

An Approach to the Theological Thought of al-Raghib al-Isfahani in the Book Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received 09 April 2025 Received in revised form 05 June 2025 Accepted 15 June 2025 Available online 22 June 2026 Keywords: Mufradat, al-Raghib al-Isfahani, Islamic theology (kalam), theological terminology	This research examines the theological thought of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī in the book Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān (The Vocabulary of Qur'anic Terms). Its objective is to elucidate the true meaning of Qur'anic theological terminology and to discover al-Rāghib's theological orientations through lexical analysis. The research method is descriptive-analytical, based on library sources. The findings indicate that al-Rāghib adopts a rationalist ('aql-garā) and transcendence-oriented (tanzīhī) approach in discussions of monotheism (tawhīd), divine attributes, justice ('adl), determinism and free will (jabr wa ikhtiyār), prophethood (nubuwwa), and the eschaton (ma'ād). The most important conclusion is that al-Rāghib's theological thought is close to the school of 'Adlīya (Imāmī Shī'a and moderate Mu'tazilism), because he emphasizes divine transcendence (tanzīh), the negation of corporeal vision (ru'yat al-jismānī), rational goodness and evil (ḥusn wa qubḥ al-'aqlī), divine justice, the negation of both determinism and absolute free will (the doctrine of al-amr bayn al-amrayn—the position between the two positions), although he refrains from explicit sectarian affiliation. Accordingly, Mufradāt is not merely a lexical work but a theological work of significant content, featuring innovations such as the distinction between will (irāda) and providence (masī'a), the analysis of divine decree and destiny (qaḍā' wa qadar) within the framework of divine knowledge, and the defense of the doctrine of al-amr bayn al-amrayn.

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1. Introduction

This research examines the theological thought of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī in the valuable book *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qurʾān* (The Vocabulary of Qurʾānic Terms). The primary objective is to elucidate the true meaning of Qurʾānic theological terminology through al-Rāghib's lexical analysis and to discover his theological orientations. The research method is descriptive-analytical, based on library sources. While most previous studies have regarded *Mufradāt* as a purely lexical or literary work, this research demonstrates that this book possesses a deep layer of coherent and innovative theological thought.

Background

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī lived in the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE), a period in which the main theological currents—such as Muʿtazilism, Ashʿarism, and Imāmī Shīʿism—were actively present in the Islamic world. Although al-Rāghib never explicitly disclosed his sectarian affiliation, in *Mufradāt* he adopts a rationalist (ʿaql-garā) and transcendence-oriented (tanzīhī) approach. The research findings indicate that his theological thought is close to the ʿAdlīya (Imāmī Shīʿa and moderate Muʿtazilism) because he emphasizes principles such as divine transcendence (tanzīh), the negation of corporeal vision (ruʾyat al-jismānī), rational goodness and evil (ḥusn wa qubḥ ʿaqlī), divine justice (ʿadl), the negation of both determinism (jabr) and absolute free will (tafwīd), and the acceptance of the doctrine of al-amr bayn al-amrayn (the position between the two positions).

2. Methodology

This research has been conducted employing a "descriptive-analytical" method, based on library-based research and textual analysis. The investigative process proceeds through the following stages:

Stage One: Source Selection and Data Collection — The primary source for this research is al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qurʾān*. The study examines the entries for key theological terms across major doctrinal categories, including: (a) theology and monotheism (ilāhiyyāt wa tawḥīd); (b) divine names and attributes (asmāʾ wa ṣifāt Allāh); (c) anthropology and human nature (insān); (d) religion and sacred law (dīn wa sharīʿa); (e) divine justice (ʿadl); (f) determinism and free will (jabr wa ikhtiyār); (g) divine decree and destiny (qaḍāʾ wa qadar); (h) prophethood and the Prophet's infallibility (nubuwwa wa ʿisma); (i) the nature of revelation (waḥy); and (j) the eschaton and related topics (maʿād).

Stage Two: Lexical and Semantic Analysis — The selected entries are subjected to detailed analysis, with attention to: (a) al-Rāghib's lexical definitions and etymological explanations; (b) his theological commentary and interpretive choices; (c) his engagement with alternative interpretations;

(d) his use of rational arguments (*adilla 'aqliyya*); and (e) the implicit or explicit theological commitments that inform his analysis.

Stage Three: Comparative Analysis — Al-Rāghib's positions are compared with the major theological schools of his time to identify points of convergence and divergence.

Stage Four: Synthesis and Evaluation — The findings are synthesized to identify the distinctive features of al-Rāghib's theological thought.

3. Findings

The findings of this research reveal that al-Rāghib's theological thought, as articulated in *Mufradāt*, is characterized by the following features:

3.1. Theology and Monotheism (*Ilāhiyyāt wa Tawḥīd*)

Al-Rāghib regards the word "Allāh" as a proper name (*ism 'alam*) for the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) and connects its roots to meanings of wonder, concealment, and profound attachment. He interprets monotheism (*tawḥīd*) as the simplicity of the Divine Essence (*basāṭat al-dhāt*) and the negation of any composition or plurality (*kathra*) in God. In discussing divine attributes, he regards divine life as absolute deathlessness and negates any resemblance to creation. He explicitly considers corporeal vision (*ru'yat al-ḥissī*) of God impossible and interprets the verses concerning vision as referring to divine knowledge and encompassing power (*iḥāṭa*). On the question of divine speech (*kalām*), although he affirms divine speech, he does not regard it as being of the kind of sounds and material letters, and regards its quality in the hereafter as unknown (*majhūl*). These middle positions distance him from the Ash'arīs and bring him closer to the 'Adlīya.

3.2. Innovation: The Distinction between Will (*Irāda*) and Providence (*Masī'a*)

One of al-Rāghib's significant innovations is the distinction between divine will (*irāda*) and divine providence (*masī'a*). In his view, divine will means definitive decree and legislative command (*ḥukm tashrī'ī*), the external realization of which is not necessary. Providence, however, means creation and bringing into existence (*ījād wa āfarīnīsh*), and whatever God has providentially willed necessarily occurs. This distinction paves the way for reconciling divine absolute sovereignty with human free will. Al-Rāghib also regards human will as real, although he considers its realization dependent upon divine providence.

3.3. Divine Decree and Destiny (*Qaḍā' wa Qadar*)

In discussing divine decree and destiny, al-Rāghib regards these as deriving from the levels of divine knowledge (*marātib al-'ilm al-ilāhī*). He defines *qaḍā'* as "final decision and definitive decree" (*fayṣala wa ḥukm qat'ī*) and *qadar* as "measurement and determination of the existential limits of things according to wisdom" (*andāza-gīrī wa ta'yīn-i ḥudūd-i wujūdī-yi ashyā' bar*

asās-i ḥikmat). By narrating the story of ‘Umar fleeing from the plague, he explains the difference between qaḍā’ and qadar: escape from qaḍā’ is impossible, but one can seek refuge from one qadar in another. This analysis, which is consistent with the views of philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā and ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī, reconciles divine foreknowledge with human free will.

3.4. Determinism and Free Will (Jabr wa Ikhtiyār)

On the question of determinism and free will, al-Rāghib explicitly defends the doctrine of al-amr bayn al-amrayn (the position between the two positions). He defines jabr as "reform through compulsion and force" (iṣlāḥ bi qahr wa zūr) and interprets "al-Jabbār" as one of God's names meaning "the Reformer" (iṣlāḥ-kunanda), not "the Compeller" (majbūr-kunanda). Citing the prophetic hadith "lā jabra wa lā tafwīḍa" (neither determinism nor absolute free will) and critiquing the view of the Mujaḥḥibīra (determinists), he offers a middle approach that preserves both God's absolute power and human moral responsibility. He also critiques a group of Mu‘tazilīs who deny any divine compulsion, while God has created human beings in circumstances such as death and illness in which they are compelled.

3.5. Divine Justice (‘Adl)

In discussing justice, al-Rāghib divides it into two types: absolute (muṭlaq)—which reason always deems good—and relative (nisfī)—which may be abrogated in the sacred law (sharī‘a). He bases his position on rational goodness and evil (ḥusn wa qubḥ ‘aqlī) and purifies the divine realm from the performance of reprehensible acts (af‘āl-i qabīḥ).

3.6. Anthropology (Insān)

In anthropology, al-Rāghib calls the human being "the microcosm" (‘ālam-i ṣaghīr), the manifestation of the macrocosm (‘ālam-i kabīr). He traces the root of the name "insān" to "nisyān" (forgetfulness), because the human being has forgotten the divine covenant (‘ahd-i ilāhī). He emphasizes "there is no compulsion in religion" (lā ikrāḥa fī al-dīn) and regards religion as a matter of the heart (amr-i qalbī) based on sincerity (ikhlāṣ), which is incompatible with compulsion.

3.7. Prophethood (Nubuwwa) and Revelation (Waḥy)

Al-Rāghib defines the prophet (nabī) as the bearer of an important and certain news (khabar-i muhimm-i yaqīnī) and the messenger (rasūl) as one sent for wise delivery of the message. He divides revelation (waḥy) into six types: through the angel, hearing a voice without seeing the speaker, inspiration in the heart (ilqā’ dar qalb), intuition (ilhām), instinctive subjugation (taskhīr-i gharīzī), and dreams (ru’yā). He establishes the infallibility (‘iṣma) of the prophets while preserving their free will.

3.8. The Eschaton (Ma'ād)

Al-Rāghib believes in corporeal resurrection (ma'ād-i jismānī), regards the soul as an immaterial reality (ḥaqīqat-i mujarrad), and considers death as an existential transition (intiqāl-i wujūdī). He describes the barzakh as the intermediate world between death and the Resurrection ('ālam-i miyān marg wa qiyāmat), intercession (shafā'a) as by divine permission, and explains iḥbāt (nullification of good deeds) and takfīr (expiations) within the framework of divine justice.

4. Conclusion

The final conclusion is that Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān is not merely a dictionary but a work of theology with significant innovations. Al-Rāghib's theological thought is close to the 'Adlīya (Imāmī Shī'a and moderate Mu'tazilism), and by avoiding sectarian bias, he has been able to present a moderate and rationalist system of Qur'ānic knowledge. It is recommended that future research compare al-Rāghib's theological views with those of prominent theologians of each school.

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