CHAPTER 6

Between Hellenism, Islam, and Christianity: Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and His Controversies with Contemporary Muʿtazilite Theologians as Reported by the Ashʿarite Theologian and Philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī

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Someone who could look at the human condition and suppose that we’re doing about as well as could be expected must have a very pessimistic view of human nature. The shared assumption of early Christian thinkers was that a good and wise God made human nature far better than it appears at present, but that something went terribly wrong at the dawn of history. Christ entered the world of space and time to undo the damage.¹

This common assumption of early Christianity was also shared, in a way or another, by a number of late-antique Christian and non-Christian authors, especially Neoplatonists of Christian obedience, Manicheans, and thinkers imbued with Hermetic ideas. For all of them, philosophy and religion were primarily concerned with salvation, whatever the specific meaning of it. Among these authors also was a philosopher of the Islamic period, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d. 312/925), the physician known to the Medieval Latin world as Rhazes.² This simple fact brings the chronology commonly received among Arabic philosophy scholars into question as well as the relevance of the “Sitz-im-Leben” methodology of recent studies. I will come back to this chronological problem in the conclusion.

Abū Bakr was never especially known for his concern about salvation and the underlying assumption of God’s goodness. Yet his motto, as reported by his fellow countryman, the Ashʿarite theologian and Avicennian philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 605/1209),³ was that God is purely ṭahīm karīm, “merciful-benevolent,” and as such would never do anything that could result

¹ Rogers, Anselm on freedom 131, my emphasis.
² Henceforth: Abū Bakr. See e.g., Pines, Al-Rāzī.
³ Henceforth: Fakhr al-Dīn. See e.g., Shihadeh, The teleological ethics 4 ff. The reference to the relevant work of Fakhr al-Dīn is found in the next page.
in harm inflicted on human beings or living beings in general, including animals. Starting from this fundamental assumption, Abū Bakr was in a similar position to that of most early Christian theologians, for instance Origen and the Origenists, as regards the explanation of the origin of human beings' subjection to sinful delusions and physical pains. From his long controversy with a Muʿtazilite theologian called Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī, another Persian thinker, nicknamed Kaʾbī (d. 321/933), it appears that Abū Bakr's motto of God's pure goodness put him at odds with Islamic theology as a whole and, much more relevantly, with the Quran itself and its specific insistence on God's omnipotence. Abū Bakr would show Kaʾbī that Muslim theologians, in order to comply with the Quran, either have to admit of God's being responsible for the existence of evil, or put a drastic limit on His omnipotence, or altogether renounce reasoning out Quranic tenets. An omnipotent God such as the one described in the Quran can only be violent in some way. And violence is evil. All in all, reason is the only grounds to reach truth. In this regard, violence is destructive of reason and its truth-verification ability, which itself relies on God's goodness. Between reason and violence, a choice must be made. One cannot retain both. A rational justification of violence against living beings is, by definition, impossible. Accordingly, a revelation-based justification of violence makes religion irrational. So Abū Bakr thought, aiming at all “prophetic" religions, that is, aiming at all religions viewed by the Quran as "prophetic." Abū Bakr was in this regard, both and by no means in a contradictory way, the heir of late-antique Hellenic religious thought and a kind of liberal thinker before the liberal foundational myth of religious violence was forged in the aftermath of the so-called Wars of Religion at the end of the seventeenth century.

Abū Bakr's portrait which emerges from the newly discovered textual evidence I am referring to is in itself not completely new. That he believed “prophetic" religions inevitably lead their adherents to wage wars against each other was known thanks to one long fragment of a conversation he had with the Ismāʿīli theologian Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 321–2/933–4). The self-sufficiency

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4 Henceforth: Kaʾbī. See van Ess, Abūl-Qāsem Kaʾbī. For the reference of preserved fragments of his Book on the principles of proofs, see below 183.
5 See Cavanaugh, The myth of religious violence 4: “... in what are called 'Western' societies, the attempt to create a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state. The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject.”
6 See below: Text 14. In order to limit the size of this article, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's Aʿlām al-nubuwāwā (“Proofs of prophecy”), also called Refutation of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī the heretic, is examined elsewhere.