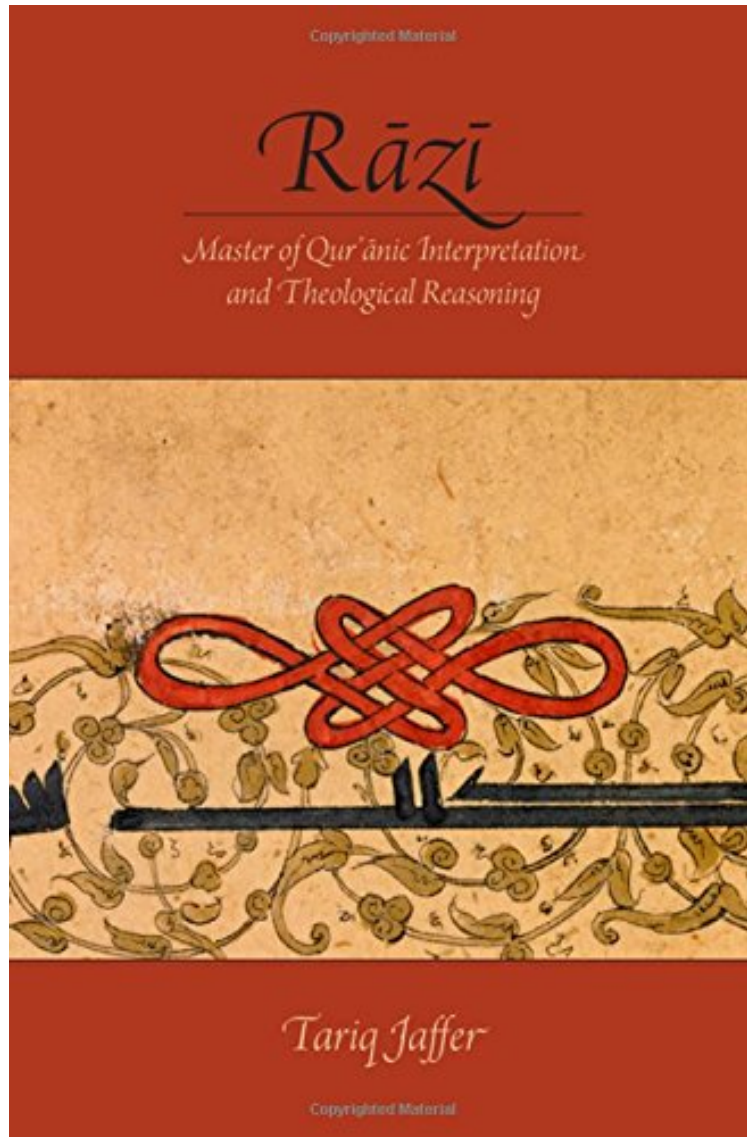


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R=az=i: Master of Quranic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning

Tariq Jaffer

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Tariq Jaffer : R=az=i: Master of Quranic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised R=az=i: Master of Quranic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning:

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explores the ideas of Imm Fakhr al-Dn al-Rz (d. 606/1210) in the context of the intellectual currents of his social environment through the lens of his Qu'nic exegesis (tafsr). The methodology in his tafsr has an emphasis of reconciling aql (reason) and naql (scriptural canon). If "scripture conveys evidence that God is in a direction or place, and the faculty of reason provides evidence that God is transcendent above direction and place, which source ought to be given priority?" Al-Rz assimilates a range of diverse sciences into his tafsr "by exploiting the rich resources of the ancient and Islamic sciences" by analysing their veracity. We therefore get a look at his methodical synthesis in unifying these different sciences in to this one discipline of Qu'nic exegesis. Enter the Master of Qu'nic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning. In the introduction the author traces the development of the study of al-Rz by Western scholars up until now. The major contribution has been in the twenty-first century with Ayman Shihadeh's *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dn al-Rz* published in 2006. However, his works have garnered attention in the West since 1912. The latter half of the introduction breaks down the objectives of the author in each chapter. You have more appreciation for this section after you've finished reading the work as you can connect the dots. The introduction concludes with a very short (eight point) summary of the milestones in this prestigious theologian's life. Unfortunately, we do not get a look at his life from a biographical perspective in the introduction or otherwise. The first chapter begins by espousing the concept of doubt and how it has been used as a prerequisite to ascertaining certainty. This is then mirrored in the Ash'ar School and their perspective on belief (imn) through taqlid (uncritical acceptance of authority). The author does a really good job in presenting the perspectives of the pillars of Ash'arism on this concept. He presents the view of Imm Abul al-Hasan al-Ash'ar (d. 324/936), Imm Ab Bakr al-Bqilln (d. 403/1013), Imm al-Haramayn al-Juwayn (d. 478/1085) and Imm Ab Hamid al-Ghazl (d. 505/1111) who all echo the position that taqlid in assenting to belief is unacceptable and one must examine the rational evidences for oneself to attain truth. We thus begin with al-Rz's concern of the uncritical acceptance of authority (taqlid). He however not only attaches this to imn but extends it to other disciplines such as philosophy and tafsr with the added function in his tafsr of organising all knowledge that was available during his time within the framework of his commentary". This includes disciplines such as logic, physics, metaphysics, astronomy, medicine, law, hadth, kalm and mysticism. He wanted to expose previous errors in these fields by investigating and discussing their problems and their epistemic value in order to test their veracity; ultimately seeking to resolve them. He states that God created the Qu'rn as a treasure trove of wisdom encompassing philosophical, scientific and religious knowledge. The systematic procedure he employs seeks to demonstrate that you can elicit a thousand questions from a single verse of the Qu'rn. We get an insight in to this through the verse "the Master of the Day of Doom" from which al-Rz asserts two rational propositions; that the world can be annihilated and then returned [to existence] and that the return of a person after death is possible. This then obviously leads to the exploration of many other questions in many other fields which therefore demonstrates his initial proposition of eliciting thousands of questions from a single verse, e.g. the nature of the soul's substance, evidence that God's power can cause the soul to return etc. The ultimate purpose devised in his methodology was to deter "commentators from uncritically assenting to interpretations and arguments" from previous authorities. The final part of the first chapter examines the method in the Qu'rn itself which al-Rz points out is unmatched and the most advantageous in engaging the intellect. The first example in this work is of the verse 6:59, "With Him are the Keys of the Unseen", and how the verses that follow it instruct the audience through sensorial representations. Al-Rz's explanation of the method in which the Qu'rn substantiates theology through a didactic process which is logical and appeals to the faculties of intellect and the imagination was a joy to read. The author's flow of the text and the manner in which he has written it keeps you engaged and this is followed in the second example of the Verse of the Throne. Again, it is broken down and argued that the verse is further confirmation of intellectual proofs which have also been established by Avicennian philosophical concepts thus making the point that philosophical knowledge derives its authority from the Qu'rn. He highlights the pattern in which this verse is presented by Allah and how it is tailored to the human intellect's mode of discursive reasoning. It was an excellent example of reconciling aql and naql. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this part of the book. It made me reflect on the Word of God and the deeper aspects of it beyond the text itself, i.e. the purposeful arrangement of the verses which engage your senses. The second chapter is a look at the origins of the methods adopted by al-Rz. He is an established pillar of authority in the Ash'ar school but as this chapter investigates, his methodology is strongly Mu'tazilite. He assigns a very authoritative role to reason. Al-Rz is obviously not of the Mu'tazilites as he disagrees with many of their foundational positions but "he is indebted to them for their methodology" which is explored further in this chapter. The author states his views are characteristic of the Mu'tazila but I saw them as no less as Maturidi. For example, the author states that al-Rz "continued the Mu'tazilite trend that aimed to harmonise reason and divine revelation. According to this postulate, God is knowable through human reasoning. God's being and attributes are discoverable through human reasoning." This all conforms to Maturidi theology which states that God can be known through the intellect without the aid of revelation. However, where it does depart from the Maturidis is the treatment of mutashbiht (ambiguous) verses. The Maturidis do not interpret them and state that they are entrusting their meaning to God, i.e. the meaning of such ambiguities are known only to God. Al-Rz on the other hand interprets "He ascended the Throne" (57:4) as "to take possession of" or "to become master of", very much in line with the ta'wil methods of previous Ash'ar authorities like al-Juwayn and al-Ghazl who also gave prominence to

reason as a source of knowledge to validate core beliefs. The next part of the chapter seeks to demonstrate how al-Rz integrated the "Mu'tazilite interpretive method" into Sunnism. The author proposes that he did this by upgrading the Mu'tazilite ta'wil method by integrating it with Avicennian philosophy thus raising Ash'arism to "higher philosophical standards". I found this small section a dry read but it instantly picks up again when discussing the epistemological criterion for the application of ta'wil. Here we see how al-Ghazl and al-Juwayn tackled the ta'wil issue as well as al-Rz's inheritance of it from them. However, al-Rz sees the hadth literature, even tawatur reports, as only yielding probable knowledge and not certain knowledge due to the many problems that can occur through transmission (al-Rz gives his justification for this in the book). This impacts the naql element of his tafsr as he sets the pedestal very high for necessary/certain knowledge and this results in rejection of some of the reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (all Allhu alayhi wasallam) which "smacks of Mu'tazilism" influence. He argued such reports can only be accepted if one can establish that they came from the Prophet (all Allhu alayhi wasallam) but this isn't possible on their own merit due to the issues he lists with their transmission hence as evidenced later in the book, establishing probable knowledge must go through the filter of the intellect to establish certain knowledge. In my opinion this wasn't a novel methodology of hadth as even the "hadth weary" Hanafis, as Jonathan Brown describes them, would analyse the matn before accepting narrations and some of these Hanafis that codified these principles were Mu'tazilites, i.e. s b. Abn (d. 220/835). The third chapter analyses his methodology in reconciling aql and naql. If the two of them clash then how is one to resolve this issue? We see how al-Rz tackles this problem by establishing that ta'wil (or the alternative of entrusting the meaning to God) is a logical necessity. To reject reason is to reject scripture according to al-Rz as it will lead to logical impossibilities and absurdities. How do you then establish naql on rational grounds? This is one of the issues addressed by al-Rz and the Ash'ar scholars in this chapter. We also get a look at the reception of his methodology in Traditional circles and their refutation through the perspective of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328). He was highly critical of al-Rz's ta'wil methods and was of the opinion that scripture (naql) takes precedence over reason (aql). He turns the argument on its head by stating that "reason approved the truth of scripture" in the first instance so if the two of them conflict then to deny scripture is to deny the rational evidence which established its truth. He therefore holds to the apparent and declares God to be in a direction, namely, "above". The chapter makes for a really good read in analysing two different methodologies and their reasoning behind them. The final two chapters further convey al-Rz's practice of ta'wil and how he systematised Avicennian philosophy into his Qu'rn commentary in his various works. The author presents al-Rz's tafsr of the Qu'rn, 24:35, the Light Verse. We see a mixture of his rational approach as well as "methods and principles characteristic of classical Sfism". He adopts the position of al-Ghazl here who in turn also modelled his view from Ibn Sn (d. 428/1037) i.e. Avicenna. On another occasion we see how al-Rzi interprets the same verse through classical Sfism, diverging from philosophical and rationalist methods. He goes from proposing the intellect acquires theoretical knowledge through discursive reasoning (or intuition) to knowledge of the divine is bestowed upon an individual's heart by God. This is an example of how he applied different and diverse methods on the same verse which, as the author states, is just one example of the many times he does this in his commentary. The final chapter concludes with a look at al-Rz's interpretation of the soul (nafs) and the spirit (rh) and how he resolves difficulties concerning their nature by adopting fundamental elements from Ab Ishq al-Nazzm (d. 230/845), a Mutazilite. Overall, this was an enjoyable read about the method al-Rz incorporates in his tafsr. When any passage from al-Rz is quoted by the author you are not left to decipher the extract yourself, it is always followed up with a commentary by the author. However, the work has its shortcomings in that you don't get an insight into the debates he had with the various groups from the Mu'tazila to the Hanbalis. We never gauge how he developed as a scholar and theologian. You will not learn who his teachers are or his students so do not expect a life and works composition. The verses of the Qu'rn from his commentary that are presented in this work for examination are explored in depth but ultimately what you're taking away from this book is how al-Rz engineers diverse disciplines into one orthodox framework in his tafsr. The aim was to introduce these different sciences into the field of tafsr as branches of knowledge for the orthodox mainstream which the Qu'rn itself has hidden within it for those that have the capacity to extract them. The author states that he was "the first Sunn theologian to develop a methodology that unified reason (aql) and the scriptural canon (naql), which included the Qu'rn and prophetic traditions." However, in my opinion this endeavour was undertaken by Shaykh Ab Mansur al-Mturd (d. 333/944) prior to al-Rz in his tafsr, Ta'wil Ahle Sunnah. What al-Rz has introduced into his tafsr are textual devices to avoid taqlid (something al-Mturd stresses to avoid too) as well as incorporating many different disciplines into one field. This, no doubt, was a unique and masterful approach to advance the intellectual milieu of his people and future generations, may Allh be pleased with him.

Winner of the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion: Textual Studies from the American Academy of Religion Fakh al-Din al-Razi (1148 - 1210) wrote prolifically in the disciplines of theology, Quranic exegesis, and philosophy. He composed treatises on jurisprudence, medicine, physiognomy, astronomy, and astrology. His body of work marks a momentous turning point in the Islamic tradition and his influence within the post-classical Islamic tradition is striking. After his death in 1210 his works became standard textbooks in Islamic institutions of higher

learning. Razi investigates his transformative contributions to the Islamic intellectual tradition. One of the leading representatives of Sunni orthodoxy in medieval Islam, Razi was the first intellectual to exploit the rich heritage of ancient and Islamic philosophy to interpret the Quran. Jaffer uncovers Razi's boldly unconventional intellectual aspirations. The book elucidates the development of Razi's unique appropriation of methods and ideas from ancient and Islamic philosophy into a unified Quranic commentary--and consequently into the Sunni worldview. Jaffer shows that the genre of Quranic commentary in the post-classical period contains a wealth of philosophical material that is of major interest for the history of philosophical ideas in Islam and for the interaction of the aqli ("rational") and naqli ("traditional") sciences in Islamic civilization. Jaffer demonstrates the ways Razi reconciled the opposing intellectual trends of his milieu on major methodological conflicts. A highly original work, this book brilliantly repositions the central aims of Razi's intellectual program.

"Razi: Master of Qur'anic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning, is a thoroughly researched and eloquently expressed contribution to an exciting and relatively new line of inquiry in Islamic studies/Near Eastern studies...Jaffer's writing is engaging and elegant, and the organization of the book as a whole, as well as within each chapter and subsection, makes his thesis and subpoints accessible and clear. Overall, his first published monograph, based upon his dissertation, is a pleasure to read both in form and content. Jaffer's monograph engages thoroughly and critically with previous scholarship and is, in itself, a truly excellent addition to the emerging study of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and the trend of incorporating philosophical methods and ideas into theological thought in the postclassical Islamic intellectual world."--The Journal of Religion"Jaffer's monograph will serve as an excellent introduction to the thought of Fakhr al-din al-Razi, and to some of the ways in which philosophical thought intersects with the interpretation of the Qur'an."--Journal of the American Academy of Religion

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