AL-GHAZALI AND THE SUNNA

From a comparatively early period in the history of Islam the duty of following the practice (summa) of the Prophet in all matters has been incumbent on good Muslims. Al-Shâfi‘i (d. 505/1111), was the one who above all others established the importance of the Prophet’s summa as a basis of law second to the Qur’ān; and as law in Islam includes every aspect of life, this means that the Prophet’s summa should be followed in everything and not merely in such matters as are commonly associated with the law in Western countries. With the immense growth of Tradition, collected both in the 3rd century works which eventually came to be considered canonical and in other collections, earlier and later than these, Muslims were provided with all the information they required to model their lives on that of the Prophet. The question of the genuineness or otherwise of the enormous mass of traditions does not concern us here; it is enough to notice that they were treated as genuine by the Muslim community, so long as an authoritative statement declared any tradition to be weak or spurious. Thus Muslims had no excuse for ignorance of how the Prophet had conducted himself and, accordingly, of how they ought to conduct themselves.

It is therefore only natural that religious teachers should have emphasized the importance of following the summa. Among such teachers no one has a higher reputation than Al-Ghazâlî (d. 505/1111) whom many have considered to be the greatest man in Islam since the days of the Prophet. He combined vast scholarship with a deep religious devotion, and he devoted all his gifts to commending a religious life to his fellow men. He was an ardent Muslim not merely because he had been brought up to believe in the teachings of Islam; he had studied the doctrines of different schools both within and without Islam, and he was led to an firm conviction of the truth of the religion revealed through Muhammad. He believed that Muhammad was under divine guidance not only when he gave utterance to the verses of the Qur’ān, but at all times, and that, therefore, some spiritual secret lay hidden beneath all his actions. So whether or not one could understand its significance, the summa of the Prophet should be followed in detail. For Al-Ghazâlî comparatively insignificant matters of everyday life were invested with a religious significance, and he stoutly contested the views of those who believed otherwise. So when he exhorted men to follow the Prophet’s summa in the most ordinary affairs, he did it because he believed that such action had an important influence on happiness both in this world and in the next.

To those who have been brought up in a different religious and mental atmosphere some of his teaching may seem strange. He rose to great heights of spirituality, and yet at the same time he seemed to be controlled by ideas which appear to have little connection with a spiritual life. For example, the order in which one cuts one’s fingernails and toe-nails may seem to be a matter of little importance, but to Al-Ghazâlî it was important to cut them in a particular order because that was the order in which the Prophet was said to have cut his.

Al-Ghazâlî wrote a large work entitled Jawâhir al-Qur’ân of which a section, entitled Kitâb al-arba‘in fi wad al-din, has been published separately. This section forms a unit in itself and therefore suitably appears as a separate work. Indeed Hâfiz Khalîfa says that Al-Ghazâlî gave permission for it to be copied by itself and that people availed themselves of it. 1 A convenient edition of 320 pages was published in Cairo in 1344/1926. The forty (arba‘in) sections of the work are arranged in four groups of ten. The first group deals with matters of belief, largely taken up with a discussion of the divine attributes, and covering much the same ground as the creed from Iyyâd ‘uldîn al-dîn translated by D. B. Macdonald in Appendix I of his Muslim Theology. The second group deals with duties incumbent on a good Muslim, the third with blameworthy traits from which the heart must be purified, and the fourth with praiseworthy traits.

The tenth section of the second group 2 deals with the following of the summa of the Prophet. In this Al-Ghazâlî deals with principles rather than with details. He quotes the Qur’ân to support the necessity for following the Prophet’s summa. He does not, like Al-Shâfi‘i, argue that the Quranic phrase: "The Book and the Wisdom" (cf. ii, 146; iii, 138; iv, 113; livi, 2) speaks of the Qur’ân and the summa, but quotes verses which speak of following the Prophet and obeying his commands and prohibitions (iii, 29; xx, 7). This provides him with all he needs to show the importance of the Prophet’s summa. He realizes that some people will want to know why the summa should be followed, and so he proceeds to put forward three main principles which he calls secrets. In doing so he lays emphasis chiefly on everyday affairs, after which he explains that this was the aspect which required more emphasis, because the only reason one could have for not following the Prophet in religious exercises must be either latent infidelity or clear folly. He discusses the foolishness of people who believe astrologers and physicians, even when they do not understand the point of their advice, but refuse to learn from the Prophet. He concludes by quoting a few traditions, and says that there are many more traditions about everyday affairs, underlying each of which there is an important secret.

This section of the book has great interest, as it shows us a reasoned attempt to prove the importance of following the Prophet’s summa. While Al-Ghazâlî does mention some matters of detail, they are used merely to illustrate the general principle. He obviously cannot here

1. See ibid., p. 243, for an English translation of the above.

2. See ibid., pp. 251 ff., for an English translation of the above.
speak of all the matters in which one must copy the example of the Prophet, as that would involve producing something in the nature of a complete compendium of Tradition. But by his treatment he makes it clear that he believes in the necessity of following the Prophet’s sunna in the most minute details.

It is of interest to notice that when he quotes traditions he does not confine himself to such as are found in the six books now considered canonical. This is not surprising, for in his time there was no general agreement on the matter. The first man to give Ibn Māja a place along with the other five was probably Muhammad b. Tāhir al-Maqdisī ⁸, who died in 507/1113, two years after Al-Ghazālī’s death; but many others did not accept him for centuries after this. Muhammad b. Mūsā al-Hāzimī ⁴ (d. 582/1188) and Ibn al-Saʿīdī ⁶ (d. 643/1245) still spoke only of the five books, omitting Ibn Māja. In Al-Ghazālī’s time Al-Tirmidhī had also failed to gain general acceptance among the most authoritative books ⁶. But it should be noted that while the six books eventually received special honour, Muslims have never at any time felt bound to confine themselves to their contents. That being so, it is only natural that Al-Ghazālī should be catholic in his sources. There are traditions quoted by him which I have been unable to discover, even with the help of the Concordance which gives traditions from fourteen different collections.

In preparing the translation of the section on following the sunna I have used the edition printed in Cairo, but I have had the advantage of consulting an MS of the work in the John Rylands Library, Manchester ⁷. Such differences as occur between the MS and the printed version are of no account. Occasionally the MS adds or omits a word, or gives a different form of a word from that in the printed text, but this does not affect the general sense. In only two places have I felt it necessary to refer to the reading in the MS. To save space I have omitted the conventional phrases used when the names of God or the Prophet are mentioned.

TRANSLATION

THE TENTH PRINCIPLE: CONCERNING THE FOLLOWING OF THE SUNNA.

Know that the key of happiness is following the sunna and imitating God’s apostle in all his goings out and comings in, in his movements and times of quiescence, even in the manner of his eating, his deportment, his sleep and his speech. I do not say that concerning his

⁸ See his Sharḥ al-tirmidhi al-z pundits Cairo, 1357/1938.
⁴ See his Sharḥ al-tirmidhi al-khamis publ. along with the above.
⁶ See his al-Tirmidhi, Aleppo 1354/1934, p. 42.
⁷ Arber 252; in Mingana’s Catalogue it is No. 72. The passage translated is on ff. 22a to 23a.

manner in matters of religious observances alone, because there is no reason to neglect the traditions (sunna) which have come down concerning them; nor, that has to do with all the matters of use and wont (al-kaddāb), for in that way unrestricted following arises. God said, “Say, If you love God, follow me and God will love you” (Surah iii, 29). And He said, “What the apostle has brought you receive, and what he has forbidden you refrain from” (Surah lix, 7). So you must sit while putting on trousers and stand while putting on a turban; you must begin with the right foot when putting on your sandals; eat with your right hand; when cutting your nails you must begin with the forefinger of the right hand and finish with its thumb in the foot you must begin with the little toe of the right foot and finish with the little toe of the left. It is the same in all your movements and times of quiescence. Muhammad b. Aslam used not to eat a melon because the manner in which God’s apostle ate it had not been transmitted to him. A certain man was unmindful and began to put on the left shoe first, so he made atonement for that with a kharṣ ¹⁰ of wheat. Now it is not fitting to be lax in such matters and say that this is one of the things which pertain to use and wont, so that there is no point in following [the Prophet] regarding it, because that will lock against you an important gate of happiness.

CHAPTER.

Perhaps you now wish to enquire about the reason which makes one desire to follow [the Prophet] in these actions, but consider it unlikely that it should have underlying it some important matter which necessitates such severity towards acting differently. Know then that to mention the underlying secret concerning all the items of these practices (sunna) would take too long and that this book cannot undertake their exposition, but you must understand that that can be comprised within three kinds of secrets.

The first is that we have drawn your attention in a number of places to the connection between this world (mulk) and the world above (malakūt), and between the members of the body and the heart, and to the nature of the effect on the heart of the action of the members of the body, for the heart is like a mirror in which the true nature of things is clear only by polishing, illuminating and adjusting it. As for polishing it, it is by removing the depravity of the appetites and the turblinace of blameworthy characters. As for illuminating it, it is by the lights of remembrance of God (dhikr) and knowledge which are aided by sincere worship when you render complete service

¹⁰ See Lane, Lexicon, p. 2602, where it is explained as a measure of wheat amounting to six ass loads.
in accordance with the requirement of the sunna. As for adjusting it, it means that in all the movements of the members of the body it should follow the rule of equity (qawāṣī al-ʿadl), for authority (al-ʿam) does not reach the heart till you purpose to adjust it and produce in it a symmetrical and sound form which has no crookedness. The only way for the heart to have freedom of action is by means of adjusting the members of the body and adjusting their movements; and for this reason this world has become the place where the harvest to be reaped in the next world is produced (maṣaraʾūt al-ḥākime). On this account great is the grief of one who dies before adjusting them, because the way to adjusting them has been closed by death, since the connection between the heart and the members of the body has been broken. So as long as the movements of the members of the body, nay, the movements of the thoughts also, are weighed in the scale of equity, there arises in the heart a straightforward and good form which is prepared to receive the verities in a manner characterised by soundness and straightforwardness, just as a symmetrical mirror is prepared to copy sound forms without crookedness.

The meaning of equity is putting things in their places. To illustrate it, the directions, for example, are four, but the direction of the qibla has been distinguished among them in honour. So equity involves that you should face it (i.e. the qibla) when engaged in remembrance of God, worship and ablation, and turn away from it when relieving yourself and uncovering your private parts, to display the superiority of that whose superiority is apparent. The right hand has excellence over the left generally because of the excess in strength, so equity involves that you should prefer it to the left and use it for certain noble actions like handling copies of the Qurʾān and food, and you should leave the left hand for cleansing yourself and handling impure things. Cutting the nails, for example, is a purification for the hand and it is a means of showing honour, so it is fitting that you should begin with the more honourable and excellent. Perhaps your mind may not be able to understand independently how to arrange about that and how to begin, so follow the sunna regarding it and begin with the forefinger of the right hand, because the hand is more excellent than the foot, and the right hand is more excellent than the left, and the forefinger which is used in pointing when declaring the Unity of God is more excellent than the rest of the fingers. Then after that you go round to the right of the forefinger. The hand (kaff) has a back in the direction you face; and when you make the palm (kaff) the face of the hand (yad) the right of the forefinger.

\[32\text{ cf. Bulhū, Wadā, 117; Abū Dāwūd, Tahāra, 4.}
\[33\text{ Whence kaff is strictly speaking the hand and yad the arm including the hand. kaff is commonly the palm and yad the hand. In this passage Al-Ghazālī uses kaff in both its senses. The John Rylands MS reads us-ul-kaff yahir fi jihat ma yaghibūhu. The printed text reads wa-ul-kaff yahir wa-ma fi wa-ul-kaff.}

will be on the side of the middle finger. Now consider the hands with their faces opposite one another, consider the fingers as though they were individuals (asbāḥ), and go round with the scissors from the forefinger until you finish with the thumb of the right hand. Thus did God’s apostle, and the wisdom regarding that is what we have mentioned. When you accustom yourself to pay attention to equity in niceties (daqīq) of movements, uprightness and soundness will become a mode rooted in your heart and its forms will be right, in which way you will be ready to receive the form of happiness.

On that account God said, “So when I form him and breathe some of my spirit into him” (Surat xv, 29; xxxviii, 72). Now the spirit of God is the key of the gates of happiness, but the breathing of it was only after the forming, and the meaning of forming has reference to adjusting. That contains a lengthy secret too long to be expounded, and we wish only to hint at its principle. If you do not possess the power to understand its true nature, experiment will benefit you. Consider him who accustoms himself to truthfulness, how his vision is generally true because truth has obtained a truthful form in his heart which receives the flashes of light (lāmāʾ) from the unseen in sleep in a sound manner. And consider how the vision of the liar is false, much more the vision of the poet, due to his accustoming himself to false imaginations, on which account the form of his heart has become crooked. So if you wish to have a glimpse of the holy gardens, abandon both open and secret sin, and abandon shameless deeds both open and secret. Abandon falsehood also, even within your own thoughts.

The second secret is to know that the effect of some of the things which affect your body is recognised only by a kind of relationship to heat, cold, moisture and dryness, like your remark that honey injures those who are feverish and benefits him whose humour is cold. But some [effects] cannot be appreciated by measurement (gīṣ) and are referred to by certain properties (bāḥiyāt) which cannot be known by measurement, the beginning of enquiring into which is rather revelation (waṣḥāh) and inspiration (thawrāt). The magnet attracts iron and sammonky draws out the humour of bile from the depths of the veins, not by measurement but by a special property which is made known by inspiration or experiment.

Most of the properties are known by inspiration, and most of the affects in medicines and elsewhere are from the properties. On that account you must know that the effects of deeds on the heart are divided into what causes one to understand the nature of its relationship, like your knowledge that following worldly passion confirms
its attachment to this world so that one goes out of the world with his head inverted, turning his face towards this world since what is beloved by him is in it; and like your knowledge that continuance in the remembrance of God confirms fellowship with God and produces love, so that the pleasure derived from it becomes great when one leaves the world and approaches towards God, since the pleasure is according to the extent of the love and the love is according to the extent of knowledge and remembrance of God.

Among deeds there are some which have an effect on preparation for happiness or misery in the next world by an immeasurable property which cannot be known apart from the light of prophecy. So when you see that the Prophet turned away from one of two things which were permissible to the other and preferred it to it in spite of his ability to choose either, know that by the light of prophecy he became acquainted with a property in it and received a revelation about it from the world above, as he said, “O men, God commanded me to inform you from what He informed me and teach you from what He has taught me, so let none of you talk much while having sexual intercourse, because dizziness comes to the child from it; and let none of you look at his wife’s private parts when he has intercourse with her, for blindness comes from it; and let none of you kiss his wife when he has intercourse with her, for deafness comes to the child from it; and let none of you look long at water, for loss of intelligence comes from it.”

This is an example of what we have mentioned and desired to warn you to study concerning the properties of things in relationship to the affairs of the world, in order that you may estimate by it [the Prophet’s] study of what affects happiness and misery by its peculiar property, so that you may not be pleased to believe Muhammad b. Zakariya’ al-Razi, the physician in what he mentions about the properties of things with reference to cupping, stones and medicines, and not believe the Lord of men, Muhammad b. Abdullah al-Haithami al-Makki al-Madani in what he tells about them. You know that he received revelations from the world above about all secrets, and this warns you to follow [him] in matters regarding which one does not possess understanding, according to what we have mentioned concerning the first secret.

The third secret is that man’s happiness consists in his resembling the angels in abstaining from passions and subduing the soul which leads to indulgence in evil, while removing far from resemblance to the beast wandering vainly at large which roams freely in pursuit of desire according to the requirement of its nature without any restriction. As long as a man accustoms himself in all matters to do as he wishes without any restriction, he becomes used to following his will and his desire, and the characteristic of the beast gets predominance over his heart. His wellbeing depends on his being bridled in all his movements with a bridle which turns him from one road to another, in order that his soul may not forget devotion and adherence to the straight path. Then the effect of devotion is apparent in him in every movement since he does nothing according to nature but according to command, and in all his circumstances he remains subject to the clash of fate (muqaddam al-samad) by preferring some matters to others.

Now if one entrusts his guidance to a dog, for example, his management and his going backwards and forwards are not under the rule of his nature but under the rule of something else, so his soul is more adapted to receive the true discipline and is readier and stronger than the one who entrusts his guidance to his passion, wandering at large with it like a beast. Underlying this is a great secret concerning the purification of the soul, and this is a benefit which arises by whatever manner the laqab (nom de guerre) appointed it. The benefit pertaining to what is laid down by law and the property do not change by what is appointed, while this man changes by what is appointed, for the purpose is that he should not be left alone with his choice, and that purpose is achieved by prohibiting one of the two sides, whichever side it is. In such a way it is realised that the laws differ, because it is the fruit of what is appointed. Now these three warnings are enough for you concerning the excellence of continually following [the Prophet] in all times of movement and quiescence.

CHAPTER

All this exhortation which I have mentioned relates only to matters of custom. As for what concerns acts of worship, I know of no object in abandoning the sunna without excuse other than latent infidelity or clear folly. It may be explained as follows: When the Prophet says, “Corporate worship is twenty-seven degrees better than the worship of a solitary person,” how can the soul of the believer abandon it even though there is no reason? Yes, the cause of that is either folly or neglect in that one does not consider this great irregularity. If one considers another foolish when he prefers one to two, how does he not consider himself foolish when he prefers one to twenty-seven, especially in a matter which is the prop of religion and the key of everlasting happiness?

As for infidelity, it means that it occurs to his mind that this is
Saturday said that this tradition was weak. Then he contracted leprosy and was greatly distressed till he saw God's apostle in a dream and complained of that to him. He asked, "Why did you wish to be cupped on a Saturday?" He replied, "Because the transmitter was weak." He asked, "Had he not transmitted from me?" So [the traditionist] replied, "I repent, O apostle of God." Then God's apostle prayed that he might be cured, and in the morning his trouble had left him.

[Muhammad] also said, "If one seeks to be cupped on Tuesday the 17th, it will serve as medicine for a year." 20 And again, "If one sleeps after the afternoon prayer and loses his mind, let him blame no one but himself." And again, "If the strap of the sandal of one of you is cut, he must not walk with one sandal till he repairs his strap." 21 And again, "When a woman gives birth to a child, let the first thing she eats be fresh ripe dates (ru'ab), but if there are none, then dried dates (tamar), for if there had been anything more excellent, God would have given it to Mary to eat when she bore Jesus." 22 And again, "When any of you is brought sweets let him take some of them, and when any of you is brought perfume let him touch some of it." And there are many such sayings about matters of custom, none of which is devoid of a secret.

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20 cf. Abu Dāwūd, Ṣahīḥ, 5, where cupping on the 17th, 16th and 21st is said to provide healing for every disease. Ibn Māja, loc. cit., recommends Monday and Tuesday, and says Job was cured on a Tuesday.
21) Abu Dāwūd, Ṣahīḥ, 41.
22) cf. Surah, xix, 25.

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18 Arabic sheqiq. See Lane, Lexicon, 1972, where the phrase in the text is translated Lane translates as "affectionate", but that meaning does not suit the present context.
19 Ibn Māja, Ṣahīḥ, 22, says Wednesday, Friday and Saturday should be avoided, adding that Job was smitten with his trouble on a Wednesday.