

ФИЛОСОФИЯ

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<https://doi.org/10.47526/3007-8598.6523>MUAMMER İSKENDERÖĞLU *Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University, Doctor of Philosophy, Emeritus Professor
(Bolu, Türkiye), e-mail: iskenderoglumuammer@gmail.com***THE ETERNITY OF THE WORLD IN ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AL-RĀZĪ AND AQUINAS***

Abstract. This article compares medieval Islamic and Christian debates on the eternity of the world, focusing on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas. It examines how revelation, philosophical reasoning, and inherited theological interpretations shaped different understandings of creation. The discussion considers whether creation necessarily implies a beginning in time and whether an eternal world must be independent of God. Particular attention is given to Ibn Sīnā's influence and the distinction between necessary and contingent existence. The article also evaluates arguments drawn from divine attributes, the nature of the physical world, and the concept of infinity. It argues that al-Rāzī and Aquinas departed from dominant theological approaches by taking philosophical accounts of eternal creation seriously. Although both questioned the conclusiveness of arguments for either eternity or a temporal beginning, their positions differed in relation to revelation. Al-Rāzī allowed greater interpretive scope, whereas Aquinas accepted the world's beginning as an article of faith rather than a rationally demonstrable conclusion. The comparison shows that both thinkers emphasised the world's complete dependence on God for its existence and continuation, rather than treating a temporal beginning as essential to the meaning of creation.

Keywords: eternity, creation, revelation, reason, God, al-Rāzī, Aquinas.

Муаммер Искендероглу*Болу Абант Иззет Байсал университеті, философия ғылымдарының докторы, эмерит-профессор
(Болу, Түркия), e-mail: iskenderoglumuammer@gmail.com***Ислам және Христиандықтағы әлемнің мәңгілігі: ар-Рази мен Аквинскийдің
көзқарастарын салыстырмалы зерттеу**

Андатпа. Мақалада ортағасырлық ислам және христиан ойындағы әлемнің мәңгілігі, яғни уақыттық бастауының болмауы туралы пікірталастар салыстырмалы түрде қарастырылады. Негізгі назар Фахруддин ар-Рази мен Фома Аквинскийдің көзқарастарына аударылады. Зерттеуде уақи, ақылға негізделген дәлелдер және қалыптасқан теологиялық түсіндірулер жарату ұғымын қалай айқындағаны талданады. Жаратылу міндетті түрде уақыттық басталуды білдіре ме және бастауы жоқ әлем Құдайдан тәуелсіз бола ала ма деген

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сұрақтар қойылады. Ибн Синаның ықпалына, сондай-ақ қажетті болмыс пен мүмкін болмыстың айырмашылығына ерекше мән беріледі. Құдайдың сипаттарынан, физикалық әлемнің табиғатынан және шексіздік ұғымынан туындайтын дәлелдер де қарастырылады. Мақалада ар-Рази мен Аквинскийдің бастаусыз жаратылу мүмкіндігін байыппен талқылау арқылы кең таралған теологиялық ұстанымдардан ерекшеленгені көрсетіледі. Екі ойшыл да әлемнің мәңгілігін немесе уақыттық басталуын дәлелдеуге бағытталған тұжырымдардың түпкілікті дәлелділігіне күмән келтіреді. Алайда олардың уахиды түсіндірудегі ұстанымдары бірдей емес. Ар-Рази әртүрлі түсіндірулерге кеңірек мүмкіндік берсе, Аквинский әлемнің басталуын ақылмен дәлелденетін қорытынды емес, сенім қағидасы ретінде қабылдайды. Осы айырмашылық екі дәстүрдегі діни ілім мен философиялық пайымның өзара қатынасын ашуға көмектеседі. Салыстыру екі ойшылдың да жаратуды тек уақыттық басталумен байланыстырмай, әлемнің бар болуы мен сақталуының Құдайға толық тәуелділігіне басымдық бергенін көрсетеді.

Кілт сөздер: мәңгілік, жарату, уахи, ақыл, Құдай, ар-Рази, Аквинский.

Муаммер Искендероглу

*Университет Болу Абант Иззет Байсал, доктор философских наук, профессор-эмерит
(Болу, Турция), e-mail: iskenderoglumuammer@gmail.com*

Вечность мира в исламской и христианской мысли: сравнительное исследование взглядов ар-Рази и Аквинского

Аннотация. В статье сопоставляются средневековые исламские и христианские дискуссии о вечности мира с особым вниманием к взглядам Фахруддина ар-Рази и Фомы Аквинского. Рассматривается, как откровение, рациональные доводы и сложившиеся теологические толкования определяли понимание творения. Основные вопросы состоят в том, предполагает ли творение начало во времени и означает ли вечность мира его независимость от Бога. Особое значение придаётся влиянию Ибн Сины и различению необходимого и возможного бытия. Анализируются также аргументы, основанные на божественных атрибутах, природе физического мира и понятии бесконечности. Показано, что ар-Рази и Аквинский отошли от преобладающих теологических подходов, серьёзно рассматривая философскую возможность творения без временного начала. Оба мыслителя ставили под сомнение окончательную доказательность аргументов как в пользу вечности мира, так и в пользу его начала. Однако их отношение к откровению различалось. Ар-Рази допускал более широкий круг толкований, тогда как Аквинский принимал начало мира как положение веры, а не как вывод, доказуемый разумом. Это различие раскрывает особенности взаимодействия религиозного учения и философского рассуждения в двух традициях. Сопоставление показывает, что оба мыслителя подчёркивали полную зависимость мира от Бога в его существовании и сохранении, не считая временное начало обязательной частью самого понятия творения.

Ключевые слова: вечность, творение, откровение, разум, Бог, ар-Рази, Аквинский.

Muammer İSKENDEROĞLU

*Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi, Felsefe Bilimleri Doktoru, Emekli Profesör (Bolu, Türkiye),
e-posta: iskenderoglumuammer@gmail.com*

İslam ve Hristiyan Düşüncesinde Âlemin Ezeliliği: Râzî ve Aquinas Üzerine Karşılaştırmalı Bir İnceleme

Özet. Bu makale, Ortaçağ İslam ve Hristiyan düşüncesindeki âlemin ezeliliği tartışmalarını Fahreddin Râzî ve Thomas Aquinas'ın görüşleri üzerinden karşılaştırmalı olarak

incelemektedir. Çalışmada vahyin, akli delillerin ve yerleşik teolojik yorumların yaratma anlayışını nasıl şekillendirdiği ele alınmaktadır. Yaratmanın zorunlu olarak zamanda bir başlangıç gerektirip gerektirmediği ve ezeli bir âlemin Tanrı'dan bağımsız sayılıp sayılamayacağı temel sorular olarak tartışılmaktadır. Bu çerçevede İbn Sînâ'nın etkisine ve zorunlu varlık ile mümkün varlık ayırımına özel önem verilmektedir. Tanrı'nın sıfatlarından, fiziksel âlemin tabiatından ve sonsuzluk kavramından hareketle geliştirilen deliller de değerlendirilmektedir. Makale, Râzî ve Aquinas'ın başlangıçsız yaratma imkânını ciddiye alarak kendi geleneklerindeki yaygın teolojik yaklaşımlardan ayırdıklarını göstermektedir. Her iki düşünür de âlemin ezeliliğini veya zamanda başlangıcını savunan delillerin kesin ispat sağladığını kabul etmemektedir. Bununla birlikte vahyin yorumlanması bakımından aralarında önemli bir farklılık bulunmaktadır. Râzî farklı yorumlara daha geniş alan tanırken Aquinas, âlemin başlangıcını akılla kanıtlanabilir bir sonuç olarak değil, iman esaslı olarak benimsemektedir. Bu farklılık, iki gelenekte dinî öğreti ile felsefî düşüncenin ilişkisini anlamaya katkı sağlamaktadır. Karşılaştırma sonucunda, her iki düşünürün de yaratmayı yalnızca zamansal başlangıç üzerinden açıklamak yerine âlemin var olmak ve varlığını sürdürmek için Tanrı'ya bütünüyle bağımlı oluşunu öne çıkardığı ortaya konulmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: ezelilik, yaratma, vahiy, akıl, Tanrı, Râzî, Aquinas.

Introduction

Although debates about the eternity of the world can be traced back to the earliest encounters between Greek and Jewish thought, they first reached their height in Islamic thought. With the transmission of Islamic thought to the West, similar debates emerged in medieval Christian thought. The eternity of the world is one of the central issues in the Tahâfut tradition within Islamic intellectual history and has attracted the attention of many researchers (Leaman, 1992). This article aims to contribute to their work by comparing different intellectual traditions, focusing on Islamic and Christian thought.

For this purpose, the discussion will address two main questions. First, since both the Christian and Islamic traditions take revelation as their starting point, how has revelation been understood over time in relation to the eternity or created nature of the world? This raises further questions about how creation and eternity have been understood, whether these concepts contradict one another, and whether defending the eternity of the world conflicts with the fundamental principles of religion.

Second, do the arguments developed within the Islamic and Christian traditions for the eternity or creation of the world conclusively prove either position? In addressing this question, the discussion will refer to major thinkers from both traditions, with particular attention to Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî and Thomas Aquinas. These thinkers brought together the arguments of their predecessors and, in doing so, played an important role in shaping later debates (İskenderoğlu, 2002).

Research Methods

This study employs qualitative, comparative, historical-philosophical, and conceptual analysis methods. The primary sources consist of the works of Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî and Thomas Aquinas concerning creation, the eternity of the world, divine attributes, causality, time, and motion. Through textual analysis, the arguments of both thinkers are examined within their respective Islamic and Christian intellectual traditions. Conceptual analysis is used to clarify such notions as creation from nothing, eternity, necessity, contingency, divine will, and freedom. Their arguments are reconstructed and evaluated in terms of their premises, conclusions, and theological implications. The comparative method identifies similarities and differences between their approaches to reason and revelation. Classical sources and modern scholarly studies are also consulted to situate their views within the broader context of medieval philosophy.

Discussion and Results

1. Revelation and the Formulation of the Theory of Creation from Nothing

As Oliver Leaman observes, sacred texts serve as a foundation for faith and rarely contain statements about the creation of the world that have philosophical or scientific precision (Leaman, 1992: 25). Although many passages in the Torah and the Qur'an refer to the creation of the heavens and the earth, they neither present philosophical or theological propositions nor clearly explain the nature of this creation. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the first chapter of Genesis is regarded as the most important text on creation. Its opening verses clearly state that God created the heavens and the earth. However, as systematic thought developed, thinkers within this tradition disagreed about the nature of the creation described there. Their main questions concerned whether the world was created from absolute nothingness or from eternal matter, and whether this creation had a beginning.

From an early period, Jewish and Christian thinkers drew on Greek philosophical theories to formulate a religious account of the world's origin. In this respect, Plato and the Platonic philosophers, rather than Aristotle, offered theories they could adapt and adopt. They believed that Plato's account of creation could be reconciled with the biblical teaching, whereas they understood Aristotle's theory of eternity as rejecting creation altogether.

Philo of Alexandria is regarded as the first thinker in the Jewish tradition to attempt a philosophical formulation of the teaching on creation in Genesis 1. In his view, this teaching resembles Plato's theory of creation from eternal matter. He therefore considers Moses and Plato to be in agreement in accepting this theory. However, Philo regards eternal matter neither as an ontological principle equal to God nor as a challenge to God's power. By contrast, he considers Aristotle's theory of the eternity of the world to be incompatible with the teaching of Moses (May 1994: 9-21; Sorabji 1983: 203-209; Wolfson 1947: 295-324.).

Philo's approach became a model for early Christian theologians. In formulating the Christian account of creation, they initially adopted the Platonic theory. Over time, however, developments in Christian thought led to the rejection of creation from eternal matter and the formulation of the theory of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) (May, 1994: 22, 148). According to this new theory, the world, including its prime matter, was created from nothing, and its existence had a beginning. In this sense, creation from nothing was entirely foreign to Greek thought and was an innovation of early Christian thought. Christian thinkers' opposition to radical Gnostic dualism and Greek philosophical formulations can be seen as the main reasons for this development. They believed that only such a theory could preserve God's power and free will as described in the Bible (Alousi, 1968; May, 1994).

Although creation from nothing gradually became the orthodox doctrine within Christianity, some thinkers continued to defend the idea of creation without a beginning. One example is Boethius, an important figure in the transmission of Greek thought to the Latin world. In discussing creation, time, and eternity, Boethius distinguishes between God's eternity and the eternity of the world. Similar distinctions can also be found in Augustine.

Thus, although the teaching of Genesis 1 was interpreted in different ways within the Christian tradition, thinkers such as Boethius remained in the minority. Creation from nothing was accepted as the orthodox doctrine and was confirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In this way, particularly in the medieval West, the Church ruled out alternative interpretations of the teaching on creation in Genesis 1 for Christian thinkers.

Turning to the Islamic tradition, although the Qur'an does not begin with a creation narrative like that in Genesis 1, verses in various surahs concerning the creation of the heavens and the earth show parallels with it. Muslim thinkers' attempts to interpret these verses also resemble those of Jewish and Christian thinkers. With the development of systematic thought, Muslim theologians began to describe God as the only eternal being. Consequently, they argued that the world must have come into existence: it must have been created from nothing and have a beginning. For them, creation implied that the world's existence had a beginning, whereas eternity

implied not only that the world had no beginning but also that it was self-sufficient. They therefore understood the theory of the eternity of the world as a denial of its creation and, ultimately, of its Creator (Bāqillānī, 1947: 41-53).

Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) did not accept this understanding of creation. They distinguished between an eternal being that has no cause and is therefore self-sufficient, and an eternal being whose existence has no beginning. They considered the world eternal only in the second sense. For example, Ibn Sīnā stated that the world was brought into existence from absolute nonexistence. In other words, although it is subject to nonexistence in itself, it exists because an eternal cause eternally grants it existence (Ibn Sīnā, 1938: 218; Ibn Sīnā, 1908: 102). In this sense, the world is created, but this does not mean that it has a beginning.

Unlike the Christian tradition, Islam has no institution that can declare one of these different understandings of creation an article of faith. Thus, for Muslim thinkers, as for medieval Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides, the claim that the world was created from nothing in time did not become an article of faith. The possibility of interpreting Qur'anic verses in different ways therefore remained open. This difference is clearly reflected in the later discussions of eternity by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas.

Unlike many thinkers within their respective traditions, al-Rāzī and Aquinas took the idea of eternal creation seriously. This can be seen as a reflection of their general attitude towards philosophy, since both sought to incorporate philosophical thought into their systems as far as possible. Ibn Sīnā was an important source for both thinkers. His influence is particularly evident in their discussions of the meaning of creation.

Although al-Rāzī criticised Ibn Sīnā on many issues, he also adopted many of his ideas. In discussing creation, al-Rāzī takes the concept of *ḥudūth*, or coming into existence, as his starting point. However, he does not interpret it in the same way as earlier representatives of his theological tradition, such as al-Bāqillānī and al-Ghazālī. For these theologians, something created (*muḥdath*) is something whose existence has a beginning and which comes into being from nothing (Ghazālī, 1997: 96). Al-Rāzī sets aside this simple definition and, following Ibn Sīnā, defines a created thing as something whose nonexistence precedes its existence. He then distinguishes five types of priority, explaining that God may be prior to the world in terms of causality, essence, or rank, without necessarily being prior to it in time (Rāzī, 1987: 1/13).

When creation is understood, as most theologians understand it, as involving a beginning of existence, the idea of an eternal world clearly conflicts with the created world described in Genesis 1 and numerous Qur'anic verses. For this reason, al-Ghazālī declared that the philosophers' theory of the eternity of the world contradicted the fundamental principles of Islam. In doing so, he did not consider it necessary to refer explicitly to any particular Qur'anic verse.

Al-Ghazālī's rejection of the eternity of the world and his defence of its creation from nothing in time led Ibn Rushd (Averroes), representing the philosophers, to question the theologians' account. According to Ibn Rushd, their theory, like that of the philosophers, did not agree with the literal meaning of the Qur'an. In his interpretation, the Qur'an teaches that God never existed alone, that other beings existed before this world, and that the world was created from something rather than from nothing (Ibn Rushd, 1998a; Ibn Rushd, 1998b; Ibn Rushd, 1930: 222). Ibn Rushd therefore argues that the theory of the eternity of the world cannot be said to contradict the fundamental principles of Islam.

Although al-Rāzī is regarded as belonging to the same tradition as al-Ghazālī, he criticises the theologians' approach in ways similar to Ibn Rushd. According to al-Rāzī, although most Jews, Christians, and Muslims maintain that the matter and form of the world were created from absolute nothingness, such a teaching cannot be found in either the Torah or the Qur'an. Referring to Genesis 1:1 and several Qur'anic verses, he shows that these texts can support the view that the world was created from eternal matter (Rāzī, 1987: 4/29; Zarkān, 1963: 370-376). Through such interpretations, al-Rāzī challenges Muslim theologians' formulations of creation and allows for the possibility of an eternal world as understood by Ibn Sīnā.

Unlike al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī distinguishes between a being that is eternal in the sense of having no cause and therefore being self-sufficient, and a being that is eternal in the sense of having no beginning. He also differs from Muslim theologians in arguing that the world requires a cause because it is contingent, rather than because it began to exist (Rāzī, 1987: 4/232). He therefore emphasises that even an eternal world depends on God both for its existence and for its continued existence. On the basis of revelation alone, neither the theologians' theory nor the philosophers' theory can be considered superior to the other. The question must therefore be discussed entirely through reason, and the position supported by stronger rational arguments may be considered more convincing.

Unlike al-Rāzī, Thomas Aquinas begins his discussion of creation by accepting the world's beginning in time as an article of faith. He then analyses the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*. Aquinas argues that, in linguistic terms, this expression does not imply that the world had a beginning. Rather, revelation adds this meaning to the concept. Unlike many of his Christian contemporaries, he maintains that *creatio ex nihilo* expresses two things. First, the world was not created from anything that already existed. Second, the world's nonexistence precedes its existence in terms of its essence, rather than in time (Aquinas, 1997: II, 1.1.2). The world does not exist through its own essence but receives its existence from God.

For Aquinas, Genesis 1:1 is a central reference both in analysing the meaning of creation and in addressing whether creation had a beginning. In his view, although this verse describes something being brought into existence from nothing, it gives no indication of whether that existence had a beginning. Accordingly, as reason can demonstrate and Scripture can confirm, God does not need any eternal matter to create the world.

Aquinas rejects the claim that this verse provides a basis for proving through reason that the world had a beginning. He maintains that the world's beginning can be known only through revelation and cannot be established by rational arguments (Aquinas, 1988, Ia, 46.2; Aquinas, 1997: II, 1.1.5). The most important concept Aquinas drew upon in developing this understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* was undoubtedly Ibn Sīnā's concept of *ibdā*.

Aquinas also drew on the works of Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Boethius to support his interpretation. According to this understanding, the concepts of "created" and "eternal" do not contradict one another. Aquinas maintains that although the world has a beginning, as Catholic faith teaches, it could have existed eternally and still have been created from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This would not have made the world equal to God. As Boethius explains, the eternity attributed to God, understood as possessing infinite life as a whole, differs from the eternity attributed to the world, understood as an endless succession in time (Aquinas, 1964: 19-25).

By contrast, Aquinas's contemporaries, including Bonaventure, argued that creation from nothing and eternity were logically incompatible (Bonaventure, 1964: 99-117; Bonansea, 1974: 7-33; Dales, 1990: 86-96; Van Veldhuisen, 1990: 24-28). Similarly, al-Ghazālī regarded the eternity of the world as contrary to the fundamental principles of Islam. Rather than referring to a particular Qur'anic verse, he emphasised the supposed logical contradiction between eternity and creation.

Through his formulation, Aquinas sought to reduce the apparent conflict between Catholic faith and Aristotle's teaching. He aimed to show that Aristotle, an important source for his theology, did not deny that God created the world but only denied that the world had a beginning.

The concepts of creation and eternity have therefore been interpreted in different ways over time within the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Some theologians argued that the two concepts contradicted one another, while others rejected this view and maintained that they could be reconciled. Those who defended their compatibility did so because they took the views of Greek and Muslim philosophers more seriously. In the Islamic tradition, this interpretation could also find support in revelation. In the Christian tradition, however, it could be defended only as a rational possibility, since a central authority had established one interpretation as an article of faith.

2. Assessing the Arguments for the Eternity of the World

Aristotle is undoubtedly the original source of the arguments developed to support the eternity of the world. Proclus also deserves particular mention because of his influence on medieval debates. These arguments were repeatedly reformulated, and by the Middle Ages, both the arguments and the responses to them had become largely standardized (Davidson, 1987). Although thinkers such as al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī do not identify their sources when assessing these arguments, they can be said to have drawn particularly on the works of Aristotle, Proclus, and Ibn Sīnā. In the case of Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Rushd and Maimonides must also be added to these sources (Dales, 1990; Burrell, 1995).

Although different classifications are possible, the arguments for the eternity of the world can generally be divided into two main groups: arguments based on God's essence and attributes, and arguments based on the nature of the world.

Al-Rāzī and Aquinas present these arguments in different ways. Al-Rāzī first explains the philosophers' argument in detail. He then presents the objections that theologians might raise, followed by the philosophers' possible responses. The discussion takes the form of a dialogue between philosophers and theologians. Some of these detailed exchanges can be found in the works of earlier thinkers. However, the extent of the discussion also gives the impression that al-Rāzī himself developed arguments on behalf of both sides, working from their basic claims. Ultimately, he does not hesitate to accept whichever argument he finds stronger. In general, he considers the philosophers' arguments more convincing.

Aquinas's position is somewhat different. Since he accepts the world's beginning as an article of faith, his main aim is to show that the philosophers' arguments fall short of conclusively proving its eternity. However, this approach appears largely unsuccessful, particularly in relation to arguments based on the nature of the world, many of whose premises he accepts.

The arguments based on God's essence and attributes appear stronger than those based on the nature of the world. The responses offered by opponents of the world's eternity to this first group of arguments can therefore be considered relatively weak. To illustrate this, it is useful to summarise some of these arguments and the responses to them.

According to the philosophers, God's nature requires Him to create the world eternally. God is the sufficient cause of the world, and since He is eternal, the existence of His effect—the world—cannot be delayed. Furthermore, whatever moment is proposed as the beginning of the world, the question can always be asked: why at that moment rather than earlier or later? Since God is unchanging, He cannot begin to act after previously being inactive. Certain attributes ascribed to God also require Him to give existence to the world eternally (Rāzī, 1987: 4/45; Rāzī, 1934: 41-42).

The standard response to the claim that God is a sufficient cause, that all the conditions for creation are eternally present, and that the world must therefore exist eternally is that God is a free agent. His eternal will determines that the world should be created at a particular moment. According to the philosophers, however, there must be a reason why God chooses that particular moment.

Although Thomas Aquinas agrees that there must be a reason for God's choice, he points out that God created time as well as the world. There was therefore no time before creation. Asking why God did not create the world earlier is, in his view, like asking why He created the heavens where they are rather than somewhere else, since there is no other place beyond the heavens. The question "Why did He not create it earlier?" therefore cannot be asked. Instead, one might ask, "Why did He create it with a beginning rather than eternally?" (Aquinas, 1975: II, 35.6).

Aquinas's response is only one of several that al-Rāzī presents on behalf of the theologians. However, al-Rāzī argues that it does not answer the philosophers' central question. The philosophers maintain that all the conditions for creation are eternally fulfilled, whereas the theologians claim that one of the conditions for eternal action is missing.

According to most Muslim theologians, God can choose between two alternatives without a reason and can therefore select a particular time without a reason. They argue that the

philosophers themselves allow such choices in their account of the physical world. One example is the movement of celestial bodies from east to west rather than from north to south.

According to al-Rāzī, if a sufficient cause necessarily required the existence of its effect, the First Principle would itself have to be a contingent being. Furthermore, the philosophers would then be unable to explain beings subject to generation and corruption. If the existence of the First Principle necessarily entailed the existence and persistence of its effects, there could be no beings that come into existence and pass away (Rāzī, 1987: 4/ 55).

Muslim and Christian thinkers agree that God possesses certain eternal attributes. According to the philosophers, these attributes require the world to be eternal. One argument discussed by both al-Rāzī and Aquinas is based on God's goodness (Aquinas, 1975: II, 32.9). For Aquinas, God's goodness is the fundamental purpose of creation, and this goodness is infinite and self-diffusive. The philosophers argue that the world, as the outward expression of this goodness, must therefore be eternal. Aquinas responds that God's goodness can be revealed more clearly in a world that has a beginning. Such a world can show more clearly that God is its creator, that He was not compelled to create it, and that He is an intelligent and free agent. Although al-Rāzī presents this argument without offering his own assessment, he generally does not accept the Mu'tazilite premises that creation is good and that God is obliged to do what is good.

Other divine attributes used to support the eternity of the world include God's power, will, and knowledge. The philosophers' central claim is that the eternity of these attributes requires the world to be eternal. Al-Rāzī observes that it is difficult to attribute power and will to God in the sense understood by the theologians (Rāzī, 1987: 3/9; Rāzī, 1934: 122). They define power as the ability to act or refrain from acting, and will as the ability to choose between two alternatives without any determining factor. According to the philosophers, however, power and will in this sense can be attributed to human beings. God's power and will are permanent, requiring Him to give existence to the world eternally.

Muslim theologians argue that a distinction must be made between an agent who acts necessarily and one who acts freely. To preserve God's freedom, they maintain that it must be possible for Him to choose the moment of creation without a determining reason. At this point, in an approach reminiscent of Ibn Rushd's, al-Rāzī draws attention to the difference between God's agency and the agents we encounter in the world of experience.

In this world, natural causes operate consistently and always produce the same effects. Free agents, however, can produce different effects when circumstances change, and circumstances are constantly changing. Furthermore, natural causes have no knowledge of the effects they produce, whereas free agents produce their effects knowingly and consciously. Since no change can be conceived in God's essence or attributes, He can be called a free agent only because of this second characteristic (Rāzī, 1987: 4/113). According to the philosophers, therefore, God acts with will and knowledge.

Al-Rāzī's understanding and presentation of the philosophers' position differ considerably from those of his predecessor, al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī claimed that, according to the philosophers, the world emanates from God in the same way that sunlight comes from the sun. He therefore argued that their position makes it impossible for God to act with will, choice, and knowledge (). As Ibn Rushd also points out, however, al-Ghazālī's understanding of a free agent is drawn from the world of experience and cannot be attributed to God (Ghazālī, 1997). What al-Rāzī and Ibn Rushd seek to emphasise is that God's agency differs fundamentally from that of both natural and free agents in the world of experience.

The claim that God is a free agent also forms the core of Thomas Aquinas's response. In an approach reminiscent of al-Rāzī and Ibn Rushd, he emphasises two distinctions: the difference between natural causes and voluntary agents in the world of experience, and the difference between these voluntary agents and God as an agent (Ibn Rushd, 1930). According to Aquinas, however, these distinctions do not mean that God acts necessarily. After these explanations, the question of whether God acts necessarily or freely actually loses its meaning, since these concepts apply to

natural and voluntary causes within the world of experience. Nevertheless, concern for preserving an article of faith appears to lead Aquinas to continue emphasising that God is a free agent.

The second group of arguments supporting the eternity of the world is based on the nature of the physical world. These arguments draw on the nature of matter, the concept of possibility, the nature of motion and time, and the nature of incorruptible beings. They generally depend on premises taken from Aristotle's philosophy.

A particular difference emerges in the assessment of these arguments. Al-Rāzī generally rejects their premises, perhaps because his outlook is more Platonic than Aristotelian. He therefore seeks to show that their conclusions do not establish the eternity of the world. Aquinas's position is somewhat different. As an Aristotelian, he generally accepts these premises but finds it necessary to reject the conclusions that logically follow from them. A few examples of these debates will be sufficient to illustrate their different approaches.

1. According to Aristotle, the claim that nothing comes into existence from nothing, and that everything that comes into existence arises from something, is a self-evident proposition accepted by everyone. The underlying matter of the world must therefore be eternal, and its creation from absolute nothingness is impossible. Al-Rāzī argues that, since this proposition is accepted only by the philosophers, it cannot be regarded as a universally accepted truth (Rāzī, 1987: 4/ 117) Aquinas, by contrast, maintains that the proposition is true concerning the creation of a particular thing, but not concerning universal creation—that is, God's creation of the world as a whole (Aquinas, 1997: II, 1.1.5, ad 11).

When assessing arguments based on the nature of time and motion, al-Rāzī, unlike Aquinas, rejects the Aristotelian understanding of time. For him, time is not the measure of motion but a substance that exists in its own right. Consequently, the eternity of motion, and of the moving body, cannot be inferred from the eternity of time (Rāzī, 1987: 4/ 200; Rāzī, 1987: 5/51; Sorabji, 1983: 82). Al-Rāzī's response therefore differs considerably from the standard response to this argument. Aquinas, in a reply reminiscent of al-Ghazālī's, maintains that God is prior to the world in eternity rather than in time, and that before creation there was only imaginary time, not real time.

According to Aristotle, the heavens are not subject to corruption. Since something incorruptible cannot be conceived as having a beginning, the heavens must be eternal. In assessing this argument, al-Rāzī again rejects the Aristotelian premise. Aquinas, however, accepts that the heavens are incorruptible but denies that this requires the world to be eternal. He argues that the heavens possess this nature once they have been created.

Do these arguments, drawn either from God's nature and attributes or from the nature of the world, establish the eternity of the world? The arguments based on God's nature and attributes can be regarded as the strongest support for this thesis. The responses developed against them appear relatively weak. Thinkers such as al-Rāzī acknowledge this openly and make no attempt to soften the claims of Aristotle or Ibn Sīnā. As a Christian thinker, however, Thomas Aquinas seeks to reconcile Aristotle with the requirements of faith as far as possible, since the eternity of the world conflicts with an article of faith. This deserves emphasis as an important difference between the Islamic and Christian traditions.

3. Assessing the Arguments for the World's Beginning

Those who defend the view that the world had a beginning have generally sought to support their position by refuting arguments for its eternity. In addition, several arguments originating particularly with Yaḥyā al-Naḥwī (John Philoponus) were repeatedly developed during the Middle Ages to demonstrate the impossibility of the philosophers' position. Drawing on the basic principles of Aristotelian physics, Philoponus formulated two groups of arguments for the world's beginning. The first concerns the impossibility of infinity, while the second rests on the principle that a finite body possesses finite power (Sorabji, 1987: 233-234; Philoponus, 1987; Alousī, 1968; Davidson, 1969: 357-391; Davidson, 1987; Wolfson, 1976). Philoponus identified weaknesses in Aristotelian physics and skilfully used Aristotle's principles to reach conclusions directly opposed

to his philosophy. Responses to these arguments were developed particularly by al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd, and these responses influenced medieval debates (Davidson, 1987: 127; Mahdi, 1967: 233-260).

2. In presenting arguments concerning infinity, al-Rāzī and Aquinas seek to show that they do not necessarily establish the world's beginning, contrary to those who claim that such a beginning can be proved. Here too, al-Rāzī differs from Aquinas by rejecting several Aristotelian premises. For example, he does not accept Aristotle's definition of rest as the absence of motion (Rāzī, 1987: 4/288).

The following arguments concerning infinity are commonly presented. First, an infinite number cannot increase. Since each new day adds to the number of past days, the number of past days cannot be infinite. Similarly, if the number of past days were infinite, the number of human souls that have come into existence up to the present would also have to be infinite. Yet the number of human souls increases with each new day. The number of past days must therefore be finite.

Second, an infinite series cannot be traversed. If past days were infinite, it would be impossible to pass through them and reach the present moment. One traditional response is that the series of days is infinite towards the past but finite towards the future. Furthermore, although an actual infinity is considered impossible, an endless succession is regarded as possible.

The principle that a finite body possesses finite power provides another argument. Since celestial bodies have finite power, it may be argued that these bodies, and therefore the world as a whole, must have a finite duration. Al-Rāzī and Aquinas respond that the philosophers regard the world as having neither a beginning nor an end because it receives its power from the First Principle.

It is therefore difficult to claim that these arguments conclusively prove that the world had a beginning. It is also difficult to claim that the arguments for the world's eternity conclusively establish that position. Nevertheless, the arguments based on God's essence and attributes appear particularly strong.

Conclusion

Debates about the eternity of the world first reached their height within Islamic thought during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Following the transmission of Muslim thinkers' works to the medieval West, similar debates emerged in Christian thought during the thirteenth century. In both traditions, some thinkers maintained that the eternity of the world could be proved through rational arguments, while others argued that this position could not be rationally defended. Within Islamic thought, some regarded the eternity of the world as incompatible with the fundamental principles of Islam, whereas others rejected the claim that such a contradiction existed. In Christian thought, however, its incompatibility with an article of faith was not open to question. The debate concerned whether the world's beginning, accepted through faith, could also be proved through reason.

Although the relationship between reason and revelation requires a separate study, Muslim and Christian thinkers can generally be said to agree on the following principle: revelation may contain truths that exceed the limits of reason and can be known only through revelation. Other truths can be reached through reason and are also supported by revelation. However, there is generally no agreement about which truths belong to the first category and which belong to the second.

Although both Christian and Islamic revelation describe the creation of the heavens and the earth, there is no agreement on how creation should be understood. Theologians have generally understood creation as bringing into existence something that previously did not exist. They have therefore tended to regard an eternal world as incompatible with the fundamental principles of religion. They have also claimed that rational arguments establish the impossibility of the world's eternity. Although this has been the dominant tendency in both traditions, alternative approaches have always existed.

Theologians who sought to enrich their theological systems through philosophy also moved beyond this dominant understanding. Al-Rāzī maintained that creation could be understood either as creation from nothing in time or as creation without a beginning. Similarly, Aquinas argued that creation does not inherently imply a beginning in time; revelation adds this meaning to the concept. Both thinkers maintained that the arguments offered for either the world's eternity or its beginning fall short of conclusive proof.

Their debt to thinkers such as Ibn Sīnā in developing this understanding of creation is clear. Instead of the distinction between eternal and temporally originated beings commonly used by other theologians, they adopted the distinction between necessary and contingent beings. They therefore maintained that, whether eternal or not, the world depends on God both for its existence and for its continued existence.

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