CHAPTER 39

"Roads to Paradise" in *Risālat al-ghufrān* of the Arab Thinker al-Maʿarrī

Mahmoud Hegazi

Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1057) was one of the most important figures in the history of Arabic literature.1 His concept of religion, however, was a matter of dispute in classical Arabic biographical works because of some isolated critical verses. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1257) wrote in his *Mirāt al-zamān* (The mirror of the age) a detailed biography of al-Maʿarrī, in which some skeptical statements and several verses about his religious belief were given.2 Ibn al-Jawzī’s judgment about al-Maʿarrī refers to his uncertain belief, doubts, and some Brahmanical, Manichean, and atheistic points of view, as expressed in a few of his verses. It is noteworthy that al-Maʿarrī’s *Risālat al-ghufrān* (The epistle of forgiveness)3 was not mentioned in that text.4 In this connection, the Arab historian Ibn al-ʿAdīm (d. 660/1262) wrote his book *al-Inṣāf* (The just treatment).5 In modern studies such as that of the Egyptian scholar Shawqī Ḍayf an evaluation has been attempted through al-Maʿarrī’s poetic works.6 Moreover, the Egyptian scholar Ḥāmid ʿAbd al-Majīd, who has published many works of al-Maʿarrī, wrote on this topic in his critical edition of *Sharḥ al-mukhtār min Luzūmiyyāt Abī l-ʿAlāʾ* (The explanation of selections from Abū l-ʿAlāʾ’s “Luzūmiyyāt”).7

This paper aims to analyze the *Risālat al-ghufrān* in respect of views relevant to the theme “roads to paradise.” There are several writings in Arabic-
Islamic culture on the life in the hereafter from various points of view. The importance of the Risālat al-ghufrān in this regard lies in its various dialogues in paradise and in hell about creeds and deeds in life, which lead to specific consequences in the hereafter.8

The Risālat al-ghufrān was written by al-Maʿarrī as a response to the Risāla of his friend Ibn al-Qāriḥ. Al-Maʿarrī described it as preaching the acceptance of the Islamic sharīʿa and blaming those who deviate from a major principle (aṣl), or who diverge widely from a minor aspect of Islamic law (139).9

The terms used in the Risālat al-ghufrān for forgiveness and mercy are ghufrān and maghfira (177, 185, 251, 286, 218). These are explained as al-khalāṣ min al-nār (178), i.e., freedom from hell. These are closely related to rahmat Allāh (the mercy of God, 219), rahmat rabbinā (our Lord’s mercy, 182), or raḥma dāʾima (everlasting mercy, 344). Forgiveness is a consequent result of good manners, characterized as mujib lil-rahma (185, literally “leading to forgiveness”). The main concepts of forgiveness and mercy are explained in Risālat al-ghufrān with the support of many Quranic verses: one ought not despair of God’s mercy and should be sure that God forgives all wrong deeds. God, however, does not forgive polytheism even though other mistakes/sins may be forgiven. Only kuffār (unbelievers) have no hope of God’s mercy. In this context the repentance (tawba) of any person combined with shafāʿa (intercession) leads to forgiveness (203, 228, 447, cf. Q 39:53; 4:116; 7:87).

Many terms are in diametric opposition, such as those pertaining to earthly life on the one hand and the life in the hereafter on the other, such as the days of life (ayyām al-ḥayāt) on the one side and eternity (baqāʾ, al-taʾbīd, and al-khulūd, 185, 186, 296) on the other. Earthly life has many names, the most frequent are al-dār al-ʿājila (201, 254, 260, 268, 279, 286, 288, 293, 338), al-fāniya (153, 175, 191, 231, 288, 257, 355), al-khādiʿa (164, 216, 280, 358), and al-dhāhiba (251, 257, 280, 293), meaning that life is short, vanishing, misleading, and fleeting. Several words for this concept are used only once: al-dār al-mākira, al-gharūra, and al-sākhira (362, 358, 147, 181) to mean the cunning, the deceptive, and the mocker, and also al-sābiqa, al-khāliya, and al-māḍiya (181, 293, 395) to mean the last and previous. Earthly life is also dār al-shaqwa (241), i.e., the home of hardship. These words are used many times in combination with the noun al-dār or al-dunyā, so al-dār al-fāniya or al-dunyā al-fāniya.

---

8 It is not our aim here to select specific items that are parallel to that in other creeds, such as Greek mythology or the Brahmanic religion, rather it is to know al-Maʿarrī’s views through a synchronic approach.

9 All numbers given in brackets designate pages of the Risālat al-ghufrān.