



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Title: Jesus, Christians and Christianity in the Thought of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ

Author: Omar Alí-de-Unzaga

Source: *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 2 (900-1050)*, ed. David Thomas et al. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010); *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 14; pp. 306-311

Publication: E.J. Brill

Reproduced by kind permission from the publishers

Copyright permission has been sought from the aforementioned publisher.

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.

© 2011 The Institute of Ismaili Studies



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Jesus, Christians and Christianity in the Thought of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'
Omar Alī-de-Unzaga

[online version of the originally published article 'Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' ', in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 2 (900-1050)*, ed. David Thomas et al. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010); *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 14; pp. 306-311. Reproduced by kind permission from the publishers]

© E.J. Brill.

The pen-name Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' ('Brethren of Purity') was used by the otherwise anonymous authors of the compendium of 52 treatises on various disciplines entitled *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā' wa-khillān al-wafā'* ('Epistles of the brethren of purity and friends of loyalty'). The date of the Epistles is not known, but they must have been finished by the middle of the 10th century. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, writing in the 980s, attributes them to a group of intellectuals based in Basra in the mid-10th century, and he names them in his *Kitāb al-imtā'*. An alternative theory, held by Marquet and Hamdani, claims that the Epistles, or at least an embryonic form of them, were originated by the 9th-century leaders of the Isma'ili movement, who were hiding from Abbasid persecution in Syria.

The work is divided into 52 epistles (*rasā'il*), arranged into four sections (propaedeutical sciences, including mathematics, logic, music and ethics; natural sciences; sciences of the soul and the intellect; theological sciences). They total 1,900 pages in the 1957 Beirut edition. The Epistles are arguably one of the most interesting works in Arabic-Islamic culture regarding Christianity. The attitude towards Christianity of the Ikhwan al-Ṣafā' must be understood within the context of their respectful regard for all religions: for them, truth is one and it is contained as much in revelation as in philosophy (the aim of both being the same – the purification of the soul from matter), the differences between religions being merely on the level of practice and culture. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' understand prophethood as a series of adaptations of the same inner reality to changing times, with the idea of a progression, each revelation abrogating the ritual practice, but not the essence, of the previous one. Scattered throughout the *Rasā'il*, there are elements, references and quotations related to Christianity, which can be divided into three groups: the Gospels, Jesus, and Christians and their beliefs.

The Gospels: The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' accept the truth of the previous revealed books, and the Gospel takes a place of honor among these scriptures. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' encourage their



readers to read the Gospels, and the *Rasā'il* show a high level of awareness and accurate knowledge of them, and seem to display a preference for that of John. The same interpretive stance (which is closely related to Isma'ili *ta'wīl*) is applied to the Gospels as to the Qur'an and other scriptures. They suppose that 'the people of the Torah, the people of the Gospels and the people of the Qur'an' have different commandments, precepts and parables, but these are all symbolic allusions (*ishārāt*) to remind souls of what they have forgotten regarding their origin and their return.

There are numerous mentions of the Gospels in the *Rasā'il*, and there are also a number of quotations of Jesus' sayings; some are direct citations from the Gospels, others are reminiscent of them (including apocryphal gospels), yet others are more in line with the qur'anic account of Jesus, and finally other sayings are not traceable to any surviving Christian sources. Further, reciting a verse from the Gospels is said to be as protective in times of peril as reciting a verse from the Qur'an or the Torah.

Jesus: Jesus figures prominently in the *Rasā'il*, as one of the exemplars who embodied the views of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā': belief in the eternity of the soul and the pursuit of the purification of the soul from matter by detachment from the bodily realm. His life, teachings, death and crucifixion are all referred to in this connection. On some occasions, the authors also quote the sayings of Jesus alongside others, such as Muhammad and Socrates. Jesus' use of parables is seen in connection with the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā''s conception of religious language as being fundamentally figurative and allegorical. The life of Jesus basically follows the accounts in the Gospels, with his interaction with the disciples, his preaching, his miracles, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection all being narrated. By far, the most important element for the history of Muslim-Christian relations, is the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā''s interpretation of the crucifixion. Unlike most Muslim commentators, who are inclined to interpret Q 4:157 as meaning that someone other than Jesus was killed, the authors of the *Rasā'il* affirm that Jesus did die on the cross. However, they emphasise that it was only his human reality (*nāsūt*) that was killed. The deception into which the Jews fell, and to which the Qur'an refers, was to believe that they had really killed him. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' deny this, since Jesus' real, spiritual being (*lāhūt*) lived on, because the soul is eternal and cannot be killed. Their interpretation of the verse is thus one which is in harmony with their worldview and their conception of the soul. Two things are worth mentioning in this regard. First, that the terms *nāsūt* and *lāhūt* originate in the Christian debates on the divinity and humanity of the person of Christ, and their use in the *Rasā'il* probably betrays Nestorian influences. Second, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā''s reading coincides with other Isma'ili authors, among them Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, who had no quandaries about



accepting the crucifixion of the body, which in their view highlighted the supremacy of the spiritual over the physical realm. Two further points highlight the affinity that the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' feel with Jesus. The first is that he is portrayed as a spiritual healer, capable of curing sick souls of their blindness to spiritual realities, which is the stated aim of the *Rasā'il* themselves. Jesus is also portrayed as a missionary who counts on the help of his disciples; in the same way, the authors see themselves as a broad movement to harmonise religion and philosophy with a view to educating and advancing the spiritual status of their contemporaries.

Christians: The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' admire the attitude of Christian monks towards this world, abstaining from its pleasures and devoting their lives to the contemplation of the eternity of the soul. They exalt monasticism (*tarabhub*) as 'the Christian way', as much as they praise asceticism (*tazabhud*), *taṣawwuf*, the pondering of divine matters of the Socratic school, and the religion of the *ḥunafā'*. They describe the ideal person (a description containing a series of traits related to particular regions or groups), among other things, as 'Christian in conduct and Syrian in devotion'. There is no doubt that the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' knew Christians very well. Among the different Christian denominations, they cite the Nestorian (*Naṣṭūrī*), Jacobite (*Ya'qūbī*) and Melkite (*Malkānī*). They refer to the hierarchy of the church as being composed of monks (sing. *rāhib*), priests (*qissīs*), deacons (*shammās*) – in that order – archbishops (*mutran*) and patriarchs (*jāthilīq*), who are specified as people who should not be killed in warfare. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' were also familiar with the ambiance inside churches, which they describe as being 'lit with candle lamps, illuminated with images, filled with crosses', with 'priests and monks dressed in coarse wool habits', with belts tied around their waists, swinging censers with their hands, spreading incense perfumed 'with costus (*qusṭ*) and frankincense (*kundur*)', reciting words in praise of God and 'chanting them repeatedly'. This is all described as seen in a dream, in which 'a group of bishops (*asāqifā'*) appear 'with goblets full of wine', holding in cloths the sacramental loaves 'which they divided for the people and made them taste from that wine'.

Christian beliefs: Even though the general attitude towards Christians is largely positive, there are points of belief of which the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' disapprove. Thus, they reject the attitude of the monks who indulge in misery and suffering in their ascetic practices. Belief in the Trinity (or 'the third of three') is criticised in passing, as is the eating of pork and the worship of the cross. The *Rasā'il* also condemn those who believe that their God was the holy spirit whose *nāsūt* was crucified by the Jews.

The main significance of the *Rasā'il* for Christians-Muslim relations is the acceptance they show of the universality of the Gospels and the message of Jesus. Moreover, the interpretation



they give of the qur'anic verse on the crucifixion, in view of their philosophy and their acceptance of the actual historical death of Jesus, may prove to be fertile common ground between Christianity and Islam, especially in their more esoteric interpretations.

Bibliography

a) On Christianity in the *Rasā'il*:

- T. Lawson, *The crucifixion and the Qur'an. A study in the history of Muslim thought*, Oxford, 2009, esp. pp. 85-88
- I.R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists. An introduction to the thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā')*, Edinburgh, 19912, esp. pp. 53-71
- A. Bausani, 'La figura di Cristo nella enciclopedia musulmana del X secolo "Epistole dei Fratelli Sinceri"', in V. Lanternari, M. Massenzio and D. Sabbatucci (eds), *Scritti in memoria di Angelo Brelich promossi dall'Istituto di Studi storico-religiosi dell'Universita degli studi di Roma*, Rome, 1982, 33-43
- Y. Marquet, 'Les Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' et le Christianisme', *Islamochristiana* 8 (1982) 129-58
- L. Levonian, 'The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and Christ', *MW* 35 (1945) 27-31 (repr. in F. Sezgin [ed.], *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa khillān al-wafā' (2nd half 4th/10th cent.). Texts and Studies*, 2 vols, Frankfurt am Main, 1999)
- E.E. Elder, 'The crucifixion in the Koran', *MW* 13 (1923) 242-58

b) On the *Rasā'il*

Primary

- Al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-imtā' wa l-mu'ānasa*, ed. A. Amīn and A. al-Zayn, 3 vols in 1, Cairo, 1939-44, ii, pp. 3-11
- 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Tatḥbīt*, pp. 610-11

Secondary

- N. El-Bizri (ed.), *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and their Rasā'il. An introduction*, Oxford, 2008
- G. de Callatay, *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. A brotherhood of idealists on the fringe of orthodox Islam*, Oxford, 2005
- Y. Marquet, *La philosophie des Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1999
- I. Netton, 'The Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā')', in S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds), *History of Islamic philosophy*, London, 1996, pp. 222-30
- I. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists. An introduction to the thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā')*, London, 1982



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

A. Bausani, *L'enciclopedia dei fratelli della purità. Riassunto, con introduzione e breve commento, dei 52 trattati o epistole degli Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'*, Naples, 1978

A. Awa, *L'esprit critique des 'Frères de la Pureté', Encyclopédistes arabes du IV/ Xe siècle*, Beirut, 1948

H.F. Hamdani, 'A compendium of Ismā'īlī esoterics', *Islamic Culture* 2 (1937) 210-20

There are also numerous studies in Arabic.

Manuscripts

There are more than a hundred catalogued MSS of the *Rasā'il*.

The oldest dated MS is Istanbul, Atif Efendi Library – 1681 (1182; see I.K. Poonawala, 'Why we need an Arabic critical edition with an annotated English translation of the *Rasā'il* Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'', in El-Bizri, *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and their Rasā'il*, 33-57)

For other MSS see http://www.musicologie.org/publirem/jmw/notices/ikhwan_alSafa.html

J.-M. Warszawski, *Dictionnaire des écrits sur la musique*, 2 vols, Berne, 2005

Editions & Translations

Most epistles have been translated into a variety of languages, but there is no comprehensive translation.

Currently there are five uncritical editions, very similar to each other:

ed. 'Ā. Tāmir, Beirut, Dār al-Nashr al-Jāmi'iyya, 1995

Qum, Maktab al-Ilām al-Islāmī, 1985

ed. B. al-Bustānī, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1957

ed. K.D. al-Ziriklī, Cairo, Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1928

ed. N.D. al-Kutubī, Bombay, Maṭba' Nukhbat al-Akhhār, 1888

A complete new critical edition and English trans. of the *Rasā'il* is being published by Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies as *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity Series*.