

A SOURCE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PERSON AND LEGACY OF BURHANUDDIN AL- NASAFI

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Abstract:

This article investigates the historical problems surrounding the personality and legacy of the 13th-century Mawarannahr mutakallim (theologian) Burhanuddin al-Nasafi (approx. 600/1203–687/1288). The analysis focuses on the discrepancy between the scarcity of biographical data on al-Nasafi (especially regarding his teachers) and his high reputation as the “Sheikh of Baghdad's philosophy”. The article substantiates his affiliation with the Maturidi school through his views on the issue of “the faith of the muqallid” (iman al-muqallid). Furthermore, it reveals the reasons for the centuries-old bibliographical confusion surrounding his major works, such as “Kashf al-Haqa'iq” (tafsir) and “al-Fusul al-Burhaniya” (jadal), including their erroneous attribution to other authors (like Fakhruddin al-Razi and Muwaffaquddin al-Kawashi), and presents methodological evidence proving his true authorship.

Keywords: Burhanuddin al-Nasafi, 13th-century Mawarannahr, Hanafi jurisprudence, Kalam and Philosophy, Source criticism, Historiographical problems, Attribution confusion, Fakhruddin al-Razi, Muwaffaquddin al-Kawashi, “Sheikh of Baghdad's philosophy”.

Introduction

One of the encyclopedic scholars who emerged from the 13th-century intellectual environment of Mawarannahr (Transoxiana) is Burhanuddin al-Nasafi. Studying his historical personality presents specific challenges in source studies (manbashunoslik). On one hand, *tabaqot* (biographical dictionary) works recognize him as an eminent scholar of his era in the rational sciences, particularly *kalam* (theology) and philosophy; on the other hand, information regarding his scholarly genealogy (silsila), especially his teachers, is almost non-existent.

Furthermore, the fate of the scholar's legacy has been associated with significant bibliographical confusion. His major works (such as the tafsir “Kashf al-Haqa'iq” and “al-Fusul al-Burhaniya”) were erroneously attributed to other famous authors for many centuries, including Fakhruddin al-Razi and Muwaffaquddin al-Kawashi.

The purpose of this article is to comparatively study these scattered biographical records (particularly his scholarly journeys from Nasaf to Delhi, Damascus, and Baghdad) as well as the internal content analysis of his works (through issues like “the faith of the muqallid,” which

defines his affiliation with the Maturidi school), thereby revealing the true position and contribution of this eminent thinker in the history of Islamic thought.

MAIN PART

The study of Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's biography reveals a specific problem within medieval *tabaqat-tarajim* (biographical dictionary) literature. The information concerning him in the sources is extremely brief, often repetitive, and presented in a scattered manner. None of these works provide a complete biography of the scholar. Therefore, to reconstruct his life path as much as possible, it is required to meticulously gather all allusions and records from various sources, compare them with each other, and create a comprehensive historical picture based on this.

Information about Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's life has come down to us through an uninterrupted historical-biographical tradition spanning more than seven centuries. The initial links in this chain are formed by historians who lived in the century after al-Nasafi, notably Shamsuddin al-Zahabi (673-748/1274-1348), who left records about him in his works "al-'Ibar fi khabar man ghabar"[1] and "Tarikh al-Islam"[2], and Zayniddin Umar ibn Muzaffar Ibn al-Wardi (691-749/1291-1348), author of the work "Tarikh Ibn al-Wardi"[3]. Later, during the Mamluk period, this initial information was compiled in major works such as "as-Suluk li-ma'rifati duwal al-muluk"[4] by Ahmad ibn Ali ibn 'Abd al-Qadir al-Maqrizi (766-845/1364-1441), "al-Manhal as-safi wa al-mustasfa ba'da al-wafi"[5] by Ibn Taghribirdi (813-874/1410-1470), and "Taj at-tarajim"[6] by Qasim ibn Qutlubugha (802-879/1399-1474), and transmitted to subsequent generations.

Coming to the Ottoman period, Hajji Khalifa (1017-1068/1609-1657) in his famous work "Kashf az-zunun 'an asami al-kutub wa al-funun"[7], and Ibn al-'Imad al-Hanbali (1032-1089/1622-1677) in "Shazarot az-zahab fi akhbari man zahab"[8], bibliographically cataloged al-Nasafi and his legacy. Finally, by the 20th century, this long-standing tradition was articulated in modern encyclopedic publications such as "al-A'lam"[9] by Khayriddin al-Zirikli (1310-1396/1893-1976) and "Mu'jam al-mu'allifin"[10] by 'Umar Rida Kahhala (1323-1408/1905-1987).

In the sources, Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's full name is given in several versions, such as "Muhammad ibn Muhammad" or "Muhammad ibn Mahmud". The scholar was known by several kunyas: sources note he had kunyas like "Abu al-Fadl"[11], "Abu al-Fadail"[12], and "Abu 'Abdillah"[13]. He gained fame among the scholarly community with the laqab (epithet) "Burhanuddin" (Proof of the Religion), and is sometimes mentioned more briefly as "Burhan al-Nasafi"[14].

The scholar's nisba, "al-Nasafi", indicates he was born or active in Nasaf (present-day Qarshi), one of the ancient cities of Mawarannahr (Transoxiana). There is no disagreement in the sources regarding his affiliation with the Hanafi school of law. Although some researchers consider him to have been an Ash'ari in creed, an analysis of his works shows this view to be mistaken and that the scholar actually belonged to the Maturidi doctrine. One of the clearest proofs confirming this is his view on "the faith of the muqallid" (iman al-muqallid). Al-Nasafi

considers faith based on taqlid (following) to be valid (sahih). This is a distinctive feature of the Maturidi school, which clearly differentiates it from the views of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, the Mu'tazilites, and many other mutakallimun.

There is no precise consensus in the sources regarding Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's date of birth, but the majority of medieval authors note that he was born in approximately 600/1203. However, his student, the historian Ibn al-Fuwati (642-723/1244-1323)[15], and the tabaqat scholar 'Abd al-Qadir al-Qurashi[16] emphasized that this date was an approximation, not an exact one.

In the Middle Ages, it was an important tradition for scholars of Mawarannahr and other Islamic lands to travel in search of knowledge. Although Burhanuddin al-Nasafi did not remain aloof from this tradition, his travels were within a limited circle compared to his contemporaries. According to the sources, he was active in three major scholarly centers outside his homeland of Nasaf: first, he went to India and taught students in the madrasas of the Delhi Sultanate. Later, he traveled to Syria and engaged in teaching in Damascus for a time. The final destination in his life path was Baghdad, the former capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. One of the most valuable pieces of information about Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's activity in Delhi and his unique teaching methodology is provided by the historian 'Abd al-Hayy al-Hasani (1286–1341/1869–1923). Its significance lies in the fact that al-Hasani quotes this information from a contemporary of al-Nasafi, one of the famous Sufi figures, Nizamuddin Awliya (633–725/1238–1325). According to al-Hasani's writing, al-Nasafi was an "eminent scholar... a sheikh and a great person in fiqh, usul, and the Arabic language"[17], who taught at the royal court in Delhi and served as a teacher to many scholars and sheikhs. According to Nizamuddin Awliya's testimony, al-Nasafi set three strict conditions for accepting students: eating only once during the day and night, whatever food he desired; never being late for lessons (a student late even once was permanently expelled from the lessons); and refraining from excessive formalities such as kissing the hand when meeting on the road, limiting oneself to giving the salam (greeting) according to the Sunnah. These conditions show that Burhanuddin al-Nasafi was a highly disciplined and principled teacher who led an ascetic life and prioritized scholarly seriousness and sincere respect over superficial formalities.

Sources describe Burhanuddin al-Nasafi as an eminent figure of his era, possessing encyclopedic knowledge. He possessed deep knowledge in several fields, such as *kalam* (theology), philosophy, and *tafsir* (exegesis). However, the majority of authors specifically emphasize that al-Nasafi was unrivaled in his time, especially in the arts of disputation (*bahs-munozara*) and *hikmah* (philosophical sciences). One of the earliest and most important descriptions regarding this is provided by Shamsuddin al-Zahabi in his work "Tarikh al-Islam": "*He is the polymath (allama), the theologian (mutakallim), the Sheikh of Baghdad's philosophy, and the author of many works on the science of khilaf (juristic disagreement), Burhanuddin al-Nasafi. Many people learned from him. He lived a long life*" [2].

This brief but meaningful assessment by al-Zahabi was later repeated almost verbatim by the historian Afifuddin al-Yafi'i (696–768/1298–1367) in his work "Mir'at al-jinan" [18]. Al-Nasafi's contemporary, the historian Salahuddin al-Safadi (696-764/1296-1363), also describes

him in "al-Wafi bi al-wafayat" as "a sheikh of the Hanafi school, a master of the science of logic, and the author of many works" [19].

An even more detailed and the most reliable description of his personality and scholarly profile is transmitted by Ibn Qutlubugha, narrating from his student Ibn al-Fuwati. Ibn al-Fuwati remembered his teacher as follows:

"He was our sheikh, the investigator (muhaqqiq), the meticulous scholar (mudaqqiq), the polymath (allama), and the sage (hakim). He had famous works. He was unparalleled in the sciences of khilaf and philosophy, was able to control his emotions, and also practiced asceticism (zuhd)"[20].

This testimony shows that al-Nasafi was not only a master of theoretical sciences but was also a great teacher respected by his students for his high moral qualities—asceticism and self-control.

Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's deep knowledge in rational sciences such as *kalam* (theology), logic, and philosophy necessitates that he must have studied under the eminent masters of his time. Nevertheless, the fact that not a single specific name of his teachers is mentioned in historical-biographical sources is one of the main problems in the research. A similar discrepancy is observed regarding his students. Although the historian Shamsuddin al-Zahabi wrote that "many people learned from him", the names of only a few of his students have been preserved in the sources.

Among his students were high-ranking politicians such as Sharafuddin Harun ibn Muhammad al-Juwayni (d. 685/1286), a *mudarris* (professor) at the Nizamiyya madrasa in Baghdad and a member of the "Sahib Diwan" family of the Ilkhanate state.

The most significant among his students is, without a doubt, the historian Kamaluddin 'Abd al-Razzaq ibn Ahmad, known as "Ibn al-Fuwati". Having left the most reliable primary information about his teacher, Ibn al-Fuwati was recognized by Jalaluddin al-Suyuti and al-Zahabi as a great historian and *hafiz* (memorizer of Hadith), described as a "garden of knowledge and an ocean of information."

Another of al-Nasafi's eminent students was Shamsuddin Muhammad al-Samarqandi (d. 722/1322), known by the titles "Hakim" (philosopher) and "Muhandis" (geometer). The fact that he authored works such as "Ashkal al-ta'sis" (geometry) and "al-Saha'if al-ilahiyya" (*kalam*) indicates that Burhanuddin al-Nasafi was also a strong instructor in rational and philosophical sciences.

Furthermore, while in Damascus, Burhanuddin al-Nasafi also taught Abu Muhammad A'lamuddin Qasim al-Barzali (665-739/1266-1338), a famous *muhaddith* (hadith scholar) and historian who was also Imam al-Zahabi's teacher. Another of his students was Jalaluddin Ahmad al-Hanafi (651-745/1253-1344), the *qadi* (judge) of Damascus and *mudarris* at the "Khatuniyya" madrasa, who, according to 'Abd al-Qadir al-Qurashi, learned the science of *khilaf* (juristic disputation) specifically from Burhanuddin al-Nasafi.

Sources express a unanimous opinion regarding Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's place of death—Baghdad—and his burial place (the Khayzuraniyya cemetery near the grave of Imam Abu

Hanifa). However, several different views exist among historians regarding his exact date of death, such as 684/1285 [25], 686/1287 [26], and 688/1289 [27].

Based on a comparative analysis of the available historical views, the majority of modern researchers recognize the date 687/1288 as the most correct and well-founded year. This conclusion relies on the strongest evidence—the direct testimony of al-Nasafi's student, the historian Ibn al-Fuwati. He recorded his teacher's date of death with the specific day and month, writing: "He passed away on the twenty-eighth day of the month of Dhul-Hijjah in the year 687 (January 25, 1289)" [28]. In historical source criticism, a student's information about their teacher is considered a primary and the most reliable source.

An analysis of Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's scholarly legacy shows that he was a thinker with a clear specialization for his time. The main emphasis in his work was placed on the rational sciences, such as *kalam* (Islamic theology), *jadal* (the art of scholarly disputation), and *hikmah* (philosophy). At the same time, he also wrote works dedicated to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*). In total, fourteen works attributed to him are known, the most important of which are analyzed below.

One of the scholar's important treatises in the field of *kalam* and philosophy is titled "Risala fi al-dawr wa al-tasalsul" (Treatise on Circularity and Infinite Regress) [29]. In it, the impossibility of *dawr* (circular reasoning) and *tasalsul* (an infinite causal chain), which are considered logical fallacies, is proven. The fact that the manuscript copy preserved in the Qatar National Library (No. 0117/6) begins with the address, "My son, know that...", indicates it was written for an educational purpose in response to a specific student's question.

One of al-Nasafi's most important works in the fields of philosophy and logic is his commentary on the great thinker Ibn Sina's "al-Isharat wa al-tanbihat" (Remarks and Admonitions). This work shows that al-Nasafi actively participated in the most complex philosophical debates of his time. Its existence is recorded in the works of bibliographers such as Hajji Khalifa [30], Isma'il Pasha al-Baghdadi [31], and 'Umar Rida Kahhala [32]. Today, numerous manuscript copies of the work are preserved in libraries around the world (including Saudi Arabia [No. 184], Egypt [No. 18076], the USA, Syria, India, Iraq, and Morocco). Nevertheless, some confusion regarding authorship is observed in the manuscript tradition of the work. For example, some copies in Turkish libraries are erroneously attributed to another famous commentator on Ibn Sina, Fakhruddin al-Razi (544-604/1149-1207).

The work dedicated to the art of disputation (*jadal*), "al-Fusul al-Burhaniya fi al-jidal" (The Burhanian Chapters on the Science of Disputation), holds a special place in Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's scholarly legacy. According to the modern researcher Larry Miller, this work is not merely about the rules of disputation, but is an important manual that established a methodology for reasoning and conducting debate based on the principles of Islamic jurisprudence [33]. Interestingly, a commentary titled "Miftah an-nazar fi 'ilm al-jidal" was written on this work of al-Nasafi by his student, the famous scholar Shamsuddin al-Samarqandi, and this commentary became even more famous than al-Nasafi's original text.

This situation caused significant confusion in later bibliographical sources. For example, Hajji Khalifa, in one part of his work "Kashf az-zunun" [34], mistakenly attributes al-Samarqandi's

"Miftah an-nazar" to al-Nasafi himself, calling it "Muqaddimatun fi al-jadal". While Isma'il Pasha al-Baghdadi lists this commentary under the title "Sharh Muqaddima al-Burhaniya" [35], al-Zirikli erroneously records "Sharh Muqaddima al-Burhaniya" and "Miftah an-nazar" as two separate works [36]. In conclusion, al-Nasafi's "al-Fusul al-Burhaniya" was an important methodological manual for its era, but the fame of the commentary written by his student al-Samarqandi surpassed that of the original text, causing centuries of bibliographical confusion. Another known work by the scholar, related to the art of disputation, is dedicated to the science of *khilaf* (scholarly disagreement in jurisprudence), titled "'Mansha' an-nazar fi 'ilm al-khilaf" (The Source of Reasoning in the Science of Juristic Disagreement) [37, 38, 39]. Furthermore, sources record the existence of a commentary he himself wrote on this very work, titled "Sharh al-mansha".

Another work indicating Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's deep engagement with the major religious-philosophical traditions of his time is "'Sharh ar-risala al-qudsiya bi-adillatiha al-Burhaniya lil-Ghazali" (Commentary on al-Ghazali's 'al-Risala al-Qudsiyya' with Burhanian Proofs). This work is a commentary dedicated to the famous treatise on creed, "al-Risala al-qudsiya," by the great thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (450-505/1058-1111). The phrase in the title, "bi-adillatiha al-Burhaniya" (with its Burhanian Proofs), indicates that al-Nasafi analyzed al-Ghazali's credal views therein using his own unique style and rational arguments. The fact that a scholar of the Maturidi doctrine wrote a commentary on the work of the most prominent representative of the Ash'ari school demonstrates that he also engaged in deep scholarly debate with other schools. One of Burhanuddin al-Nasafi's most important works is his Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) titled "Kashf al-Haqa'iq wa Sharh al-Daqa'iq" (Unveiling the Truths and Explaining the Subtleties). Significant confusion exists in historical sources regarding the title and authorship of this work. While the title appears as "Kashf al-Haqa'iq fit-Tafsir" in manuscripts, in *tabaqat* (biographical) books, it is referred to by descriptive names such as "al-Wadih" or "an abridgment of Fakhruddin al-Razi's tafsir."

The confusion regarding authorship is even more complex. Sources mention three main candidates: Burhanuddin al-Nasafi, Fakhruddin al-Razi, and Muwaffaquddin al-Kawashi. Some catalog entries attribute a tafsir titled "al-Wadih" to al-Razi; however, research has shown this to be incorrect. Influential bibliographers such as Hajji Khalifa (*Kashf az-zunun*) and Brockelmann attributed this tafsir to Muwaffaquddin al-Kawashi (d. 680/1282). Although this view is widespread, a stylistic analysis demonstrates its flaw.

It is known that al-Kawashi's confirmed tafsirs (like "at-Tabsira" and "at-Talkhis") primarily rely on linguistic-grammatical analysis and narrations (*riwayat*). "Kashf al-Haqa'iq", in contrast, places significant emphasis on *kalam* (theology), *jadal* (disputation), and logic. In it, the author actively engages in debate with sects such as the Mu'tazilites and the Jabrites. This style is not characteristic of al-Kawashi; rather, it perfectly matches the scholarly profile of al-Nasafi, who was known as a master of the rational sciences.

The analysis above—that is, the refutation of other candidates and the alignment of the work's style with al-Nasafi's scholarly orientation—confirms that the true author of "Kashf al-Haqa'iq" is indeed Burhanuddin al-Nasafi.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the life and legacy of Burhanuddin al-Nasafi reveals a striking discrepancy in medieval source studies: on the one hand, biographical information about the scholar (especially regarding his teachers) is extremely scarce; on the other hand, his reputation in his own era as the "Sheikh of Baghdad's philosophy" and "unparalleled in the sciences of *khilaf* (disputation)" was exceptionally high. His affiliation with Maturidism, although debated, is decisively proven by his acceptance of "the faith of the muqallid" (iman al-muqallid) as valid. Al-Nasafi's international activity (Delhi, Damascus, Baghdad) and the emergence of eminent students from his circle (such as Ibn al-Fuwati and Shamsuddin al-Samarqandi) confirm that he was an encyclopedic mutakallim-philosopher.

The fate of the scholar's legacy is distinguished by two major bibliographical confusions. Firstly, his work on disputation, "al-Fusul al-Burhaniya," was overshadowed by the famous commentary written by his student, Shamsuddin al-Samarqandi. Secondly, his magnum opus—the tafsir "Kashf al-Haqa'iq"—was erroneously attributed to Fakhruddin al-Razi or Muwaffaquddin al-Kawashi for a long time. However, the work's strong theological (*kalami*), polemical (*munazarawi*), and logical style proves that it belongs precisely to the pen of al-Nasafi.

In conclusion, Burhanuddin al-Nasafi, although his legacy remained obscured by bibliographical confusion for centuries, emerges as one of the most eminent mutakallim-philosophers of the 13th century, who carried the rational traditions of the Maturidi doctrine to the scholarly centers of India and the Near East.

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