

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC
THOUGHT AND CIVILIZATION (ISTAC)

IBN AL-'ARABI'S CONCEPTION OF RELIGION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC
THOUGHT AND CIVILIZATION (ISTAC)
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

BY
MOHD. SAMI BIN RADRON

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA
1410/1998



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Say (O Messenger): "If ye do love God,
Follow me: God will love you
And forgive you your sins;
For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

Say (O Messenger): "Obey God
And His Messenger":
But if they turn back
God loveth not those
Who reject Faith.

(Sūrat Āli 'Imrān, 3: 31-32)

ABSTRACT

The aim of my dissertation is to discuss and evaluate Ibn al-'Arabi's (560/1165 - 638/1240) conception of religion. In order to achieve this objective, the dissertation will be organized into four chapters; these chapters are entitled respectively "Muslim Encounter with Members of Other Religious Traditions Prior to Ibn al-'Arabi," "Ibn al-'Arabi: His Personal Background and Conception of Religion," "Ibn al-'Arabi on the Diversity of Religions," and "Evaluation."

By way of introduction, I will present a summation of the discourses of the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition on Islām and other religious traditions.

In chapter one, the Muslim attitude as described by some *Mutakallims* and the *Ṣūfīs*, towards other religious traditions will be presented in a historical survey. I will also make an attempt to outline the principle upon which these scholars have based their studies on Islām and other traditional religions. How the *Ṣūfīs* have distinguished themselves from the *Mutakallims* on some significant points--if any--will also be highlighted, as a background against which Ibn al-'Arabi's conception of religion will be examined.

Chapter two will deal with Ibn al-'Arabi's general conception of religion. Here, I will study how Ibn al-'Arabi understood and interpreted such Qur'anic terminology as *islām*, *dīn*, *fiṭrah*, *sharī'ah*, *minhāj*, *mansik*, *millah*, *ummah*, and all of their forms that have occurred in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Since this terminology is essential to an understanding of the meaning of religion from the Muslim point of view, our analysis of Ibn al-'Arabi's technical usage of these terms will enable us to discern how the Shaykh al-Akbar conceived and described 'religion.' Nevertheless, given the enormous corpus of Ibn al-'Arabi's works, whose mere enumeration fills two volumes of Osman Yahia's *Histoire et Classification*, my dissertation will concentrate particularly on the following three works of Ibn al-'Arabi: the *Futūḥāt Makkiyyah*, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* and *Ījāz al-Bayān fī 'l-Tarjamah 'an al-Qur'ān*.

While chapter two deals only with Ibn al-'Arabi's general conception of religion, chapter three will concentrate on a more specific problem: the issue of the diversity of religions. Here, my analysis will be directed to Ibn al-'Arabi's explicit statements and assertions on the problem of the plurality of religious forms (*millahs*) and religious communities (*ummahs*). Ibn al-'Arabi's understanding of the Qur'anic theory of *tahrif*, and his remarks about non-Muslims and their paramount doctrines, especially regarding those of the *Ahl al-Kitāb*, like the Christian's Trinity, Incarnation, and Redemption, will also be examined in this particular chapter.

After all of the above mentioned points have been clarified, I will attempt a general evaluation of Ibn al-'Arabi's understanding of Islām vis-à-vis other religious traditions. I trust that this dissertation will provide a preliminary yet solid investigation of Ibn al-'Arabi's own understanding of religion, which can hopefully enlighten further research leading to a critical assessment of the so-called doctrine of the Transcendent Unity of Religions, to which Ibn al-'Arabi allegedly adhered.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"O my Lord! Grant me that I may forever be grateful for Thy blessings with which Thou hast graced me...." (*al-Aḥqāf*, 46: 15).

My special appreciation is due to Professor Syed Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas, Founder-Director of ISTAC. His invaluable works -- such as *Islām: Faham Agama dan Asas Akhlak* which I began to read and reflect upon from the age of fifteen -- have constantly impressed on me the importance of having a true understanding of Islamic key concepts.

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Last but far from least: "All praise is due to Allāh, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds!" (*Yūnus*, 10: 10).

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ABBREVIATIONS

- BW Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam)*, tr. R. W. J. Austin
- FH Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. Abū 'l-'Alā al-'Afīfī
- FM Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, Cairo edition
- Ījāz Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī, *Ījāz al-Bayān fī 'l-Tarjamah 'an al-Qur'ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Maḥmūd al-Ghurāb
- JMIAS *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society*
- MS Su'ād al-Ḥakīm, *al-Mu'jam al-Ṣūfī: al-Ḥikmah fī Ḥudūd al-Kalimah*
- Rasā'il Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī, *Rasā'il Ibn al-'Arabī*
- RR [Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī], *Raḥmah min al-Raḥmān fī Tafṣīr wa Ishārāt al-Qur'ān min Kalām al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyi 'l-Din Ibn al-'Arabī*, collected and presented by Maḥmūd Maḥmūd al-Ghurāb

QUOTATIONS FROM THE QUR'ĀN

All quotations from the Qur'ān's translation are either from Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, new edition with revised translation and commentary (Brentwood: Amana Corporation, 1991) or Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān: Translated and Explained* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1980).

REFERENCES TO THE FUTŪḤĀT MAKKIYYAH

References to the *Futūḥāt Makkiyyah* will be made in the form of, for example, 1: 2 (3) where the first number refers to the volume number, the second to the page, and the third to the line. This means that if a reference is made in the form of, for instance, 4: 5, it only refers to the volume and page number.

INTRODUCTION: THE QUR'ĀN AND OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

A Muslim's conception of religion is not merely the result of his discursive thinking. It is, rather, his understanding of the Qur'ānic teachings. Indeed, to have a true understanding of a Muslim's conception of religion, one must first of all know the Qur'ān, which is the source of Muslim's belief and practice. In the following, we will discuss the Qur'ānic assertions regarding the essence of Islām vis-à-vis other religious traditions.

The classical biographers of the Messenger Muḥammad (may Allāh bless and give him Peace!) shared the view that the first Qur'ānic revelation was sent to the Prophet (may Allāh bless and give him Peace!) in the year 13 Before Hijrah, which corresponds to, as some historians have computed, 22nd. December, 609 C.E. This was the beginning of a new, universal Religion, namely Islām, that was to be revealed over a period of about twenty-three years. Obviously, this new religion was very conscious of the fact that there were already so many religious traditions then in the world; of these, Christianity, Judaism, Sabeanism, and Zoroastrianism were perhaps the most important ones.¹

The Qur'ān claims to be the only divine revelation that is sempiternal, and it is through the Qur'ān that Islām claims itself to be the only religion that possesses the totality of truth, realized in the first Community of Believers of Madīnah under the

¹ See, for examples, Shibli Nu'mani, *Sirat-un-Nabi (The Life of the Prophet)*, tr. M. Tayyib Bakhsh Budayuni, 2 vols. (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1979-1981), 1: 106-15; 'Allamah Shibli's *Sirat-un-Nabi*, tr. Sibtain Ahmad, vol. II (Karachi: Jamiyat-ul-Falah, 1971), 308-23; Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasulullah (Sallallahu 'alaihi wa Sallam)* (Karachi: Huzaifa Publications, 1979), 22-31; idem., "Two Christians of Pre-Islamic Mecca 'Uthman ibn al-Huwairith and Waraqah ibn Naufal," *Journal of Pakistan Historical Society*, January 1958, 97-103; idem., "The Christian Monk Abū 'Amir of Medina of the Time of the Holy Prophet," *Journal of Pakistan Historical Society*, October 1959, 231-240; idem., "The Friendly Relations of Islam with Christianity and How They Deteriorated," *Journal of Pakistan Historical Society*, January 1953, 41-45; idem., "The Prophet as a Statesman and His Treatment of Non-Muslim Subjects, and Its Fruit," in his *The Prophet's Establishing a State and His Succession* (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1988); idem., "Tolerance in the Prophet's Deeds at Medina," in *Islam, Philosophy and Science* (Paris: The UNESCO Press, 1981), pp. 17-35; Muḥammad Siddique Qureshi, *Foreign Policy of Muḥammad (SAW)* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1989).

authority and jurisdiction of the Holy Prophet (may Allāh bless and give him Peace!). This particular concept of the perfect religion is couched in the term *al-Dīn* and, more specifically, *Dīn Allāh*, *Dīn al-Ḥaqq*, *al-Dīn al-Qayyim*, *al-Dīn al-Khālīṣ*, and *Dīn al-Qayyimah*.² Although its root has numerous significations, and it belongs to the category of words known as *addād* (i.e., words having two contrary meanings); with all of its forms that occur ninety-five times, *dīn* is, as remarked by the late Izutsu, “an extremely important key-term in the Qur’ān.”³ That subtle conception of perfect religion is also conceptually interconnected--nay, interlocked--with the other terms as well, such as *shar’*, *millah Ibrāhīm ḥanīf*, *khayr ummah* and *ummah wasaṭ*.⁴ This conceptual complexity, as a matter of course, has led to some confusions especially on the part of non-Muslim Islāmologists and historians of religions who, in turn, have confused their followers about the reality of Islām as the perfect religion vis-à-vis the other religious traditions.

Implied in its claim to be the most perfect religion, one of the beliefs of Islām is the “unity of all messages of Allāh to humankind”. This principle is established with precision by Abū Hafṣ ‘Umar Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. 537 /1142) as:

Allāh, may He be exalted, has sent a number of messengers from among mankind to their fellow mankind announcing good tidings, cautioning against evil and making clear for all mankind what they have need for of the undertakings of the world and of religion....The first among the Prophets was Ādam and the last among them is Muḥammad, may Allāh bless and give him peace....All of them are transmitters of commands from Allāh Most High, veracious in conveying their

² See *al-Dīn (al-Baqarah)*, 2: 132, 193, 256; *Āli ‘Imrān*, 3: 19; *al-Anfāl*, 8: 39, 72; *al-Tawbah*, 9: 11, 122; *Yūnus*, 10: 105; *al-Ḥajj*, 22: 78; *al-Rūm*, 30: 30; *al-Aḥzāb*, 33: 5; *al-Shūrā*, 42: 13; *al-Mumtaḥanah*, 60: 8, 9; *al-Bayyinah*, 98: 5; *Dīn Allāh (Āli ‘Imrān)*, 3: 83; *al-Naṣr*, 110: 2; *Dīn al-Ḥaqq (al-Tawbah)*, 9: 29, 33; *al-Fath*, 48: 28; *al-Saff*, 61: 9; *al-Dīn al-Qayyim (al-Tawbah)*, 9: 36; *al-Rūm*, 30: 30, 43; *al-Dīn al-Khālīṣ (al-Zumar)*, 39: 3; and *al-Dīn al-Qayyimah (al-Bayyinah)*, 98: 5).

³ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur’ān* (Salem: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., repr. ed. 1987), 220. See also, Ghulam Haider Aasi, “The Qur’ān and Other Religious Traditions,” *Hamdard Islamicus*, IX: 65-91, no. 2. Cf. Y. Y. Haddad, “The Conception of the Term *Dīn* in the Qur’ān,” *The Muslim World* LXIV (April 1974) 2 pp. 114-23; Jane I. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term Islām as Seen in a Sequence of Qur’ān Commentaries* (Montana: Scholars Press), 1975.

⁴ See *shar’ (al-Shūrā)*, 42: 13; *al-Mā’idah*, 5: 48; *al-Jāthiyah*, 45: 18), *millah Ibrāhīm ḥanīf (al-Baqarah)*, 2: 135), *khayr ummah (Āli ‘Imrān)*, 3: 110) and *ummah wasaṭ (al-Baqarah)*, 2: 143).

teachings for all creatures. The most excellent among the Prophets is Muḥammad, Allāh's blessings and peace be upon him.⁵

This is indeed an obvious fact and one that can be easily understood even by non-Muslim Islāmologists, like Montgomery Watt who once remarked that "belief in other prophets...is of course included in the message Muhammad received from God by revelation."⁶

In this light, all of the adherents of Islām do, in fact, unanimously uphold a sort of belief in the "unity of religions". But that is not all. Added to this belief in the unity of religions which were brought by messengers of Allāh, both of the sources of Islām i.e., the Holy Qur'ān and the Traditions of the Holy Prophet, have also charged the followers of other earlier religious traditions--in particular those of the Biblical traditions--with *tahrif* (falsification, distortion and change of Divine Writ), *tabdīl* (substituting the revealed words with human words), *lawa* (distorting the Divine words with their own dishonest tongues), *labs* (superimposing falsehood on the truth), *kitmān* (repressing and concealing the truth), and *nisyān* (lapse of the exact wordings of the Divine Writ from memory).⁷

Such Qur'anic-traditional charges have been well-recapitulated by Hassan Hanafi in his article entitled "History and Verification: A Qur'anic View on the

⁵ Syed Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqā'id of al-Nasafi* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Publications University of Malaya, 1988), 71-72. Cf. Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzāni, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islām: Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzāni on the Creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafi*, tr. with intro. and notes Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 127.

⁶ Watt, "The Short Creed of al-Sanūsi," *Journal of Turkish Studies* no. 18 (1994): 315-21, on 320. Italics is mine.

⁷ For the *tahrif* see the Qur'ān, *al-Baqarah*, 2: 75; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 46; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 13, 41; for *tabdīl*, *al-Baqarah*, 2: 59; *al-A'rāf*, 7: 162; *lawa*, *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 78, *al-Nisā'*, 4:46; for the *labs* see *al-Baqarah*, 2: 42, *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 71; for the *kitmān* see *al-Baqarah*, 2: 42, 140, 146, 159, 174; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 71, 187; *nisyān*, *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 13-14, *al-A'rāf*, 7: 53. For a competent analysis on this issue of the *tahrif*, see further, for example, Ghulam Haider Aasi, "Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: An Analytical Study of Ibn Ḥazm's 'Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa l-Ahwā' wa 'l-Nihāl'" unpublished Ph.D thesis (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1986), 40-46. Hereinafter cited as *Understanding*.

Scriptures."⁸ We will reproduce this in the following paragraphs, with modifications wherever necessary.

A. Inauthenticity of Existing Scriptures

First and foremost, the Qur'ān challenges the authenticity of existing religious scriptures. In some texts of the Scriptures, on the one hand, the words have been displaced from their right contexts by intentional mispronunciation in order to alter meaning.⁹ Other texts, on the other hand, have been altered, apparently, substituting in their place more lenient texts regarding political or religious authority. Original texts have been changed, confused or clothed with others.¹⁰ Yet, other texts were concealed, hidden away, and completely dropped, whereas the Covenant itself was concluded in order to declare in open the revelation of Allāh, not to hide it.¹¹ And finally, other texts were the invention of the creative mind of the narrator or of the scribe or the product of the connivance between the so-called religious and political authorities. Some laws were invented by the priests to be imposed on the people, not out of piety and obedience but out of hypocrisy. This invention is termed a lie (*al-kadhib*) in the Qur'ān. Human passions and interest groups have substituted Divine Revelation.¹² So, the Word of Allāh has been confused and intermingled with the word of man. From that, sprang out divergencies in doctrines and the split of the community into different schisms.¹³ The Qur'ān comes to unravel such divergencies and verifies them.¹⁴

⁸ In his *Religious Dialogue & Revolution: Essays on Judaism, Christianity & Islam* (Cairo: Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1977), Part I, Chapter 2, pp. 21-68. Another important article in this anthology that is in pertinent with the subject matter of our dissertation is "The Image of Abraham in the Qur'ān and the Bible," 69-94. Cf. also Muḥammad Ḥamidullāh, "Les Juifs: Faits Divers," "Jesus-Christ et le Christianisme selon le Qur'ān," and "Autres Religions," in his *Le Prophète de l'Islām*, 2 vols., 4th. ed. (Paris: Libraire Philosophique, 1959), on pp. 409-11, 422-8, and 429-32 respectively.

⁹ *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 78; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 46; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 14, 41.

¹⁰ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 75; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 71; *al-A'rāf*, 7: 162.

¹¹ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 42, 146, 174; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 187. Hassan Hanafi notes that the Bible, in 2 Kings 22: 8, 13, does mention stories of a hidden Tawrah found by the priest as well as about other found rolls or registers. There is also, in Zachariah 5, a story of burning portions of the Scriptures, and warns against stealing any.

¹² *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 79; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 94; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 50; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 41.

¹³ *Hūd*, 11: 110; *al-Bayyinah*, 98: 4-6.

¹⁴ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 15; *Hūd*, 11: 110.

B. Corrupt Scriptural Interpretations

As such, all scriptural understanding and interpretation is based on conjecture and has equal probability of being right or wrong. Subsequently, personal opinions prevailed over true interpretations, and wishful thinking dominated the real content of texts; in reality, of course, conjecture is no substitute for certainty.¹⁵

Conjecture affected the articles of belief (or dogma). Some Christians wanted the divinity of Christ to prevail over his humanity.¹⁶ Others wanted the humanity of Christ to prevail over his divinity, otherwise Allāh Himself would be jeopardized.¹⁷ The Council of Nicea I declared the equality of the three persons as One God in Three Persons and Three Persons in One God. "They do blaspheme (*kafar*) who say: Allāh is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no God (*ilāh*) except One God (*ilāh wāhid*)."¹⁸ The Qur'ān affirms only that Jesus was a human being, although conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary, who performed miracles as signs of Belief and Faith, and went to Heaven.¹⁹ Likewise, the Crucifixion of Christ is mere conjecture. No body was ever certain of his death.²⁰ Although most of the criticism in the Qur'ān regarding misunderstanding of the religious scriptures are addressed to Christians, the Arabo-Judaic dogma is not exempted. For example, the Arabic Jews call 'Uzayr (Ezra) 'a son of God'.²¹

C. Corrupt Religious Practices

Pertaining to the practical function of religious Scriptures, the Qur'ān talks about the transgression of the law by the disobedient Jews.²² Concerning this, the

¹⁵ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 78; *al-Najm*, 53: 28.

¹⁶ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 17, 72. In Christian history, the most important doctrinaire of this dogma is Apollinarius.

¹⁷ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 116.

¹⁸ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 73.

¹⁹ *Al-Nisā'* 4: 171-2; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 74, 116-7. For Ibn al-'Arabi's interpretation of *al-Nisā'* 4: 171-2, see, for examples, FM, 1: 636; 2: 400, 331; 3: 283, 346, 398; 4: 73. On *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 116-7, see FM, 1: 552; 2: 202; 3: 210; 4: 406. In history, it was Arius who hold the doctrine of the absolute humanity of Christ.

²⁰ *Al-Nisā'*, 4: 155-9.

²¹ *Al-Tawbah*, 9: 30-31. Hassan Hanafi notes that that Arabo-Judaic trinity may applicable either to Osiris, Ezra the Scribe, the Rabbi, or Hassid. Cf. Old Testament, Job 38: 7; Psalms, 29: 1, etc.

²² *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 59; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 66, 68; *al-Jumū'ah*, 62: 5.

Qur'ân warns that formal obedience to a ruling which does not generate piety or is not based on piety is pure hypocrisy.²³ The Sabbath, the sign of the Covenant, has been transgressed.²⁴ The dietary laws have been disobeyed.²⁵ Usury, though prohibited, has been practiced. Greed for money and avarice have been projected on Allâh who has been conceived as avaricious.²⁶ Even rulings about prayers and alms have been disobeyed.²⁷

D. Breaking of the Covenant

There is also a charge of breaking the Covenant.²⁸ The People of the Book are considered guilty of disregarding the Covenant by not believing in the Messengers of Allâh. Even more, they accused some of the Messengers of being impostors and slew others.²⁹ The Covenant is broken by the transgression of religious law.³⁰

E. Ingratitude to the Divine Grace

There was also an ungratefulness to the Divine Grace. The Children of Israel did not recognize the favours Allâh bestowed on them, nor did they believe in His signs nor in Him.³¹ Allâh saved them from extermination when the Pharaoh ordered the killing of their males; and when the Pharaoh followed them to the sea, He drowned the latter and his soldiers.³² The Children of Israel asked Allâh many times for material things, food and special kind of food, and Allâh gave them what they asked for, but still, they never believed in Him or obeyed Him.³³ Once a prophet left them alone for a while or he died, the Children of Israel returned to their original materialistic attitude by

²³ *Al-Nisâ'*, 4: 160.

²⁴ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 65; *al-Nisâ'*, 4: 154; *al-A'raf*, 7: 163.

²⁵ *Al-Mâ'idah*, 5: 42, 62.

²⁶ *Al-Nisâ'*, 4: 161; *al-Mâ'idah*, 5: 64.

²⁷ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 43, 45.

²⁸ On the particular covenant of the Prophets to communicate the Messages, see *al-Ahzâb*, 33: 7, which is commented by Ibn al-'Arabi in FM 4: 58 and *K. al-Najâh*, as quoted in RR, 3: 379. On the Covenant of humankind and its stipulations, see *al-Baqarah*, 2: 83-5, 246; *al-Mâ'idah*, 5: 13-4, 22-9. On the promise of Allâh if the stipulations are fulfilled, see *al-Baqarah*, 2: 40.

²⁹ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 53, 61, 87; *Âli 'Imrân*, 3: 21; *al-Mâ'idah*, 5: 70. Ibn al-'Arabi, on this point, gives the names of Yahyâ (John) and Zakariyyâ (Zechariah) as examples of the killed messengers. See *Ijâz*, 158.

³⁰ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 63, 100; *al-Nisâ'*, 4: 154-5 (Ibn al-'Arabi makes no comment on this). This is why the Covenant was later renewed by 'Isâ, see *al-Mâ'idah*, 5: 14.

³¹ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 40, 211.

³² *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 49-50; *Ibrâhim*, 14: 6.

³³ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 58-9, 61.

worshipping the golden calf.³⁴ Their material consciousness asked more for a concrete scripture coming from Heaven (as if the Tawrah was not sufficient evidence). They even asked to see Allāh in person.³⁵

F. Unbalanced between Materialism and Spiritualism

According to the Qur'ān, there was no balance between materialism and spiritualism in the lives of the unbelievers. The Qur'ān describes such Jewish hearts as hardened.³⁶ They thought that castles and fortresses would protect them from the wrath of Allāh.³⁷ They held that reward was for them and punishment was for others in this life.³⁸ In the case of the Christians, excess prevailed over moderation.³⁹

G. Hypocrisy, Ethnocentrism and Closed-Mindedness

Hypocrisy, ethnocentrism and closed society were also prevalent among them. Hypocrisy has become common behaviour.⁴⁰ The People of the Book have usually been ethnocentric, and mocked other revelations, other prophets, and other forms of religion.⁴¹ They want to uproot all other believers from their faith and make them Jews or Christians.⁴² They may even come and help the unbelievers against those who believe in Allāh.⁴³ Even between themselves they are separated into small groups, each one hating the other and considering the latter its enemy. Instead of doing good on earth they make mischief.⁴⁴ Jews and Christians are the enemies of each other. Jews anathemized Christians, and vice versa. Only Muslims accept that both the religions of Mūsā and 'Īsā came from Allāh, as did the one of Muḥammad.⁴⁵

³⁴ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 51-2, 54, 92; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 153; *Tāhā*, 20: 85-8. About *al-Baqarah*, 2: 51-2, Ibn al-'Arabī refers to *al-A'raf* and *Tāhā* in his *Ijāz*, 136.

³⁵ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 55-7; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 153.

³⁶ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 74, 88; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 13.

³⁷ *Al-Hashr*, 59: 2.

³⁸ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 48, 94; *al-Jumū'ah*, 62: 6.

³⁹ *Al-Nisā'*, 4: 171; *al-Hadid*, 57: 27; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 77-8. For Ibn al-'Arabī interpretation of *al-Nisā'*, 4: 171, see FM, 1: 255, 636; 2: 331, 400; 3: 210; 283, 346, 398; 4: 73, 406.

⁴⁰ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 76-7; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 72; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 64.

⁴¹ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 59-60.

⁴² *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 109, 120, 145; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 69, 73, 99, 100.

⁴³ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 105; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 51-4.

⁴⁴ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 64; *al-Isrā'*, 17: 3.

⁴⁵ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 113.

The Qur'ān offers a minimum of agreement between the three religious communities: to believe in and worship none but Allāh, to ascribe no divinity to aught beside Him, to take no human beings for Lords i.e., Law-Makers beside Allāh, to believe in the Last Day, and to be righteous.⁴⁶ Muslims can eat the other's foods, live in their homes and marry their daughters.⁴⁷ The Qur'ān asks all religious communities to come together and direct their face towards Allāh and implore His curses to be sent on the liars.⁴⁸

A certain portion of the People of the Book, which are extracted from the whole judgment of the People of the Book, are those who believe in Allāh as the sole object of worship (*ilāh wāhid*) and His signs, prostrate themselves before Him, follow the message of all the Prophets, believe in the Last Judgment, do good deeds, order what is good and prohibit what is evil. The Qur'ān describes this minority as 'the portion that stand for the right (*ummah qā'imah*)'; they are saved from the curses, wrath and revenge of Allāh. Those are the positive results of the experience of the past revelation and the endeavour of the prophets.⁴⁹ While those are the exception from amongst the Jews, Christians may be closer to Muslims than the former.⁵⁰ They are the members of small groups who could distance themselves from the general disobedience of the people; the terms used, among others, are "few of them (*qalil minhum*)," "people among the folk of Moses (*ummah min qawm Mūsā*)," and "a portion (*tā'ifah*)."⁵¹

Indeed, the Qur'ān affirms the unity of the Messages of Allāh. The Injil confirms the Tawrah, and the Qur'ān confirms the Injil and the Tawrah.⁵² If mankind is in doubt about the truth of what Allāh has sent to the Prophet Muḥammad, they should learn and know the history of the Jews and Christians prior to and at the time of the Messenger; they will find that it is the truth from their Sustainer and Lord that they

⁴⁶ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 62; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 64.

⁴⁷ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 5.

⁴⁸ *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 61.

⁴⁹ *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 75, 113-5, 199; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 162.

⁵⁰ *Al-Mā'idah*, 5: 82-6. "A doctrinal error," Hassan Hanafi states, "may be less harmful than a premeditated antagonist behaviour based on arrogance."

⁵¹ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 246; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 23; *al-A'raf*, 7: 159; *al-Ṣaff*, 61: 14.

⁵² *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 41, 89, 101; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 50; *al-Nisā'*, 4: 47; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 48.

should not doubt. He is the unlettered Prophet that they shall find described in their Tawrah, and later on in the Injil. Jesus says to the children of Israel that he is a Messenger of Allāh unto them, sent to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Tawrah, and to give them the glad tidings of the Messenger who shall come after him, whose name shall be Aḥmad.⁵³ If the People of the Book give the Prophet Muḥammad a lie (*al-kadhib*), even other messengers before his time have been given the lie when they came with all evidence of the truth (*bayyināt*), books of divine wisdom (*zabur*), and light-giving revelation (*al-kitāb al-munir*). After a long time during which no messengers appeared, there came unto the followers of the Bible Allāh's Messenger to make the truth clear to them, as a bearer of glad tidings and a warner, lest they say that no such one has come unto them.⁵⁴ The Muslims, therefore, should deal with the other two communities of religious traditions with open minds, without rancor or animosity.⁵⁵ The Injil is a verification of the history of the Tawrah.⁵⁶ The Qur'ān, likewise, is a verification of both the Tawrah and the Injil or the Bible in their original form. One of the synonyms of the Qur'ān, thus, is the Criterion (*al-Furqān*): the standard by which to discern the true from the false. It sets forth the truth and confirms whatever there still remains of earlier revelations: for it is Allāh Himself who has sent the Tawrah and the Injil aforetime, as a guidance unto mankind.⁵⁷ All prophets were indeed calling for the order of religious law.⁵⁸

H. The Qur'ān: The Basis of Muslim Comparativists

Later on in Muslim intellectual history, the *Mutakallims* took the opportunity to compare and contrast the different trends and schools of Islamic thought itself with those of other religious traditions. This attempt was further intensified when the Muslims extended their rule over the whole Arabian Peninsula, Persia, Africa and Europe in the West, as well as India in the East. These are the factors that stimulated the

⁵³ *Al-A'raf*, 7: 157; *Yūnus*, 10: 94; *al-Ṣaff*, 61: 6. On *Yūnus*, 10: 94, see Bukhārī, 3: no. 335.

⁵⁴ *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 184; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 19.

⁵⁵ *Al-'Ankabūt*, 29: 46-8.

⁵⁶ *Al-Zukhruf*, 43: 63.

⁵⁷ *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 3-4; *al-Mā'idah*, 5: 15, 48-9; *Hūd*, 11: 110; *al-Nahl*, 16: 64; *al-Naml*, 27: 76.

⁵⁸ *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 133; *Āli 'Imrān*, 3: 19-20, 52, 82, 81-2; *al-Nisā'* 4: 136; *al-Tawbah*, 9: 111; *al-Naml*, 27: 31, 42; *al-A'lā*, 87: 18-9.

Muslims to write about the Comparative Religions.⁵⁹ The next chapter will survey those Muslim studies of other religions throughout their intellectual history.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See further Aasi, *Understanding*, 50-59; and David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Isa al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3-50. Henceforth abbreviated as *Polemic*.

⁶⁰ As for works on Muslim groups see Abu Zahrah, *Tarikh al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyyah* (n.p.: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 19--), 2 vols. in 1; Sharif Yahya al-Amin, *Mu'jam al-Firqah al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Anwa', 1986), 290p.; 'Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi (d. 1039), *al-Farq bayna l-Firqah* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1985), 298 p.; Muhammad Jawad Mashkour, *Farhang Firqah Islami* (Mashhad, Iran: Islamic Research Foundation, 1989), 582 p.; and Muhammad Khalil al-Zayn, *Tarikh al-Firqah al-Islamiyyah min Khawarij wa Mu'tazilah wa Ashā'irah wa Shi'ah*, second ed. (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-'Alami al-Matbu'at, 1985) 240p.

Chapter One

MUSLIM ENCOUNTER WITH MEMBERS OF OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS PRIOR TO IBN AL-'ARABI

In this chapter, I will briefly present a historical account of the attitude of the Muslim, as represented by the *Mutakallims* and the *Šūfis*, towards other religious traditions. I will also make an attempt to outline the principle upon which they based their studies of Islām and other traditional religions. The way in which the *Šūfis* distinguished themselves from the *Mutakallims* on certain significant points will also be highlighted, as a background against which Ibn al-'Arabi's conception of religion will be examined.

We will divide these works into three main sections, in accordance with the religion that is given a primary treatment by the particular book: Christianity, Judaism, and Asian Religions. Those works are discussed according to the chronological period in which their authors lived. The works which are available to me will be thoroughly examined. However, occasionally, when primary sources are not available, secondary sources will be consulted.

A. Works on Christianity

1. The Second / Eighth Century

Although, according to Aḥmad Amin and Ghulam Haider Aasi,¹ the *Mutakallims* first engaged in disputations with Manichaeans and Dualists in Iraq, representatives of Islam had also encountered their Christian theologians from the early times. During the middle of the second/eighth century, for example, there were exchanges attributed to John of Damascus (d. 132/750), the debate between the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I with the caliph al-Mahdi, and the brief exchanges between the Shi'ite theologian Hishām Ibn al-Ḥakam and the Christian patriarch Bariha. The focus of all of these works is on the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity

¹ See Aasi, *Understanding*, 63, who quotes Aḥmad Amin, *Duḥa al-Islām*, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Misriyah, 1961), 1: 307ff.

and attempts to prove its inconsistency within the Godhead or Deitship or Divinity between Persons who are both distinct from one another and are also equal and identical.²

2. The Third / Ninth Century

It is also a well-known fact that around the year 200/815, polemics against adherents of other religious traditions constituted part of the discussion of '*ilm al-kalām*. Among the *mutakallims* involved were Dirār Ibn 'Amr; his pupil Ḥafṣ al-Fard; Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir, the founder of the Baghdad Mu'tazilites; his pupil 'Isā ibn Ṣubayḥ al-Murdār who wrote against Theodore Abū Qurrah; Abū Hudhayl al-'Allāf, the founder of the Basrah Mu'tazilites, who wrote against 'Ammār al-Naṣārā; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad al-Iskāfi; and Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām. Only a small number of fragments of their works survived.³

One of the most important works of this period is *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* by 'Alī al-Tabarī (d. 225 /855).⁴ The author, a Christian turned Muslim, claimed that the Christian teachings are distorted and inconsistent, particularly if we compare the Creed and the Gospels' statements about the figure of Christ. The author scrutinised the doctrine of the Trinity too. He also tried to prove that the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad was foretold in the Bible.

Another important work of the same title was written by Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ḥasanī al-Rassi (d. 246/860), a Zaidite theologian. This book concentrates on the absolute uniqueness of Allāh, the humanity of Jesus, and gives the evidence from the Gospels themselves that Christian teachings are distorted. The author, al-Rassi also argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is an inaccurate means of comprehending the real nature of God.⁵

² Thomas, *Polemic*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁴ This work has been edited by I. A. Khalife and W. Kutsch in *Melanges de la faculté orientale de l'Université St Joseph de Beyrouth*, xxxvi / 4 (1959), 115-148.

⁵ Thomas, *Polemic*, 32-35.

Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 250/864) also contributed one work entitled *al-Radd 'alā 'l-Naṣārā*. Here, the philosopher gave a short description of the Trinity and proved that that doctrine entails composition within the Godhead. Al-Kindi argued strongly that composition is, philosophically speaking, incompatible with divinity.⁶

Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's (d. 247/861) *Radd 'alā al-Thalāth Firaq min al-Naṣārā*⁷ is apparently more important than the other three treatises. This book is an attack against the Christians, particularly the sects of Nestorians, Monophysites (Jacobites), and the Chalcedonians (Melkites); on the issues of the doctrines of the Trinity and the uniting of the divine and human characteristics in the Messiah.

The *Risālah fī 'l-Radd 'alā 'l-Naṣārā* by Abū 'Amar al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868)⁸ also belongs to this century. In this treatise, al-Jāhīz characterized Christianity as a false faith as well as a social evil. He criticized the Jews, too.

3. The Fourth / Tenth Century

Around the end of the third century, Abū 'Alī Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Jubbā'i al-Mu'tazili (d. 303/915) wrote a treatise that focuses on the irrationality of the doctrine of Christianity. Another member of the Baghdad-Mu'tazili's school, Abū al-Qāsim 'Abdallāh Ibn Aḥmad al-Balkhī al-Ka'bī in his *Awā'il al-Adillah fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* also argued against Christianity. From the Ash'ari's school, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn Ismā'il wrote *al-Fuṣūl*, wherein he presented a description of Christianity, and its refutation based on the Bible itself. There was also a convert to Islām from Christianity by the name of al-Ḥasan Ibn Ayyūb who wrote *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā: Risālah ilā 'Alī Ibn Ayyūb* in which he accused Christianity of being a mere blind following (*taqlid*).⁹

⁶ Ibid., 35-37.

⁷ This work was partially translated in *ibid*.

⁸ This work was edited by J. Finkel in his *Three Essays of Abu Othman Amr ibn Bahr Al-Jahiz* (Cairo: Salafiyyah Press, 1926); and translated by him into English in *Journal of American Oriental Society*, xlvii (1927), 311-34.

⁹ Thomas, *Polemic*, 37-42; and Finkel's introduction to his translation, see above n.8.