy with a benign purpose and rational design. That which the prophets presume to bring to us is ultimately conjugated with the irrationality of religious dogmas and practices and the covetous and manipulative purpose of clerics. All this renders religion conducive to fanaticism, discord, and war.

Thesis 2. Prophets are hoaxers (al-Ma’arri excepted); what appear to be miracles are acts of conjuration, using the laws of nature to their own purpose, just like wizards. Thus the *Qur’an*, which according to Muslim dogma is Muhammad’s evidentiary miracle, is far from being miraculous and inimitable; it is more than matched in style by much Arabic poetry (thus Ibn al-Rawandi), and in content by the writings of Ptolemy and Galen (thus al-Razi), and is more akin to the declamations of soothsayers (thus also al-Razi). We still have fragments of the *mu’aradat*, texts composed with the purpose of matching Qur’anic

diction, rhythm, and vocabulary; al-Ma'arri practiced this rhetorical art, as did, much earlier, Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 756 or 759)⁵³.

Thesis 3. Religions are self-contradictory, and contradict one another. Such multiplicity betokens confusion, not divine provenance. Thus al-Razi signalled that, among Muslims, some say the Qur'an is created in time, some argue the contrary, that it was co-eternal with God; some deny free will, others affirm it; some affirm anthropomorphism and others deny it. Jesus claimed he was the son of God, Moses claimed God had no son, and Muhammad claimed that Jesus was a man created like the rest of us. Mani and Zoroaster contradicted the three monotheistic prophets regarding God, the creation of the world and the reason for the existence of good and evil. The Torah claims that God liked the smell of burnt flesh and portrayed him as an old man walking about in the Garden of Eden, and claimed that he demanded a finely-woven silken rug—these are the desires of someone who is needy rather than a self-sufficient and transcendent deity. For his part, Ibn al-Rawandi, a highly accomplished dialectical theologian by formation, is reported to have written treatises intended to demonstrate both free-will and predestination.

Thesis 4. Religions are full of absurdities insulting to sound reason. Beginning with Ibn al-Muqaffa', all freethinkers paid special attention to religious rites, which they considered to be absurd. To what purpose do Muslims on pilgrimage at Mecca circumambulate a dumb black stone, and scurry between the hills of al-Marwa and al-Safa? There were anthropological explanations advanced by Muslim jurisprudence, as arbitrary ritual practices instilling a habitus, and this point had been a staple of anti-Muslim polemics by Jews and Christians charging Muslims with paganism⁵⁴. Ibn al-Rawandi wondered why the Heavenly Host of angels helped Muhammad's army at the Battle of Badr, while at the Battle of Uhud they stood and looked on. Do the

(53) Richard Hartmann, 'Zu den kitāb al-fuṣūl wa 'l-ghāyāt des Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri,' *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse*, no. 2, 1944; Josef van Ess, 'Some fragments of the Mu'aradat Al-Qur'an attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa',' in *Studia Arabic et Islamica. Festschrift for Iḥān 'Abbās on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Wadād Al-Qādī, Beirut 1981, 151-163.

(54) For instance, Bernard Septimus, 'Petrus Alfonsi on the Cult at Mecca', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 517-533 and John Tolan, *Saracens*, New York 2002, *passim*.

doctrine of the Trinity, the status of Jesus as increate, *agennetos*, and the Chalcedonian notion of a double nature and one hypostasis, agree with a rigorous conception of monotheism (so al-Razi and al-Warraq)? More radically: is the very concept of monotheism not structurally dependent upon an implicit dualism involving the play of God and Satan (so Ibn al-Muqaffa')? And why does Qur'anic myth pretend to be history? Is Qur'anic myth any less absurd than Zoroastrian myth?

Such were the main points made by Abbasid freethinkers as they spoke for human reason. One does not discern atheism in these propositions, but a notion of divinity as belonging more to natural philosophy than to religion. In a way, this is akin to Varro's gods of the philosophers, as distinct from the gods of the poets and that of the magistrates, much decried by our thinkers. One finds in the foregoing much that is reminiscent of Lucretius, Cicero, and other antique thinkers, including sceptics. One finds in the critique of Christianity specifically many of the motifs of Porphyry, Celsus, and of the Emperor Julian, and of Rabbinic propositions as well. The critique of Judaism is inspired by Christian polemics, as is to a considerable extent the critique of Islam, both of which were also nurtured by Manichaeic polemics. Indeed, what we have is a critique of religion irrigated by the availability of everything in a cosmopolitan setting. Motifemic and argumentative concordances are evident, with the past as well as with subterranean trends in Europe medieval Europe—emblemetised by centuries of search for and alleged sightings of the holy grail of *De tribus impostoribus*⁵⁵—and, later, with elements from erudite libertinism in the age of reason in radical Enlightenment.

(55) The first mentions were in connection with Friedrich II Hohenstaufen (d. 1250), Holy Roman Emperor and 'baptised Sultan' (Michele Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani in Sicilia*, Florence 1854-72, 3:365). The history of this book is well related by Georges Minois, *The Atheist's Bible*, tr. Lys Ann Weiss, Chicago 2012. Different versions of this text are edited with excellent annotations as *Le « Traité des trois imposteurs »* et « *L'Esprit de Spinoza* ». *Philosophie clandestine entre 1678 et 1768, Textes présentés et édités par Françoise Charles-Daubert*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1999.

This treatise recapitulated in systematic compass the world of ideas and the polemical motifs I have outlined. Thus God appears as a vengeful being, creating evil in order for humans to succumb to it, and fully complicit in the evils that Darwin would regard as being grist to the mill of a Devil's chaplain. We find the Bible to be a bundle of self-contradictory fables, and religions to be based upon imposture, falsehood, and violence, designed to empower the clergy who manipulate sentiments of elemental fear on the part of the mob. We find, finally, prophets to be impostors: Moses was something of a magician much under the influence of Egyptian wizards; Jesus preached a false message of hope, contrary to nature, and preached it to idiots. He was a human made to pass for a god by St. Paul (this is a persistent and not implausible motif in Muslim polemics), creating a religion whose claims to truth are vitiated by its very many divisions. Muhammad was fair game to the author as he was to most Europeans of the time.

There will be resistance among the readers of this essay to the notion of continuities between Abbasid freethinking and modern European ideas, much less so for an argument of continuity with antique and late antique traditions. This has little justification apart from academic institutional habits and boundaries, and their anxieties of influence allied to ideological criteria of admissibility. But it is evident that there are capillary pathways of motifemic, argumentative, and conceptual concordances. Clearly, there is a forgotten chapter in a universal history of freethinking Humanism to which the Abbasid contribution was crucial.