

Book Review

Thomas Würtz, *Islamische Theologie im 14. Jahrhundert. Auferstehungslehre, Handlungstheorie und Schöpfungsvorstellungen im Werk von Sa‘d ad-Dīn at-Taftāzānī*, *Welten des Islams* 7 (Berlin: de Gruyter 2016), viii, 295 pp. ISBN 9783110399585, \$113.00.

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Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. c. 1390) ranks among the most influential Muslim theologians of the late middle period and his works continue to shape Sunni religious thinking up to the present day. Nevertheless, scholars writing in European languages have largely neglected al-Taftāzānī, publishing only a few studies of very modest length about his life and works over the past decades. Würtz’s book, which constitutes the first book-long study of selected aspects of al-Taftāzānī’s thought, is based on the author’s dissertation defended at the University of Zurich and represents a most welcome contribution to the field. It focuses on three key topics of al-Taftāzānī’s theological writings: his teachings about resurrection, human actions, and creation. The study, furthermore, situates them within their intellectual context as defined by the traditions of *falsafa* and *kalām* in the late middle period. Moreover, it sheds light on the evolution of al-Taftāzānī’s thought by paying special attention to differences in

content between his early *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya* (written in 1367), his main work *Sharḥ al-Maqāsid* (completed in 1383), and his late short summary work *Tahdhīb al-manṭiq wa-l-kalām* (written in the late 1380s).

The book consists of seven chapters, a bibliography, and an index. The first chapter (pp. 1-16) discusses the significance of al-Taftāzānī’s works during the 20th and early 21st century by highlighting their ongoing use as teaching materials at Cairo’s al-Azhar University. It also contrasts al-Taftāzānī’s ongoing importance with the thus far very limited amount of research undertaken on him and his writings—a consequence of still widespread notions about an alleged intellectual stagnation of Islamic theology in the late middle period. The first chapter moreover reflects on the concepts of “theology” and “philosophy” as used by Würtz and argues *inter alia* that terms such as *kalām* and *mutakallim* can be meaningfully translated as “(rational)

theology” and “theologian,” respectively. While one can disagree with Würtz’s point of view in this regard and argue that translating *kalām* as “theology” bears the risk of attributing to *kalām* the status of Islamic theology *per se* instead of rather seeing it as a theological tradition within Islamic scholarship, the author deserves credit for explicitly discussing an issue that is often enough passed over in silence.

Chapter Two (pp. 17-36) offers the most detailed biography of al-Taftāzānī published hitherto in a European language. It begins with a synopsis of the political history of Greater Iran and Central Asia in the 13th and 14th centuries before discussing al-Taftāzānī’s biography proper. Würtz focuses in particular detail on questions that have been controversial in earlier scholarship such as the dates of al-Taftāzānī’s birth and death, the identity of his teachers in *kalām*, his *madhhab*, and his role in learned debates at Timur’s court. The remainder of the chapter introduces al-Taftāzānī’s works in the fields of rhetoric, grammar, logic, and law not dealt with in the subsequent chapters.

The third chapter (pp. 37-84) presents the three above-named theological works by al-Taftāzānī that form the basis of Würtz’s analysis, whereby the author pays ample attention to their broader theological and philosophical background. To this end, the chapter begins with a general introduction to the early history of theological thought in Islam before broadly discussing the theological peculiarities of the theological group of the Māturīdiyya. Thereafter it turns, likewise briefly, to the teachings of Ibn Sīnā and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī inasmuch as these are relevant for al-Taftāzānī before shedding light on the Qur’an commentaries of Jār Allāh

al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī that Würtz uses in the remainder of his study to point to similarities and differences between al-Taftāzānī’s writings and the *tafsīr* tradition of his period. The by far longest part of the chapter then deals one by one with *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya*, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, and *Tahdhīb al-manṭiq wa-l-kalām*. In each case it offers not only information on the structure and content of the respective work itself, but also on other texts with close intertextual relations, such as—in the case of *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya*—*al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya* by Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī and *Tabṣirat al-adilla* by Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī or—in the case of *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*—the pertinent works by Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī, Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, ‘Abdallāh al-Bayḍāwī, and ‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī.

The analysis of al-Taftāzānī’s writings proper starts in Chapter Four, which is dedicated to his teachings on resurrection (pp. 85-152). Würtz selected this topic mainly because al-Taftāzānī’s discussion of this notion is still relied upon by students of al-Azhar today, and because it offers a particularly clear case for demonstrating how al-Taftāzānī dealt with teachings of the *falāsifa* that were of theological significance. The chapter begins with short discussions of eschatological material in the Qur’an, the *ḥadīth* literature, and early *kalām* works before turning to the relevant sections in al-Taftāzānī’s *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya*, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, and *Tahdhīb al-manṭiq wa-l-kalām*, each of which is discussed separately. As Würtz shows, all three works seek to refute the teaching of the *falāsifa* that there is no bodily resurrection, thereby,

however, focusing on different aspects of eschatology. While the broader strands of this discussion are only hinted at in the generally rather concise relevant sections of *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya*, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* deals with this topic in great detail in the sense of a “theological encyclopedia” (p. 100) that seeks to discuss as broad array of different theological opinions about the topic as possible—regardless of whether al-Taftāzānī agreed with them or not. Moreover, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* also pays special attention to the importance of the subject within the *falsafa* tradition, as becomes apparent *inter alia* from the fact that it uses the word *ma‘ād* for “resurrection”—a well-established term in the philosophical discussions of the topic, but one that in al-Taftāzānī’s time had also found entry into *kalām* debates, where it was reinterpreted to match the concept of a bodily resurrection. In *Tahdhīb al-mantiq wa-l-kalām*, al-Taftāzānī presents a final systematic synthesis of his own position on the topic which agrees with its more general treatment in *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*.

In the fifth and longest chapter of the book (pp. 154-241), Würtz analyzes the passages of al-Taftāzānī’s theological works which deal with the theory of human action, a time-honored topic of the *mutakallimūn* stimulated by the question of how human beings can be held responsible for their acts if these are known ahead of time and are brought into being by God. After a discussion of the relevant Qur’anic verses, Würtz sheds light on earlier *kalām* debates about this topic and the respective positions held by the theological groups of the Qadariyya, the Mu‘tazila, the Ash‘ariyya, the Māturīdiyya, and the Jabriyya, thereby paying special

attention to what he calls the neo-Jabriyya strand within late Ash‘arī *kalām*. The latter ascribed to human beings a smaller role in their actions than mainstream Ash‘arī authors usually did. As Würtz shows in his detailed discussions of the development within al-Taftāzānī’s position, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya* seems to largely follow the standard Māturīdī position on the issue which postulated the existence of different aspects (*jihāt*) of an action that, in part, pertain to God and, in part, to human beings, as well as the presence of a human ability to act (*istiṭā‘a*) in addition to God’s ability to act. This allowed Māturīdī *mutkallimūn* to endorse a pronounced intermediate position that neither negated a human being’s influence on his or her acts nor curtailed God’s power over them. In *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, however, which again offers a sophisticated and nuanced discussion of various theological views on the topic but pays also special attention to relevant Qur’anic verses, al-Taftāzānī voices support not for the standard Māturīdī understanding, but for an Ash‘arī view that assumes positions of the neo-Jabriyya, while *Tahdhīb al-mantiq wa-l-kalām* shows him embracing a mainstream Ash‘arī outlook and distancing himself from the neo-Jabriyya. Thus, Würtz is able to demonstrate that al-Taftāzānī’s view on the issue of human actions as attested to in his writings evolved considerably over time.

The sixth chapter (pp. 242-277) deals with al-Taftāzānī’s theory of creation and thus addresses another issue that was highly contested between the *mutakallimūn*, who opined that the world was created in time, and the *falāsifa*, who taught that the world was eternal. Beginning again with a discussion of

relevant Qurʾanic material, Würtz offers a brief outline of the positions of *falsafa* and earlier *kalām* on the topic before dealing again with the three studied works by al-Taftāzānī. His most important findings include the fact that, in *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafiyya*, al-Taftāzānī sides again with the Māturīdiyya by viewing creation (*takwīn*) as an eternal attribute of God, a position he vehemently rejects in his later works, which exhibit a largely mainstream Ashʿarī character. Moreover, while in all of his works, al-Taftāzānī clearly objects to the *falsafa* opinion about the eternity of the world, his discussion of the philosophical teachings on this issue in *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* deserves special attention as here he deals with pre-Socratic positions that are otherwise only rarely discussed in pre-modern Arabic works.

The seventh chapter (278-283) summarizes Würtz’s main findings. Among other things, in this chapter the author highlights al-Taftāzānī’s clear embeddedness in the earlier *kalām* tradition as well as the profound impact that the writings of Ibn Sīnā, being the most prominent representative of the *falsafa*, had on al-Taftāzānī’s works, also and especially when it comes to the latter’s ontological terminology. These close connections between al-Taftāzānī and the earlier *mutakallimūn* and *falāsifa* become especially apparent when al-Taftāzānī quotes their works or implicitly tries to distance himself from their views. With regard to the intellectual tradition represented by Ibn Sīnā, Würtz speaks in this context of an “amalgamation (*Verschmelzung*) of *kalām* and *falsafa*” (p. 278). Moreover, Würtz highlights that his results suggest a development in al-Taftāzānī’s thought that made him

at later points in time, when he seems to have identified more strongly with the Ashʿariyya, reject Māturīdī positions that he had embraced earlier in his life. Furthermore, Würtz emphasizes that, at least when it comes to his teachings about resurrection and the human ability to act, al-Taftāzānī engages in more detail with relevant Qurʾanic verses and *ḥadīths* than had previously been documented in the writings of other *mutakallimūn* of his time. Finally, Würtz notes that there is little to suggest any direct impact al-Taftāzānī’s biographical experiences may have had on his theological writings.

Thomas Würtz’s book is a pioneering contribution to our knowledge about one of the most influential *mutakallimūn* of the late middle period and thus helps to close a large gap in the state of research obvious to everyone working on Islamicate intellectual history of this period. His discussions of the selected aspects of al-Taftāzānī’s writings are clear and—bearing in mind the highly technical character of much of the subject matter—relatively easy to understand. They offer not only valuable descriptions of al-Taftāzānī’s views, but also contextualize them within their broader intellectual framework in a helpful manner. Among his broader conclusions, Würtz’s arguments for a significant change in al-Taftāzānī’s theological views over time are absolutely convincing, as are his findings regarding the assumption of *falsafa* terminology by the *mutakallim*. Furthermore, Würtz’s discussion of al-Taftāzānī’s engagement with pre-Socratic philosophy opens up a previously largely neglected area of our knowledge about the reception of Greek philosophy within the Arabic-speaking tradition. Likewise, Würtz’s detailed

account of al-Taftāzānī's biography constitutes an important step forward in our understanding of this thinker. Finally, *Islamische Theologie im 14. Jahrhundert* is a very clearly structured book, written in a sophisticated and always appropriate German that might, however, not always be easily understandable for nonnative speakers. Moreover, especially the latter parts of the book would have profited from a more careful proofreading, which might have detected a number of missing words and incomplete sentences. These, however, do not compromise the general clarity of Würtz's argumentation.

Würtz's book should be understood as a pioneering foray into the sometimes dense, highly-developed, and broad theological thought of a prolific author. One cannot blame the author for hardly or not at all dealing with many key topics of al-Taftāzānī's thought, such as his epistemology, his teachings about God's attributes, prophethood, or the imamate, given that, with our present state of knowledge, no monograph could do equal justice to all facets of this *mutakallim's* work. Likewise, the question of the reception of al-Taftāzānī's thought remains almost completely unstudied, apart from Würtz's short remarks about the use of his books at al-Azhar, which offer a valuable starting point for further inquiries. Furthermore, future scholarship should explore whether and to what degree one can discern connections between al-Taftāzānī's theological writings and his works in other scholarly disciplines such as law and rhetoric.

Nevertheless, there are passages in Würtz's often largely descriptive and in part redundant discussion of al-Taftāzānī's writings where one would have wished for

greater analytical depth. This is especially the case with the generally rather short chapter on creation. Furthermore, while Würtz is absolutely convincing in tracing the evolution of al-Taftāzānī's away from Māturīdī towards Ash'arī positions, the reasons for this development remain unclear and demand more study. Moreover, Würtz's discussion of the state of research remains, with less than two pages, overly brief, especially since the author has managed to gain access to several modern studies in Arabic that are not easily available to many scholars outside of the Arab world and might therefore have called for a more thorough discussion. At the same time, the general introductions to authors and traditions of thought predating al-Taftāzānī, based almost completely on secondary literature, are often of interest only to nonspecialists and might have been dispensed with given that most if not all of the readers interested in a book of this nature can be expected to have at least a general knowledge of key aspects of the earlier traditions of *kalām* and *falsafa*.

Finally, one of the author's terminological choices appears infelicitous. Given that Würtz refers to al-Taftāzānī's time, i.e., the 14th century CE, repeatedly as the "late period" (*Spätzeit*) of the *kalām* tradition, the question arises as to how we should denote even later periods in the development of the same intellectual tradition, especially since the recent work of Aaron Spevack, Khaled El-Rouayheb, and others showed beyond a doubt that the *kalām* tradition was very much alive in the centuries after al-Taftāzānī, up to at least the 19th century CE. Here, a clearer discussion of the chronological framework in Würtz's study would have been helpful.

These observations notwithstanding, *Islamische Theologie im 14. Jahrhundert* deserves applause as a very clear discussion of important aspects of al-Taftāzānī's thought. Indeed, it is the very first and thus groundbreaking monograph written in a European language on this much too

long neglected important figure of Islamic intellectual history. Future studies in al-Taftāzānī will have a solid grounding in Würtz's book, and it is hoped that it will receive attention beyond the rather small germanophone community of scholars interested in *kalām*.