

BOOK REVIEWS

Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1999), ix+261 pp, HB, ISBN 90 04 11374 6

Denoting the period around the third-fourth century after the *hijrah* (migration) of the Prophet of Islam to Madinah as “medieval”, “early medieval Islam” and “early Islam”—all treated as near synonyms—this book explores “two paradoxes” of this era: (i) the relative marginal position accorded to two “freethinkers” of this period; and (ii) the vehemence with which Muslim thinkers supposedly attacked freethinking even though this was a “marginal and short-lived” phenomenon of the medieval Islam.

The two protagonists of Sarah Stroumsa’s book are Abū Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Ishāq ibn al-Rāwandī (b. 205/815) and Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Zakariyā’ al-Rāzī (b. 251/865). Given the contemporary social and political realities, the subject matter of this book is, indeed, explosive, and given the fact that the two original texts related to this inquiry have not survived intact, “the likelihood of misinterpretation becomes almost a certainty”, as Stroumsa herself informs us in her Preface. Yet, she then puts herself on the line, setting out with a deliberate care worthy of a medievalist, only to let it be blown to pieces as the minefields around her inquiry start to explode due to ambitious over-arching definitions and concepts.

To begin with, the borrowing of the key term of her title—freethinking—from early modern European intellectual history opens the question of the legitimacy of her paradoxes, but this is a choice that Stroumsa has consciously made and justified—in her own manner, that is. The task of the critic, then, is to examine the justification, not the choice. For this, one has to first examine her definition of “freethinking”, as applied to medieval Islam. “I suggest we limit the application of the term ‘freethinkers’ in early Islam to those Muslim intellectuals who, in opposition to other heretics, did not adhere to any scriptural religion” (p. 8). According to her working definitions, “one cannot really consider [these freethinkers] to have

been ‘Muslim heretics,’ since they did not offer a new, heretical, interpretation of Islam”. Rather, it was the very message of Islam, its very foundations—The Qur’ān and the Prophet—which they rejected” (p. 8).

Having defined her term as well as what it does not denote, Stroumsa emphatically rejects any dilution of her definition and categorically labels as misleading all usages of this term which include those critically-minded intellectuals who accepted the presuppositions of the monotheistic religions; she only allows this term to be used for those who did not accept these presuppositions. Thus, even before she begins her own inquiry, she feels the need to weed out numerous other usages of the term and isolate her protagonists from all others who might stand next to them. Her “freethinkers” are not “atheists”, she insists; it would be incorrect to call them atheists because “their criticism of religion never included the negation of God’s existence. What they did deny was the scriptural religion’s idea of God, His epithets, and His interference in the world through revelation” (p. 8).

They can also not be called “deists” in the sense in which this term is used in modern European thought, she contends, because, although

the thinkers who are the subject of the present book did indeed have some traits in common with the deists; like them, they believed that natural reason was sufficient to attain truth; like them, they believed in the natural laws and science which should be the only guide to human conduct; and like them, they regarded with suspicion all established religions. But other central components of deism, and primarily the belief in the goodness of divine providence, were missing in the thought of some of the freethinkers of Islam. In the search for a term that will identify the common traits of these people, ‘deists’ thus seems unsuitable (p. 9).

They cannot also be called “materialists”, she informs us, for the same reasons. Thus, having weeded out the extraneous matter, she reaffirms that her term “freethinkers” only denotes “the advocates of autonomous reflection on the major metaphysical and human issues, with no commitment to the monotheist tradition” (p. 9); a little later, she rephrases her definition: “the term ‘freethinking’ is used here solely to denote the rejection of the authority of both revelation and of the revealed religions” (p. 9). But in spite of her consideration that the precise meaning of the term is essential for her project, there appears an internal inconsistency in her variously stated definitions when she

comes to examine the phenomenon of freethinking in Islam. Here, she makes two self-contradictory claims: (i) this phenomenon entailed a total rejection of prophecy; and (ii) it rejected all but one manifestation of prophecy—the initial, primal mode that cannot be abrogated by a succession of prophets; hence, in this second mode, freethinking involved rejection of succession of prophets, not of prophecy.

This inconsistency notwithstanding, she rejects numerous other contemporary usages of this term by such scholars as Dominique Urvoy, Majid Fakhry, and Josef van Ess, and makes her two protagonists stand alone in the spotlight. She disagrees with Fakhry, for instance, in his categorization which puts al-Nazzām (d. 845) and al-Rāzī “on the same footing” (p. 11); with H. S. Nyberg, who lumped ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd and Ibn al-Rāwandī together; and with a host of other scholars—Kraus, Kraemer, Abrahamov, Goodman, Calder—anyone who diluted the definition to include independent thinkers of classical Islam in this category. Thus, so far as she is concerned, Ibn al-Muqaffa‘, Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq, Abū’l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī do not qualify for the distinction of being “freethinkers”, although she does clarify that Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Rāzī were not the only “freethinkers”, she yet insists that the number of freethinkers was extremely small, without telling us who else could stand next to her protagonists.

As soon as she finishes with the task of creating her watertight compartment to hold her freethinkers, Stroumsa’s whole project becomes a spider’s web: having incessantly worked to establish the boundaries of her framework, she becomes trapped in it. The very first objection that can be raised is none other than her own objection against Majid Fakhry’s categorization: How can one lump two individuals as different as Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī in this watertight compartment? Believing in her own construction with a single minded tenacity, Stroumsa foresees this objection to her framework of inquiry and attempts to justify it. She acknowledges enormous “difference in their intellectual backgrounds and tastes”, but insists on keeping her two “freethinkers” together on the premise that “they had in common a vociferous rejection of all religions based on revelation”, a rejection founded “on the assumption that the human intellect should be, and indeed is, a sufficient source for all knowledge” (p. 13).

Whether or not one can lump together Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Rāzī

may not be the most important issue here, however, because the main problem is the fact that the whole edifice of Stroumsa's daring enterprise rests on two fragmentary texts, the *K. al-Zumurrud* (*B. of the Emerald*) of Ibn al-Rāwandī and *K. Makhārīq al-anbiyā'* (*The Trickery of the Prophets*) of al-Rāzī, which she needed to reconstruct from a host of secondary, often mutually contradictory, sources. But before launching into this enormously difficult task, she presents "the Muslim dogma which is the backdrop to freethinking in Islam" in the first chapter of her book, which is divided into two parts; the first part consists of five chapters which deal with the phenomena of freethinking in medieval Islam; the last three chapters, constituting the second part of the book, explore its repercussions in Islamic thought.

In order to reconstruct the two salient texts of her "freethinkers" in the religious-historical context in which they lived, Stroumsa first outlines the central position of prophecy in Islam in her first chapter, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Touchstone of Muslim Prophetology". As soon as she begins, one can sense a deliberate sense of steering the discourse toward a peculiar goal through selective use of source material. Even the first sentence is problematic: "The basic Islamic position toward other religions is reflected in the two 'testimonies' (*al-Shahādatayn*) which constitute the Muslim declaration of faith: the belief in the unity of God and the belief in the prophecy of Muḥammad" (p.21). How does this statement reflect Islamic position toward *other* religions? It can only be said to have an indirect connection with the basic Islamic position toward other religions outlined in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān constructs a coherent account of the prophetic chain, initiating with Adam and ending with Muḥammad. It makes use of historical data connected with the mission of these prophets in order to reaffirm the centrality of its message, Unicity of God. But Stroumsa does not refer to any of this; instead, she begins her study on a linear historical plane, using selected source material from Arabic literature.

It is, however, with her reconstruction of the two primary texts of her protagonists—*The Book of the Emerald* and *The Trickery of the Prophets*—in the second and the third chapters of her book that her whole project starts to fall flat due to internal contradictions in her source material as well as in her own usage of these highly complex and problematic texts. Since the extant material does not present the

position of her two freethinkers in a coherent manner and since this material is full of mutually exclusive claims, extrapolations, additions, deletions and distortions that make these two “freethinkers” schizophrenic personalities who devote all their strengths to espouse one position only to dismantle it as soon as it has been proclaimed, Stroumsa’s attempt to present their peculiar “freethinking” as a coherent, thoroughgoing affair becomes fraught with internal inconsistencies. This renders her task of making sense of this diverse source material extremely challenging. In her self-assumed task of imparting coherence to the self-contradictory statements of her protagonists, she accepts and rejects historical data arbitrarily. Thus, against Paul Kraus, she equates the historical Indian Brahmins with Ibn al-Rāwandī’s *Brāhima*, who accept and reject prophecy at the same time, just as she describes the Sabeans of Harrān as a community believing in messengers, but messengers who, “on closer examination...do not fit exactly the biblical or Qur’ānic notion of a succession of prophets” (p. 165).

The zeal with which Stroumsa has constructed her freethinkers is then transferred to the second part of her book in which she examines their repercussions in Islamic thought. If one were to believe her construction, it would appear that the impact of her freethinkers infiltrated the whole spectrum of Islamic thought; no one—from ṣūfīs to philosophers—seems to have remained unaffected by them. She even makes al-Ghazālī’s self-reflection “reminiscent of that of the freethinkers” (p. 169) and misreads autobiographical account of his epistemological dilemma as evoking “the familiar theme of the equivalence of religions (*takāfu’ al-adyān*)” by claiming that al-Ghazālī “struggles to counter this dangerous notion with a belief that enjoys perfect certainty” (p. 169). Her claim is based on a passage from *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, in which, according to Stroumsa “Ghazālī recycles the argumentation of the freethinkers against the prophets’ miracles.... like the freethinkers, Ghazālī refuses to accept the evidentiary power of miracles” (p. 170).

Anyone familiar with al-Ghazālī would find this juxtaposition highly problematic. The quest for certainty underlying al-Ghazālī’s so-called spiritual crisis, so poignantly narrated in his *al-Munqidh*, has absolutely nothing to do with the impact of freethinkers and there is no reference to the “familiar theme of the equivalence of religions (*takāfu’ al-adyān*)” in *al-Munqidh*; rather, al-Ghazālī is systematically

leading his readers to the inner processes that led him to examine the epistemological foundation of certain knowledge. Furthermore, the immediate reference to the quoted passage, which Stroumsa does not mention, is to a saying of the Prophet—upon whom al-Ghazālī invokes God’s blessings and peace, every time he mentions him, thus indicating his deep belief and respect in Prophets, as opposed to Stroumsa’s freethinkers. This *ḥadīth*, which al-Ghazālī quotes, says: “Every child is born endowed with the *fiṭrah*, then his parents make him Jew or Christian or Magian”. He then goes on to explain: “I felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original *fiṭrah*, and the true meaning of the beliefs arising from blind imitation (*taqlīd*) of parents and teachers...So, I said to myself: what I seek is the knowledge of true meaning of things (*al-‘ilm bi ḥaqā’iq al-‘amūr*), therefore I must begin by inquiring into the true nature of knowledge”.¹ It is in this context that al-Ghazālī cites the arithmetical example quoted by Stroumsa and it has nothing to do with the impact of freethinkers. Likewise, her passing remark about the mystical experience of ṣūfis posing a threat to the mission of the prophets (p. 169) is totally unsubstantiated.

What remains, then, is a confusing account of “freethinking” and its impact on Islamic thought, a muddle produced by reading into the classical Islamic texts what Stroumsa wants to read, against all other scholars, as if she herself aspires to do what her protagonists supposedly did: freethinking. Yet, one cannot be a free thinker in vacuum; after all, there is a solid core of literature with its power of influence from which no mind can remain detached. All attempts to ignore this historical contingency merely produce illusive flights of self-delusion that may convince one that he or she is a freethinker. Such fanciful flights may lead one to believe in one’s own conclusions, but they remain a personal tragedy, rather than a generally accepted perception. In her “Conclusion”, Stroumsa extends her freethinking to the poetry of Jalāl al Dīn Rūmī, whose poetic expression of mystical states are construed as blunt expressions of freethinking!

All that can be said about the book’s merit is its scattered testimony to, and a fragmentary account of, the intellectual effervescence of that era of Islamic thought during which so many currents were flowing

1. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (Beirut: Mū’assah al-kitāb al-thaqāfiyah, 3rd ed., 1991), p. 18.

through its fabric—a period that deserves to be studied in much more detail and in its proper context; Stroumsa's book adds only a few disjointed strands to our understanding of that century.

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