



Fakhr Al-Din Al-Razi – His Life, Scientific Heritage, And Era

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the life, multifaceted scientific heritage, and socio-political environment of the prominent 12th-century polymath, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Living in an era marked by the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, the rise of the Mongol threat, and intense sectarian conflicts involving the Batiniyya and Mu'tazilite movements, Al-Razi emerged as a pivotal figure in Islamic intellectual history. The study analyzes his "Razian synthesis"—the integration of Aristotelian logic into Ash'ari theology—and explores how his works in linguistics, physics, and metaphysics provided a resilient framework for the survival of the "rational sciences" (al-ulum al-aqliyya) during political decay. The research concludes that Al-Razi's methodological innovations acted as an intellectual bridge, ensuring the continuity of the Islamic scholarly tradition into the post-classical era.

Keywords:

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Islamic Scholasticism, Ash'arism, Rational Sciences, Batiniyya, Socio-political instability, Mafatih al-Ghayb, Intellectual History

His full name is Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Umar ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali ar-Razi. Originally from Tabaristan, he was born in the city of Ray. His lineage traces back to the Quraysh tribe (Taymi al-Bakri). In jurisprudence (*fiqh*), he followed the Shafi'i school, and in theology (*aqidah*), he adhered to the Ash'ari school.

In scholarly circles, he was renowned by the following honorary titles:

1. **Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (The Glory of Religion);**
2. **Ibn Khatib al-Ray (The Son of the Preacher of Ray);**
3. **Sultan al-Mutakallimin (The Sultan of Scholastic Theologians);**
4. **Shaykh al-Ma'qul wa-l-Manqul (The Master of Rational and Traditional Sciences).**

Al-Razi was an eminent exegete (*mufassir*), jurist (*faqih*), legal theorist (*usuli*), and polymath. His research and works spanned a vast spectrum, ranging from the humanities

(linguistics and rational sciences) to the exact sciences, such as physics, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy.

In pursuit of knowledge, Ar-Razi traveled extensively through Khwarazm, Transoxiana (*Mavarannahr*), and Khorasan. His works gained widespread popularity and were studied profoundly by his contemporaries. He possessed a perfect command of the Persian language. A leading defender of Ash'ari doctrine, he gained fame for his polemics and refutations against philosophers and the Mu'tazilites. His influence was such that when he traveled on horseback, he was often accompanied by an entourage of three hundred disciples and jurists. In the city of Herat, in recognition of his immense scholarly potential, he was honored with the title "**Shaykh al-Islam.**"

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi authored numerous influential treatises in every field of science. Among his most significant works are:

1. "**At-Tafsir al-Kabir**" (The Great Exegesis), also known as "**Mafatih al-**

Ghayb" (The Keys to the Unseen). This work contains unique insights and data not found in other commentaries.

2. "**Al-Mahsul**" – regarding the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*).
3. "**Al-Matolib al-Oliya**" and "**Ta'sis at-Taqdis**" – concerning scholastic theology (*kalom*).
4. "**Nihoyat al-Iyjoz fi Diroyat al-I'joz**" – on the science of eloquence (*balogah*).
5. "**Al-Arba'in fi Usul ad-Din**" – on the foundations of religion.
6. "**Kitob al-Handasa**" – concerning geometry.

Ar-Razi established a close connection with the Khwarazmshah Sultan Muhammad ibn Takash, earning high status and respect at his court. The scholar passed away in 606 AH (1210 AD) in the city of Herat.

Ar-Razi lived during the second half of the 6th century AH. This period marked a difficult stage of decline in the political, social, and theological life of the Muslim world. The Abbasid Caliphate had weakened to its lowest point. Simultaneously, the Crusades in the Levant and the emerging Mongol threat from the East disturbed the stability of the Muslim world.

Furthermore, sectarian and theological conflicts intensified. In the city of Ray alone, three major factions coexisted:

- **Shafi'is** (minority);
- **Hanafis** (majority);
- **Rafidites** (a significant portion of the population).

Initial confrontations occurred between the Sunnis and the Rafidites, with the Sunnis prevailing. Subsequently, conflicts arose between the Shafi'is and Hanafis, where the Shafi'is gained dominance despite their smaller numbers. Numerous sects emerged during this period, leading to prolonged debates, most notably among the Shi'a, Mu'tazila, Murji'ah, Batiniyya, and Karramiyya.

Regarding the intellectual atmosphere of the region, the famous historian **Ibn Khaldun** remarked:

"Reports reach us from the people of the East that these sciences (natural sciences, theology, geometry, and music) still flourish among them, particularly in Persian Iraq and

Transoxiana. Due to their advanced urbanization and the strength of their civilization, they maintain a stable methodology in both the rational and traditional sciences."

During this period, the violence of the **Batiniyya** movement intensified, leading to a wave of assassinations targeting the great figures of the era. Among their victims were the celebrated vizier **Nizam al-Mulk** and the Judge of Isfahan. As the historian Ibn al-Imad noted: *"Due to these accursed ones, affairs were turned upside down; their sudden attacks struck terror into the hearts of emirs and scholars alike."* Regarding them, Imam al-Ghazali famously stated: *"Their outward appearance is Shi'a, but their inward reality is pure unbelief (kufr)."*

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi was raised amidst this profound political and religious instability. His journey to Khwarazm led to heated theological debates with the **Mu'tazilites**, eventually forcing his departure from the city. A similar sequence of events occurred in Transoxiana, leading to his return to Ray. Furthermore, he frequently engaged in intellectual polemics with the representatives of the **Karramiyya** sect. At that time, Ray was a pivotal crossroads of history; due to incessant warfare and external threats, the inhabitants had constructed subterranean dwellings and tunneled roads beneath the city for safety.

Al-Razi was born in 543 AH (1149 AD), a time when the **Ghurid Dynasty** was rising while the **Seljuk** and **Ghaznavid** empires were in decline. Shortly after Al-Razi's death, these states would ultimately vanish under the weight of the Mongol invasions from the East.

Although the 6th century AH was an era of contradictions, Islamic civilization remained resilient. As one state collapsed, another power often emerged to maintain the historical continuity. For instance, the **Khwarazmshahs** initially repelled the Mongol advances and offered significant resistance before their eventual fall. Meanwhile, the **Ayyubids** replaced the Seljuks in Western Iran and the Near East, leading the struggle against the Crusaders.

During this century, the **Abbasid Caliphate** fragmented into numerous petty states. Each principality vied for local hegemony,

which inevitably led to social fragmentation and stagnation.

However, a fascinating paradox emerged: scientific and intellectual movements did not cease. Because the *madrāsas* (educational institutions) and scholars maintained a degree of independence from the political apparatus, the "body" of the state might have been ailing, but its "intellect" (knowledge) remained healthy and continued to evolve.

The decline of the Caliphate and the rise of internal strife can be attributed to several key factors:

1. **Power Struggles:** The exhaustion of resources through the intense rivalry between the **Abbasids** and the **Fatimids**.
2. **Territorial Vastness:** The Caliphs were compelled to appoint governors (*walis*) to distant provinces. Once granted military and religious authority, these governors frequently sought total independence.
3. **The Caliph-Sultan Conflict:** As the Caliphs grew weak, actual power shifted to the Sultans. For example, Sultan Sanjar once seized the Prophet's (PBUH) mantle and staff from the Caliph (though they were later returned).

Frequent wars erupted between Sultans and Caliphs. In the desperate pursuit of power, some factions even sought assistance from external enemies; for instance, certain groups in Egypt purportedly reached out to the Crusaders in an attempt to overthrow **Saladin (Salahuddin Ayyubi)**.

Despite the surrounding political chaos, Al-Razi developed a rigorous and systematic approach to both the rational (*ma'qul*) and traditional (*manqul*) sciences. His methodology was characterized by a synthesis of Aristotelian logic and Islamic theology.

1. The Supremacy of Reason (Al-Aql)

Al-Razi is famously associated with the principle of the "**Universal Rule**" (**Al-Qanun al-Kulli**), which asserts that when a conflict arises between a literal scriptural text and a definitive rational proof, reason must be the foundation for interpretation (*ta'wil*). This approach allowed him to defend Islamic tenets against the

critiques of philosophers while maintaining a high standard of logical consistency.

2. Encyclopedic Synthesis

What sets Al-Razi apart is his ability to integrate disparate fields of knowledge. In his magnum opus, *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, he does not merely explain the Quranic verses but delves into:

- **Natural Philosophy:**

Discussing the nature of atoms, vacuum, and the plurality of worlds.

- **Linguistic Analysis:**

Applying advanced Arabic grammar and rhetoric to uncover the miraculous nature of the text.

- **Ethics and Psychology:**

Exploring the relationship between the human soul and divine providence.

The Legacy and Historical Significance

Al-Razi's era was a "bridge" between the classical period of Islamic thought and the later scholasticism. While the political structures of the 6th century AH (the Seljuks and Khwarazmshahs) were fragile, the intellectual structure Al-Razi built remained unshakable for centuries.

His influence was so profound that:

- He redirected the course of

Ash'ari theology, making it more philosophically sophisticated.

- He paved the way for later

polymaths and thinkers in the Ottoman and Safavid periods.

- Even his critics, such as **Ibn**

Taymiyya, acknowledged his unparalleled mastery of the rational sciences, often referring to his works to engage with complex metaphysical questions.

In summary, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi was not merely a product of his time but a response to it. Amidst the fragmentation of the Caliphate and the threat of foreign invasions, his work served as a unifying intellectual force. His life proves that while empires may fall, the pursuit of knowledge possesses an inherent resilience that transcends political boundaries.

In the final analysis, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi was far more than a scholar who reflected the intellectual currents of his time; he was a

transformative figure who fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of Islamic thought. His life and work stand as a testament to the resilience of human intellect amidst the profound socio-political fragmentation of the 6th century AH.

The Synthesis of Reason and Revelation Al-Razi's most significant contribution remains his sophisticated synthesis of Aristotelian logic and Ash'ari theology. By institutionalizing the "Universal Rule" (*Al-Qanun al-Kullī*), he provided a methodological framework that allowed future generations of scholars to navigate the complexities of faith and reason. This "Razian synthesis" became the gold standard for subsequent centuries of scholasticism across the Islamic world, from the Ottoman madrasas to the intellectual centers of Mughal India.

A Bridge Between Eras Living in an era of transition—where the old Abbasid order was decaying and the shadow of the Mongol invasion loomed—Al-Razi served as a bridge. He preserved the heritage of the classical era while anticipating the needs of the post-classical world. His encyclopedic approach ensured that the "rational sciences" (*al-ulum al-aqliyya*) were not lost in an age increasingly dominated by traditionalism. Even his most vocal critics, such as Ibn Taymiyya, were forced to engage with his logic, thereby unintentionally cementing his influence on nearly every major theological debate that followed.

The Resilience of Knowledge The history of Ray, Herat, and Khwarazm during Al-Razi's life was one of warfare and instability. Yet, the fact that his works—spanning from medicine and geometry to linguistics and metaphysics—survived and flourished proves a vital point: while political structures are ephemeral, intellectual structures possess an inherent longevity. Al-Razi demonstrated that even when the "body" of the state is ailing, the "intellect" can continue to thrive, provided there are institutions and individuals dedicated to the pursuit of truth.

Ultimately, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi remains the "**Sultan of Mutakallimin**" because he provided the tools for the Islamic intellectual tradition to survive the dark centuries of Mongol

and Crusader invasions. His legacy is not just a collection of books, but a vibrant methodology that continues to be studied by contemporary theologians and philosophers alike.

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