ATHEISMUS

IM MITTELALTER UND IN DER RENAISSANCE

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in Kommission

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The Religion of the Freethinkers of Medieval Islam[1]

Introduction: In Search of Atheists

Although many Muslim theologians in the early Abbasid period wrote various treatises "Against the Unbelievers," most of these works are lost. The earliest extant work bearing this title is probably the *Radd ʿalā al-mulḥid* of the ninth century Zaydī theologian al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm[2]. In this work, al-Qāsim polemicizes with an anonymous person who doubts the existence of God. In his concentrated effort to prove God's existence, al-Qāsim also wrote two other books, entitled, respectively "The Small Book of Proof" and "The Big Book of Proof". In his introduction to the latter, he specified that this work was meant to teach the reader "what to answer the heretics and unbelievers (*al-zanādiqa wa'l-mulḥidīn*) when they ask for a proof for the existence of God." The simple, logical conclusion that one would tend to draw from all this is that the "heretics and unbelievers" intended here were people who denied, or at least questioned, the existence of God, and that al-Qāsim was concerned by the persuasive power of such contemporaneous atheists.

An examination of the theological literature written in Arabic from the ninth century onwards would seem to corroborate such a conclusion. A significant part of *kalām* (scholastic theology) works, written by Muslim, Christian and Jewish theologians, is dedicated to the attempt to prove that God does exist. In theological *summae* this discussion, presented as the corner-stone of religious thought, is usually placed close to the beginning of the work, and it is almost always done in a polemical tone[3].

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1 My warm thanks go to my colleagues Meir M. Bar-Asher and Guy G. Stroumsa for their valuable comments on a previous draft of this paper.

2 Cf. Qāsim b. Ibrāhim, *Radd*, pp. 17 – 34 (I am indebted to Hans Daiber for referring me to this edition, and for kindly making a copy of it available to me); Wilferd Madelung, *mulḥid*, EI^2; Idem, *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin, 1965), pp. 100 – 110.

3 This feature is so common in *kalām* work that it does not really require an example. An illuminating illustration of its importance, however, can be found in Maimonides's polemics against the *mutakallimūn*, who deduct God's existence from the created nature of the world. According to Maimonides, since the created nature of the world is not unanimously agreed upon, it is a serious methodological mistake to

Again, one would tend to draw the conclusion that these theologians were arguing against people known to be atheists, just as in the polemical discussions of theodicy we can identify the writer's real dualist or predestinarian opponents.

Nevertheless, in the discussions of God's existence the actual opponents are not identified. As a group, they are sometimes given a name, and are variously called: heretics, unbelievers, materialists, skeptics. These names can often appear together, and they do not always seem to be clearly distinguished in the author's mind. Thus, for example, in his discussion of theodicy Ibn Fūrak quotes his master, the tenth century al-Aš'arī, as having said:

> The methods of our opponents in this context (i. e., theodicy) are all the same, whether they are Mu'tazilīs, unbelievers who deny God's attributes (*al-mulḥida min al-mu'aṭṭila*), heretics (*zanādiqa*), dualists, *barāhima* or any other person, who denies the Creator and rejects the revealed religions.[4]

And yet we can search these texts in vain for a specific contemporaneous person accused of denying the existence of God. While the notion of atheism seems to have been recognized and to have occupied an important place in medieval Arabic theological literature, the atheists themselves remain always faceless and nameless. When a name does appear, it is always that of a person accused of some specific heretical doctrine which, the theologians say, is as bad as atheism or may lead to atheism – never of somebody the core of whose heresy is actually identified as atheism.

The question then arises, were there any real atheists in the Arabic cultural sphere in the middle ages? And if there were, who were they and by what names are they designated?

A thorough study of this topic would require a re-examination of the various sects and heresies, both real and imagined, a task obviously beyond the scope of the present paper. Assuming that for medieval Muslim orthodoxy atheism – to the extant that it was at all thinkable – was the utmost denial of religious beliefs, an economical place to look

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base on it the proofs of God's existence. In this context, Maimonides says: "I wish to establish in our belief the existence of God, may He be exalted, through a demonstrative method as to which there is no disagreement in any respect. Thus we shall not cause the true opinion, which is of immense importance, to be supported by a foundation that everyone can shake and wish to destroy, while other men think that it has never been constructed." See Maimonides, *Guide*, I, 71, p. 182.

4 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad maqālāt al-Aš'arī*, ed. D. Gimaret (Beirut, 1986) p. 143.

for atheists is among those described as rejecting all established religions, the freethinkers. As we have seen in al-Aš'arī's words quoted above, when Muslim texts refer to "those who deny the existence of God," they often mention them in the same breath with those who deny religions (*al-adyān*), or, more specifically, revealed religions (*al-nubuwwāt*). Unlike the denial of God's very existence, however, the rejection of revealed religions is associated by Muslim medieval authors with specific contemporaneous names. In what follows I propose to focus on the nature of freethinking in the world of medieval Islam, in an attempt to see whether the freethinkers also qualify as atheists.

a. Freethinking

Before going any further, I should like to clarify some terms. In current usage, the terms "atheist" and "freethinker" are often ussed as synonyms[5]. But if we are to identify the precise beliefs held by certain thinkers, it is advisable to draw the parameters of each term with some precision. I shall therefore use the term "atheism" in the strict, narrow sense: the doctrine that God does not exist[6].

In a previous study, I have tried to describe "Islamic freethinking." I have defined it as an independent reflection on metaphysics and ethics, which leads to the rejection of the authority of revealed religions in general and of Islam in particular[7]. Of course, the term "freethinking" is not used in this way in medieval texts, although an equivalent is found in Šahrastānī's notion of "the arbitrary use of personal opinion" (*al-istibdād bi'l-ra'y*)[8]. For Šahrastānī, individuals who truly fit this description are "those who deny the (necessity of) prophecy."[9] I therefore use the term "freethinking" to denote the rejection of all religions based on prophetic or revealed authority. "Freethinking" is a "negative" term, which tells us what the freethinkers rejected. It also implies that like other thinkers,

5 Cf. Fabro, "Atheism," pp. 479 f.

6 Cf. Fabro, "Atheism," pp. 479 f.; James, "Atheism," pp. 479 f.; Müller-Lauter, "Atheismus," p. 379.

7 Stroumsa, "Ecritures alternatives," pp. 270 – 293, esp. p. 270. On the topics discussed in the present paper, see further now S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden, forthcoming).

8 *Milal*, pp. 4 f. Cf. also D. Gimaret, art. "niḥal", EI^2, Vol, VII, p. 55.

9 *Al-mustabiddūn bi'l-ra'y muṭlaqan hum al-munkirūn li'l-nubuwwa*. cf. *Milal*, p. 15. In this context, Šahrastānī quotes the prophetic trandition (*ḥadīth*): *mā šaqiya imru'un 'an mašūra wa-lā sa'ida bi-'stibād bi-ra'y*."

they put great stock in the power of rationality. But can we say something positive about the content of their religion?

As the clearest examples of freethinkers I have chosen the ninth century Ibn al-Rāwāndī and the tenth century Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Zakariyyāʾ al-Rāzī, although, on the one hand, they are very different from each other, and on the other hand, there were others who shared some of their characteristics[10]. Nevertheless, the term "freethinker" focuses on a central and typical aspect of their thought. In spite of their very different intellectual backgrounds and tastes, Ibn al-Rāwandī and Rāzī had in common a career of radical and vociferous rejection of all religions based on revelation. They founded this rejection on the assumption that the human intellect should be, and indeed can be, a sufficient source of all knowledge. Prophecy is thus at best superfluous, and, more often than not, also harmful. Although their common rejection of revealed religions is not sufficient to allow us to speak of "a school of freethinking," it is in fact possible that Rāzī was influenced in this respect by Ibn al-Rāwandī[11]. Ibn al-Rāwandī is said to have written several books which expounded the absurdity of the notion of prophecy in general and of the Quran in particular[12]. Rāzī is said to have written a book on the charlatanism of prophets[13]. Although these books are not extant, long and detailed quotations from them, cited by their opponents, can give us a fairly clear idea of their content.

It should be noted that a few modern scholars, following the reports of some medieval authors, reject the heretical image of both Ibn al-Rāwandī and of Rāzī and raise the suspicion that it was concocted by their jealous

10 For a thorough compilation of sources concerning Ibn al-Rāwāndī, see Aʿasam, *History*, and Aʿasam, *Marājiʿ*. For recent studies, see van Ess, *TG*, IV, pp. 295 – 349 and VI, pp. 433 – 490; Urvoy, *Penseurs libres*, pp. 117 – 133. For recent studies on Rāzī see Lenn E. Goodman, art. "Rāzī", EI²; Albert Z. Skandar, "al-Rāzī," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*, ed. M. J. L. Young et al. (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 370 – 373; and Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (865 – 925)," in F. Niewöhner, ed., *Klassiker der Religionsphilosophie: von Platon bis Kierkegaard* (München, 1995), pp. 99 – 111; Urvoy, *Penseurs libres*, pp. 142 – 152.

11 Cf. Niewöhner, *Veritas*, p. 245, n. 34.

12 Foremost among these are the *Kitāb al-zumurrud* and the *Kitāb al-dāmigh*; cf. Stroumsa, *"The Blinding Emerald."*

13 Cf. Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Aʿlām al-nubuwwa* (*The Peaks of Prophecy*), ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Sāwy (Téhéran, 1977); F. Brion, "Philosophie et Révélation: Traduction annotée de six extraits du *Kitāb Aʿlām al-Nubuwwa* d'Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī," *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 28 (1986), pp. 134 – 162.

opponents[14]. This view, which I do not share, deserves a separate thorough examination. For our present purposes suffice it to say that many, probably most, medieval thinkers, present these two authors as the prototypes of radical heresy. I suggest to examine this image, regardless of its historicity, and to see whether it included the sin of atheism.

b. Ibn al-Rāwandī

Abū al-Ḥusayn Ibn al-Rāwandī was a renegade Mu'tazilī, with at least some Aristotelian leanings. In the attempt to define with some precision the nature of his heresy, a major difficulty relates to terminology. In modern scholarship, Ibn al-Rāwāndī is sometimes described as a "free-thinker"[15] and sometimes as an "atheist."[16] Muslim sources usually call him *zindīq*. As noted by Bernard Lewis, this word, which originally denoted dualists,

> later ... was generalized to cover all holders of unorthodox, unpopular and suspect beliefs, particularly those considered dangerous to the social order and the state. At the same time it applied loosely to materialists, atheists, agnostics and the like, and came to have the general meaning of free-thinker and libertine."[17]

Quite often Ibn al-Rāwandī is also called *mulḥid*[18], a term almost as vague as *zindīq*, especially when the two appear together (i. e., *al-zindīq al-mulḥid*). In this context, Lewis says:

> More or less synonymous with *zandaqa* in its later, generalized application is the word *ilḥād*, originally meaning deviation from the path... In the first few centuries

14 Van Ess regards the notoriety of Ibn al-Rāwandī as reflecting the intolerance of his contemporary mu'tazilī theologians rather than his own ideas. For him, Ibn al-Rāwandī was "a capricious young theologian." His consistent attempt to question the heretical image of Ibn al-Rāwandī is based mostly on sources of non-Mu'tazilī *kalām*, e. g., Māturidī's *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*. See, for example, van Ess, "Image," pp. 5 – 26. Rāzī's heretical image, rejected already by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a as mere slander (cf. IAU, p. 426), is questioned by Paul Walker ("The Political Implications of al-Rāzī's Philosophy," in Charles E. Butterworh, ed., *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin E. Mahdi* (Harvard, 1992), pp. 67, 89.

15 Van Ess, "Image," p. 11: "free thinker [*mulḥid*]"; Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 96.

16 For example, Niewöhner, *Veritas*, p. 238.

17 Lewis, "Heresy," pp. 54 f. See also van Ess, *TG*, I, pp. 416 ff.; Melhem Chokr, *Zandaqa et zindīqs en Islām au second siècle de l'hègire* (Damas, 1993); 'Āṭif Šukrī Abū 'Auḍ, *Al-zandaqa wa'l-zanādiqa* (Amman: Dār al-fikr, n. d.), pp. 111 f.

18 According to al-Ḫayyāt, Ibn al-Rāwandī himself claimed this title, proclaiming: "Know that I am a *mulḥid*." See A'asam, *History*, p. 23; See also A'asam, *History*, p. 127 (quoting al-Mu'ayyad).

> of Islam the *mulḥid* – deviator – is the man who rejects all religion, the atheist, materialist or rationalist, of the type of the notorious Ibn al-Rāwāndī.[19]

Considering Ibn al-Rāwand's notoriety, one would have expected to know something concrete about him. Paradoxically, however, this notoriety is almost the only certain fact that we have about him. Concerning all aspects of his life and thought we possess a plethora of contradicting information. As a result, modern scholars have defined him in different ways. This is apparent, for instance, in Lewis's words, quoted above. Lewis cites Ibn al-Rāwandī as the example of "the man who rejects all religion, the atheist, materialist or rationalist." Are these terms synonymous in the Islamic medieval world? Did Ibn al-Rāwandī hold all these heretical doctrines, did he adopt only some of them, or perhaps, as J. van Ess has consistently tried to argue, none at all?[20]

As I have tried to show elsewhere, our scant, fragmentary and often contradictory information about Ibn al-Rāwāndī is relatively consistent regarding his rejection of prophetic religions[21]. But almost nothing positive is known of his own religion. We know what were the traits of the Scriptural God that were repulsive to him: in his view, this God was stupid and petty, vindictive and cruel[22]. Does this mean that he believed in the existence of a different God, or that he did not believe in any God? Ibn al-Jawzī's says about him:

> We have never heard anyone defame the Creator and make jest about him as much as this cursed one did: Woe to him, had He denied the Creator altogether, it would have been better for him than to admit His existence, then to polemicize against Him and defame Him...[23]

In all likelihood, Ibn al-Jawzī's words here (scil., that Ibn al-Rāwandī admitted God's existence) reflect Ibn al-Rāwandī's use of *ilzām*. This

19 Lewis, "Heresy," pp. 54 f.; On the term *mulḥid* see also van Ess, *TG*, I, p. 418; Wilferd Madelung (art. *mulḥid*, EI^2) defines it as "deviator, apostate, heretic, atheist." Cf. also Zamḫšārī, *al-Kaššāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*, vol. II, p. 429, on Q. 16:103: "*Al-mulḥid* is called by that name because he follows a doctrinal school which deviates from all religions, and it is not that he [merely] turned from one religion to the other."

20 See above, note 13.

21 See Stroumsa, "The Blinding Emerald."

22 The depiction of God as cruel and vindictive was probably the main topic of Ibn al-Rāwandī's *Kitāb ʿabath al-ḥikma*, but it also appears in his *Kitāb al-zumurrud*, e. g., in his commentary on Q. 50:9.

23 Ritter, *Philologica* IV, 9.

widely practiced polemical technique consists of using the opponent's premises in order to refute his claims. From the *ilzām* itself it is impossible to conclude whether or not the polemicist also accepted his opponents premises. Ibn al-Rāwandī was using the monotheists' own definition of God to show that, according to their own criteria, the God of their Scriptures was not fit for his position. But this does not tell us whether he had a better candidate, a God who did not suffer from these weaknesses, or whether he himself did not believe in God at all. Ibn al-Rāwandī's close association with the Manichaean Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq suggests the probability of the first solution, namely that Ibn al-Rāwandī was not an atheist, but only adopted the dualists' criticism of the Scriptural God[24]. Ibn al-Rāwandī's Muʿtazilī opponent al-Ḫayyāṭ even says explictely that Ibn al-Rāwandī "gives thanks to God for his goodness, charitiy and benevolence," but, of course, this statement, if true, may reflect only one state in Ibn al-Rāwandī's turbulent career.

Besides the terms *zindīq* and *mulḥid*, and the accusation of association with the Manichaeans, Ibn al-Rāwandī is often called in the sources a *dahrī*[25]. This term, translated usually as "materialist," designates the adepts of the doctrine of the eternity of the world. More precisely, it designates those who believe that the world as it is has existed from eternity and was not created *a parte ante*, and in particular the Aristotelian philosophers. The designation of Ibn al-Rāwandī as *dahrī* has led H. S. Nyberg to suggest that Ibn al-Rāwandī was an Aristotelian philosopher[26]. It is of course possible that Ibn al-Rāwandī was influenced by the already existing translations of the Aristotelian Corpus. But considering his theological background and vocabulary, he cannot be regarded as a precursor of what was later called *falsafa*, the school of Aristotelian philosophy[27]. It is also certain that the application of the term *dahrī* to

24 The closeness of the Gnostic myth (incorporated into Manichaeism) to atheism is noted in James, "Atheism," pp. 479 f. James seems to present Gnosticism (which denied worship to the Creator God, and refered to the ultimate being as the unknown One, the unfathomable) as a form of Atheism. This, however, is clearly a wrong presentation of first century Gnosticism as well as of Manichaeism.

25 See, for example, Abū Ḥusayn b. ʿUthmān al Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al Intiṣār wa'l-radd ʿalā Ibn al-Rāwandī al-mulḥid, Le livre du triomphe et de la réfutation d'Ibn al-Rawandi l'hérétique*, ed. Albert N. Nader (Beirut, 1957), p. 172.

26 H. S. Nyberg, "ʿAmr ibn ʿUbaid et Ibn al-Rawendi: deux réprouvés," in R. Brunschvig and G. E. Von Grunebaum, *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'histoire de l'Islam* (Paris, 1957), pp. 125 – 139.

27 The *falāsifa* would have surely found it difficult to accomodate Ibn al-Rāwandī's rejection of prophetic religions. On the importance of prophecy in the metaphysic

him by his opponents, even if we believe their claim, does not allow us to say that he was an atheist. We do not know whether he believed in Aristotle's unmoved Mover, or whether he developed another concept of a transcendent being that can be called God.

c. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī

One modern scholar declared al-Rāzī to be "the greatest nonconformist in the whole history of Islam."[28] Regarding Rāzī's heterodox ideas we stand on firmer ground than with Ibn al-Rāwandī, and the Muslim sources also seem to be more sure of the nature of his heresy[29]. He is usually referred to by the very ambivalent term "the physician" (*ṭabīb or mutaṭabbib*)[30]. When, however, a Muslim writer chooses to be more specific in describing Rāzī as a heretic, he calls Rāzī a *mulḥid* rather than a *zindīq*[31]. Rāzī presents himself, and is presented by others, as a Platonist[32], although in other instances he is also described as a Pythagorean[33]. His creation-myth describes the soul's infatuation with Matter. Seeing the soul's plight, the Creator united it with Matter, so that, through learning, the soul may recognize its own folly, attain wisdom, and become free again from the bonds of Matter[34]. Although eternal, Rāzī's God does not have absolute power over the other eternal beings[35]. He is, however, benevolent, omniscient, compassionate and caring[36]. In the list of Rāzī's books preserved by Ibn al-Nadīm, one entry presents a book arguing "that human-beings have a wise Creator."

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and in the political philosophy of the *falāsifa*, see, for instance, F. Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam* (London, 1958).

28 Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 97.

29 On Rāzī, see P. Kraus and S. Pines, art. al-Rāzī, EI; Skandar, pp. 370 ff.

30 On the limits of the appreciation of the physician as intellectual authority, see S. Stroumsa, "Al-Fārābī and Maimonides on Medicine as Science," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 235 – 249, esp. pp. 248 f.

31 E. g., *Raziana*, p. 358; *Rasā'il*, p. 243.

32 Cf., for example, *Rāsā'il*, pp. 27 ff.; Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 99 – 102; R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic* (Oxford, 1963), p. 16.

33 Cf., for instance, *Rāsā'il*, pp. 187 f. (quoting Ibn Ṣā'id and al-Mas'ūdī); Pines, *Atomenlehre*, p. 82, note 3; and see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford, 1995), p. 388.

34 *Raziana*, p. 366, ll. 15 – 17.

35 Cf. *Rāsā'il*, p. 170 (quoting Ibn Ḥazm's *Kitāb al-fiṣal fī'l-milal wa'l-ahwā' wa'l-niḥal*), pp. 191 – 216.

36 Cf. *Rāsā'il*, p. 103: 13 f. I owe this reference to Meir. M. Bar-Asher.

Rāzī's God was thus not the indifferent God of some philosophers, nor the unknowable God of the Buddhists as perceived by the Muslims, the *Samaniyya*[37]. Rāzī believed that his God cared for the created world and intervened in it. God's intervention in the world, however, was done in a discrete, natural way. God inspired his creatures from birth with the essential knowledge they need and can develop when necessary. This inspiration (*ilhām*) is God's *modus operandi* for all created beings, from ducks and geese to mortal man[38], and there is no need for an additional instruction through prophets. According to Rāzī's Ismaʿīlī opponent, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī,

> Rāzī claimed that it is inconceivable that God, who is mindful of His creatures, and can impose on His servants an easy, available thing, will disregard it and choose to impose on them the more strenuous thing. What Rāzī meant to say is that God did not impose upon them the obedience to prophets and messengers, this being "the more strenuous thing." Rather, He inspired them with what they need, so that they can obtain it by nature.[39]

In other words, it is precisely Rāzī's perception of God as wise and compassionate that justifies his rejection of prophecy. The revealed reli-

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37 On the *Samaniyya* or *Sumaniyya*, see van Ess, *TG*, II, pp. 20 ff.; and see Pines, "A Study of The Impact of Indian, Mainly Buddhist, Thought On Some Aspects of Kalām Doctrines," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17 (1994), pp. 181 – 203, esp. pp. 183 ff.

38 Al-Bīrūnī in his *Risāla* (pp. 21 ff., 28) discusses the question of the origin of sciences and mentions two groups: those who hold that the sciences are revealed, each science by a different prophet, and those who hold that all acquired sciences are, in fact, natural to man just as animals have natural, inborn knowledge. Unlike animals, however, man has these sciences *in potentia* only, and he acquires them gradually in his lifetime as well as by profiting from previous generations. According to al-Bīrūnī, the rationale behind this opinion is the following: "Since the Creator is compassionate and generous towards man, He will not delay man's benefits to his existence, if indeed He does not prepare it for him in advance, as He prepared for him his abode on earth, the plants to feed him and the animals to serve him." In all likelihood, al-Bīrūnī is well aware that this opinion, which he presents in some length, is also al-Rāzī's; Compare, for example, *Raziana*, p. 368, XIX II. 24 – 26; p. 372, XIX, II. 20 – 27.

39 *Raziana*, p. 362, II. 26 – 33. See also p. 367. In a polemical pun, Rāzī's Ismaʿīlī opponent turns the *ilhām* (inspiration) into *ihmāl* (negligence), and says that according to Rāzī, human beings are left to stray, like unattended cattle. By this he intends to imply that the notion of "inspiration" without further guidance is not compatible with God's compassionate nature. Abū Ḥātim's polemical claim, however, does not do justice to Rāzī, who, as we have seen above, presents his God as caring and compassionate.

gions cause fanaticism and thus encourage strife and wars. The good, merciful God must have had a better idea for the salvation of humankind[40].

Rāzī's belief in a merciful God should not, however, mislead us to think that he entertained a cheerful image of the world. Maimonides reports that Rāzī's metaphysics (*ilāhīyyāt*) included a discussion of the predominance of evil in this world, a discussion which supposedly led Rāzī to the conclusion that man's existence on earth is but a painful affliction. According to Maimonides, this discussion was part of Rāzī's attack on monotheistic theodicy. Although Rāzī's perception of the world was indeed rather pessimistic, Maimonides is probably drawing conclusions which are not Rāzī's[41]. These conclusions may, in fact, reflect Maimonides's perception of what a heretic of this sort would say, a perception which could have been influenced by Maimonides's familiarity with other freethinkers, perhays even with Ibn al-Rāwandī[42].

d. Cult

Both Ibn al-Rāwandī and Rāzī mock the Muslim ritual, which they compare to the ritual of pagan Indians[43]. But this in itself does not mean that they rejected the very notion of cult. The person from whom Rāzī learned his freethinking was probably Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Īrānšahrī. According to al-Bīrūnī, "al-Īrānšahrī had no connection whatsoever with any of the (known) religions. Rather, he invented his own religion, which he was propagating."[44] Al-Bīrūnī's statement, if correct, implies that al-Īrānšahrī

40 For the religions as source of strifes and wars, see *Raziana*, p. 367 f.

41 Cf. Maimonides, *Guide*, III, 12, p. 441 (= Rāzī, *Rasā'il*, pp. 179 f.), and compare, for example, with Rāzī's words in his *Kitāb al-sīra al-falsafiyya, Rasā'il*, pp. 103:9 – 18, 108:4 – 5.

42 See Kraus, *Rasā'il*, pp. 163 – 169, 179 – 180; On Rāzī's "ascetic hedonism," see Goodman, "Ethics," esp. p. 21. Goodman regards Rāzī's asceticism as stemming from a certain conformism on Rāzī's part concerning the religious and philosophical conventions of his time. Consequently, according to Goodman, "If he was a freethinker, the term must be applied in a relative sense, and even then with care." On Maimonides's familiarity with the ideas of the freethinkers of Islam, see S. Stroumsa, "Elisha Ben Abuya and Muslim Heretics in Maimonides' Writings," *Maimonidean Studies 3* (1995), pp. 173 – 193.

43 Cf. Rāzī, *Rasā'il*, p. 105:15 – 106:3.

44 Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, *Fī taḥqīq mā li'l-hind*, p. 4: "*Lam yakun min jamīʿ al-adyān fī šayʾ, bal munfaridan bi-muḫtaraʿ lahu, yadʿū ilayhi.*" According to Nāṣir-i-Ḫusraw, however, Rāzī plagiarized al-Īrānšahrī's ideas and distorted them, turning them into heresy. Cf. Pines, *Atomenlehre*, p. 35.

did not dispense with the idea of a religion altogether, but rather that he substituted the known religions with a new one. Īrānšahrī's invented religion could well have included some cultic elements. Of the cult of the freethinkers we know nothing. We do not know if they had any form of worship, either ritual or contemplative. We can, however, make some guesses.

It seems that in their attempt to distance themselves from their own monotheistic, scriptural religion, the freethinkers of medieval Islam were attracted by other religious models. Ibn al-Rāwandī attributes his rationalistic argument against the prophetic religions to the Indian *barāhima*[45]. Al-Īrānšahrī was, according to al-Bīrūnī, interested in Indian religions. And Rāzī is known to have drawn on the Sabeans[46]. One of Rāzī's main sources on this pagan community of Ḥarrān, al-Saraḫsī, has left us detailed and gruesome descriptions of the Sabean cult of star-worship, which included human sacrifice[47].

The question of the historicity of Ibn al-Rāwandī's *barāhima* and of al-Saraḫsī's Sabeans, though important in itself, is irrelevant to our present concern[48]. Whether invented or real, these non-monotheistic religions seem to have fascinated the freethinkers. This fact demonstrates that their rejection of religion was specifically directed against the prophetic religions, and did not necessarily amount to complete irreligiosity or to atheism.

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45 Cf. Kraus, "Beiträge," pp. 335 – 379; Niewöhner, *Veritas*, pp. 238 ff.; S. Stroumsa, "The Barāhima in Early Kalām," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 6* (1985), pp. 229 – 241.

46 See, for example, Rāzī, *Rasā'il*, p. 188 (quoting al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Barbier de Meynard [Paris, 1865], IV, pp. 67 f.), and p. 203. On the Sabeans, see Pines, "Translator's Introduction," Maimonides, *Guide*, pp. cxxiii – cxxiv; van Ess, *TG*, II, pp. 442 – 446; Fakhry, *Islamic Pilosophy*, p. 99. The philosophers' fascination with the Sabeans led Michel Tardieu to his ingeniuous theory on the Sabean philosophical community of Late Antiquity. See his "Ṣābiens coraniques et 'Ṣābiens' des Ḥarran," JA 274 (1986), 1 – 44. Several historians of Late Antiquity have accepted Tardieu's theory (cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* [Ann Arbor, 1990]; Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* [Princeton, 1933], pp. 62 – 65.) Nevertheless, Tardieu's main argument, which reconstructs the sixth-century reality on the basis of two criptic tenth-century evidences, seems to me to require a leap of faith.

47 Cf. F. Rosenthal, *Aḥmad b. aṭ-Ṭayyib as-Saraḫsī* (New Haven, 1943).

48 See Stroumsa, "Ecritures alternatives", pp. 278 – 284; idem, "Sabéens de Ḥarrān et Sabéens de Maïmonide", *Actes du colloque du CNRS sur Maïmonide: Traditions philosophiques et scientifiques médiévales arabe, hébraïque, latine*, ed. T. Lévy (Paris, forthcoming).

But of course, this paradoxical fascination of the spokesmen of rationality for the crudest cults does not allow us to say that in their rejection of monotheist religions, the freethinkers actually adopted the religion of the pagan philosophers or what they believed it to be. The examination of pagan or Indian religions gave them the necessary distance from their own original religion. The claim that all religions were, in fact, equal, (*takāfu' al-adyān*) and that consequently no religion had the ultimate truth, is indeed often presented as an important part of freethinking[49]. The "counter-religions" were necessary for the freethinkers to "neutralize" their own original religion. But there is no indication that their fascination with these religions led the freethinkers to adopt them.

e. Skepticism

In theological literature in Arabic the theoretical discussion of atheism is often preceded or followed by an epistemological discussion which aims at a refutation of skepticism in its various form. The tenth century Jewish theologian Saadia, for example, translates Psalm 14:1 ["The fool says in his heart: 'There is no God' "] as: "The ignorant said to himself: God has no commanding power."[50] The atheist of the Bible is thus understood by Saadia as a practical atheist[51]. His atheism is connected to the fact that he is "ignorant" (*jāhil*). This is not involuntary ignorance, but the willful ignorance of the skeptics (*tajāhul*). The close connection between this brand of atheism and skepticism is made clear in Saadia's theological *Summa*, where he criticises the attitude of people "who think that if they do not believe in God being a Lord, they can get rid of his command and prohibition, his promise and his threat." This attitude Saadia describes as "the ultimate ignorance."[52]

Some modern scholars describe Ibn al-Rāwandī as a skeptic[53]. In Arabic texts he is indeed often branded an ignoramus (*jāhil*)[54]. This may be, of course, only a term of opprobrium, and it is indeed often accompanied by similar curses, such as "fool" (*safīh*), "wicked" (*ḫabīth*)[55], impudent" (*mājin*), or "cursed" (*la'līn*)[56]. But it could also be understood as

49 For a masterly study of this issue, see Niewöhner, *Veritas*, esp. pp. 238 – 250.
50 Ed. J. Qafih (New York, 1966), p. 72: *Qāla al-jāhil fī nafsihi: Laysa li-'llāhi amran.*"
51 Cf. Fabro, "Atheism:" "*Practical atheism*: living as if God did not exist."
52 *Kitāb al-amānāt wa'l-i'tiqādāt*, ed. J. Qāfiḥ, Introduction 3, p. 13.
53 For example, Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 96.
54 See, for example, A'asam, *History*, p. 79, fragment 1 (quoting Tawḥīdī).
55 A'asam, *History*, p. 34, fragment 30.
56 A'asam, *History*, p. 52, fragment 13 (quoting al-Aš'arī).

"a skeptic"[57]. The Muslim sources strive to depict Ibn al-Rāwandī's attacks on all religions as an exercise in spite or as a mercenary endeavor, rather than as stemming from some deep conviction. He is said to have written refutations of his own works[58], a fact which, if true, would again strengthen the supposition that his thought had some skeptic components. The eleventh century *Qāḍī* ʿAbd al-Jabbār says about him that "he became an apostate and an unbeliever and he denied that he had the knowledge of God's existence."[59] This saying of the *Qāḍī*, however, also refers to the Manichaean al-Warrāq. Moreover, as al-Aʿsam rightly points out, the ability of human beings to know God was a disputed question among many Muʿtazilīs, and not specifically among those with weak faith. Therefore ʿAbd al-Jabbār's testimony cannot be taken as a proof of Ibn al-Rāwandī's agnosticism, still less of his atheism. The sum of our information concerning him does not allow us, in my view, to state that his heterodox ideas included the repudiation of the possibility of a statisfactory answer to the question of God's existence[60].

Rāzī, on the other hand, is not accused of being a skeptic. In fact, in his *dubitationes contra Galenos* Rāzī criticized Galen severely for his agnostic attitude regarding the created nature of the world, and it is patently clear that he did not adopt an agnostic or a skeptic attitude on this question[61]. In his view, the world was created, and had a Creator.

Conclusion

Neither Ibn al-Rāwandī nor al-Rāzī is described in our sources as an atheist. The same holds true for the enigmatic Īrānšahrī. Our information on the thought of all three thinkers derives from their Muslim opponents. Usually, these sources are suspected of drawing their opponents in dark colors, describing them as more radical heretics than they actually were. The fact that, when their opponents enumerate their various sins, they do not include atheism in the list, seems to strengthen the supposition that indeed they were no atheists.

57 Cf., for example, Aʿsam, *History*, p. 264, fragment 10.

58 Aʿsam, *History*, p. 88, fragment 13 (quoting Ibn al-Nadīm).

59 Aʿsam, *History*, p. 93 (quoting *Šarḥ al-uṣūl al-ḫamsa*): *"'rtadda wa-kafara wa-nafā ʿan nafsihi al-ʿilma bi-'llāhi."*

60 *Pace* Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 96.

61 Cf. *Kitāb al-šukūk ʿalā Jālīnūs*, ed. Mehdi Mohaghegh (Tehran, 1993), p. 7:17 ff.

In his seminal work on the history of atheism in the western world, Fritz Mauthner has rightly observed that when a religious belief is rejected, the form of the rejection reflects the religion which triggered it, and that thus pagan atheism is not the same as Christian atheism[62]. The particular kind of disbelief generated by Islam was freethinking. The centrality of prophecy in Islam could not but effect philosophers in the Muslim world[63], and philosophers who chose to remain within the fold had to accomodate prophecy. The *falāsifa*, for example, accorded it a central role in their political thought, identifying the prophet with the philosopher-king. Likewise, the thinkers who rebelled against Islam focused their rebellion on the notion of prophecy.

The implication of this conclusion, however, needs to be spelled out. For, if we want to pursue Mauthner's train of thought (scil., that pagan atheism is different from Christian atheism), then we must state clearly that the kind of heresy generated by Islam was *not* atheism. Moreover, the study of the two most notorious heresiarchs of medieval Islam suggests that, although the abstract notion of atheism existed in medieval Islam, no individual was associated with this notion.

List of Bibliographical Abbreviations

A'sam, *History* = 'Abd al-Amīr al-A'sam, *Ta'rīḫ Ibn al-Rīwandī al-mulḥid; nuṣuṣ wa-wathā'iq min al-maṣādir al-'arabiyya ḫilāl alf 'ām* [= *History of Ibn ar-Rīwandī, The Heretic*] (Beirut, 1975).

A'sam, *Marāji'* = 'Abd al-Amīr al-A'sam, *Ibn al-Rīwandī fī al-marāji' al-'arabiyya al-ḥadītha* (Beirut, 1978), 2 Vols.

EI^2 = The Encyclopedia of Islam, second edition.

Fabro, "Atheism" = Cornelio Fabro, "Atheism," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1973), Vol. 1, pp. 479 f.

Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy* = Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York, 1983^2).

James, "Atheism" = George Alfred James, "Atheism," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York and London, 1987), pp. 479 f.

62 Fritz Mauthner, *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendland* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1920), Vol I, p. 10.

63 Cf. S. Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985), pp. 101 – 114; "Ecritures alternatives" pp. 271 – 295.

Kraus, "Beiträge" = P. Kraus, "Beiträge zur islamischen Ketzergeschichte; das *kitab az-zumurrud* des Ibn ar-Rāwandī," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali XIV* (1933), pp. 93 – 129, XIV (1934), pp. 335 – 379.

Lewis, "Heresy" = Bernard Lewis, "Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam," *Studia Islamica* 1 (1953), pp. 43 – 63.

Maimonides, *Guide* = Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963).

Müller-Lauter, "Atheismus" = Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, "Atheismus II: Systematische Darstellung," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin and New York, 1979), pp. 378 – 436.

Niewöhner, *Veritas* = Friedrich Niewöhner, *Veritas Sive Varietas: Lessings Toleranzparabel und das Buch Von den drei Betrügern* (Heidelberg, 1988).

Pines, *Atomenlehre* = S. Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre* (Berlin, 1936).

Qāsim b. Ibrāhim, *Radd* = *al-Radd ʿalā al-mulḥid li'l-imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhim*, ed. M. Y. S. Azzān (Ṣanʿāʾ, 1992).

Rāzī, *Rasā'il* = Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Zakariyyāʾ al-Rāzī, *Rasāʾil falsafiyya*, ed. Paul Kraus (Beirut, [rpr.] 1973).

Ritter, "Philologica" = H. Ritter, "Philologica IV: Ibn al-Gauzī's Bericht über Ibn ar-Rēwandi," *Der Islam*, 19 (1931), pp. 1 – 17.

Stroumsa, "The Blinding Emerald" = S. Stroumsa, "The Blinding Emerald: Ibn al-Rāwandī's *Kitāb al-Zumurrud," Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114 (1994), pp. 163 – 185.

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Urvoy, *Penseurs libres* = Dominique Urvoy, *Les Penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique* (Paris, 1996).

Van Ess, "Image" = Josef van Ess, "Ibn ar-Rēwandi, or the Making of an Image," *al-Abḥāth* 27 (1978/9), pp. 5 – 26.

Van Ess, *TG* = Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, I – III (Berlin and New York, 1991 – 1992); IV (1997); VI (1995).