

# Al-Ghazālī

from *The Incoherence of the  
Philosophers*

تهافت الفلاسفة

(Tahāfut al-falāsifa)

Abu Hāmid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Tūsi al-Ghazālī, born in 1058 in northeast Persia, is one of medieval Islam's best-known religious intellectuals. He wrote his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, or *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in the last decade of the eleventh century. Michael E. Marmura, who translated *Incoherence*, writes that al-Ghazālī “undertook to refute twenty philosophical doctrines”. Of these, seventeen he condemned as “heretical innovations”, while the other three he condemned as “totally opposed to Islamic belief”. While the motivation for *Incoherence* was religious and theological, al-Ghazālī makes his case “through closely argued criticisms that are ultimately philosophical”.<sup>1</sup> In the introductions that al-Ghazālī wrote to *Incoherence* (there are four), he notes that not all philosophical doctrines are to be refuted, and one example he gives is demonstrable scientific doctrines, such as the explanations of lunar and solar eclipses. This excerpt is from the second introduction:<sup>2</sup>

[In certain cases] the doctrine of philosophers is of such kind that it does not clash with any tenet of the true religion; and arguing against it is not among the necessities of belief in the prophets and messengers (God's prayers be upon them).

For example, the philosophers say:

*A lunar eclipse consists of an erasure of the light of the moon by the interposition of the Earth between it and the sun, because the moon derives its light from the sun, while the Earth is a ball enveloped on all sides by the heavens. For when the moon falls into the Earth's shadow, the sunlight is cut off from it.*

They also say:

*An eclipse of the sun means an exact positioning of the moon's bulk between the observer and the sun.*

We will not sink into a pointless refutation of this sort of thought, and whoever thinks that it is a religious duty to engage in disputation

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Gazālī: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers, a parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced, and annotated by Michael E. Marmura* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7. The translation here is derived in large part from the Marmura translation.

for the purpose of refuting such a theory harms religion and diminishes its true weight. For these matters rest upon geometrical and mathematical proofs that leave no room for doubt; whoever inspects them and is convinced by their evidence, deriving for himself information about the extent, times of occurrence, and duration of these two kinds of eclipses—and who then is told that this is contrary to religion—will grow suspect of religion, not of science. Those who defend religion in an improper manner inflict greater harm upon it than those who attack it in a manner proper to it. As it is said: “A rational foe is better than an ignorant friend.”

If it is said—

*God’s messenger (God’s prayers and peace be upon him) said, “the sun and moon are two of God’s signs that are eclipsed neither for the death nor the life of anyone; should you witness such events, then hasten to the remembrance of God and to prayer.” How, then, does this agree with what the philosophers state?*

—we say there is nothing in this that contradicts what the philosophers have stated, because there is nothing in it other than the denial of the occurrence of an eclipse for the death or life of anyone, and the command to pray when one occurs. Why should it be a reach for the religious law that commands prayer at noon and sunset to also command prayer at the occurrence of an eclipse?...

The atheists rejoice in nothing more than for the defender of religion to declare that such things are contrary to religion. If such declarations are rendered a condition for true religion, then the atheist’s path for refuting religion becomes easy.