

Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning by Tariq Jaffer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), viii + 243 pp.

The past several decades have been witness to a wave of scholarship on the later period of Islamic intellectual history. By “later period” I have in mind what is somewhat misleadingly referred to as the “post-Avicennian” phase of Islamic thought, which takes in an enormous enterprise of intellectual activity from the death of the most influential Islamic philosopher Avicenna (d. 1037) to several generations of thinkers following the death of that other towering philosophical figure Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640).

This second wave of intellectual activity in Islamic civilization covers a vast geographical expanse, from Spain in the west to China in the east, and almost every place in between. And this is to say nothing of the major figures in this six-hundred year period who, on a conservative estimate, number in the hundreds. The major linguistic vehicles of expression here are naturally Arabic and Persian, but also Ottoman Turkish and Chinese. Muslim intellectuals in this period are still engaged, in one form or another, with the heritage of Ancient Greece and Late Antiquity (primarily developed forms of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism), but there are also other kinds of rapprochement with very different civilizations and religious traditions, including Hinduism in India, Neo-Confucianism in China, and Buddhism in Iran and Central Asia.

Now, add to this complicated picture the rise of varying intellectual schools and perspectives indigenous to Islam and the dominating presence of rational discourse in Islamic philosophy and theology, coupled with the ever-increasing tendency for many thinkers after Avicenna (and partly because of him) to unite a variety of perspectives into their own intellectual projects (including philosophy, theology, mysticism, and scriptural exegesis), and you have nothing short of an all-imposing intellectual tradition. Thus, the aforementioned “wave” of scholarship accounts for just a tiny drop in the vast ocean of the post-Avicennian Islamic intellectual tradition.

It should be recalled here that most of the giants belonging to this period, such as ‘Ayn al-Qudāt (d. 1131), Shihāb al-Dīn Suhawardī (d. 1191), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274) were completely unknown to the Latin West, and hence were (and sometimes still are) virtually absent from our standard intellectual histories (the one major exception here being Peter Adamson’s excellent multi-volume *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013-J]). The same holds true for another major figure in this period and the subject of the book presently under review, namely, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210).

Rāzī hailed from the famous medieval Iranian city of Rayy, which today is a suburb in Tehran. He can be said to occupy a similar kind of status in Islam that Maimonides (his contemporary) and St. Albert the Great do in Judaism and Christianity respectively. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Rāzī’s intellectual presence dominates a large part of the discourse of post-Avicennian Islamic philosophy and theology, and that in these two domains he has historically been far more influential than his intellectual predecessor, the great al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). Rāzī contributed to changing the course and character of the Kalam tradition for good, authoring a major refutation of Avicenna and a number of highly influential books in philosophical theology.

Like so many other philosophers and theologians in the Islamic tradition, Rāzī was also a master of all of the religious sciences, particularly excelling in the domains of legal theory and Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*). Rāzī’s commentary upon the Quran, known as *The Grand Commentary* (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*) or *Keys to the Unseen* (*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*), is widely recognized as the most profound commentary upon the Quran to have ever been written (and there are thousands of pre-modern commentaries upon the Quran). Filling some seventeen hefty volumes in modern Arabic print, Rāzī’s commentary is in many ways a grand synthesis of the Islamic intellectual project up to his own day, bringing together the received wisdom of past authorities’ reflections on the Quran and a host of other materials in the disciplines of philosophy, theology, mysticism, and science.

For all of its interesting content, the sheer size and complexity of Rāzī’s Quran commentary also make it a rather daunting task for the modern scholar to study. In his award-winning book, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning*, Tariq Jaffer attempts to do just this. Taking a different line of inquiry from the only other major book on Rāzī’s work on the

Quran in modern scholarship (7), Jaffer sets out to demonstrate how Rāzī's Quran commentary, aptly described as "the crowning glory of his vast oeuvre" (5), introduces a number of creative innovations into the enterprise of Quranic exegesis.

Amongst these innovations is a new "form" of scriptural exegesis which is heavily indebted to the argumentative, dialectical, and problem-based approach to intellectual topics in texts of Islamic philosophy and philosophical theology (32-34, 36-39). This then ushers in an entirely different way of approaching issues dealt with in traditional Quranic exegetical literature, as the range of possible meanings entertained by Rāzī are expanded to now seriously factor into the equation not only materials from the transmitted sciences such as law and Prophetic traditions, but also materials from the intellectual sciences, namely metaphysics, logic, physics, psychology, cosmology, and astronomy (31, 35-36). In doing so, Rāzī is able to tackle a range of problems in Quranic exegesis on the basis of a new rational, interpretive methodology which seamlessly naturalizes philosophy and philosophical theology into the art of Quran commentary, both with respect to form and content.

One major implication of Rāzī's far-reaching rational approach to the Quran is that it allows for a new kind of philosophical reasoning to enter into the interpretively watertight genealogical tradition of Quranic exegesis, with the net effect that reason and revelation—or, in Islamic terms, the intellectual and transmitted sciences—are seen as compatible (84-116). Be that as it may, Rāzī is also of the view that, in cases where scripture seems to contradict reason, the latter is to be the arbiter and scripture is to be seen in its light (see 94ff). This is because, as Jaffer shows, for Rāzī sound rational principles and the sciences that these engender, such as metaphysics, are already embedded in the Quran (84-85). Thus, if a Quranic text seems to contradict what reason dictates to be true, then it is because the Quranic text is veiled by a layer of symbols which themselves obscure its correct, rational content. As Jaffer puts it, in such cases Rāzī's method entails that one come to discover the true meaning of the text by "diverting the Qur'ān's apparent sense to a figurative, allegorical, or symbolic sense" (85).

This takes us to one of the more interesting findings in Jaffer's study, namely the dominating presence of Mu'tazilī theology in Rāzī's method of Quranic interpretation over and against the principles of his own intellectual school, namely that of Ash'arism (see ch. 2). This indeed seems to explain the thoroughgoing rationalist project of Rāzī's theoretical scriptural hermeneutics. At the same time, Rāzī's interpretation of the famous Light Verse (Q 24:35) introduces an added nuance. The Light Verse reads: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, even if no fire had touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His Light whomsoever He will, and God sets forth parables for mankind, and God is Knower of all things" (translation taken from S. H. Nasr et al. editors, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* [New York: HarperOne, 2015]).

As Jaffer demonstrates (ch. 4) when assessing Rāzī's interpretation of this verse, Rāzī's noetics in his Quran commentary and in his commentary upon a major work by Avicenna emerge as Avicennian, and somewhat derivative of Ghazālī's own appropriation of Avicenna in this regard (it should be noted that both Avicenna and Ghazālī wrote commentaries upon the Light Verse). Jaffer then goes on to show (159 ff.) that in a work on the Quranic sciences entitled *The Mysteries of Revelation* (*Asrār al-tanzīl*), which Rāzī wrote after he completed his Quran commentary proper, Rāzī ends up siding with certain Islamic mystical doctrines centred around the heart (the seat of human consciousness), and this by way of Ghazālī's own transcending of Avicennian noetics.

Thus, Rāzī takes up a line of interpretation with respect to this key verse of the Quran that reverts to symbolic readings and the like. But the Avicennian psychology and cosmology which inform Rāzī's readings in two of his works that treat the Light Verse go beyond conventional Mu'tazilī theological principles and take us more squarely into the world of Islamic philosophy. Then, in another one of his later works on the Quran, where he comments on the Light Verse a third time, Rāzī ultimately settles on a reading informed by Islamic mysticism, to which he was deeply attracted.

What all of this means with respect to Rāzī's methodology for interpreting the Quran is that it is a convenient but not incoherent fusion of varying perspectives. This also aligns very well with the increasing tendency in post-Avicennian Islamic thought to synthesize the various intellectual

and religious sciences into a single, sweeping vision. Jaffer rightly sees this synthetic scriptural hermeneutics as a strength in Rāzī's methodology (168), and later on identifies Rāzī's work on the Quran as "an apparatus to forge his intellectual outlook" (212) which, by virtue of his expansive vision of things, could not be confined to just one discipline as such. Rāzī thereby ends up transcending the formal barriers of not only traditional Quranic interpretation, but of philosophy and theology as well. To be sure, we notice this same tendency some four hundred years later where, with an even more significantly developed Islamic intellectual tradition at his disposal, Mullā Sadrā was able to synthesize all of its major perspectives into his own philosophical commentary upon the Quran. Here I point the reader to my own work, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Sadrā* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012).

However we characterize Rāzī's method of approach to interpreting the Quran, it has not been universally acknowledged as entirely sound or legitimate. Jaffer discusses how the great polemicist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) responded to Rāzī on this and other counts, attempting to argue that Rāzī's theoretical scriptural hermeneutics was marred by a set of unresolvable tensions (see 117–130, especially 123–130). Nevertheless, the positive reception and even integration of Rāzī's commentary into the Quran commentaries of subsequent generations (see 6)—Sunni and Shī'ī alike—attest to the profound impact it exercised upon the cumulative weight of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Tariq Jaffer's fine study of Rāzī's Quran commentary will do much to inform the growing body of scholarship on post-Avicennian Islamic philosophy in general and the thought of Rāzī in particular. On account of the clarity and sound historical interpretive lens that Jaffer brings to bear upon this work, there is no doubt in my mind that his book will also be of great interest to scholars and students of intellectual history, religious studies, philosophical theology, and philosophy of religion. And, because Rāzī has such a wide-ranging, polysemic view of scripture that has clear cognates amongst a number of leading medieval Jewish and Christian thinkers, Jaffer's study also recommends itself to Jewish scripture scholars and Christian theologians who, like Rāzī and his contemporary Muslim audience, continue to grapple with the perennial problem of reason versus revelation.

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Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology and the Ethics of Personhood by Christina Bieber Lake (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), xi + 264 pp.

Christina Bieber Lake's *Prophets of the Posthuman* is an insightful and well-written monograph that brings the work of nine American fiction writers to bear on ethical questions concerning biotechnology. Throughout the work, Lake develops a contrast between two competing moral visions. The first of these, and the focus of Lake's critique, is "posthumanism"—or "transhumanism," a similar though distinguishable perspective (169)—which seeks to overcome present human limitations and radically remake humanity through the scientific application of technology. According to Lake, this posthumanist ideology offers a reductive account of human existence, even as it engenders an "oppressive rhetorical framework" that devalues the humanities and exiles the moral imagination (29). Foreclosing any contemplation of the nature of the "good life" or the *telos* of technological development, such scientism simply redefines all of humanity's problems in technological terms (i.e., susceptible to technological resolution): "in the late modern world, *techne* has replaced *telos*; process has replaced progress" (15). The promise of such a technological "quick fix," Lake warns, may incline us away from the hard work of character formation.