

## **The Priority of Rational Proof in Islam: The View of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses the instrumental and foundational roles of rational proof in Islam, as reflected in Islamic theology and with special focus on the thought of a renowned Muslim theologian of later Ash'arite school, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209). The priority of rational proof, the way he had articulated it, lies in its two important roles in regard to revelation: being the basis for the justification of revelation (*asl al-naql*) as well as being an important criterion in verifying the certainty of revelation. While the first becomes clear via the role of reason in proving the existence of God which forms the basis of one's belief in the Qur'ān, the Divine Speech of God, the second becomes evident in the importance of the ten rational criteria in determining the truth of a revealed text. The article contends that the aforementioned priority as expounded by al-Rāzī is still relevant and any attempt at relearning it shall render one's contemporary approach to revelation more comprehensive and systematic.

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**Keywords**

Rational proofs, textual proofs, reason, revelation, theology, anthropomorphic verses, certainty.

**Introduction**

As a religion that emphasises truth and certainty,<sup>1</sup> Islam views the issue of the basis of true knowledge as fundamental. Such concern can be seen, among others, in the inclusion of various topics related to epistemology in the writings of Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and jurists (*usūlī*) such as the problem of certainty (*yaqīn*), reasoning (*naẓar*), concept and assent (*taṣawwūr* and *tasdīq*), as well as proofs (*dalīl*).<sup>2</sup> In Islamic theology (*kalām*), such topics were discussed mainly as preliminaries to the discussion on God—being the ultimate question in theology—in refutation of philosophical ideologies with sophisticated leanings which, via epistemological door, had

1. The Qurʾān repeatedly stresses the importance of certainty (*yaqīn*) particularly in regard to eschatological matters (for example, *wa bi al-ākhirati hum yuqīnūn*: *al-Baqarah* (2): 4; *al-Naml* (27): 3). The good believers are also described by the Qurʾān as those who are certain of the signs of God referring to the creation (*al-Naml* (27): 3; *al-Sajdah* (32): 24). The Qurʾānic term for those who have certainty is *mūqīnūn* (*al-Sajdah* (32): 12; *al-Anʿām* (6): 75; *al-Shuʿarāʾ* (26): 24; *al-Dukhān* (44): 7). The Qurʾān also states three levels of certainty, *ʿilm al-yaqīn* (*al-Takāthur* (102): 5), *ʿayn al-yaqīn* (*al-Takāthur* (102): 7) and *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* (*al-Wāqīʿah* (56): 95; *al-Hāqqah* (69): 51).
2. See, for example, the discussion on the nature of knowledge (*ḥaqīqat al-ʿilm*), classification of knowledge (*aqṣām al-ʿilm*) and proof (*dalīl*) in Abū Bakr al-Baqillānī, *Kitāb Tamhīd al-Awāʾil wa Talkhīs al-Dalāʾil*, ed. Imād al-dīn Ahmad Jaidar (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfah, 1987); on reasoning (*naẓar*) in Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Alī Samī Nashshār (Alexandria: Al-Maʿārif, 1969); on the nature of knowledge (*ḥaqīqat al-ʿilm*) and categories of reasoning (*ahkām al-naẓar*) in Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1995); on all the above topics in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muhassal Afkār al-Mutaqaddimīn wa al-Mutaʾakhkharīn min al-ʿUlamāʾ wa al-Hukamāʾ wa al-Mutakallimīn* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyyah, n.d); on the definition of knowledge (*taʿrīf al-ʿilm*), concept and assent (*taṣawwūr* and *tasdīq*), and reasoning (*al-naẓar*) in Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿUmayrah (Beirut: ʿAlam al-Kutub, 1989).

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intruded Islamic theology, thus creating doubts. In *usūl al-fiqh*, they served as an important introduction to the discussion on the sources of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>3</sup>

Of all such topics, the question of proof (*dalīl*) is more significant due to it being a means to arrive at true and certain knowledge. Generally, two kinds of proof are discussed, the rational proofs and the textual ones. While the importance of both kinds of proof in theological discussions is beyond dispute, the contention, however, revolves around the question of priority between the two in leading to the knowledge of religious truth. For instance, which is prior when there is incongruence between the two proofs? Which of the two will lead more towards certainty? What is the relation between both proofs?

Answers to such questions are important not only in relation to the historical discourse of different Muslim sects, but also in tracing the contemporary problem of sectarianism in the Muslim community caused by different interpretations of religious texts. Be it under the banner of modernism vs. traditionalism, or that of salafism vs. liberalism, the conflict is mainly concerned with methodological difference between strict textual approach and ultra-rational approach in understanding the meaning of religious texts. Further analysis of the issue would show that the fundamental root of the debate could ultimately be traced to their respective stance toward the rational and textual proofs.

With the above background, this essay will further analyse the view of one of the renowned 13th century Muslim theologians, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209)<sup>4</sup> on the role of

3. See, for example, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Mahsūl fī Ṭm Usūl al-Fiqh*, ed. Taha Jābir al-Alwānī, vol. 1 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1992), 87–8.
4. Among the important works that provide biographical information on al-Rāzī are Sālih Zarkān, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa Arā'ihū al-Kalāmiyyah wa al-Falsafīyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1963); Yasin Ceylan, *Theology and Tafīr in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 642–56; Tony Street, "Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought and*

rational proof. As an important Ash‘arite theologian after Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111/505), al-Rāzī had placed more emphasis on the instrumental role of rational proof as well as its position as the basis for textual proofs. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, he was seen as the champion of the rational school in theology and *tafsīr* as reflected among others in continuous reference by modern Muslim intellectuals to his work, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* or *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* as well as others. Together with al-Ghazzālī, al-Rāzī was regarded as being among later scholars who brought reason closer to religion by successfully combining the problems of philosophy and *kalām*, hence offering a more systematic theology in Islam.<sup>5</sup>

### The Meaning of Proof (*Dalīl*)

The term “*dalīl*” literally means “that by which something is indicated” (*mā yustadallu bihī*).<sup>6</sup> Derived from the root word, *dalla*, meaning “to point out,” *dalīl* is by religious implication close to the meaning of the term *hadā*—to guide.<sup>7</sup> Al-Rāzī defines proof (*dalīl*) as “something a correct reflection of which may lead one to knowledge” (*alladhī yumkinu an yutawaṣṣalu bi ṣaḥīḥ al-naẓar fīhi ilā al-‘ilm*).<sup>8</sup>

As stated earlier, two main kinds of proof are employed by Muslim scholars particularly in arguing religious matters, namely, rational proofs and textual proofs. The rational proof (*al-dalīl al-‘aqliyyah*) is the proof whose premises are based on rational principles. Based on the way rational proof is employed in the discipline of logic, it can be divided into three: syllogism

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*Society: A Festschrift in Honour of Anthony H. Johns*, ed. Peter G. Riddell & Tony Street (Leiden: Brill, 1997); G. C. Anawati, “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2d. edition, vol. II, 751–5.

5. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Alamī li al-Maṭbū‘ah, n.d.), 466; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 96.
6. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, vol. 11 (Beirut: Dār al-Šādīr, 1994), 248 s.v. “d-l-l.”
7. Ibid.
8. Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 88.

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(*al-qiyās*)—a kind of deductive reasoning which operates by moving from general premises to specific conclusion; induction (*al-istiqrāʾ*) which begins with specific premises and ends up with general conclusion; and analogy (*al-tamthīl*) which is a comparison between two things to arrive at similar conclusion. Textual proof (*al-dalīl al-naqliyyah*), on the other hand, is proof that is based on reports from religious textual sources, i.e., the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* that are transmitted from one person to another.<sup>9</sup> As far as their function in an argument is concerned, the proofs employed are either purely rational (*al-ʿaqlī al-makḥṣūs*), or solely textual (*al-naqlī al-maḥḍ*), or a combination of the two. However, in reality, as reflected in the dialectical discussions among theologians, an argument is hardly presented purely from textual basis. Therefore, most theologians consider the third division (the combination between rational and textual proof) as textual proof, too.<sup>10</sup>

The justification that there are two kinds of proofs is based mainly on the fact that epistemologically, knowledge of realities in Islam is not acquired only through two channels, the empirical as well as the rational. In fact, knowledge of most of the religious matters, especially concerning metaphysical and spiritual realities, is acquired through the reports of the prophets who were supported by miracles (*ḵabar al-rasūl al-muʿayyad bi al-muʿjizah*). Matters acquired from such a channel, according to theologians, are considered to be true and certain based on the well-adjudicated position of the prophets.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the Qurʾān and the sayings of the Prophet, being the two most fundamental sources of Islamic teachings, are included under the third channel of knowledge.

However, the question remains as to how far reason has a role, not only in understanding such reports, but also in

9. See Muḥammad ʿĀlī al-Tahanāwī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1998), 133.

10. Ibid.

11. Al-Taftazānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī on the Creed of Naḥm al-Dīn al-Nasafī*, with introduction and notes by Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia University Press), 22.

serving as an important criterion in determining their truth. Must their content, for instance, be scrutinised by rational criteria? Such questions had been part of the concerns of Muslim theologians, as can be discerned from the theologico-epistemological discussions of such Ash‘arite theologians as al-Ġhazzālī and al-Rāzī. Henceforth, the aforementioned questions shall be the focus of our analysis and discussion.

### **Conflicts between Religious Texts and Rational Principles as the Background Problem**

The importance of this discussion could be better appreciated if problems revolving around this issue is properly understood, hence serving as a background in understanding the issue. One of them pertains to occasions where there seems to be a conflict between textual proofs and rational principles.<sup>12</sup> For instance, there are verses which allude to the so-called anthropomorphic attributes of God—sometimes named as *ṣifāt khabariyyah* (attributes which are reported directly from the Qur‘ān and *ḥadīths*)—which are found in verses whose meanings are ambiguous (*āyāt mutashābihāt*). In such verses, not only is God described with possession of “physical organs” such as hand<sup>13</sup> and face<sup>14</sup> but He is also said to perform such physical acts as sitting on the Throne, speaking,<sup>15</sup> forgetting,<sup>16</sup> and plotting (*makara*).<sup>17</sup> Several Prophetic traditions also report

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12. It is important to note that the issue of consistency is of high priority in the *kalām* discussion. This is based on two important premises. First, that there is no contradiction between reason and revelation since both come from God; hence, any part of the revelation must be properly analysed based on this principle. Secondly, the purpose of *kalām* itself is to expound religious principles based on rational proofs.

13. *Sād* (38): 57; *al-Fath* (48): 10.

14. *Al-Qaṣas* (28): 88.

15. *Al-Nisā‘* (4): 164.

16. *Al-Taḥbah* (9): 67.

17. *Āl-Imrān* (3): 54; *al-Tāriq* (86):16.

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that God is angry,<sup>18</sup> happy,<sup>19</sup> and cheerful (*tabashbasha*),<sup>20</sup> as well as has a form.<sup>21</sup> To affirm such verses at face value will naturally lead to an epistemological problem; for, the descriptions are seen as going against the principles of reason which affirm that God must be different from created beings. Being a transcendent and a one true God, He must be unique and free from any resemblance with any other being. He transcends every category and classification that human reason can comprehend. In logical terms, God is described as without genus or differentia, the two elements necessary for a definition of any concept.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from their apparent contradiction with reason, such verses also seem to be in opposition to the meaning of clear verses (*ayāt muḥkamāt*) which stress on the transcendence of God, such as the affirmative, “Nothing is like unto Him” (*laysa ka muṥhlihi shay*),<sup>23</sup> a verse which to the theologians is of utmost significance as a definitive proof for His absolute transcendence, particularly from any anthropomorphic implications. When commenting on the aforementioned verse, al-Rāzī remarked, “scholars of *tawḥīd*, ancient and recent, argue on the basis of this verse, against the [errant] views that portray [the essence of] God as corporeal (*jism*), composed of organs and parts, and that He exists (*ḥāṣīlan*) in place and

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18. *Al-Nisā* (4): 93.

19. Ibn Majah, “Bāb Luzūm al-Masājīd wa Intizār al-Ṣalāh,” *Sahīh Sunan Ibn Mājah*, vol. 1 (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Tarbiyyah al-‘Arabī, 1988), 133.

20. “Tawbah,” in *Sahīh Muslim bi Sharḥ al-Nawawī*, vol. 17 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1998), 63.

21. “Verily God has created Adam according to His form” (*Inna Allāh khalaqa Adam ‘alā sūratihī*). Muslim, *Ṣahīh*, no. 7092, vol. 17, 175–6.

22. Fadlou Shehadi, *Al-Ghazālī’s Unique and Unknowable God* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 40; Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, eds., *History of Islamic Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1996), 241. Similar understanding of God was held by the Neo-Platonists who later left a strong influence on Medieval, Islamic and Renaissance thought. See Thomas Mautner, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 431, s.v. “God.”

23. *Al-Shūrā* (42): 11.

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direction.”<sup>24</sup> Another emphatic verse that stresses the uniqueness of God and the denial of any resemblance of divine essence with other anthropomorphic qualities is in the 114th *ṣūrah* (chapter) of the Qurʾān—*al-Ikhlās*—which describes God as One and Unique, clearly contradicts the Christian belief of God as the “father” with a “begotten-son,” as well as utterly denies of God any likeness (*kufū*) with others.<sup>25</sup> Other verses known to go against anthropomorphic imports include: “No vision can grasp Him;”<sup>26</sup> “They cannot encompass Him with their knowledge;”<sup>27</sup> “Praise and Glory be to Him, for He is above what they attribute to Him;”<sup>28</sup> and “Glory be to Him! He is high above all that they say, Exalted and Great.”<sup>29</sup> While in the ḥadīth, the emphasis on divine transcendence is seen among others in the following *ḥadīth* that denies the fact that Prophet Muḥammad was seeing Allah:

‘Aishah said: “If anyone tells you that Muḥammad has seen his Lord, he is a liar; for, Allah says, “No vision can grasp Him” [*al-Anʿām* (6): 103]. And if anyone tells you that Muḥammad has seen the Unseen (*al-Ghayb*), he is a liar; for, Allah says, “None has the knowledge of the Unseen but Allah” [*al-Naml* (27): 65].”<sup>30</sup>

### Solution to the Conflicts

To analyse further the issue, first and foremost, it is important to emphasise that scholars of Islam are in agreement that there should be no contradiction between reason and revelation in Islam. This can be seen among others from the titles of books

24. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 9 (reprint, Beirut: Dār Ihyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1997), 582.

25. *Al-Ikhlās* (112): 1–4.

26. *Al-Anʿām* (6): 103.

27. *Tā Hā* (20): 110.

28. *Al-Anʿām* (6): 100.

29. *Al-Isrāʾ* (17): 43.

30. Al-Bukhārī, “al-Tawhīd,” *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 7380, as found in al-Qaṣṭallānī, *Irshād al-Sāri li Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥi Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1990), vol. 15, p. 395.



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written by Muslim scholars such as Ibn Rushd's (d. 1198) *Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā bayna al-Ḥikmah wa al-Sharī'ah min al-Ittisāl* (On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy) and Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 1328) *Dar' al-Ta'arud al-'Aql wa al-Naql* (Repulsion of Conflict between the Intellect and the Transmitted Text).

According to al-Rāzī, the principle of harmony between reason and revelation is based on the following grounds:

1. Just as revelation is a command from God, reason is also a special gift by God to mankind. Reason is created by God in man as the most important faculty through which he can contemplate and weigh between right and wrong. Both reason and revelation are therefore complementary mediums for man to arrive at truth. Quite a number of Qur'ānic verses emphasise the use of reason as an appropriate way of understanding the truth such as, "Do they not reflect upon the Qur'ān? If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction."<sup>31</sup>; and "Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'ān, or are there locks upon [their] heart?"<sup>32</sup>
2. The Qur'ān itself made a self-proclamation that it is a clear book (*kitāb mubīn*),<sup>33</sup> it was revealed in a clear Arabic tongue (*bi lisān 'arabiyyin mubīn*),<sup>34</sup> it is the book that serve as an explanation of all things (*tibyānan li kulli shay*);<sup>35</sup> and it is the message to all mankind (*balāghun li al-nās*).<sup>36</sup>
3. Since the Qur'ān is a speech (*kalām*) whose very meaning presupposes understanding (*ijhām*), the absence of the rational understanding with regard to some of the verses will therefore render the speech useless (*'abathan*).<sup>37</sup>

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31. *Al-Nisā'* (4): 82.

32. *Muḥammad* (47): 24.

33. *Al-Mā'idah* (5): 15.

34. *Al-Shu'arā'* (26): 195.

35. *Al-Nahl* (16): 89.

36. *Ibrāhīm* (14): 52.

37. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Asās al-Taqdīs*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqā (Beirut: Dār al-Jil), 200.

All the above arguments not only imply that there is a harmonious condition between reason and revelation but also indicate that reason plays a significant role especially in understanding the meaning of the revelation. It is the necessary framework through which human beings have to go to arrive at a proper understanding of the Qurʾān. Epistemologically, reason is the first channel of knowledge that must be used in order to justify the basis of the revelation. Further elaborations on this matter would be the concern of our next section which shall further analyse al-Rāzī’s explanation on the priority of rational proofs in Islam and its epistemological relation with the traditional proofs.

### **The Priority of Rational Proofs According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī**

Generally, the position of al-Rāzī is based on the following two grounds: firstly, that the justification of revelation is based upon reason; and secondly, that the certainty of the traditional proofs depends on rational verifications.

#### *Justification of Revelation Based upon Reason*

Al-Rāzī emphasised the priority of reason in his *kalām* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* works,<sup>38</sup> especially when discussing the way of argumentation using the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*. Under the topic “whether or not textual proofs yield certainty,” al-Rāzī pointed out the crucial position of reason in contextualising certain verses of the Qurʾān. He argued that rational proofs are necessary in any argument to such an extent that they must be

38. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Maʿālim fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, annotated by Taha Abd. Raʿūf Saʿīd (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1984), 21–2; idem, al-Maḥsūl, 385–418; idem, *Muḥassal Afkār al-Mutaqaddīmīn wa al-Mutaʾakkhirīn min al-Ulamāʾ wa al-Hukamāʾ wa al-Mutakallimīn* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿah Husainiyyah, 1905), 51–2; idem, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʾirah al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmānī, 1934), 423–26.

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the basis of the textual (transmitted) proofs (*al-adillah al-naqliyyah*).<sup>39</sup> According to him, “reason is the origin for understanding a revealed text (*asl al-naql*).” Therefore, “if we disprove reason, we have disproved the very tool in understanding of a revealed text, and once we have disproved its very tool, then we have also disproved the revealed text.”<sup>40</sup>

What does al-Rāzī mean by reason as the origin of a revealed text? According to him, reason is the basis on which the authority of revelation is established. This is because the truth of revelation is based primarily on the truth of two important premises which can only be proved through reason, namely: the existence of God and the truth of the Prophet. This Revelation, particularly al-Qur’ān, which represents the textual proof, is the manifestation of one of the attributes of God, namely, the Divine speech (*kalām Allāh*). Before it can be attributed to God, He must first be proven to exist, for, only a god that exists can be a subject of which speech is predicated.<sup>41</sup> Yet, the existence of God cannot be proven except through reason.

Arguably, the existence of God could be proven through the Qur’ān. To this, al-Rāzī would reply that it was logically false to justify the existence of God by His own speech since it would lead to circularity (*dawr*); for, the truth of the speech of God itself is ultimately dependant on His existence. Therefore, the existence of God must first be established before any reference can be made to one of His attributes. Therefore, this argument clearly shows that reason must be the prior basis or point of origin for the truth of revelation.

If one were to argue that the truth of the revelation could be established through the reports coming from the true

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39. Al-Rāzī, *Ma’ālim*, 25; and idem, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 390–1.

40. Idem, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 406.

41. The Ash‘arites regard the attribute of existence as the attribute which is closely related to the essence (*dhāt*) of God; hence, it is called the personal attribute (*al-sifāt al-naḥsiyyah*). While the attribute of speech is one of the additional attributes (*ma’ānī*) which subsist in the essence of God.

Prophet, al-Rāzī would reply that similarly, the veracity of the Prophet must also be first verified by reason.

A proof based on the Qurʾān and the tradition (*al-Sunnah*) depends on the knowledge of the veracity of the Prophet, and this knowledge [of the truth of the Prophet] is not attained (*lā yustafād*) by textual proof, for that will lead to circularity; rather, it is based on the rational proofs. And it is beyond doubt that this [preliminary] premise [which is based on the rational proof] is one of the important parts in the validity of the textual proof.<sup>42</sup>

Such an argument is not new in Islamic theological tradition. Earlier than al-Rāzī, al-Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), one of the leading Ashʿarite theologians, had already emphasised a similar principle. Al-Juwaynī had argued that any question of belief that comes prior to the belief in the speech of God, the Qurʾān, can only be understood or known by reason:

As for what cannot be perceived except by reason, all elements of faith originally depend on knowing the Word of God, the Exalted, and on the necessity of its having the quality of being true. The evidence supplied by tradition is grounded in the speech of God. Thus, prior to the affirmation of the speech, what one must acknowledge cannot possibly be grasped through tradition.<sup>43</sup>

This position is further strengthened by al-Ghazzālī who held that among theological knowledge knowable by reason without needing evidence from the *Sharʿ* (referring to revelation) are the origination of the world, the existence of the Originator, and His Power, Knowledge and Will. In his view, such

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42. Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn*, 424.

43. Al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, translated by P. E. Walker (Reading: Garnet Publishing), 195.

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important matters precede the knowledge of internal speech (*kalām al-nafs*) which refers to the Qurʾān; for, they cannot be substantiated by the same *kalām* (the Qurʾān) but instead by reason.<sup>44</sup> Al-Rāzī, in this regard, extended the arguments of his Ashʿarite predecessors in strengthening the position of reason.

The aforementioned is also in line with another epistemological discussion in Islamic theology concerning the instrumental position of rational proof related to the importance of thinking and reflection (*nazar*). Reason, as argued by al-Rāzī, is the source of reflection (*nazar*), which is a way to understanding divine matters. Al-Rāzī defined *nazar* as “ordering of assents in order to arrive at other assents” (*tartīb taṣdīqāt li yatawaṣṣalu bihā taṣdīqāt akhar*).<sup>45</sup> *Nazar*, according to al-Rāzī, is necessary in religion since it is the only way for man to arrive at the knowledge of the existence of God. He argued that since the knowledge of the absolute God is necessary, *nazar*, as the only way to the knowledge of Him, is also necessary. This is based on the famous maxim known in *uṣūl al-fiqh*, namely, “that without which a necessary thing becomes incomplete, is itself necessary” (*mā lā yatimm al-wājib illā bihī fa huwa wājib*).<sup>46</sup>

It can thus be concluded that textual proofs, in the final analysis, cannot continuously base themselves on similar textual proofs, but must somehow be founded on rational proofs. This is also based on the logical principle that a branch cannot be stronger than the root. Since the rational substantiation, compared with the traditional proofs, is prior and is considered to be the principle, its position is more fundamental in determining the strength of the argument.

44. Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fī al-ʿItiqād*, partially translated into English by ʿAbd Rahman Abu Zayd as *Al-Ghazali on Divine Predicates and Their Properties* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1994), 132. See also M. A. R. Bisar, “Al-Juwaynī and al-Ghazālī as Theologians: With Special Reference to *al-Irshād* and *al-ʿItiqād*,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Edinburgh University, 1953), 40–1.

45. Al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal* (published by Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyyah), 40.

46. *Ibid.*, 44. Cf. al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād* (published by Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah), 7.

*Certainty of the Textual Proof Depends on Rational Verifications*

The second reason why al-Rāzī regards rational proofs as prior is that the textual proofs do not yield certainty (*lā tufīdu al-yaqīn*) unless they are verified by some rational criteria. This is because textual proofs by their very nature undergo the process of transmission which is based on some contextual conditions that need to be verified before they can be regarded as certain. The obscurity of these conditions, according to al-Rāzī, will lead to a difficulty in understanding a given textual proof:

Textual proofs *do not yield certainty* [italics mine] since they are based on the transmission of language (*naql al-lughāt*), grammar (*al-naḥw wa tahrīf*), equivocation (*al-ishṭirāk*), metaphor (*al-majāz*), conveyance (*al-naql*), concealment (*al-idmār*), priority and posteriority (*taqdīm wa ta'khīr*), specification (*takhṣīs*), abrogation (*nāsikh*), and [rational] contradiction (*mu'ārid*). All these are conjectural (*zannīyyah*).<sup>47</sup>

Such conditions or criteria, which al-Rāzī called “the ten rational premises” (*al-muqaddamāt al-‘asharah*), were further elaborated by him as the following:

1. The knowledge of language (*ma'rifat al-lughāt*) based mostly on the solitary narrations (*riwāyāt al-āḥād*) of linguists who were not infallible from errors and disagreements among one another. For example, the views of linguists such as al-Aṣma'ī and al-Khalīl who were at times contested by others.
2. The correctness of the grammar and syntax (*siḥḥat al-naḥw wa taṣrīf*) with various expressions (*i'ṣābāt*) and meanings which were also disputed among grammarians. The grammarians in fact belonged to different schools

47. Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 390–1; see also idem, *Ma'ālim*, 22; and idem, *Kūtāb al-Arba'īn*, 423–6.

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- such as the Kūfah and Baṣrah schools which were not in agreement on many subjects of the Arabic language.
3. Equivocation in the meaning of words (*al-ishṭirāk fi al-lafẓ*) whose presence renders the words intended by God to mean differently from what we understand.
  4. The qualification whether a word is literal (*ḥaqīqah*) or metaphorical (*majāz*). If it is metaphorical, it will then give rise to a number of possibilities of which one in turn needs to determine the meaning that is really intended. Elsewhere, al-Rāzī emphasises the importance of determining whether a word is used in the literal (*luḡhawī*) or technical (*ma'nā al-manqūl*) sense. For example, the word *shar'* bears different literal and technical meanings.
  5. Omissions and concealments (*ḥadhf wa idmār*) in the verses are likely to cause confusion between denial and affirmation and vice versa. Based on the discussion in the field of *balāghah*, there are verses in the Qurʾān whose meanings are understood differently due to the principles of omission and concealment. For example, the negation “*lā*” in the first verse in *Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* “*lā uqsimu bi yawm al-qiyāmah*” is omitted, hence the meaning is understood in the positive sense (without negation) “I do call to witness the resurrection day.”<sup>48</sup>
  6. Priority and posteriority (*taqdīm wa takhīr*) with regard to a narration or verse that will confuse the meaning.
  7. General statements (*ʿumūmāt*) without any specific meanings.
  8. Abrogations of verses (*nāsikh wa mansūkh*). The occurrence of abrogation in the verses of the Qurʾān will affect the strength of certain judgments.<sup>49</sup>
  9. Contradictions in narrations (*muʿārid samʿī*) which will confuse the true meaning.
  10. Rational contradictions (*muʿārid ʿaqlī*) with the apparent

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48. Idem, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn*, 425.

49. Idem, *Al-Maḥṣūl*, 406.

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meaning of the verse whose occurrence will necessitate a metaphorical interpretation of the meaning of the verse.<sup>50</sup>

Linguistically, such conditions, which surround the derived meaning of any given textual proof, are pertinent in determining the meaning of words.<sup>51</sup> According to al-Rāzī, since the meanings of textual proofs are based on language which is conditioned by the ten contextual matters, the meanings of textual proofs are regarded as conjectural (*maznūn*). Anything which depends on the conjectural is itself conjectural (*al-mawqūf ‘alā maznūn maznūn*).<sup>52</sup> Hence, to him, arguments (*dilālāt*) which are based solely on traditional arguments cannot stand alone since it will not yield certainty.

Al-Rāzī’s view on this matter had also influenced many *mutakallimūn* after him, especially in their treatment of the issue of proofs. For example, in both al-Taftāzānī’s (d. 1390) *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* and al-Jurjānī’s (d. 1413) *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, two important works of later Ash‘arite *kalām*, the ten conditions discussed above were elaborated as being necessary conditions that must be satisfied before any scriptural text can yield certain knowledge.<sup>53</sup> They had classified the ten into three general headings:

1. That the language of the text be known for certain, which should encompass vocabulary (*lūghah*), grammar (*nahw*), and syntax (*sarf*);
2. That the intent (*irādah*) of the speaker be verified; either the text is devoid of changes in the meaning of words

50. Idem, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn*, 424–6.

51. Ibid., 424. For a lengthy linguistic discussions by al-Rāzī on words and meaning, and their related problems, see al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 1, 29–50.

52. Idem, *Ma‘ālim*, 22; idem, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 407; idem, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 1: 41–2.

53. Quoted in Nicholas Heer, “The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyah and the Mutakallimūn,” *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam*, ed. Mustansir Mir (Princeton: The Darwin Press Inc., 1993), 181–3.



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(*naql*), ambiguity (*ishtirāk*), metaphor (*majāz*), ellipsis or omission (*idmār*), limitation (*takhsīs*), and irregular ordering of word (*taqdīm wa ta'khīr*); and

3. That rational counter-argument be not present which conflicts with the meaning of the scriptural text. If such conflicts do exist, the scriptural text must then be interpreted allegorically.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

From all the aforementioned, it is clear that al-Rāzī had highlighted several important points concerning the priority of rational proof in Islam. Firstly, from the epistemological point of view and in comparison with the textual proof, rational proof is not only prior but also foundational. Because of their dependence on rational proofs, textual proofs need to be intellectually assessed and cannot stand by themselves.

Secondly, the priority of rational proof over the textual one lies more in its logic. In other words, textual proofs must logically be preceded by rational proofs. Any Qur'ānic text or *ḥadīth* first depends on the veracity of the Prophet as the conveyer of the message, and the truthfulness of a Prophet, in turn, is justified through rational proofs.<sup>55</sup>

Thirdly, rational criteria play an important role in substantiating some major foundational aspects of religious doctrines. Doctrines that come from textual proofs also must not be in contradiction with the principle of reason.

The contemporary relevance of this discussion can be seen in the context of the need for proper interpretation and

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54. Ibid.

55. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-Iḥāz fī Dirāyat al-Iḥāz*, ed. Bakrī Shaykh Amīn (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1985), 133–42. The *mutakallimūn*, according to al-Shahrastānī, argued that it is possible for God to send a Prophet because he has the power to choose a man to communicate His will to mankind so that there is no impossibility in Him doing so. They also argued for the possibility of miracles through rational arguments.

understanding of the Qurʾān. In the contemporary discourse of the holy text, groups with a strong tendency to affirm the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in a literal sense without taking into consideration the contradiction that will take place with other clear verses still exist. Such an extreme approach ultimately leads to *tajsīm* and *tashbīh*, affirming physical attributes to God which is in clear contradiction to the principle of *tawhīd*. Furthermore, such an understanding will create an inconsistent understanding of the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*. This counters the core nature of the Qurʾān which is clear (*mubīn*) and with neither doubt (*lā rayba fīhi*) nor crookedness (*ghayri dhī ʿwajin*).

Generally, the issue bears a significant impact on the way Islamic education in the Muslim world is currently being structured and organised. The dismissive approach towards rational proofs will cause certain countries to focus on religious knowledge that is purely based on religious texts without taking into consideration the rational explanation which is important to the contemporary Muslim society. Similarly, disapproval of rational disciplines such as logic, philosophy and *kalām* in complementing the religious discourse will drag Muslims further from the religious intellectual tradition that is required in solving many contemporary problems such as human rights issues and the relation between religion and science etc.