Did al-Ghazālī End Islamic Philosophy? An Oxford Professor's Revisionist Perspective

Part One

Frank Griffel is the Professor in the Study of Abrahamic Religions at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at Oxford University and Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall. This is a forum on his book, The Formation of Post-classical Philosophy in Islam *(Oxford University Press). The forum will be released in four parts before the final publication of the entire conversation, which will be available as a digital book at* Marginalia*. The transcript has been lightly edited for print.*

Introduction

Samuel Loncar

Welcome. My name is Samuel Loncar. I am a philosopher, scholar of religion, and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Marginalia Review of Books*. Today, I am delighted to introduce a very special forum on an extraordinary new work of philosophy, *The Formation of Post-classical Philosophy in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2021), by the Oxford professor of the Study of Abrahamic Religions and the Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, Frank Griffel. He is one of the world's leading experts on the history of Islamic philosophy, particularly al-Ghazālī , and this work is a revolution in the historiography of Islamic philosophy and, more broadly, philosophy since the Enlightenment.

In this conversation, we have two wonderful scholars joining us, also specialists in the history of medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy: Peter Adamson and Carlos Fraenkel. Professor Adamson is the Chair of Late Ancient and Arabic Philosophy at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. He is also the author of a very influential Oxford book series, *A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*, which is based on the eponymous podcast, which has reached hundreds of thousands of listeners. Professor Fraenkel is the James McGill Professor at McGill University, with a joint department in Jewish Studies and Philosophy, and the author of the prize-wining book, *Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World* (Princeton University Press, 2015). Thank you all for being here.

Frank Griffel

Thank you, Samuel.

Carlos Fraenkel

Thank you so much.

Peter Adamson

It's a pleasure.

Samuel Loncar

I want to give a brief introduction, which I would love for each of you to contest in any way that you would like, and I will begin with the significance of Professor Griffel's book, *The Formation of Post-classical Philosophy in Islam,* for our viewers.

Broadly speaking, many people are aware of a narrative—which, unfortunately, has a great deal of relevance today—namely, that the rise of Western modernity coincides with, and in many ways indicates the superiority of, Western philosophy and the Western "embrace of rationality" over the Islamic world. Thus, the birth of the Enlightenment narratives that justify colonialism, and justify the Western conquest of many of the territories that used to belong to Islamic States, is linked to a particular narrative in the history of philosophy.

So, from the beginning, we have a very deep connection between two things that are often not connected: first, the very current and relevant political and cultural debates about the role of Islamic culture, society and philosophy in the modern West, and second, the modern world more broadly, and what can seem like esoteric debates among scholars of the history of philosophy. But as Professor Griffel shows in this book, this is linked to a particular narrative, which in fact requires deep challenge, and that is what he does in *The Formation of Post-classical Philosophy in Islam*.

The typical narrative of the history of Islamic philosophy has been that it played a bridging role between the reception of the Greek ancient culture, particularly the

thought of Plato and Aristotle, which was translated and received in the Islamic world in the Arabic linguistic tradition, and then it happily found a proper philosophical reception, eventually, in the Latin West. This narrative, as Professor Griffel indicates, has much to do with the history of philosophy written by George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel. But it has broader roots in the Enlightenment and its narratives of the idea that reason is, somehow, peculiarly Western in its appropriate and proper expression.

Crucial to this narrative is the figure of al-Ghazālī , who is viewed in most histories of philosophy, even contemporary ones, as the person who defeated the role of the philosophical tradition and ended the embrace of reason in the Islamic tradition. This narrative has been so influential that, as Professor Griffel shows, it did not begin to be challenged until the late 1980s by a couple of prominent scholars whose work he continues in this book.

Now you might be thinking, *What is the significance of al-Ghazālī in the history of philosophy for these broader contemporary issues about Islam?*

One of the things I want to propose is that the narrative Professor Griffel uncovers in his book shows that, in fact, al-Ghazālī did *not* end the tradition of Islamic philosophy. Instead, he actually catalyzed a new beginning under a different term, the term *falsafah*, the Arabic term linked to philosophy. This became a sectarian term to indicate a particular school of Aristotelian philosophy.

This is not only a matter of historical relevance to the Islamic world, but as Professor Griffel shows in the book, it sets up a pattern that becomes normal in the Jewish world, and then Latin Christian world, which is this: the identification of philosophy with a particularly controversial theological reception in the Aristotelian tradition. I will very briefly recap this, and then let all our scholars here complicate my narrative and refine it based on their work.

Broadly speaking, Aristotle's doctrine of God posed a massive challenge to the traditional ideas of the Abrahamic religions, which insisted on the free creation of the world from nothing. This is called by many older historians of philosophy and theology, the doctrine of *voluntarism*: the idea that the will of God, or the agency of God, is the decisive and supreme factor in the divine reality. From this, one gets the doctrine that the creation of the world happens *in time*. This tradition broadly thought this was congruent with Plato's ideas in the *Timaeus*.

But Aristotle, very famously and very powerfully, challenge this idea, arguing that the world was eternal, and that indeed, in many interpretations, it was *necessarily* eternal; thus, the eternality of the world was linked to the very character of God, which therefore was necessary, unchanging, and the very rational structure of reality, and which therefore had no role for what we think of as free will or free agency.

Now this is a well-known factor in the history of Western philosophy, but the traditional narrative, which sees Arabic philosophy as simply bridging into the West, gets crucially wrong this momentous fact: *it was, in fact, the Arabic Muslim philosophical tradition that first dealt, most profoundly and consequentially, with the internal division about these two different doctrines of God*—the Aristotelian doctrine of God, as being linked to the necessary rationality of God, which seemed to threaten the creation of the world, the freedom of divine agency, and therefore, the dogmatic culturally received traditions of the Abrahamic religions, and the traditional ideas that Plato and many of the traditional Islamic, Jewish and Christian thinkers, that held creation was free.

So, this is the framework, and it remains deeply relevant today. It is connected with the thought of Spinoza and current debates about scientific determinism: is there a role for free will or agency in the world?

As a scholar and philosopher, I believe the significance of Professor Griffel's book, and the history of Islamic medieval philosophy as he shows it, is not only a revolution in the way that Arabic and Muslim philosophy is thought about among scholars, but has great significance for the broader history of Western, Jewish, and Christian philosophy, for determining who first explored—perhaps most consequentially—the deepest divides in our ideas of reason, freedom and determinism. These debates still live amongst us today, not only among philosophers and theologians, but also among natural scientists.

Frank, is there anything that you would like to contest in that? If so, please do, and say more about what you see as the significance of this book. Then we will open it up to a discussion with all three of you.

Frank Griffel

Samuel, first of all, thank you very much for organizing this forum, and *Marginalia Review* as well for doing this. I am very grateful for that. Also, thank you too, Carlos and Peter, for being here as well.

What you just presented. Samuel, was a very rich report. You brought up so many aspects of the book for which I am very grateful. There is nothing I contest as such, only a detail in this case.

You may be right that the Arabic tradition is the first one where this conflict between these two different views of God—a philosophical view of God, the "God of the Philosophers," and you might say, the "God of Aristotle," who acts out of necessity, and the God of the theologians where this plays out. But the conflict existed before, even in Late antiquity. In Christianity, there are thinkers like John Philoponus (490-570 AD), for instance, who attacked Aristotle on this front, coming from the point of view of Christian theology, saying, in this case, "this is not well-argued." And that is basically the point that al-Ghazālī made.

Now, let me provide a little bit of context about how I came to the subject. First of all, you very generously said that the book is a revolution. I would correct that in so far as it is *part* of a revolution. The book itself is a brick in a larger wall that we are trying to build right now. I am attempting to change the narrative of the history of philosophy, Western philosophy and Mediterranean philosophy. But I agree with you that a certain view of history focuses on this one figure, Al-Ghazālī .

So, we might say, the first inklings of a change of mind, in this case, begin in the 1990s. It took me quite some time to figure out the importance of the work that was done. Right from the beginning, I have been very fascinated by the books that came out scholars, such as Richard and Frank, in the early 1990s. I read them right away. However, I never fully understood their relevance until recently.

I worked on al Ghazali's condemnation of *falsafah*, focusing on the last page of his book, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa: The Precipitance of the Philosophers*. That was my dissertation subject, where I dealt with the document itself, with the theological and legal reasoning behind it. My dissertation, the book, was published in German in the year 2000, and there, I assume, I still assume, that what al-Ghazālī wrote down on the last page of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa,* became the law of the land for centuries to come. That was basically a position that was unchanged in Western Islamic studies since the very early days of engagement with al-Ghazālī , and with the history of philosophy, since Ernest Renaud in the 1840s.

Until that point in time, there was not any significant shift in this idea that philosophy had a great time in Islam and that this was the golden age of Islam, but then it somewhat disappeared. This document of al-Ghazālī played a very, very important role.

I continued to work on al-Ghazālī , and at one point—it might have been in the year 2012, after I wrote my next book—I picked up a book of *hikmah.* One sees, very clearly in this case, that *falsafah* is a particular tradition in Islam, that it is not the word we use for philosophy as such; it is Avicenna (Ibn Sina) philosophy, it is Aristotelian philosophy. *Hikmah* is somewhat wider. It does not represent all of philosophy in the post-classical period, but it is a particular tradition, you might say, that grows out of *falfasah*. At that point in time, around 2012, only three books of *hikmah* were printed: the *Hidayat-ul-Hikma* by al-Abhari, another by al-Otaibi, and *Al-Mabi al-Mashakiya* by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. I simply started with the shorter ones. They were in Yale's library in very, very bad prints, and I was surprised to see that these books really did continue the approach of Ibn Sina.

For a long time, many people, myself included, thought that nobody could propose that the world is eternal after al-Ghazālī because he says, "Whoever does this will be liable to the death sentence" (and we have examples where the death sentence was applied in those cases). But here was a book that was widely read and widely commented on, so I looked at the commentaries. One might think the commentaries would say, *Oh, this is all wrong, this is all wrong*. But no, the commentaries were only explanatory.

That is when I started to look into this phenomenon of *hikmah*. By that point in time, it had already been clear that there was a philosophical tradition in the genre of Kalam. Rob Wiśniewski and others had worked on that and had made clear that Kalam literature, theological literature after al-Ghazālī , uses Aristotelian techniques, uses logic, and must count as philosophy. But at that point in time, it was not fully understood that there was also a genre of literature that continued to propose all the problematic theses that al-Ghazālī had *condemned* on the last page of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*. That made me interested in this kind of literature, and it put me on the track to write this book.

Samuel Loncar

Thank you so much for sharing this helpful context. Peter and Carlos, both of you are also scholars in this field. I would love for each of you to comment on your initial reaction and how you each see its significance in the field and in your own research.

Peter Adamson

My experience is similar to Frank's, and I consider myself to be even a later party to this revolution. For about the first fifteen years of my career, I was very focused on the reception of Greek philosophy in Arabic. So, I was working on al-Kindī translations of Greek philosophical works and so on. Then I rode the wave of what other people have been doing, including Frank, but also scholars like Ayman Shihadeh, Rob Wiśniewski, Heidrun Eichner, and others who were working on what we now call "post-classical philosophy in Islam," but I do not think anyone' has defined exactly what year post-classical starts. I tend to think of it as the year 1111 because that is the year that al-Ghazālī died. So, you have Ibn Sina, or Avicenna, and you have the rejection, or partial rejection, by al-Ghazālī, and then the question is, *What happens next?*

I have been doing a project here in Munich for several years, which is still ongoing, called *The Heirs of Avicenna*, a series of source books, which are approaching the same material, but in a very different way than Frank's book. Frank's book is more focused a later philosopher— Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Much of it is about evaluating the different purposes of al-Rāzī's works, and their classification as works of *hikmah* or *kalam*, whereas what we have been doing is producing source books on specific philosophical topics by several dozen philosophers in the 12th and 13th centuries. I think that provides a very different perspective on things. These are, to me, two complementary ways of thinking about post-classical philosophy. One is trying to understand what is motivating each thinker, and even within that, what is the motivation for each book.

But something that Frank argues for—and I think, in a way, this is the most distinctive thing about his book—is not highlighting post-classical philosophy, because, as he said, many people are doing that now, rather the distinctive and provocative thesis of the book is what he already mentioned—looking at works of *hikmah*, works of *falsafah*, and maybe works that are harder to classify, and that it might even be the case that the doctrines espoused in a given work are relative to genre. That is an interesting idea, which we probably need to talk about some more in this conversation. But my main point is that, instead of thinking about one author at a time, or even one book at a time, like in what we have been doing—because we are philosophers, first and foremost, in my group—so we are thinking about hypothetical syllogistic or the eternity of the world, but also questions like, "How does eyesight work, according to these writers? How do the heavens influence the world below the heavens? How does the soul relate to the body?"

I think we get a very different perspective on the period of time that we are talking about if you do it that way. So, for example, if you take Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, he seems to change his views on a topic, depending on what kind of book he is writing.

But sometimes not. So it depends on the topic, and it sometimes depends on how religiously sensitive the topic is. Frank's book is addressed to intellectual historians of Islam, among others. Whereas we are talking to philosophers, and we are saying, "Look how amazing these philosophical arguments are! These are top-shelf philosophers!"

A comparison that we often draw is between this period of Arabic philosophy, also Persian, and what was going on in Latin philosophy in the High Scholastic period about 100 years later. We are looking at the 12th and 13th century. High Scholasticism is 13th and 14th century in medieval Europe, and the period of time that we are looking at here produces literature that is every bit as philosophically and intellectually sophisticated as what happens in later Latin medieval philosophy. Something quite surprising and significant is that they seem to be invested in the project of tackling philosophical questions for their own sake, without *any* regard to religious concerns at all.

So again, it depends on the topic. Certainly, if it is the eternity of the world, they are thinking about religious concerns. But if they are thinking about, for example, how eyesight works or hypothetical syllogistic, then religious concerns are nowhere on the agenda. One can read hundreds and hundreds of pages in these texts without ever knowing whether you're reading a Christian, a Jew, or a Muslim. So, the idea that people sometimes have—that post-classical philosophy is somehow dominated by religious concerns or mysticism—that is completely wrong. It is a technical scholastic philosophy that is highly focused on specific philosophical problems that had come to the fore, and they almost always were problems that came out of the works of Avicenna.

Samuel Loncar

Thank you, Peter, that is remarkable. So, in one sense, not only was there a continued philosophical tradition, but in fact, Islam had its own scholastic tradition, which, in a way, Frank and your work and these projects are uncovering. We associate this tradition with the university culture. Frank, you mentioned that at the end of the book. We should discuss the historiographical differences that the institution of the university has made, but right now, Carlos, I would love for you to comment on this and bring in your own perspective.

Carlos Frankel

Yes, I think it is fully justified to describe what is happening in the scholarship as a revolution to which Frank and Peter's work contributes. I think this is one of the most exciting developments in the history of philosophy, this discovery and the

reconstruction of post-classical Islamic thought, because it was blended out for so long. One question I want to ask you and my colleagues is, what exactly is the significance of this revolution?

Is this mainly about closing a very big gap in the history of philosophy, to pick up on Peter's podcast and book series. Are we just redrawing, as it were, the intellectual map, and filling out all these spaces that had been ignored because of the narratives that were already mentioned?

Frank mentioned Hegel. My addition of the lectures on the history of philosophy by Hegel runs to 1800 pages; one of those pages is dedicated to Islamic philosophy. Hegel is not unaware, as Peter said, that this is very sophisticated and accomplished philosophical thinking. He knows that, and he acknowledges that it does not contribute anything to the kind of teleological narrative that *he* wants to tell. So, it has, somehow, not contributed to the process by which Geist became aware of itself.

There are two important stages: ancient Greek philosophy and German idealism, culminating in Hegel himself—Christian philosophy is a kind of prelude, because it, for the first time, brings together Christianity and philosophy—and so Islamic philosophy simply does not have a function in this narrative. It is completely blended out. This brings us back to Renan, whom Frank mentioned and who wrote the first serious study of medieval Islamic philosophy in the 19th century, *Averroès et l'averroïsme*. And at the same time, in this this infamous lecture in Islam and science, he claimed that so-called Semitic nations are not fit for philosophy, and that Islam is a kind of fanatic religion, as embodied by al-Ghazālī , and that it stifles philosophy and rational thought.

He then went on to reconcile that observation with his account of the flourishing of philosophy and science and Islam by saying that the great philosophers of the Islamic world were actually not Semites: Averroes was Spanish, Ibn Sina was Persian, so they were not Semites. Hence, they were able to do philosophy. I think he compares them to Galileo, who was not stifled by the Catholic Church, rather, he was able to do his astronomy *despite* Catholicism. So Averroes and Ibn Sina were able to do philosophy despite Islam.

Broadly speaking, what the work of Peter Frank and others contributes to is correcting these kinds of narratives and making visible all of those things that became invisible because of these narratives. These narratives shaped the field in such a way that the parochialism is still there, and we are fighting against that. There is no question that one benefit of this revolution is that the history of philosophy is being corrected and is being completed, and things that were not visible are now visible. We are able to appreciate the sophistication of the

intellectual contributions that were made. But is there some kind of significance beyond that correction? I am unsure.

I recently was in touch with a scholar in Iran who has translated my book on philosophical religion into Persian. From our correspondence, it became very clear that what was a historical project for me is very much a life project for him because there is a living intellectual cultural context for the kind of philosophy that I describe in this book. For him, this is a kind of appropriation of something that is still alive in Iran. One can trace a story that goes from Ibn Sina to Ayatollah Khomeini, and that is mediated, in part, through medieval Islamic thinkers and the reception of Plato. That tradition remains alive in the Islamic world much more than it does in the West. But is this something that we should applaud? Is this kind of philosophy still something that we should be concerned about as human beings—something like a philosophy of life that we could embrace?

There, I am more skeptical. I am certainly happy to applaud the kind of historical revolution that is taking place, but I am unsure that this type of philosophy remains a life option for us today or that there is any sort of deeper significance to the fact that there are intellectual and cultural centers where that this type of philosophy is still cultivated beyond historical curiosity.

PART TWO FORTHCOMING

Frank Griffel is Professor of the Study of Abrahamic Religions at Oxford University and Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. He has published widely in the fields of Islamic philosophy and theology as well as Muslim intellectual history. After working on apostasy in Islam and on the leading theologian and philosopher al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Griffel turned his interest toward the history of philosophy in Islam and Judaism, particularly during Islam's post-classical period after the 11th century. He publishes in English and in German and his books have been translated into Turkish and Arabic. Griffel is also the Louis M. Rabinowitz Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Yale University.

Peter Adamson is a professor of philosophy at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. He is the author of several books, including *The Arabic Plotinus* (2002), *Great Medieval Thinkers: al-Kindi* (2007) and *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (2016), and he hosts the podcast, *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps.*

Carlos Fraenkel grew up between Germany and Brazil, studied in Berlin and Jerusalem, and teaches philosophy and religion at McGill University and Oxford University. He's written on philosophers such as Plato, al-Fârâbî, Maimonides, and Spinoza, and on conducting philosophical debates in places of conflict—for example with Palestinian students, lapsed Hasidic Jews, and members of an Iroquois nation. His publications include *Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World* and pieces for, among others, the *London Review of Books*, the *TLS*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times.*

Samuel Loncar is a Yale-trained philosopher and scholar of religion and science. He is a Fellow at the Gulbenkian Institute for Advanced Study and a visiting scholar at the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, Boston College. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Marginalia Review of Books* and the Director of the Institute for the Meanings of Science. His book, *Philosophy as Religion and Science from Plato to Posthumanism*, is forthcoming with Columbia University Press.