Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Use of al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt* in His Commentary on the Light Verse (Q 24:35)

**Jules Janssens**

As early as 1975, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh pointed out that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razī (d. 606/1210) in his commentary on the Light Verse (Q 24:35) in his *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (*The Long Qur’an-Commentary*) relied heavily on al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār* (*Niche of Lights*).\(^1\) But it was not until 1991 that a scholar, namely Hermann Landolt in his seminal study “Al-Ghazālī and ‘Religionswissenschaft,’” paid explicit attention to the nature of this usage.\(^2\) Among other aspects, Landolt emphasizes that Fakhr al-Dīn does not follow the order of the discussion in al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt*. Al-Rāzī, though, largely supports al-Ghazālī’s opinion that God is the only light, yet says nothing of the latter’s controversial interpretation of the divine face (*wajh Allāh*) as the source from which all being emanates.\(^3\) In the section of the *Tafsīr* dealing with the so-called “veils-tradition,” in which different groups of worshippers are classified according to how much they are veiled by light and/or darkness, al-Rāzī places, if we follow Landolt, all *falāsifa*—the “naturalists” as well as those who look to the movers of the spheres—in the second highest class of those veiled by light and darkness. Despite the use of a philosophical language, al-Rāzī reserves the highest class of those veiled by pure light, Landolt argues, for the defenders of a classical (Ashʿarite) attributism.\(^4\) He stresses that even if in this last case al-Rāzī offers an interpretation that critically deviates from al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt*, this would not prove that the actual third section of the *Mishkāt* is a forgery, as William M. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazālī*, 45, n. 32.


Watt had claimed, but is more likely the expression of the desire of Fakhr al-Din to maintain the image of al-Ghazali as an “orthodox theologian.”

More recently, Soraya M. Hajjaji-Jarrah dealt anew with the first two sections of al-Razi’s commentary on the Light Verse. She mainly agrees with Landolt’s views, but particularly stresses the presence of monism or of what resembles the idea of “unity of being” in al-Razi’s commentary. Unfortunately, none of these publications offers a detailed survey of the passages in Fakhr al-Din’s Tafsir that are derived from, or at least clearly inspired by the Mishkat. In order to fully and correctly grasp al-Razi’s debt to the latter, it is important to know precisely what he literally reproduces, as well as the exact degree and nature of his rewordings when present. Undoubtedly important to note also is the presence of any additions or omissions. Even if Landolt’s interpretation is generally thought to be the most valuable, it is hoped that this more detailed analysis will offer further substantial evidence for his view, while adding (minor) nuances. Let me add that the analysis, which follows, will not deal with minor differences. These probably result from editorial mistakes, especially in the case of al-Razi’s Tafsir of which no critical edition is available.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi starts his commentary on the Light Verse with the rejection of those who interpret, as he claims the Manicheans did, God’s being as “light” in terms of body or bodily form. But if it is neither body nor bodily form, what is it? Al-Razi gives four possible interpretations, but only after noting that the argument that God is light is in need of further explanation. This means that it cannot be taken literally and has to be subject of ta’wil (“allegorical interpretation”). The four retained alternatives are: (1) God’s light is His guidance; (2) God’s light is His ruling over heavens and earth; (3) God’s light is His organization of heavens and earth; and (4) God’s light is His figurative “enlightening” of heavens and earth. Using the language at the end of

5 Watt, “A Forgery in al-Ghazali’s Mishkat?”
7 al-Razi, al-Tafsir al-kabir, 23:222–38. The edition I use is one of the standard ones, included by Michel Lagarde in his Index du Grande Commentaire de Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 60–80. It was prepared by a “committee of editors” (ḥay’at al-taṣḥīḥ, p. ghayn in vol. 1) that was, according to G. C. Anawati in EI2, 3:754, headed by Muḥammad Muḥyī l-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (1900–72). The edition provides no information on its textual bases. The text of al-Razi’s commentary on Q 24:35 has also been reproduced in Sayrawān’s edition of al-Ghazali, Mishkat al-anwār, 79–109. Recently it has been translated into English in Hamza and Rizvi (eds.), An Anthology of Qur’anic Commentaries, 1:384–408, though that translation should be used with much caution.