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Abū Al-Ḥasan Al-Mas‘ūdī on pre-Islamic Arab Religions and Belief

Majdan Alias

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Abstract: This study aims to shed light on one aspect of the contributions of an early Muslim historian of religion, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī. It focuses on al-Mas‘ūdī’s work on pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs. The study is based on textual analysis of al-Mas‘ūdī’s treatment of the issue in his *Murūj* (The Meadows), and comparisons are made with al-Mas‘ūdī’s treatments of the non-Arab religions.

Keywords: Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī, jāhiliyyah, treatment of non-Arab religions

Abstrak: Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan penerangan tentang satu aspek dalam sumbangan seorang sejarawan Islam awal iaitu Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī, dengan memfokuskan karya-karya beliau terhadap agama masyarakat Arab pra-Islam. Kajian ini berasaskan analisis teks tentang pengendalian al-Mas‘ūdī, terhadap isu tersebut dalam karyanya *Murūj*. Seterusnya ia dibandingkan dengan pengendalian beliau terhadap agama masyarakat bukan Arab.

Kata kunci: Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī, jāhiliyyah, pengendalian terhadap agama-agama bukan Arab

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Introduction

The works of al-Mas‘ūdī (956C.E.) stand out as one of the most outstanding early Muslim contributions to historiography. Al-Mas‘ūdī’s endeavours to explore the varieties of human nations and his tireless travels and attempts at dictating the marvels of the world had led to his being considered as the Herodotus of the Arabs by the Orientalist Alfred Von Kremer (1889 C.E.) (as cited in Al-Suwaykat, 1986, p. 447). Among the attractive features of al-Mas‘ūdī’s historical writings are his systematic treatment of the world’s major religions prevailing during his time. The religions dealt with by al-Mas‘ūdī in his works are Magianism, Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, Sabianism, the Greek religions, the Chinese religions, the Indian religions, Judaism, Christianity, and pre-Islamic Arab religions. The present article sheds light on al-Mas‘ūdī’s study of pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs, and the affiliations of the Arabs prior to the revelation to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), a period known in Muslim literature as *al-Jāhiliyyah*. Two reasons have led the author to his choice of presenting al-Mas‘ūdī’s study of the pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs. First, al-Mas‘ūdī did not confine his discussion only to these religions and beliefs, but in most cases he studied them within a wider scope, analyzing the religious phenomena among the pre-Islamic Arabs and viewing them as general phenomena taking place in most human societies, the Arabs and the non-Arabs alike. Hence, we find al-Mas‘ūdī made comparisons between the beliefs of the Arabs and the beliefs of people of other nations. Second, al-Mas‘ūdī’s treatment of the pre-Islamic Arab religions contains a special feature which is not found in his treatments of other religions, that is his categorizations of religions, a subject also known as the “typology of religions” (Kamaruzzaman, 2003, p. 132).

Several studies have been conducted on al-Mas‘ūdī’s contributions to historical writings. The work of Khalidi (1975), *Islamic Historiography, the Histories of al-Mas‘ūdī* is the most extensive. Other studies are those carried out by Al-Kharbūtlī (n.d.), *Al-Mas‘ūdī*, Al-Suwaykat (1986), *Manhaj al-Mas‘ūdī fī Kitābah al-Tārīkh* (Al-Mas‘ūdī’s Methodology in Historical Writing) and ‘Āṣī (1993), *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī al-Mu’arrikh wa al-Jughrāfī* (Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī the Historian and Geographer). All these works provide overviews of al-Mas‘ūdī’s engagement in the study of religions other than Islam.

The work of Shboul (1979), *Al-Mas‘ūdī and His World* is an extensive work providing in-depth discussions on several aspects in al-Mas‘ūdī’s study on humanities. Another important study is the one conducted by Ḥammūd (1983), *Manhaj al-Mas‘ūdī fī Baḥth al-‘Aqā’id wa al-Firaq al-Dīnīyah* (Al-Mas‘ūdī’s Methodology in the Study of Beliefs and Religious Sects). However, both Shboul and Ḥammūd did not provide much in-depth analyses on the scientific method employed by al-Mas‘ūdī in the study of religions. Likewise, they provided an overview of the pre-Islamic Arab religions. Hence, a more comprehensive study is needed.

The present study is based on textual analysis of al-Mas‘ūdī’s treatment of pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs in his *magnum opus: Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar* (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems). In presenting al-Mas‘ūdī’s descriptions of the religions and beliefs of pre-Islamic Arabs, this study employs a descriptive method. Moreover, the comparative method will be applied to compare al-Mas‘ūdī’s methodology in his study of these pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs with those of the non-Arabs.

Al-Mas‘ūdī’s Background

His name is ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Hadhalī and he is also popular with the nickname Abū al-Ḥasan. His lineage can be traced back to one of the most learned companions of the Prophet (S.A.W.), ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd, hence, he is known as al-Mas‘ūdī (‘Āṣī, 1993, p. 46). Al-Mas‘ūdī was born in 900C.E. in the city of Baghdad, where he was raised. His family was very much connected to Iraq, as his great grandfather, ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd, migrated to this land during the reign of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān. In Iraq, this family devoted itself to knowledge and the arts (*al-Ādāb*), but was not involved in the political struggle that took place in the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd periods. Being in a family that gave serious attention to knowledge, and living in the most important center of knowledge during that time, i.e. Baghdad, al-Mas‘ūdī was exposed to many different branches of knowledge (‘Āṣī, 1993, p. 49).

Al-Mas‘ūdī, however, was not content with what he obtained in Baghdad. He felt the need to experience first-hand information after knowing some through written works. The first direction taken by al-Mas‘ūdī was towards the east where he travelled to Persia, particularly

in Kerman, and settled for some time in Istakhr. During this time, all these regions were under the rule of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire. In 921 C.E. al-Mas‘ūdī continued his journey to the Indian sub-continent. He travelled to places in the Indus valley, moving to places in the west coast of the sub-continent, and settled for a period in Bombay. He then lived for some time in Sri Lanka. From there, he sailed on the Indian Ocean, visiting some of the islands, particularly Madagascar and Zanzibar. It is said that he proceeded to China, then returned and visited Oman. In 926 C.E., al-Mas‘ūdī travelled to places around the Caspian Sea, particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia. Later on, he proceeded to Syria and Palestine. In 944 C.E., al-Mas‘ūdī went to Antioch, then back to Basrah, then again to Syria, staying in Damascus for some time. During the last few years of his life he travelled frequently to Iraq, Syria and Egypt, and finally he settled in Fustāt until his death in 957 C.E (Al-Kharbūṭlī, n.d., pp. 26-28 & Zaydān, n.d., vol. 2, pp. 313-314).

Al-Mas‘ūdī’s Works on Pre-Islamic Arab Religions and Beliefs

Al-Mas‘ūdī was a prolific writer whose works cover different fields of knowledge. However, most of his works have been lost except two that remain in their fullest form: *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar* (*Murūj*) (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) and *Al-Tanbīh wa al-Ishrāf* (*Tanbīh*) (The Admonition and Revision). It can be deduced from the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh* that al-Mas‘ūdī’s main contribution was in the field of historiography and most of his works may be categorized under this discipline.

He also wrote on several other branches of the Islamic sciences, both in the fundamentals of Islam (*al-uṣūl*) and Islamic practices (*al-furū’*). Apart from that, al-Mas‘ūdī also wrote on philosophy, politics, astronomy, and the pure sciences.

With regard to the present article, the study refers to the *Murūj* for al-Mas‘ūdī’s description of the pre-Islamic Arab religions (*Diyanāt al-Jāhiliyah*). These religions and beliefs are not mentioned in the *Tanbīh*.

The titles of al-Mas‘ūdī’s lost works on pre-Islamic Arabs can be found in the *Murūj* (2000, vol.2, pp.132-196). Through al-Mas‘ūdī’s citations of his works written prior to the *Murūj*, it is possible to figure out some of the contents of these works with regard to pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs. The following are the titles and brief contents:

Kitāb Sirr al-Ḥayāh (Sirr) (The Secret of Life) contained information on the views of the Arabs and other nations on the levels of the soul (*al-Nafs*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 183). It also contained information on the belief in metempsychosis (*Tanaqqul al-Arwāḥ*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 159). There was also the *Kitāb al-Da‘āwā al-Shanī‘ah (al-Da‘āwā)* (The Disgusting Claims) which contained information on the belief in metempsychosis (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 159).

Kitāb al-Maqālāt fī Uṣūl al-Diyānāt (al-Maqālāt) (Opinions on the Principles of Religion) contained the Arabs’ beliefs of the characteristics of the jinn (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 164), and some information about the belief of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the uncle of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 137).

Kitāb Akhbār al-Zamān wa man Abādahu al-Ḥadathān min al-Umam al-Māḍiyah wa al-Ajyāl al-Khāliyah wa al-Mamālik al-Dāthirah (Akhbār) (The Accounts of Time and Ancient Nations, Past Generations, and Vanished Kingdoms) and *Kitāb al-Awsaṭ (Awsaṭ)* (The Intermediate) had information about soothsayers among the pre-Islamic Arab communities (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 196).

Kitāb al-Istibṣār fī al-Imāmah (al-Istibṣār) (Deliberating on the *Imāmah*) and *Kitāb al-Ṣafwah fī al-Imāmah (al-Ṣafwah)* (The Epitome of the *Imāmah*) both contained information on the belief of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 137).

Al-Mas‘ūdī’s Methodology

The following paragraphs analyze three dimensions of al-Mas‘ūdī’s methodology in his treatment of the pre-Islamic Arab religions. First, al-Mas‘ūdī’s sources and method of gaining information. Second, his method of analyzing the information he gained on these religions, which relied basically on comparisons. Third, al-Mas‘ūdī’s method of presenting these religions, as well as his method of presenting the results of his analyses.

Sources of Information on Pre-Islamic Arab Religions and Beliefs

With regard to data collection, al-Mas‘ūdī was very much concerned with the validity of information that reached him regarding the religions and beliefs he studied. Certainly, the advent of sciences, together with political and theological development that took place in the Muslim

lands during his time, had shaped al-Mas‘ūdī’s attitude towards the data on past and distant nations.

In al-Mas‘ūdī’s study of the religions and beliefs of the non-Arabs, his passion to gain eyewitness information had taken him away from his hometown to spend several phases of his life at the settlements of communities unfamiliar to him. However, with regard to the historical pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs, al-Mas‘ūdī might have felt at ease to collect information from people who settled in Baghdad, his home town, where he spent the first phase of his life. Since many of the issues he dealt with in his study on pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs revolved around the land of Ḥijāz as well as the fact that descendants and successors of the migrants of Madinah in Baghdad (and al-Mas‘ūdī was one of them, since his lineage can be traced back to the companion ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd) (‘Āṣī, 1993, p. 46) existed during his time had facilitated al-Mas‘ūdī in gaining authentic information about these religions and beliefs.

Basically, al-Mas‘ūdī’s knowledge about the beliefs and religions of the Arabs prior to the advent of Islam is based on three main sources: first, the Qur’ān, second, his observation of the remnants of ancient Arab settlements, and third, pre-Islamic Arab literature.

The Qur’ānic verses referred to by al-Mas‘ūdī in his study of pre-Islamic Arab beliefs are *al-Zumar* verse 3 to refer to the idol worshippers among the Arabs; *al-Jāthiyah* verse 24 when describing pre-Islamic Arab materialists and *al-Najm* verse 57 to refer to the claims among some Arabs that angels are daughters of Allah (S.W.T.) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132).

Regarding al-Mas‘ūdī’s observation, one obvious example is his phrase when describing the settlement of the ancient Thamūd community, a city known today as Petra. Al-Mas‘ūdī said:

...and their settlements are until this time sculpture of buildings in the mountains, their paintings still remain and their monuments are unique..., and the size of their homes are the same as ours, indicating that the size of their bodies was the same as ours, unlike the description of some story tellers who described them (the Thamūd community) as huge in size (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 46).

It is clear from the above mentioned paragraph that one of al-Mas‘ūdī’s sources of information on pre-Islamic Arab communities were his own observations of the settlements of the communities. Here al-Mas‘ūdī was bringing forth two important tools in studying religions and beliefs of people of past generations. First, the significance of eyewitness observations in acquiring objective statements about the religions and beliefs of “the others”. Second, sculptures and paintings as instruments in depicting their beliefs about the unseen, and thus, they are reliable instruments for students and researches in attaining dependable statement about religions and beliefs.

Al-Mas‘ūdī’s effort of visiting the settlements of his subjects to gain valid information about their religions and beliefs can also be seen in some parts of his descriptions of the non-Arab religions. Examples are his visit to the settlements of the Sabians in the city of Ḥarrān, where he had a chance to see by himself their temples and rites (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 1993, p. 154), and his visit to Sri Lanka (*Sarnadīb*), where he had the chance to observe the cremation of the corpse of a Hindu king (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 1, p. 95). All these reflect the spirit of objectivity and unprejudiced engagement into scholastic analysis of humans’ religions and beliefs carried out by an early Muslim historian of religions.

With regard to the pre-Islamic Arab literature, al-Mas‘ūdī attained the information through the writings and collections of his predecessors, who before that, had received the information from scholars who lived in the eighth century C.E. (second century of the Hijrah), the century when the movement for the compilation of the prophetic traditions began. It is said that the compilation of literary works, i.e. the news of the Arabs, and Arab poems and proverbs, also began in this period (Al-Asad, 1998, p. 156). Here al-Mas‘ūdī’s reference to scholars like Hammād al-Rāwiyah (772C.E.) who was one of the important figures in the movement of the collection of pre-Islamic literature (Al-Asad, 1998, p. 268), and al-Aṣma‘ī (832C.E.) who took from Hammād and some others among Hammād’s contemporary, might have assisted al-Mas‘ūdī in acquiring the literature of the Arabs during the pre-Islamic period. Interestingly, in his introduction to the *Murūj*, al-Mas‘ūdī listed the names of his predecessors whose works he consulted. Hence, we are able to trace al-Mas‘ūdī’s sources of information when he wrote on the religions and beliefs of pre-Islamic Arabs. The following are some examples:

When describing the belief in ghouls (*Ghūl*) among the Arabs, al-Mas‘ūdī quoted a poem of Ta‘abbata Sharrā (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 160) and the same poem is mentioned by Ibn Qutaybah (889C.E.) in his *Al-Shi‘r wa al-Shu‘arā*, (Ibn Qutaybah, 1958, p. 313) and since al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned Ibn Qutaybah in the list of his pioneers in his introduction to the *Murūj* (2000, vol. 1, pp. 20-24), we are certain that al-Mas‘ūdī had taken some information about the belief in ghouls from Ibn Qutaybah.

When describing the religion of ‘Ād who worshipped three idols - Ṣamūd, Ṣadā’ and Hibā’ - al-Mas‘ūdī referred to a poet by the name Marthad ibn Sa‘d who said that the people of ‘Ād had an idol called Ṣamūd which they believed to be a rival of Ṣudā’ and Hibā’. Al-Tabari (922C.E.) whose works were admired by al-Mas‘ūdī (2000, vol.1, p. 23), also mentioned these three idols of ‘Ād by name in his Qur’ānic commentary (Al-Ūbarī, n.d., vol. 12, pp. 507-508). Thus, we are certain that al-Mas‘ūdī had benefited from al-Ūbarī for the information on the religion of ‘Ād.

It is not clear whether al-Mas‘ūdī had benefitted from the prolific writer of *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah*, Abū Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām (833C.E.), and the author of a popular book of history, Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn Ishāq ibn Ja‘afar al-Ya‘qūbī (897C.E.). Nevertheless, some of the poems al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned in his *Murūj* are also mentioned by these two writers, but in al-Mas‘ūdī’s listing of his predecessors, these two names are not included. Thus, our assumption is that Ibn Hishām and al-Ya‘qūbī might have taken the poems from a different source. Here are some examples:

When describing the religion of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of the Prophet (S.A.W.), al-Mas‘ūdī quoted three poems where ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib expressed his belief in one God (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 134). One of the poems states:

“O my Lord, the servant protects his camels thus, You protect Your camels

Their crosses and plots should not overcome Your plots”

Al-Ya‘qūbī in his *Tārīkh* (2002, vol. 1, p. 216) and Ibn Hishām in his *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah* (2004, vol. 1, p. 52) both mentioned these lines of poems; however, with slight difference in the wordings. Since

we are not sure whether or not al-Mas‘ūdī had benefitted from both of them, the slight difference in the narrative of the poems may suggest that the poems reached al-Ya‘qūbī and Ibn Hishām through a different chain.

In his description of the belief in metempsychosis, al-Mas‘ūdī quoted a poem by ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib (al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 135), and the same poem is mentioned by al-Ya‘qūbī in his *Tārīkh* (2002, vol. 1, p. 253). Since we do not have any evidence that al-Mas‘ūdī had benefitted from any of al-Ya‘qūbī’s work, we may assume that both al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Ya‘qūbī took the poem from the same source.

As mentioned earlier, in al-Mas‘ūdī’s introduction to the *Murūj*, he listed the names of scholars whose works he referred to. Through the titles of some of the works of these scholars we may trace al-Mas‘ūdī’s references in his writing of pre-Islamic Arab religions. They are:

Al-Haytham ibn ‘Udayy (822C.E.) who wrote “Families of Arabs” (*Buyūtāt al-‘Arab*), “Families of Qurāysh” (*Buyūtāt Qurāysh*), “Division of Arabs, Their Journeys and Settlements” (*Iftirāq al-‘Arab wa Nuzūluhā wa Manāziluhā*) and “The Journey of Arabs in Khurāsān and al-Sawād al-Mawāsīm” (*Nuzūl al-‘Arab bi Khurāsān wa al-Sawād al-Mawāsīm*) (Tarḥīnī, 1991, p. 64).

‘Alī ibn Muhammad ibn al-Madā’inī (838C.E.) who wrote “The Genealogy of Qurāysh and their Stories” (*Nasab Qurāysh wa Akhbāruhā*) and the book with the last title has reached us (Al-Baghdādī, 1997, p. 55 & Tarḥīnī, 1991, p. 66).

Abū ‘Ubaydah Ma‘mar ibn al-Muthannā (826C.E.) who wrote “The Genealogies (*al-Ansāb*), “The Days of Arabs (*Ayyām al-‘Arab*), and “Families of Arabs” (*Buyūtāt al-‘Arab*). Al-Baghdādī mentioned that Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā said, “whoever wants to get information on the Jāhilīyah Arabs should refer to the books of Abū ‘Ubaydah” (Tarḥīnī, 1991, p. 66). Some of Abū ‘Ubaydah’s works are “The Book of Tribes” (*Kitāb al-Qabā’il*), “The Poems and the Poets” (*Al-Shi‘r wa al-Shu‘arā’*), “The Book of Makkah and al-Ḥaram” (*Kitāb Makkah wa al-Ḥaram*), “Families of the Arabs” (*Buyūtāt al-‘Arab*), “Adventures of the Arabs” (*Ma‘āthir al-‘Arab*), “Story of the Ka‘bah” (*Qiṣṣah al-Ka‘bah*) and “The Days” (*Al-Ayyām*) (Ibn al-Nadīm, 1997, pp. 76-77).

‘Abd al-Malik ibn Qarīb Al-Aṣma‘ī (832C.E.) had written “The Book of Genealogy” (*Kitāb al-Nasab*), and “History of the Early Arab Kings” (*Tārīkh Mulūk al-‘Arab al-Awwalīyyah*). Only the latter was edited by Muhammad Ḥasan Āl Yāsīn and published with the title “History of the Arabs before Islam” (*Tārīkh al-‘Arab Qabl al-Islām*) is available today (Tarḥīnī, 1991, p. 67).

Abū Ja‘far ibn Yaḥyā Al-Balādhūrī (892C.E.) produced “Genealogy of the Nobles” (*Ansāb al-Ashrāf*) or otherwise known as “The News and the Nobles” (*Al-Akḥbār wa al-Ashrāf*).

Abū Zayd ‘Umar ibn Shabbah (875C.E.) wrote “The Poems and The Poets” (*Kitāb al-Shi‘r wa al-Shu‘arā*), “The Genealogy” (*Kitāb al-Nasab*) and “The Book of Songs” (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*).

‘Abd Allāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah (889C.E.) had written “The Book of Adversity” (*Kitāb al-Anwā*).

Finally, Naṣr ibn Shumayl (819C.E.) was the writer of “The Book of Adversity” (*Kitāb al-Anwā*) and “The Book of the Sun and the Moon” (*Kitāb al-Shams wa al-Qamar*) (Ibn al-Nadīm, 1997, pp. 74-75).

Analysis: Comparative Method

Al-Mas‘ūdī applied a scientific method in analyzing the data he gained. Reasoning to him, played a vital role in identifying whether information is acceptable or otherwise. This can be seen in al-Mas‘ūdī’s description of the belief of the extremists (*al-ghulāt*) who neglected some of the basic logical imperatives and hence, their embracing of the belief in metempsychosis (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 136).

Al-Mas‘ūdī’s analytical instruments can be found in his comparative method. By comparing various aspects of religion such as principles, historical backgrounds, and religious vocabularies, one would be able to get a deeper understanding of religion, the interconnectivity of fundamental concepts within one religion and across various religions, and assist a student of comparative religion in comprehending the general principles governing religions. Two levels of comparison can be deduced from al-Mas‘ūdī’s work on pre-Islamic Arab beliefs. First, to compare the usages of one single concept within one religion or system of belief. For example, al-Mas‘ūdī’s comparison of different types of demons (*al-shayāṭīn*) described by the Arabs using different

vocabularies. Al-Mas‘ūdī said that the Arabs differentiated between *al-Ghūl* and *al-su‘lāt* (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 162-163). Another example is al-Mas‘ūdī’s comparison between two different categories of soothsayers: *al-‘arrāf* and *al-Kāhin* (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 178). Second, to compare the applications of one concept within different religions. For example, al-Mas‘ūdī looked into the usages of the concept of metempsychosis (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 136, 159), soothsayer (*al-Kahhānah*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 176) and tracking (*al-qiya‘fah*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 171) among the Arabs and the non-Arabs. Indeed, this type of comparison can be traced in many parts of the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh*. In the *Murūj* al-Mas‘ūdī made comparison between the Chinese religion (*al-samnīyah*) and the pre-Islamic Arab religion (*al-jāhilīyah*) on idol worshipping (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, pp. vol. 1, p. 148). In the *Tanbīh*, he compared the beliefs of the Indians, the Chinese, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Greeks, and the Ḥarrānians on the influences of movements in heavenly bodies such as stars and planets over the fates on earth (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 1993, p. 154). At another place he compared the Christologies of different Christian groups existing during his time: the Nestorians, the Melkites, the Maronites, and the Jacobites (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 1993, p. 148).

Presentation

Throughout the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh*, it is evident that al-Mas‘ūdī’s arrangement of presentation takes a thematic approach. Issues and events are organized according to the reigns of rulers who were ruling the empire, state, or territory where the issues and events took place. When al-Mas‘ūdī spoke about the religions of the Arabs, he placed the discussion under Kings of Arab Tribes (*Muluk al-Ṭawā‘if*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 118). Unlike *al-Ṭabarī*, who presented history chronologically, and is said to be a true historian who wrote history without trying to shape it to suit any particular interest (Rasul, 1968, p. 28), al-Mas‘ūdī’s thematic arrangement is obviously more objective towards getting the lessons from historical events. Furthermore, al-Mas‘ūdī’s method would hinder the disturbance in the flow of thought that is taking place in the minds of the readers.

The general approach adopted by al-Mas‘ūdī in his presentation in the *Murūj* is descriptive and analytical. He mentioned that he avoided value judgment when presenting the views because the *Murūj* is

specifically meant for narratives, not for judgement (*Kitāb al-khabar lā Kitāb al-ārā' wa al-niḥal*). However, in one instance, al-Mas'ūdī seemed to have gone beyond his own methodology of avoiding value judgments where he viewed the Islamic sects who embraced the belief in metempsychosis as extremists (*al-ghuluw*) (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 136).

In al-Mas'ūdī's presentation of history, he did not use the well-known *isnād* listing method among historians and scholars of *ḥadīth*. The reason being, as al-Mas'ūdī mentioned, that he had already listed the full *isnād* for the same reports in his earlier works (Khalidī, 1975, p. 26). Furthermore, in many cases he presented composite accounts and thus used phrases such as “and they said...” (*wa qālū...*), “there is a dispute over...” (*wa qad tunūzi 'a fī*) and “a group of predecessors view...” (*qad dhahaba ṭā'ifatun min salaf*). This shows that it is not that al-Mas'ūdī refused to embrace the *isnād* method, but he found it unnecessary to mention the chain (Khalidī, 1975, p. 26).

Pre-Islamic Arab Religions

Al-Mas'ūdī's description of religions of the Arabs before the advent of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) in the *Murūj* is preceded by his categorizations of these religions; the typology of religions. However, this study begins by presenting the religions as presented by al-Mas'ūdī in his *Murūj* followed by an analysis of al-Mas'ūdī's typology of religions to see how each of the pre-Islamic Arab religions presented by al-Mas'ūdī fits into his typology.

The Monotheists (*Muwaḥḥidūn*)

The *Muwaḥḥidūn* believed in the Creator, rewards and punishments in the afterlife, and they affirmed the truth of prophethood. During the interval (*al-fatrah*), between 'Isā (A.S.) and Muhammad (S.A.W.), this group believed in the call of preachers, among others, al-Mas'ūdī mentioned, were Quss ibn Sā'idah al-Iyādī, Ri'āb al-Shannī and Baḥīrā al-Rāhib. Al-Mas'ūdī also mentioned 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and in this respect, he mentioned a poem said by 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib when the later manifested his belief in the unity of God and his rejection of blind imitation. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib unearthed the well of *Zamzam*, which had been covered under earth for many years. He established the services of feeding the pilgrims

(*Rifādah*) and offered them water (*Siqāyah*). He was the first to offer the water of *Zamzam* for drinking (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 132-133).

Idol Worshipers

They believed in the Creator and resurrection, but they clearly denied prophethood (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132) which put them into ambiguity about the god that they believed in. They worshipped idols, they visited the idols during their pilgrimage, they sacrificed to the idols and all their do’s and don’ts were due to the idols. This group was addressed by the Qur’ān as “...those who take protectors besides Him (say), “we only worship them that they may bring us nearer to Allah (S.W.T.) in position” (Al-Qur’ān, 39:3).

The people of ‘Ād, according to al-Mas‘ūdī, worshipped three idols: Ṣamūd, Ṣadā’ and al-Habā’. Allah (S.W.T.) sent them Hūd (A.S.), but they denied him, hence were deprived from rain for three years, and a wind within it came as a painful punishment (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 149 & Al-Qur’ān, 46:24).

Worshippers of the Sun

Al-Mas‘ūdī referred to the people of the Dam of Mareb (*Sadd Ma’rib*) who worshipped the sun. Allah (S.W.T) sent them prophets to bring them back to the true path, but they denied them, hence were destroyed by the famous event of the “flood of the dam” (*sayl al-‘aram*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 195).

Rejecters of Resurrection

They believed in the existence of God, but they denied the prophets and resurrection (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132). They were inclined towards the belief of the materialists (*Ahl al-Dahr*). According to al-Mas‘ūdī, verse 24 of sūrah *al-Jāthiyah* describes this group, “And they say: There is not but our worldly life; we die and live, and nothing destroys us except time. And they have of that no knowledge; they are only assuming.”

Those Inclined towards Judaism and Christianity

These are people who were inclined towards Judaism and Christianity (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132), but al-Mas‘ūdī did not mention the

details of their belief. It is likely that their beliefs were the same as the beliefs of the Jews and the non-Arab Christians which al-Mas'ūdī had already mentioned in other parts of the *Murūj* (2000, vol. 1, pp. 43, 50, 52, 69, 322-325, 330, 333-334, 340-341) and the *Tanbīh* (1993, pp. 115, 123-124, 135-136, 138-139, 142-146, 148, 152, 198).

Offensive Personalities

These people spent their life in arrogance (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132), but al-Mas'ūdī did not give any example of this group of people.

Worshippers of Angels

They believed that angels were daughters of God (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 133), thus, their worshipping of the angels was to intercede on behalf of the angels. They were the people whom Allah (S.W.T) mentions in the Qur'ān in verse 57 of *al-Naḥl* and verses 19-22 of *al-Najm* (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 133).

Typology of Religions

Throughout the description of non-Arab religions in his *Murūj* and *Tanbīh*, al-Mas'ūdī did not provide his readers with any sort of categorizations for the religions he described. Interestingly however, in his description of pre-Islamic Arab religions, he provided his categorizations for all these religions (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132). From the author's presentation of al-Mas'ūdī's account on pre-Islamic Arab religions in his *Murūj*, (refer to the presentation in the previous section of this article), it can be deduced that al-Mas'ūdī's typology of religion is grounded on the method adopted by the *Mutakallimūn* in categorizing the fundamentals of religion under three headings: the Divine (*al-Ulūhīyah*), the Prophethood (*al-Nubūwah*) and the Resurrection (*al-Ba'th*) (Al-Ghazālī, 2004). Al-Mas'ūdī categorized the pre-Islamic Arab religions as follows: One, believers of God, prophethood and resurrection. Two, those who believed in God and resurrection, but denied prophethood. Three, those who only believed in God, but denied prophethood and resurrection. After these three categories, al-Mas'ūdī mentioned three other special categories due to certain exceptions. Al-Mas'ūdī could not place them under any of the three categories mentioned earlier.

It is likely that what al-Mas‘ūdī meant by the first category is the primordial religion (*al-Dīn al-Ḥanīf*) mentioned in the Qur’ān *sūrah* Āl ‘Imrān verse 67. The *Ḥanīfs* among the Arabs before the advent of Muhammad (S.A.W.) who belonged to this category were people who had true understandings about the oneness of God, the concept of prophethood and scripture, and the concept of resurrection and the last day. Hence, in spite of the presence of these three fundamentals (*al-Ulūhīyah*, *al-Nubūwah*, *al-Ba‘th*) in Judaism and Christianity, al-Mas‘ūdī did not include the two religions under the first category. Being a Muslim with a belief in the Qur’ān, the Christians, with their belief in the divinity of ‘Isā (A.S.), the Jews with their denial of many of the prophets, and in both the Christians and the Jews their distortion of the scripture, al-Mas‘ūdī certainly found these religions to be unfitting to be categorized under the *Ḥanīf* religion. Hence al-Mas‘ūdī put them under a special category: those who were inclined towards Judaism and Christianity (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 132). The idol worshippers were categorized under the second category: those who denied prophethood. They did not take the idols as Gods but considered the idols as mediators between themselves and God. Their belief in the idols as mediators is a consequence of not believing in the prophethood, hence, there was no guidance in their understanding of how acts of worship should be done. Al-Mas‘ūdī excluded the worshippers of angels from this category and placed them in a special category: the worshippers of angels. The reason being, in the case of angel worshiping, the subject of worship is believed to be divine, i.e. the angels were daughters of God, but in the case of idol worship, the subject, i.e. the idols were not believed to be divine.

Even though al-Mas‘ūdī provided a description of the worshippers of the sun in his *Murūj* (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 195), he was silent regarding the categorization of this group. However, based on al-Mas‘ūdī’s method of categorization, it is most likely that the worshippers of the sun be classified together with the worshippers of angels, and not together with the worshippers of idols since the sun was regarded as divine, just as the angels were believed to be divine, and unlike the idols who were believed to serve just as mediators between human being and the divine.

It is obvious from the title of the third category, that this category specifically includes those who denied resurrection. They believed in

God, but they could not accept the idea that there will be resurrection of the dead.

As for the offensive personalities, they were also unqualified to be categorized under any of the three categories, because they hardly abided by or believed in any of the three fundamentals of religion mentioned earlier due to their arrogance, hence al-Mas'ūdī placed them under a special category: the offensive personalities.

To conclude, al-Masudi's typology of religions is as follows:

Those who believed in God, prophethood, and resurrection; those who denied prophethood but believed in God and resurrection; those who denied prophethood and resurrection but believed in God; those who were inclined towards Judaism and Christianity; offensive personalities; and worshippers of angels and the sun.

The Pre-Islamic Arab Beliefs

In the *Murūj*, apart from mentioning the religions of the pre-Islamic Arabs, al-Mas'ūdī provided his descriptions of some of their major beliefs. Some of these beliefs were adopted by certain groups among the pre-Islamic Arabs, while some others were common to all of them.

The Soul (*al-Nafs*)

In the *Murūj*, al-Mas'ūdī discusses the pre-Islamic Arabs' views of the soul (*nafs*). Three definitions were offered, and it is obvious from these definitions that al-Mas'ūdī was aware of the inclination of the Arabs towards interpreting soul as a material and tangible element in human beings ('Abd al-Mu'īd Khan, 1993, p. 33). Al-Mas'ūdī said that some Arabs believed that soul means "blood", and the difference between soul and spirit (*rūh*) according to this group is that spirit is "air" (*hawā*'). Women during menstruation are called *nufasā'* and the scholars of jurisprudence spoke about blood, (*nafs*) when it is dropped into water, making water impure. Al-Mas'ūdī referred to a man by the name Ta'abbat Sharra who answered his uncle when the latter asked him about his killing of a man: "I silenced him with a cut, and then his soul (*nafs*) flowed out" (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 158). Thus, according to this definition, a man who dies a natural death does not have blood (Al-Mas'ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 158). Some others, according to al-Mas'ūdī, believed that soul is a "bird" (*hām*) that spread in the

human body. When a man dies or is killed, the bird will remain at his grave (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 158). A third group, al-Mas‘ūdī said, believed that soul is an echo (*ṣadā*) (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 159).

Metempsychosis (*Tanāsukh al-Arwāḥ* or *Tanaqqul al-Arwāḥ*)

It is the belief that at the point of death, the soul moves to another body, and the rewards and punishments for all deeds will be in this earthly life (Al-Shahrastānī, 1992, vol. 2, p. 362). In the *Murūj*, al-Mas‘ūdī used the term “migration of soul” (*tanaqqul al-arwāḥ*) and “reincarnation of soul” (*tanāsukh al-arwāḥ*). It is not clear whether al-Mas‘ūdī was saying that pre-Islamic Arabs believed in metempsychosis, but it is clear that al-Mas‘ūdī found that some Shī‘ah sects had used the poems of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and al-‘Abbās as proofs for their beliefs in metempsychosis (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 136). According to al-Mas‘ūdī, both Arabs and non-Arabs had many views about metempsychosis, and al-Mas‘ūdī had mentioned this belief in his previous works, *Kitāb Sirr al-Ḥayāh* and *Kitāb al-Da‘āwā* (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 159). In the *Murūj*, al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned the groups and nations that believed in metempsychosis and they were al-Muḥammadīyah, al-‘Ilbānīyah (they were Shī‘ah) and some people among the Greeks, the Indians, the Dualists, the Magians, the Jews, and the Christians (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 136).

Ghoul (*Ghūl*)

Referring to a poem by Ta‘abbaṭ Sharra, al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned the Arabs’ belief in ghoul (*Ghūl*), the belief in monsters or evil spirits. They believed that it will appear in front of people in various shapes while they are in the desert. The Arabs described the ghoul with physical descriptions such as having legs like the legs of a deer. According to al-Mas‘ūdī, the ghouls appear during a human’s private time, and some people may even invite them to have conversations with them. Al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned different views among different groups of people concerning the ghouls. The philosophers viewed them as deformed huge animals, coming out from the desert alone. The Indians (*al-Hind*) associated them with stars and planets such as the Orion (*Kalb al-Jabbāar*) which is described in the Qur‘ān as *al-Shi‘rā*, Canopus (*Suhayl*) in Aries (*al-Ḥaml*), and Wolf (*al-Dhi‘b*) in Ursa (*al-Dab*). Some others (al-Mas‘ūdī did not specify who they were) used the term *al-Ghūl* to refer to obstructers, mostly females but some are males,

who blocked travelers on their journeys. Some of the Arabs before Islam believed that the ghouls glowed like fire at night to tamper and disturb pedestrians. Al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned that some companions of the Prophet (S.A.W.) like ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, had witnessed such ghouls on their ways and al-Mas‘ūdī also mentioned *al-Su ‘lāh*, the ugliest form of the ghouls (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 160-161).

Anonymous Talks (*Hawātif*)

Al-Mas‘ūdī claimed that pre-Islamic Arabs had different opinions on the anonymous talks (*hawātif*). Some people, according to al-Mas‘ūdī, believed that it is a psychological reflection in a human being when being alone in quiet places such as deserts. The reflection causes a person to be frightened. In that state of fear, some feelings enter his mind and they appear to him in the form of sounds and shapes which are figments of his imagination (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 165).

Jinn (*Jānn*)

Pre-Islamic Arabs believed that some jinn came in the form of half-man, and they will appear to people while they are alone on a journey. The Arabs called this type of jinn as *shiqq*, and according to al-Mas‘ūdī, they had a long list of people who were killed by jinn. Some of them were ‘Alqamat ibn Ṣafwān, Ḥarb ibn Umaīyah, Mirdās ibn Abū ‘Āmir al-Sulamī and Abū ‘Abbās ibn Mirdās al-Sulamī (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 165-167).

Soothsayer (*al-Kāhin*) and Fortune-teller (*al-‘Arrāf*)

Pre-Islamic Arabs believed in soothsayers. Two of the most popular pre-Islamic soothsayers were Rabī‘ah ibn Rabī‘ah ibn Mas‘ūd who was known as Saṭīḥ *al-Kāhin* and Shiqq ibn Muṣ‘ab (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 183). According to al-Mas‘ūdī, soothsayers were also popular among the non-Arabs (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 170). The Greeks, the Romans, and the Christians had various opinions regarding soothsaying. Some people said that soothsayer received information about the future through the devils (*shayāṭīn*) who got it by eavesdropping the heaven (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 177). This is mentioned in the Qur’ānic verse in which the devils said “and we have sought to reach the heaven; but found it filled with stern guards and flaming fires” (Qur’ān, 72:8) and the verse “and certainly, the devils do inspire their friends to dispute with you, and if you obey them then you would indeed be polytheists”

(Qur’ān, 6:121). A group of people viewed soothsayers as experts in tracing horoscopes (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 177).

According to al-Mas‘ūdī, fortune-tellers were ranked below the soothsayers. Some of them were al-Ablaq al-Azdī, al-Ajlah al-Dahrī, ‘Urwah ibn Zayd al-Azdī and Rabāh ibn ‘Ijlah (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 178).

Tracking (*Al-qiyaḥ*)

According to al-Mas‘ūdī, tracking (*al-qiyaḥ*) is a unique expertise among some of the Arabs. When this skill is seen in other nations - al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned the Europeans (*al-Ifranjah*) - it is likely that they inherited it from the Arabs. It is the skill of tracking people’s linages or footsteps. According to al-Mas‘ūdī, this expertise is very much related to reasoning and making analogies. He mentioned the view of a group of people who viewed that trackers would consider the “foot” as the most accurate element of the human body when it comes to investigating the lineage connection of a person to his father (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 171). Tracking was also used to trace the footsteps of a person, thus, during the migration of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) to Yathrib, a tracker was able to trace the footsteps of the Prophet (S.A.W.), but Allah (S.W.T.) protected his servant through the weaving of a spider web (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 174).

Development in Religions and Beliefs

Throughout the study of al-Mas‘ūdī’s work on pre-Islamic Arab religions, it is observed that al-Mas‘ūdī was suggesting that religions, being a phenomenon in human communities worldwide, share with one another many of their key elements, thus the religions of the Arabs before the advent of Islam should be looked into in a wider context, as one among the world’s religions (Shboul, 1979, p. 124). Al-Mas‘ūdī’s comparative method helped him in detecting a reciprocal system of how religion influences human beings and how human beings influence religion; thus, a system in the development of religion can be drawn. The proceeding paragraphs are an attempt to extract the system in the development of religions and beliefs as found by al-Mas‘ūdī in his study of pre-Islamic Arab religions and beliefs. Some examples from al-Mas‘ūdī’s works on the non-Arab religions will also be looked into to see how they fit into that system.

Obviously, al-Mas‘ūdī perceived monotheism (*tawḥīd*) as the earliest form of religion. He saw the monotheists among the Arabs as bearers of the message brought to them by Nūḥ (A.S.) The stories of ‘Ād, Thamūd, Madyan, and the people of Ma‘rib in the Qur‘ān, are all pointing to the attitudes of people who deviated from the true original message revealed by Allah (S.W.T.). The sending of prophets Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shu‘aib (P.B.U.T.) to bring their societies back to the true path (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 150-156), are all supporting the notion that the primordial state of religion in human communities was monotheism. In the *Murūj*, al-Mas‘ūdī said:

The nations whom we described earlier did not deny the Creator, and they believed that Nūḥ (A.S.) was a prophet, and that he had delivered to them the divine promise of punishment, except that later, due to their abandoning of finding out through reasoning, they fell into dubiousness. They became inclined towards complacency, joy and imitation. When they realized the greatness of the Creator, they got to Him through idols, they worshipped them, thinking that they brought them close to Him (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 150).

From al-Mas‘ūdī’s above mentioned paragraph, humans’ deviation from the true form of *al-tawḥīd* was due to two reasons, and these two reasons represent two stages of development in the belief of human beings from monotheism to polytheism. First,

the abandoning of reason. At this level, human beings started to become dubious of the truth. The second reason which is the following stage is the complacency and contentedness to imitate. At this second stage, the belief in the Creator, to whom man refers, at times of suffering and pressure, will always remain in human beings, thus because they had deviated from the true path they imitated the actions of generations before them; thus when they intended to surrender to God, they used physical objects as mediators between them and God, believing that the mediators bring them close to God.

Al-Mas‘ūdī’s description of the views on the soul (*al-naḥs*), metempsychosis (*tanāsukh al-arwāḥ*), the tracking (*al-qiyāfah*), the ghoul (*al-Ghūl*) and soothsayer (*al-Kahhānah*) among nations of the world indicates that al-Mas‘ūdī was aware that in interpreting the changes and development of religious beliefs from the primordial

state (*al-tawḥīd*) to other forms of religions, several points need to be pondered:

First, there are elements in belief that are formed out of humans' own observation of phenomena in existence. One example is the phenomenon of "death". One may detect in al-Mas‘ūdī's description of pre-Islamic Arab beliefs that he viewed the "soul" (*nafs*) as a common element of belief in many human societies, and interestingly many modern scholars of comparative religion made the same observation ('Aqqād, 1978, p. 25). In his presentation of the belief in soul among pre-Islamic Arabs, it is obvious that al-Mas‘ūdī saw an interconnection between the belief in the soul and the phenomenon of death; hence in al-Mas‘ūdī's scheme of understanding, the interpretations of the phenomenon of death constitute differences in the belief in the soul. This consequently means that humans' interpretations of the phenomenon of death and their definitions of the soul constitute a factor in the changes and developments of religions and beliefs.

Second, al-Mas‘ūdī found that some wrong interpretations of belief are widely (if not universally) shared by many nations. If human beings are not guided by revelation, they will wrongly understand the unseen due to their inclination towards that wrong interpretation. In al-Mas‘ūdī's observation of the belief in metempsychosis, he found that this belief is common among many nations of the world. Al-Mas‘ūdī stated:

...and all those who believed in the reincarnation of soul in different parts of the body of animals, among the Muslims, the Greeks, the Indians, the Dualists, the Magians, the Jews and the Christians... (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 136).

At another occasion al-Mas‘ūdī said:

...and among the Arabs and others among followers of religions, among past generations and the generations that followed, there were many words describing metempsychosis (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 159).

Furthermore, in his study of India, al-Mas‘ūdī found that in spite of the variety of beliefs among the communities who were scattered throughout the huge Indian sub-continent, they all shared in believing in the metempsychosis (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 1, p. 94). To conclude,

there is no doubt that al-Mas‘ūdī saw believing in the metempsychosis is indeed common in many human nations.

Similarly, al-Mas‘ūdī’s observations of the phenomena of the ghoul (*al-Ghūl*) and the soothsayer (*al-Kahhānah*) among various nations of the world as mentioned earlier indicate that these elements of belief are common in many nations.

Thirdly, al-Mas‘ūdī viewed that there are beliefs in a human community that are formed through the influences of elements external to the community. The human community that is influenced by a belief that is external to it in terms of origin may then modify the belief to suit its needs. For example, as mentioned earlier, in his study of the phenomenon of tracking (*al-qiyāfah*) among nations of the world, al-Mas‘ūdī concluded that tracking is a unique expertise among the Arabs, and when the phenomenon is found elsewhere among other nations, it should mean that they have taken it from the Arabs. Another example is when al-Mas‘ūdī pointed to the origin of idol worshiping among pre-Islamic Arab community, and his view that it was the product of imitation (*al-taqlīd*). In both examples, al-Mas‘ūdī had suggested that there are changes in beliefs of a community that are products of the influences of one community over the other. When the influencing elements reach the community being influenced, the community “being influenced” may offer some modifications over it and attributes it to itself. Examples for this theory on religions other than those of pre-Islamic Arabs can be observed in some parts of the *Murūj* and the *al-Tanbīh*. The following are two of the examples.

The first example, in al-Mas‘ūdī’s analysis of how the term *zindīq* (*zandaqah*) was introduced into the Islamic Arab society, he found that it started when the dualist prophet, Mānī, introduced his doctrine which had deviated from the original teaching of Zoroastrianism. It was known in the community during that time, that the Zand (*Zind*), represented an exegesis (*ta’wīl*) of the original Avesta. The connotation of the term *Zind* then developed and it began to carry negative implications for those who made attempts to deviate from the original teaching of the Avesta and they were called *Zindī*. Since Mānī came with a teaching that deviated from the teaching of the original Avesta, his teaching was thus included under the term *Zindī*. When the Muslim Arabs came, they borrowed this term. However, not only did they used it to describe

those who deviated from the Avesta, but in their usage of the term, they applied it to the Arabs who had deviated from Islam by believing in the eternity of the world (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 1, p. 264).

The second example, when al-Mas‘ūdī described the fire worshiping among the Persians, he mentioned that Afridūn was the first among the Persian kings to introduce this teaching among the Persian community. That was when Afridūn found people offering their worship to fire. After knowing their reason for doing so, and was convinced with it, Afridūn directed his people to build a house for fire worshiping in Tūs and Bukhārā. This, according to al-Mas‘ūdī was the beginning of the fire worshiping in the Persian community (Al-Mas‘ūdī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 252).

Conclusion

It is obvious that al-Mas‘ūdī’s treatment of the religions and beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arabs was not confined to the Arab world. Being a historiographer who considered observation as prerequisite to understanding the beliefs of “the other”, and whose tireless travels to almost one third of the world to experience the real empathy towards other human beings, al-Mas‘ūdī was able to examine the history of the belief of his own nation in a wider context, as one among many nations of the world. The comparison, categorization and presentation methods he offered exhibit a well-equipped humanist scholarship, who had paved the way for scholarships of the following generations.

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