Forum

Not Truth But Tolerance:
A (Much Belated) Response
to Atif Khalil

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I should like to begin this essay with a sincere apology. More than five years have passed since Professor Atif Khalil penned his scholarly critique of some of my suggestive ruminations on intra-Islamic theological ecumenism in the introduction to my translation of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghâzalî's *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*.[1] While scholarly convention – not to mention etiquette – would certainly demand a much more timely response than I have been able to manage, I am afraid that I can plead no better than to throw myself on the understanding of those who have insight into and appreciation for the various ways in which the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001 have skewed the scholarly agenda of many an Islamicist. I sincerely hope that this delay will not be construed as some kind of veiled or surreptitiously snide dismissal of Professor Khalil's thoughtful analysis. I also hope that it will not have gone so far as to suggest any inability on my part to respond to what I shall argue amounts to a clever but ultimately wrong-minded critique.

According to Professor Khalil, despite the ingenuity with which I approach the issue of Muslim theological diversity, many of my central

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arguments are beset with "'internal contradictions and incongruencies' that might otherwise evade the casual reader" (85). At bottom, these can be summarized as: (1) the lack of an objective criterion for distinguishing "legitimate [interpretive] traditions from illegitimate ones"; (2) an inescapable relativism, especially given my apparent assertion that the true meaning of historically transcendent scripture remains hopelessly closed to historically embedded, contingent human beings; (3) the notion that we can have *'aqīdah* (sustained belief about God) independent of a systematic rational method to produce and sustain it; (4) the false dichotomy I assert between eisegesis and *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis); and (5) my failure to consider what the likes of the famed if controversial Muḥyī al-Dîn Ibn 'Arabī might contribute to a project of theological ecumenism. There are a number of other minor issues and extrapolations tucked in the interstices of all of this. But what I have enumerated here constitutes the backbone of Khalil's critique.

I should like to begin my response by noting that, despite my recognition of the utility of al-Ghâzalî's work for a contemporary program of theological ecumenism, the main point of my introduction was to empower the reader to arrive at a more informed understanding of the translated text. Throughout Professor Khalil's critique, however, it is not always clear whether his issue is with me or al-Ghâzalî, or both. In the end, it turns out to make little difference. For, as we shall see, Khalil's critique is ultimately grounded in a fundamental and consistent misunderstanding of both al-Ghâzalî and me.

Both al-Ghâzalî and I are clear and explicit about the objective of his (and by extension my) project – to establish a criterion for theological *tolerance*. The title of the book is *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*. And the opening pages of the introduction explicitly state that al-Ghâzalî's aim is, "*not* to establish who among the theological schools is 'right,' but to demonstrate the folly and unfairness of the practice of condemning a doctrine as heresy simply because it goes against one's own theology."[2] Khalil, on the other hand, seems bent on converting al-Ghâzalî's (and my) aim into one of pursuing and policing theological *truth* – of establishing the means via which correct doctrine might be arrived at and of laying down a criterion on the basis of which true beliefs might be objectively differentiated from false ones. This is why, for example, he takes me to task for not spelling out an objective criterion for distinguishing "legitimate" from "illegitimate" interpretive backdrops against which scripture might be read. For on this omission, I (and here he explicitly targets me) am ultimately bound to accept as valid "all possible doctrine," since a boundless array of equally legitimate interpretive

backdrops must yield a boundless array of equally legitimate interpretations. As he put it, "This … opens the door to an acceptance of not only Process Theologian Hanbalites and Aristotelian-Neoplatonic Ash'arites, but anyone who simply claims to speak on behalf of Islamic revelation, no matter how convoluted their logic might seem" (87). This lack of a criterion for separating true from false backdrops cum-doctrine is a particularly glaring oversight on my part, given that al-Ghâzalî, according to Professor Khalil, "suggests the exact opposite in *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*, when he argues for the need of a common and agreed upon methodology to eliminate *flawed* interpretations (pp. 93–96)" (87, emphasis mine).

To be sure, both al-Ghâzalî and I have an obvious interest in truth cum-correct theological doctrine.[3] But, contrary to Professor Khalil's reading, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-zandaqa* is simply and emphatically *not* about the pursuit of truth, at least not as a primary, first order concern; nor is it, precisely for this reason, ultimately about accommodating multiple expressions of truth; nor is it even about distinguishing truth per se from falsehood per se. Rather *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* is about sharpening and policing the definition of *unbelief* and affirming that not all untruth necessarily amounts to *kufr* (formal unbelief)! In this light, Professor Khalil's focus on what is substantively valid, correct, or legitimate simply misses the point. For the very crux of al-Ghāzalī's argument is that any number of views that are substantively invalid – indeed, demonstrably *false*, *untrue* or *incorrect* – may be tolerated inasmuch as they do not constitute *kufr*! Again, al-Ghâzalî's aim is to distinguish who is a Muslim – theologically speaking – and who is not and to confirm, much to the chagrin of those he characterizes as "extremists," that one can be a Muslim despite one's subscription to any number of substantively wrong theological views.[4]

As for Professor Khalil's assertion that al-Ghâzalî aspired to lay down a "universal principle" to serve as "a common and agreed upon methodology to eliminate flawed interpretations," this too reflects a basic misunderstanding of al-Ghâzalî's project. For in *Fayṣal*, he is not at all interested in establishing correct or eliminating flawed doctrine per se. Rather, in *Fayṣal*, his concern lies with the tyranny of the universal and the exclusivist claims of those – for example, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī – who believe themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be in possession of correct theological doctrine *and* that the resulting "incorrect" doctrines of their theological adversaries necessarily amounts to unbelief.

Two examples from *Fayṣal* itself should help to throw my argument into relief. The first comes with al-Ghâzalî's treatment of Twelver Shiism.[5] Speaking of the Imāmī doctrine of occultation (*ghaybah*), he states explicitly:

> This is a false, clearly absurd and extremely abominable doctrine. But it
> poses no threat to religion. In fact, the only threat it poses is to the fool
> who believes in it…. The point here is that not everyone who embraces
> senseless hallucinations must be branded an Unbeliever, even if his
> doctrines are clearly absurd.[6]

Al-Ghâzalî clearly believes the Twelver Shiite doctrine of occultation to be neither valid nor legitimate, certainly not in the sense that Khalil uses these terms. And yet, it is precisely his aim in *Fayṣal* to refute and interdict such practices as branding Twelver Shiites as unbelievers simply because they hold this substantively incorrect belief. Indeed, Twelver Shiites, despite their "wayward doctrine," fall perfectly within the parameters of Islam that al-Ghâzalî articulates and defends in *Fayṣal*. Again, *pace* Professor Khalil, al-Ghâzalî's (and my) aim is simply not to rid the market of all wrong ideas and replace these with substantively correct ones. Rather, the only idea that al-Ghâzalî (or I) wants to rout from the field is the idea that all wrong theological views invariably take one outside the pale of the faith.

The second example speaks to Professor Khalil's understanding of al-Ghâzalî's "common and agreed upon methodology" as being for the purpose of determining which traditions are valid and which are not. Again, Khalil's point here is that without an objective criterion for determining which traditions can be legitimately relied upon in interpreting scripture and which cannot, we have no way of distinguishing the true from the false among the interpretations generated thereby. On this inability, all interpretations must be recognized as correct, since no tradition or interpretive backdrop can rightfully claim a status that it denies to all the rest. Again, however, a careful reading of al-Ghâzalî reveals that his preoccupation is not at all with determining which traditions are legitimate and which are not. Rather, his point of departure is the simple and undeniable fact that Muslim scriptural interpretations are informed by a variety of competing interpretive backdrops. To see him as focusing on (and to see me as having to focus on) which of these is legitimate and which is not is simply to miss his (and my) point.[7] For even where a tradition is deemed "illegitimate," this alone does not doom the status of the views it engenders. Speaking, for example, of the widely diffused tradition of rationalist *kalām* (speculative theology) as an interpretive backdrop and "methodology," al-Ghâzalî states:

> [W]ere we ourselves to put aside all pretensions of deference and
> decorum, we would declare outright that delving into speculative theology
> [*kalām*] is religiously forbidden (*ḥarām*)… (123).

To avoid misunderstanding here, I should note this was a judgment made by al-Ghâzalî in passing in *Fayṣal*, as any fair reading

of the text will plainly bear out.[8] Still, he explicitly negates *kalām*'s status as *a*, or *the*, normative backdrop or methodology against or via which to read or vindicate scripture. And yet, al-Ghâzalî clearly does not intend to proscribe all doctrines that recline upon *kalām*. This is because the legitimacy or validity of the interpretive tradition from which an interpretation draws its substance is for him largely a moot point. The operative issue is, rather, how the interpretation itself relates to his criterion for *tolerance* – that is, not whether it is substantively right or wrong but whether or not it constitutes *kufr*.

In many ways, and with a number of obvious qualifications, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* might be more profitably understood not as a theological tract but as a political one – far more akin in spirit and intent with, say, John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* than with Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*.[9] Its aim is neither to affirm, establish, or police the concrete substance of theological truth but to referee and impose a semblance of discipline upon competing pronouncements of theological infidelity. Understanding this subtlety is key to understanding the role and function of *reason* in *Fayṣal*. And understanding al-Ghâzalî's deployment of reason in this text is the key to understanding that – *pace* Professor Khalil, neither al-Ghâzalî nor I are advocates of theological relativism.

For al-Ghâzalî, reason is not the primary – and certainly not the exclusive – means to religious truth; indeed, for him – *pace* modern liberalism – reason is emphatically not the only means of knowing. Rather, truth and knowing for al-Ghâzalî are often far more subtle and subjective indulgences. This epistemological insight is clearly reflected in his critique of rationalist *kalām*, in which he scoffs at the claim that speculative theology (deemed by many at the time to be reason par excellence) is the only way to truth:

> [A]nyone who believes that the way to faith (*îmân*) is speculative theology, abstract proofs, and systematic categorization is himself guilty of unsanctioned innovation. For faith in God comes rather of a light which God   casts into the hearts of His servants, as a gift and gratuity from Him. Sometimes this comes in the form of a proof that appears to one internally but which one cannot explain to others; sometimes it comes through visions in one's sleep; sometimes it comes by witnessing the ways of a religious man whose light is transferred to one upon befriending and spending time with him; and sometimes it comes by way of circumstantial considerations…. (121)[10]

Now, while systematic reason may not be the means via which one arrives at all of one's religious convictions, reason remains, ceteris pa-

ribus, the most likely if not only ostensibly objective[11] medium through which such views can be publicly negotiated cum-validated. The aim of *Fayṣal* is to enlist reason as a public medium for negotiation by laying down the "rules of engagement." These rules, however, are neither calibrated nor bound to preempt the emergence of any and all substantively wrong views. Rather, the whole point of al-Ghâzalî's *Fayṣal*, literally, "decisive criterion"; it is to determine *how* wrong a recognizably wrong view must be if its proponent is to be legitimately branded an infidel.

Professor Khalil seems to think that this kind of accommodation amounts to theological relativism. But this, again, bespeaks a serious misunderstanding of al-Ghâzalî's (and my) project, as well as the very nature and pluralistic sensibilities of Islam as a "religion." In a word, "tolerated" is simply not the same as "correct," "endorsed," or "agreed with." Nor does the fact that I tolerate a wrong view in others mean that I have no interest – or even a reduced interest – in ensuring that my own views are substantively correct.[12] Since, however, the true ground of so much theological belief is demonstrably subjective and closed to the dictates[13] of reason, I must accept the fact that I may not be able to communicate my beliefs faithfully to others or enlist their assent. Again, however, such recognition should not be mistaken for a lack of conviction regarding my own views. Rather, for me, absolute truth exists – and I know what it is! I also know, however, that you "know" too and that I may not be able to convince you of my truth.[14] At its essence, al-Ghâzalî's (and my) project is about allowing each of us to look upon our own truth as absolute without having to look upon what we deem to be the falsehoods of our coreligionists as absolute in the sense of constituting *kufr*. This is hardly an exercise in theological relativism. For, assuming due-diligence, it neither entails nor necessitates the slightest hesitation in judging one's own or others' views to be absolutely true or false.[15]

If I had to guess, I would hazard that Professor Khalil's reading of al-Ghâzalî (and of me) owes much to the intellectual liberalism enshrined by the Western academy, where closed, subjective conduits of knowledge – the heart (*qalb*), the self/soul (*nafs*), the primordial disposition (*fiṭrah*), guidance from God (*hudā*) – have no epistemological value at all. This in turn prompts him to superimpose upon al-Ghâzalî (and me) an Enlightenment understanding of the relationship between knowledge, truth, and reason. What we know, we know only through reason; and our claims to knowledge/ truth can be validated only by rational arguments.[16] On this understanding, what al-Ghâzalî *must* be seeking to negotiate through his patently rational approach in *Fayṣal* is the substantive content of truth. For not only is truth the business of reason; it is the latter's inevitable and inextricable result.

Again, however, a careful reading of al-Ghâzalî reveals that not only is he opposed to this kind of rationalist fundamentalism,[17] *Fayṣal* is dedicated to negotiating not truth but tolerance. The role and function of reason in this text is to promote not the religious truth but the secular peace! Whether or not this or that Muslim group or individual ultimately ends up in possession of the actual religious truth is a matter to be left to God in the life to come.[18] In the here and now, the issue is how competing claims to truth and judgments of falsehood can be accommodated – not endorsed! – without threatening or undermining the integrity of Islam and the Muslim community.

This is the actual ideational context and utilitarian intent of *Fayṣal*. In its light, not only does the bulk of Professor Khalil's major criticisms begin to fade, his more minor criticisms are also revealed to be problematic. Take, for example, the claim that I argue that "revelation qua revelation, insofar as its source is ahistoric, remains forever inaccessible to the historically contingent theologian (of any school) and that the most people can do is engage in limited, fallible attempts to interpret and understand the divine intention behind scripture…" (87). Again, having misdiagnosed the main objective of *Fayṣal*, Professor Khalil goes on to confuse the question of what we can know with that of what we can prove. I never said (or implied) that because humans are embedded in history they can never know the intended meaning of scripture. How could I, when Islam's very creation narrative includes transcendent God teaching contingent Adam the names of all things? And for the post-creation period of secular history, the Qur'ān repeatedly refers to God's gifting humans – that is, not just prophets – direct knowledge of truth. Pharaoh, for example, and his people, are said to have received God's signs but to have, "*rejected them, out of impudence and arrogance, despite the certainty of their truth that had settled in their souls*" (27:14). And if "signs" here is too ambiguous to dispose of the matter, we need only note the case of a segment of the Children of Israel who are explicitly credited with having an accurate reading of scripture: "*They hear the speech of God and then knowingly distort its meaning after they had clearly understood it*" (2:75). In none of these cases is there any question but that historically embedded humans can know the intent of scripture. What they cannot do – and this was the point that Professor Khalil seems to have misconstrued – is impose their historically embedded understandings on others, who do not share their interpretive background, as self-authenticating, unassailable, universally valid truth.

Another minor criticism leveled by Professor Khalil is his apparent attribution to me of a rather curious strain of antirationalism, according to which reason is deemed incapable of knowing anything. I never said

or implied this (nor did al-Ghāzalī).[19] What I suggested, rather, following the lead of al-Ghâzalî, was that systematic reason has its epistemological limits. Of course, reason can know, certainly from the perspective of the reasoner him- or herself. But we should be clear here that theology reclines not simply upon the natural faculty of reason but upon specific regimes or systems of reason. And while these regimes or systems can produce metacognitive, internally self-authenticating knowledge or truth, what they cannot do is sustain universal claims to this truth and knowledge across boundaries that separate them from other regimes or systems of reasoning.[20]

Again, Professor Khalil finds this to be highly problematic. For, for him, this denies the possibility of arriving at universal truth that can be independently validated as such. As he put it, "if no school can claim comprehensive [read, "universal"] doctrinal truth, then are we not forced to accept that all schools can, in the absence of an agreed upon method, claim it at the relative level?" (87). My response to this would be, "No, all schools can claim – and actually believe! – it at the absolute level!" What al-Ghâzalî wants to do is simply keep these mutually competing and contradictory claims to absolute truth and falsehood from leading to a national pastime spent at the gallows.

Related to this point is Professor Khalil's criticism of my claim that one can have *'aqīdah* without relying on theology as a systematic means of arriving at and validating it. Here, however, he appears to stare reality in the face but to misapprehend it by dint of the rationalist fundamentalism he seems to have embraced. He notes explicitly (though he deems it misleading for me to note it) that the Prophet (ṢAAS) could have "direct access to transcendent truth by virtue of his prophethood," and that "He had no need for a theological method to understand revelation because he was in a state of constant communion with God" (89).The reality, however, is that the Prophet had no need for theology (or *fiqh*, for that matter) not because he was in communion with God (after all, Muslims believe that God can inspire (*yulhim*) or guide (*yahdī*) any of us). The Prophet had no need for theology because his *authority* and status as Prophet relieved him of any and all necessity of validating his views to others. In other words, he could claim for his theological views – by sheer, undemocratic, prophetic fiat – an *authority* that no one else could either claim or challenge.

At the bottom, however, the real issue here is, again, the difference between "arriving at" and "validating" a belief. As a matter of private, individual belief, anyone could give assent to his or her understanding of what the Prophet handed down and hold that as their theological belief, with no effort or even ability to validate this. The moment, however, they ventured into the public and claimed (or implied) that this belief was normative for others; they, unlike the Prophet, would have to point to something beyond

that belief itself – for example, rational argument, historical precedent, their recognized status as a person of gnosis, or supersensory knowledge – in order to endow it with enough authority to validate it. Clearly, however, this process of validation would be separate and distinct from the actual instantiation of the belief itself. Professor Khalil's understanding of the role of reason, however – that is, as the necessary basis of both the instantiation and the validation of beliefs – seems to blind him to this distinction. But, unless we are talking about *correct* doctrine (as determined, that is, by some specific criterion), it seems to me merely to state the obvious to say that one can have all kinds of beliefs about God without systematic ways of arriving at or validating them. Professor Khalil's obsession, however, with doctrinal correctness – in tandem with the almost mechanically causal relationship he seems to posit between reason and truth – leads him to impose this obsession on al-Ghâzalî (and me). Reason and only reason can produce and judge truth. Otherwise, "All we could attain in regards to … [our] truths would be a kind of mindless assent to a very small and specific set of assertions about God that are explicitly spelled out in revelation" (89). Now, even if we leave aside the question of what, then, judges reason, and even if we ignore the implications of acknowledging that some things can be known directly by virtue of how explicitly they are laid out in revelation, we are inexorably brought back to the fact that measuring the concrete correctness of competing doctrines is simply not al-Ghâzalî's program, at least not in *Fayṣal*. On the contrary, al-Ghâzalî's concern lies, again, not with doctrinal correctness but with tolerance.

This misapprehension of the distinction between truth or doctrinal correctness and tolerance also informs Professor Khalil's critique of my reference to process theologian Charles Hartshorne. Khalil suggests that I am disingenuous when I *invoke* Hartshorne's logic but do not *subscribe* to it. Again, however, this is based on a misapprehension of the meta-context of my and al-Ghâzalî's project and the role that these references to Hartshorne play in it. Professor Khalil starts out by noting correctly that I adduce Hartshorne to back the argument that Traditionalist Hanbalites could make an equal claim to being rational, since, on Hartshorne's logic, "settling" on the throne, for example, could not be deemed irrational.[21] But then he goes on to claim that by using Hartshorne to argue for equal "legitimacy" between Traditionalists and Rationalists, I run into the problem of not having a criterion for distinguishing "legitimate traditions from illegitimate ones" (87). I have already dealt with this above. Here, however, I would simply add that my reference to Hartshorne was not at all an effort to identify an alternative backdrop (or logic) that might lead to correct doctrine; it was

simply to argue for the existence, *pace* the Muslim Rationalists, of multiple regimes of reason (*'aql*), and to point up the fact that if the criterion for acceptance of a doctrine was simply that it be reasonable, Traditionalist doctrine should pass muster. Again, this was an effort to enlist Hartshorne into the cause of al-Ghâzalî's campaign for tolerance, not, as Professor Khalil seems to see the matter, of co-opting him into the cause of truth.

There are two final points that Professor Khalil raises that are actually, in my view, rather marginal to the main argument but still deserve perhaps some comment. The first of these is his critique of the distinction I draw between eisegesis and *tafsīr*. Here, let me state openly that if I were to rewrite this section ten years later, I would word it more carefully. I would *not*, however, change the basic substance of what I said. What I said was that as a discipline, *tafsīr* is supposed to amount to a simple exercise in exegesis – that is, of extracting the meanings of words in simple diction-ary fashion. Khalil challenges this and argues that in point of fact *tafsīr* routinely if not necessarily entails some level of eisegesis. Now, in the main, I agree with Khalil. But I think he rather exaggerates (and in so do-ing distorts) my point. I was not arguing that *tafsīr* never entails eisegesis; in fact, the example I gave of Imām Ahmad clearly demonstrated that it does.[22] My point was simply that because *tafsīr* is supposed to be a simple matter of extracting meaning in simple dictionary fashion – that is, with no formal, ideological presuppositions informing this process – every theo-logian would want to pretend that he or she was involved precisely and only in this enterprise when doing theology. But theology, I argued, being grounded as it is in the attempt to make sense of revelation in the context of some formal or quasi-formal regime of reason, cannot dispense with eisegesis, even if it is not always willing to admit this.[23] Now, Khalil points to the fact that al-Ṭabarī contradicts the definition of *tafsīr* I attributed to him (91). In a sense, however, this actually confirms the point that I was trying to make: eisegesis routinely invades the domain of exegesis. But Khalil takes al-Ṭabarī's contradiction of the definition of *tafsīr* I adduced and attributed to him to be a contradiction of the definition itself. Yet, when we consult such authoritative classical lexicons as *Lisân al-'Arab*, we find precisely the definition of *tafsīr* I cited: "*fsr* … and *tafsîr* is to uncover the meaning of a difficult expression (*wa al-tafsîr kashf al-murâd 'an al-lafz al-mushkil*)."[24] Again, my point was not that *tafsīr* never en-tailed eisegesis. My point was rather that, properly speaking, it is not sup-posed to – even if, especially in the service of theology, it routinely does.

Finally, there is the suggestion that I was remiss in not mentioning the famed Sufi Muḥyī al-Dîn Ibn 'Arabī in the context of explicating my (and

al-Ghâzalî's) project. There is much to be said about this, but let me limit myself here to the following. It seems to me that Ibn 'Arabī in particular would be a problematic figure to integrate into a discussion of al-Ghâzalî's project, inasmuch as the entirety of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, as I understand him, proceeds on the basis of a cosmology fundamentally at odds with that of al-Ghâzalî. For al-Ghâzalî – certainly in the context of the theological universe and interlocutors he assumes in *Fayṣal*[25] – the Creator-created dichotomy and distinction is both vertical (that is, hierarchical) and absolute. For Ibn 'Arabī, on the other hand, and his *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence), this distinction might be said to be neither vertical nor entirely absolute. As one of my teachers (a master and proponent of Ibn 'Arabī's thought) used to explain it, one can say, "God is this chair," even if one cannot say, "This chair is God." Now, I am not sure about how all of this might or might not be reconciled with al-Ghâzalî. But I fail to see how caution and prudence in this regard can be turned into a charge of gratuitous, unwarranted omission.

There are numerous lesser issues in Professor Khalil's critique on which one might wish to comment.[26] In closing, however, I would like to take the opportunity to address a broader problem informing the study of Islam in the West of which I think Professor Khalil's analysis might be a reflection. Given the power and prestige of the Western academy – including the rise and incursion into Islamic studies of the social sciences, according to whose approach the foundational texts and tradition of Islam are often marginal to a determination of the normative parameters of the religion – it seems that Muslims who write out of a classical idiom are increasingly less understood on their own terms. Instead, the interpretive prisms of the Western academy and its intellectual liberalism routinely impose meanings and implications that distort if not subvert the integrity of classical and neo-classical Islamic thought. Beyond their substance, moreover, these interpretive interventions routinely go on to imply a finality that all but raises them beyond critique. This is not always the case; but it seems to be increasingly so. We see it, for example, in the superimposition of fundamentalist/literalist interpretations onto the Muslim legal tradition by scholars who avoid any serious engagement of Islamic law itself. On this approach, Muslims cannot honestly extract a pluralistic political theory from the Qur'ān, Sunnah or Shari'ah tradition, because those writing in the powerful Western academy cannot.[27] We see it as well in the tendency to graft the legal monism of the Western nation-state onto Islam, in which light Muslims *must* take it to be their duty to impose a uniform body of rules indiscriminately across all segments of society, because this is what modern Western states purport to do. Shari'ah

in this context, whether it really is or not, comes to be seen as a mortal threat to all non-Muslims and even Muslims who might dare to dissent.[28]

And now, with Professor Khalil, one wonders if we are witnessing yet another incursion of Western liberalism in the form of imposing the pursuit, if not imposition, of truth as the only real and legitimate concern of religion, to the exclusion – in our case, of tolerance, but more generally of order, efficiency, and a host of other secular concerns. Viewed through this prism, Islam can only commit to tolerance as an apology, a pale substitute for its failure to live up to its normative ideal. This ultimately derives from and perpetuates the myth that only *modern*, *secular* orders can accommodate falsehood and that tolerance and critique must remain modern, secular monopolies. Islam being neither modern nor secular, we should not even seriously expect it to rise to such a challenge. To be fair, I sincerely doubt that this is Professor Khalil's consciously held position. But if a religiously grounded program as explicit in its commitment to tolerance as is al-Ghâzalî's *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-zandaqa* can be so thoroughly misapprehended and seamlessly appropriated to the lone cause of pursuing and policing truth, one can only wonder how conscious one's commitments to liberalism have to be for the storied prisms and historically driven presuppositions of the modern West to inform – and inform thoroughly – one's scholarly perspectives and interpretive thrusts.

Endnotes

1. Atif Khalil, "Is an Intra-Islamic Theological Ecumenism Possible? A Response to Sherman Jackson," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22:4 (2005): 84–95.

2. Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghāzalī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-zandaqa.* (Karachi, India: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5. Emphasis added here.

3. Nowhere is this perhaps more vividly demonstrated than in his moving autobiographical testimony in *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍālal* (Deliverance from Error).

4. See, incidentally, Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 54, where none other than the reputedly puritanical Traditionalist Ibn Taymîya expresses a similar ecumenical attitude: "[A]nyone who considers this carefully will know that many of the people of undisciplined passions and unsanctioned innovation (*bidaʿ/s. bidʿa*) may be ignorant, wrong-minded Believers who have simply veered away from some aspect of what the Prophet brought (*muʾmin mukhtiʾ dâll ʿan*

ba'd mâ jâ'a bihi al-rasûl) just as they may be Hypocrites and Crypto-infidels who pretend to be other than what they are."

5. I must beg the indulgence of contemporary Twelver Shiites here, as my aim is neither to endorse nor advertise al-Ghâzalî's invective but simply to highlight his deeper and more important point in the context of the present discussion.

6. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 119–29.

7. In a modern context, in other words, *Fayṣal* would not see it as its task to make a blanket judgment on whether or not modern science is a "legitimate" tradition or interpretive backdrop. Nor would its primary interest be in pronouncing which of the interpretations spawned by modern science was substantively correct. Rather, *Fayṣal*'s focus would be on which interpretations generated by modern science is substantively wrong enough to take its proponent outside the fold of Islam. And in this context, any number of wrong scientifically based views might be tolerated even if not endorsed.

8. See Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 123. I do not wish to put too sharp a point on al-Ghâzalî'scritique of *kalām*. After all, he makes exceptions for those who need it to clear up doubt and for those who wish to learn it either to treat those beset with doubts or to beat back the attempts of adversaries who seek to undermine the doctrinal integrity of the faith. Still, he sees *kalām* as far from the ideal, normative or necessary backdrop or methodology for a proper let alone exclusively true reading of scripture.

9. Of course, notable differences in the historical, political and institutional context in which they wrote underwrite obvious differences between the outlook, concerns, and approach of al-Ghāzalī and Locke.

10. Shockingly, Khalil states that the second part of my introduction merely deals with "the historical background of the work," and that, as such, "This article is only a response to the first introduction" (94n3). Given that any number of issues directly germane to his critique are dealt with in the second part of the Introduction (for example, al-Ghâzalî's critique of *kalām*, his view on the role and function of reason and its relationship to truth, the fact that theologians routinely disguise their eisegesis, etc.). I will leave it to the reader to determine the cost of this omission on Khalil's part.

11. By "objective," I mean simply equally available and accessible to all.

12. Speaking inter-religiously, this insight might go some way in explaining, at least in part, why Islam did not produce a Treaty of Westphalia and all that came in its train. Whereas European kings, magistrates and prelates may have been less willing or able to recognize any difference between tolerating and endorsing heresy or infidelity, this distinction

was woven into the very warp and woof of Islam, from the (now much maligned) accommodation of *dhimmīs*, to al-Ghāzalī's's *Fayṣal*, to the Ottoman Capitulations.

13. Which is not to say that belief is beyond the analytical function of reason. Reason, in other words, can look back on belief, but it cannot get fully behind it in order to push it into place. On this point, see, for example, R. M. Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), esp., 29–62.

14. This is a paraphrase of Stanley Fish, "Postmodern Welfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals" *Harper's Magazine*, July 2002.

15. As we saw, for example, with his depiction of the Shiite doctrine of occultation. Again, for al-Ghâzalî, this doctrine was not relatively wrong; it was absolutely wrong, as he put it, " a false, clearly absurd and extremely abominable doctrine." Yet, it did not constitute *kufr* and was thus not a justifiable basis for excluding Shiites from the pale of the faith.

16. This is what routinely dogs religious students in the secular Western academy. There they are taught, directly or indirectly, that they can only know what they can prove; and the only acceptable proof of anything is rational proof! Compare, this, however, with the myriad sources of valid knowledge and belief adumbrated by al-Ghâzalî above (and elsewhere in *Fayṣal*). Of course, even al-Ghâzalî would agree that reason is the only (or most likely means) of negotiating the validity of one's beliefs in the public square. But a more honest and sympathetic position for the academy to assume would be to acknowledge more explicitly the difference between what we can know (or justifiably believe) and what we can prove rationally – and that one's inability to prove the existence of X on rational grounds is not the same as proving that X does not exist.

17. Speaking against the pretensions of such rationalist fundamentalism, al-Ghâzalî insists in another context: "You have erred in stating that reason (*al-'aql*) is a motivator (*dâ'in*). Nay reason is only a guide (*hâdin*), while impulses and motives (*al-bawâ'ith wa al-dawâ'î*) issue from the self (*al-nafs*) based on information provided by reason." *Al-Mustasfâ min 'ilm al-usûl* , 2 vols. (Cairo, Egypt: al-Amîrîyah Press, 1322/1904), 1: 61. For a fuller treatment of this point, see my, "The Alchemy of Domination? Some Ash'arite Responses to Mu'tazilite Ethics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 31 (1999): 185–201.

18. Indeed, among the oft-repeated themes in the Qur'ān is that reflected in such verses as, "Then you will be returned to the Knower of the seen and the unseen, whereupon He will inform you concerning that about which you differed" (9:94). See also: 3:55, 5:48, 6:164, 16: 92, and passim.

19. Nor did I say, or imply, *pace* Khalil, that, just because a doctrine is grounded in human thought and is thus not historically transcendent, it can never be true.

20. Again, Khalil thoroughly misses the point when he argues that, "mindless assent" "may have been the position of a small number of Muslims in history, the 'we-believe-without-asking-how' group, but this is not al-Ghâzalî's position as he articulates it, for example, while defending the theological enterprise in the second section of *Qawâ'id al-'Aqâ'id* (The Principles of the Creed), the second book of his *Iḥyâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*" (89). First, the issue is not at all one of assent but of the degree to which such assent can be imposed on others as a normative duty. Second, al-Ghazâlî's *Iḥyâ'* is a very different book from his *Fayṣal*. Richard M. Frank in *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994) and others have noted the palpable evolution in al-Ghazâlî's thought, which should warn us against assuming that all of his works are tied together by a common aim. Third, in *Fayṣal*, al-Ghâzalî directly – at least in part – contradicts this view of Khalil: "[I]t had to occur to them that there were groups of uncivilized Arabs during the time of the Prophet* and the Companions, may God be pleased with them, who were steeped in idol-worship and who devoted no attention at all to systematic proofs *('ilm al-daîl)* – and even if they had devoted attention to this they would have not understood it – who in the end were adjudged (by the Prophet and the Companions) to be Muslims." Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* , 120–21. See also p. 122 for a similar statement.

21. I never said, incidentally, *pace* Khalil, that the Hanbalites were "Process Theologians" (87).

22. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 12–13.

23. See, for example, the conclusion in the second part of the introduction to *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 66–68 for a confirmation of this.

24. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisân al-'arab*, 6 vols. (Cairo, Egypt: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, n.d.), vol. 5, 3412–13.

25. And we might recall that the *falāsifah* (Muslim Neoplatonic philosophers) are the only ones he explicitly places outside the boundaries of tolerance that he defines in this text.

26. Most notably perhaps the assertion that: "Some of the dilemmas he [Jackson] encounters in his attempt to formulate a coherent theory of theological diversity seem to lie in his use of diverse and conflicting strains of thought, which range from al-Ghazâlî and African studies to Christian theology and postmodernism. It was perhaps only inevitable that a project that synthesized ideas from such a wide range of disparate sources would encounter its own incoherencies – interestingly, the same

dilemma al-Ghazâlî's own writings face" (92). Let me just add here that it seems strange then that Khalil would criticize me for not adding yet another "strain of thought" in the person no less of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī! On another note, I would also address, inter alia, Khalil's tendency toward what appears to be an unstoried, *sola scriptura* of sorts that all but ignores the spontaneous understandings of the Prophet's generation and their (real or purported) ideological heirs – leaving reason as the sole determinant of the kinds of normative meanings that can be legitimately derived from or read into scripture.

27. In this regard, see, for example, my "Jihad: Between Law, Fact and Orientalism," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 62 (2009): 133–48, where I discuss the views of Patricia Crone on jihad as a legal institution.

28. On this point see my, "The Beginning of History? Between Islamic Law and the Nation-State," *Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. J. Esposito and E. Shahin (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), where I discuss the views of Abdullahi an-Naʿīm on Islam and the secular state; see also my "Legal Pluralism Between Islam and the Nation-State: Between Medieval Romanticism and Modern Pragmatism," *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 24 (2007), 101–109.