Introduction

In the twenty-first book of his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*), al-Ghazâlî reports a parable (*mithāl*) that has since become famous and legendary: A group of Byzantine painters—symbolizing philosophers and theoretical scholars—are pitted in a contest against a group of Chinese artists—symbolizing the Sufi masters. Each group was asked to paint an image on opposite walls of a room divided by a curtain. Whereas the Byzantines created a magnificent drawing rich in color and precious materials, the Chinese artists polished the walls of the room to the extent that it could purely and faithfully reflect the image on the opposite side. When the curtain was withdrawn the room had two magnificent and very similar paintings, produced, however, by very different methods. In this highly allegorical story on the merits of discursive philosophical knowledge and Sufi self-cultivation, al-Ghazâlî does not betray any preference for either side but seems to recognize these two methods as valid approaches to cultivating one’s intellectual and spiritual abilities.¹

Although al-Ghazâlî’s treatment of this issue is striking, discussions about the relation of mystical and philosophical knowledge reappear in various forms throughout Arabic intellectual history and received divergent formulations in the works of different authors. The aim of the present contribution is to address the way in which this problem crystallized in the works of the famous philosopher and theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzî (d. 606/1210). More specifically, this study will discuss Fakhr al-Dīn’s views on cogitative and intuitive knowledge, and how the latter in particular relates to mystical

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knowledge. Two pressing questions in this regard concern, first, the extent to which al-Rāzī’s theory of human cognition relies on Avicenna’s (Ibn Sinā, d. 428/1037) psychology and theory of intuition, as well as on the tradition that developed after Avicenna, notably in the works of al-Ghazālī, and second, how al-Rāzī assessed the other approaches to knowledge practiced during his day, notably the approach of the Sufis. It is by now acknowledged that al-Rāzī entertained some interest in the Sufi tradition, while continuing to be an Avicennian thinker in many fundamental ways until the very end of his life. This duality can be explained by the sustained process of assimilation and transformation of Avicennian philosophical concepts within *kalām* after the death of al-shaykh al-raʾīs and by the wide influence of the Sufis in the society of al-Rāzī’s time. Yet the co-existence of these ideas and their function in al-Rāzī’s thought remain to be examined in detail.2

The present article proposes to tackle these issues in light of key passages drawn from al-Rāzī’s corpus, many of which are here translated into English and analyzed for the first time. I begin with an examination of how Fakhr al-Dīn conceived of the nature of mystical knowledge and of its relation to the various faculties of the human intellect. I then proceed to elucidate its connection with philosophical knowledge and address the issue of their potential compatibility, exploring in the process the more general question of how al-Rāzī regarded the relation between Avicennian philosophy and Sufism. In the last section of the article, I examine the repercussions that al-Rāzī’s cognitive theories have on the issue of the knowability of God.

1 **Intuition and Mystical Knowledge**

In a recent article, Ayman Shihadeh has shed some valuable light on al-Rāzī’s relation to Sufism and the impact that mystical cognitive ideas had on the great Ashʿarite thinker. In this study, Shihadeh argues that toward the end of his life, and as a result of his increasing skeptical outlook, al-Rāzī turned to Sufism and embraced a new cognitive theory based on mystical concepts and practices. Accordingly, two distinct cognitive theories can be found in Fakhr al-Dīn’s works: the first consists in syllogistic, discursive knowledge and the other in what—for want of a better word—may be called mystical or esoteric knowledge. The latter kind of knowledge amounts to non-discursive and non-syllogistic knowledge that is conveyed in the form of divine disclosures, which

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2 For a recent study on another aspect of al-Rāzī’s epistemology and its relation to Ibn Sinā, see Eichner, “Knowledge by Presence.”