

## **Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology**

*Frank Griffel*

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This work of historical theology is essential reading for those wanting to understand with new depth and clarity the life and teachings of al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111). It is sometimes maintained that he contributed significantly to Muslim scholars' ending of scientific inquiry and the use of reason. This view has recently been promoted afresh by Robert Reilly's *The Closing of the Muslim Mind* (Wilmington, DE: 2010). Griffel extensively discusses two factors contributing to this general perception: al-Ghazali's opposition to the philosophers in *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (see M. Marmura, ed and tr. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* [Provo, UT: 1997]) and his endorsement of occasionalism, the idea that events do not occur because of their inherent prop-

erties, such as fire's ability to burn cotton, but instead God creates each individual event with no reference to causes and effects in the physical world. Thus there is, at least in theory, no predictable causality in the world. This would seem to render scientific inquiry, which relies on predictable processes, theoretically impossible. Scholars have differed over whether al-Ghazali is indeed an occasionalist (Marmura) or in fact endorses causality in line with the philosopher Ibn Sina (Richard Frank).

In contrast, Griffel sets out to demonstrate that al-Ghazali "is the first Muslim theologian who actively promotes the naturalization of the philosophical tradition into Islamic theology" (p. 7) and that his writings are 'a particular kind of Avicennism' (p. 14). His central argument is that al-Ghazali remained uncommitted throughout his career as to whether God brings about events in this world through occasionalism or via secondary causality. Griffel contends that his consistent position was to regard each position as possible, developing "something like a synthetic position between these two poles" (p. 12). In arguing for this, the author presents a highly persuasive reading of al-Ghazali's principal texts, which presents him as avoiding self-contradiction on this issue.

The opening two chapters represent the first, biographical section of the book, as Griffel notes (p. 12), although the contents pages do not indicate this division of the work into two parts. Chapter 1, an absorbing biographical study making excellent use of al-Ghazali's Persian correspondence and entitled "A Life Between Public and Private Instruction," encapsulates Griffel's thesis that, contrary to popular belief, al-Ghazali did not enter a period of isolation from teaching and other affairs after he left Baghdad in 1095. Instead, references to his "seclusion" (*uzlah*) refer to his withdrawal from involvement with rulers and state institutions. He continued to teach, but in private or unofficial madrasas. Griffel also proposes a revised birth date for him, probably 448/1056 rather than the commonly cited 450/1058, and notes that his introduction to Sufism occurred far earlier than is indicated in his spiritual autobiography *Munqidh min al-Dalal* (*The Deliverer from Error*). Further information in chapter 2 draws on figures such as Ibn Tūmart in assessing al-Ghazali's influence on principal students and early followers.

The book's second part, on cosmology, begins with two brief chapters summarizing the results of Griffel's first book, *Toleranz und Apostasie in Islam* (Leiden: 2000). Chapter 5 provides essential background by discussing Ash'arite and philosophical views of creation and causality prior to al-Ghazali. Chapters 6 and 7 form the book's pivotal section. Chapter 6

focuses on the seventeenth discussion of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence*. Here Griffel analyzes his famous statement that "The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary, according to us" (*Tahafut*, p. 170). This is the *locus classicus* for regarding al-Ghazali as an advocate of Ash'arite occasionalism, thereby denying necessary causal connections in this world. For Griffel, the key question is his understanding of "necessary," which he takes as denoting for al-Ghazali that no alternative scenario can be imagined. If an alternative is conceivable, even if it will never exist, then something is not "necessary."

For Ibn Sina, however, "necessary" describes something that is not and never will be different – a narrower definition. Here, argues Griffel, lies the root of the confusion over al-Ghazali's relationship to Avicenna's causal theories. Drawing on the work of Obermann, Rudolph, and Kukkonen, Griffel emphasizes that al-Ghazali's concern is with what is possible to conceive, not with what is possible in actuality. Chapter 7 explains further how al-Ghazali combines occasionalist and philosophical understandings. Since he had decided that neither revelation nor logical demonstration yielded certain knowledge about cosmology, he "simply lost interest" (p. 122) in that particular aspect of the topic.

Chapter 8 analyzes causality in al-Ghazali's most famous work, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences)*. The final main chapter then explores the same theme as treated in four later works. A conclusion repays thorough attention as it both summarizes and reflects on Griffel's analysis.

For scholarship of such rigor, it is disappointing that the editing process allowed, on my reckoning, over fifty errors to appear – either lapses in the accuracy of the English used or simply misprints and inconsistencies (e.g., *muta`* transliterated in two different ways on p. 256). There is also occasional repetitiveness in reviewing where the argument has reached so far. Yet these are trivial points given the scope of Griffel's achievement, and his writing, while at times demanding, is admirably clear. His exposition of subtle differences between philosophical theories means that certain sections will stretch many students on first encounter; however, they will repay patient rereading, both for undergraduates and the main target audience, the specialized researcher. The book's significance lies primarily in setting out clearly how al-Ghazali's views on cosmology can be harmonized and how they affect other aspects of his thought, such as divine foreknowledge and theodicy. Griffel's work is partly devoted to clearing up "profound confusions

among many of his interpreters” (p. 122) who try to identify al-Ghazali with one or the other position on causality. Griffel’s final comment stresses his concern that interpreters should work harder to harmonize the apparently conflicting messages of texts from a different age. His book is devoted to just this cause.

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