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An Early Doctrinal Controversy in the Iranian School of Isma'ili Thought and Its Implications*

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Abstract

The controversy stemmed from Nasafi's *Ketāb al-Mahsul*, wherein he introduced a pre-Fārābian version of Neo-Platonism into Isma'ili cosmology, adapting it to Shi'i-Isma'ili doctrines. It provoked a sharp reaction among the Isma'ili missionaries of Khorasan. Rāzi, an accomplished theologian and Nasafi's contemporary, wrote his *Ketāb al-Eslāh* mending Nasafi's errors. This led Sejestāni to defend his teacher Nasafi's views and rebut Razi's arguments in his *Ketāb al-Nosra*. Kermāni tried to reconcile the debate from a vantage point of post-Fārābian philosophy in his *Ketāb al-Riāz*. The controversy demonstrates that even a difference of opinion concerning major doctrinal issues was tolerated and resolved by scholarly debate.

Keywords

da'wa, *ta'wil*, *zāher*, *bāten*, *nāteq*, *qā'em*, *dawr*, Gnostic myth, Neo-Platonism, *tawhid*, *ebdā'*, *mobde'*

The Isma'ili movement before the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa in 297/909 was clandestine. It appeared on the historical stage shortly after the disappearance of the twelfth Shi'i imam in 260/874 when its activities are reported by Nawbakhti and Qommi, who seem to be well-informed contemporary writers describing the situation of the Isma'ilis prior to the year 286/899 when a split occurred in the movement.¹ During the last decades of the ninth century it emerged as a dynamic revolutionary organization conducting intensive religio-political missionary activities (*da'wa*) covertly or overtly in various parts of the Abbasid Empire. These activities were led

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¹ Much of the forward movement of Isma'ili history can be viewed in terms of the creative ferment that arose either from conflicts within the Isma'ili factions over various issues, such as doctrine and strategies to be adopted, or from encounters between Isma'ilis and non-Isma'ilis.

through a network of very talented and learned missionaries (*do'āt* pl. of *dā'i*) who were well versed in the art of disputation (*kalām*) and leadership qualities.² The missionaries were secretly organized and controlled by a central leadership; they were united in their common objective of supplanting the ruling Sunni dynasty with a Shi'i imamate in the name of the awaited Mahdi/Qā'em who would rise from the progeny of the Messenger of God and fill the earth with justice and equity.³ Each mission operated with a considerable degree of flexibility depending on the local conditions and prevailing political situation in the given region.

Modern scholars of Isma'ili studies have identified three major centers of Isma'ili missionary activities that have left distinct imprints on the development of early Isma'ili thought. Following the consolidation of the Fatimid dynasty by the fourth caliph-imam al-Mo'ezz le-Din Allāh (341-65/953-75), all three schools converged on a common ground in their efforts to revamp the entire system of thought into a unified whole under the leadership of the Fatimids.

The first and the oldest school was from the Yemen. The Yemeni mission dates back to the year 268/881 when two Isma'ili missionaries, Ebn Hawshab and his companion 'Ali b. Fazl, succeeded in establishing a political power base there. Within a few years all of Yemen was conquered in the name of the awaited Mahdi. Because of his dazzling military success, Ebn Hawshab was later given the honorific title Mansur al-Yaman (the Conqueror of Yemen; No'mān, 2-26, tr. 20-44; Hamdāni, 27-48). Some fragments of Mansur al-Yaman's writings have survived and they provide evidence of early Isma'ili teachings (Poonawala 1977, 34). However, the main representative of this school is the latter's son Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman, who is recognized for his allegorical interpretations of the stories of the major law-announcing prophets (*notaqā'*) and esoteric interpretations (*ta'wil*) of the relevant Koranic verses (for more, see *idem*, 70-5).

The second school was from North Africa. The Isma'ili mission there was founded by Abu 'Abd-Allāh al-Shi'i in 280/893. A glimpse of his teachings can be observed in Qāzi No'mān's *Eftetāh al-dā'wa* (The Beginning of the Mission) which contains the oldest and most detailed account of al-Shi'i's

² The Isma'ilis refer to their movement as *dā'wa* (mission) or *dā'wa hādīa* (the rightly guiding mission), while the term *dā'i* is used for an authorized representative of the *dā'wa*, i.e., a missionary responsible for spreading the Isma'ili religion and winning converts. The *dā'wa* is organized with an elaborate hierarchy of ranks under the imam, often called *hodud al-dā'wa*.

³ For an overall view of the pre-Fatimid Isma'ili movement, see Poonawala 1977, 5-8; Daftary 2007, 87-136.

activities (No'mān, 30ff, tr. 45ff). Ebn Haytham, another Isma'ili missionary from North Africa, recorded in his *Ketāb al-Monāzarāt* (The Book of Debates) the details of his meetings and conversation with two Isma'ili leaders, namely, Abu 'Abd-Allāh al-Shi'i and his elder brother Abu'l-'Abbās Mohammad, who spearheaded the movement and established the Fatimid dynasty (see Madlung and Walker). The most prominent representative of this school is Qāzi No'mān, who served the first four Fatimid caliph-imams for almost half a century. He is the founder of the Isma'ili school of jurisprudence and an official historian of the ruling dynasty (for details, see Poonawala 1977, 48-68; idem 1996). It should be noted that the origins of the Isma'ili movement, both in Yemen and North Africa, is well documented in Isma'ili and non-Isma'ili sources. However, for the Iranian school of Isma'ili thought, our information is derived from non-Isma'ili sources. All reports about the beginning of the Isma'ili mission in Iran, especially in Khorasan and Transoxiana, that have reached us, such as Ebn al-Nadim's *Ketāb al-Fehrest* (the Catalog [of Books]), Bostī's refutation of the Isma'ilis, Baghdādī's *al-Farq bayn al-feraq* (Discrimination between the Sects), Tha'ālebi's *Ādāb al-moluk* (Manual for the Kings), and Nezām al-Molk's *Siar al-moluk* or *Sīāsāt-nāma* (the Book of Government or Rules for Kings), originate from Ebn Rezām. The latter describes the beginning of the Isma'ili mission in Khorasan subsequent to the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa.

Ebn Rezām lived in the early decades of the fourth/tenth century. He wrote an extremely hostile anti-Isma'ili tract entitled *Ketāb al-Radd 'alā'l-Esmā'iliya* (Refutation of the Isma'ilis), also called *Naqd 'alā'l-Esmā'iliya* (Censure of the Isma'ilis), during the second quarter of the tenth century at a time when Fatimid rule was being consolidated by the fourth caliph al-Mo'ezz le-Din-Allāh across North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea, while Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, was under the firm control of the Shi'i Buyid dynasty. Ebn Rezām's main contention in the aforementioned tract was that the alleged founder of the Isma'ili movement, and by implication the founder of the Fatimid dynasty, was a diabolical non-'Alid bent on destroying Islam from within (for older sources, see Daftary 2007, 99, 101ff, 107).

I have discussed the reliability of those non-Isma'ili sources for the Iranian school of Isma'ili thought at length in the introduction to my critical edition of Sejestāni's *Ketāb al-Maqālid al-malakutiya* (The Book of the Keys to the Kingdom); hence there is no need to elaborate it here (Sejestāni, *Maqālid*, 8-30). Suffice it to say that I concluded my critical analysis of the sources by stating that Hamid al-Din Kermāni (d. after 411/1021), the chief *dā'i* during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Hākem be-Amr-Allāh (r. 386-411/996-1021), who came from the eastern region and was well informed about Isma'ili

missionary activities in that part of the Islamic world, claimed the three main representatives of this school, namely, Nasafi, Rāzi, and Sejestāni, for the Isma'ili *da'wa*. Moreover, he devoted his last work, entitled *Ketāb al-Riāz* (The Book of the Meadow), to reconcile the divergent views of his predecessors (Kermāni, 49f). In the introduction to *Ketāb al-Maqālid*, I also demonstrated that the mission in Khorasan was established during the pre-Fatimid period of Isma'ili activities. Subsequently, this mission, as was the case with the mission of Hamdān and Qarmat in the vicinity of Kufa, drifted away from the main stream of Isma'ili thought. However, the fact remains that Sejestāni, the youngest of the three above mentioned Isma'ili thinkers, reconciled himself with the ruling Fatimids in North Africa and accepted them as deputies of the awaiting *Qā'em* (Sejestāni, *Eftekhār*, 175).

The orientation of the Iranian *da'wa*, in sharp contrast to the Yemeni and North African missions, was intellectual and philosophical in trying to reach out and convert the upper echelons of the ruling establishment, viz., the courtiers, the bureaucrats and ultimately the rulers themselves. The reason behind this strategy was to secure a court shield so that they could conduct their missionary activities overtly without the apprehension of the ruling authorities. Historical records suggest that the mission had partial success at the Samanid court. However, due to court intrigue and frequent interventions by the Turkish military commanders who were staunch supporters of Sunni Islam, many Isma'ili missionary activities were ruthlessly suppressed and a large number of Isma'ilis were massacred.⁴

It is certain that the doctrine of the imamate and the technique of the allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) of the Koran and the *shari'a* (canon law of Islam) were the two fundamental elements in the early Isma'ili doctrine, but they did not comprise the entire doctrinal framework. Hence, the question arises: what was the cosmogony or cosmology of the early Isma'ilis? Scholarly opinion on this issue is divided. One group of scholars maintains that their cosmogony was built around a Gnostic myth of the primeval pair of creative principles (female and male) called *Kuni* and *Qadar* (Halm 1978; idem 1996). Another group asserts that Neo-Platonism was the primary source for their cosmology.⁵ Still others argue that the Gnostic and Neo-Platonic features found in early Isma'ilism do not necessarily constitute distinctive and consecutive stages of

⁴ For the life and works of Nasafi, Rāzi, and Sejestāni, see Poonawala 1977, 36-39, 40-43, 82-89.

⁵ The French scholar Paul Casanova was the first to recognize the Isma'ili character of the *Rasā'el*. Later scholars debated the issue as to whether its Neo-Platonic character reflected the earliest Isma'ili doctrine or not. Marquet considers the *Rasā'el ekhwān al-safā'* an expression of early Isma'ili doctrine. See his review of Stern's *Studies*.

development of their doctrines. The latter contention is based on the early dating and Isma'ili authorship of the anonymous, celebrated encyclopedia entitled *Rasā'el ekhwān al-safā'* (Epistles of the Sincere Brethren), wherein both Gnostic and Neo-Platonic elements are found side by side because they are derived from the same source, viz., the Harranian Hermetic tradition (Marquet 1982). The questions of the authorship and dating of the *Rasā'el* are beyond the scope of this paper. However, I have addressed the issues in a monograph yet to be published.⁶ Heinz Halm (1996) states that a Gnostic myth lies at the root of the Isma'ili cosmogonical doctrine, with Neo-Platonism representing a secondary stage in the development of the doctrine superseding the previous phase.⁷

Background to the Controversy

Thus, leaving aside the *Rasā'el ekhwān al-safā'* argument from our present discussion, credit for the introduction of Neo-Platonism into Isma'ili doctrine is generally attributed to Abu'l-Hasan Mohammad b. Ahmad Nasafi (or Nakhshabi, d. ca 332/943). He was the chief *dā'i* in Nishāpur and was responsible for the conversion of the Samanid ruler Nasr II b. Ahmad II (r. 301-31/914-43) of Transoxiana and Khorasan and several dignitaries of the court to the Isma'ili cause.⁸ Nezām al-Molk describes Nasafi as “a man from the brilliant company of the philosophers of Khorasan, and a theologian.”⁹ The origin of the controversy is believed to have started with the dissemination of the book *Ketāb al-Mahsul* (The Book of Harvest) composed by Nasafi, most probably around the beginning of the tenth century.¹⁰ Although it no longer exists, from the ensuing debate concerning its contents among the Isma'ili missionaries in Khorasan, it appears that the book was an early comprehensive work on Isma'ili doctrines. In addition to expounding the pre-Fatimid Isma'ili teachings the author had inherited from his predecessors, Nasafi introduced the pre-Fārābian (Fārābi, d. 339/950) version of Neo-Platonism which was disseminated among the followers of Kendi (d. ca 252/866). In his *Ketāb al-Mahsul*, Nasafi introduced into the Isma'ili cosmogony the three hypostases

⁶ My conclusion is that the *Rasā'el* were post-Kendi and pre-Fārābi compositions.

⁷ Ivanow postulated that Isma'ili cosmogonical and cosmological doctrine evolved from an early Gnostic myth. The Gnostic dimensions of the cosmology were further explored by Corbin in his numerous studies.

⁸ All the sources, except for Tha'ālebi's *Ādāb al-muluk*, treated in my English introduction to Sejestāni's *Maqālid*, are listed in the entry on Nasafi; see Poonawala 1977.

⁹ See my English introduction to Sejestāni's *Maqālid*, 24.

¹⁰ For more details, see *ibid.*, 30.

of Plotinus (d. 270), viz., the One, the Intellect, and the Soul, and the theory of creation as a gradual procession of the universe from One (God), and tried to adapt this to the Islamic principle of monotheism and Shi'i-Isma'ili teaching. The process of interpretation of Neo-Platonism and its adaptation was bound to provoke criticism and divergent reactions from other thinkers and theologians within the Isma'ili *da'wa*. This is, in fact, what happened within certain Isma'ili circles in Khorasan. The reason is obvious: the orientation of the *da'wa* in this region, as noted above, was intellectual and philosophical, quite different than the *da'wa* operating in other parts of the Islamic world, such as Yemen and North Africa, where it had succeeded in mobilizing a mass religio-political movement and overthrowing the ruling Sunni authorities.

Abu Hātem Ahmad b. Hamdān Rāzi, Nasafi's contemporary who was also an accomplished theologian, thinker and was familiar with Neo-Platonism, was the first to react. It is important to note that there were slightly different versions of Neo-Platonism in circulation at this time in the Islamic world. Excluding other doctrinal issues, this was also a cause for disagreement between Nasafi and Rāzi as their sources and orientations varied. Consequently, Rāzi wrote his *Ketāb al-Eslāh* (The Book of Correction) to rectify what he considered to be the errors in the *Mahsul*. The *Eslāh* has survived, but is incomplete at the beginning and end. The lack of any additional evidence does not allow us to pinpoint the exact date of its compilation. It is known that Rāzi died in 322/934-35; therefore, one can assume that the *Ketāb al-Eslāh* must have been written during the second decade of the tenth century or even earlier. In turn, one can presume that the *Mahsul* was compiled a few years earlier, i.e., at the beginning of tenth century.¹¹

The *Eslāh* of Rāzi prompted Abu Ya'qub Eshāq b. Ahmad Sejestāni or Sejzi (d. after 361/971) to respond to the criticism leveled against his teacher Nasafi, as he subscribed to similar views. One is led to surmise that Nasafi and Sejestāni relied on almost identical sources of Neo-Platonism, and that Sejestāni composed *Ketāb al-Nosra* (the Book of Support) to defend the views of his teacher as well as his own position and criticize the corrections presented by Rāzi (ibid.).

The Entrance of Kermāni into the Debate

Hamid al-Din Ahmad b. 'Abd-Allāh Kermāni (d. after 411/1021) was the foremost *da'i* during the reign of the Fatimid caliph-imam Hākem (386-

¹¹ See my English introduction to Sejestāni's *Maqālid*, 31.

411/996-1021). After having confronted the immediate threat posed by the proto-Druze movement, he turned his attention to this earlier controversy that had erupted and continued to fester for years within the Iranian school of Isma'īlism, and composed his *Ketāb al-Riāz*. He was the most learned and talented theologian of his day and was highly conversant in the Greek philosophical trends (especially post-Fārābian) that were prevalent at the time. Kermāni's concern was with advancing the interests of the *da'wa*, and not with asserting a particular ideology and enforcing it regardless of the consequences. Hence, his role in mediating the dispute was simultaneously delicate and challenging, but he was highly skilled for the task. One cannot fail but to admire his dexterity in handling this controversy without offending the sensibilities of the various factions of the *da'wa* (ibid., 30f). Therefore, the following passage at the beginning of the tenth chapter dealing with the major issues in *Ketāb al-Mahsul*, such as the concept of *tawhid* (unity of godhead) and the First Originated Being (*al-mabda' al-awwal*), deserves to be cited in full. Kermāni states:

When the author of the *Mahsul*, may God have mercy on him, undertook to exercise his judgment [concerning a theological question] and did his utmost [in resolving it], he discharged what was due him in the *da'wa* and its followers. He opened the gates to its signposts by composing books that he wrote for [the benefit of] those who eagerly anticipated those works. When Abu Hātem, may God have mercy on him, amended what he amended of it, many people thought that it was a censure of the author of the *Mahsul*, despite the author of the *Eslāb*'s apology for that in his own book. Thus [some folks of the *da'wa*] found fault with Abu Hātem and reproached him for it. But that was an erroneous assessment on the part of those folks and a deviation from the truth. The [truth of the] matter was quite different than what they had perceived.

When the speaking-prophet (*nāteq*), peace be upon him, realized that, with respect to the planning of the affairs [of the *da'wa*] that the sciences of religion are too numerous to be comprehended by any single human being other than the imam, or that any single individual might be able to guard them all at once, he designated for this purpose a large number of individuals below the office of the imam [who are] to collaborate among themselves [in the pursuit of] all the sciences and in their preservation and safekeeping. Such persons include the twelve *hojjas* [an office below that of the imam], each of whom acquires his knowledge from those righteous imams who were appointed by God, the exalted, to assume the reins of guidance, God bless them all, about the most obscure of matters, both the esoteric and exoteric aspects of them, commensurate with their own inherent abilities and strengths in acquiring [that knowledge] and deducing [appropriate conclusions from that knowledge]. In this way they are to provide guidance for others similar to the way the imams, peace be upon them, who confer knowledge and interpretation [on their *hojjas*].

Religion is represented in the person of the imam like a single individual composed of various bodily parts and those parts are to him like numerous senses by

means of which things are perceived. If a matter escapes one of those senses, another will perceive it without the perception by another sense implying any fault in the first that failed to perceive it or in any other of the senses. That being the case, the emendations by Abu Hâtem, may God increase his rank [in the hereafter], of what he amended in the book *al-Mahsul* should neither be taken as a condemnation of Abu Hâtem nor considered a censure against the author of the *Mahsul* or belittling of its author. Rather, it is as we have just stated above that the individuals assigned to ameliorate the sciences of religion are like different senses. If one sense fails to perceive a thing in the realm of the physical world, it will not escape the other sense, which will instead cooperate to assist the other sense in fulfilling the duty of religion and confirming the obligation of the Lord of the universe.

That being so, I observed in *Ketâb al-Mahsul* [that certain things are treated incorrectly], which must have compelled Abu Hâtem to explicate and amend whatever he was able to amend [from the book]. Whatever he did not discuss and might have overlooked [in his *Ketâb al-Eslâh*], I am obliged to explain and fulfill my responsibility with regard to certain things that are not permitted [to be expressed incorrectly] in a sound belief system, [particularly] with regard to the profession of the unity of God (*tawhid*) and the First Originated Being and other matters related to the derived subsidiary principles (*foru*). If God prolongs my life, I will deal with those issues in [yet] another book. (Kermâni, 213f)¹²

The passage is remarkable and set an excellent precedent as to how the Isma'ili *da'wa* should function in promoting a fair and free debate concerning doctrinal issues. The Isma'ili *da'wa* was well known for its enterprise of scientific and philosophical inquiry with a good degree of freedom. This was also one of the reasons for its dramatic success and vitality. The only taboo subject seemed to be the question of the Fatimid claim of legitimacy to the imamate. However, even in this case there was enough room for speculation and justification as the letter of the Mahdi to the Yemeni *da'wa* demonstrates (H. Hamdani; A. Hamdani and de Blois). The aforementioned passage also reveals much about Kermâni's role in bringing various factions of the Isma'ili *da'wa* together. He might have felt that there was a common "sense of connectedness," and wanted to impose a measure of uniformity over any individual work. It would also serve to unite and hold together various factions—the Isma'ili movement being composed of a mosaic of different ethnic and cultural groups—and thus achieve a common purpose. It was due to his efforts that the works of Nasafi, Râzi, and Sejestâni were introduced into the 'main stream' of the *da'wa* and were eventually considered part of the *da'wa*. *Ketâb al-Riâz* was his last composition wherein Kermâni revisited the earlier debate between Râzi and Sejestâni that had been provoked by Nasafi's work. He wrote his *Ketâb al-Riâz*

¹² All English translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.

with the sole purpose of settling once and for all a dispute that had raged on for a considerable time within Isma'ili circles in Khorasan and Transoxiana. The full title of his book is indicative of its contents and the author's intent to rectify the deviations of some highly venerated and learned missionaries (*do'at*) of the *da'wa*. Its full title reads: *Ketāb al-Riāz fi'l-hokm bayn al-sādayn: Sāheb al-Eslāb wa-sāheb al-Nosra* (Book of the Meadow in Judgment between the two [books with the letter] *sād*: The author of *al-Eslāb* and the author of *al-Nosra*).¹³

Major Contentious Issues Raised in the *Mahsul*

Unfortunately, Kermāni did not live long enough after he had completed the *Ketāb al-Riāz* to fulfill his promise for elaboration in yet another book. Constraints of space do not permit me to treat the controversy in full details; hence I will concentrate on a few major contentious issues. First, it is worth noting that both Rāzi and Kermāni point out that there were serious shortcomings in the doctrines preached by Nasafi and recorded in his *Ketāb al-Mahsul*. Rāzi states:

Now, we proceed with the correction of the errors that occurred in the book [*al-Mahsul*] and circulated [among the people]. I intend to discuss [those errors] because the erroneous doctrines are not permitted [in one's faith]. [On the other hand], I will refrain from the discussion of derivative principles... [because] mistakes are allowed with regard to [the derivative principles] if the author's intention [in presenting those matters] was correct and sound... (Rāzi, 23)

In the introduction of *Ketāb al-Riāz*, Kermāni stresses the same point:

The most worthy thing for a person who professes the unity of God is that he should turn his attention to that very concept and reflect on it and on obtaining the knowledge about His ordinances... I noticed that the Shaikh Abu Hātem, may God's mercy be upon him, corrected what he considered to be unsound [doctrine] in the *Mahsul*. And Shaikh Abu Ya'qub al-Sejzi, may God's mercy be upon him, supported the author of the *Mahsul*, thereby testifying to the soundness of Nasafi's views. However, the matters concerning which both [Abu Hātem and Abu Ya'qub] disputed do not pertain to the subsidiary principles about which discord is permitted if the fundamental principles are sound.

I found Shaikh Abu Ya'qub al-Sejzi, may God's mercy be upon him, accurate at times in his refutation, but he also treated Shaikh Abu Hātem unjustly at other times. Sometimes both argued without [maintaining] proper sequence [of their

¹³ The reading *fi'l-hekam* in the title of this book by the editor is incorrect.

thought]. Nevertheless, the author of the *Mahsul* had stated something [incorrectly], particularly in the chapter[s] dealing with the *tawhid* and the First Intellect, leaving aside [other errors concerning minor things] that pertained to the *foru'* (secondary rules). Shaikh Abu Hâtem, may God have mercy upon him, therefore, ought to have corrected and discussed [those major issues]. Instead, he elaborated his book [the *Eslâh*] with the discussion about the *foru'* and neglected [the *osul*, fundamentals]. This was more harmful to the *da'wa hâdiya* (lit. rightly guided mission, i.e., the Isma'ili community) when they took up positions on a discord concerning the lofty way to the profession of *tawhid*, the divine ordinances, and [led them] to the state of disrepair. Therefore, I intend to cite the statements of both [Abu Hâtem and Abu Yâ'qub]; what is said in the *Eslâh* by way of correction and what is said in the *Nosra* by way of refutation . . . Thereafter, I will discuss what was ignored [by Abu Hâtem] in the *Mahsul* that touches upon the fundamental principles [of faith, i.e., the *osul*] about which disagreement is not permitted. I will clearly differentiate the truth, craving for reward [from God]. (Kermâni, 49f)

The next point of contention concerns the very definition of the Originator (*mobde'*) and the First Originated Being. According to Râzi, Nasafi maintained that the First Originated Being is perfect because it [came into being] through perfect Origination (*ebdâ'*) via the perfect Originator. In other words, the Originator is perfect; hence His act of Origination cannot be anything except perfect. Consequently, the product has to be and is also perfect. Râzi objects to the very premise of Nasafi that the Originator (i.e., God) can be predicated with any attribute. He states:

Rather we assert that the First Originated Being is perfect because [He came into being] through Origination which is perfect. Moreover, the First Originated Being and the [act of] Origination are identical (*ays wâbed*). The Originator, who is most sublime and most lofty, absolutely does not require any attribute. We describe Him neither with perfection nor do we assert that He is perfect. It is [totally] wrong to [describe Him] in such a manner. (Râzi, 36f)

Therefore, one can understand why both Râzi and Kermâni rebuked Nasafi for violating the most fundamental Islamic principle of *tawhid*. According to it, God transcends human description; therefore, no attributes can be ascribed to Him.¹⁴

The next point of discord, discussed at great length by Râzi, concerns the cyclical sacred history of seven major epochs (*dawr*, pl. *adwâr*), each inaugurated by a major prophet called *nâteq* (pl. *notaqâ'*) who brings a new religious law (*shari'a*) abrogating the previous law and initiating a new epoch in the

¹⁴ The Isma'ilis maintain transcendence of God. See Sejestâni, *Eftekhâr*, 81-99; idem, *Maqâlid*, 42ff.

religious history of mankind.¹⁵ An important component of early Isma'ili doctrine held that the seven *notaqā'* were Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, and the *Qā'em*, or *Qā'em al-qiāma* (who was considered a millennial savior figure).¹⁶ Each of the first six *nāteq*s were succeeded by a *wasi* (legatee), also called *asās* (foundation) or *sāmet* (silent), who interpreted the esoteric meaning of the revelation of that era. The *Qā'em* is the seventh and the last. However, there was disagreement about the latter's role among the various factions of the Isma'ilis. The point of contention was whether he would abrogate the prevailing *shari'a* or not.

Nasafi maintained that the "messengers with determination" (*olu'l-'azm*) were the seven *notaqā'*.¹⁷ The first *nāteq*, Adam, inaugurated the first cycle of hierohistory but was without determination (*'azima*) since he did not introduce any *shari'a*. Nasafi also advocated that there was no *nāteq* after Mohammad who would announce new *shari'a*. Consequently the *shari'a* of Mohammad will continue to prevail until the Day of Resurrection. He states:

The masters of the cycles of history are seven: Adam is the first, while the seventh is the last. Concerning the advent of the latter, the Prophet had given good tidings when he stated: 'If only one day is left of the duration of the world, God will prolong that day until a person from my progeny will emerge who will fill the world with justice as it was filled with injustice before.' (Rāzi, 61; for Mahdi traditions, see Wensinck, s.v. *j-w-r, q-s-t*); transmitted by Ebn Hanbal, Abu Daud, and Ebn Māja)

Rāzi states that Nasafi's assumption that *'azima* and *dawr* are identical is erroneous. To support his argument Rāzi elaborates on the linguistic meaning of the terms *'azima*, *dawr*, and *shari'a* with quotations from the Koran. He affirms that the messengers who brought the *shari'a* were six: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad; not five as held by Nasafi. Rāzi further asserts that Adam, the first *nāteq*, did introduce *shari'a*. The messengers with determination, on the other hand, were five: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad; not seven as maintained by Nasafi. Rāzi then adds:

We are in the cycle of the Prophet Mohammad, and when this cycle is completed, mankind will indeed get in touch with the Master of the seventh cycle. The latter will not compose new *shari'a*, and there is no preceding *shari'a* to be revoked by him. Rather he will reveal the hidden, esoteric meaning of the prevailing *shari'a*. (Rāzi, 61-63)

¹⁵ For *dawr* and *nāteq*, see Poonawala 1977, 376, 378.

¹⁶ It should be noted that there are divergent interpretations of this millennial figure.

¹⁷ The expression *olu'l-'azm men al-rosol* occurs in the Koran 46:35.

Following the discussion of cyclical history and the preeminent prophets, a major portion of the *Eslab* is devoted to the *ta'wil* of the Koranic verses dealing with the stories of the prophets. It is here that Rāzi demonstrates a superior knowledge of biblical stories by revealing serious shortcomings in the understanding and interpretation of those verses on the part of Nasafi.

Let us now turn to Kermāni and his *Ketāb al-Riāz*. It is divided into ten chapters and each chapter is subdivided into several sections. The first nine chapters deal with his critique of both Rāzi and Sejestāni and his own resolution of the issues debated by the former two missionaries. The last chapter is exclusively devoted to rectifying the major errors in the *Mahsul*, dealing with the concept of *tawhid* and the Originated Being (or the First Being). It is here that Kermāni has concentrated his efforts in refuting Nasafi, sentence-by-sentence and word-by-word, because according to him Rāzi overlooked this aspect. In order to better understand Kermāni's rebuttal I will first introduce Nasafi's position as stated by Kermāni and then present the latter's arguments refuting the former's views.¹⁸

Nasafi states:

God is the Originator of things (*shay'*) and nothing (*lā shay'*), intelligible (*'aqli*), imaginary (or illusionary, *wahmi*), speculative (*fekri*), and logical (*manteqi*). I mean whatever falls under the aforementioned categories and others that do not fall under those categories.

Kermāni responds:

Such a statement makes it necessary [and takes it for granted] that there are certain things among God's creation that were originated by Him, but cannot be discerned through [the human] intellect, imagination, or speculation. Therefore, it implies that those things cannot be logically appraised. It further implies that although the existence of such things is impossible, one can still believe in their existence [as implied by the premise]. Hence, [let us assume that they exist.] In such a case their existence must fall in one of the following three categories: (i) they preceded the existence of the Intellect; (ii) they coexisted with the latter; or (iii) they followed the existence of the Intellect.

Kermāni continues:

The first scenario is impossible because nothing preceded the Intellect except God, and the Intellect is a pure Origination of God. The second scenario is also

¹⁸ In what follows I have summarized Nasafi's views as presented by Kermāni, followed by the latter's refutation. I have avoided giving notes to save space, but my translation or summary is based on the text of Kermāni in the last chapter of *Ketāb al-Riāz*, 213-30.

impossible because the Intellect is the Origination, and the essence (or the entity) of the Intellect at the time of its creation cannot be but (a distinct solitary) one; it cannot be two [entities]. Even if we assume coexistence [of the Intellect with other entities], because of their dissimilarities yet sharing existence, it implies multiple causes from God or that there was another entity besides God. This is a necessary assumption simply because the existence of the effect is commensurate with its cause. Since both of those entities [the Intellect and other entities] are dissimilar, it would require two or more causes. The third scenario is also impossible, because the Intellect would not have failed to notice those entities as it perceives everything intelligible and sensible. In short, such a belief is nothing but straying from the right path.

Kermāni goes on and states:

Following his affirmation that God originated thing/s (*shay'*), and no-thing (*lā shay'*), Nasafi did not specify what falls or does not fall under those categories. If by thing/s he meant corporeal thing/s and by no-thing/s non-corporeal things in the realm of origination, he is wrong. Moreover, both the essences and accidents, intelligible or sensible, come under thing/s. Perhaps by no-thing/s Nasafi meant that some philosophers had deprived a thing of its two essential characteristics of belonging to either the essences or accidents. The latter position is called a transformed proposition and it is like saying: 'Not human.' It means affirming everything [or all attributes] that a human being does not have. Such a proposition robs the human being of his very existence without affirming that which is not a thing.

Then Kermāni sums up the above discussion and states:

Perhaps Nasafi meant that the Originator of a thing and no-thing is indeed the Originator of His own essence, which is something other than a thing. And the Originator of a thing is something other than His own essence. However, Nasafi is wrong if he meant that it is the denial of the tangible essence of a thing. In the latter case, Nasafi's statement that God the High is the Originator of a thing is incorrect because the thing is the Origination. And it is the tangible essence of existence, and no-thing amounts to the denial of Origination and annulment of existence. If no-thing meant the denial of Origination, then it is also incorrect that it could be Origination. Consequently, such a denial is impossible.

Next, Kermāni states Nasafi's position with regard to the Originator:

[God] is the Originator of things, but not from a thing. He, and nothing else, persists with Him. When we say: "He and nothing with Him," we negate thing and no-thing and make both of them originated (or created). We thereby disassociate every form, simple and compound, from His *ipseity* (existence). Thus, we make everything which could be categorized or uncategorized by speech to have been created [by God] and finite. Indeed, no-thing comes after [the existence of]

a thing, because its categorization [as no-thing] occurs only after the existence of a thing.

Kermāni refutes Nasafi's above statement, sentence by sentence, and demonstrates that those presupposed positions taken by Nasafi are incorrect and fallacious. Demonstrating inconsistency in the former's assertion, Kermāni states that the following two statements are contradictory: (i) [God] is the Originator of things not from a thing [*ex nihilo*]. He and nothing else persists with Him. (ii) God is the Originator of thing/s (*shay*'), and no-thing (*lā shay*'). Kermāni then adds:

When al-Nasafi asserts that nothing persists with Him, the question arises: "From where comes no-thing at the time of origination?"

Nasafi further states:

No-thing comes after [the existence of] a thing, because its categorization or description [as no-thing] occurs only after the existence of a thing.

Kermāni rejects the above premise and states:

But the term no-thing cannot be applied to any tangible essence in existence, because it does not have existence altogether. The term can be applied only to a thing.

Next, Nasafi states:

Indeed the Creator, Most High, originated (created) the world at once (*dof ar^{an} wābedat^{an}*), which means He originated the Intellect all at once too. As a result the forms of the two worlds [the higher and the lower] and all they contain emerged from the latter [the Intellect] as determined by Him. However, those forms were not pointed at with their *ipseities* [as long as] they reside in the Intellect. Yet, the Intellect's knowledge is inclusive of these forms and they are known by the Intellect, although in actuality the Intellect preceded over those forms. In other words, either in actuality or in potentiality, the Intellect and all the forms are identical.

Kermāni counters Nasafi's statement with the following affirmation:

The above description cannot be applied to the First Originated Intellect, because what precedes existence cannot be conceived with what is created, since its existence depends on its creator who created it. [The Originated Being] does not need to know more than the knowledge of itself and [the fact] that it is originated

and its existence is not by itself. Rather its existence is due to other agency, which is the Originator and that it is the cause of all existence below it. Nasafi's description applies to the intellect that proceeds from the natural, physical world, and not to the First Originated Being.

Nasafi holds:

The cause of the Intellect is the unity of the Creator—the exalted and powerful. The unity is eternal; hence the Intellect becomes eternal.

Kermāni retorts:

The above statement of Nasafi implies that something preceded the First Intellect in existence and it is the cause [of the Intellect], which is called unity. But we have already explained before that absolutely nothing precedes the First Intellect in existence that could be more worthy of description than the attribute of eternity. Unity is not the cause of the First Intellect, which precedes the latter; rather it is the essence of the First Intellect. The latter is the very essence of unity. The First Intellect is one. It is the cause [of creation] and it is the effect [of that creation]. It is the Origination, and it is the Originated [Being]. Both are identical. It is the perfection and it is perfect. It is the eternity and it is eternal. It is the existence and it exists with one [indivisible] essence. The statement of the author of the *Mahsul*, therefore, applies to the intellect/s in the physical world and not to the realm of the Origination.

Nasafi asserts:

The Intellect is called perfect because [it came into existence] through the Origination. The reason for its [perfection] is that the Origination came about from the Originator. A perfect Origination only produces a perfect Originated [Being].

Kermāni rejoins:

The above affirmation by Nasafi is erroneous for several reasons. First, Nasafi applies the term intellect to the Originated [Being] and makes it similar to its Originator, by describing it as perfect. This is nothing but *sherk* (belief in a plurality of godheads). God is above and beyond perfection. The analogy itself is wrong because Nasafi applies the terminology used in the physical world to the higher realm.¹⁹

¹⁹ It should be noted that Kermāni rebukes Sejestāni for making similar errors.

Nasafi maintains:

Verily, the Intellect bestows forms [upon the descending hierarchy] from its very cause, which is the Word [or the Command of God]. The bestowal of benefit by the Intellect is similar to that of the sun, which bestows its light on things that acquire it. Thus, it is apparent that the Word, which became the cause of things protruding from the Intellect, is not the *ipseity* of the Intellect; rather the Intellect is an intermediary between the Word and what comes after the Intellect.

Kermāni responds:

We totally disagree with the above affirmation and Nasafi's description does not apply to the First Originated Intellect, because the latter does not need something else besides itself in the creation of other things from itself. We reiterate that the First Intellect is the embodiment of the Word and the cause [of creation] and is not a different entity. Nothing precedes the First Originated Intellect except God.

Nasafi declares:

Origination is a medium between the Originator and the Originated. The latter is [like] a trace left behind by an actor [acting] upon an object. The process of origination is therefore like an intermediary between the actor and the object. The existence of this process is due to the part of the actor—the Originator. Hence, the trace of that process is to be found on the part of the Originator in the object. This process or form—i.e., the origination—thus occurred in the Originator.

Finally, Kermāni concludes the book by defending the twin aspects of religion: *zāher* (exterior) and *bāten* (interior). The former consists of performing the obligatory acts laid down in *sharī'a*. The latter is comprised of knowing the hidden, inner, true meaning of the Koran and the *sharī'a*. Both the exoteric and the esoteric aspects are complimentary to each other.²⁰ Therefore, Kermāni calls the two corresponding features of worship *al-'ebādatayn* (two forms of worship). The first is *al-'ebāda al-'amaliya* (the worship of God by carrying out religious obligations and observation of religious rites). The second is *al-'ebāda al-'elmiya* (the worship of God by knowledge and philosophical reflection). Despite this repeated affirmation in the writings of Sejestāni and Kermāni, the Ismā'ilis were unfairly accused by their opponents to have abandoned the *zāheri sharī'a*.

²⁰ Note that the tension between the exoteric (*zāheri*) and the esotericism (*bāteni*) is indeed an obvious characteristic of the Shi'i religion and experience throughout the ages. Both of those aspects are expressed in the Shi'i exegesis of the Koran and other sacred writings. Henry Corbin, a leading scholar of Shi'ism in the twentieth century, captures this essence of Shi'ism when he states that Shi'ism is "le sanctuaire de l'esoterisme de Islam" (Corbin, I, xiv).

Conclusion

This early debate among the four most distinguished Ismaʿili thinkers and theologians that continued for almost a century clearly demonstrates that even a difference of opinion concerning major doctrinal issues was tolerated and resolved by the means of scholarly exchange between the antagonists. It reminds us of Ghazālī's *Tabāḥfot al-falāsefa* (Incoherence of the Philosophers) and its rebuttal by Ebn Roshd's *Tahāḥfot al-tahāḥfot* (Incoherence of the Incoherence) when the debate moves to a very high level of sophistication and is conducted with the most fairness and consistency. Unfortunately in our time, the political and religious climate over the past few decades has changed so radically that it is not easy to introduce rational thinking in matters connected with dogma and the *shariʿa*. For this very reason let me conclude by quoting Mohammad Arkoun, a contemporary Muslim scholar and thinker from Algeria who taught at the Sorbonne in Paris. Participating in a colloquium to discuss the book entitled *Toward an Islamic Reformation* by ʿAbd-Allah Ahmad al-Naʿim, a Sudanese scholar and a disciple of Mahmud Mohammad Taha,²¹ Arkoun states:

As a Muslim scholar and intellectual I know through my own experience and continuous combat how difficult and even dangerous it is to introduce a modern intellectual viewpoint, or a scientific critique in any matter linked to Islamic dogma. Problems related to Islamic law—*shariʿa*—became the domain of the *unthinkable* in contemporary Islamic thought... This is the reason why the *space of thinkable* issues related to dogmatic debates in the classical period (the period of *ijtihād*) became the space of the *unthinkable*, due only to political control, and not to dogmatic pressure of Qurʾanic texts as is often said by Muslims.

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²¹ He was a Sudanese writer and an Islamic reformer. The main argument of his writings is that the Meccan period revelations of the Koran had been abrogated permanently by the latter period of Medinese revelations. He was executed for apostasy during the reign of President Numairi.

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