

Imam Gazzali: A Great Philosopher of Islam

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Abstract

Imam Gazzali is known one of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, logicians and mystics of the Islamic Golden Age. He is considered to be the 5th century's mujaddid, means a renewer of the faith, who, according to the prophetic hadith, appears once every hundred years to restore the faith of the Islam and its community. His works were so highly acclaimed by his contemporaries that al-Ghazali was awarded by the honour of the title "Hujjat al-Islam" means "Proof of Islam" Gazzali believed that the Islamic spiritual tradition had become moribund and that the spiritual sciences taught by the first generation of Muslim had been forgotten. This belief led him to write his mugnum opus entitled 'Ihyaulumad-din' (The Revival of the Religious Science). Among his other works, the Tuhfat al- Falasifa (Incoherence of the philosophers) is a landmark in the history of philosophy, as it advances the critique of Aristotelian science developed later in 14th century in Europe. Others have cited his opposition to certain stands of Islamic philosophy as a detriment to Islamic scientific progress. Besides his work that successfully changed the course of Islamic philosophy the early Islamic Neo-Platonism that developed on the grounds of Hellenistic philosophy, for example, was so successfully criticized by al- Ghazzali that it never recovered—he also brought the orthodox Islam of his time in close contact with Sufism. It became increasingly possible for individuals to combine orthodox theology and Sufism, while adherents of both camps developed a sense of mutual appreciation that made sweeping condemnation of one by the other increasingly problematic. Al-Ghazzali occupies a unique position in the history of Muslim religious and philosophical thought by whatever standard we may judge him. Al-Subki went so far in his estimation of him as to claim that if there had been a prophet after Muhammad, al-Ghazzali would have been the man. Various spiritual phases developed by him. He was in turn a canon-lawyer and a scholastic, a philosopher and a skeptic, a mystic and a theologian, and a moralist. His position as a theologian of Islam is undoubtedly the most eminent. Through a living synthesis of his creative and energetic personality, he revitalized Muslim theology and reoriented its values and attitudes. His combination of spiritualization and fundamentalism in Islam had such a marked stamp of his powerful personality that it has continued to be accepted by the community since his time. His outlook on philosophy is characterized by a remarkable originality which, however, is more critical than constructive. In his works on philosophy one is struck by a keen philosophical acumen and penetration with which he gives a clear and readable exposition of the views of the philosophers, the subtlety and analyticity with which he criticizes them, and the candour and open-mindedness with which he accepts them whenever he finds them to be true. Nothing frightened him nor fascinated him, and through an extraordinary independence of mind, he became a veritable challenge to the philosophies of Aristotle and Plotinus and to their Muslim representatives before him, al-Farabi and ibnSina. The main trends of the religious and philosophical thought of al-Ghazali, however, come close to the temper of the modern mind. The champions of the modern movement of religious empiricism, on the one hand, and that of logical positivism, on the other, paradoxical though it may seem, would equally

find comfort in his works. The teachings of this remarkable figure of Islam pertaining either to religion or philosophy, either constructive or critical, cannot, however, be fully understood without knowing the story of his life with some measure of detail, for, in his case, life and thought were one: rooted in his own personality. Whatever he thought and wrote came with the living reality of his own experience.

Keywords: Philosophy, Philosopher, Islamic, Theology, Imam Gazzali, Theologians, Mystics, Mujaddid, Islamic Spiritual, Hujjat Al-Islam, Religious Science, Islamic Philosophy, Incoherence, Orthodox Theology, Sufism, Revitalized, Extraordinary.

Prologue

Imam al-Ghazzali was born in 448 AH. He was a Muslim scholar, law specialist, rationalist, and spiritualist of Persian descent. He was born in Tabaran, a town in the district of Tus, Khorasan, now its part of Iran. His father was so poor and died in poverty and left the young al – Ghazali and his brother Ahmad to the care of a sufi. According to Abd al- Ghafir al- Farasi al-Ghazali began to receive instruction in fiqh from Ahmad al-Radhakani, a local teacher and Abu Ali Farmadi, a Naqshbandisufi from Tus. Later, he studied under al- Juwayni, a famous jurist and theologian and the most outstanding Muslim scholar of his time, after al-Juwayni’s death in 1085, al-Ghazali departed from Nishapur and joined the court of nizam al-Mulk, the powerful vizier of the Seljuq empire, which was likely centered in Isfahan. After bestowing upon him the titles of “Brilliance of the Religion” and “Eminence among the religious Leaders,” Nizam al-Mulk advanced al- Ghazali in July 1091 to the “most prestigious and most challenging” professorial position at the time: the Nizamiyya madrasa in Baghdad. He underwent a spiritual crisis in 1095, which some speculate was brought on by clinical hysteria, abandoned his career and left Baghdad on the pretext of going on pilgrimage to Mecca. Making arrangements for his family, he disposed of his wealth and adopted an ascetic lifestyle. According to biographer Duncan B. Macdonald, the purpose of abstaining from scholastic works was to confront the spiritual experience and more ordinary understanding of “the Word and the Traditions.” After sometime in Damascus and Jerusalem, with a visit to Medina and Mecca in 1096, he returned to Tus to spend the next several years in *uzla*. This consisted in abstaining from teaching at state-sponsored institutions, but he continued to publish, receive visitors and teach in the *zawiya* and *khanqah* that he had built. Fakhr al-Mulk, grand vizier to Ahmad Sanjar, pressed al-Ghazali to return to the Nizamiyya in Nishapur. Al-Ghazali reluctantly capitulated in 1106, fearing rightly that he and his teachings would meet with resistance and controversy. He later returned to Tus and declined an invitation in 1110 from the grand vizier of the Seljuq Sultan Muhammad I to return to Baghdad. He died on 19 December 1111. According to Abdul Ghafir al-Farisi, he had several daughters but no sons. Al- Ghazali made a great contribution to the development of philosophy, a systematic view of Sufism and its integration and acceptance in mainstream Islam. As a scholar of Sunni Islam, he belonged to the Shafi’i school of Islamic jurisprudence and to the Asharite school of theology. Al-Ghazali received many titles such as *Sharaf-ul-Aimma*, *Zayn-ud-din* and *Hujjat-ul-Islam*. He is viewed as the key member of the influential Asharite school of early Muslim philosophy and the most important refuter of the Mutazilites. His beliefs and thoughts differ in some aspects from the orthodox Asharite School.

Epicenter

Al-Ghazali wrote more than 70 books on sciences, Islamic philosophy and Sufism. His 11th century book titled *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* marks a major turn in Islamic epistemology. The encounter

with skepticism led al-Ghazali to embrace a form of theological occasionalism, or the belief that all casual events and interactions are not the product of material conjunctions but rather the immediate and present Will of God. The *Incoherence* also marked a turning point in Islamic philosophy in its vehement rejections of Aristotle and Plato. The book took aim at the *falasifa*, a loosely defined group of Islamic philosophers from the 8th through the 11th centuries. In the next century, Ibn Rushd drafted a lengthy rebuttal of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence* entitled *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* however, the epistemological course of Islamic thought had already been set. Al-Ghazali gave as an example of the illusion of independent laws of cause the fact that cotton burns when coming into contact with fire. While it might seem as though a natural law was at work, it happened each and every time only because God willed it to happen—the event was "a direct product of divine intervention as any more attention grabbing miracle". Averroes by contrast insisted while God created the natural law, humans "could more usefully say that fire caused cotton to burn—because creation had a pattern that they could discern.

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This long-held argument has been criticized. George Saliba in 2007 argued that the decline of science in the 11th century has been overstated, pointing to continuing advances, particularly in astronomy, as late as the 14th century. On the other hand, author and journalist Hassan in 2012 argued that while indeed scientific thought in Islam was stifled in the 11th century, the person mostly to blame is not Al-Ghazali but Nizam al-Mulk.

Autobiography

The autobiography al-Ghazali wrote towards the end of his life, *Deliverance From Error (al-munqidh min al-dalāl)*, is considered a work of major importance. In it, al-Ghazali recounts how, once a crisis of epistemological skepticism had been resolved by "a light which God Most High cast into my breast ... the key to most knowledge," he studied and mastered the arguments of kalam, Islamic philosophy, and Ismailism. Though appreciating what was valid in the first two of these, at least, he determined that all three approaches were inadequate and found ultimate value only in the mystical experience and insight he attained as a result of following Sufi practices. William James, in *Varities of religious experience*, considered the autobiography an important document for "the purely literary student who would like to become acquainted with the inwardness of religions other than the Christian" because of the scarcity of recorded personal religious confessions and autobiographical literature from this period outside the Christian tradition.

The Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihya' Ulum al-Din)

Another of al-Ghazali's major works is *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* or *Ihya'u Ulumiddin (The Revival of Religious Sciences)*. It covers almost all fields of Islamic sciences: fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), kalam (theology) and sufism.

It contains four major sections: *Acts of worship (Rub' al-'ibadat)*, *Norms of Daily Life (Rub' al-'adat)*, *The ways to Perdition (Rub' al-muhlikat)* and *The Ways to Salvation (Rub' al-munjiyat)*. The *Ihya* became the most frequently recited Islamic text after the Qur'an and the hadith. Its great achievement was to bring orthodox Sunni theology and Sufi mysticism together in a useful, comprehensive

guide to every aspect of Muslim life and death.^[62] The book was well received by Islamic scholars such as Nawawi who stated that: "Were the books of Islam all to be lost, excepting only the Ihya', it would suffice to replace them all."

The Alchemy of Happiness

The Alchemy of Happiness is a rewritten version of The Revival of the Religious Sciences. After the existential crisis that caused him to completely re-examine his way of living and his approach to religion, Al-Ghazali put together The Alchemy of Happiness to reassert his fundamental belief that a connection to God was an integral part of the joy of living. The book is divided into four different sections. The first of these is Knowledge of Self, where Al-Ghazali asserts that while food, sex, and other indulgences might slake humans appetites temporarily, they in turn make a human into an animal, and therefore will never give true happiness and fulfillment. In order to find oneself, people must devote themselves to God by showing restraint and discipline rather than gluttony of the senses. The second installment is called Knowledge of God, where Al-Ghazali states that the events that occur during one's life are meant to point an individual towards God, and that God will always be strong, no matter how far humans deviate from His will. The third section of The Alchemy of Happiness is Knowledge of the World. Here he states that the world is merely a place where humans learn to love God, and prepare for the future, or the afterlife, the nature of which will be determined by our actions in this phase of our journey to happiness. The final section is Knowledge of the Future World, which details how there are two types of spirits within a man: the angelic spirit and the animal spirit. Al-Ghazali details the types of spiritual tortures unbelievers experience, as well as the path that must be taken in order to attain spiritual enlightenment. This book serves as a culmination of the transformation Ghazali goes through during his spiritual awakening.

Disciplining the Soul

One of the key sections of Ghazali's Revival of the Religious Sciences is Disciplining the Soul, which focuses on the internal struggles that every Muslim will face over the course of his lifetime. The first chapter primarily focuses on how one can develop himself into a person with positive attributes and good personal characteristics. The second chapter has a more specific focus: sexual satisfaction and gluttony.^[65] Here, Ghazali states that indeed every man has these desires and needs, and that it is natural to want these things. However, the Prophet explicitly states that there must be a middle ground for man, in order to practice the tenets of Islam faithfully. The ultimate goal that Ghazali is presenting not only in these two chapters, but in the entirety of The Revival of the Religious Sciences, is that there must be moderation in every aspect of the soul of a man, an equilibrium. These two chapters were the 22nd and 23rd chapters, respectively, in Ghazali's Revival of the Religious Sciences. It's also important to note here that Ghazali draws from Greek as well as Islamic philosophy in crafting this literary staple, even though much of The Incoherence of the Philosophers, his most well-known work, takes a critical aim at their perspective.

The Eternity of the World

Al-Ghazali crafted his rebuttal of the Aristotelian viewpoint on the creation of the world in The Eternity of the World. Al-Ghazali essentially formulates two main arguments for what he views as a sacrilegious thought process. Central to the Aristotelian approach is the concept that motion will always precede motion, or in other words, a force will always create another force, and therefore for a force to be created,

another force must act upon that force. This means that in essence time stretches infinitely both into the future and into the past, which therefore proves that God did not create the universe at one specific point in time. Ghazali counters this by first stating that if the world was created with exact boundaries, then in its current form there would be no need for a time before the creation of the world by God. The second argument Ghazali makes is that because humans can only imagine the time before the creation of the world, and your imagination is a fictional thing, that all the time before the world was created is fictional as well, and therefore does not matter as it was not intended by God to be understood by humans.

The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Clandestine Unbelief

Al-Ghazali lays out in *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Clandestine Unbelief* his approach to Muslim orthodoxy. Ghazali veers from the often hardline stance of many of his contemporaries during this time period and states that as long as one believes in the Prophet Muhammad and God himself, there are many different ways to practice Islam and that any of the many traditions practiced in good faith by believers should not be viewed as heretical by other Muslims. While Ghazali does state that any Muslim practicing Islam in good faith is not guilty of apostasy, he does outline in *The Criterion* that there is one standard of Islam that is more correct than the others, and that those practicing the faith incorrectly should be moved to change. In Ghazali's view, only the Prophet himself could deem a faithfully practicing Muslim an infidel, and his work was a reaction to the religious persecution and strife that occurred often during this time period between various Islamic sects.

Works in Persian

Al-Ghazali wrote most of his works in Arabic and few in Persian. His most important Persian work is *Kimiya-yisa'adat* (The Alchemy of Happiness). It is al-Ghazali's own Persian version of *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences) in Arabic, but a shorter work. It is one of the outstanding works of 11th-century-Persian literature. The book was published several times in Tehran by the edition of HussainKhadev-jam, a renowned Iranian scholar. It is translated to English, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, Azerbaijani and other languages.

Another authentic work of al-Ghazali is the so-called “first part” of the *Nasihah al-muluk* (Counsel for kings), addressed to the Saljuqid ruler of Khurasan Ahmad b. Malik-shah Sanjar. The text was written after an official reception at his court in 503/1109 and upon his request. Al-Ghazali was summoned to Sanjar because of the intrigues of his opponents and their criticism of his student's compilation in Arabic, *al-Mankhul min ta'liqat al-usul* (The sifted notes on the fundamentals), in addition to his refusal to continue teaching at the Nizamiya of Nishapur. After the reception, al-Ghazali had, apparently, a private audience with Sanjar, during which he quoted a verse from the Quran 14:24: “Have you not seen how Allah sets forth a parable of a beautiful phrase (being) like a beautiful tree, whose roots are firm and whose branches are in Heaven.” The genuine text of the *Nasihah al-muluk*, which is actually an official epistle with a short explanatory note on *al-Mankul* added on its frontispiece and the title given to it later, discloses the verse image of the “beautiful tree” (*shajaratayyiba*) consisting of ten roots and ten branches.

Faza'il al-anam min rasa'il Hujjat al-Islam is the collection of letters in Persian that al-Ghazali wrote in response to the kings, ministers, jurists and some of his friends after he returned to Khorasan. The collection was gathered by one of his grandchildren after his death, under five sections/chapters. The longest letter is the response to objections raised against some of his statements in *Mishkat al-Anwar* (The

Niche of Light) and *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* (Rescuer from Error). The first letter is the one which al-Ghazali wrote to Sultan Sanjar presenting his excuse for teaching in Nizamiyya of Nishapur; followed by al-Ghazali's speech in the court of Sultan Sanjar. Al-Ghazali makes an impressive speech when he was taken to the king's court in Nishapur in 1106, giving very influential counsels, asking the sultan once again for excusing him from teaching in Nizamiyya. The sultan was so impressed that he ordered al-Ghazali to write down his speech so that it will be sent to all the ulemas of Khorasan and Iraq.

Zad-e Ākhirat (Provision for the hereafter) is an important Persian book of al-Ghazali but gained less scholarly attention. The greater part of it consists of the Persian translation of one of his Arabic books, *Bidayat al-Hidaya* (Beginning of Guidance). It contains in addition the same contents as the *Kimiya-yi Sa'adat*. The book was most probably written during the last years of his life. Its manuscripts are in Kabul (Library of the Department of Press) and in Leiden.

Another Persian work is **Hamāqāt-i ahl-i ibahat** or **Radd-i ebāhīyya** (Condemnation of antinomians) which is his *fatwa* in Persian illustrated with Quranic verses and Hadiths.

The majority of other Persian texts, ascribed to him with the use of his fame and authority, especially in the genre of Mirrors for Princes, are either deliberate forgeries fabricated with different purposes or compilations falsely attributed to him. The most famous among them is *Ay farzand* (O Child!). This is undoubtedly a literary forgery fabricated in Persian one or two generations after al-Ghazali's death. The sources used for the forgery consist of two genuine letters by al-Ghazali's (number 4, in part, and number 33, totally); both appear in the *Faza'il al-anam*. Another source is a letter known as '*Ayniya* and written by Muhammad's younger brother Majd al-Din Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. 520/1126) to his famous disciple 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani (492-526/1098-1131); the letter was published in the *Majmu'a-yi athar-i farsi-yi Ahmad-i Ghazali* (Collection of the Persian writings of Ahmad Ghazali). The other is 'Ayn al-Quzat's own letter, published in the *Namaha-yi 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani* (Letters by 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani). Later, *Ay farzand* was translated into Arabic and became famous as *Ayyuha al-walad*, the Arabic equivalent of the Persian title. The earliest manuscripts with the Arabic translation date from the second half of the 16th and most of the others from the 17th century. The earliest known secondary translation from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish was done in 983/1575. In modern times, the text was translated from Arabic into many European languages and published innumerable times in Turkey as *Eyyühe'l-Veled* or *EyOğul*.

A less famous *Pand-nama* (Book of counsel) also written in the genre of advice literature is a very late compilatory letter of an unknown author formally addressed to some ruler and falsely attributed to al-Ghazali, obviously because it consists of many fragments borrowed mostly from various parts of the *Kimiya-yi Sa'adat*.

Epiloque

Al-Ghazali was one of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystics of Sunni Islam. He was active at a time when Sunni theology had just passed through its consolidation and entered a period of intense challenges from Shi'ite Ismâ'îlite theology and the Arabic tradition of Aristotelian philosophy (*falsafa*). Al-Ghazâlî understood the importance of *falsafa* and developed a complex response that rejected and condemned some of its teachings, while it also allowed him to accept and apply others. Al-Ghazâlî's critique of twenty positions of *falsafa* in his *Incoherence of the*

Philosophers (Tahâfut al-falâsifa) is a significant landmark in the history of philosophy as it advances the nominalist critique of Aristotelian science developed later in 14th century Europe. On the Arabic and Muslim side al-Ghazâlî's acceptance of demonstration (*apodeixis*) led to a much more refined and precise discourse on epistemology and a flowering of Aristotelian logics and metaphysics. With al-Ghazâlî begins the successful introduction of Aristotelianism or rather Avicennism into Muslim theology. After a period of appropriation of the Greek sciences in the translation movement from Greek into Arabic and the writings of the *falâsifa* up to Avicenna (IbnSînâ, c.980–1037), philosophy and the Greek sciences were “naturalized” into the discourse of *kalâm* and Muslim theology (Sabra 1987). Al-Ghazâlî's approach to resolving apparent contradictions between reason and revelation was accepted by almost all later Muslim theologians and had, via the works of Averroes (IbnRushd, 1126–98) and Jewish authors, a significant influence on Latin medieval thinking.

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