

Epistles of the brethren of purity and their vision of a pluralistic world

Introduction

The authors of a famous encyclopedia of the philosophical and religious sciences assumed the pseudonym *Ikhwan al-Ṣafa'* (*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 epistles, entitled *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Ṣafa' wa-Khullān al-Wafa'* (*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 Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), to the great astronomer and mathematician al-Majrīṭī (d. ca. 398/1007), and to the Mu'tazila, to the Qaramiṭa of Baṣra and to the Ṣūfīs. The assertion of Abu Ḥayyan 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 Isma'īlī Musta'li-Ṭayyibī tradition attributes the authorship of the said encyclopedia to the hidden imam Aḥmad. He also indicated certain marked features of the *Epistles* that are manifestly Isma'īlī in character. Yves Marquet, who authored numerous studies on the *Rasa'il*, believes that Isma'īlīs 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 *Rasa'il* represent the oldest extant source for Isma'īlī 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 *Rasa'il* found in the Isma'īlī literature. He rejects Qaramiṭi authorship of the *Epistles* and argues that they were compiled before the establishment of the Fatimid state in North Africa in 297/909 as an ideological and intellectual spearhead in support of Fatimid political activities. In short, the Isma'īlī character of the *Epistles* is no longer in dispute.

I fully concur with Hamdani's findings. In my latest study, I reiterated that Abu Ḥayyan 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 *Rasa'il*. All the internal evidence points to the fact that the authors of the *Rasa'il* were not affiliated with the Qaramiṭa, 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-Farabi'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 *Rasa'il*, from 'Atīf 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

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of the *Epistles* are marred by copyists' intentional and unintentional interpolations. I think those interpolations occurred soon after the circulation of the *Rasa'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 *Rasa'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 Isma'īlīs compiled the *Rasa'il*, the identity of the group that did so cannot be precisely determined. The pre-Fatimid Isma'īlī movement was a coalition composed of numerous groups with the goal of supplanting the 'Abbasid dynasty with a Shi'i one. Nonetheless, the names of the authors will remain a mystery.

The philosophical system of the *Rasa'il* is a synthesis of reason and revelation wherein the cosmos is viewed 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 'Alid imam, and their utopia, referred to as *al-madīna al-faḍīla* (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'an, particularly the themes present in verses 62 of *surat al-Baqara* and 69 of *surat al-*

Ma'ida,¹ along with verses 136 and 285 of *surat al-Baqara* and 84 of *surat Al 'Imran*.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-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) understood very well that the threat of the Isma'ilis and the *Rasa'il* was not merely political but also intellectual. He perceived that it was not simply Mu'tazilite rationalism, for in their synthesis the Isma'ilis 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 *Fada'ih al-Batiniyya* (or *al-Mustaẓhiri*), which is exclusively devoted to refuting the newly formulated doctrine of *ta'lim* by Ḥasan-e Šabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), that one must accept the absolute authority of the infallible Imam in religious faith, he refuted the Isma'ilis 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 *Rasa'il* in his *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (Deliverance from Error), which has been called Ghazali's "*Apologia pro doctrina sua*," he states that the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Šafa'* is really the refuse of philosophy. Because,

¹Those who believe and those who are Jews and the Christian and Šabi'un – 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'an 2:62; 5:69).

²We 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'an 2:136. We find more or less the same contents in other two verses.

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

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.