

Epistles of the Brethren of Purity and Their Vision of a Pluralistic World

The authors of a famous encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences assumed the pseudonym *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (The Brethren of Purity), describing themselves as a group of fellow-seekers after truth. Members of a religio-political underground movement, they deliberately concealed their identity so that their treatises, entitled *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ wa-Khullān al-Wafāʾ* (The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity and the Friends of Loyalty), would gain wider circulation and appeal to a broad cross-section of Arab society, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Over the centuries, the authorship of the *Epistles* has been ascribed to various individuals and groups, such as to Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), to the great astronomer and mathematician al-Majrīṭi (d. ca. 398/1007), and to the Muʿtazila, to the Qarāmiṭa of Baṣra and to the Ṣūfīs. The assertion of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) that the treatises were composed by a group of learned men in Baṣra during the middle of the fourth/tenth century was widely accepted until recently. Al-Qifṭī (d. 646/1248), the famous biographer of physicians and philosophers, was the first to express his skepticism about al-Tawḥīdī’s attribution.

In 1932, Ḥusayn al-Hamdānī stated that the Ismāʿīlī Mustaʿlī-Ṭayyibī tradition attributes the *Rasāʾil* to the hidden imam Aḥmad. He also indicated certain marked features of the treatises that are manifestly Ismāʿīlī in character. Yves Marquet, who authored numerous studies on the *Rasāʾil*, believes that Ismāʿīlīs composed the *Epistles* over a long period of time and perhaps the final form was settled upon around the middle of the fourth/tenth century. He further contends that the *Rasāʾil* represent the oldest extant source for Ismāʿīlī doctrines. In 1978, Abbas Hamdani deconstructed al-Tawḥīdī’s theory and pointed out the untrustworthiness of his report. Additionally, he published the earliest reference to the *Rasāʾil* found in the Ismāʿīlī literature. He rejects Qarmaṭī authorship of the *Epistles* and argues that they were compiled before the establishment of the Fāṭimid state in North Africa in 297/909 as an ideological and intellectual spearhead in support of Fāṭimid political activities. In short, the Ismāʿīlī character of the *Epistles* is no longer in dispute.

I fully concur with Hamdani’s findings. In my latest study, I reiterated that Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī’s narration does not stand up to close scrutiny and must be abandoned. Similarly I have refuted at length Stern and Madelung’s thesis based on al-Tawḥīdī’s account of the authorship and dating of the *Rasāʾil*. All the internal evidence points to the fact that the authors of the *Rasāʾil* were not affiliated with the Qarāmiṭa, and certainly their *Epistles* were composed much earlier than the middle of the fourth/tenth century. There are no traces of any influence from al-Fārābī’s (d. 339/950) strand of Neoplatonism on their thought. I have, therefore, argued that as far as philosophy is concerned, the *Epistles* represent a post-Kindī (d. ca. 256/870) component of Neoplatonism. Furthermore, I pointed out that the oldest extant copy of the *Rasāʾil*, from ʿĀṭif Efendi (MS 1681) in Istanbul and transcribed in 578/1182, is almost three centuries later than the

first circulation of the encyclopedia. We can, therefore, state that the text of this manuscript, and, in turn, of the entire encyclopedia, is not well attested or documented. Myself and other editors (of the latest critical edition with an annotated English translation, published by the Oxford University Press) have indicated that extant manuscript copies of the *Epistles* are marred by copyists' intentional and unintentional interpolations. I think those interpolations occurred soon after the circulation of the *Rasā'il*, prior to the emergence of proto-archetypes and the subsequent establishment of various manuscript traditions adhering to these archetypes. My above assumption is based on the fact that there is a major lacuna of almost three centuries between the time of the *Rasā'il*'s composition and the transcription of the oldest extant copy as stated above. Unless new evidence comes to light, the present state of our knowledge will not change. Finally, I should add that if we concede that Ismā'īlīs compiled the *Rasā'il*, the identity of the group that did so cannot be precisely determined. The pre-Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī movement was a coalition composed of numerous groups with the goal of supplanting the °Abbāsīd dynasty with a Shī'ī one. Nonetheless, the names of the authors will remain a mystery.

The philosophical system of the *Rasā'il* is a synthesis of reason and revelation wherein the cosmos is viewed as a unified, organic whole. The philosophical structure and the cosmology are derived from Neoplatonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism. Eclectic in nature, the system draws on various faiths and philosophies, with a strong undercurrent of rationalism and humanism. *The Brethren of Purity* offered a new political program under the aegis of an °Alīd imam, and their utopia, referred to as *al-madīna al-fāḍila* (the spiritual, virtuous city), or *dawlat ahl al-khayr* (the government of virtuous people), was to be governed by a law-giving philosopher-prophet. The organization and arrangement of the *Epistles* and their classification of the sciences reflect this ultimate objective.

Without going into further details about the superstructure of the hierarchy of beings originating with the Intellect emanating from One (God), humanity is described as the noblest of all creation. The other three kingdoms: minerals, plants, and animals, are made subservient to it. The unity and complexity of the human being's soul and body make him/her a microcosm. Humans, by virtue of their position in this hierarchy, are the central link in a long chain of beings; below them is the animal kingdom and above them is the world of angels, and they are connected to both. In the Perfect Human Being, who has realized his divine origin, the process of generation in descending order comes to an end and the reverse journey in ascending order starts. The human being, therefore, fulfills the purpose of creation.

Given their grandiose view of the cosmic world, they also formulated a model of a pluralistic world held together by values of inclusiveness, tolerance and understanding between different religions and cultures. Yet, their so-called "liberal and inclusive" interpretation of Islam, put forward more than a millennium ago, was still rooted in the spirit of the Qur'ān, particularly the

themes present in verses 62 of *sūrat al-Baqara* and 69 of *sūrat al-Mā'ida*,¹ along with verses 136 and 285 of *sūrat al-Baqara* and 84 of *sūrat Āl 'Imrān*.²

The *Epistles* occupy a unique position in the history of Islamic thought and exercised a great influence on the Muslim elite. The existence of a large number of manuscript copies of the text (more than one hundred) scattered throughout the world is an eloquent witness to their popularity and influence. Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) understood very well that the threat of the Ismā'īlīs and the *Rasā'il* was not merely political but also intellectual. He perceived that it was not simply Mu'tazilite rationalism, for in their synthesis the Ismā'īlīs went far beyond rationalism to encompass the entire spectrum of scientific thought. They integrated the Greek sciences, philosophy, and formal reasoning into one universal valid truth, synonymous with religious reality. Therefore, in addition to his *Faḍā'iḥ al-Bāṭiniyya* (or *al-Mustazhirī*), which is exclusively devoted to refuting the newly formulated doctrine of *ta'lim* by Ḥasan-e Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), that one must accept the absolute authority of the infallible Imam in religious faith, he refuted the Ismā'īlīs in several other books. In some of those polemical works he loses his customary academic serenity and becomes almost shrill in his denunciation. Referring to the *Rasā'il* in his *Munqidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from Error), which has been called Ghazālī's "*Apologia pro doctrina sua*," he states that the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* is really the refuse of philosophy. Because, he adds, their doctrines are based on the feeble beliefs of Pythagoras whose assumptions are the weakest of all philosophical principles and had already been refuted by Aristotle.

Select Bibliography:

In his article "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., Yves Marquet provided an extensive bibliography; Abbas Hamdani, "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī and the Brethren of Purity," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9 (1978); 345-53 and "An Early Fāṭimid Source on the Time and Authorship of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*," *Arabica* 26 (1979), 62-75; Ismail Poonawala, "Ikhwān al-Safā'," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn.; idem, "Why We Need an Arabic Critical Edition with an Annotated English Translation of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*," in *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and their Rasā'il: An Introduction*, ed. Nader El-Bizri, Oxford, 2008, 33-57; idem, "Humanism in Ismā'īlī Thought: The Case of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*," in *Universality in Islamic Thought*, ed. Michael Morony, London, 2014, 65-144; idem, "Introduction to *Epistle 41*," in *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: Sciences of the Soul and*

¹ Those who believe and those who are Jews and the Christian and Ṣābi'ūn – those who believe in God and the Last Day and act righteously – Their reward is with their Lord. No fear will be upon them nor will they grieve. Qur'ān 2:62; 5:69).

² We believe in God and in what was revealed to us, and in what was revealed to Abraham, Issac, Ishmael, Jacob and the tribes, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and in what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them. Qur'ān 2:136. We find more or less the same contents in other two verses.

Intellect, Part II, An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of *Epistles* 39-41, eds. and trans. by Carmela Baffioni and Ismail K. Poonawala, Oxford, 2017, 277-308.

Ismail K. Poonawala

Professor Emeritus of Arabic & Islamic Studies

University of California, Los Angeles