CHAPTER 7

Theology as a Rational Science: Aristotelian Philosophy, the Christian Trinity and Islamic Monotheism in the Thought of Yahyā ibn ‘Adī

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The courts, observatories and hospitals, the libraries and the book markets in fourth-/tenth-century Baghdad formed the stages of theological and philosophical discussions in an open society. Arabs and Iranians, Muslims, Christians, Jews and what was left in Mesopotamia of the pagan “Sabians” met for instruction, competed for scholarly reputation and social rank, and measured up in fierce debate. Since the foundation of Islam on the soil of the ancient civilizations of Syria and Mesopotamia, Muslims had been the disciples of Christian physicians and Iranian astrologers, and philosophers from all over the Hellenized Orient—the polyglot community of connoisseurs of the languages of ancient learning, Greek and Aramaic, and the disciplines of the encyclopedia of the sciences, and in their turn, Christians, Jews and Sabians served at the Arabic Islamic courts as astrologers, physicians and secretaries. The scholars had a common language: the language of the Greek sciences and the methodology of Euclidean mathematics and Aristotelian logic. In the process of transmitting, translating and appropriating this heritage in Arabic Islamic civilization, the monophysite Christian Yahyā ibn ‘Adī was one of the most prominent and influential participants.¹

¹ For the biography and bibliography of Yahyā ibn ‘Adī, see Endress, The works; idem, GGP h-Islam 301–24. New texts of Ibn ‘Adī, previously believed to be lost, were found in a Tehran manuscript and described by Wisnovsky, New philosophical texts; for the works of Christian theology and Christian-Muslim apologetic, see Graf, GCAL 11, 233–49.
Būyids, had risen to the emirate and usurped actual power in Western Iran and, finally, in Baghdad. While as Shiʿites, they would side with the claims of the ʿAlid Imāms, they did nevertheless recognize the Abbasid Caliph; but for no other purpose than to have him confer upon them the cloak of legitimacy in face of the institutions of law and administration. Along with the political coexistence of Sunnite and Shiʿite Islam, two worlds united in culture and intellectual life, the Sasanian-Persian and the Muslim Arab, Great King and Caliph. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), one of the great masters of Arabic prose, and a dedicated observant and belligerent participant in the religious, literary and philosophical circles of Baghdad, has described for us the intellectual life of this time and provided portraits of the protagonists, among them his first teacher in philosophy, Yahyā ibn ᾞdī:

Yaḥyā ibn ᾞdī was a shaykh gentle and meek in his nature. As a translator, he was inaccurate, and a bad stylist. But he was eager to engage in the discussion of all manner of disputed questions. In his majlis [“circle” of discussion, “seminar”], he united most of the scholars of this group [viz., the group of Ibn ᾞdī’s Muslim follower, Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī]. In metaphysics, he did not gain success, but was exhausted by it and lost in its vastness, deeming embarrassing even what is evident, let alone its subtleties. But his majlis was blessed.2

According to his biographers, Yaḥyā ibn ᾞdī was born in 280–1/893–4 in Tikrit in northern Iraq and died on 21 Dhū l-Qaʿda 363/13 August 974, at the age of 81. The circle whose members were described by al-Tawḥīdī around 374/984 kept a respectful memory of their revered teacher, the master of Aristotelian logic (raʾīs al-manṭiq) after his own master, the Nestorian Abū Bishr Mattā (Matthew) ibn Yūnus. With Mattā already, Muslims as well as Christians had studied the Organon of logic. The first Arabic version of the Posterior analytics, the centerpiece of logic, was Mattā’s achievement, and he and his pupils proudly presented the teachings of the “Master of Logic,” made available as complete and authentic as never before. Philosophy was being emancipated from the practical arts and sciences: in leading the way to ultimate happiness, philosophy was the ultimate end of rational activity. In assured arrogance, Mattā’s Christian and Muslim disciples played off their universal logic against the conventional grammar, their universal metaphysics against the contingency of religious symbols and traditions.

2 Al-Tawḥīdī, Al-Imtāʿ1, 37.