

AL-GHAZZĀLI'S RULES OF CONDUCT

BASED ON AL-QAWĀ'ID AL-'ASHARAH

He dropped his bag and eased his weight,
He tossed his bowl from which he ate;
He shed his shoes and freed his feet,
His course to run, his Lord to meet.

So spoke al-Subki¹ of al-Ghazzāli, adding, "And he turned his back on this world, and devoted himself to God, in private and in public."² Al-Ghazzāli had by this time achieved all the honours which the world could bestow upon a learned man. He had succeeded the Imām al-Ḥaramayn³ in the court of Niẓām-al-Mulk,⁴ established himself as the foremost and most influential lecturer at the Niẓāmīyah School⁵ in Baghdad, and earned for himself the honorific titles of Imām Khurāsān and Imām al-'Irāq.⁶ Scholars flocked to hear him, and dignitaries courted his favor. His reputation spread far and wide across the world of Islam, and the number of his enemies multiplied—often the sign of greatness. The Baghdad of the great Saljūqs lay at his feet. Yet he was restless, aggressive, and arrogant. He was conscious of his own gifts: prodigious memory, keen intellect, happy expression, and an amazing capacity for work. These produced in him an inordinate sense of superiority. He despised his contemporaries, and had nothing but contempt for other learned men.⁷ He was, as the moderns phrase it, "fixed for life". And yet, overnight, he forsook it all. He turned his back on pomp, position, prestige, popular acclaim, and

¹ Tāj-al-Dīn abu-Naṣr 'Abd-al-Wahhāb ibn-'Alī al-Subki, d. A.H. 771/A.D. 1370; see Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalāni, *al-Durar al-Kāminah*, vol. ii (Hyderabad, 1349), pp. 425-8.

² *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah al-Kubra* (Cairo, 1324), vol. iv, p. 102.

³ Abu-al-Ma'ālī 'Abd-al-Malik ibn-'Abdullāh al-Juwayni, d. A.H. 478/A.D. 1085; see Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yan* (Cairo, 1299), vol. i, pp. 514-16.

⁴ The illustrious Saljūq vizier and statesman; see Ibn-Khallikān, vol. i, pp. 255-7.

⁵ Founded and endowed in A.H. 457/A.D. 1065. It was the first real academy in Islam which made provisions for the physical needs of its students, and became a model for later institutions of higher learning. See al-Suyūṭī, *Husn al-Muhādharah* (Cairo, 1321), vol. ii, pp. 156-7.

⁶ Al-Subki, vol. iv, p. 107.

⁷ Al-Yāfi'i, *Mir'āt al-Janān*, vol. iii (Hyderabad, 1338), p. 184.

personal security. He experienced a sudden transformation of ideas and ideals as thoroughgoing and complete as that of Saul of Tarsus on the way to Damascus. In his own words, as reported by his friend and biographer, 'Abd-al-Ghāfir ibn-Ismā'il ibn-'Abd-al-Ghāfir al-Fārisi,⁸ "a door of fear was opened upon him, which diverted him from everything else and compelled him to ignore all but God."⁹ So complete was the change that many, including some of his friends, could not accept its authenticity. Even 'Abd-al-Ghāfir entertained some doubts. For a while he thought that al-Ghazzālī "had clothed himself with the garment of pretence".¹⁰ Others were more certain and less charitable. 'Abd-al-Ghāfir conducted a personal investigation, the result of which convinced him that contrary to the prevalent belief, al-Ghazzālī's transformation was sincere, and that he came to himself.¹¹ "The evil spirit of folly, the inordinate desire for rank and position, love of pomp and prestige, and the reprehensible traits which characterized him were transformed into tranquillity, calm, magnanimity, and oblivion to conventional formalities. He took on the habit of the saints, and devoted himself to the task of guiding people to a deeper concern for the affairs of the hereafter."¹²

The reason for this abrupt change is not easy to determine. It can only be surmised from the words of al-Ghazzālī himself in his autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*.¹³ He started his life as an authoritarian traditionalist (*taqlidi*), then became a proponent of rigid rationalism, followed by a period of thoroughgoing skepticism, and, wearying of it all, came at long last to mysticism—a way of life which goes beyond rationalism, and partakes directly of that knowledge which comes from above. "God at last deigned to heal me of this mental

malady, [a state of doubt which threatened my very reason], my mind recovered sanity and equilibrium, the primary assumptions of reason recovered with me all their stringency and force. I owed my deliverance, not to concatenation of proofs and arguments, but to the light which God caused to penetrate into my heart—the light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge."¹⁴ On this point, 'Abd-al-Ghāfir tells how al-Ghazzālī became disgusted and weary of science, although he surpassed all his contemporaries therein, and how he turned his attention to what would avail for the hereafter.¹⁵ Al-Sayyid al-Murtaḍa¹⁶ preserves for us in his voluminous commentary on the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*¹⁷ the following explanation for al-Ghazzālī's remarkable conversion. One day, as al-Ghazzālī was preaching, his brother Aḥmad¹⁸ entered the hall, and, addressing his brother, said:

"Thou guidest others, but thou art not guided;
Thou chidest others, but thou art not chided;
Whetstone, as thou art, how long wouldest thou
Sharpen the knife, and yet thou remainest blunt?"

Whereupon al-Ghazzālī forsook his previous ways and renounced the world.¹⁹

This tale is interesting only in so far as it reflects the intellectual and moral snobbishness of al-Ghazzālī prior to his conversion. But once converted, he turned his back on arrogance too. In the course of his new life, he laid down for himself certain rules of conduct. One can discern them in his *Ihyā'*, as well as in his other works, although his impatience with the learned men of his age continued. Thus he repeatedly unleashes his biting sarcasm against them. Using the same figure of speech his brother applied to him before his conversion, he describes them as "a whetstone which sharpens the razor, but is itself blunt".²⁰ And again:

⁸ *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 6; *The Confessions of Al Ghazzali*, pp. 18-19.

⁹ Al-Subki, vol. iv, p. 109; *Mir'at al-Jandān*, vol. iii, p. 184.

¹⁰ Al-Subki, vol. iv, pp. 108-9.

¹¹ *Mir'at al-Jandān*, vol. iii, p. 184.

¹² Al-Subki, vol. iv, p. 108.

¹³ Edited by Schmoeders in his *Essai sur les écoles philosophiques chez les Arabes* (Paris, 1842); French tr. by C. Barbier de Meynard in *Journal Asiatique*, 7ième sér. (Paris, 1842); English tr. by Claud Field. *The Confessions of Al Ghazzali*

¹⁴ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

¹⁶ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ihyā' al-Sādah*, vol. i, p. 8.

"Strange to me is he who barter good for evil;
Stranger still the one who trades his soul for pleasure;
But he who pays so dear a price as this, to rob
The earthly joys of others, he is strangest yet."²¹

And again:

"The shepherd keeps the sheep from harm and hurt;
Who would then keep them safe by day and night,
If they who watch were wolves instead of men?"²²

And again:

"Ye learned men of this city of favour,
What will cure salt which loses its savour?"²³

And yet again:

"Admonsher of men, thou wouldest be indicted when
Thou chidest them for that which thou thyself dost do;
Advice thou givest, and then thyself the sin commit,
And scoff the love of life while loving it more than they."²⁴

By and large, however, he tried to act according to his own rules. These are embodied in a short tract by al-Ghazzālī entitled *al-Qawā'id al-'Asharah*²⁵ (The Ten Rules). They best show the code which this humbled and chastened man has drawn for himself. They are the best summary of his ethics.

The road to hell may be paved with good intentions, but the path to heaven may not be built without them. Al-Ghazzālī, then, insists on intention as the first rule of conduct. As usual he quotes the tradition in support of his position: "Verily, to every man is the intention he hath resolved."²⁶ This intention should be good and lasting without change. Good in so far as it concludes what it set out to do and leaves the rest to God; lasting in so far as it continues to be good, and is not dissuaded from its goal by anything worldly, but persists in its resolve.

Unity of purpose is the second rule. Serving God alone is the way he states it. The sign of this service is to be satisfied with nothing but the truth, and to deem all things besides unworthy. "Woe unto him who is subservient unto

money."²⁷ Therefore, let him who would serve the Lord avoid the things of this world, and rest his hopes and aspirations in God. Al-Ghazzālī realizes the difficulty of this rule in a world where man is exposed to want and need, and his standards are ruled by false values. Having himself experienced doubt as to the goodness of God, the meaning of life, and the basis of certitude, he warns against doubt as the most vicious of all afflictions. It drove him to the verge of madness. Therefore, "cast away that which breedeth doubt within you, and take hold of that which maketh for strength."²⁸ Furthermore, man should be physically in this world, but in reality in the hereafter. "Be in this world as a stranger, or a traveller, and regard yourself as dead [to the world]."²⁹ The outward sign of this state is contentment: to be satisfied with mere shelter against the elements, and with enough to keep hunger from your door. "Sufficient unto a man is a mouthful wherewith he keepeth his body and soul together."³⁰ Therefore, he that has a loaf of barley should not seek a loaf of wheat, and he that has a mess of porridge should not desire a pot of gold. The sign of the stranger is a light load as he sojourns in alien land, and his mark is his disinclination to weigh himself down with the goods of this world. The sign of the traveller is his prompt response, and his seal is his contentment with what comes his way. The sign that one is dead to the world is to prefer the affairs of the hereafter to the affairs of this world.

The third rule is to conform throughout to truth, and to make bold to differ with self by forsaking pleasure and enduring pain, by resisting desire and abjuring luxury and ease. As a result of such discipline, the disciple penetrates the veil, and enters upon that state where he could see the truth face to face. His sleep would then become wakefulness, his company solitude, his satiety hunger, his high rank abasement, his speech silence, and his plenty paucity.

The babel of religious sects and philosophical thought

²⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Jihād*: 70, *Riḳāq*: 10.

²⁸ Al-Dārīmī, *Ṣunan*, *Buyū'*: 2.

²⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Riḳāq*: 3.

³⁰ Al-Tirmidhī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Zuhd*: 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

The verses are by abu-al-'Atābiyah; see his *Dīwadn*, (Beirut, 1887), p.

241. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Aḥkām* (Būlāq, 1285), vol. iii, p. 142.

²⁵ Published together with nine other of the tracts of Al-Ghazzālī (Cairo, 1934).

²⁶ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *al-Aḥkām wa'l-Nudhūr*: 23.

confused and appalled al-Ghazzālī. To him "this diversity in beliefs and religions, and the variety of doctrines and sects which divide men," were "like a deep ocean strewn with shipwrecks, from which very few can be saved."³¹ Worse still, "each sect believed itself sole possessor of truth and salvation; 'each party', as the Koran puts it, 'rejoices in its own creed'."³² He, therefore, urged orthodoxy upon the Moslems. This constitutes his fourth rule. It is to conform in life to the established practice, and to avoid all innovations, lest one be a faddist, vain in his own ways. For he who is a law unto himself shall not prosper. It might be difficult to understand how such an independent thinker as al-Ghazzālī would advocate a principle which would amount to blind acceptance of authority—one which he himself rejected in practice. It must be remembered that al-Ghazzālī's concern was primarily the public, whose discernment and judgment he did not respect or trust. In the second place he deemed authority, despite its shortcomings, better than anarchy. The unbridled sectarianism of the Protestant churches in the United States, for example, is more degenerate and disturbing than the ossified traditionalism of the Coptic or the Abyssinian Church. And finally, it is not unusual for a great soul to seek refuge against perplexity and bewilderment in the authority of an established orthodoxy, be the person al-Ghazzālī, or Newman, or even Heywood Brown.

In the fifth rule al-Ghazzālī recognizes the evils of procrastination and warns against them, urging steadfast zeal and determination. In the sixth he reminds his fellowmen of their duty to acknowledge their inability (*'ajz*) to accomplish anything without the help of God, but warns them not to use this as pretext for laziness in good works and neglect of independent action. Side by side with this sense of dependence they should cultivate humility and lowliness, and show respect and regard to their fellowmen.

In the seventh rule al-Ghazzālī preaches a doctrine of

³¹ *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 2; *The Confessions of Al Ghazzali*, p. 12.
³² *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 2; *The Confessions of Al Ghazzali*, p. 12; the Koranic reference is to *Sārah* xxiii:55, xxx:31.

salvation by faith. He calls it the rule of true fear and hope. One should not feel secure in the superiority of well-doing, but should rest his hope in God. This sounds like a faint echo of the Pauline doctrine, and reminds us of the words, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."³³ It is not unlikely that al-Ghazzālī, who boasted of investigating every system,³⁴ had access to the writings of Paul. But whatever influence there was, it must have been unconscious. Or could it be inherent in the nature of their parallel religious experiences?

In the eighth rule al-Ghazzālī recommends a life of devotion and prayer. He is sure that to neglect devotional exercises is to shut oneself from the only source of spiritual power. The eighth rule leads to the ninth, that of continual observation and watchfulness (*murāqabah*). This is the first of the mystical states (sing. *hāl*).³⁵ He who persists in watching and observing his own heart for God, and banishes therefrom everything but God, will find God and His grace, and certainty besides. He will move from groping to tranquillity, and from tranquillity to reality, through the will and power of God. His meditation will, then, increase, until he attains true faith. Thence he will be absorbed in God, wherein is the substance of faith. He will then say, "I have seen nought without seeing God therein, exalted above all in His subsistence, existing through His will and power, according to the contemplation and presence of the heart." The outward sign of this rule is to be courteous to other people, and discriminating in the choice of friends and companions. The Prophet said, "My Lord hath taught me, and hath taught me well."³⁶

The tenth rule is consecration to a knowledge wherein one would see God. It should be pursued with diligence, both outwardly and inwardly. Its outward sign is perseverance in good works, since he who thinks that he can do without good works is a moral bankrupt. God, besides

³³ Ephesians 2:8-9.

³⁴ *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 3; *The Confessions of Al Ghazzali*, p. 13.

³⁵ Al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma' fi al-Taṣawwuf*, ed. and tr. by R. A. Nicholson (London, 1914), text, p. 54, tr. p. 16.

³⁶ Based on al-Bukhārī, 'Ilm: 31; cf. Psalm 139: 23, 24.

whom there is no other god, said, "If ye love me, then follow me: God will love you."³⁷

The non-Moslem tone of these rules is apparent. They differ from the legalism of Moslem orthodoxy. By them Islam has been freed from the dead formalism of scholastic literalism, and quickened by the warmth of the living spirit. And it is exactly this warmth for which Islam was groping. By this spirit, the moral consciousness of Islam, which was all but dead, was stimulated and brought back to life. Personal religion and individual experience became an integral part of Islam. And this humbled and chastened man, who was cursed as a heretic in Baghdad, Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo, North Africa, and Spain, became the Authority of Islam (*Ḥujjat al-Islām*). But the best story of his life and works is summed up in the title of his major work, the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Sciences of Religion). He brought Islam back to life, revitalized the law, and breathed into it a spirit of warmth and kindness.

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³⁷ *Sūrah* iii: 29; cf. James 2:20, 3:13.