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AUB professor's English translation of medieval Islamic document reveals dynamism of Islamic debate

Beirut, Lebanon- 06/06/2012 - A new English translation of a debate between two celebrated figures of the medieval Islamic era who diverge on notions of prophecy, miracles and the origins of science helps to dispel the notion of Islam as a rigid, monolithic religion.

Tarif Khalidi, Shaykh Zayid Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at AUB who translated *Abu Hatim al-Razi: The Proofs of Prophecy*, explains that debates were frequent in pre-modern Islamic culture though very few have survived, and fewer still at such length.

The debate took place around 920 AD between Abu Hatim al-Razi, a well known Isma'ili missionary, and Abu Bakr al-Razi, a widely revered physician and philosopher known by his Latin name, Rhazes, as it appears, for instance, in medieval Europe and even in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The two figures were not related.

Rhazes, during the debate, expresses deep religious skepticism. He attacks the Qur'an and Bible, points to contradictions in holy scriptures and religious narratives, and dismisses scripture as superstition.

On the other side of the debate, Abu Hatim vigorously defends prophecy. When debating the origins of the sciences, for example, he argues that scientists in different parts of the world could not possibly have coordinated or shared their accumulated knowledge. He argues that the origins of science were divinely inspired, and that scientific knowledge was passed on from God to mankind. Holy scriptures too should be understood metaphorically and not literally.

The debate was written by Abu Hatim and thus may raise questions over accuracy in the representation of his opponent; however, Khalidi says, the views are consistent with other opinions of Rhazes. The manuscript was the basis for the original, 250 or so-page Arabic edition of the book published in 1977.

The candid nature of the debate and the instincts of the characters to speak freely and to openly question basic Islamic and religious tenets forces readers to challenge widely held views of Islam and religious freedom, especially during the Middle Ages.

"It represents huge divergences in religious debate between medieval and modern periods," Khalidi says. "Medieval times were in many ways more tolerant than modern."

He says the book would be useful for courses on world religion to show religious skepticism as a "very healthy antidote to religion," courses on Islamic thought, and would also be suitable for courses on the history of science.

Khalidi says he worked on the translation "off and on" over the past five or six years. After completing the book, he discovered that Brigham Young University Press in Utah was eager to publish it as a part of the university's Islamic translation series. It may soon become available in some Beirut bookshops.

The publishers recently sent Khalidi his only copy of the book which, he says, he will donate to the AUB library as he always does after completing a book. Khalidi recently completed a new translation of the Qur'an (Penguin, 2008) which received wide praise for its accuracy and elegance, as well as a study of the Prophet entitled *Images of Muhammad* (Doubleday, 2009).

Currently, he is also translating his mother's memoirs and is working on an anthology of Arabic literature in English translation.

"When I finish with a book I just say 'good riddance and good luck,'" he says. "I don't interest myself at all in its fate."

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Note to Editors

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Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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