

their faith and who has been called the most important Muslim since the Prophet Muhammad.

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), a protégé of vizier Nizamulmulk, a lecturer at the Nizamiyyah *madrasah* in Baghdad and an expert in Islamic law, suffered a nervous breakdown in 1095. The Ismaili revolution was at this time at its height, but al-Ghazzali was chiefly distressed by the possibility that he was losing his faith. He found that he was paralyzed and could not speak; his doctors diagnosed a deep-seated emotional conflict, and later Ghazzali explained that he was concerned that though he knew a great deal *about* God, he did not know God himself. He therefore went off to Jerusalem, practised Sufi exercises and returned to Iraq ten years later to write his masterpiece *Iyah alum al-Din* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*). It became the most-quoted Muslim text after the Quran and the *abadith*. It was based on the important insight that only ritual and prayer could give human beings a direct knowledge of God; the arguments of theology (*kalam*) and *Falsafah*, however, could give us no certainty about the divine. The *Iyah* provides Muslims with a daily spiritual and practical regimen, designed to prepare them for this religious experience. All the Shariah rules about eating, sleeping, washing, hygiene and prayer were given a devotional and ethical interpretation, so that they were no longer simply external directives, but enabled Muslims to cultivate that perpetual consciousness of the divine that is advocated by the Quran. The Shariah had thus become more than a means of social conformity and a slavish exterior imitation of the Prophet and his *sunnah*: it became a way of achieving interior *islam*. Al-Ghazzali was not writing for the religious experts, but for devout individuals. There were, he believed, three sorts of people: those who accept the truths of religion without questioning them; those who try to find justification for their beliefs in the rational discipline of *kalam*; and the Sufis, who have a direct experience of religious truth.

Al-Ghazzali was aware that in their new political circumstances people needed different religious solutions. He disliked the Ismaili devotion to an infallible *imam*: where was this *imam*? How could ordinary people find him? This dependence upon an authority figure seemed to violate the egalitarianism of the Quran. Falsafah, he acknowledged, was indispensable for such disciplines as mathematics or medicine, but it could give no reliable guide to spiritual matters that lie beyond the use of reason. In al-Ghazzali's view, Sufism was the answer, because its disciplines could lead to a direct apprehension of the divine. In the early days, the *ulama* had been alarmed by Sufism, and regarded it as a dangerous fringe movement. Now al-Ghazzali urged the religious scholars to practise the contemplative rituals that the Sufi mystics had developed and to promote this interior spirituality at the same time as they propagated the external rules of the Shariah. Both were crucial to Islam. Al-Ghazzali had thus given mysticism a ringing endorsement, using his authority and prestige to assure its incorporation into mainstream Muslim life.

Al-Ghazzali was recognized as a supreme religious authority in his own time. During this period Sufism became a popular movement, and was no longer confined to an elite. Now that the people's piety was not preoccupied, as in the early days, with the politics of the *ummah*, they were ready for the ahistorical, mythical inward journey of the mystic. Instead of being a solitary practice for esoteric Muslims, *dhikr* (the chanting of the Divine Names) became a group activity that propelled Muslims into an alternative state of consciousness, under the guidance of their *pir*. Sufis listened to music to heighten their awareness of transcendence. They clustered around their *pirs*, as Shiis had once gathered around their *imams*, seeing them as their guide to God. When a *pir* died, he became, in effect, a "saint," a focus of sacredness, and the people would pray and hold *dhikrs* at his tomb. Each town now

had its *khanqah* (convent), as well as a mosque or a *madrasah*, where the local *pir* instructed his disciples. New Sufi orders (*tariqahs*) were formed, which were not bound to a particular region but which were international, with branches all over the Dar al-Islam. These *tariqahs* thus became another source of unity in the decentralized empire. So were the new brotherhoods and guilds (*futuwwahs*) for artisans and merchants in the towns, which were greatly influenced by Sufi ideals. Increasingly, it was the Islamic institutions that were pulling the empire together and, at the same time, the faith of even the most uneducated Muslims was acquiring an inner resonance that had once been the preserve of a sophisticated and esoteric elite.

Henceforth there would be no theological or philosophical discourse in Islam that was not deeply fused with spirituality. New "theosophers" began to expound this new Muslim synthesis. In Aleppo, Yahya Suhrawardi (d. 1191) founded a school of illumination (*al-ishraq*) based on ancient pre-Islamic Iranian mysticism. He saw true philosophy as the result of a marriage between the disciplined training of the intellect through Falsafah and the interior transformation of the heart effected by Sufism. Reason and mysticism must go hand in hand; both were essential to human beings, and both were needed in the pursuit of truth. The visions of the mystics and the symbols of the Quran (such as heaven, hell and the Last Judgement) could not be proved empirically, but could only be glimpsed by the trained intuitive faculty of the contemplative. Outside this mystical dimension, the myths of religion made no sense, because they were not "real" in the same way as earthly phenomena which we experience with our normal waking consciousness. A mystic trained himself or herself to see the interior dimension of earthly existence by means of the Sufi disciplines. Muslims had to cultivate a sense of the *alam al-mithal*, "the world of pure images," which