



Ahmed H. al-Rahim. *The Creation of Philosophical Tradition: Biography and the Reception of Avicenna's Philosophy from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century A.D.* Diskurse Der Arabistik 21. Wiesbaden: Harrasswitz Verlag, 2018. XVII+218 s. ISBN: 978-3-447-10333-6

KENAN TEKİN

Yalova Üniversitesi İslami İlimler Fakültesi

kenan.tekin@yalova.edu.tr

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0823-0658>

Studies of philosophy in the Islamic history tend to focus either on the oeuvre of a philosopher or a shared theme among philosophers. Rarely one finds studies on a philosophical movement, especially in the post-Avicennan period. Ahmed al-Rahim's *The Creation of Philosophical Tradition* is a welcome contribution to this latter kind of works. In this book, al-Rahim studies biographical literature to show emergence of Avicennan philosophical tradition from eleventh to fourteenth century. The book consists of two parts. In the first introductory part, al-Rahim puts forward some theses, and introduces primary sources of the study. Al-Rahim points out and discusses merits of three sets of primary sources: biographical and doxographical books on philosophers, prosopographical works on the followers of legal schools, particularly the Shāfi'ī school, and the comprehensive twelver Shī'ite bio-bibliographies from later periods. Al-Rahim critically evaluates these sources (more on this below) while also challenging some of the misconceptions in the secondary literature regarding the reception of Avicennan philosophy. One problem which al-Rahim mentions is that the history of Avicennan philosophy, particularly during the Saljuqid, Ayyubid, and Mongol Ilkhanate rule, has been neglected, mainly because of a bias against the dominant genres of writing (commentary and glosses) in that period. Another misconception, against which al-Rahim argues, is that Sunnī Muslims neglected philosophy after al-Ghazālī's condemnation of some of its

tenets in the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (pp.1-2) while it flourished among Shī'ites. With a study of the post-Avicennan philosophers, al-Rahim not only provides a bio-bibliography of some of the most important philosophers but also shows that Sunnīs in general, and Shāfi'īs in particular played a key role in the formation of an Avicennan philosophical tradition.

The second part of the book is devoted to the study of biography and philosophical works of some post-Avicennan philosophers. Al-Rahim divides them into two categories, the immediate disciples of Avicenna (including al-Jūzjānī, Bahmanyār, Ibn Zayla, and al-Ma'sūmī) and later Avicennan philosophers (including al-Lawkarī, al-Īlāqī, al-Ghazālī, al-Sāwī, al-Khūnajī, al-Abharī, al-Kātībī, al-Urmawī, al-Tustarī, and al-Taḥṭānī a.k.a. Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī). In each entry, al-Rahim uses primary sources to establish, as much as possible, where and when the relevant philosopher was born, lived, studied, and whom they taught. Al-Rahim also evaluates contradictory reports in the sources, such as regarding their death dates, and their connections with other philosophers some of which remain speculative due to lack of information in the sources. The entries also mention the logical and philosophical works which are also supplemented with an inventory of these works making it easier to navigate them.

One shared feature of the later generations of post-Avicennan philosophers that al-Rahim selected for his study is that almost all of them followed the Shāfi'ī school of law. Al-Rahim acknowledges that there were some Avicennan philosophers among Ḥanafīs and Shī'ites as well, but he believes the Shāfi'īs constituted the main bulk at that time. Perhaps this is the reason he focuses on the philosophers following the Shāfi'ī school.

While the study is based on the bio-bibliographical sources, al-Rahim does not take their contents for granted. He, in fact, points out several features of these sources which are prone to entertaining certain themes rather than striving for accuracy. Both the earlier biographical sources devoted to the philosophers and the prosopographical sources on the adherents of a certain school include literary topoi and themes which are more revealing about the purpose of the narrative rather than merely conveying biographical information. For instance, in his overview of the works in the genre of the lives of philosophers such as *Tatimmat Şiwān al-Ḥikma* of al-Bayhaqī (a.k.a. Ibn Funduq), *Ta'riḫ al-Ḥukamā'* of Ibn al-Qiftī, *'Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'* of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, and *Nuzhat al-Arwāḥ* or *Ta'riḫ al-Ḥukamā'* of al-Shahrazūrī (pp.10-13), al-Rahim points out that the narratives on the transmission of Avicennan philosophy were modeled

after the transmission of the prophetic reports as there were attempts to establish close and superior links in the chain of learning. Al-Rahim dwells on attempts at making al-Lawkarī a student of Bahmanyār (pp.15-19). Although he doubts that this might be the case, given the gap between their death dates, he finds this attempt noteworthy because it demonstrated the impact of the science of hadith transmission on the history of philosophy. The idea being that the shorter the link the better the transmission. Narratives on transmission of ancient philosophy which connect Socrates and Greek philosophers with prophets such as Dāwūd and Luqmān further corroborate al-Rahim's point. Other tendencies in biographical literature which al-Rahim mentions include the topoi of the meeting of the great minds and making one of the colleagues a student of another. Therefore, the biographical literature and chains of transmission should be read carefully, as exemplified in the attempt to make Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī a student of Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (p.22), and al-Kātibī a student of al-Ṭūsī (p.107).

An important development in the post-Avicennan period was, as al-Rahim rightly notes, that the older specialization in either philosophical/ancient sciences or religious sciences became porous. Scholars no longer limited themselves to one kind of science. Rather they were polymaths who wrote works across this divide. This development was well attested to by Ottoman bio-bibliographers such as Ṭashkopriẓāde and Kātib Chelebī (the latter is quoted by al-Rahim in this regard, p.25). According to al-Rahim, this change came about in the madrasa environment, despite restrictions in endowment deeds against teaching philosophical sciences. Examples of scholars who seems to have actively engaged in philosophical sciences in that environment are al-Khūnajī, al-Abharī and others mentioned previously (pp.29-30). Considering that post-Avicennan philosophers were active across the divide between rational and religious sciences, this often meant that they either worked as professors in the madrasa, or served as judges or jurisconsults which means that the prosopographical works on the school of law they adhered to would include information on them. As noted previously, al-Rahim makes use of the prosopographies (*ṭabaqāt*) of Shāfi'ī legal school such as *Ṭabaqāts* of al-Subkī and al-Asnawī, which include information about the above-mentioned philosophers who adhered to that school.

Prosopographical works, though useful for excavating information on later philosophers that followed or contributed to religio-legal corpus of the relevant school, were also problematic at times as they tended to cast doubt

on the degree to which these philosophers belonged to the school. In the case of bio-bibliographical works of Shāfi'īs, al-Rahim shows that at times philosophically bent members of the school were subject to accusations of *rafḍ* (i.e. having Shī'ite proclivities), or criticized for playing chess too much, or neglecting prayers, both of which implied that they did not take religious doctrine seriously (p.32). Some Sunnī scholars, who were accused of *rafḍ*, were readily claimed by later authors of Shī'ite bio-bibliographical works as genuinely being so (p.36). This constitutes one weakness of this third major source of bio-bibliography of post-Avicennan philosophers.

Besides the bio-bibliographical literature, al-Rahim uses licenses or certificates of teaching and learning to show that Shāfi'ī-Ash'arīs played a significant role in the transmission of Avicennan philosophy. Al-Rahim draws attention to one chain of transmission based on the study of *al-Ishārāt*, Avicenna's summa of his philosophy. The transmission is as follows, Avicenna to Bahmanyār to al-Lawkarī to Afḍal al-Dīn Ibn Ghaylān to Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Sarakhsī to Farīd al-Dīn Dāmād al-Nīshāpūrī to Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. Despite some questions about the earlier part of this chain, al-Rahim notes that the latter part of the chain shows that al-Ṭūsī studied with Farīd al-Dīn Dāmād who was a student of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. It is suggested that al-Ṭūsī probably studied with Farīd al-Dīn at the Nizāmiyya madrasa of Nishapur (pp.19-20). From this, al-Rahim deduces that there was a study of Avicennan philosophy among the Sunnī Shāfi'īs. Based on these connections, al-Rahim asserts that the "Sunnī tradition of reading Avicenna in the *madrasa* was not only central to the transmission of post-Avicennan philosophy from Ḥurāsān to Syria to Egypt but also to its early reception within imāmī-Šī'ism" (p.21).

By reading bio-bibliographical works closely, al-Rahim not only emphasizes the up-to-now neglected role of Shāfi'ī-Ash'arīs in the transmission of Avicennan philosophy, he also rectifies a misconception in the secondary literature about the Sunnīs in general as being against philosophy. This is partly due to the biographical dictionaries of Shāfi'īs which for various reasons repudiated some fellow Shāfi'īs such as Muḥammad b. As'ad al-Tustarī and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī who engaged with philosophy. Nevertheless, al-Rahim notes, the Shāfi'ī philosophers and theologians constituted "the greatest intellectual force in the creation of the Avicennan philosophical tradition both in and out of the madrasa during the medieval Islamicate period" (p.33).

The book as a whole is an important contribution to the history of Avicennan philosophy. It is well researched, includes extensive footnotes some of which are quite comprehensive (for instance, footnote 14 spans pages 4-6). The bibliography of primary sources, though helpfully arranges commentaries and glosses of books under the entry on the base text, let's say al-Abhari's *Īsāghūjī*, it does not identify commentators and glossators, unless they are explicitly mentioned in the title of the printed edition. There is also an expansive and useful index. Leaving aside these stylistic issues, one wishes that the author had dealt further with some of the themes. For instance, how do we decide whether a given author can be considered Avicennan? Relatedly, to what extent post-Razian philosophers can be considered Avicennan? On another note, al-Rahim suggests that there were not any particular religious reasons for the Shāfi'īs' contribution to philosophy (p.28). In that case, what explains their interest?

To conclude, Ahmed al-Rahim's study of the biographical literature and the biographies of the most important transmitters of the Avicennan tradition between 11th and 14th centuries shows that they mostly were Shāfi'ī-Ash'arī Sunnīs. This study makes an important revision to the history of Islamic philosophy which for far too long has assumed that the Sunnīs denigrated philosophy while the Shī'īs venerated it. The evidence shows that in fact the Sunnīs played a key role not only in the establishment of the Avicennan philosophical tradition but also in its reception by the Shī'īs. The study illustrates that biographical literature which include many literary topoi can be read in a manner that is cautious, yet revealing.

