



Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Account of Metaphysical Certainty in terms of Ta'wīl

Fahreddīn el-Rāzī'nin Te'vīl Teorisi Açısından Metafizik Yakîn Anlayışı

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Abstract

This paper examines Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's understanding of metaphysical certainty in terms of his theory of *ta'wīl* (interpretation) while showing his optimism in attaining metaphysical certainty. Rāzī, also known as the leader of the skeptics (*shaykh al-mushakkikīn*) in the Shi'i sources, while thoroughly criticizing the philosophical and kalam traditions before him, remains a controversial figure among scholars. His critical thinking confounded subsequent thinkers, and thus, various ways of reading about Rāzī have emerged. Some have evaluated Rāzī as a metaphysical agnostic who believed that the intellect cannot attain certainty in theological knowledge. This study positions Rāzī's account of metaphysical certainty in relation to his theory of *ta'wīl*. The first part of the article focuses on the history of the relationship between metaphysical certainty and *ta'wīl* —the debates over the relationship between intellect and transmission in theological knowledge — and offers the historical context in which Rāzī developed his idiosyncratic approach. The second part identifies Rāzī's principles of reason in metaphysical knowledge through the interpretation of the concept of *istiwā'*. This article does not aim to fully investigate Rāzī's understanding of *ta'wīl*. However, it analyzes how intellectual truths, one of the main components of the theory of *ta'wīl*, become metaphysical certainties. The Mu'tazilī *mutakallimūn* made metaphysical certainties, which are transformed from intellectual truths, a yardstick of understanding and interpreting religion. On the other hand, what some might call their obsession with reliance upon metaphysical certainties became an intolerant attitude towards different interpretations of religion, grew into an oppressive ideology with political power, and ultimately fueled a critical resistance by non-Mu'tazilī scholars against rationality (or even rationalism itself). As a natural consequence, the rational development of other doctrines was slowed down by the reaction against Mu'tazilī influence. The first part of the article, while discussing Kalam schools, especially the Ash'arī school of theology, in terms of metaphysical certainty and the interpretation of revelation, charts the crystallization of the Ash'arī account of the relationship between interpretation (*ta'wīl*) and intellectual truths, a historical process inversely correlated with the presence of the Mu'tazilī. However, the crystallization process, which was somewhat ambivalent until Rāzī, reaches its ultimate form with Rāzī. The first of the main principles of Rāzī's theory of *ta'wīl* is that the intellect is the foundation of revelation (*al-'aql aṣl al-naql*). The intellect becomes the decisive factor not only in terms of authentication and understanding of revelation but also in terms of its interpretation (*ta'wīl*). Focusing on his *Tafsīr*, one of his last treatises and which was left incomplete, this article argues against the claim that toward the end of his life, he was inclined to metaphysical agnosticism, falling into an epistemic pessimism with respect to attaining metaphysical certainty. Rāzī takes a firm stance on the probability of transmission in works written throughout his life. Rāzī's firm stance on the probability of transmitted sources necessarily leads to the principle that reason is the foundation of transmission. Especially with his account of *ta'wīl*, he offers a rational theology in which he maintains his optimism on metaphysical certainty.

Keywords: Kalām, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Metaphysical certainty, Ta'wīl, Ash'ariyya, al-'Aql aṣl al-naql, Istiwā'.

Öz

Bu makale Fahreddin el-Rāzī'nin metafizik yakīn anlayışını *te'vīl* teorisi açısından incelerken, onun metafizik yakīne ulaşma hususundaki optimistik tutumunu da ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Kuşkucuların lideri (*şeyhü'l-müşekkikīn*) olarak da bilinen Rāzī'nin, kendisinden önceki felsefe ve kalam geleneklerini etraflıca kritik ederken yeni ve özgün bir anlayış ortaya koyup koymadığı tartışılmış, eleştirel düşüncesi kendisinden sonraki düşünürlerce tenkit edilmiş ve bu vesile ile Rāzī hakkında çeşitli okuma biçimleri ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu okuma biçimleri arasında Rāzī'yi, aklın kelâmî bilgide yakīne ulaşamayacağı şeklinde bir metafizik bilinmezci olarak değerlendirenler de olmuştur. Bu çalışma, Rāzī'nin metafizik yakīn anlayışını *te'vīl* teorisi ile birlikte serimlemeye çalışmaktadır. Makalenin ilk ana bölümü metafizik yakīn ve *te'vīl* ilişkisi ekseninde -başka bir deyişle kelâmî bilgide akıl-nakil tartışmaları açısından- Rāzī öncesi düşünceye dair -ipuçları niteliğinde- tarihsel bağlam vermektedir. İkinci ana kısım ise Rāzī'nin metafizik bilgide akıl anlayışındaki ilkelerini *istivā'* kavramının *te'vīl* üzerinden belirginleştirmektedir. Bu makale, Rāzī'nin *te'vīl* anlayışını bütünüyle ortaya koymayı amaçlamamaktadır. Ancak, *te'vīl* teorisinin temel bileşenlerinden birisi olan akliyyâtın nasıl metafizik yakīniyyâta dönüştüğünü analiz etmektedir. Mu'tezile, akliyyât üzerinden dönüştürdüğü metafizik yakīniyyâtı, dini anlama ve yorumlamada kıstas haline getirmiştir. Öte yandan metafizik yakīniyyât anlayışlarındaki iddiaları, farklı din yorumlarına karşı müsamahasız bir tavra dönüşmüş, siyasi erkle birlikte baskıcı hale gelmiş ve Mu'tezile dışı kalam düşüncelerini akılcılık -daha radikal bir ifade ile rasyonelizm- karşısında eleştirel-tepkisel olmaya sevk etmiştir. Doğal bir sonuç olarak diğer doktrinlerin rasyonel gelişimi Mu'tezilî etki yüzünden yavaşlamıştır. Makalenin birinci kısmı, Rāzī öncesi Eş'arî düşüncüyü, metafizik yakīniyyât ve nass yorumu açısından değerlendirirken, yorum ve akliyyât ilişkisine dair

anlayışlarındaki dakikleşmeyi Mu'tezile'nin tarihsel varlığına ters orantılı olarak ele almaktadır. Ancak Râzî'ye kadar kararsız bir şekilde gerçekleşen dakikleşme süreci, Râzî ile birlikte nihayi formuna ulaşmaktadır. Râzî'nin *te'vîl* teorisinin temel prensiplerinden ilki, aklın nakle esas (*el-'akl aşlu'l-nakl*) teşkil etmesidir. Akıl, naklin yalnız ispatı ve anlaşılması bakımından değil, aynı zamanda yorumlanması (*te'vîl*) açısından da temel belirleyici bir unsura dönüşmektedir. Bu makale, Râzî'nin ilmi hayatının sonlarına doğru, metafizik yakîniyyâta ulaşma noktasında pesimizme düşerek, metafizik bilinmezliğe doğru yöneldiği şeklindeki anlama biçimlerine karşı, en son eserleri arasında olan ve tamamlanmamış *Tefsîr'i* üzerinden cevaplar aramaktadır. Râzî, değişik zamanlarda ele aldığı eserlerinde, “naklin zanniliği” hususundaki ısrarlı duruşunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu makale Râzî'nin naklin zanniliği noktasındaki ısrarlı duruşunun, “aklın asıllığı” ilkesindeki kararlılığı ile zorunlu bir paralellik gösterdiğininin altını çizerken, metafizik yakîniyyât açısından da hala optimistik olduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kalam, Fahreddin el-Râzî, Metafizik yakîn, Te'vîl, Eş'ariye, el-'Akl aşlu'l-nakl, istivâ'.

Introduction *

The role of reason (*'aql*) in religious matters is one of the oldest issues in the intellectual history of Islam. The varying emphases on the use of reason in religion have played a significant role in the formation of schools of thought. For all of these schools of thought, the challenge was to discover the correct role of reason in relation to the transmitted sources—the Qur'an and the Sunnah—which remained a touchstone of the faith for all. If we were to formulate the problem in broad terms, we would say that the main concern of those schools of thought is an inquiry into the sources of knowledge in religion. Generally speaking, some schools of thought were conventionally labeled traditionalists, or the people of *ḥadīth*, for rejecting *Kalām*. They first emerged towards the end of the first century of Islam and relied (so they claimed) simply on the transmitted sources as the only dependable source of knowledge in religious matters. Other schools of thought, like the Mu'tazila at the beginning of the second century of Islam, treated reason as the primary source of knowledge in religion. Of course, the reliance on reason varied widely between those extremes. These middle approaches became evident in the fourth century of Islam, and their versions of *Kalām* were generally categorized as *Sunnī* theology.¹

On the other hand, these moderate approaches create challenges for scholars who attempt to understand their methodologies. The Ash'arī school of theology is a prime example. Is Ash'arī *Kalam* a rationalist or literalist? Indeed, it is not a literalist. However, especially with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, the Ash'arī school was seen as more rationalist, as Ibn Taymiyya argues.² On the other hand, notably with al-Juwaynī and reaching its peak with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, the school was said to have leaned towards a moderate skepticism in which no certainty in metaphysical knowledge

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¹ Ghazzālī (450-505 AH/1058-1111 CE) is one of the most prominent Ash'arī theologians who are engaged in the problem of the correct relationship between reason and revelation, especially in his *Iqtisād*, where he points to two extreme approaches to religion: i) practicing religion by taking a stance against reason or ii) understanding religion through reason alone. He does not approve of any of these alone, paving the way for moderate understanding. Ghazzālī, *Itikadda Orta Yol: al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād*, a Turkish-Arabic parallel text, trans. Osman Demir (Istanbul: Klasik Yayinlari, 2012), 14-6. See also its English translation, *Moderation in Belief: al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād*, trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1-4.

² Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'arūḍ al-'aql wa al-naql aw-muwāfaqat ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl li-ṣarīḥ al-ma'qūl*, ed. M. Rashād Sālīm (Beirut: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyya, n.d. [1980]), 1/4-5.

is possible. Rāzī was already labeled as the leader of skeptics (*shaykh al-mushakkikīn* or *imam al-mushakkikīn*), particularly in the Shī'ī sources.³ In recent scholarship, Ayman Shihadeh revisits this aspect of the Ash'arī Kalam, focusing primarily on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.⁴ Is Rāzī a moderate skeptic or a metaphysical agnostic in a way that no metaphysical certainty can be attained?

Sunnī theology reached its finest form at the end of the sixth century of Islam in the works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543-606 AH/1149-1210 CE). In this paper, I will examine Rāzī's rational theology, examining his account of metaphysical certainty in connection with his theory of *ta'wīl*, while probing the problem of knowledge with metaphysical certainty. Elsewhere, I have argued that Rāzī remains optimistic about metaphysically certain knowledge, investigating the sources of knowledge in his theology.⁵ This paper is a continuation of that project and examines his account of metaphysical knowledge/certainty in connection with *ta'wīl* (interpretation) while highlighting one of the essential elements of Rāzī's theory of *ta'wīl*, which is called '*aqliyyāt* (intellectual truths).

Slightly differing from his predecessors, Rāzī shows a firm rational attitude in the interpretation of ambiguous Qur'anic phrases, such as *istiwā'*. In his firm stance, he considers '*aqliyyāt* (intellectual truths) metaphysical certainties while he argues for the probability of transmission. Thus, he establishes the necessity of interpreting (*ta'wīl*) those phrases. Here, Rāzī is determined by his account of metaphysical certainties; therefore, he cannot be considered an epistemic pessimist in terms of metaphysical knowledge. On the other hand, he may appear to be an epistemic pessimist in metaphysical knowledge, especially in his *Maṭālib*, where '*aqliyyāt* do not seem functional anymore. This paper focuses on Rāzī's optimism about metaphysical certainties, which are more evident in his theory of interpretation. Even though the question of how one should understand his so-called epistemic pessimism in the *Maṭālib* is not one of the questions in this paper, which deserves another study, I can state that his pessimism regarding '*aqliyyāt* is concerned with a cataphatic theology, not an apophatic theology. Therefore, regarding apophatic theology, Rāzī relies on reason, especially in interpreting ambiguous Qur'anic phrases. Accordingly, as this paper emphasizes, '*aqliyyāt* have a decisive role in his negative theology. Nonetheless, as we will see in the first part, the Ash'arī scholarship before Rāzī does not present such a crystallized relationship between '*aqliyyāt* and transmission, especially in the practice of *ta'wīl*.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will offer some historical analysis to show how genuinely and deeply rooted the debate about the role of reason in religious matters is in the intellectual history of Islam. Here we will encounter Mu'tazilī rationalism and its political manifestation as an apparatus that impeded both the development of a rational Sunni theology and the consistency of the resulting doctrine. Since the Mu'tazilī model of rationalism and its

³ Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm, *Majmū'a raṣā'il al-falsafiyya li-Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī* (Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 393; Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, *Al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya fi al-asfār al-'aqliyya al-arba'a* (Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1981), 1/106; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, *Nihāya al-ḥikma* (Qum: Mu'assasah-i Āmūzishī va Pizhūhishī-i Imām Khumaynī, 1386 [2007]), 2/428.

⁴ See Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2006).

⁵ Recep Erkmen, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: the Problem of Knowledge and Metaphysical Skepticism* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 2022).

political engagement with some of the ‘Abbāsī caliphs right before and during the emergence of the two Sunnī schools of theology, Ash‘ariyya and Māturīdiyya deserve another study, I rather focus on some prominent Ash‘arī scholars up to Rāzī and their approaches to the sources of knowledge in religion. The main concern of this part is to show how their understanding of metaphysical certainty (i.e., their theological concept of God) formed their interpretation (*ta‘wīl*) of religion, especially with regard to the main textual sources (the Qur‘an and the Sunnah).

In the second part, I will focus on Rāzī’s approach to the problem, namely the relationship between reason and transmitted knowledge, which is closely related to the problem of metaphysical certainty. Since he has written extensively and the topic is quite broad, I felt the need to focus on a particular theme by examining Rāzī’s understanding of *istiwā‘*, a Qur‘anic term notorious for its ambiguity. The second part of the paper aims to understand the phrase *istiwā‘* and, through this analysis, discover Rāzī’s stance on the relationship between reason—which is said to be the foundation of metaphysical certainties—and the transmitted sources. As I analyze the text regarding Rāzī’s explanation of the term, I examine his rationality, focusing on how intellectual truths become metaphysical certainties given his concept of God.

The main argument of this paper is that Rāzī is never a pessimist in attaining metaphysical certainty. His account of *‘aqliyyāt* becomes metaphysical certainties, especially in the interpretation of ambiguous Qur‘anic phrases. Thus, in his *Tafsīr*, Rāzī confidently practices *ta‘wīl* based on *‘aqliyyāt*. On the other hand, mention should be made again that one may rightly argue that in his *Maṭālib al-‘āliya*, Rāzī appears to be skeptical and somewhat pessimist in attaining metaphysical certainty, even though Rāzī wrote the *Maṭālib* at the same time with his *Tafsīr*. As explained in more detail later, Rāzī seems to divide theology into two camps: apophatic theology (negative theology) and cataphatic theology (positive theology). Rāzī confidently offers an apophatic theology through *‘aqliyyāt* and maintains his optimism about metaphysical certainty, as he does in his *Tafsīr*. He, however, becomes exceptionally critical of cataphatic theology, especially in the *Maṭālib*. However, his critical approach to a cataphatic theology should not be considered a metaphysical agnosticism. Therefore, this paper argues that Rāzī always remains optimistic about metaphysical certainty attained through *‘aqliyyāt*. Moreover, *‘aqliyyāt* remain always at the heart of his account of religion in general and kalam in particular. *‘Aqliyyāt* were crucial for the Ash‘arī scholarship before Rāzī. However, they do not seem to show a crystallized account of *‘aqliyyāt* in the practice of *ta‘wīl*. Now, we shall see a brief explanation of the Ash‘arī scholarship before Rāzī with regard to their view on the relationship between *‘aqliyyāt* and *ta‘wīl*.

1. The Relationship between Reason and Transmitted Knowledge in Theology before Rāzī

I think the following question needs to be asked: What is the main characteristic of a Muslim theologian/*mutakallim* which distinguishes him from other Muslim scholars? Many characteristics can be found. In the present context, the evidence suggests that a theologian needs to be decisive with respect to the intellectual truths by which metaphysical certainties can be attained because the rest of the religious sciences ultimately rely on the legitimacy of kalam, as

Rāzī and other theologians argue.⁶ And this legitimacy cannot be established until a coherent concept of God has been reached. Therefore, Muslim theologians argue for the necessity of *nazar* in religion, only through which *ma'rifat Allah* (knowing God) can be attained.⁷ As Rāzī argues, a tautology, or more specifically, a vicious circularity, would ensue if a concept of God were to be established through revelation. Put it differently, the authenticity of revelation can be reached only when it is established by something else, namely the intellect. On this score, the question of *ma'rifat Allah* seems to be the first place for which the intellect becomes the foundation of transmission.⁸ Nonetheless, the Ash'arī theologians show a reluctance to interpret transmitted sources until Rāzī. This part will discuss their reluctance and ambivalence about making *'aqliyyāt* the yardstick of interpreting religion, even though they argue for the importance of reason in religion.

As we shall see in the second part of this study, Ibn Taymiyya argues that Rāzī considers the intellect as the foundation of transmission. Frank Griffel critically examines this assertion of Ibn Taymiyya. However, Rāzī explicitly states that the intellect is the foundation of transmission (*al-'aql aṣl al-naql*). In his book, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning*, Tariq Jaffer underscores that not only the authenticity of *naql* is dependent on reason, but also intellectual truths cannot be dismissed in understanding and interpreting it. Referring to Nicolas Heer's paper, "The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyyah and the *Mutakallimūn*," he further argues that Rāzī's theory of *ta'wīl* profoundly influences the later Ash'arī scholarship.⁹

On the other hand, one may argue that Rāzī's theory of *ta'wīl* is similar to the Mu'tazilī *ta'wīl* methodology, in which the intellect is the yardstick of understanding and interpreting religion. Mention should be made again that this paper does not intend to reconstruct Rāzī's account of *ta'wīl*. Instead, it looks into how intellectual truths, from which metaphysical *certain* conclusions are attained, are becoming one of the main tools of the Ash'arī school of theology in understanding and interpreting religion. This part of the paper argues that the Ash'arī school had shown reluctance in making reason as the foundation of *naql* until Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. This part briefly points to possible reasons behind the Ash'arī reluctance and even ambiguity in practicing *ta'wīl*.

⁶ 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allāh Al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, edited and introduced by 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Dayb (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Anṣār, 1979 [1399AH]), 1/84-5; 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī, *Ṣerhu'l-Usūli'l-Hamse: Mu'tezile'nin Beş İlkesi*, (a Parallel Text Turkish-Arabic), tr. İlyas Çelebi (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2013), 1/125; Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fī dirāsa al-uṣūl*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Laṭīf Fūda (Beirut, Dār al-Dhakhāin, 2015), 1/97-9; Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min 'ilm al-ilāhi*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā, (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), 1/37-40.

⁷ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Ṣerhu'l-Usūli'l-Hamse*, 1/65; Al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād: ilā qawāti' al-adillah fī uṣūl al-i'tiqād*, edited, annotated, and introduced by Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā and Ali 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Abd al-Hamid (Egypt: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1950), 3; Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'Uqūl fī Dirāya al-Uṣūl*, 1/195.

⁸ Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fī dirāya al-uṣūl*, 1/142.

⁹ Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 117. Also see Nicholas Heer, "The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyyah and the *Mutakallimūn*," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam, Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir (Princeton, N.J.: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1993), 181-195.

In the formation of 'ilm al-Kalām, the problem of the *'aql-naql* (reason-transmission) relation played a significant role. Mu'tazilī theologians consider reason as a reliable source of knowledge. To them, if there were no revelation, people would still know the existence of God by means of their intellect, as well as the natures of things, and the existence of good and evil. They applied their rationalist approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an. They took offense at instances of *mujassimah* and *mushabbihah* (anthropomorphism) in the Qur'an and so endorsed *ta'wīl* that would absolve revelation of these seemingly crude depictions of God. On the other hand, giving weight to transmitted sources, the people of ḥadīth criticized the Mu'tazilī scholars for their rationalist interpretation of the Qur'an, particularly their approach to ambiguous verses (*mutashābih*) such as *yad Allah* (God's hand), giving rise to a rationalist concept of God that is abstract, divested entirely of attributes (*ta'ṭīl*) and personal qualifications while putting prophetic knowledge on the back burner. The tension between the Mu'tazila and the people of ḥadīth moved to the political sphere. As the Mu'tazila became more engaged in political interests, they weaponized rational methodology as a means to attack proponents of Sunni theology as irrational and unsound while politically domineering them.¹⁰ As a result, the traditionalist groups became more reactionary against Mu'tazilī rationalism. As a result of the traditionalist backlash, the politicized Mu'tazila turned into a real obstacle against a rational Sunnī theology in its formative period. The political ambitions of the Mu'tazila increased the rigidity of the ahl al-ḥadīth against the Mu'tazila.

Despite the conflict between Mu'tazilī rationalism and the transmission-based attitude of the people of ḥadīth, there were scholars among the mainstream, such as Abd Allah b. Kullāb (d. 854), Ḥārith al-Muhāsibī (d. 857), Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944), and especially Abū al-Hasan al-Ash'arī (d. 936), Mu'tazilī convert, who attempted to reconcile reason and tradition (*naql*) in religious matters. In the Ash'arī school of theology, the concepts of *nazar* and *istidlāl* (reasoning) stand at the heart of their theological system. Al-Ash'arī wrote a treatise in defense of Kalām and hence on the significance and correct use of reason in religion. He argues that there is no irreconcilable conflict between transmitted knowledge and the foundational assumptions of Kalām. In his work, *Istiḥsān al-Khawḍ fi 'ilm al-Kalām*, he seems to be arguing against the people of ḥadīth, who challenge the role of reason in religion. In *Istiḥsān*, he mentions the argument of the people of ḥadīth: for them, such issues as motion (*ḥaraka*), rest (*sukūn*), body (*jism*), accidents (*'araḍ*) would be addressed, if necessary, by the Prophet; however, "the Prophet, peace be upon him, did not die until he addressed all the necessary religious matters."¹¹ Dealing with such problems is considered *bid'ah* (deviation). Al-Ash'arī, on the other hand, proposes three rhetorical counterarguments against them. First, the Prophet himself did not say whether addressing these problems is *bid'ah*. He further states that the traditionalists commit *bid'ah* because they discussed

¹⁰ For the Mu'tazilī engagement in politics, see John Abdallah Nawas, *Al-Ma'mūn, the Inquisition, and the Quest for Caliphal Authority* (Atlanta, Georgia: Lockwood Press, 2015); Muharrem Akoğlu, "Ahmed b. Ebi Du'ād'in Abbasi-Mu'tezilī Politikaları Üzerindeki Etkisi [The Impact of Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād on the 'Abbāsī-Mu'tazilī policy]." *Bilimname: Düşünce Platformu* 3, no: 7 (2005).

¹¹ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Risāla istiḥsān al-khawḍ fi 'ilm al-kalām*, annotated and introduced by Muhammad al-Walī al-Ash'arī al-Qādirī al-Rifā'ī (Beirut: Dar al-Mashārī' li-al-ṭibā'a wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1995/1415), 38. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī criticizes the traditionalists in his *Istiḥsān*, which was most likely written before his conversion. In his post-conversion works, his language is more tolerant, although he still insists on the significance of reason in religion.

something the Prophet did not discuss.¹² *Khalq al-Qur'an*, for example, was one of the problems that the Prophet did not discuss. The people of ḥadīth, however, took a position and argued against the Mu'tazilī claim that the Qur'an was created. Second, indeed, the Prophet did not talk specifically about such issues as motion (*ḥaraka*), rest (*sukūn*), body (*jism*), and accidents (*'araḍ*), but he was not, al-Ash'arī argues, ignorant of those issues. It is also true that the basic principles of those issues exist in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.¹³ Third, some problems in inheritance, *ḥadd*-punishments, divorce, and so on, were not discussed by the Prophet because they did not occur in his time, although their principles are present in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Based on the principles and issues already addressed, Muslim scholars practiced analogy (*qiyās*) and *ijtihād* (legal reasoning). If the later problems were to have occurred in the time of the Prophet, he would definitely have addressed them and not have left them unanswered.¹⁴

Although al-Ash'arī argues that there can be no conflict between no irreconcilable conflict between transmitted knowledge and the foundational assumptions of Kalām, by which he means metaphysical certainties of kalam, he shows an unsure attitude toward the interpretation of ambiguous phrases of the Qur'an. Similarly, Abu Bakr al-Bāqillānī (338-403 AH/950-1013 CE) avoids making any suggestions or practicing *ta'wīl* on ambiguous verses, like *yad Allah*. As Anjum discusses, by employing the *bi-lā-kayf* argument, al-Bāqillānī intentionally divorces himself from the Mu'tazilī view of *ta'wīl* and “shows his commitment to the legacy of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.”¹⁵ In the example of *yad Allah*, he does not assert that God has hands as we do; however, he argues that the meaning of hands in the context of God should not be interpreted as simply His power because its true meaning cannot be known.¹⁶ He discusses other possible figurative meanings of *yad* in the Arabic language. For example, *yad* can also be interpreted as a blessing. Taking into consideration other possible meanings of *yad*, he discusses possible misinterpretations and risks in the *ta'wīl* of the ambiguous phrases.¹⁷

Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (419-478 AH/1028-1085 CE) is another Ash'arī theologian who is unsure of applying *'aqliyyāt* in the interpretation of ambiguous phrases, God's attributes, and particularly the concept itself of God through *'aqliyyāt*. Based on Anjum's reading, he makes a conciliatory move toward the Mu'tazila by commending the consistency of their theological system.¹⁸ In his *Irshād*, he argues for the importance of speculative reasoning (*nazar*) in religion. Speculative reasoning regarding God's existence, unity, attributes, and wisdom is —religiously— obligatory (*wājib*). The transmitted sources decreed the commitment to *nazar*.¹⁹ For him, practicing *nazar* concerning the existence of God is obligatory for every believer. When it comes

¹² Ash'arī, *Risāla istiḥsān al-khawḍ fi 'ilm al-kalām*, 39

¹³ Ash'arī, *Risāla istiḥsān al-khawḍ fi 'ilm al-kalām*, 39-46.

¹⁴ Ash'arī, *Risāla istiḥsān al-khawḍ fi 'ilm al-kalām*, 47-51.

¹⁵ Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought: the Taymiyyan Moment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 142.

¹⁶ Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought*, 142. See also Abī Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib ibn al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, ed. Ritshard Yūsuf Makārthī (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Sharqiyah, 1957), 259.

¹⁷ Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, 258-260.

¹⁸ Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought*, 154.

¹⁹ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād : ilā qawā'ī' al-adillah fi uṣūl al-ī'tiqād*, edited, annotated, and explained by Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā and 'Alī 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Abd al-'Hamīd (Egypt: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1950), 8.

to the concept of God based on the attributes stated in the transmitted sources, he slightly departs from al-Bāqillānī's view of *ta'wīl* and reinterprets some attributes of God metaphorically. His interpretation of God's hands, eyes, and face is as follows:

“Certain of our masters maintained that the two hands, the two eyes, and the face are proper attributes of the Lord God and that this is proven by tradition rather than rational proof. But what is correct, in our view, is that the hands should be construed as power, the eyes as vision and the face as existence.”²⁰

He criticizes the traditionalists. For them, he states, interpreting the hands as power causes the text to lose its specific implication in this case. He argues that this is not true because the intellect “attests that creation cannot occur except by means of the power or by the All-powerful having power. Thus, there is no reason to think that the creation of Adam, peace be upon him, took place other than by means of the power.”²¹ On the other hand, he argues that the vision of God (*ru'yat Allah*) is possible and presents a perplexing explanation of it, which is somewhat similar to the *bi-lā-kayf* argument.²²

As Ömer Türker argues, Juwaynī's criticism of *nazarī* methods in theological knowledge marks a major turn in the Ash'arī school of theology.²³ However, the question of how one should understand Juwaynī's criticism of *nazar* naturally arises. I suggest that the distinction between positive and negative theology helps us understand both Juwaynī and the later Ash'arī scholarship. Even though there seems to be a consensus on the possibility of attaining metaphysical certainty in negative theology, Juwaynī is the first Ash'arī theologian who systematically shows his most critical approach to *nazar* in positing a cataphatic theology where *'aqliyyāt* become inconclusive in reaching metaphysical knowledge.²⁴ In *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, according to Juwaynī, the best theological knowledge the intellect can attain is the unsubtle (or general, Arabic *mujmal*) aspects of theological issues.²⁵ Juwaynī's distinction between apophatic and cataphatic theology becomes more obvious in his method of theological reasoning (*nazar*). He divides *nazar* into two camps: *al-burhān al-mustadd* (demonstration by formal reasoning) and *al-burhān al-khulf* (demonstration by contradiction; *reductio ad absurdum*). He shows an extreme reluctance to *al-burhān al-mustadd*, as he majorly relies on *al-burhān al-khulf* in theological issues.²⁶ We shall see a similar attitude in Rāzī's account of metaphysical knowledge with regard to his theory of *ta'wīl*.

Aiming for a moderate understanding of religion, Ghazzālī's writings appear to be a reaction to these two extreme accounts of theology: literalist and rationalist. As he refutes both rationalist

²⁰ Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād*, 86. All translations from Juwaynī are mine unless otherwise indicated.

²¹ Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād*, 86-87.

²² Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād*, 93-102.

²³ See Ömer Türker, “Es'arī Kelâmının Kırılma Noktası: Cüveynī'nin Yöntem Eleştirileri,” *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, No: 19, 2008, pp.1-24.

²⁴ Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, edited and introduced by 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Dayb (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Anṣār, 1979 [1399AH]), 1/127-136.

²⁵ According to Juwaynī, the intellect is temporal and limited because it is originated in time. Therefore, it cannot comprehend the reality of what is infinite. Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1/142.

²⁶ Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1/157.

theology in Islam and strict literalism, he also stands against the idea that revelation and reason would contradict one another. If there seems to be a conflict, according to him, it is the theologians' duty to offer a reconciliation between the two.²⁷ Ghazzālī offers some aspects of the method of *ta'wīl* (interpretation) in *Iljām al-'awām 'an 'ilm al-kalām* and *al-Qānūn al-kullī fī al-ta'wīl*. However, these two epistles do not introduce a comprehensive view of *ta'wīl*. In the first treatise, he strongly discourages the masses from delving into kalam, while in the second epistle, he dissuades them from any sort of interpretation. Concerning the rules of *ta'wīl*, the *Qānūn*, in particular, appears to be more of a rudimentary, partial, and incomplete text when compared to *Iljām al-'Awāmm* and *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*, which are more comprehensive and sophisticated. Even if there seems to be a conflict between reason and a transmitted source, they were inclined to leave its true meaning to God without discussing possible meanings. In relation to understanding ambiguous Qur'anic phrases, such as *istiwā'*, the traditionalist attitude developed the *bi-lā-kayf* ("knowing without how," or "no questioning") argument and forbade speculative reasoning. Ghazzālī attempts to provide a more consistent theology and looks for a more coherent epistemology in which he intends to offer an alternative explanation to the *bi-lā-kayf*. Ghazzālī criticizes the methods of theologians, philosophers, and, to some extent, traditionalists. In this regard, he suggests that the personal/mystical experience of religion is the highest understanding of metaphysical issues. The experience is largely intuition (*mukāshafa*). By intuition, one can taste and know about things that cannot be known only by reason. When it comes to negative theology, Ghazzālī was the first scholar in the Sunnī tradition who attempted to formulate the rules of *ta'wīl* in connection with intellectual truths, which are considered metaphysical certainties.²⁸ He argues that "rational demonstration [*burhān al-'aql*] in essence cannot be wrong, for reason can never lead to falsehood. If it is deemed possible for reason to lead to falsehood, its establishment of [the truthfulness of] revelation is called into question."²⁹

In *Qānūn al-Ta'wīl*, Ghazzālī again reviews the scholarly attitudes toward the relationship between reason and transmitted knowledge in three main categories: the pure literalist attitude, a mere rationalist account, and a synthesis of both accounts. He goes further and divides the third group into three: the first group endorses transmitted knowledge over reason without being attentive to rational proofs, the second group gives the intellect supremacy over the transmitted sources without deeply examining them, and the third group takes reason and transmitted knowledge as the two main sources of religion and makes an effort to reconcile them. For him, the last group is right. In this connection, he basically defends al-Ash'arī's position that there is no incompatible conflict between the transmitted knowledge and definitive rational proofs. For him, whoever rejects the epistemological significance of the intellect denies the religion because the message of

²⁷ Ghazzālī, *Itikadda Orta Yol: al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*, a Turkish-Arabic parallel text, trans. Osman Demir (Istanbul: Klasik Yayinlari, 2012), 14-6. See also its English translation, *Moderation in Belief: al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*, trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1-4. See also Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī at His Most Rationalist: The Universal Rule for Allegorically Interpreting Revelation (al-Qānūn al-kullī fī t-ta'wīl)," in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī. Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary*, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 1/89-120.

²⁸ Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought*, 147.

²⁹ Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought*. 147.

the religion and the Prophet can be authenticated only by the intellect.³⁰ For him, *ta'wīl* is a method to resolve what seems to be a conflict between reason and transmission. In his defense of the last group, he does not escape ambivalence and makes a confusing case for *ta'wīl*, and thus for the relationship between reason and transmission as well. For him, although *ta'wīl* is an option, there are many possible meanings of a concept in the language of Arabs and making judgments based on possibilities and suppositions (*zann*) with regard to God's speech and the Prophet's intention is dangerous. In the end, he suggests a very similar method to that of Anas b. Malik, and advises that the safest route is to display an uncommitted attitude and leave their correct meanings to Allah by confessing that "I believe in them [because] they all are from my Lord" (3:7).³¹ He even uses al-Mālik's argument to defend his prudent but ambivalent approach to *ta'wīl*, as will be mentioned.

The fourth and fifth centuries of the Muslim era, then saw a concerted effort to determine and argue for the correct relation between reason and revelation and the correct way to approach challenging hermeneutical issues arising from the Qu'ranic text. The main concern was the reconciliation between intellectual truths and revealed theological (ambiguous) phrases. Agreeing with the Mu'tazila, the mainstream theologians argued that ambiguous phrases should not be understood literally. Why? The outward meaning of transmission must not conflict with intellectual truths. On the other hand, unlike the Mu'tazila, the mainstream scholars developed a somewhat ambivalent stance on how to interpret those phrases. Even though Ghazzālī was the first theologian who formulated the rules of *ta'wīl*, his application is not completely free from ambivalence.

2. Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Rāzī's Account of *Ta'wīl* and Metaphysical Certainty

Rāzī is known for giving one of the moderate accounts of the relationship between reason and transmitted knowledge. He has his own peculiar methodology for understanding religion, which is, to some extent, analogous to the contextualist theory of epistemology. In this section, I will examine Rāzī's approach to the problem of the relationship between reason (*aql*) and the transmitted sources (*naql*), while identifying the limits of his (rational) theological standpoint of *ta'wīl*, which is similar to the Mu'tazila in terms of interpreting ambiguous phrases but distinctively tolerant from them.

Distinguishing theology into two camps, the apophatic and the cataphatic, we see that the Kalam schools almost uniformly agreed that metaphysical certainty is only possible in apophatic theology, not cataphatic theology. Especially in the Ash'arī school of theology, Juwaynī appears to be the most critical scholar who systematically criticizes the existing Kalam methods in terms of cataphatic theology. In *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, Juwaynī criticizes previous Kalam methods through which a cataphatic theology was attempted.³² He also offers a critique of the intellect in theological knowledge. According to him, the intellect cannot fully capture the full being of the divine or its attributes. The best theological knowledge the intellect can attain, for Juwaynī, is the

³⁰ Nicholas Heer, "Al-Ghazali's *The Canons of Ta'wīl*," in *Windows in the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51.

³¹ See Heer, "Al-Ghazali's *The Canons of Ta'wīl*," 54.

³² Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1/127-136.

unsubtle (or general, Arabic *mujmal*) aspects of theological issues.³³ He talks about two sorts of *naẓar* (reasoning): *al-burhān al-mustadd* (demonstration by formal reasoning) and *al-burhān al-khulf* (demonstration by contradiction; *reductio ad absurdum*). He states that all the theological issues which can be resolved are based on *al-burhān al-khulf*.³⁴ Favoring an Ash'arī apophatic theology, Rāzī remains loyal to Juwaynī's methodology in theological knowledge and implements his account of *ta'wīl* in such a way that intellectual truths become metaphysical certainties through *al-burhān al-khulf*. Mention should be made that there seem to be instances where no *ta'wīl* is possible. In those cases, as we will see in Rāzī's account of the rules of interpretation, scholars appeal to *tawaqquf* (leaving the true meaning to God). On the other hand, there are instances in which *ta'wīl* is considered necessary based on *al-burhān al-khulf* because there seems to be a conflict between the outward sense of a given transmission and reason (metaphysical certainties). Here, it is safe to state that Rāzī's rationality in theological knowledge, especially in the interpretation of ambiguous phrases such as *istiwā'*, reaches its finest form through *reductio ad absurdum*.

In *al-Arba'īn fī uṣūl al-dīn*, Rāzī asks whether transmitted knowledge (*naql*) is certain (*yaqīn*).³⁵ He mentions two groups: those defending its certainty (*yaqīn*) and those advocating for its probability (*ẓann*). It should be noted that Rāzī points to the possibility of a semantic shift and loss of the full sense in transmitted knowledge between the time of utterance and his time. Rāzī offers ten reasons for the epistemic probability of transmission. First, any transmitted source is not independent of language. However, the way of transmission of language is probable. Second, grammar is another element in understanding transmitted knowledge. Grammar consists of i) main theories (*uṣūl*) passing down from generation to generation and ii) subsidiary standards (*furū'*) being established by a set of rules. Neither of them is free from probability because the former includes single reports (*riwāyāt al-āḥad*), which signify probability. Also, the two prominent schools of grammar, al-Baṣriyyūn and al-Kūfiyyūn, disagree with each other regarding the main theories. As for the subsidiary standards, he argues that they are questionable. Third, homonymic words (*al-ishtirāk fī al-alfāz*) are another challenge in determining the true meaning of a transmission. Fourth is the question of determining the true (*ḥaqīqa*) or the figurative (*majāz*) meaning of a transmission. In the case of figurative meaning, there are many options, and choosing one of the figurative meanings might not be more proper than choosing another. Fifth, identifying pronouns (*iḍmār*) and determining deleted meanings (*ḥadhf*) also give rise to probability. Sixth, preposition (*taqdīm*) or postposition (*ta'khīr*) in a sentence are abundantly used in the Qur'an. However, Rāzī argues that this can result in probability. Seventh, Rāzī argues that it is almost impossible to reach a general statement (*'umūm*) without any exception or specificity

³³ According to Juwaynī, the intellect is temporal and limited because it is originated in time. Therefore, it cannot comprehend the reality of what is infinite. Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1/142.

³⁴ Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1/157.

³⁵ Recently, Rāzī's account of language and its epistemic value has been studied in the Turkish academy. For further readings, see Mehdi Cengiz, *Dilde Kesinlik Sorunu: Anlatabilmenin İmkânı* (Istanbul: Ketebe Yayınevi, 2021); Mehdi Cengiz and Şükran Fazlıoğlu, "Fahreddin er-Râzî'nin 'Dilde Kesinlik' Sorununa Yaklaşımı: Tespit ve Tercih," *Kutadgu Bilig* 42 (2020): 37-62; Selma Çakmak, "Fahreddin er-Râzî'de Lafzî Delillerin Kesinlik Sınırı ve Bilgi Değeri," *Pamukkale Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 7 (2020): 417-439; Selma Çakmak, "Dilin Kesinliği Müdafaasında İbn Teymiyye," *Pamukkale Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 9 (2022): 430-449.

(*huşûş*) and therefore raises doubts about its epistemic certainty. This discussion may seem to be peculiar to *Fiqh*. However, if we are talking about the Ash'arī theology, their account of occasionalism significantly engages with this debate. In short, based on the philosophical account, every fire-cotton instance leads to the same conclusion. However, Rāzī would argue against the certainty of this conclusion because we cannot be certain that every instance of a fire-cotton relation has the same conclusion. In other words, the assumption that every fire-cotton relationship necessarily leads to the same conclusion could be proven only if all the instances of the cotton-fire relationship in the past, present, and future are known by us. However, it is impossible. Therefore, the Ash'arī theologians developed their account of habit (*āda*) vs. necessity (*ḍarūra*). Eight, one of the vehemently debated issues is the problem of abrogation (*naskh*). The difference of opinion between schools necessarily gives rise to probability. Ninth, one piece of transmitted knowledge should not conflict with another piece of transmitted knowledge. If a conflict exists, one must choose one over the other. In this case, the choice would not be free from probability. Rāzī goes further and argues that we cannot be *certain* whether there exists another piece of transmitted knowledge conflicting with the transmitted knowledge known to us. Tenth and last, transmitted knowledge should not conflict with *certain* rational knowledge. He adds that if there is a conflict between the two, then transmitted knowledge should be reinterpreted (*ta'wīl*).³⁶ He concludes: "It has been established that transmitted proofs are contingent upon these ten premises, all of which are probable. That which is based on probability is most likely probable. Therefore, transmitted proofs are probable."³⁷

In *Ma'ālim Uşūl al-Dīn*, Rāzī argues that "it becomes evident that transmitted proofs are probable, whereas rational proofs are *certain*. Thus, probable cannot conflict with *certain*."³⁸ In doing so, Rāzī successfully paves the way for *ta'wīl*. On the other hand, as noted before, Malik b. Anas makes a normative statement and forbids questioning the nature of ambiguous Qur'anic phrases. This attitude became the general attitude of the people of ḥadīth towards ambiguous verses in the Qur'an, such as *yad Allah* (God's hand), *wajh Allah* (God's face) and so on. As we discussed before, Ash'arī scholars presented their ambivalence towards such issues. Although Ghazzālī attempted to formulate the rules of *ta'wīl*, he was not willing to practice it, as Rāzī states.³⁹ Mention should be again made that the Ash'arī's cautious attitude arises from the problem of assigning a specific equivalent to the ambiguous phrase in question. However, they are certain that the literal meaning of the ambiguous phrase should not be taken because it conflicts with an intellectual

³⁶ Rāzī, *al-Arba'in fi uşūl al-dīn*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Cairo: Maktaba al-Kulliya al-'Azharīyya, 1986), 2/251-3; Rāzī, *al-Maḥsūl fi 'ilm uşūl al-fiqh*, ed. Ṭāhā Jābir Fayyāḍ al-'Alwānī (Beirut: Mu'assasa al-Risāla, n.d.), 1/390-407; Rāzī, *al-Muḥaṣṣal: Ana Meseleleriyle Kelām ve Felsefe* (a Parallel Text of Turkish-Arabic) tr. Eşref Altaş (Istanbul: Klasik, 2019), 44; In the *Maṭālib*, Rāzī talks about ten criteria but slightly modifies them. See Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliyyā min 'ilm al-ilāhi*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā, (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), 9/113-8. In the *Ma'ālim*, Rāzī does not talk about all of the ten criteria. He mentions just five of them in a short passage. See Rāzī, *Uşūl al-dīn li al-Rāzī wa huwa al-kitāb al-musammā ma'ālim uşūl al-dīn*, annotated and introduced by Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd (Cairo: Maktaba al-Kulliyāt al-Azharīya, 2004), 24.

³⁷ Rāzī, *al-Arba'in fi Uşūl al-Dīn*, 2/253; Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliyyā*, 9/113-4. All translations from Rāzī are mine unless otherwise indicated.

³⁸ Rāzī, *Ma'ālim uşūl al-dīn*, 24.

³⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī: al-mashūr bi-al-al-tafsīr al-kabīr wa mafātiḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 22/6.

truth. On the other hand, Rāzī appears to be more confident in practicing *ta'wīl* on ambiguous verses. Because of this willingness, Ibn Taymiyya identifies Rāzī as an extreme rationalist who denies prophetic knowledge.

As Ibn Taymiyya harshly criticizes Rāzī's account of *ta'wīl*, he considers Rāzī (and even Ghazzālī) part of the philosophical tradition.⁴⁰ Thus, one may rightly trace back to Ibn Taymiyya the argument that Rāzī's writings are philosophical theology. Frank Griffel disagrees with Ibn Taymiyya's reading of Rāzī on the basis of two claims: (i) "reason contradicts [information that comes from the prophets]" (*al-ʿaql yuʿarīḍu [mā jāʿat bihi l-anbiyāʾ]*) and (ii) "reason is the foundation of revelation (*al-ʿaql aṣl an-naql*)."⁴¹ Although the latter could be deduced from Rāzī's account of transmitted knowledge, shown as probable in this study, the former, as Griffel rightly argues, corresponds with neither Rāzī's account of revelation nor with al-Ghazzālī's.

The major theological works of the Ashʿarī theologians, especially Juwaynī, Ghazzālī, and Rāzī, begin with the main concerns of their authors. In this regard, Ghazzālī's *Moderation in Belief* (*al-Iqtisād fī al-Iʿtiqād*) begins with the problem of the relationship between reason and transmission. Concerning his formulas, one of Ghazzālī's major arguments is based on the Ashʿarī assumption that there can be no conflict between reason and transmission. If there seems to be a conflict "at first glance and after a superficial examination,"⁴² it is the theologian's duty to reconcile them.⁴³ An alleged conflict could result for many reasons. The most common reason is the semantic difference between literal and figurative meanings. If these Ashʿarī theologians were to delve into *ta'wīl* without making a distinction between the literal and the figurative, Ibn Taymiyya would be right in his accusation that Rāzī and his followers denied the prophetic knowledge about the concept of God.⁴⁴ As we shall see, Rāzī endorses this distinction and undertakes the responsibility of reinterpreting the literal meanings of Qurʾanic ambiguous phrases in light of intellectual certainties/truths. And these intellectual certainties function as metaphysical certainties.

A note should be added that especially since al-Ghazzālī, the view that reason is the foundation of revelation had seemed to be an unwritten rule in the Ashʿarī school of theology. The very first obligation in religion is *nazar* (speculative reasoning) about God's existence. When this is established, the problem of prophecy and the authenticity of prophetic knowledge becomes the second major question. As Griffel rightly points out, in Ashʿarī Kalam until Ghazzālī, "only miracles could confirm prophecy and thus verify revelation."⁴⁵ Although Ghazzālī does not reject this *de facto* attitude, he does not find it satisfactory. Griffel mentions two more ways of verifying revelation in Ghazzālī's view: reason and *sūfī* experience (*tajriba*).⁴⁶ Why is there such a tendency? The question of whether the miracles took place remains probable.

⁴⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Darʾ taʿarūḍ al-ʿaql wa al-naql*, 1/4.

⁴¹ Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī at His Most Rationalist," 90.

⁴² Heer, "Al-Ghazālī's *The Canons of Ta'wīl*," 48; Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī at His Most Rationalist," 118.

⁴³ Ghazālī, *Moderation in Belief: al-Iqtisād fī al-iʿtiqād*, 1-4.

⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Darʾ taʿarūḍ al-ʿaql wa al-naql*, 1/4-5. See also Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī at His Most Rationalist," 90.

⁴⁵ Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī at His Most Rationalist," 113.

⁴⁶ Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī at His Most Rationalist," 113-5.

In addition, even if they took place, they happened in the time of the Prophet. So, our knowledge of the miracles is based on transmitted sources. As explained above, Rāzī argues for the probability of transmitted knowledge because a probable source could only prove another probable source. To avoid this vicious circularity, the Ash‘arī school leans toward the necessity of reason in religion. According to Rāzī, “the most advanced way to verify revelation is to compare it with what is known from reason.”⁴⁷ In this regard, the Qur’an is seen as the strongest miracle⁴⁸ because its message can be verified by reason. In other words, what is known as probable can be verified by what is known as certain. Moreover, reason becomes the yardstick for verifying the authenticity of revelation and interpreting it. Rāzī takes this tendency to its finest form, as we shall see in his *ta’wīl of istiwā’*.

It should be mentioned that Rāzī is not well organized in his interpretation of *istiwā’*. He begins directly with an explanation of the term. But when he finishes his explanation, he makes a reference to one of his other treatises, *Asās al-taqdīs fi ‘ilm al-kalām*, regarding his *qānūn al-ta’wīl* (the rules of interpretation). In this work, he reformulates the rules of *ta’wīl*. His *qānūn al-ta’wīl* is as follows:

“What is it to be done if a rational demonstrative proof contradicts the outward meaning of transmitted evidence? Know that there must be one of the four options if the proof of a thing is based on sound rational evidence and if we find a transmitted indication whose literal meaning makes us feel a conflict with [the rational evidence]. [First,] we are to accept the demands of both reason and transmission, which necessitates the acceptance of two contradictions at the same time. It is absurd. [Second,] we are to reject both, which necessitates the denial of two contradictories. It is also absurd. ([Third,] we are to deny the literal meanings of the transmission and accept the rational significances.) [Fourth,] we are to accept the literal meanings of the transmission while rejecting the rational significances. This is baseless (*bāṭil*) because we cannot know the authenticity of the literal meanings of the transmission unless we know [it] by rational proofs: the existence of the Creator, His attributes, the modality of the proofs of miracles for the truthfulness of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and the occurrence of the miracles at (the hand of) Muhammad, peace be upon him. If we are to condemn decisive rational proofs, which make the intellect suspicious, this is not an acceptable view. If it were so, [suspecting the intellect] would not, yet, be an acceptable view based on these principles. On the other hand, if these principles were not established, the transmitted proofs would not be useful, either. Thus, it has been established that tarnishing the intellect to accept the transmission only would discredit both the intellect and the transmission together. This is absurd. If we invalidate the four possibilities, no choice remains except [one option]: based on decisive rational proofs, [we conclude that] the transmitted sources are either incorrect or correct with the exception that their correct meanings are different from their literal meanings. If we are allowed to practice *ta’wīl*, we engage in practicing *ta’wīl* in detail as long as permitted. If we are not allowed to practice *ta’wīl*, we pass the [true] knowledge of it to Allah, the exalted. This is the general law to follow in all ambiguous verses [or issues].”⁴⁹

The question of how to approach the ambiguous verses in the Qur’an is a sure indicator of a Muslim scholar’s particular understanding of the relationship between intellect and transmitted

⁴⁷ Griffel, “Al-Ghazalī at His Most Rationalist,” 117.

⁴⁸ Rāzī, *Ma‘ālim uṣūl al-dīn*, 91-2.

⁴⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Asās al-taqdīs fi ‘ilm al-kalām*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyah, 1986), 220-21. See also Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 22/6.

knowledge. As mentioned, the issue of understanding ambiguous phrases in the Qur'an seems to be one of the earliest problems. As early as the second Muslim century, as discussed above, Malik b. Anas was asked to explain *istiwā'* and answered angrily with the formula, "*Istiwā'* is known, [its] quiddity is unknown, the belief in it is obligatory, and the question of how is deviation (*bid'a*). I am afraid you are a misguided one (*dāll*)."⁵⁰

According to this report, Anas believes even the inquiry into *istiwā'* and other ambiguous languages in the Qu'ran is misguided; the very question of how to understand such terms should not be raised. Despite such warnings, Rāzī argues that *istiwā'* cannot mean that God is firmly settled on the Throne because, according to him, the outward meaning conflicts with metaphysical certainties. He discusses *istiwā'* from different perspectives and practices *ta'wīl* because, for him, it is impossible for God to sit on the Throne in a literal sense based on both rational and transmitted knowledge.⁵¹ He proposes sixteen rational arguments and eight transmitted sources (which can be judged to be "rational") to prove that *istiwā'* is one of the ambiguous phrases that must be interpreted metaphorically. In what follows, as I summarize his arguments for the necessity of *ta'wīl*, I will highlight how intellectual truths become metaphysical certainties in Rāzī's theology.

2.1. Rational Arguments

As a response to an anthropomorphic description of God, Muslim theologians developed the *tanzīhī* theology, which is apophatic or negative theology. Using this methodology, Muslim theologians offer a concept of God who is free from all corporeal accidents. The philosophers' concept of God—simple, eternal, and good—clearly influenced Muslim theologians who employ *tanzīh*. In the interpretation of *istiwā'*, Rāzī bases his rational arguments on God's simplicity on the grounds that anything composite is subject to (i) generation and corruption, (ii) growth, (iii) alteration, and (iv) locomotion. Since God is perfect (again, known rationally), these attributes would violate God's perfection, simplicity, and eternity.

In his first rational argument, Rāzī argues that if God were to settle on the Throne as understood literally, "He would have to be finite on the side that is close to the Throne; or else, it would be necessary for the Throne to be part of His essence (*dhāt*)."⁵² For him, both are logically impossible because the intellect decrees that all finite beings increase or decrease in quantity. This premise, according to Rāzī, is necessary knowledge based on his use of *ḍarūrī*, which is a term in logic and philosophy referring to self-evident truths, such as "the whole is bigger than any one of its parts." If God were finite in some respects, His essence would accept increase and decrease in quantity. In this regard, God would be originated and thus in need of an originator based on the fact that all beings that accept increase and decrease are originated and need an originator. If *istiwā'* was

⁵⁰ Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf, *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, edited and annotated by 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1993), 4/310-311.

⁵¹ Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī: al-mashūr bi-al-al-tafsīr al-kabīr wa mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 14/106. Although I also benefitted from the Turkish translation (1989), I shall cite the Arabic copy.

⁵² Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/106.

understood literally, it would suggest that God would be originated from the side next to the Throne. This is absurd.⁵³

In the second rational argument, Rāzī argues that if God were located in a place and direction, He would be either infinite in all directions, finite in all directions, or finite in some directions, to the exception of others. All of these options are invalid.⁵⁴ Rāzī argues for the impossibility of these options one by one. For instance, if God were in a place, according to Rāzī, God's essence would merge with all servile (*sufli*) and heavenly (*'ulwī*) objects. This is absurd for several reasons. First, He would be composed, the sum of all parts and wholes (a violation of the rational principle of simplicity). Second, everything between the skies and the earth would be at the same place at the same time and in different places. Since God would be located in a place, He could be located in a garbage dump. This cannot be possible. Rāzī further argues that assigning a location to God would limit His essence to a certain quantity and to a place. This would lead us again to a concept of God which is originated. Since God is free from anything imperfect, all these possibilities are absurd.⁵⁵

In the third argument, Rāzī argues that the literal meaning of *istiwā'* would assign a place and direction to God. If God were in a place, He would be as big and wide as that of the place itself. This also necessities Him to have a magnitude, which is impossible. If God were in a location, the location would be eternal with Him, which is also absurd based on the consensus of the majority of scholars.⁵⁶ In the fourth argument, Rāzī examines the Qur'anic term *istiwā'* in respect to God as the Necessary Being. He argues that if we were to understand *istiwā'* literally, we would say that God is a possible being by being specified with space and direction because His essence would be in need of something other than Himself in order to be actualized and exist. Any being that requires something else to be actualized is possible in its essence. Rāzī makes his case from a philosophical standpoint and argues that if God were in need of a location, He would not be the Necessary Being. He, however, is always the Necessary Being in His essence, not being dependent on another.⁵⁷

In the fifth proof, Rāzī focuses on the temporality of place and direction, which means absolute void and complete vacuum. The gist of this proof is based on the view that place *qua* place is temporal. If place, be it place *qua* place or this or that place, is temporal, that which is located in a place must be temporal. On the other hand, if God were to be located in a place, He would be temporal in a way that He would need a placer and, therefore, He would logically be originated in time. It is impossible.⁵⁸

In the sixth proof, if God were located in a place and given a direction, He would be limited to the scope of the senses. In this case, such beings are either divisible or not.⁵⁹ Divisible beings are composed beings in a way that they are possible beings needing another being to come into

⁵³ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/106-107.

⁵⁴ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/107.

⁵⁵ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/107-108.

⁵⁶ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/108.

⁵⁷ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/109.

⁵⁸ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/110.

⁵⁹ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/110.

existence, which is absurd for the Necessary Being. If God were indivisible but discernable through the senses, He would be an indivisible particle (*al-juz' lā yatajazzā* or *jawhar fard la yanqasim*). According to Rāzī, God, conceived of in this way, would be composed of trivial particles, which is impossible for God's essence, according to the people of intellect. Building on the sixth proof, in the seventh proof, he states that every self-subsistent being (*qā'im bi-al-nafs*) that is perceived through the senses is still divisible and, therefore, a possible being. Accordingly, since God is the Necessary Being, He cannot be perceived through the senses.⁶⁰

In the eighth proof, according to Rāzī, if it were true that God was located in space, this space would be either (i) bigger than the Throne or (ii) equal to it, or (iii) smaller than it. In the first two cases, since the Throne is divisible, so it would be true for the space as well. This would again make God divisible next to the divisible space, which is absurd. If the third alternative were true, then it would be necessary for the Throne to be bigger than God. This is also absurd based on the consensus of scholars, including the opponents.⁶¹ In the ninth argument, Rāzī argues that God being in a space would give rise to two problems: *i*) He would be finite in all directions or *ii*) would not. In the first case, God would create universes that are above/beyond Him. It is absurd. If God were to create things around Him, He would be located in the middle of those things. He would either touch them or be separate from them. These are absurd, too. God cannot be infinite in all directions because all the directions would be infinite with Him. It is impossible.⁶² In the tenth argument, if God is in a space, Rāzī discusses the possibility of another being with God in that space. He raises three options: identicalness/equality (*masāwā*), dissimilarity (*mukhālafā*), and incarnation (*ḥulūl*). None of these is possible for God because they all violate His unity and simplicity.⁶³ In the eleventh proof, he argues that if God were located in space, it would be either possible for Him to move away from this space or impossible. Both are absurd. Rāzī's argument here is that motion and rest are the features of originated beings and in need of an originator, which is also *the* free agent (*fā'il mukhtār*). Since the Necessary Being is free from such physical characteristics, His establishment in a place is impossible. On the other hand, if we say that God is located in a place but cannot move away from it, it would mean that God was subject to disability.⁶⁴ In the twelfth proof, Rāzī makes the simplicity argument, which overlaps with the theory of *tanzīh*. In the rest of the rational arguments, Rāzī argues for the impossibility of God's being on the Throne as understood literally based on the fact that the earth is round. Based on this fact and some other scientific findings at his time, he makes similar arguments to the already mentioned ones from different perfectives.

In conclusion, the main concern of this study is not to explain Rāzī's method of *ta'wīl* in detail. Instead, it aims to demonstrate that Rāzī's account of certainty in theological knowledge should not be considered metaphysical agnosticism; that is, Rāzī did in fact believe that the intellect can

⁶⁰ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/111.

⁶¹ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/111. Who are the opponents? Rāzī does not explicitly mention "the opponents" in the interpretation of verse 7:54. As one may easily guess, they are the Mushabbihah (anthropomorphists). In the interpretation of 20:5, he explicitly criticizes the Mushabbihah in ten respects. See Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 22/5-6.

⁶² Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/111-112.

⁶³ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/112-113.

⁶⁴ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/113-114.

attain certainty in theological knowledge. As shown here, in a way very similar to his predecessors and even to the Mu'tazilā, he does not abandon intellectual truths in explaining his concept of God. Indeed, rationality is the test to which ambiguous terms are put. Those intellectual truths become metaphysical certainties in interpreting the Qur'anic descriptions of God. Accordingly, for Rāzī, it is necessary to practice *ta'wīl* in the interpretation of *istiwā'* by providing rational proofs. Interestingly, he gives rational arguments first and then turns to the transmitted sources. We now follow his lead to talk about the transmitted proofs.

2.2. The Transmitted Proofs

In this part, Rāzī interprets the Qur'an using the Qur'an itself (*Tafsīr al-Qur'an bi-al-Qur'an*). He emphasizes some major themes in the Qur'an as he proposed at the very beginning of the interpretation of this verse (7:54), namely God's unity, prophethood, metaphysics, and predetermination. Rāzī underlines the abundance of transmitted proofs and addresses some of them. Even though Rāzī calls them transmitted sources, he rationally interprets them.

The first verse he adduces is the first verse of chapter 112, in which God describes Himself as *āḥād*, the ultimate degree of one-ness.⁶⁵ In the explanation of this verse, he again appeals to the rational arguments he has already made. The second transmitted proof is verse 69:17. In this verse, God informs us about eight angels carrying the Throne. Rāzī argues that if God were to sit on the Throne, the angels carrying the Throne would carry Him, too. In this case, God would be both carried and carrier and protected and protected. This is absurd.⁶⁶ The third verse, whose theme is also repeated in other chapters of the Qur'an, is 47:38, in which God describes Himself as self-subsistent. This implies, argues Rāzī, that God is self-sufficient from space and direction.⁶⁷ In the fourth argument, Rāzī gives the dialogue between Pharaoh and Moses. Pharaoh asks Moses about God's essence (26:23), and Moses responds by talking about God's divine attribute of creation (44:7; 23:26-28). This, according to Rāzī, does not satisfy Pharaoh because he wants Moses to give a concept of God that is located in space. Rāzī goes further and argues that describing Allah in terms of space and direction follows the path of Pharaoh and other great sinners, not the religion of Mūsā and all other prophets.⁶⁸

In the fifth proof, Rāzī returns to verse 7:54 and discusses the word *thumma* ("later" or "then" as in the verse "...then settled on the Throne"). He argues that *thumma* is used for a lapse of time (or subsequently). If *istiwā'* were to be interpreted literally, it would suggest that God is to move from one state to another after the creation of the heavens and the earth; in other words, He would be in motion at one time and at rest at another as other existents. This is absurd.⁶⁹ In the sixth Qur'anic proof, Rāzī discusses the Prophet Abraham's reasoning of God.⁷⁰ In the seventh proof, Rāzī reinterprets the part right before the *istiwā'* (7:54).⁷¹

⁶⁵ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/118.

⁶⁶ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/119.

⁶⁷ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/119.

⁶⁸ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/119.

⁶⁹ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/119.

⁷⁰ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/119-120.

⁷¹ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/120.

In the final argument, Rāzī examines the word *samā'* (sky), which, for him, is a noun indicating anything that rises and is high. He adduces another verse (8:11), in which God calls clouds *samā'*. For him, anything rising, towering up, and being high can be called sky (*samā'*). In this regard, if God were to sit on the Throne, His essence would be a sky for the things located on the Throne. On the other hand, the Qur'an underlines the fact that "He is the creator of all skies" in many verses, like verse 7:54. Again, if God were a sky above the Throne for things located on the Throne, He would be the creator of Himself. This is impossible.⁷²

Rāzī adduces some verses from the Qur'an to show the impossibility of understanding *istiwā'* literally. In his rational arguments, the main themes are God's simplicity and unity, which are informed by rational truths. Even in explaining the transmitted indications, he appeals to rational arguments. All he wants to prove is the necessity of practicing *ta'wīl* in the *istiwā'*. On the other hand, he sometimes uses statements to show his adherence to his school of theology. One of his statements is as follows:

"If this is established, we say that His saying "[He is the one] who creates the skies and earth" is a precise verse (*muḥkam*) that demonstrates that His saying "then, He settled on the Throne" is one of the ambiguous verses and must be interpreted. This is a subtle point. Similarly to this, He, exalted, said at the beginning of the chapter *al-An'ām* that "And He is Allah in the skies." (6:3) Then He said soon after it that "To whom belongs whatever is in the skies and earth. Say, to Allah." (6:12) This last verse demonstrates that everything in the skies belongs to Allah. If He were in the skies, He would be the owner of Himself. This is absurd. The same applies here. It is established by these rational and transmitted proofs that it is impossible to interpret His saying "then, He settled on the Throne" as sitting, settling, and occupying a place and location [as understood literally]. At this point, according to the scholars who are firmly grounded, there exist two doctrines. The first doctrine is that we certainly know that Allah is exalted above place and direction. Then, we do not delve into an interpretation of the verse in detail. Rather, we entrust (or refer) its knowledge to Allah, which is what we have established in the interpretation of His saying "And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah." But those firms in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord." (3:7) This is the doctrine that we choose and support and depend on. The second doctrine is for us to delve into its interpretation in detail."⁷³

Although Rāzī argues that the first doctrine is the one that his school of theology chooses, supports, and depends on, he has primarily chosen the second doctrine, delving into the interpretation, *ta'wīl*, of ambiguous verses. On the other hand, in the interpretation of verse 20:5, he gives the impression that the first group was said to be avoiding *ta'wīl* altogether. Here, he states that al-Ghazzālī and some friends of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal adopted the first attitude. According to Rāzī, if intellectual certainties conflict with the outward meaning of the phrase, they cannot simply state that the outward meaning should not be understood as it is, even though, he argues, what they do is a sort of interpretation. He further argues that leaving the phrase without interpreting it is not permissible. Therefore, it must be interpreted with the best possible Arabic correspondence.⁷⁴ As we have shown in the *ta'wīl* of *istiwā'*, he wants to highlight the problems that arise—both philosophical and theological—from the literal understanding of *istiwā'* in light

⁷² Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/120

⁷³ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 14/114-115.

⁷⁴ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 22/6.

of rational certainties. His method of *ta'wīl* favors the intellect. In his *Asās al-taqdīs fī 'ilm al-kalām*, he goes further and argues that if a transmitted source conflicts with the intellect, the transmitted source needs to be reinterpreted with the evident conclusion of the intellect. In the interpretation of verse 2:7, based on the probability of transmitted sources, he argues for the necessity of *ta'wīl*:

“Transmitted proofs do not lead to certainty, whereas intellectual truths lead to [metaphysical] certainties. Thus, the probable [transmitted sources] cannot be inconsistent with the certain [intellectual truths]. The reason why the transmitted sources do not lead to certainty is based on principles, all of which are probable. That which is based on the probable is probable. We have mentioned that [transmitted sources] are based on probable principles because they are based on the transmission of (i) languages and (ii) grammar. The transmission of these things cannot be known [with certainty] in terms of whether their transmission reaches the level of authentic (*tawātur*). Thus, their transmission is probable. Also, the transmitted sources are probable because of (iii) homonymic words, (iv) figurative meanings, (v) specification, (vi) pronouns, (vii) preposition and postposition. All of these are probable. Also, (viii) it is not certain whether [a transmitted source] conflicts with an intellectual truth. If there were a conflict, they could not both be true, and one would be wrong. Transmission cannot be chosen over intellectual truth because *the intellect is the foundation of transmission*. Impeaching the intellect necessarily leads to the impeachment (*ṭa'n*) of both the intellect and transmission together. However, the absence of a conflict between the intellect [and transmission] is probable. What is [the principle] if there seems to be a conflict between intellectual truths and outward meanings of [transmitted sources]? It has been established that transmitted sources are [always] probable. So, there is no doubt that the probable [transmission] cannot conflict with the certain [the intellect].”⁷⁵

As Ibn Taymiyya rightly states, Rāzī explicitly argues that “the intellect is the foundation of revelation.” (*al-'aql aṣl al-naql*).⁷⁶ As shown, the intellectual truths become metaphysical certainties in not only the concept of God but also the intellect becomes the yardstick for determining the best possible Arabic translation in the process of *ta'wīl*. Especially in the translation of *'istiwā'*, Rāzī appears to be more determined. The foregoing leads clearly to the fact that there is a great shift in the application of theory to practice regarding the role of reason in religious matters and the interpretation of religious textual sources. The Ash'arī scholars up to Rāzī had discussed the role and importance of reason in religion. In their application, they slightly appeal to the *bi-lā-kayf* argument showing their stance against the Mu'tazilī rationality. On the other hand, Rāzī provides a more rational theology and explanations in the interpretation of *istiwā'*. We may need to note again that Rāzī remains committed to the Ash'arī school of theology through his tolerant language. On the other hand, in his interpretation of *istiwā'*, he practices *ta'wīl*, which is, one may argue, more similar to the Mu'tazila, which no longer posed a political threat to Sunni theology.

Conclusion

During the formative period of Islamic sciences, the problem of the role of reason in religion polarized schools of thought. As the Mu'tazila represent one extreme to the problem holding on to reason as the only source of knowledge, the people of ḥadīth represent the other arguing against the Mu'tazila and embracing transmitted sources as the only reliable source of knowledge

⁷⁵ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 2/63.

⁷⁶ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 22/7.

in religion. In the period that followed, moderate approaches to the problem emerged and soon became dominant. Two of the leading scholars of the moderate approaches are Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and Abū Manṣūr al-Māturidī. In the paper, I have provided a brief historical context regarding reason and transmitted sources, as highlighting the roots of the main components and then presented Rāzī's approach to the problem based on his interpretation of an ambiguous phrase, *istiwā*, in his *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*. The main concern of this paper is to show his optimism and even firm stance on 'aqliyyāt regarding metaphysical issues.

The first premise of this paper is that there is a strong parallelism between the debate over the relationship between reason and transmitted knowledge and the formation of Kalām schools. The second premise is that the Mu'tazila played a key role in the formation of those schools. I have chosen the Ash'arī school of theology to better understand the epistemological shifts up to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and to examine the role of the Mu'tazila in the formation and development of Sunnī theology. My argument is simple and as follows: The Mu'tazila were the real obstacle to the rationality of Sunnī theology in its formative period. The Mu'tazilī model of rationality was rooted in political interests and become intolerant towards others, and the Sunnī schools of thought extended their position against the Mu'tazilī political aggression by also opposing the Mu'tazilī model of rationality. It was reactionary but ultimately temporary.

On the other hand, the development of rational theology in the mainstream was inaugurated with al-Māturidī and al-Ash'arī at the beginning of the fourth century. However, the methodological ambivalence in interpreting the textual sources of the religion remained for two more centuries until Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. The ambivalence was overcome by the "near-complete triumph of reason," and Sunnī theology reached its "most developed form"⁷⁷ in the work of Rāzī. The principle of interpretation in the pre-Rāzī Ash'arī school of theology slightly differs from that of the people of ḥadīth. The principle of interpretation (*qānūn al-ta'wīl*) was in favor of transmitted knowledge at the expense of rational arguments, even though it was quite ambivalent. With Rāzī, if the intellect appears to be in contradiction with transmitted knowledge, the intellect takes precedence over transmitted knowledge/revelation on the condition that the literal meaning of the text needs to be interpreted by a metaphorical reading in conformity with rational truths. As discussed in the paper, Rāzī successfully applies his account of 'aqliyyāt in the interpretation of the ambiguous term, *istiwā*' based on his account of metaphysical certainty.

In conclusion, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī marks a major turn in Sunnī theology with his reconciliation of reason and transmitted knowledge. Since he felt the need for a new method in understanding religious matters, he went on to reconcile 'ilm al-Kalām and philosophy without brushing aside the concerns of the people of ḥadīth. As discussed in the paper, Rāzī successfully applied his principle of *ta'wīl* to ambiguous phrases of the Qur'an such as *istiwā*'. In the example of *istiwā*', he offers explanations to the term in various Qur'anic verses (7:54; 10:3; 13:2; 20:5; 32:4; 57:4; 25:59). He makes his richest explanation in the interpretation of the verse 7:54. Here, he shows his openness to different ideas and decisively uses the intellect as the primary source in theological knowledge. Since he makes a shift to "a more liberal exchange of ideas, a 'synthesis' even, between Kalām and

⁷⁷ Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought*, 149.

Falsafa,⁷⁸ his analyses of religious issues offer us a wider intellectual background about Kalām and philosophy. As we have shown in the explanation of *istiwā'*, he does not mind abandoning the explanations of classical Kalām, and attempts to provide a comprehensive and rational theology in which intellectual truths become metaphysical certainties

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⁷⁸ Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 1.

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