

al-'Amiri, Abu'l Hasan Muhammad ibn Yusuf (d. 992)

Although al-'Amiri had only a limited long-term impact, his extant works provide useful insights into an extremely creative period in Islamic philosophy in the tenth century ad. He attempted to reconcile philosophy with religion by showing that the genuine conclusions of philosophy could not contradict the revealed truths of Islam, and attempted to build consensus within Islam. He argued for the individual immortality and the punishment or reward of the soul. His analysis of the soul is largely Neoplatonic. The reward of the afterlife is determined by the actualization of the intellect in this life, aided primarily by right actions which moderate the physical faculties and turn the intellect toward the Divine.

Abu'l Hasan Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-'Amiri was born in Khurasan (in modern Iran) in the early fourth century ah (tenth century ad) and died in Nishapur in ah 381/ad 992. He began his career in Khurasan, where he studied under Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, and moved to Rayy and Baghdad, where he met and was discussed by such substantial intellectuals as [al-Tawhidi](#) and [Ibn Miskawayh](#). He ended his career in Bukhara, where he had access to the Samani library (in which [Ibn Sina](#) studied shortly thereafter), and in Nishapur.

Al-'Amiri's main concern was the rational defence of Islam against a form of philosophy regarded as independent of revelation, and against competing religious traditions. In the tradition of [al-Kindi](#), he attempted to reconcile philosophy with religion by showing that the real conclusions of philosophy could not contradict the revealed truths of Islam. Unlike his contemporary [al-Farabi](#), however, al-'Amiri argued that revealed truth must be superior to philosophy, since revelation was necessary for the completion of the human intellect and as the indubitable guide to right action. The Greeks possessed useful wisdom, but they could not be considered final authorities because they lacked a prophet.

In spite of his attacks on, for example, the Mu'tazila and the Batiniya esotericists, al-'Amiri's approach was generally conciliatory toward philosophy, the *mutakallimun* (theologians) and a wide variety of Islamic sects. His respected treatise on Sufism, for example, provided both a rational, Aristotelian interpretation of Sufism and a reconciliation of Sufism with more conventional Islam. He preferred to emphasize areas of agreement between philosophers and Islamic sects, perhaps because he perceived the dangers of sectarianism in the diverse environment of Khurasan and perhaps also because Islam had not fully consolidated its position relative to pre-Islamic traditions. He had a marked preference for religious, rather than philosophical, terminology (for example, *ruh* rather than *nafs* for the soul), indicating that his probable primary audience was the Islamic religious elite.

In [al-I'lam bi manaqib al-Islam \(An Exposition on the Merits of Islam\)](#) and [Inqadh al-bashar min al-jahr wa'l-qadar \(Deliverance of Mankind from the Problem of](#)

[Predestination and Free Will](#)), al-'Amiri attempted a rational justification of the moral superiority of Islam to other religions, especially to Zoroastrianism and Manicheism. In the latter work, he also attempted a resolution of the theological problem of free will by the application of Aristotelian principles, a project which he repeated with greater philosophical subtlety in his [al-Taqrir li-awjuh al-taqdir](#) ([The Determination of the Various Aspects of Predestination](#)).

His resolution of the problem of predestination required a distinction between necessary, contingent and possible beings. Only God is necessary existence (*wajib al-wujud*), whose essence is identical with his existence. Human use of multiple terms for divine attributes is thus figurative, since God is essentially a unity. All other existents are contingent and, in so far as they require the support of necessary existence, are preordained. The relations of contingent things to each other, however, are of a different order, in which individual responsibility is possible. Significantly, al-'Amiri's use of the term *wajib al-wujud* is one of only two extant examples (the other is Ibn Miskawayh) of the use of this term prior to Ibn Sina, who adopted the term into the very heart of his thought. Al-'Amiri's interpretation of [Empedocles](#) suggests the possible existence of a pseudo-Empedoclean text or tradition extant in his time which might have been a significant precursor of some important Avicennan arguments.

Al-'Amiri's list of the five 'sages' of Greek philosophy is unusual, since Empedocles is first in a line which progresses through [Pythagoras](#), [Socrates](#), [Plato](#) and [Aristotle](#). In keeping with al-'Amiri's conciliatory method, each was given a means of contact with a prophetic tradition, even though each spoke from the perspective of reason alone. Empedocles was said to have studied with Luqman in Syria, and Pythagoras with the companions of Solomon in Egypt. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle then preserved and developed the wisdom of Pythagoras. Al-'Amiri's sources for philosophical history are primarily Neoplatonic, especially pseudo-Ammonius (see [Neoplatonism](#)).

One or more fragmented translations of the *Phaedo* were especially important for al-'Amiri's [Kitab al-amad 'ala'l-abad](#) ([On the Afterlife](#)), in which he argued for the individual immortality and punishment or reward of the soul. His analysis of the soul is largely Neoplatonic, and the reward of the afterlife is determined by the actualization of the intellect in this life, aided primarily by right actions which moderate the physical faculties and turn the intellect toward the Divine.

Al-'Amiri's work was soon eclipsed by the philosophical revolution brought about by Ibn Sina. Nevertheless, his work provides a window into the philosophical and religious debates which formed the background of that revolution and into the sources upon which the participants in those debates drew. Although partisans of various schools may find his interpretations problematic, his emphasis on the importance of good action over particulars of doctrine and his synthesizing

interpretations represent an important attempt to build consensus within Islam during a turbulent, fractious, creative period in its history.

See also: [Ibn Sina](#); [Islamic theology](#); [Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy](#); [Predestination](#); [Soul in Islamic philosophy](#)

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List of works

Al-'Amiri (before 992) *al-I'lam bi manaqib al-Islam (An Exposition on the Merits of Islam)*. (A translation of most of Chapter 1, 'The Quiddity of Knowledge and the Appurtenances of its Species', can be found in F. Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage of Islam*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973, 63-70. A translation by F. Rosenthal of Chapter 7, 'The Excellences of Islam in Relation to Royal Authority', appears in 'State and Religion According to Abu l-Hasan al-'Amiri', *Islamic Quarterly* 3: 42-52.)

Al-'Amiri (before 992) *Inqadh al-bashar min al jahr wa'l-qadar (Deliverance of Mankind from the Problem of Predestination and Free Will)*. (There is at present no modern edition of this work.)

Al-'Amiri (before 992) *al-Taqrir li-awjuh al-taqdir (The Determination of the Various Aspects of Predestination)*. (There is at present no modern edition of this work.)

Al-'Amiri (before 992) *Kitab al-amad 'ala'l-abad (On the Afterlife)*, ed. and trans. E.K. Rowson, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and Its Fate: Al-'Amiri's Kitab al Amad 'ala l-abad*, New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1988. (Rowson contains a critical edition and translation with a commentary on al-'Amiri's most influential work, with thorough background and bibliographic material.)

References and further reading

Biesterfeldt, H.H. (1977) 'Abu'l-Hasan al-'Amiri und die Wissenschaften' (*Abu'l Hasan al-'Amiri and the Sciences*), *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplement III (1), Wiesbaden. (A useful discussion of the division of the sciences in the *I'lam*.)

Rowson, E.K. (1996) 'Al-'Amiri', in S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds) *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, ch. 14, 216-21. (Concise evaluation of the

career of this influential thinker.)

Vadet, J.C. (1974-5) *'Une Défense philosophique de la sunna: les Manaqib al-islam d'al-'Amiri'*, *Revue des études islamiques* 42: 245-76 and 43: 77-96. (An overview of the *I'lam*.)

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