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The *Ghulāt* and Abbasid Culture Polemics in *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ*

Because of the cryptic nature of *Ghulāt* writings, it is often near impossible to understand anything about the *Ghulāt*'s attitudes to the real world. Reading *Ghulāt* texts, one learns about the fate of human souls, believers and unbelievers, about God's manifestations on earth, and about the esoteric meaning of religious rituals. One learns almost nothing about other Muslims, contemporary politics, and the broader world around them. One or two of *Ghulāt* texts do nonetheless contain rather explicit references to the real world out there. *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ*, by pseudo-Mufaḍḍāl b. 'Umar al-Ju'fī, is the richest surviving example. It is a well-crafted treatise elaborating *Ghulāt* theology and cosmology in great detail. It also polemicizes against the *Ghulāt*'s critics, attacks caliphal dynasties, refers to historical events, and critiques the dominant learned culture. Thanks to some of the references it contains, it has a firm terminus post quem and can be dated – uniquely for the *Ghulāt* corpus – with precision to half a century. In this paper I will discuss three sorts of polemics found in *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ*. First, their polemics against the Caliphate; second, polemics against Imami Shi'is and their teaching about *ghayba*; finally, their criticism of Abbasid learned culture, and in particular, “exoteric” (*ẓāhir*) sciences, such as the science of *ḥadīth*, variant readings of the Qur'ān, dialectical reasoning (*naẓar*), and polemics between schools of thought (*madhāhib*), and the practice of theological debate (*jadāl*). *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ*'s criticism of debate, dialectical reasoning, and other “exoteric” sciences should be understood as part of a broader Abbasid religious and intellectual milieu, where different approaches to knowledge coexisted side by side. The approach espoused by *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ* could be termed “esoteric,” implying that true knowledge could be acquired through a personal, intimate connection with an authoritative teacher. Transfer of knowledge is thereby seen as akin to revelation, hence in *Ghulāt* literature it is frequently equated to marriage or sexual intercourse. The “cruder” alternatives to such a transfer were the deist approach of *ḥadīth* scholars, based on a careful transmission of texts and nothing more, and the one espoused by dialectical theologians (*mutakallimūn*), which implied the use of personal judgement and reasoning in theological matters and, relatedly, debating these matters in public venues. *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ* provides a unique glimpse into the broader world that the *Ghulāt* inhabited, and I will use it to situate them within this world.



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