

Nuha A. Alshaar, *Ethics in Islam: Friendship in the Political Thought of al-Tawḥīdī and his Contemporaries*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 252, £ 110, ISBN 9780415858519

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Ethics in Islam: Friendship in the Political Thought of al-Tawḥīdī and his Contemporaries edited by Nuha A. Alshaar is the first English study about the Xth Century philosopher and *littérateur* Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's ethics, political thought and social idealism beginning from his idea of friendship. The book begins, in the first chapter, with a bird's-eye view of the socio-political and cultural contexts under the Būyids (946-1048), and goes on, in the second chapter, with the presentation of al-Tawḥīdī's background - both historical, philosophical and ethical - focusing on his controversial religious beliefs.

The arrival to Baġdād (946) of the Būyid Mu'izz al-Dawla was a turning point in Islamic history and society: large cities such as Baġdād, Samarqand, Šīrāz and Rayy became active centres of knowledge challenging each other for social prestige and facilitating the flourishing of intellectual communities. Some of these, like the so-called "court-based" groups (*kuttāb*), were strictly affiliated to the Būyids, while others, the "knowledge-based" groups, such as the philosophical and theological circles, tried to be at least semi-independent from the ruling establishment. Thanks to al-Tawḥīdī's writings we do have testimony of many of these discussions and epistemological pluralities which took place in Baġdād: especially here, intense discussions were organized in sessions (*maġālis*) held both privately as well as in the market place of Baġdād. Together with the uninterrupted translation of unrevealed texts - which includes Greek philosophy - those gatherings built up a cosmopolitan atmosphere full of fertile dialogues, fruitful exchanges of ideas and doctrines. Al-Tawḥīdī, throughout all his life, was actively exposed to different religious, philosophical and political gatherings: he was linked to more than one Šāfi'ī circle and Šūfi master; to the court of the viziers al-Šāḥib b. 'Abbād and Ibn Sa'dān; to the school of Yaḥyā b. 'Adī, Abū Sulaymān al-Siġistānī and Aḥmad b. Miskawayh; to the circles of al-Sīrāfi and al-Rummānī; and the Brethren of Purity. Al-Tawḥīdī internalized various forms of knowledge, trying to connect them, in contrast to the scholars' tendency to limit the

study to one specific field.

In the third and fourth chapter, the author describes the sources, the themes, and the conceptual framework of al-Tawḥīdī's expression of friendship (*ṣadāqa*). To this theme the latter dedicated a whole work, *al-Ṣadāqa wa al-Ṣadīq (Friendship and the Friend)*: it is a long letter written over thirty years by al-Tawḥīdī soon after his return to Baḡdād from Rayy at the end of 980 on the behalf of Ibn Sa'dān. Alshaar explains the reasons of the composition of this text and how it places itself within al-Tawḥīdī's *corpus* comparing it with *Aḥlāq al-Wazīrayn (The Morals of the Two Viziers)*, *al-Imta' wa al-Mu'ānasa (The Book of Delight and Conviviality)* and *Risāla ilā al-Qādī Abī Sahl (The letter to Abū Sahl)*. She shows how in the preface of *al-Ṣadāqa* - the English translation of the text is in an appendix - al-Tawḥīdī gives information about the epistemological bases upon which he builds his treatise about *ṣadāqa*: he probably heard them in different *maḡālis*. Subsequently, he analyses friendship's nature, components, types and purposes: he interprets *ṣadāqa* as the realization of all available knowledge (religious, philosophical, literary and rhetorical), as having the inclusive function to transcend human boundaries. Al-Tawḥīdī identifies four key components of friendship: the affinity of the soul (*mumāzaḡa nafsīyya*), intellectual friendship (*ṣadāqa 'aqliyya*), natural assistance (*musā'ada ṭabī'iyya*), and moral harmony (*muwātāt ḥuluqīyya*). In agreement with the widespread Platonic thought of the soul as a self-subsisting entity superior to the body, he argues that the soul is important for *ṣadāqa*, and that is composed by three forces: "the rational soul (*al-nāṭīqa*), the irascible soul (*al-ḡaḍabiyya*) and the appetitive soul (*al-ṣahwāniyya*)", and that *ṣadāqa* only emanates from the rational and virtuous soul. In this he clearly distinguishes between accidental relationships that are based on sensuality and contaminated by human desires, and categories - like friendship - that are characterized by loyalty and are based on the intellect emanating from the rational soul.

In this way, the meaning of *ṣadāqa* shifts from the Aristotelian φιλία - that is considered as a natural sentiment not only among human beings but also among animals covering all kinds of sentimental relationships and family ties -, to a much more restricted and ethical kind of friendship. Indeed, in his dissertation, al-Tawḥīdī sometime quotes al-Siḡistānī, one of the characters of the letter in addition to al-Tawḥīdī himself. Al-

Siġistānī does not fully agree with the Aristotelian idea of friendship, he approves only of disinterested friendship without contemplating any other kind of it: friendship should not be sought for benefit nor for reasons other than its own sake. The most important point, however, is the spiritual component of unity among friends added to the Aristotelian definition: al-Siġistānī describes the highest level of friendship as self-annihilation and the fusion into one merged being. Alshaar pointed out that this shows some similarities with the Šūfī's concepts of merging (*ḥulūl*) and unity (*ittiḥād*) and that al-Siġistānī was not sympathetic to Sufism; this may lead us to question the accuracy of al-Siġistānī's views given by al-Tawḥīdī. One last aspect - according both to al-Siġistānī and al-Tawḥīdī - is equally important: *ṣadāqa* requires high moral qualities and, for this reason, it is not up to every person. It is sometimes vitiated by external elements, for example when it is built "on the basis of fear, power, oppression, passion, impulsiveness, caprice, and flightiness" (p.169). In the end, al-Siġistānī identifies two categories of men able to establish the true *ṣadāqa*: the "possessors of religion and piety" and the "people of knowledge". Friendship among the latter can be true even if their conditional structure indicates the necessity of an alternative social setting.

Thus, this study also contributes in demonstrating how close in al-Tawḥīdī's thought the relationship between politics and friendship, politics and emotions, and public and private life is. In this sense, the classical idea of friendship among Greek philosophers is subtly altered, as particular bonds between people are stretched out for a broader social harmony. Al-Tawḥīdī believed in the necessity of a wise and just ruler that could maintain justice and protect his people by virtue of friendship. His particular idea of *ṣadāqa*, similar to the Platonic notion of a philosopher-king and 'ruler-friend', could be related to his pragmatic attempt at self-promotion and his persuasion of Ibn Sa'dān and of the ruling élite. On the one hand, al-Tawḥīdī indirectly recommends to ask friends for advice, offering insights about the bonds of political affiliations and addressing the importance of friendship as a political practice, especially in times of trouble, when political alliances shift. On the other hand, he states that only two types of people should be linked in performing their duty to ensure social stability: the ruler and the righteous scholar, such as Alexander and Aristotle. Furthermore,

al-Tawḥīdī highlights a truly Islamic aspect: the relationship that a ruler has with God. He argues that the values and practices of the Prophet and early Muslim communities are the best moral example for the ruler, for every person, and for society to exist harmoniously. In conclusion, al-Tawḥīdī builds his ethical system on previous frameworks, establishing a dialogue between numerous works and different kinds of texts: he freely incorporated Ṣūfī's ideas, Christian, Islamic and Greek sources, especially Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his definition of a friend as a second self. Despite this, he did not simply add sources to Aristotelian ethics, but he shaped his idea of friendship by omitting and adding meanings in a new and personal way.

The last chapter of Alshaar's work discusses the concept of *ṣadāqa* in relation to other themes, such as brotherhood (*uḥuwwa*), love (*maḥabba*), and humanity (*insāniyya*) following the scheme of al-Tawḥīdī and his contemporaries'. They proposed these concepts not only in relation to the purification of the soul, but also as part of a wider discourse that promoted a harmonious way of living in response to the moral decline and the social disintegration characteristic of the Būyid age. Indeed, in their view, friendship is not mechanical, but active and conscious; it is not a subjective bond of affection and emotional warmth, but is a mostly an objective bond of reciprocal obligations. The definitions they give are based on voluntary commitments, on free will, and on reason, for creating a community where people are not defined by race, social category, authority, or even religion. To explain the human need of social cooperation, the philosophers describe two main occasions in which human beings are not self-sufficient: the inability to secure all their needs and the inability to reach moral perfection or to purify their soul alone. They mixed and incorporated Qur'ānic quotations, Ṣūfī expressions, a form of the good life connected to the Platonic idea of ἔπος, and the Aristotelian idea of φιλία, and they presented new forms of moral action, they developed the inner self, and they made spiritual progresses, in order to offer a form of practical moral philosophy - *conditio sine qua non* for the survival and welfare of a community - and to describe the effect of a harmonious unity between people.

Alshaar more than once underlines how her study offers a revision of al-Tawḥīdī's background and of the role he played in

his society: he has often been seen as a romantic figure, a lonely and cynical man alienated from his society who rejected the constraints of traditional Muslim beliefs and even the basic tenets of Islām: a true outsider. The book reviewed here underlines the importance of taking the encyclopaedic nature of al-Tawḥīdī's writings into account by letting them speak for themselves, instead of constructing an image of their author based on how he was portrayed by later biographers.

After putting his work in the right historical and intellectual context, Alshaar shows that al-Tawḥīdī's outlook is firmly rooted in the Islamic culture he was educated in: she does not resolve the difficulties of categorizing al-Tawḥīdī by labelling him as a societal outsider. She supports this thesis not only because of al-Tawḥīdī's eclectic approach, but also because of *al-Ṣadāqa wa al-Ṣadīq* itself: the view of politics and friendship explained in this work aims at remoulding the moral values and the character of a ruler, of a friend, and - by extension - of a man. The treatise was morally edifying, serving the purpose of influencing the ruling elite as well as of educating audiences, and it expressed the idea that a person's identity is secondary to the primacy of an intellectually coherent group. Speaking of the analysis of *al-Ṣadāqa wa al-Ṣadīq*, a work that al-Tawḥīdī wrote at the end of his long life and that probably forms his masterpiece as well as the recap of his rich intellectual experiences, it needs to be said that Alshaar offers only an introductory presentation, while in the well-known fifty-five-pages-long article *Une anthologie sur l'amitié d'Abū Ḥayyān at-Tawḥīdī* (1958), the French scholar Marc Bergé offers a much more systematic analysis of it from every point of view. Finally, as Alshaar rightly underlines, it is necessary not to separate *belle-lettres*, religion and political philosophy in the analysis of Xth Century Islamic culture. As the examination of al-Tawḥīdī reveals, both religion as well as philosophy are valid paths to truth and are indispensable for his thought.

Bibliography

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