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Literature and Religious Controversy

The Vision of Hell in Jamīl Ṣīdqī al-Zahāwī's Thawra fī l-jaḥīm

Richard van Leeuwen

Sometimes it appears that religion and literature are each other's natural foes. The lack of harmony between the two domains may partly result from different views about the function of texts. Whereas literary authors usually claim the liberty to explore new, sometimes controversial, visions of the human predicament and to dislodge traditional certainties, religious authorities generally see it as their task to uphold sacred models and preserve religious prescriptions. Both literary authors and religious authorities feel the responsibility to develop visions of the moral integrity of society, but whereas the latter tend to stabilize interpretations of texts and of the moral boundaries derived from them, the first usually propagate the pluriformity of the process of interpretation and a possible redefinition of moral boundaries. The different perceptions of texts, as a medium to either confirm or question established world-views, not only result in clashes between specific writers and specific religious authorities, but rather reflect frictions between different kinds of interpretive communities, with their own structures and institutions of authority, their respective modes of influencing society, and their mechanisms for self-perpetuation.

In recent years, the clashes that have occurred between religion and literature have mainly been related to Islam. The case of the fatwa of the Iranian leader Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, accusing him of apostasy because of certain allegedly blasphemous passages in his novel *The satanic verses*, generated a world-wide debate about artistic freedom and the repressive nature of religion in general and of Islam in particular. This quite spectacular and shocking incident was followed in 1988 by a similar verdict by a prominent religious scholar in Egypt against the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature Nagīb Maḥfūz, who was accused of distorting Islamic history and advocating the death of God in his novel *Children of our alley* (*Awlād ḥāratinā*). In these and other cases, the condemnation of writers should be placed in the context of political and cultural conflicts both between the Muslim world and the West and within the respective societies in which these problems erupted. Although the verdicts were based on religious arguments, they were not restricted to the religious domain.

Against the accusations of heresy, both Rushdie and Maḥfūz retorted that they had in no way intended to vilify or discredit religion, God, or the Prophet Muḥammad, nor to incite the public to atheism or even scepticism. Both declared themselves to be Muslims and ascribed the outrage of the religious authorities to misunderstandings and, especially, a misinterpretation of their texts. They insisted that their texts were fictional novels which were not intended to denounce religious truths or to propose an alternative vision of the Islamic history of revelation, but rather to reflect on the complexity of moral, social and political issues and their relationship with the religious domain. These reflections, moreover, belonged to the field of artistic expression and fiction, which fall outside the scope of religious judgement. The religious authorities were not impressed by these arguments. They insisted that the novelistic genre should not be considered as a separate, or autonomous, domain with regard to the discursive representation of reality. For them, there was only one discourse, only one reality, only one historical truth, and only one vision of reality. Thus, at least on one level, the conflict can be reduced to a difference of opinion about the nature of texts and their relationship to reality and truth.¹

These observations raise intriguing questions concerning the recurrent frictions between literature and religion. To what extent should generic differentiation be taken into account in disputes about the religious, and perhaps moral, evaluation of literary texts? Does the fictional character of a novel by definition make it incommensurable with religious truth claims? Can fictional literature even convey a truthful reflection of the religious attitude of the author or should it by its inherent nature be considered deprived of any serious religious significance? In other words, are the literary and religious discourses essentially different and separated, so that any effort to link them is useless? In this paper I would like to relate questions such as these to a literary work which produced a religious uproar in the 1930s and which permanently branded the author as a heretic (*zindīq*). In 1931 the Iraqi poet and philosopher Jamīl Ṣīdqī al-Zahāwī published his long poem *Revolution in hell* (*Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*), an evidently controversial theme. It is remarkable that in later evaluations of his life and work, in which he is usually presented as a heretic and a sceptic, conclusions are based almost exclusively on his poetic work, and not, for instance, on an analysis of his philosophical essays or, even more strikingly, on a religious treatise he wrote in 1905 that contained a fierce refutation of Wahhābī doctrines. The question arises whether al-Zahāwī's treatment of

1 See about the controversies about Maḥfūz and Rushdie, Ruthven, *A Satanic affair*; van Leeuwen, *Creation and revelation*; Najjar, *Islamic fundamentalism*.

religious elements in his poems, and specifically in *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*, justifies the verdict of heresy. Or should his poetry, because of its fictional nature, be rejected as a criterion to assess his orthodoxy? And does the fictional nature of poetry not forcibly exclude an evaluation of al-Zahāwī's references to religion according to religious standards? Are doctrinal criteria adequate to judge a work of fiction?

In the following we will first give a brief overview of al-Zahāwī's life and work, before analyzing the text that concerns us here. It should be noted that we will not discuss al-Zahāwī's poetic oeuvre as a whole, nor his philosophical/scientific essays, which are controversial in their own way. We will limit our discussion mainly to al-Zahāwī's use of the concept of hell in combination with his strategy of fictionalization.²

1 Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī

Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī was born in Baghdad in 1863³ as the son of the mufti of the Iraqī province of the Ottoman Empire and studied the traditional Islamic sciences, although eventually he became more interested in the 'modern' disciplines through his readings of such journals as *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Mu'ayyad*. He was appointed to several official positions, especially in the field of education and in the judiciary. He led an eventful life, which was at least partly due to his rather recalcitrant character, and partly to his unconventional writings, which consisted of poetry and philosophical/scientific treatises. He remained a controversial scholar/intellectual throughout his life and was even summoned to Istanbul for a time and put under surveillance of the authorities. His poetry aroused the anger of religious scholars who accused him of heresy, because he openly put into doubt the compatibility of modern scientific insights with religious doctrines. He befriended such secularly oriented intellectuals as Fāris Nimr, Shibli Shumayyil, Jurjī Zaydān and Ibrāhīm al-Yazījī. Apart from his religious scepticism, he became especially famous for his defense of women's rights and his rejection of the veil for women.⁴

Al-Zahāwī's name remains known mainly for his poetic oeuvre. His philosophical work is rather eccentric, because he was fascinated by the modern natural sciences but was unable to grasp their concepts and methodology. His

² I am grateful to Luc Deheuvels (INALCO, Paris) for drawing my attention to al-Zahāwī's text.

³ For al-Zahāwī's biography, see Walther, Camīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī; Masliyah, Zahawi's philosophy; Widmer, Der 'irāqische Dichter.

⁴ See Masliyah, Zahawi: a Muslim pioneer.

deficient absorption of the sciences resulted in ideas about the nature of matter, gravitation and energy that would have been considered bizarre by specialists even in his lifetime. In his poetry al-Zahāwī was unconventional as well, not only because of the religious ideas that it contains, but also because of his rebelliousness against the Ottoman authorities. During his exile in Istanbul he wrote a fierce attack on the Sultan, for which he was punished with two weeks imprisonment, and in general he tried to incite the population to 'wake up' and stand up against obsolete ideas, anachronistic mentalities, repression, fatalism and injustice. The Iraqis should adopt a modern world-view based on scientific knowledge and a radical rationalism.

The accusation of heresy and religious scepticism which was directed at al-Zahāwī during his life and afterwards, was based mainly on his poetry, and, more specifically, on his collection *al-Nāzighāt* ("Incitements to evil"), published in 1924, and on *Thawra fi l-jaḥīm*. The controversial verses focus particularly on the incompatibility of the traditional concept of God with scientific rationality: "When science lives, God will die," and: "Science came into the world after religion and sharpened its weapons, to deprive it of its place; religion used to triumph over science, in the future it is science that will triumph."⁵ This scepticism repeatedly leads to a questioning even of the existence of God:

When you were unable to solve the mystery of Nature,
You persistently invented an interpretation thereof.
You have created a God to solve your problem,
But in the end He became your biggest problem.⁶

And: "I no longer know about Truth; did I create [God] or did He create me?"⁷ Although verses such as these suggest a deep religious doubt, there are other verses that mitigate them to some extent, and that rather reveal a mystical attitude: "My religion is the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*); there is no being but the mighty, eternal God."⁸ Thus, perhaps al-Zahāwī prefers a pantheist vision of God, inspired by Ibn al-'Arabī, in which God becomes identical with the basic force in nature, which he calls "ether" (*athīr*).⁹

Before evaluating the significance of these controversial statements, we will now discuss the text that concerns us here in more detail.

⁵ Walther, Camīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī 447.

⁶ Masliyah, Zahāwī's philosophy 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

2 *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*

The poem *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* by al-Zahāwī consists of almost 400 double verses divided into 24 parts by sub-headings. It is a narrative poem, in the sense that it tells a coherent story centred on a main character and contains dialogues between the different protagonists. In the first part, the poet relates that he has died and, while lying in his grave, sees Munkar and Nakīr, the two angels of death, approaching with ominous faces, eyes spitting fire, large teeth, and thick snakes in their hands. The grave becomes narrow and suffocating. The two angels start interrogating the dead man with a gruff voice about what he has done during his life. The poet feels like a sparrow sitting before a vulture and simulates that his soul has never known any doubt. Upon the persistent questions of the angels, he finally confesses, however, since for a “free poet” hypocrisy is reprehensible and inadmissible.¹⁰

After this brief introduction, the conversation between the two angels and the poet is represented in a more detailed way. The poet claims that Islam and God are his religion, but he says that during his life he has been a “slave” without freedom, unable to act freely. He argues—shivering—that he has obeyed the religious obligations and that he believes in Muḥammad and the Quran. Still he acknowledges that there are many things in religion about which the mind says the opposite of what the heart claims,¹¹ and that in his youth he was a believer, but later in his life was beset by unrest and doubt, so that in the end he did not know what to believe. As far as angels, devils and jinn are concerned, for instance, the poet says: “God has created many creatures in heaven, on earth, and in between, but I am in doubt about everything that the mind and intelligence, in their weakness, are unable to understand.”¹²

When questioned about God, the poet states that he has no doubt about the existence of God, but he complains that God has allowed the devil to sow doubt in the hearts of human beings. He asks: “Why should I be punished when everything I have done was predetermined? I had no free choice. Is it justice to create a devil who sows doubt? There are injustice and violence everywhere without heaven intervening.”¹³ And about the nature of God, he avers: “Everything that exists has only one God, who does not perish, and that is “ether,” from which all life derives and to which everything after death returns.

10 Zahāwī, *Dīwān* 715–7, tr. Widmer, 50–2.

11 *Ibid.*, 717/52.

12 *Ibid.*, 720/56.

13 *Ibid.*, 721/57.

Between God and ether there is no distinction except in expression, when your feeling leads you correctly."¹⁴

The poet realizes that these statements can harm him and laments that "The word of pure truth is forbidden for free men even in the grave."¹⁵ He resigns himself to his fate, but reproaches the angels that they pester him with senseless questions. Why have they not asked about what is in his heart? About his defence of the fatherland, his loyalty to friends, his fight against evil, his defence of women? And why is his poetry not taken into account? In poetry lie "the liberation of a people and an admonition." In his poems he has established Truth as a rock to build upon. Should they remain silent about this while asking many questions about what is untrue? The angels retort that they are only interested in the true faith and continue to interrogate him about such notions as the Mountain of Qāf, Gog and Magog, and Hārūt and Mārūt. The poet, resigning himself to his fate, exclaims that he does not know anything about these things and that his mind orders him to deny their existence.¹⁶

In the final part of the interrogation the poet calls in the help of "ether," the Lord: "You are my only Lord; through You I live and will decay in my grave; You are the Almighty under whose Authority the graves will remain."¹⁷ This supplication enrages the angels, who now expose him as a heretic destined to go to hell. They throw stones at him, while he screams: "Forgive me! My whole philosophy was only what my weak mind dictated to me. The 'You are my Lord' was a mistake!"¹⁸ However, his fate has been decided. He is beaten with clubs, they throw pitch over his head and scourge his head and face. His grave becomes hot like an oven and he loses consciousness. When he awakes he finds himself in chains.

Next, the angels take the poet to paradise, and show him its joys and pleasures to increase his spite. Then he is thrown into hell, which is a ravine filled with fire and screams, scorpions, serpents, lions, panthers, faces black as pitch, eyes spitting fire, food of the Zaqqūm tree and red and black fire for drinking. The poet meets Laylā, who bemoans her beloved, and the poets al-Farazdaq, al-Akhtal, Jarīr, al-Mutanabbī, al-Ma'arrī, Bashshār and Imru' al-Qays. They are all great poets and philosophers, since "the abode of the ignorant is paradise."¹⁹ There are not only Arabic literati in hell, but also Christian ones, such as Dante

14 Ibid., 722/58.

15 Ibid., 723/59.

16 Ibid., 724-5/61.

17 Ibid., 725/61-2.

18 Ibid., 725/62.

19 Ibid., 731-2/68-70.

and Shakespeare, because they didn't attach much significance to religion. A typically incorrigible 'Umar al-Khayyām sings the praise of wine. Then the poet meets a group of philosophers and scientists, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus and Darwin. A large and rather diverse group of thinkers follows, among them Spencer, Fichte, Spinoza, Bruno, Newton, Renan, Rousseau, Voltaire, Zarathustra, Epicurus, al-Kindī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Rawandī and al-Ṭūsī.²⁰

Of this group Socrates is the most strong-willed. After he has explained the origin of the fire burning in hell, he declares: "Development will end our current situation. When we remain steadfast the difficulties will disappear thanks to the progress of science. In this valley there are wells from which great quantities of petrol spout. In the course of time these wells will dry up."²¹ Now it is the turn of al-Ḥallāj to proclaim his bitterness. He reproaches God: "Why haven't You protected me during my life? It was my fate that the people should kill me. Should I be punished here as well? Has Fate made a mistake?"²²

Subsequently, a smart "sinner" invents a machine that can extinguish the fire and a weapon that can kill a large number of people with one blow, as well as a device by which a man can make himself invisible. At that point a young man holds an inflammatory speech instigating the millions of inhabitants of hell to revolt. Is it justice that someone who is forced to unbelief for one hour should burn in eternity? "We have served science, were killed for it and now suffer punishment."²³ He summons them to liberate themselves by using violence and reclaim their rights. The people in hell take up their arms and go to battle. Al-Ma'arrī proclaims: "You have only wretched huts, made of fire, whereas the blockheads live in palaces in paradise; fire is the fate only of those who strive for lofty aims—a bad outcome!"²⁴

A fierce struggle ensues, which is described vividly. Bellies are ripped open, heads fly off, blood flows; hot winds blow, the angels throw lightning, mountains and seas; the devils, embittered, too, help the rebels against the angels guarding hell. God's throne shakes, the heavens nearly fall down and the angels finally take flight. The rebels enter paradise flying on the backs of the devils. They throw the blockheads out after a brief struggle and occupy the magnificent palaces. Only those who have advanced the good may stay. During the

20 Ibid., 733/71–2.

21 Ibid., 733–4/72–3.

22 Ibid., 734/73.

23 Ibid., 736/75.

24 Ibid., 736/76.

festivities the poet sighs: “This was the great revolution through which times became better in their long course.”²⁵

The final lines contain the plot which changes the perspective of the whole poem and which can to some extent be considered an anti-climax: “And when I woke up in the morning from my sleep, the sun shone in the sky; it turned out that everything had not been real but a dream I had dreamt because I had eaten cress.”²⁶

3 Truth and Illusion

Readers of *Thawra fi l-jaḥīm* who are even faintly familiar with Arabic literature would immediately be reminded of Abū ‘Alā al-Ma‘arrī’s famous work “The epistle of forgiveness” (*Risālat al-ghufrān*), and we can be sure that al-Zahāwī had al-Ma‘arrī’s poem in mind as a model. However, the resemblance is limited to concept and form, and the differences are perhaps more significant. Whereas al-Ma‘arrī describes a visit to hell by someone else and lets him observe it rather than experience it, al-Zahāwī describes himself as the unfortunate “traveller” and suffers the tortures himself. Moreover, the discussions embarked upon by al-Ma‘arrī’s protagonist are focused on literary matters and poetry, not on the injustice of God’s judgement. It would appear that al-Zahāwī may have borrowed al-Ma‘arrī’s concept, but that his message is much more radical. Another obvious influence is Dante’s *Inferno*. In his discussion of *Thawra fi l-jaḥīm*, Nāṣir al-Hānī claims that al-Zahāwī became acquainted with Dante’s work through a summary and analysis in a Turkish study. This could also be the way in which al-Zahāwī had access to another potential source, Victor Hugo’s *Dieu* and *La fin de Satan*.²⁷

It is clear that al-Zahāwī intended to use the setting of hell for a much more controversial purpose than his prominent predecessors. Whereas Dante uses cosmological and eschatological visions to link hell to earthly morality and thereby rationalizes its function as a punishment for sins, al-Zahāwī on the one hand stresses the punitive function of hell as part of a moral system, but on the other hand questions this morality and even inverts it. Like Dante and al-Ma‘arrī, al-Zahāwī refers to traditional visualizations of hell, even with reference to the Quran, creating a sense of familiarity in the setting of the narrative. This realism is enhanced by taking the figure of the poet—in the first

25 Ibid., 737/79.

26 Ibid., 738/79.

27 Hānī, *Muḥaḍirāt* 58–9.

person—as the perspective from which the story is told. The poet undergoes all the horrendous experiences himself and through his person draws the readers into the experience, enabling them to identify with him. By emphasizing his weakness, as a human being, opposite the enormous forces of judgement, he expects to arouse a feeling of sympathy and compassion in the reader during his ordeal.

By constructing a traditional setting and perspective, al-Zahāwī draws the reader's attention to the immense contrast between the standards imposed by the faith and the limitations of the human experience. Judgement is based on the acceptance of certain doctrines, but there are several obstacles that may make this acceptance difficult. The first is the deficiency of the human mind, that is, its inclination to try to understand phenomena in a rational way and explain them in rational terms. It is very difficult to accept explanations that are outside the scope of this rationality, or, even worse, it may be impossible for the human mind to internalize phenomena by other means than its rational capacity. The second obstacle is that this "weakness" is exploited by the devil, who uses the inability of humans to rationalize their explanations not only to sow doubt, but also to seduce them to unbelief in the existence of God.

The nature of hell as the quintessential site of punishment imposes a matrix of morality, which is carefully constructed in the interrogation by Munkar and Nakir. It requires, first, adherence to Islam and belief in the existence of God, and, secondly, the practicing of the religious duties; it entails belief in the Quran in its entirety and in elements of seemingly secondary importance, such as the existence of angels and *jinn*, the bridge in the hereafter and the Mountain of Qāf. It is, in brief, a matrix in which morality is reduced to belief in a system of doctrines and prescriptions that are seen as a complete, undifferentiated whole. There is no distinction between central and marginal issues; there are no exceptions; it is, moreover, a system that is abstract, devoid of any practical significance. It seems to have its own logic, constructed around the concept of hell, apparently aimed only at recruiting souls to inhabit it, rather than to evaluate, differentiate and punish specific sins.

The poor poet who is subjected to this severe set of rules tries to wriggle his way out of it through a number of strategies. First, as was noted above, he emphasizes human weakness, beset by the evil whisperings of the devil, and he calls upon God's mildness and clemency. Secondly, he tries to introduce an element of relativity into the system by differentiating between, for instance, essential and secondary doctrines. The first are indispensable for evaluating piety, while the latter cannot be embraced by the rational mind and therefore cannot be accepted as an essential criterion for religiousness. To support this, he argues that the Book may be true, but that interpretations may be wrong,

thus relativizing the whole process of deriving religious knowledge from the Quran and reducing at least part of the system of rules to the human effort of interpretation. This relativization does not, apparently, diminish the poet's belief in the essentials; on the contrary, it is the insistence that the whole system should be accepted as equally true which makes the poet doubt the essentials, too.

A third strategy used by the poet is to juxtapose the system of doctrines and rules with a system of values as the basis of moral judgement. This change of perspective turns the abstract matrix meant for 'collective' judgement into a practical template, which can be used to judge individual acts. It is not abstract, but linked to human experience in daily life. Thus, the poet enumerates his virtues and good deeds, which, although specific to his person and scattered over his life rather than integrated into a system, still justify a positive evaluation of his conduct and character. Whatever his beliefs and whatever his deviations from the rules, he has lived according to the values of which morality should be a reflection. Although his individual acts may not be included in the doctrines, they still ultimately represent what the result and impact of religiousness should be.

The poet's relativization of the moral matrix brings the values of morality back to human proportions. By doing this, however, the chasm between the system of doctrines and everyday human practice becomes so vast as to be virtually unbridgeable. For if the faith's doctrines have such a compelling force, what would be the sense of human agency and what is the ratio behind human weakness? Why has God, in commanding such severe rules, not equipped human beings with the power to adhere to them? Why, if He is almighty, has He given them the faculty of doubt, and why does He punish them if they submit to it? How, if man has no free choice, can any punishment be justified? Here, the poet refers to the age-old discussion about man's freedom to act, which, within Sunnite orthodoxy, resulted not in a doctrine of predestination, but nevertheless in a narrowing of the space for human agency. The poet complains that since God has created him as he is, with all his deficiencies, and created a devil to exploit these deficiencies, He should not punish him in the end for 'sins' that he could hardly have avoided. If God wanted to punish him without committing an injustice He should have given him more freedom to choose and a greater capacity to understand His intentions.

The poet's inability to solve the theological problems underlying the doctrines results in a scepticism that is amplified by his awareness that the human mind is to a large extent capable of explaining phenomena and experiences in a rational way. The doubts about certain doctrines are inspired by their apparent incompatibility with the insights of modern science. Since the doctrines

are unable to give rational explanations, they are gradually pushed back by scientific knowledge, which can provide explanations that can be grasped by human intelligence. Here the poet shows his predilection for the natural sciences. It is no coincidence, of course, that hell is filled with scholars, philosophers and scientists, who have striven to discover the nature of the world, sacrificed their lives for the disclosure of Truth, and are now being punished for their noble efforts. Socrates praises the merits of science and progress, and in the end it is scientific inventions that destroy the traditional cosmological setup based on an unjust polarity between paradise and hell.

The destruction of hell with the help of modern science symbolizes the possibility of replacing the age-old obscurantist visions of life and the world with new insights. If science has the power to deconstruct traditional cosmology, it may also provide a rational basis for a system of values, and, moreover, provide explanations for phenomena that have hitherto belonged to the domain of religious speculation. It is here that the poet poses his most radical hypothesis concerning religion: it may be true that God exists, but He should perhaps be identified as the basic force in the universe, which the poet calls "ether." In al-Zahāwī's philosophy, based on European scientific theories, "ether" is a non-substantial matter that "embodies" the elementary force in the universe, and thus, in an Aristotelian way, could be equated with a divine "energy," a "prime mover."

In al-Zahāwī's philosophy it is science that poses the greatest challenge to traditional religion. Religion, in its traditionalist form, seems to be part of an obscurantist world-view, in which scientific explanations do not exist or are invalid; in the future, science will provide rational explanations for phenomena about whose nature religion can only speculate. Hell is vanquished by two phenomena: scientific thinking and the awakening of a revolutionary spirit. This combination not only counters obsolete ideas, but also deeply-rooted structures of authority.

4 Fiction and Theology

After this analysis, we can try to assess al-Zahāwī's intentions in writing his rather peculiar poem. It has been said that when King Fayṣal complained about the rebellious purport of the poem, al-Zahāwī retorted: "Since I was unable to instigate a revolution on earth, I enacted a revolution in hell."²⁸ It is clear that the controversial attitude of al-Zahāwī concerning religion was

28 Hānī, *Muḥaḍirāt* 58.

linked to a more general abhorrence of repression, fatalism, and the perpetuation of obscurantist ideas. He saw before him a future governed by freedom and a modern, rationalized world-view, which would liberate the society from backwardness and stagnation. Through the literary form he uses he expects the readers to experience themselves the injustice imposed on the poet and to be mobilized through their identification with him. The poet represents the reader and is subjected to injustice by a system based on a traditional interpretation of existence. The traditional view is subsequently dismantled, to set an example, it seems, for the readers: a call to revolt against injustice and backwardness. It is important to keep in mind, however, that in the poem it is not the poet who calls for revolution, nor the scientists and philosophers, but a young hot-head who perhaps does not take into account the consequences of his rashness. The role of the poet himself is not described.

An important narrative strategy adopted by al-Zahāwī is the strengthening of the fictional character of the text through the use of dialogue. A dialogue is by definition an open and contingent form of communication, based on arguments and rationality, and intended to convince and persuade. Still, it takes place during a physical encounter and is thus susceptible to outbursts of emotion, physical threats, and pressures connected with relationships of power. Dialogues present opportunities for manipulating the 'dialogic situation,' by way of lying, simulation, &c. Since dialogues are based on the provocation of direct responses and counter-responses, they are typically apt to question and even subvert fixed ideas and doctrinal systems, because forms of all-knowingness would make any dialogue *a priori* senseless and impossible. Thus, by using the device of the dialogue, the poet aims to draw Munkar and Nakīr into his discursive domain, that is, the domain of literature and poetry, in order to force them to deconstruct their monologic religious discourse, with its moral and prescriptive implications and the potential punishment following from it. In the poem the doctrines are thus drawn into a novelistic, fictionalized world that tailors the religious world-view to human proportions. Needless to say, the two angels refuse to enter into a real dialogue, thereby confirming the reality and consistence of the religious discursive system and its instruments for punishment.

Although the poem is not a mere instigation to revolt and is clearly fictionalized, it still contains an explicit religious component. With its exploration of the compatibility of science and religion, it fits in the context of intellectual developments in the interwar period, especially its avalanche of new scientific knowledge, political upheavals and ideological debates. If we compare al-Zahāwī's thought to, for instance, the ideas of the reformist Rashīd Riḍā, we see a similar fixation on politics, societal modernization, and incorporation of

scientific knowledge. Riḍā, too, tried to grasp the developments in Western science, and his interpretation of the nature of electricity and spiritism resembles al-Zahāwī's scientific speculations. However, whereas Riḍā sees no contradiction between science and religion and embraces new discoveries, al-Zahāwī does not succeed in reconciling the two domains and ends up with a rather pantheistic view of religion. Whereas Riḍā saw modern science as a possibility to rationalize the faith, for al-Zahāwī radical rationalism results in a rejection of not only obsolete manifestations of religion, but also of quite fundamental doctrines.²⁹

Although he can be linked to the discussions within Islamic reformism, al-Zahāwī cannot himself be considered a religious reformist. In a treatise written in his youth (1905),³⁰ al-Zahāwī fiercely attacked the ideas of the Wahhābīs, whose influence was spreading to Baghdad at the time. It is remarkable that al-Zahāwī's arguments in this treatise are derived from a rather traditional form of theology and that he for instance rejects Mu'tazilite ideas about the Quran as heretical innovation (*bid'a*). He opposes the Wahhābī prohibition of *tawassul*, or mediation by saints, which was also rejected by Riḍā. He denounces the Wahhābī conviction that the attributes of God should be accepted, but does not embrace the Mu'tazilite doctrine that they should be interpreted metaphorically. In short, al-Zahāwī rejects the irrational ideas *and* rational ideas of the Wahhābīs, clearly to oppose their violent and oppressive nature as a movement, and, especially, their adoption of anathematizing (*takfīr*). He does not develop an alternative theological system rooted in the Islamic tradition. Although it is not a pamphlet advocating religious reform or a re-evaluation of theological thought, it is a serious treatise, which contrasts with al-Zahāwī's literary work.

The poem *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*, then, is not a component in a coherent theological system of reasoning, but rather a playful enactment of a religious dilemma. It is ironic that the poet undergoes the interrogations and torments that are precisely the object of his scepticism, without changing his view. During his life he would probably have rejected the existence of Munkar and Nakīr, but their appearance before him does not instigate him to give up his doubts. It is ironic, too, that at a certain point during the interrogation he calls in the help of God, or "ether," hoping that He/It will save him. In traditional conversion stories similar episodes are usually inserted to prove the powerlessness of idols, when confronted with the almighty powers of God. Perhaps the poet realizes this when he repents having said this. Does this mean that the poet

29 See van Leeuwen, Islamic reformism.

30 al-Zahāwī, *al-Fajr al-Ṣādiq*.

accepts the existence of God according to the traditional theodicy? Does it mean that the rebellion does not spring forth from a denial of His existence but from anger about the alleged injustice? After all, in the poem God's throne is shaken, but it does not fall.

Perhaps the crux of the matter is that on discovering the truth of the doctrines, the poet sees it as an injustice that God was unwilling to convince him of this truth during his life and now punishes him for what the poet considers to be God's deficiency. After all, the poet now finds out that the doctrines are true, and it is this discovery which confirms his sense of injustice and which makes a revolution unavoidable. However, this revolt is directed against a specific part of religion only, since God's status remains unscathed. Religion is to a large extent drawn into the sphere of secular struggles, excluding only God Himself. The revolution is thus not an attack on religion as such, but rather on the claims it lays on the secular domains of life and the ways in which these claims are shaped into doctrines, threats and authority.

It is important, of course, that *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* is not a religious treatise, but a work of fiction. Its fictionality is emphasized by the final sentence, which relegates the whole adventure to the realm of dreams. This device is also used by Salman Rushdie, who incorporated some of the controversial episodes of *The satanic verses* into a dream. This relativization in *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* may be intended to avoid the accusation of heresy, of course, but it may also indicate that the author does not intend to deliver a theological religious statement, but rather create a narrative space for the staging of a moral dilemma, in its individual and human implications. Since the dream is presented as a nightmare, the contradictions in the adventure are not solved: like Maḥfūz in his defence of *Awlād ḥāratinā*, he can argue that he did not represent the revolt in hell as a positive event, but as something rather frightening, both in its actual happening and in its consequences. The ironies and inconsistencies in the work, such as the poet's persistence in his 'error' in full view of the reality of the eschatological doctrines, are signs as well that the account is not intended as a blasphemous denouncement of religion or God, but rather as a visualization of the human predicament *vis-à-vis* the enormity of religious truth. The poet may ridicule certain rigid forms of religious authority, but in the end he does not ridicule God or religiousness as such. What is portrayed is not unbelief, but scepticism.

By using the device of dialogue to strengthen the fictional nature of the text, al-Zahāwī juxtaposes the poetic and religious worldviews, defining his own work as being outside the realm of religious discourse. He exposes the absence of a dialogic potential in religious discourse, which is unable to compromise or to give up its monolithic claims. Still, at a certain point, the truth-claims of

religion are opposed by al-Zahāwī's claim that poetry, too, contains a measure of 'truth' and represents a moral value system. In contrast to religious truth, however, poetic truth is part of a dialogue, an open worldview and a vision of ethics that can be understood by man. Does this poetic truth, in *Thawra fī l-jahīm* replace religious truth? It is significant that in the dialogue with Munkar and Nakīr the poet accepts the existence of God, but his vision of God is complex: He is almighty, but he allows the revolution to take place. In the end, God's throne is shaken, but not toppled, so God continues to exist with His authority intact. Therefore, even if God is equated to ether, this should not be seen as a denial of God's existence, but rather as a concept of God stripped of all its doctrinal attributes, as in the mystical, speculative vision of the highest power. Apparently, it is not al-Zahāwī's intention to destroy God or religion, but only to create a space for posing questions and discussing moral and social dilemmas by limiting the domain of religious authority. It is of course understandable that in spite of its limited aims, religious authorities would be disturbed by the ultimate purport of al-Zahāwī's poem.

Although the poem as a piece of fiction rejects any religious authority and avoids the criteria of the religious interpretive community, its reference to poetry as containing some truth, opposing art to the angels' questions as truth versus untruth, could suggest some form of religious obstinacy. It can be argued, however, that the fictional nature of the poem would sufficiently protect it against the criteria of religious evaluation. The poem may contain some truth, but it is the truth of scepticism rather than a truth that can be equated with religious doctrines. Rather than with theological doctrines, poems such as *Thawra fī l-jahīm* should be compared with mystical texts, which contain speculations about the nature of existence and God, and combine experiential certainty with intellectual speculation. Whether God is God in the traditional sense or "ether" as in the imagination of al-Zahāwī is of no essential significance. What is important is the way in which religious belief is linked to the human experience and to human values. In this relationship religious doctrines, traditions and authorities are only of secondary importance. For al-Zahāwī once remarked that the question whether he was an atheist or not concerned only himself and no-one else.³¹

We can now clearly see the function of hell in al-Zahāwī's poem: it is the locus where the struggle between doctrine and human experience takes place, where authority is effectuated, where traditional ideas are protected and preserved, and where judgement is put into cruel practice. It is also a fictional setting, where dilemmas and contradictions can be shown in their full complexity,

31 Widmer, *Der 'irāqische Dichter* 13.

without the necessity to reach a final judgement or to solve all the questions that are raised. And, finally, it is a setting where the reader can identify more than in any other setting with the fear, doubts and horror of the poet in his predicament as an essentially free, sceptic mind.

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