



An Interview with Professor Frank Griffel on Islamic Thought

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Abstract

Prof. Frank Griffel, after studying philosophy, Arabic literature, and Islamic studies at universities in Göttingen, Damascus, and Berlin, obtained his Ph.D. in 1999 from the Freie Universität in Berlin. His master's thesis focused on Ibn Sīnā's (d. 1037) logical and ontological influence on al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) theological work, *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa*. In his Ph.D. thesis, he delved into the development of the judgment of apostasy in classical Islam. Following a research fellowship at the Orient Institute of the German Oriental Society in Beirut, Lebanon, he joined Yale in 2000. At Yale, he teaches courses on the intellectual history of Islam, covering its theology and philosophy, both classical and modern, and the way Islamic thinkers react to Western modernity.

Prof. Griffel has produced a wide range of publications on classical and contemporary Islamic thought. One of his standout books is *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (2009), where he analyzed al-Ghazālī's life and philosophical metaphysics and cosmology in coherence with Islamic thought. This book concluded that in al-Ghazālī's opinion, the two distinct cosmologies of occasionalism and secondary causality emerge as equally convincing explanations regarding God's creative activity. The latest comprehensive book by Prof. Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (2021), explains how, as a result of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, a new kind of philosophical discourse emerged in the Islamic East, dominating the education at madrasas. This study, covering many aspects of the practice of philosophy during the 12th century in the Islamic East, particularly focuses on Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baḡhdādī (d. c. 1165) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210).

This book is prompted by the observation that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī is the first author who followed al-Ghazālī's critique of Ibn Sīnā in *kalām* books and, at the same time, aimed to develop Ibn Sīnā's philosophical system in *ḥikma* (philosophy) books. Its main thesis is that authors of post-classical philosophy, such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, wrote books in the discipline of *ḥikma* that are conscious in their continuation of the discourse of *falsafa* in Islam while also writing books in the discipline of *kalām* that are part of a different genre of texts and follow different discursive rules. According to the conclusion of this book, al-Rāzī developed *ḥikma* and *kalām* as two distinct academic discourses that argue for different sets of teachings. This inspired argument opens the window for new debates about the post-classical period. In this interview, Prof. Griffel shares insights that brought us closer to his works, along with his impressions on Islamic studies in America and Türkiye. The conversation provides remarks that illuminate his academic perspectives and contributions to the field.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kalām, Islamic Philosophy, Ḥikma, al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ambiguity.

Öz

Prof. Frank Griffel, Göttingen, Şam ve Berlin'deki üniversitelerde felsefe, Arap edebiyatı ve İslam araştırmaları okuduktan sonra 1999 yılında Berlin'deki Freie Üniversitesi'nde doktorasını tamamladı. Yüksek lisans tezi, İbn Sīnā'nın (ö. 1037) Gazzālī'nin (ö. 1111) kelâm eseri olan *Fayṣalü't-tefrīka*'daki mantıksal ve ontolojik etkisine odaklanmıştır. Doktora tezinde ise klasik İslam'da irtidâd hükmünün gelişimini irdelemiştir. Lübnan'ın başkenti Beyrut'ta Alman Şarkiyat Kurumu'nda kısa bir araştırma burs programının ardından 2000 yılında Yale Üniversitesi'nde göreve başlamıştır. Yale Üniversitesi'nde İslam'ın entelektüel tarihine dair dersler vermektedir. Bu dersler, klasik ve modern dönemlerdeki İslam kelâm ve felsefesini ve İslam düşünürlerinin Batı modernitesine nasıl tepki verdiklerini kapsamaktadır. Prof. Frank Griffel'in klasik ve çağdaş İslam düşüncesi üzerine oldukça geniş yelpazede yayınları bulunmaktadır. Öne çıkan kitaplarından biri, Gazzālī'nin hayatını, felsefi metafiziğini ve kozmolojisini İslam düşüncesiyle bağlantılı olarak analiz ettiği *Gazzālī'nin Felsefi Kelâmı*'dır. Bu kitap, Gazzālī düşüncesinde, Tanrı'nın yaratması konusunda vesileci ve ikincil nedenlerle yaratma teorisi olmak üzere iki farklı kozmolojinin eşit derecede ikna edici açıklamalar olarak ortaya çıktığı sonucuna varmıştır. Prof. Frank Griffel'in son kapsamlı kitabı *İslam'da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, Gazzālī'nin *Tehāfutü'l-felâsife*'sinin bir sonucu olarak, Doğu İslam dünyasındaki medreselerde eğitime hâkim olan yeni bir tür felsefi söylemin nasıl ortaya çıktığını açıklamaktadır. Doğu İslam dünyasında 12. yüzyıldaki felsefe pratiğinin birçok yönünü ele alan bu çalışma, özellikle Ebü'l-Berekât el-Baḡdâdî (ö. yak. 1165) ve Fahreddin er-Râzî (ö. 1210) üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Bu kitap, Fahreddin er-Râzî'nin kelâm kitaplarında Gazzālī'nin İbn Sīnâ eleştirisini takip eden ve aynı zamanda hikmet türü (felsefe) kitaplarında İbn Sīnâ'nın felsefi sistemini geliştirmeyi amaçlayan ilk yazar olduğu gözleminde hareket etmektedir. Kitabın temel tezi, Fahreddin Râzî gibi klasik-sonrası felsefe yazarlarının bir yandan İslam'daki felâsife söylemini devam ettirdiklerinin bilincinde olarak hikmet türü (felsefe) kitaplar yazarken, diğer yandan da farklı bir metin türünün parçası olan ve farklı söylemsel kuralları takip eden kelâm disiplininde kitaplar yazdıklarıdır. Bu kitabın sonucuna

göre Râzî, hikmet ve kelâmî farklı öğretileri savunan iki ayrı teorik söylem olarak geliştirmiştir. Bu ilham verici argüman, klasik-sonrası döneme ilişkin yeni tartışmalar için bir pencere açmaktadır. Bu mülakatta Prof. Frank Griffel, Amerika ve Türkiye'deki İslami çalışmalara dair izlenimlerinin yanı sıra bizi çalışmalarına yaklaştıran değerlendirmelerini paylaşmaktadır. Mülakatta Prof. Frank Griffel'in akademik bakış açısını ve alana katkılarını aydınlatan değerlendirmeler de yer almaktadır.

Keywords: Kelâm, İslam Felsefesi, Hikmet, Gazzâlî, Fahreddin er-Râzî, Müphemlik.

An Interview with Professor Frank Griffel on Islamic Thought¹

Büşra Yurtalan: Professor Frank Griffel, it is a great honor to have the opportunity to interview you. Having attended some seminars and your classes at Yale Religious Studies, I've gained valuable insights into the dynamics of Islamic studies in the U.S. Now, I am eager to hear your insights into the historical trajectory and changing structure of Islamic studies in the U.S., especially in the distinctive context of Yale University. Yale University undoubtedly holds a prominent place in the history of Islamic studies, being the first institution to teach Arabic in the U.S., initiated by Edward Salisbury in 1841.² Notable names like Charles C. Torrey (1899), Franz Rosenthal (1956), and Dimitri Gutas (Ph.D. from Yale, 1974) continued this tradition.³ As someone who has been a crucial part of this tradition for 23 years, could you share your assessments and perspectives?

Prof. Frank Griffel: Thank you very much for this interview. I came to Yale in 2000, more or less right after my Ph.D. in 1999, as an assistant professor. The landscape at Yale changed significantly, not only at Yale but also in America overall, due to the attacks of September 2001.

Whereas before, Islamic studies and, to some degree Middle East Studies overall was one of the niche fields of academic inquiry at Yale, the 9/11 attacks put Islamic studies in the foreground. Now, there was a lot of national attention to the whole field. Enrollment figures were relatively small before, but after 9/11 they mushroomed and became much bigger. That's the one development.

The second development is with increased attention to Islamic studies after 9/11, the field also changed. There was much more interest in contemporary Islam after that, whereas Islamic studies in the U.S., have always been regarded until 9/11 as a field that was dealing with historical subjects. It's a little bit different from Europe, where Islamic studies is basically everything or can be everything that is in connection to Islam. The question, for instance, of the subject of political Islam has in America always been dealt with in departments of political science. Anthropology has had its own inquiry into Islam. Subjects of history have also dealt with Islam. All this could in Europe be Islamic studies, whereas in America before 9/11, Islamic studies was, in most cases, the study of Islamic literature, distinctly religious literature of the premodern period. After 9/11, that

¹ This paper has been prepared during the studies conducted at Yale University as part of the TÜBİTAK “2214/A - Abroad Doctoral Research Fellowship Program”. The interview transcript has been edited for clarity. The usage of [...] in this context represents omitted or overlooked portions from the original interview transcript without distorting the meaning. I would like to express my gratitude to the “Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning,” for providing the opportunity for “Individual Consultation” during the editing of the interview, and to Aida Feng for her helpful support during these sessions.

² Charles Kurzman - Carl W. Ernst, “Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 46/1 (2012), 27.

³ “History of the Department to 1975 | Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations” (Accessed November 18, 2023).

changed significantly. There was a great interest in contemporary Islamic thought, in the jihad movements, Islamic fundamentalism, and the Islamic community in America, which until then was not studied at all. New subfields emerged in the study of Islam in America.

Whereas earlier, the kind of things that I did, namely Islamic intellectual history, was to some degree at the center of what might be called Islamic studies before 9/11, it became now of much lesser importance. And I think that has continued in the past 20 years. There are in the U.S., only three or four, maybe five, programs left that do Islamic studies the way it was mainly pursued before 9/11, meaning the study of Islamic literature of the premodern period. The majority of programs in Islamic studies, in particular college education in Islamic studies, are now focusing on the contemporary and the modern periods.

Büşra Yurtalan: I would like to refer to your book *Den Islam Denken: Versuch, eine Religion zu verstehen*, which was translated into Turkish as *İslam'ı Düşünmek: Bir Dini Anlama Denemesi*. In this book, readers find your insights on the obscurities of Islam for Central Europeans.⁴ By referencing figures such as Renan, de Boer, and Goldziher, you explain that Western scholars have historically approached the study of Islam in comparison to “us,” meaning “the West”⁵ because of the “progressive paradigm” and “colonial ideals”.⁶ Could you elaborate on the challenges faced by Western scholars in understanding Islam and your primary recommendations for a deeper understanding of Islam?

Prof. Frank Griffel: The book I wrote more or less for German readers who were asking questions about Islam, and in the majority of cases, the answers that they were given were such things as there are the five pillars of Islam, this is the history of Islam and these are the things that Muslims do. And I never felt that those were good answers to anybody who was asking questions about Islam from a Western perspective. I wanted to give a different answer that also reflects on ourselves, meaning in this case Germans, but generally speaking Western readers. First of all, to understand, that there is a history to these questions and also that the answers that were given to generations of people who asked these questions before, were, in my opinion, very often wrong, and that also has to do with the previous question, the changes that have happened in the past 20 years in Islamic studies. At least for myself, there was a very significant change when I realized that most of the things that I have been taught about Islamic intellectual history turned out to be wrong.

I, of course, started to study Islam or Islamic studies in the late 1980s and throughout the '90s and all throughout my undergraduate education I was told such things like “Averroes was the last philosopher of Islam,” “there was a decline in Islam after the 12th or 13th century,” and lots of other things that in my own studies, when I started to pursue them, turned out to be wrong.

One other thing that I was taught and that I myself discovered to be wrong was about the role of al-Ghazālī in the history of philosophy. Initially, I was taught that al-Ghazālī was responsible for

⁴ In this book, readers find Professor Griffel's insights on the obscures of Islam for Central Europeans. It is not only a book about Islam but above all about Germans/ Europeans in the 21st century and their ideas about Islam. Frank Griffel, *İslam'ı Düşünmek Bir Dini Anlama Denemesi*, trans. Mücahid Kaya (İstanbul: Albaraka Yayınları, 2020), 9, 22.

⁵ Griffel, *İslam'ı Düşünmek Bir Dini Anlama Denemesi*, 97.

⁶ Griffel, *İslam'ı Düşünmek Bir Dini Anlama Denemesi*, 47, 65–101.

the decline of philosophy in Islam. Once I actually looked at the works of al-Ghazālī himself, I thought how is that possible given the fact that he engages so closely with philosophy? So that triggered a whole different inquiry on my part; but I was not the only one there. There is now a generation out there of people who work on Islamic intellectual history, who basically have put all those things that seemed to be certain in the 1980s and the 1990s now on the bookshelf and said, “These things are actually not valid anymore.”

That's a very significant move and in a sense the book *Den Islam Denken* is the attempt to put some of these ideas that have been come out of this study of Islamic intellectual history, more or less on a popular footing.

So, first of all, the question of the colonial context, I think, became much more important—the colonial context of early Islamic studies, but also the colonial context of any kind of engagement that the West actually had with Islam throughout the past two centuries. That's what I wanted to point out. Then making a couple of points about intellectual history, for instance, the question of ambiguity. My aim was to point out that intellectual history works differently in other contexts in other societies. Those are also the things that I wanted to express in the book's last chapter. There, I even tried to reflect on such things as migration, a problem of course that is very important for Germans and for Central Europeans overall. And other things that are also connected with Islam.

Büşra Yurtalan: Western scholarship on Islam has undergone significant transformations over the years, as evidenced by your references in your book review to Thomas Bauer's *Die Kultur der Ambiguität* (*A Culture of Ambiguity*), Wael Hallaq's *Impossible State*, and Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam?*⁷ Since Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* in the late 1970s,⁸ what new perspectives have scholars like Bauer, Hallaq, and Ahmed brought beyond established paradigms?

Prof. Frank Griffel: It's interesting and it connects to the question that you posed before. When I first started studying Islamic studies, as I said, in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, somebody like Edward Said was somewhat contested. Teachers rejected his perspective. There was also in Germany the widespread notion that whatever he criticizes in French and in English literature, didn't exist in German literature and didn't exist in the German engagement with Islam. I think what became clear in the past 30 years since then is that Edward Said, first of all, is no longer contested. Particularly when one looks at the work, for instance of Wael Hallaq, you mentioned his book *The Impossible State* but I think two years or three years after he published a second book that was *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* which is a kind of, as it points out in its title, a restatement of Edward Said's views, or Edward Said's technique that is much more radical than Edward Said ever was. It points out much clearer to the colonial context of scholarship that was produced about Islam. It is much clearer about the misunderstanding that writings about the East have produced, and my field, the study of Islamic philosophy, can be easily added to that. That is also true for Thomas Bauer's book. In both cases, I think these are important

⁷ Frank Griffel, “Contradictions and Lots of Ambiguity: Two New Perspectives on Premodern (and Postclassical) Islamic Societies,” *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 7/1 (2017), 4.

⁸ Said defines “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 3.

developments that point out how ill-equipped Western scholarship was during the 19th and much of the 20th century to understand Islamic culture and Islamic intellectual history and in a sense also how helpless we still are now when we actually try to do that. I think that many people who work in the field of Islamic studies and in Islamic intellectual history, do not fully understand the importance of this point, namely the importance of a much higher tolerance for ambiguity, and they are still searching for a coherent point of view that these authors have produced, which is the Western perspective and the Western quest. These authors themselves would probably not engage in that kind of questions.

[...]

Edward Said started a process that by now is in full swing not only in the field of classical Islamic studies or premodern Islamic studies, but any part of Islamic studies. Islamic studies also has become an academic field that holds any kind of Western humanities study a mirror to its face. So many things are viewed in Islamic studies as important. That is so by virtue of the fact that here we are studying a culture different from the West, and therefore, we can learn a lot about how one studies culture overall—things that were unclear before Edward Said's book. So, meaning also that methodologically in the whole project of the Western humanities, Islamic studies has become quite significant, largely because we have to adjust our questions, our views, and our whole inquiries to a culture that works differently to our culture and to something that is a challenge for us. Studying culture overall might learn a lot from this project, I mean Islamic studies.

Büşra Yurtalan: We gain insight into al-Ghazālī's quest for truth or epistemological crisis from his autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*. He evaluates the knowledge methodologies of theologians, Bātinīs, philosophers, and *Ṣūfīs*, asserting that he found the sought-after truth through the *Ṣūfī* path. How would you contextualize the *Ṣūfī* method within his overall intellectual journey? Furthermore, do you see a correlation between his adoption of the *Ṣūfī* method and his critiques of *kalām* and philosophy?

Prof. Frank Griffel: The way al-Ghazālī actually portrays himself in *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* is that he was unsatisfied with three directions, with *falsafa*, with *kalām*, and with what you called Bātinīs, which is of course Sevener Shiism. And out of the frustration of dealing with these three movements, he adopts Sufism. There is a long debate to what extent al-Ghazālī's *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* is a kind of pedagogical book or to what extent it is based on factual events in his life. I would say the book is a way of how al-Ghazālī produces a picture about himself and maybe even how he thought about himself at a certain stage of his life, which however, in my opinion, does not cohere with what has really happened earlier in his life. So, in my opinion, and the way I read al-Ghazālī, is that he is right from the beginning, very concerned with the question of epistemology. And these questions of epistemology he tackles by studying and dealing with epistemological ideas in *falsafa* and in *kalām*, and to a minor degree also in Sevener Shiism. But the ones in *falsafa* and *kalām* become important. He develops his own justification of Sufism and justification of such sources of knowledge as *ilhām* and others on the basis of philosophical theories. Let me point out, what's the difference between, how he sees himself and how I see him. Whereas in *al-Munqidh* he portrays his adoption of Sufism as something that happened in the face of a rejection of *falsafa*, I would actually put it rather in a way that when he read *falsafa* very closely,

he realized that *falsafa* can offer a justification for such things as *ilhām* and others, no matter whether such authors as Ibn Sīnā and Fārābī actually thought that they would provide such justification or not. He used this justification to prop up his own theory of *ilhām* (which can be translated as inspiration, mystical insight, and the superior insights of the *awliyāʾ*). Now, this is a debate that happened a lot after Ibn Sīnā. It's closely connected to the last chapters in Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wal-tanbihāt*, which often are seen as a justification of Sufism. No matter whether Ibn Sīnā himself thought of it that way, I think for Ibn Sīnā himself, these chapters are more a philosophical explanations of *Ṣūfī* phenomena. But for authors and readers of Ibn Sīnā such as al-Ghazālī, they thought here is actually a philosophical, which means a scientific justification for the kinds of things that they actually thought exist, namely inspiration as a source of knowledge, which Ibn Sīnā himself might probably not have defended.

Büşra Yurtalan: I understand that you make an important connection between al-Ghazālī's *Ṣūfī* paradigm and Ibn Sīnā's philosophy.

Prof. Frank Griffel: Well, *al-Munqidh* makes no connection of this kind, *al-Munqidh* portrays *falsafa* as a project that has pros and cons. It foregrounds the counterpoints, but it also makes significant points about the pros of *falsafa*. But it never really explains something that I think was nevertheless very important for al-Ghazālī. Namely, that there are also ideas in *falsafa* that justify *Ṣūfī* knowledge. At least this is how al-Ghazālī understood it. As you know my colleague Dimitri Gutas made, I think, the valid point that Ibn Sīnā never thought to provide justification for Sufism. For him any kind of knowledge that is important is rational knowledge, is apodictic knowledge. But Ibn Sīnā was read afterwards in a way where the last chapters of *al-Ishārāt wal-tanbihāt* offer something like a justification for Sufism, and I think that al-Ghazālī was one of the first who read it that way.

Büşra Yurtalan: Are we to understand that you do not agree with Professor Gutas on this matter?

Prof. Frank Griffel: I do agree with Gutas in the sense that he would say, yes, when we look at the sources for knowledge in Ibn Sīnā, all of them rational in the sense that Ibn Sīnā understands it that way. So, we can say Ibn Sīnā has this important notion of *ḥads* which is a rational source of knowledge for him. For readers like al-Ghazālī, however, *ḥads* becomes *ilhām*. It also becomes a much more important source of knowledge and al-Ghazālī then interprets it as a super-rational source of knowledge, one that is superior to deductive reasoning, just like deductive reasoning is superior to sense perception. I believe that is what he says in *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*.

Büşra Yurtalan: In the conclusion of *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, you argue that in al-Ghazālī's thought, the views of occasionalism and secondary causality emerge as equally convincing theories regarding God's creative activity.⁹ Do you think this outcome is connected to al-Ghazālī's skeptical inquiries and epistemological approach? Can we say that he continues the classical Ash'arite thought on the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and the limits of reason?

Prof. Frank Griffel: I would say yes. One of the most impressive chapters in al-Ghazālī's autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* is the one that is called *madākhil as-safsāṭa* which can be

⁹ Frank Griffel, *Gazālī'nin Felsefî Kelâmı*, trans. İbrahim Halil Üçer - Muhammed Fatih Kılıç (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2012), 437, 447; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 227, 284.

translated as “the inroads of skepticism.” Skepticism is something very important in al-Ghazālī’s search for epistemological certainty. And yes, my conclusion about whether al-Ghazālī was an occasionalist or whether he subscribed to secondary causality, the way the *falāsifa* did was particularly guided, first, by comments that he made that there is no clear evidence in our sense perception in this world, nor in our rational capacity, that would point to either the truth of occasionalism or secondary causality. And second also in Revelation, there is no clarification of the way how God acts toward His creation, meaning there is no clear decision between occasionalism and secondary causality, neither in reason nor in Revelation. He holds a position of equal possibility which is something that I connect very closely to this idea of ambiguity or tolerance for ambiguity in the Islamic civilization that we don’t see to this extent in Western civilization.

Büşra Yurtalan: So there is a direct connection with Ash‘arite thought.

Prof. Frank Griffel: We should also say what I pointed out in my book, that once he has come to the conclusion that humans cannot decide between occasionalism or secondary causality, he is no longer interested in the question. This is why in certain books he uses occasionalist views and other books he uses views and the kind of language that is connected to secondary causality. And for practical purposes, of course, he says that secondary causality for the ordinary people is the most helpful way to deal with these questions. Overall, yes, he maintains Ash‘arite position in metaphysics, which is very clear, namely that there is no demonstrative knowledge in metaphysics. Meaning also that reason can only give guidance in metaphysics, but it must also, and he’s very clear about that, rely on the guidance that is available in Revelation. That’s a classical Ash‘arite point of view. He also holds Ash‘arite views on moral value. Here, he has a very classical Ash‘arite view despite the fact that he also relies on philosophical insights such as those about virtues. But his ultimate position about moral value is an Ash‘arite one, in the sense that moral value is defined only through Revelation.

Büşra Yurtalan: Are you saying that this was the classic Ash‘arite thought?

Prof. Frank Griffel: [...] This is a position that is maintained throughout the Ash‘arite school, even in the post-classical period, namely that when it comes to ultimate moral value, this can only come from Revelation. However, in this case, there is a coherence between these kinds of values that Revelation teaches us and the virtues that we are able to develop through the teachings, for instance, of Aristotle and others.

Büşra Yurtalan: Your latest book, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* traces the emergence of books on *ḥikma* as a new philosophical genre from al-Ghazālī to its fully developed form in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. This book concludes that al-Rāzī presents different views on whether the world is created or eternal in his *kalām* books and two early philosophical compendia. It argues that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī held the position of equal possibility when it comes to the question of whether God has a free will and chooses His creations from alternatives or acts out of the necessity

of His essence.¹⁰ In this book, you mentioned that *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*, one of al-Rāzī’s latest works, combines the two genres of *ḥikma* and *kalām* and transcends them.¹¹ In the article published in 2021, Laura Hassan argues that al-Rāzī “ultimately deems creation *ex nihilo* as the most probable based on the balance of evidence, and therefore the doctrine that is to be believed”.¹² In your classification of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s works, how do you position *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*, considering its integration of *ḥikma* and *kalām* genres? Additionally, what are your thoughts on Laura Hassan’s assertion that al-Rāzī ultimately supports creation, especially in *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*?

Prof. Frank Griffel: First of all, as I’ve also argued in my book, I believe that in the early and middle period of his career, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī distinguishes his writings in different genres, so he writes books in *ḥikma* and he writes books in *kalām*. Books in *ḥikma* are *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* and *Mulakhkhaṣ fi l-ḥikma wa-l-manṭiq*, plus several other smaller texts. And books in *kalām* are *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl* and *al-Arba‘in fi uṣūl al-dīn* and *Muḥaṣṣal*, and these kinds of books. Now, in the late period, I think his project was guided by something different. Other things become important to him. In his late period he tries to find a solution between the impasse that existed between his philosophical books and his *kalām* books. That is happening in *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*. *Al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya* is in my opinion not a *kalām* book. It never pretends to be a *kalām* book. When you read the introduction, it says that it is concerned with certain questions that are called *ilāhiyyāt* which is a word that doesn’t come out of *kalām*. It comes out of the context of *ḥikma*. These are the questions that he clarifies—questions about God’s essence, God’s attributes, God’s actions, and several other questions that have always been closely connected to it in the philosophical project, for instance, the soul. He tries to then give answers to these, I would almost say in a comparative way that he presents the arguments of *kalām* and he presents the arguments of *ḥikma* and tries to adjudicate between them. Here he comes to several conclusions. The book of course has been studied a lot since it was edited in the mid-1980s. One of them is that he puts forward an occasionalist cosmology. However, he also puts forward a very philosophical view of the human soul and of anything that has to do with psychology.

And now, of course, then comes the last question is, what does he teach about the eternity of the world? What does he teach at the end of the day, about God’s nature? And the way I read *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya* is that philosophically this question must be left undecided. There is no strong philosophical argument to either say that the world was created or uncreated, and that therefore God is either a necessary actor or an actor out of free will. He says also that Revelation doesn’t solve this question overall. This alone clarifies, in my opinion, that this is not a book of *ḥikma*, but it’s a book that is written in a distinct Islamic context where Revelation is considered a source of knowledge. Revelation, however, is considered silent on this matter. But as I also pointed out, in my book, there are several hints, minor arguments that are of questionable value in the field of philosophy that actually lead him to his ultimate decision which he makes in this book, but also

¹⁰ Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 552; Frank Griffel, *İslam’da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, trans. A. Şeyma Taç - Faruk Ayyıldız (İstanbul: Albaraka Yayınları, 2023), 529.

¹¹ Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*, 546; Griffel, *İslam’da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, 522.

¹² Laura Hassan, “In Pursuit of the World’s Creator: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Origins of the Universe in *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*,” *Res Philosophica* 98/2 (April 5, 2021), 233.

in other books of this period like his *Tafsīr* and also like his *Sharḥ ‘Uyūn al- ḥikma*, that lead him to the, I would say, personal decision that God is a free actor. Here he takes a position that is identical to *kalām*. But the principal argument that, for instance, Laura Hassan points out in her article is a teleological argument. Everybody knows, particularly in an Aristotelian context, that teleological arguments are not truly philosophical arguments, because they are not deductive. They are rhetorical arguments. And he says on various occasions in his philosophical books that if you settle on a rhetorical argument that is something that has no validity in philosophy. So that's how I would see these decisions that Laura Hassan pointed out. One is teleology and another one that I pointed out is “Pascal's wager,” which is equally not a philosophical argument, in the understanding of philosophy at the time. It's an argument that is based on a personal decision of caution. So I do agree with Laura Hassan that in a personal way, he decides in *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya* in favor of the creation of the world in time and in favor of God as a free actor. But that is not a conclusion that he thinks he can argue for in a persuasive way in a philosophical context, and I believe he realizes that.

Büşra Yurtalan: You say that *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya* is not a book of *kalām*. Do you think it would be possible to accept al-Rāzī's *al-Matālib* as a work of *kalām* if we said that he changed the content of *kalām* with his philosophical background?

Prof. Frank Griffel: No, I don't think so. Let me give you an example. We just talked about the sources of knowledge in ethics. I said the Ash‘arite position in the post-classical period was the same as in classical Ash‘arism before al-Ghazālī, namely that moral value must be deduced from Revelation. This is opposition to the Mu‘tazilite view that moral value can be reached through rational inquiry and also in opposition of the *falāsifa*. So that is something that Ash‘arism has always rejected and will reject until the 19th and the 20th centuries throughout. Now when we look at *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*, there is the famous passage where he says when we ask about how to verify a Prophet, then we should compare the teachings of the Prophet with what we already know is right or wrong through reason. This is an utterly un-Ash‘arite view, yet al-Rāzī takes it in his *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*. This is a philosophical view that come straight out of the works of Ibn Sīnā or any other philosopher. And that illustrates that this book is not a book in *kalām* because it violates teachings of the Ash‘arite school on the verification of prophecy. And I would also say that therefore it's not ever been a textbook in *kalām*. It's not been considered a book that actually teaches Ash‘arism or any other type of *kalām*. The introduction clarifies this, where he actually talks about the sources of knowledge and where for instance, he points out that the insights of Sufis is a source of knowledge that one should take into consideration in the field of *ilāhiyyāt*. This illustrates the, I would say, first of all, non-*falsafa* character of the book. It's a classical philosophical book, but it's not committed to teaching of *falsafa*. It's also not committed to teachings of Ash‘arite *kalām*, despite the fact that on various occasions, it sides with Ash‘arite *kalām*, on various other occasions it sides with *falsafa*.

[....]

Büşra Yurtalan: Your latest book interprets “philosophy” in a broad sense. In addition, you argue that books such as al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī's *al-‘Awāšim min al-qawāšim* and al-Miklāṭī's *Lubāb al-‘uqūl fī l- radd ‘alā l- falāsifa* should be studied as a book of philosophy

despite their harsh polemic against *falsafa*.¹³ How do you assess the inclusivity and interrelations of the four distinct concepts: philosophy, *kalām*, *falsafa*, and *hikma*? Additionally, your book on al-Ghazālī is titled “Philosophical Theology.” How do you position and explain this term in your conceptual analysis? Would you consider al-Ghazālī as a *mutakallim* or a philosopher?

Prof. Frank Griffel: [...] The works that you quote argue against *falsafa*, but they are still works of philosophy. [...] In this case, *falsafa*, at this point in time is an intellectual movement with a distinct set of teachings. And that's not how we use the word “philosophy” today. When we use the word “philosophy,” we don't think that there are particular teachings that are connected to it. No, it's a particular technique. It's a discourse tradition. And it's committed to certain methods. And here as well, I would argue that al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* is a book of *kalām* without question. Al-Ghazālī agreed with that, and Averroes agreed with that. I think everybody realises that *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, when it comes to a genre, belongs to the genre of *kalām*. But when we open it today, we must realize that it's a profoundly philosophical book. And I write in the introduction to my latest book *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* that much of the perspective that I take there comes out of this one realization that the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* is a book of philosophy. If the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* is a book of philosophy, that means that other books in *kalām* can also be books of philosophy, as I argue. And this means that philosophy within the Islamic context is much more than just *falsafa* or *hikma*. And that's the key point that I make. If we translate *falsafa* as philosophy as such, we make a mistake. Now this is an easy mistake to make, particularly given the fact that you have, for instance, modern Turkish, “felsefe” a word that comes out of the Arabic “*falsafa*,” which in Turkish is then used for what we use in English call “philosophy.” In the 19th century the Turkish word “*felsefe*,” which has a long tradition in Islamic societies, became the translation for the French word “*la philosophie*.” The modern period hasn't made it easier for us to identify that premodern *falsafa* or at least more precise, *falsafa* in the 11th and 12th century was not the whole of philosophy that was practiced during those centuries.

Büşra Yurtalan: Then it's clear that *falsafa* is one discourse of philosophy and *hikma* is another.

Prof. Frank Griffel: I would say so. In fact, I would even say that in the post-classical period, many works of *kalām* take part in these discussions of philosophy.

Büşra Yurtalan: We might say that al-Ghazālī is both *mutakallim* and philosopher.

Prof. Frank Griffel: Exactly. But he was not a *faýlasūf*.

Büşra Yurtalan: If we focus only on *kalām*, we know that debates about its subject matter and status as a metaphysical discipline and its relation to philosophy continued in the late period.¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī identifies *kalām* as a universal science in *al-Mustasfā*, despite varying attitudes in his other works.¹⁵ Sirāj al-Dīn al-Urmawī¹⁶ (d. 682/1283) and Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (ö. 756/1355) further clarify

¹³ Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*, 111; Griffel, *İslam'da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, 118.

¹⁴ On this discussion see Ömer Türker, “Kelim İliminin Metafizikleşme Süreci,” *Divân Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 12/23 (2007), 75–92.

¹⁵ Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*, 483; Griffel, *İslam'da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, 465.

¹⁶ Sirāj al-Dīn al-Urmawī clarifies the distinction between metaphysics and *kalām* in his treatise. Tuna Tunagöz, “Sirāceddin el-Urmewî'nin *Risâle fi'l-fark beyne mevzû'ayi'l-ilmî'l-îlâhî ve'l-kelâm* Adlı Eseri: Eleştirel Metin ve Çeviri

and expand this debate.¹⁷ Both of your books, based on their titles and content, seem to be able to be involved in this discussion. Do these books make specific claims about the development of the subject of *kalām* in the process because of its relationship with philosophy? Particularly in the thought of al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī, how do you assess whether *kalām* can be considered a metaphysical discipline?

Prof. Frank Griffel: I think much of what you ask for is what we are currently debating and finding out by studying the texts. What is clear is that before al-Ghazālī, if you would ask any *mutakallim*, what is the subject matter of *kalām*? They would say it's the existence of God, God's attributes, God's essence and God's actions. And maybe in addition also prophecy, which is one of God's actions of course, and membership in the Muslim community. Those are the things that somebody like al-Juwaynī, for instance, would have pointed out. Now al-Ghazālī, of course, is mindful of Ibn Sīnā's understanding of metaphysics, meaning *Ilāhiyyāt*. And so that's the background of his statement that in he makes in *al-Mustasfā* that the subject matter of *kalām* is a similar one, namely existence by itself. But that view which may be shared by others such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and *later mutakallimūn* is only possible because they all engaged with Ibn Sīnā's views. So it is clear in this case that if people then think differently about the subject matter of *kalām* and think that it is the same subject matter as *Ilāhiyyāt*, this is a view that is influenced by Ibn Sīnā. And I think what we just talked about, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya*, which presents itself as a book on *Ilāhiyyāt* deals of course with subjects that are also discussed in *kalām*. So, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, definitely had the idea of putting these two together, namely *Ilāhiyyāt* and *kalām*, in one book. For him the two have the same subject matter. Now that is true for Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. We learn through the work of my colleague Heidrun Eichner, for instance, that later *kalām* books, the ones of al-Bayḍāwī, the ones of Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī, use the table of contents of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's philosophical books and that is puzzling. But it gives us the impression, at least the impression on my side, that for al-Ījī and al-Bayḍāwī as well as other post-classical *mutakallimūn* they also thought that the subject matter of philosophical inquiry and *kalām* inquiry is one the same.

[....]

Büşra Yurtalan: In your latest book, you reference Thomas Bauer's concepts of "ambiguity" and "tolerance of ambiguity," subjects you previously discussed in a book review.¹⁸ Could you briefly share your assessment of al-Ghazālī's and al-Rāzī's approaches to certainty and doubt in knowledge? Do you think there is a relationship between al-Ghazālī's and al-Rāzī's approaches to the certainty of knowledge and the concept of "ambiguity"?

[Sīrāj al-Dīn al-Urmawī's Work Entitled *Risāla fī'l-farq bayna mawḍū'ay al-'ilm al-ilāhī wa'l-kalām*: Critical Edition and Turkish Translation], *Kutadgubilig Felsefe-Bilim Araştırmaları* 31 (2016), 265–288.

¹⁷ Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī later expands the subject of *kalām* as *ma'lūm*. Seyyid Şerif Cürcânî, *Şerhu'l-Mevâkıf*, trans. Ömer Türker (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2015), 1/150, 151; İlyas Çelebi, "Ortaya Çıkışından Günümüze Kelam İlminde 'Konu' Problemi," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 28 (2005), 24–29.

¹⁸ Griffel, "Contradictions and Lots of Ambiguity"; Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*, 475–479; Griffel, *İslam'da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, 456–460.

Prof. Frank Griffel: If we engage in philosophy we may reach a point where we cannot find answers or where the answers become uncertain. There are different ways how scholars in the past have dealt with that moment. And one of the examples I also refer to on the last pages of my most recent book is of course Immanuel Kant's conclusion that there are "antinomies of pure reason,"¹⁹ questions that cannot be answered by means of philosophical reasoning. That's a very, I would say, Western answer in the sense that it tries to clarify things and tries to express that there is no philosophical answer on these questions. Al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, I believe, dealt with the same problem, namely, that there are certain things which cannot be answered neither philosophically nor through reference to Revelation, and that in their context they did not conclude such as Immanuel Kant, that one shouldn't engage with these questions in philosophy. In a, I would say, very Islamic way al-Rāzī dealt with the problem by proposing different answers, in this case *ḥikma* and *kalām* answers, and maybe a third answer in his *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya*. So there are two systems of thought which are competing with one another. During al-Rāzī's time it's *ḥikma* and *kalām*, later on other scholars add for instance the thought of Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī developed that to a third system that finds answers to the same philosophical and religious questions. And that's what I mean by "tolerance for ambiguity," given the fact that these are done by the same authors. It means that first of all, the authors realize that these questions don't have fully convincing answers. Secondly it also says that these authors are then able to engage in different types of answers. In my earlier book I pointed to this kind of tolerance for ambiguity with regard to al-Ghazālī and the conflict between occasionalism and secondary causality. In Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī it becomes more fundamental and affects the scholarly conflict between a created world and one that is eternal.

[....]

Büşra Yurtalan: How do you evaluate the studies in the fields of *Kalām* and Islamic Philosophy conducted in Türkiye regarding their content and accessibility? Are Turkish publications easily accessible to Western researchers in terms of language? Do you think there are a sufficient number of publications in English?

Prof. Frank Griffel: Türkiye has become in the last 20 years or so, if not longer, one of the most fertile countries of Islamic studies, particularly the study of Islamic intellectual history. There are several reasons for this. In a sense the rupture that the period of Kemalism led to very interesting developments after the restart, to some degree, of Islamic studies in Türkiye, in the 1980s and in the 1990s. And of course since 2002 many institutions have enjoyed greater supported. Hence, there has been an immense surge and many interesting developments there. Second, I would also say that Turkish scholars, not only read in English, they also write in English which is very helpful for us. It's true that there are lots of books and articles that are not yet translated. But you know we in our classes have used artificial intelligence to benefit from those publications in ways that nobody could have done 10 years ago. So, I very much value and I very much welcome these developments, I myself benefit from it a lot. And think that I can only encourage the way Islamic studies has been pursued in Türkiye in the past years. Also, I wish to encourage a close

¹⁹ Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*, 571; Griffel, *İslam'da Klasik-Sonrası Felsefenin Teşekkülü*, 546.

engagement with other countries, with other languages, not only English, also contributions in German and French, as well as in Persian and of course also in Arabic.

Büşra Yurtalan: When advising young researchers on effective research and writing, one common recommendation is to draw inspiration from successful works. Your academic publications serve as valuable guides for researchers. Could you share the fundamental principles that underlie your academic research and writing style?

Prof. Frank Griffel: I'm not sure I know myself what I'm really doing. I was trained in classical German philology and the kind of model of research for that isn't even Islamic studies. It's the study of classical languages and literatures in Latin, and in Greek. So, first of all, it's the thorough study of languages and then also the close engagement with texts. And if anything, it's probably the fact that you take these texts seriously both in what they say and secondly also in their contexts. That was always right from the beginning, the thing that I've tried to do. When I think back to my master thesis, for instance, it was a very close engagement with 30 pages of al-Ghazālī where he, however, said so difficult things about *marātib al-wujūd*, which I didn't understand and which also didn't make sense to me in the context of the Ash'arite school teachings. So, I was lucky to hit on a text that was, first of all, very interesting. But second it also had so many implications about the context. It was clear that al-Ghazālī was writing with certain teachings of Ibn Sīnā in mind which, however, he didn't express. And it was those things that I tried to bring out. I read the text, I didn't understand it, I reread the text, I started reading Ibn Sīnā and I saw the connections and that is, I think, what I have done ever since. Most importantly, I think it's the fact that one really takes the teachings and the texts seriously and doesn't think that this is just the kind of work that he himself was not really serious about or that one doesn't need to understand. I think that's what I see on occasion which frustrates me in secondary literature: somebody would refer to something and say this is not important, this is something that the author himself didn't take seriously. I don't think that helps us, because as interpreters, we have to work on the things that even the author didn't think about or to point out the connections that even the author wasn't aware of. And I think in this particular text, which was the al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa* I really realized that he himself is influenced by Ibn Sīnā in ways that he himself probably didn't realize.

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