

AL-GHAZĀLĪ AND THE SUNNA

From a comparatively early period in the history of Islam the duty of following the practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet in all matters has been incumbent on good Muslims. Al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) was the one who above all others established the importance of the Prophet's *sunna* 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 *sunna* 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 no 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 emphasised the importance of following the *sunna*. Among such teachers no one has a higher reputation than Al-Ghazālī (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 a 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 *sunna* of the Prophet should be followed in detail. For Al-Ghazālī 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 *sunna* 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-Ghazālī 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-Ghazālī wrote a large work entitled *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* of which a section, entitled *Kitāb al-arba'in fi usūl al-dīn*, has been published separately. This section forms a unit in itself and therefore suitably appears as a separate work. Indeed Ḥajjī Khalifa says that Al-Ghazālī gave permission for it to be copied by itself and that people availed themselves of this.¹ A convenient edition of 320 pages was published in Cairo in 1344/1925. 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 *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* 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 group² deals with the following of the *sunna* of the Prophet. In this Al-Ghazālī deals with principles rather than with details. He quotes the Qur'ān to support the necessity for following the Prophet's *sunna*. He does not, like Al-Shāfi'ī, argue that the Quranic phrase: "The Book and the Wisdom" (cf. ii, 146; iii, 158; iv, 113; lxii, 2) speaks of the Qur'ān and the *sunna*, but quotes verses which speak of following the Prophet and obeying his commands and prohibitions (iii, 29; lix, 7). This provides him with all he needs to show the importance of the Prophet's *sunna*. He realises that some people will want to know why the *sunna* 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 then 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 *sunna*. While Al-Ghazālī does mention some matters of detail, they are used merely to illustrate the general principle. He obviously cannot here

¹ *Lexicon bibliographicum et encyclopaedicum*, Leiden and London, 1835-1858, No. 442.

² pp. 89-97 in the edition mentioned 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 compilation 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 Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Maḡdisī³, who died in 507/1113, two years after Al-Ghazālī's death; but many others did not accept him for centuries after this. Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Ḥāzimi⁴ (d. 584/1188) and Ibn al-Ṣalāh⁵ (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 books⁶. 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, Manchester⁷. 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

³ See his *Shurūḥ al-ʿimḡat al-sitta*, Cairo, 1357/1938.

⁴ See his *Shurūḥ al-ʿimḡat al-khamsa* publ. along with the above.

⁵ See his *ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth*, Aleppo 1350/1931, p. 42.

⁶ cf. Goldziher, *Muh. Stud.*, ii, 262.

⁷ Arab. 259. In Mingana's Catalogue it is No. 72. The passage translated is on ff. 25a to 28a.

manners in matters of religious observances alone, because there is no reason to neglect the traditions (*sunan*) which have come down concerning them; nay, that has to do with all the matters of use and wont (*al-ʿādāt*), 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 sandals⁸, and eat with your right hand⁹; 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. Muḥammad 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 *hurr*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 (*sunan*) 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 (*malakūt*) 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 turbidness of blameworthy characteristics. 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

⁸ cf. Al-Bukhārī, *Libās*, 38; Abū Dāwūd, *Libās*, 41.

⁹ cf. Bukh., *Aḡīma*, 2; Abū Dāwūd, *Aḡīma*, 19.

¹⁰ See Lane, *Lexicon*, p. 2601, 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 (*qānūn al-'adl*), for authority (*al-yad*) 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 (*mazra'at al-ākhirā*). 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 ablution, and turn away from it when relieving yourself and uncovering your private parts¹¹, 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 Qur'ān 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*)¹², the right of the forefinger

¹¹ cf. Bukh., *Wuḍū'*, II; Abū Dāwūd, *Tahāra*, 4.

¹² While *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 *wa-lil-kaff qahr fi jihat mā yuqābiluhu*. The printed text reads *wa-lil-kaff qahr wa-wajh fa-wajhuhu*

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 (*ashkhās*), 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 (*daqā'iq*) 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" (Surah 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 (*lawā'ih*) 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 (*qiyās*) and are referred to by certain properties (*khawāṣṣ*) which cannot be known by measurement, the beginning of enquiring into which is rather revelation (*wahī*) and inspiration (*ilhām*). The magnet attracts iron and scammony 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

mā tuqābiluhu. I have followed the text as given in the MS, but have read *tuqābiluhu* which is given in the printed text. The idea must be that normally one has the back of the hand in front of one. In this position the middle finger of the right hand is on the right of the forefinger.

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 dumbness 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 Muḥammad b. Zakariyā al-Rāzī¹³ 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, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Hāshimī al-Makki al-Madani¹⁴ 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

¹³ The famous physician, alchemist and philosopher, known in mediaeval Europe as Rhazes. See Encyc. of Islām, iii, 1134 ff.

¹⁴ Although this is a normal way of giving a man's name with appropriate *nisbas*, one does not normally find the Prophet named in this manner.

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 clashes of fate (*muṣādamat al-zamān*)¹⁵ 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 lawgiver 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,"¹⁶ how can the soul of the believer abandon it without excuse? 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

¹⁵ The John Rylands MS reads *riyāḍa* (discipline) for *zamān*.

¹⁶ cf. *Muwattaʿ*, *Ṣalāt al-jamāʿa*, 1; Bukh., *Adhān*, 30; *Buyūʿ*, 48; Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad*, gives different numbers. For 27 cf. ii, 65, 112; for 20, 20 and over, and 25 cf. i, 376; ii, 252; i, 382.

not of that nature and that he mentioned it only to inspire liking for company; otherwise what relationship is there between the company and this number which is specified from among all the numbers? Now this is latent infidelity which is sometimes concealed in the breast while he who holds it is unaware of it. How great is the folly of one who believes an astrologer¹⁷ and a physician in matters more impossible than that and does not believe the Prophet to whom the secrets of the world above were revealed! If an astrologer were to say to you, "At the end of twenty-seven days from the first change of position (*tahrūl*) of your star a calamity will befall you, so be on your guard that day and stay in your house," and during that period you are in continual apprehension and abandon all your occupations; (and if you were to ask the astrologer for his reason he would say to you, "I said that only because there are twenty-seven degrees between the degree of the star and the position of Saturn, so the calamity will be delayed a day or a month for every degree;") then when someone says to you, "This is nonsense since there is no relationship, so do not believe him," your heart is still not free from apprehension, and you say about God's acts that they are marvels whose relationship cannot be known and perhaps they are properties which cannot be apprehended when it is known by experience that that is one of the things which produce an effect even if its relationship is unknown; yet when the matter comes round to the information about the unseen given by prophecy you deny such properties and demand a clear relationship, has this any other cause than latent polytheism, or rather clear infidelity, since there is no other interpretation of it? The reason for all this negligence is that the concern of your next life does not engross you, for the concern of your worldly affairs is what engrosses you; so regarding this you pay attention to what the astrologer and the physician say, to anxious thought, to omens, and to matters which are as far as possible from any relationship, and you submit yourself to quite impossible ideas, because the cautious one¹⁸ is addicted to evil opinion. But if you were to think, you would know that paying such heed is more likely to produce eternal risk.

If you ask, "In what class of actions is it necessary to follow the *sunna*?" I reply that it is in everything about which the *sunna* has been handed down, for the traditions (*akhbār*) about that are many. An example is [Muhammad's] saying, "If anyone seeks to be cupped on Saturday and Wednesday and is smitten by leprosy, let him blame no one but himself."¹⁹ A traditionist who wished to be cupped on a

¹⁷ cf. W. M. Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī* (London, 1953), pp. 80 f.

¹⁸ Arabic *shafiq*. See Lane, *Lexicon*, 1573, where the phrase in the text is translated. Lane translates as "affectionate", but that meaning does not suit the present context.

¹⁹ Ibn Māja, *Tibb*, 22, says Wednesday, Friday and Saturday should be avoided, adding that Job was smitten with his trouble on a Wednesday.

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 (*ruṭab*), but if there are none, then dried dates (*tamr*), 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. Abū Dāwūd, *Tibb*, 5, where cupping on the 17th, 19th 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 Abū Dāwūd, *Libās*, 41.

²² cf. Surah, xix, 25.