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The Contestation of the Two Tahafut: A Theological Analysis of the Debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd on the Harmony between Reason and Revelation

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Abstract

This article discusses the theological problem concerning the relationship between reason and revelation in the debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd through Tahafut al-Falasifah and Tahafut al-Tahafut. The main problem addressed is the tendency of existing readings to simplify this polemic as a conflict between anti-rationalism and the defence of philosophy, thereby overlooking the complexity of knowledge authority within the Islamic tradition. This study employs a qualitative method with a library research approach. The primary data sources consist of the two Tahafut works, while the secondary sources comprise journal articles and academic studies on Islamic philosophy, kalam, Islamic epistemology, burhān, ta'wil, and the relationship between reason and revelation. Data were collected through literature study and analysed using content analysis, supported by source and theoretical triangulation. The findings show that Al-Ghazali did not reject reason, but rather limited the metaphysical claims of philosophers when they exceeded the authority of revelation. Ibn Rushd, by contrast, defended demonstrative reason as a legitimate instrument for understanding truth without severing it from the Sharia. These findings affirm that the tension between the two Tahafut does not lie in a choice between reason or revelation, but in the epistemic discipline that regulates the limits of both proportionally within the classical and contemporary Islamic tradition. This article suggests that the two Tahafut provide important resources for contemporary efforts to reconstruct Islamic theology that positions revelation as a normative horizon and reason as a critical instrument for addressing contemporary scientific challenges in a reflective, ethical, critical, proportional, academic, and responsible manner.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali; Ibn Rushd; Tahafut; reason and revelation; Islamic theology.

Introduction

The relationship between reason and revelation constitutes one of the most decisive issues in the history of Islamic theology, as both not only shape the way Muslims understand truth, but also determine the direction of scientific development, ethics, and religious authority. Reason provides human beings with the capacity to weigh, prove, and construct arguments, while revelation offers a normative horizon that safeguards knowledge from being detached from divine purposes. Tension between the two emerges when philosophical reason seeks to explain metaphysical reality through rational demonstration, whereas theology demands that such explanations remain within the boundaries of belief sustained by revelation. This issue

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renders the debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd not merely an intellectual dispute of the past, but an important arena for understanding how Islam negotiates rationality, faith, and truth (Ghasemi, 2022; Griffel, 2021). While recent scholarship has complicated the opposition between faith and reason, insufficient attention has been paid to the debate as a contestation over epistemic authority.

This tension assumes its strongest form in two major works, namely Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-Falasifah and Ibn Rushd's Tahafut al-Tahafut. Tahafut al-Falasifah emerged as a critique of Muslim philosophers who were considered to have advanced a number of metaphysical doctrines that were not fully aligned with religious principles. The text used in this study affirms that Al-Ghazali's work rests on the scholarly basis of kalam in order to dissect the errors of the philosophers. Al-Ghazali himself even positioned Tahafut as a deconstructive project against the philosophical school, rather than as a complete construction of affirmative doctrinal theology (Ghasemi, 2022; Griffel, 2021; Mohamed, 2023). This position demonstrates that Al-Ghazali's critique did not arise from a blind rejection of reason, but from a theological anxiety concerning the use of reason that was perceived to exceed the limits of revelation.

Al-Ghazali's theological anxiety becomes clearer when it is recognised that he did not indiscriminately classify all philosophy as deviance. He distinguished between linguistic differences, philosophical ideas that did not contradict religious principles, and theories deemed to be at odds with the foundations of faith. The final category concerns major issues such as the beginning of the world, the attributes of God, and the perishability of bodies, which in the Islamic tradition cannot be separated from the concepts of creation, God's omnipotence, and the afterlife. Such a reading is important because it shows that Al-Ghazali was undertaking a theological selection of philosophy, rather than nullifying rationality as a path to knowledge (Erken, 2021; Kirabaev, 2024).

From this point of selection, Tahafut al-Falasifah develops its critique of twenty metaphysical and physical issues regarded as problematic. Several of the most decisive issues include the eternity of the world, God's knowledge of particulars, the relation of cause and effect, the immortality of the soul, and bodily resurrection. The list of problems in the Tahafut text shows that the issues debated were not merely technical matters of philosophy, but touched the core of Islamic theology concerning God, the world, human beings, and the hereafter (Schvarcz & Billig, 2022; Yusuf, 2021). This debate reveals that the concepts of reason and revelation do not stand as two separate domains, but meet one another in the question of how ultimate reality can be known, explained, and believed.

The problem becomes increasingly complex when Ibn Rushd appears through Tahafut al-Tahafut as a critical defence of philosophy and a refutation of Al-Ghazali. Ibn Rushd did not merely seek to defend the philosophers, but also sought to demonstrate that the use of demonstrative reason does not necessarily conflict with revelation. This debate becomes significant because both figures stand within the Islamic tradition, both acknowledge the importance of religious truth, yet they differ in arranging the relationship between rational argument and the authority of revelation (Alsayyed, 2025; Seven, 2024; Woerther, 2024). Such a difference enables the two Tahafut works to be read as a contestation of the theology of knowledge, namely a debate over who has the authority to determine the limits of truth when reason and sacred text appear to move in different directions.

This contestation of ideas cannot be simplified into Al-Ghazali being anti-reason and Ibn Rushd being pro-reason. Al-Ghazali, in fact, employed the sharpness of logic to dismantle the premises of the philosophers, while Ibn Rushd used demonstrative rationality to defend the possibility of harmony between philosophy and the Sharia (Alizadeh, 2024; Habib, 2025). The text of Tahafut al-Falasifah shows that Al-Ghazali rejected assumptions that were considered too hastily established as intuitive truths, especially when such assumptions prevented reason from more seriously examining the problem of creation and the possibility of divine power. This

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reading presents Al-Ghazali as a theologian who used reason to safeguard revelation, not as a thinker who closed the door to rational inquiry.

A similar dynamic makes Ibn Rushd important as an interlocutor who did not merely defend philosophy, but proposed another model for reading revelation rationally. For Ibn Rushd, truths cannot contradict one another if reason is used correctly and revelation is understood through proper interpretative instruments. This idea positions ta'wil, demonstration, and disciplinary knowledge as part of the intellectual responsibility of the ummah, rather than as threats to religion (Khalila et al., 2025; Troiano, 2023). The debate with Al-Ghazali ultimately reveals two different theological strategies: Al-Ghazali sought to protect doctrine from metaphysical speculation regarded as dangerous, while Ibn Rushd sought to defend the legitimacy of demonstrative philosophy within Islam by arguing that properly disciplined reason does not contradict revelation when interpreted through appropriate hermeneutical instruments.

The need to reread the two Tahafut works has become increasingly urgent in the context of contemporary scholarship. The development of modern science, digital technology, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and new cosmologies continues to generate questions about the origin of the universe, the nature of human beings, causality, freedom, and the limits of knowledge. This concern is also visible in the transformation of Indonesian cultural consumption in the digital age, where digital platforms democratise access while also introducing algorithmic control, market pressures, and new forms of cultural contestation (Susilo et al., 2026). Such a context strengthens the relevance of the two Tahafut, because contemporary theology must engage rational and technological change critically without surrendering meaning, ethics, and human responsibility to technical systems alone. This situation indicates that the problems once debated by Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd have not truly been resolved, but have merely shifted form into new intellectual spaces. Modern science requires rational courage to investigate reality, while theology requires conceptual sharpness in order to respond to change without losing its transcendent orientation (Saripudin et al., 2021; Smitananda & Akahat, 2024).

Contemporary reality shows that some religious discourses still easily fall into two extremes. Some parties suspect reason and science as threats to faith, while others treat scientific rationality as though it were sufficient to answer all dimensions of human existence. The ideal condition required is not the domination of one over the other, but an Islamic theological horizon capable of positioning reason as an epistemic gift and revelation as a source of normative orientation (Sagirah et al., 2024; Schvarcz & Billig, 2022). The debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd offers space for constructing such a model of reading, because both figures equally demonstrate that mature faith requires reason, and responsible reason requires an awareness of its own limits.

On this basis, this study views Tahafut al-Falasifah and Tahafut al-Tahafut as important arenas for re-examining the possibility of harmony between reason and revelation within the Islamic intellectual tradition. This study does not only aim to reread the debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd as a classical legacy, but also positions it as a source of theological reflection for contemporary scientific challenges. Through a theological reading of the contestation between the two Tahafut works, this study is directed towards showing that the future of Islamic theology does not have to stand in defensive tension against science, but can be constructed through critical dialogue between rationality, revelation, and human intellectual responsibility.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this article rests on Ibn Rushd's theories of burhān and ta'wil, alongside Al-Ghazali's epistemology of kalam (Haris, 2023; Strobino, 2019). The theory of burhān is used to read the position of demonstrative reason as a legitimate instrument for obtaining truth, particularly when philosophical argumentation encounters the text of

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revelation. The concept of ta'wil becomes an important entry point because Ibn Rushd provides space for non-literal interpretation when the apparent meaning of revelation seems not to accord with valid rational demonstration. This position is brought into dialogue with Al-Ghazali's epistemology of kalam, which places reason as an instrument of critique, but does not grant it absolute authority to subordinate the principles of revelation. Through this framework, the debate between the two Tahafut works can be read as a theological contestation concerning the sources, limits, and legitimacy of knowledge in Islam.

The framework of this article also needs to be situated within several foundational studies that have shaped modern scholarship on Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and the reason–revelation debate. Griffel's reading of Al-Ghazali's philosophical theology is important because it challenges the simplistic view that Al-Ghazali merely closed the door to rational inquiry, instead showing the complexity of his engagement with philosophy, causality, and theological epistemology (Griffel, 2009). Leaman's work on Averroes provides a crucial basis for understanding Ibn Rushd as a philosopher who defended the legitimacy of demonstrative reasoning within Islam rather than as a thinker who simply opposed theology (Leaman, 1988).. Marmura's edition and translation of Tahafut al-Falasifah is also foundational because it provides one of the most influential scholarly access points to Al-Ghazali's critique of the philosophers and the technical structure of his metaphysical arguments (Al-Ghazali, 2000). These foundational works help prevent the present article from relying only on recent studies and provide a stronger historical-philosophical grounding for reading the two Tahafut works as a contestation over epistemic authority.

Fakhry's contribution is particularly important for this article because his work situates Ibn Rushd not merely as a defender of philosophy against theology, but as a thinker who sought to preserve the integrity of demonstrative reasoning within the broader intellectual and religious horizon of Islam. His reading helps clarify that Ibn Rushd's project was not a simple opposition to Al-Ghazali, but part of a wider effort to defend the legitimacy of philosophical inquiry while maintaining the compatibility of rational demonstration with revealed truth (Fakhry, 2001). This perspective strengthens the article's argument that the two Tahafut works should be read as a contestation over epistemic authority rather than as a crude conflict between faith and reason.

The reading of the authority of ta'wil gains an important foundation from Alizadeh's (2024) study, which critically examines Ibn Rushd's view on granting the right of esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an to ahl al-burhān. The study employs a conceptual-critical approach based on library research into Ibn Rushd's thought on ta'wil, interpretative authority, and the capacity of rational-demonstrative groups. Its findings show that Ibn Rushd's idea of granting the right of ta'wil to ahl al-burhān raises serious questions regarding the limits of rational authority in interpreting revelation, especially when inner interpretation is reserved only for groups regarded as possessing demonstrative competence. Unlike that study, this article does not merely examine the authority of ta'wil in Ibn Rushd's thought, but situates it within a direct contestation with Al-Ghazali's critique through the two Tahafut works in order to read the possibility of harmony between reason and revelation.

The tension between demonstrative reason and public belief becomes increasingly visible in Alsayyed's (2025) study, which discusses Ibn Rushd's view of miracles between natural law and communal belief. The study uses a philosophical-theological approach through a textual reading of Ibn Rushd's thought on miracles, the order of nature, and the function of religion in public life. Its findings indicate that Ibn Rushd did not reject miracles as part of religious belief, but placed them within a careful relationship between natural law, the Sharia, and the pedagogical needs of believing communities. In contrast to Alsayyed's study, this article does not confine its attention to the issue of miracles, but broadens the analysis to the theological debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd concerning metaphysics, revelation, rationality, and the legitimacy of knowledge in the two Tahafut works.

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Metaphysics as the centre of the contestation between the two Tahafut works receives particular attention in Erken's (2024) study, which examines the debate on the eternity of the world through a logical analysis of the possibility of another world existing before the created world. The study employs a logical-philosophical approach to arguments in Tahafut al-Falasifah, particularly those related to time, creation, and the possibility of a world existing before the hādith universe. Its findings show that the question of the eternity of the world is not only related to cosmology, but also touches upon theological issues concerning creation, temporality, and the limits of rational inference. Unlike Erken's study, this article does not only discuss a single metaphysical issue, but reads the debate on the eternity of the world as part of a broader contestation between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd concerning the harmony of reason and revelation.

The epistemological dimension of Al-Ghazali is also strengthened by Taşkin's (2024) study, which discusses the scepticism of Al-Ghazali and Descartes through a response to Sami M. Najm's reading. The study uses a comparative-philosophical approach to examine Al-Ghazali's position on scepticism in relation to the Western philosophical tradition, particularly Descartes. Its findings show that Al-Ghazali's scepticism cannot be understood as destructive doubt, but rather as an epistemological strategy to liberate knowledge from taqlid and establish a stronger foundation for conviction. Unlike Taşkin's study, this article does not place Al-Ghazali in comparison with Descartes, but reads him within the internal contestation of the Islamic tradition alongside Ibn Rushd through the two Tahafut works, particularly in relation to reason, revelation, and the reconstruction of the horizon of Islamic theology for contemporary scientific challenges.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a library research approach (Strunk & Mwavita, 2020; Weyant, 2022). This design was selected because the focus of the study is directed towards an in-depth reading of texts, arguments, and the construction of theological thought in two main works, namely Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-Falasifah and Ibn Rushd's Tahafut al-Tahafut (Al-Ghazali, 2000; Rushd, 2008). Qualitative research enables the researcher to examine the debate on reason and revelation not as numerical data, but as a structure of meaning, argumentation, and epistemological contestation within the Islamic intellectual tradition. This study employs comparative textual analysis and philosophical hermeneutics of primary and secondary sources.

The primary data sources in this study are Tahafut al-Falasifah and Tahafut al-Tahafut, which form the centre of the analysis of the theological debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd. The secondary data sources include scholarly journal articles, academic books, and previous studies relevant to Islamic philosophy, kalam, Islamic epistemology, the relationship between reason and revelation, and contemporary scientific challenges.

Secondary data are used to broaden the interpretative context, strengthen the theoretical position, and ensure that the reading of the two Tahafut works is not detached from the development of contemporary academic discourse.

Data collection was conducted through library research by tracing, reading, classifying, and documenting parts of the texts relevant to the focus of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Gleeson, 2021; Takona, 2024). Data were collected from quotations, concepts, arguments, and main themes related to Al-Ghazali's and Ibn Rushd's positions on reason, revelation, metaphysics, the authority of knowledge, and the possibility of harmonising the two. The entire dataset was then organised thematically in order to reveal patterns of debate, points of convergence, and theological differences between the two figures.

Data analysis employed content analysis by systematically interpreting the textual content based on the main themes that emerge in the two Tahafut works (Krippendorff, 2022). The

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analysis was carried out through theme identification, argument categorisation, theological interpretation, and comparison of the intellectual positions of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing the primary texts with supporting academic literature, while theoretical triangulation was undertaken by using the perspectives of Islamic theology, kalam, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic epistemology so that the results of the analysis have a strong interpretative foundation and can be scientifically accounted for (Flick, 2022).

Results and Analysis

The Two Tahafut as a Theological Contestation over the Authority of Knowledge

Tahafut al-Falasifah generally appears as Al-Ghazali's critical work against the doctrines of the philosophers, which he regarded as containing confusion in metaphysical matters, particularly when rational arguments were used to explain God, the world, creation, and the afterlife beyond the limits acceptable to Islamic theology (Erken, 2021). Tahafut al-Tahafut emerges as Ibn Rushd's response to this critique by repositioning philosophy as a legitimate rational path for understanding truth, provided that reason is used demonstratively and is not detached from the framework of the Sharia (Shemesh, 2024).

These two works do not merely reveal different attitudes towards philosophy, but constitute an arena of theological contestation over who possesses the authority to determine truth: revelation safeguarded by kalam, demonstrative reason defended by philosophy, or a critical relationship between the two.

Table 1. Theological Contestation over the Authority of Knowledge in the Two Tahafut

Aspect of Contestation	Tahafut al-Falasifah by Al-Ghazali	Tahafut al-Tahafut by Ibn Rushd	Theological Meaning
Basic position of the text	A critique of the confusion of the philosophers, whose views were considered not to align with religious principles	A refutation of Al-Ghazali's critique and a defence of philosophical rationality	The two texts become an arena for contesting legitimacy between kalam and philosophy
Epistemic basis	Kalam as an instrument of critique against the metaphysical claims of philosophers	Burhān, or rational demonstration, as the basis of philosophical proof	The authority of knowledge is contested through standards of argumentative validity
Attitude towards reason	Reason is used to test and limit philosophical claims that exceed revelation	Demonstrative reason is defended as a legitimate instrument for understanding truth	The debate is not anti-reason versus pro-reason, but concerns the limits and discipline of reason
Relationship with revelation	Revelation becomes the normative horizon that limits metaphysical speculation	Revelation and rational demonstration can be harmonised through reasoning and ta'wil	The harmony of reason and revelation depends on how texts and reality are interpreted
Main metaphysical issues	The eternity of the world, the attributes of God, God's knowledge,	Defence and correction of Al-Ghazali's critique of	Metaphysics becomes the sharpest space of

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	causality, and bodily resurrection	these metaphysical issues	conflict between theology and philosophy
Intellectual consequence	Safeguarding creed from the absolutisation of philosophical reason	Safeguarding philosophy from theological rejection considered disproportionate	The Islamic tradition demonstrates a productive dynamic of internal critique
Contemporary relevance	Reminding that knowledge must not detach itself from theological orientation	Reminding that religion must not extinguish demonstrative reason	Contemporary Islamic theology requires critical dialogue between revelation and rationality

The contestation between the two Tahafut works shows that the authority of knowledge in Islam has never stood within a single and sterile space. Al-Ghazali entered the debate with a strong kalam sensitivity, so that every metaphysical claim of the philosophers was tested according to its implications for the principles of creation, divine omnipotence, and eschatological belief. This position is evident in Tahafut al-Falasifah, which is positioned as a deconstructive work against the philosophical school, rather than as a complete construction of doctrinal theology. Such a reading affirms that Al-Ghazali was not closing the door to reason, but supervising rational claims that, in his view, had moved too far beyond the horizon of revelation (Kirabaev, 2024; Moad, 2023; Seven, 2024).

This supervision of rational claims makes Al-Ghazali's critique more accurately read as a critique of philosophical authority in the domain of metaphysics, rather than as a rejection of knowledge as a whole. Tahafut al-Falasifah distinguishes between linguistic differences, philosophical ideas that do not contradict religious principles, and theories deemed to be at odds with the foundations of faith. This distinction is important because it shows that Al-Ghazali still provides space for rational knowledge as long as it does not touch points that damage theological principles. In this sense, the authority of revelation for Al-Ghazali does not mean annulling reason, but placing reason within a clear theological discipline (Kukkonen, 2025; Yaqoob, 2025).

This space of theological discipline becomes the point to which Ibn Rushd responds through Tahafut al-Tahafut. Ibn Rushd reads Al-Ghazali's critique as a methodological problem because not all philosophical views can be equated with deviation from religion. The structure of Tahafut al-Tahafut shows that Ibn Rushd formulates direct refutations of the issues that became the field of Al-Ghazali's critique, particularly the eternity of the world, the perpetuity of the world, and the statement concerning God as both maker and creator of the world. This structure indicates that Ibn Rushd did not merely defend philosophy as an intellectual tradition, but sought to restore rational standards of proof within theological debate (Alizadeh, 2024).

Ibn Rushd's defence of demonstrative reason reveals another form of knowledge authority in Islam. He does not position reason as the opponent of revelation, but as an instrument that can help human beings understand truth when used correctly. This position, however, is not a simple harmonisation, because in *Fasl al-Maqal* Ibn Rushd distinguishes levels of audience and reasoning, including rhetorical discourse for the masses, dialectical argument for theologians, and demonstrative proof for philosophers. His defence of reason therefore operates within a hierarchical epistemology in which not every form of interpretation is addressed to the same intellectual audience (Fakhry, 2001; Leaman, 1988). The crucial point lies in the distinction between reasoning that is genuinely demonstrative and speculation that only appears rational. Through this position, Ibn Rushd shifts the debate from the question of whether philosophy may be used in Islam to a more fundamental question, namely how reason should be used so that it does not conflict with revelation (Ghasemi, 2022; Griffel, 2021).

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The tension between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd ultimately shows that the two Tahafut works contain two models of theological epistemology (Batak, 2024; Kars, 2025; Mohamed, 2023). Al-Ghazali clearly seeks theological regulation of reason, while Ibn Rushd seeks a philosophical reconciliation.

The first model emphasises the necessity of revelatory limits to control metaphysical claims that may potentially damage creed. The second model emphasises the necessity of demonstrative reason so that revelation is not understood narrowly and anti-intellectually. The difference between the two should not be read as the defeat of one side, since it is precisely from this contestation that a picture emerges of the Islamic tradition as possessing a mature mechanism of internal critique in weighing truth.

The significance of the two Tahafut works for contemporary theology lies in their courage to bring faith and reason together within a serious space of debate. Al-Ghazali reminds us that rationality can turn into an excessive authority when it claims certainty over domains that exceed evidence. Ibn Rushd reminds us that theology can lose its intellectual strength when it rejects demonstrative reason disproportionately. From both figures, this article observes that the harmony of reason and revelation is not a settled condition, but a theological process that continues to be negotiated through critical reading, methodological discipline, and an awareness that human knowledge always moves between belief, argument, and limitation.

Reason and Revelation in the Metaphysical Dispute between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd

Reason and revelation constitute the most sensitive point in the metaphysical dispute between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd because the two figures differ not only in assessing philosophy, but also in determining how truth concerning God, the world, creation, and the afterlife can be justified (Moad, 2023; Taufiqurrahman & Hambali, 2021). Tahafut al-Falasifah presents Al-Ghazali as a theologian who examines the claims of the philosophers when metaphysical rationality is deemed to move beyond the limits of revelation. Tahafut al-Tahafut portrays Ibn Rushd as a defender of demonstrative reason who seeks to show that philosophy need not be read as a threat to religion. This dispute is important because the core of the debate is not merely the acceptance or rejection of philosophy, but the determination of the legitimate boundary between rational reasoning and the authority of revelation in constructing Islamic theological knowledge.

Table 2. The Metaphysical Dispute between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd in the Relation between Reason and Revelation

Metaphysical Issue	Al-Ghazali's Position in Tahafut al-Falasifah	Ibn Rushd's Position in Tahafut al-Tahafut	Implications for the Relation between Reason and Revelation
Eternity of the world	Rejects the view that the world is eternal because it contradicts the principle of creation and God's will	Re-examines Al-Ghazali's critique of the philosophers' argument on the eternity of the world	Reason is debated in terms of its capacity to explain the origin of the world
Perpetuity of the world	Questions the idea that the world has no end because it may weaken God's power over creation	Defends the possibility of a rational reading of the continuity of the world without negating God	Revelation becomes the normative boundary, while reason becomes an instrument of cosmological explanation
God as creator	Affirms God as a creator who possesses active will over the world	Reconsiders the relation between God as maker	The debate moves towards how divine power is

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		and creator within a philosophical framework	understood theologically and rationally
God's knowledge	Rejects the philosophers' claim that limits God's knowledge of particulars	Directs the debate towards the precision of understanding the form of God's knowledge	Reason must be careful when explaining God's attributes, which transcend human experience
Causality	Critiques the tendency of philosophers to necessitate the relation of cause and effect too strictly	Defends the rational order of nature as the basis for the possibility of knowledge	Revelation preserves God's power, while reason preserves the intelligibility of natural law
Bodily resurrection	Rejects interpretations that reduce resurrection to a merely metaphorical meaning	Rereads Al-Ghazali's critique of the philosophers' understanding of eschatology	The dispute between reason and revelation reaches its peak in the limits of interpretation concerning the afterlife
Standard of truth	Metaphysical truth must submit to the principles of revelation when rational arguments are uncertain	Demonstrative rational truth does not contradict revelation if it is interpreted properly	The harmony of reason and revelation depends on argumentative discipline and the legitimacy of ta'wil

The dispute over the eternity of the world becomes the main entry point for understanding how Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd position reason before revelation. Al-Ghazali views the claim concerning the world's eternity as a highly serious theological problem not merely because it challenges the doctrine of creation, but because it affects the understanding of God's voluntary agency, divine omnipotence, temporal origination, and the limits of philosophical demonstration. His objection is therefore not simply that philosophers speak about cosmology, but that their argument risks turning the relation between God and the world into a necessary causal structure rather than an act of divine will grounded in theological freedom (Al-Ghazali, 2000; Griffel, 2009). The introduction to Tahafut al-Falasifah affirms that one of the main issues criticised by Al-Ghazali is the eternity of the world, the endlessness of the world, and views that imply a rejection of religious principles. In this context, reason is not rejected, but is required not to transform metaphysical speculation into certainty that subordinates revelation (Kaya, 2025).

Ibn Rushd's defence of philosophy arises from a different anxiety. He considers that criticism of the philosophers should not be conducted by equating all rational arguments with deviation from religion. The table of contents of Tahafut al-Tahafut shows that Ibn Rushd directly responds to the problems of the eternity of the world, the perpetuity of the world, and the issue of God as both maker and creator of the world (Woerther, 2024; Yaqoob, 2025). This structure shows that Ibn Rushd does not avoid theological problems, but enters the centre of the dispute in order to examine whether Al-Ghazali's critique truly concerns philosophical error or rather the way philosophical arguments are understood.

The difference between the two becomes sharper when metaphysical issues are directed towards divine attributes and divine knowledge. Al-Ghazali rejects the tendency of philosophers who, in his view, limit God's knowledge of particular realities because such limitation can damage the understanding of God's omniscience. This position shows that revelation for Al-Ghazali is not merely a normative text, but a horizon that prevents discourse about God from being reduced by human rational categories. Reason continues to function, but its function is to test argumentation, not to set limits upon God (Klinger, 2024; Seitakhmetova et al., 2024; Woerther, 2024).

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Ibn Rushd views the issue in a more demonstrative manner. For him, many contradictions between philosophy and theology arise from an imprecise reading of terms, premises, and the intentions of the philosophers. He does not seek to make reason a substitute for revelation, but aims to show that sound reasoning can help human beings understand a deeper structure of truth. At this point, the relation between reason and revelation is not understood as a conflict between two sources that negate one another, but as an interpretative relationship that demands methodological precision.

The dispute concerning bodily resurrection reveals the peak of tension between metaphysical reasoning and religious doctrine (Vitkovic, 2025). Al-Ghazali judges that the denial or reduction of bodily resurrection into a merely metaphorical interpretation constitutes a violation of religious principles. The introductory section of Tahafut al-Falasifah mentions bodily resurrection, bodily enjoyment in paradise, and bodily torment in hell as part of the issues debated. This issue shows that, for Al-Ghazali, revelation possesses final authority when it concerns eschatological matters that cannot be fully reached by speculative reason.

A reading of the metaphysical dispute between these two figures shows that the harmony of reason and revelation cannot be built through simplification. Al-Ghazali teaches that reason must recognise its limits when entering the domains of divinity, creation, and the afterlife. Ibn Rushd reminds us that revelation must not be used as a reason to reject valid demonstrative reasoning. These two positions make the contestation of the Tahafut works remain relevant because contemporary Islamic theology still faces similar problems, namely how to keep faith rooted in revelation without losing the courage to think, and how to develop rationality without turning it into a single authority that closes the space of transcendence.

The Reconstruction of Islamic Theology amid Contemporary Scientific and Intellectual Challenges

The reconstruction of Islamic theology amid contemporary scientific and intellectual challenges can be built upon a fundamental lesson offered by the two Tahafut works: the Islamic tradition possesses an internal mechanism for examining knowledge without severing the relationship between reason and revelation (Martini Bonadeo, 2023). Tahafut al-Falasifah shows that Al-Ghazali used the instruments of kalam to correct philosophical claims considered to have entered too far into the domain of metaphysics without an adequate basis of certainty. Tahafut al-Tahafut presents Ibn Rushd as a thinker who offered a defence of demonstrative reason so that philosophy would not be hastily excluded from the Islamic scholarly tradition. The encounter between these two positions provides an important foundation for contemporary theology: religion must not lose its critical force against the absolutisation of reason, yet it must also not lose its intellectual courage to engage in dialogue with science.

This relevance becomes more concrete when applied to contemporary debates such as modern cosmology, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology. In cosmology, Al-Ghazali's caution reminds theology not to transform scientific models of the universe into metaphysical claims that exclude divine agency, while Ibn Rushd's defence of demonstrative reason encourages Muslim theology to engage scientific explanations of natural order without fear. In artificial intelligence, the same balance requires theology to examine rational and technological innovation critically, without either rejecting it as a threat to faith or absolutising it as an autonomous source of meaning. In biotechnology, the two Tahafut offer a framework for asking how scientific intervention in life, body, and human agency may be assessed through both rational inquiry and revelatory ethics, so that contemporary Islamic theology can remain intellectually open while preserving normative responsibility (Saripudin et al., 2021; Smitananda & Akahat, 2024; Sagirah et al., 2024).

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Table 3. The Reconstruction of Islamic Theology Based on the Contestation of the Two Tahafut

Dimension of Reconstruction	Lesson from Al-Ghazali	Lesson from Ibn Rushd	Relevance for Contemporary Scholarship
Authority of knowledge	Rational claims need to be examined when they enter the domains of metaphysics and creed	Demonstrative reason needs to be recognised as a legitimate instrument for understanding reality	Theology needs to be critical of science without becoming anti-intellectual
Relation between reason and revelation	Revelation becomes the normative horizon that maintains the limits of speculation	Reason and revelation can be brought together through disciplined argumentation and interpretation	Dialogue between religion and science requires rigorous standards of argumentation
Metaphysics and science	Explanations of the world must not exclude God's will and power	The order of nature needs to be understood so that science can continue to develop	Studies of cosmology, biotechnology, and AI require mature theological reflection
Critique of epistemic extremism	Philosophical reason must not be turned into a single authority	Theology must not reject reason disproportionately	Islamic theology needs to avoid both scientism and anti-rationalism
Function of ta'wil and interpretation	Interpretation must safeguard the principles of creed	Ta'wil can be used when the apparent meaning and rational demonstration appear to be in tension	The reading of revelation needs to be responsive to developments in knowledge
Future of Islamic theology	Theology must preserve the foundations of faith	Theology must remain open to critical reason	The reconstruction of theology is directed towards reasoning faith and responsible reason

The reconstruction of Islamic theology needs to begin from the awareness that contemporary scientific challenges cannot be answered merely by mechanically repeating classical formulas. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd lived within an intellectual context different from the present, yet the issues they debated continue to touch upon an ongoing problem: how religion responds to claims of knowledge that come from outside the theological tradition. Tahafut al-Falasifah demonstrates Al-Ghazali's courage in examining philosophy through the standards of kalam, while Tahafut al-Tahafut shows Ibn Rushd's courage in examining theological critique through the standards of demonstrative rationality (Badi, 2025; Richmond, 2022; Seven, 2024). These two attitudes teach that Islamic theology must not be passive before the development of science, but should emerge as a field for examining the meaning, limits, and responsibility of knowledge.

Such awareness becomes important because contemporary science often moves with very strong claims about reality. Modern cosmology discusses the origin of the universe, biotechnology touches the boundaries of the body and life, artificial intelligence transforms how human beings understand reason, and cognitive science challenges concepts of consciousness and freedom. Applied to AI ethics, a Ghazalian principle would require Muslim theology to question any tendency to treat algorithmic calculation as an autonomous source

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of truth, because technical efficiency cannot replace moral responsibility, divine accountability, or the ethical protection of human dignity.

A Rushdian principle, by contrast, would encourage serious engagement with AI as a product of disciplined rational inquiry, provided that its claims are tested through demonstrative standards, transparency, and public benefit. Together, these principles suggest that AI should neither be rejected as inherently threatening nor accepted as epistemically neutral. Its design and use must be evaluated through rational scrutiny, ethical accountability, and revelatory values concerning justice, harm, human agency, and the limits of technological authority.

All these developments are not identical with threats to faith, but they can become threats when treated as a single authority that closes off the transcendent dimension. Al-Ghazali's stance remains relevant in this context because he reminds us that rationality needs to recognise its limits when entering the domains of divinity, creation, and the afterlife.

Ibn Rushd's openness to demonstrative reason provides a counterbalance so that theology does not become a defensive space that suspects every form of rational knowledge. The Islamic tradition is not built upon the rejection of reason, but upon the recognition that reason forms part of the human epistemic gift. Ibn Rushd is important for theological reconstruction because he shows that the truth of revelation need not fear sound reasoning. This position enables contemporary Islamic theology to engage with science in a more mature manner, neither by submitting entirely to science nor by closing itself off from intellectual development.

The tension between these two positions instead produces a productive space for the formation of a more responsive theology. Al-Ghazali provides the foundation of caution so that theology does not lose its normative principles, while Ibn Rushd provides the foundation of openness so that theology does not lose its rational vitality. Islamic theological reconstruction can be built from this critical synthesis: revelation remains the orientation of value, while reason becomes an instrument for understanding reality responsibly (Hadisi, 2022; Magomedova, 2023). Theology in this form does not stop at the defence of doctrine, but moves as a mode of thinking capable of reading the changes of the age without losing its foundation of faith.

This direction of reconstruction also requires a renewal in the way religious texts are read. Contemporary challenges often present issues that are not directly mentioned in classical texts, so theology requires interpretative instruments that are careful, disciplined, and not arbitrary. The idea of ta'wil in Ibn Rushd's tradition can become an entry point for understanding how revelation is read in relation to rational knowledge, while Al-Ghazali's caution safeguards interpretation from turning into a liberation of meaning detached from the principles of creed. Through this pattern, Islamic theology can avoid two dangers at once: literalism that closes off reason and rationalism that neglects revelation.

The contemporary relevance of the two Tahafut works ultimately lies in their capacity to shape a critical, reflective, and open theological ethos. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd show that sharp differences within the Islamic tradition should not be understood as intellectual collapse, but as evidence that Islam has a long history of maintaining debate over truth. Contemporary Islamic theology can draw upon this legacy to face the challenges of science, technology, and modern thought with greater confidence. Through this reading, the harmony of reason and revelation is not understood as a simple unification, but as an ongoing theological task in examining knowledge, preserving faith, and constructing human intellectual responsibility.

Discussion

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The debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd in the two Tahafut works shows that the relationship between reason and revelation has never been a settled issue within the tradition of Islamic theology. The findings of this article show that Tahafut al-Falasifah and Tahafut al-Tahafut are not merely two polemical texts, but two major models for arranging the authority of knowledge. Al-Ghazali advances a critique of the metaphysical claims of the philosophers because uncontrolled rationality can turn into an authority that suppresses revelation. Ibn Rushd, on the other hand, defends demonstrative reason because an excessive rejection of philosophy can cause religion to lose its intellectual force. This dynamic affirms that the Islamic tradition is not constructed through an absolute separation between faith and reason, but through a theological negotiation that continually moves between belief, proof, and interpretation (Harahap & Hamka, 2023; Qatawneh & Rababah, 2021).

The global context today makes the debate between the two Tahafut works increasingly relevant because modern science continues to produce major claims concerning the origin of the universe, consciousness, the body, intelligence, and the future of humanity. Cosmology, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and cognitive science do not function merely as technical disciplines, but also shape the way human beings understand reality and themselves (Sembok, 2026). Such a situation presents a challenge similar to the classical problem in the Tahafut, namely how theology responds to rational knowledge with strong explanatory power without losing its transcendent orientation. This article finds that the legacy of Al-Ghazali provides a basis for criticising the absolutisation of reason, while the legacy of Ibn Rushd provides a foundation for preventing theology from falling into anti-intellectualism. This means that Al-Ghazali's contribution should be understood as a call for epistemic humility, especially when rational speculation enters metaphysical domains such as creation, divine agency, causality, and the afterlife. Ibn Rushd's contribution, by contrast, lies in his insistence that theology must remain intellectually disciplined and open to demonstrative reasoning, because revelation is not weakened by valid rational inquiry but can be more deeply understood through proper interpretation. The synthesis of both positions offers a balanced theological model in which reason is neither absolutised as the sole measure of truth nor dismissed as a threat to faith.

The need to rearrange the relationship between reason and revelation is also important because contemporary religious discourse often moves between two extremes. Certain religious expressions reject scientific reason because it is considered a threat to the purity of faith, while certain forms of modern rationalism treat science as the only legitimate way to understand reality. Both extremes are equally problematic because the former narrows religion into a defensive posture, while the latter reduces the existential depth of human beings to objects of technical explanation. A reading of the two Tahafut works shows that Islamic theology possesses a classical source for constructing a more mature position: revelation becomes the horizon of value, while reason becomes a critical instrument for reading reality responsibly.

This finding is in line with Alizadeh (2024), who shows that Ibn Rushd's idea of granting the right of ta'wil to ahl al-burhān raises an important issue concerning the authority of interpreting revelation. Alizadeh's study affirms that burhān is not only related to the capacity to reason, but also to who is considered worthy of entering the domain of non-literal interpretation. This article extends that reading by showing that the issue of ta'wil cannot be separated from the overall contestation of the two Tahafut works. The authority of ta'wil in Ibn Rushd becomes sharper when read in confrontation with Al-Ghazali, because their debate concerns not only the right to interpret, but also the limits of reason in determining metaphysical truth.

The connection between rationality and public belief also intersects with Alsayyed's (2025) findings on Ibn Rushd's view of miracles. Alsayyed positions Ibn Rushd between natural law and communal belief, so that miracles are not merely read as disruptions to the order of nature, but as theological issues related to the function of religion and public pedagogy. This article continues that direction by showing that the problem of miracles is only one part of a broader

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issue, namely how demonstrative reason, revelation, and the needs of the ummah are brought together within a theological framework. Ibn Rushd becomes important because he does not dismantle revelation for the sake of reason, but seeks to ensure that revelation remains rationally readable without losing its spiritual and social functions.

The discussion of the eternity of the world in this article is also closely related to Erken's (2024) study, which logically analyses the debate on the possibility of another world existing before the created world. Erken's study shows that the debate on the eternity of the world cannot be reduced to cosmology alone, because it touches upon questions of creation, time, and the limits of rational inference. This article expands that position by locating the eternity of the world as one node in the contestation between reason and revelation in the two Tahafut works. In this sense, the issue of the eternity of the world does not stand as an isolated metaphysical problem, but becomes a space in which Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd formulate different standards of certainty, possibility, and theological authority.

The epistemological dimension of Al-Ghazali in this article also has a strong connection with Taşkin (2024), who reads Al-Ghazali's scepticism in comparison with Descartes. Taşkin shows that Al-Ghazali's doubt cannot be understood as a form of the destruction of knowledge, but rather as an epistemological strategy to liberate human beings from taqlid and construct a stronger foundation for conviction. This article situates that finding within the space of internal Islamic debate, namely when Al-Ghazali's scepticism and epistemological critique directly confront Ibn Rushd's defence of philosophy. This reading affirms that Al-Ghazali is not an anti-rational figure, but a thinker who demands that reason should not too easily claim certainty in domains that still require theological judgement.

The integration of the findings with Ibn Rushd's theories of burhān and ta'wil shows that the harmony of reason and revelation is not constructed through a simple blending of philosophy and religion. Burhān demands argumentative discipline, while ta'wil demands interpretative caution when the apparent meaning of revelation appears to intersect with the results of demonstrative reasoning (Strobino, 2019). The findings of this article show that Ibn Rushd gives space to reason not because he seeks to replace revelation, but because the truth of revelation cannot contradict valid rational truth. This framework makes Tahafut al-Tahafut readable as an effort to preserve the intellectual dignity of religion through the disciplines of proof and interpretation.

A reading of Al-Ghazali's epistemology of kalam reveals another side of this harmony, namely the necessity of limits for metaphysical rationality (Mohamed, 2023). Al-Ghazali uses reason sharply, but he does not allow reason to become the sole authority that determines the truth of God, creation, and the afterlife. This position is important because theology requires not only the courage to think, but also an awareness of human limitation in reaching transcendent reality. The encounter between Ibn Rushd's theory of burhān and Al-Ghazali's epistemology of kalam produces a more balanced framework: reason is needed to avoid taqlid and rigidity, while revelation is needed to ensure that knowledge does not lose its divine direction.

The novelty of this article lies in integrating epistemic authority with contemporary theological reconstruction in its reading of the two Tahafut works as a theological contestation over the authority of knowledge that is relevant for the reconstruction of contemporary Islamic theology. This study does not stop at the classical mapping that Al-Ghazali criticised philosophy and Ibn Rushd defended it, but positions both figures as two epistemological architects who are equally necessary for constructing a theology that is reasoning, critical, and still rooted in revelation. Al-Ghazali offers the discipline of limits so that reason does not turn into metaphysical absolutism, while Ibn Rushd offers the discipline of burhān so that revelation is not read narrowly and anti-intellectually. From the tension between the two, this article offers a horizon of Islamic theology that is not defensive towards science, does not submit to scientism, and does not lose the courage to make reason and revelation two paths that mutually examine one another in the search for truth.

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This conclusion becomes stronger when returned directly to the primary texts. In *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, Al-Ghazali does not reject rational inquiry as such, but directs his critique toward specific metaphysical claims that he considers theologically excessive, especially the eternity of the world, the limitation of God's knowledge of particulars, and the denial or metaphorisation of bodily resurrection (Al-Ghazali, 2000). His use of kalam therefore shows that reason remains necessary, but must be disciplined when it enters questions of creation, divine agency, and the afterlife. In *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, Ibn Rushd responds by insisting that philosophical demonstration should not be dismissed hastily, because valid reasoning can clarify rather than undermine religious truth when its method and level of interpretation are properly understood (Rushd, 2008). The two primary works thus do not simply oppose faith and philosophy, but stage a deeper contest over how far reason may go, how revelation should guide interpretation, and how theological knowledge should remain both intellectually rigorous and normatively accountable.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the contestation between Tahafut al-Falasifah and Tahafut al-Tahafut cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between theology and philosophy, but should be understood as a profound debate concerning the authority of knowledge in Islam. Al-Ghazali shows that reason needs to operate within theological discipline so that metaphysical claims do not exceed the limits of revelation, while Ibn Rushd affirms that demonstrative reason retains legitimacy in understanding truth when used soundly and responsibly. The findings of this article show that the harmony of reason and revelation is not a final state free from tension, but an intellectual process that continues to be negotiated through critique, ta'wil, proof, and awareness of the limits of human knowledge. Accordingly, the two Tahafut works provide an important foundation for the reconstruction of Islamic theology, one that is capable of preserving the transcendent orientation of revelation without losing rational courage in facing contemporary scientific challenges.

The limitation of this study lies in its textual and conceptual focus on the two main works, meaning that it has not extensively traced the reception of Al-Ghazali's and Ibn Rushd's thought in later Islamic theological traditions or in empirical debates within modern philosophy of science. Further studies may expand this inquiry by comparing the reception of the two Tahafut works in the Ash'ari, Maturidi, and post-Ibn Rushd Islamic philosophical traditions, or by examining the relevance of the relation between reason and revelation to contemporary issues such as modern cosmology, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and the ethics of science. Future research may also develop an interdisciplinary reading between Islamic theology, philosophy of science, and hermeneutics so that the reconstruction of Islamic theology does not stop at the classical legacy, but becomes a critical framework for producing knowledge that is more reasoning, ethical, and divinely oriented.

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