

# SOME ABIDING TEACHINGS OF AL-GHAZĀLĪ

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE COLLOQUIUM ON ISLAMIC CULTURE

Abū-Ḥamīd Muḥammad ibn-Muḥammad al-Ghazālī was born in the district of Tūs in Khurāsān and lived from 450 to 505 A.H. (1058 to 1111 A.D.). He was one of the outstanding personalities and most brilliant scholars of the Islamic world during the second half of the 11th century and a man whose life and work were exemplary for any true follower of Islam. In the following pages an attempt is made to point out phases of his life and work, which have enduring value.

This short paper does not include a bibliographical study, as sufficient sources are easily available. Adequate reference material for an enquirer is provided in the article on (al) "Ghazālī" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* by D. B. Macdonald and in the reference to al-Ghazālī in the *History of Arabic Literature* by C. Brockelmann, as well as in numerous European monographs. Since the appearance of Macdonald's article, other valuable studies have been published by Goldziher, Wensinck, Gibb and other scholars. One might add the recent translation of *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* by W. Montgomery Watt and two translations of *Ayyuha-al-Walad*, one in English by G. H. Scherer (American Press, Beirut, 1933) and the other in French by Tawfiq Šabbāgh (Beirut, 1951).

The Islamic sources, such as the biographical works of al-Subkī and Ibn-Khallikan are so well known that they need only be mentioned here. There is a modest but comprehensive work in Arabic by Aḥmad Farīd al-Rifā'ī. It contains a detailed though hastily compiled bibliography, with useful references to al-Ghazālī's teachings and controversies in two volumes. There is also an extra volume of selections from his principal works, which includes the entire text of *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*.

## I. LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS OF AL-GHAZĀLĪ

If it had not been for the precedents of Ibn-Sīnā, who died twenty-two years before al-Ghazālī was born, and other prodigious authors, it would be hard to believe that al-Ghazālī accomplished what he did. During the fifty-five years of his disturbed lifetime, al-Ghazālī produced at least a hundred and twenty works, dealing with almost all of the Islamic problems of his period.

Among these books there was his masterpiece, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, a monumental work, which one might well call the "Summa Theologica" of Islam. There were also important works like *Al-Wajīz* on Jurisprudence; *Al-Mustaṣfā* on the principles of Scholastic Theology; *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifah* on Philosophy; *Mi'yār al-'Ilm* on Logic;

*Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* on the refutation of philosophy, and similar works.

Such prodigious intellectual productivity is so impressive that it deserves our deep admiration. This is especially true when one considers the fact that during at least sixteen years of his incessant literary activity al-Ghazālī was not in perfect health. From 484-488 A.H., he was lecturing in the Nizāmīyah College of Baghdad. Then he wandered to Damascus, Jerusalem, and other Islamic centers, far away from his homeland, during a period of political chaos and sectarianism throughout the Islamic world.

It was a time of serious politico-religious uprisings, like that of al-Ḥasan ibn-al-Ṣabbāh and his fanatical followers in Persia. It reveals the strength of mind and firm faith of the master that in spite of such conditions he sought quietude and remained intellectually fruitful, amidst turmoil and social restlessness.

His many works, which are still being read both by Muslims and non-Muslims testify to the spiritual energy of a man of great learning and depth of faith. They reveal the extent to which a sound mind can develop intellectually, even in the midst of most baffling circumstances.

#### II. QUEST FOR TRUTH

Another noteworthy characteristic of al-Ghazālī's was his sincere quest for true knowledge. All through his life he kept searching for the truth.

First of all he tested his own mental powers. He subjected his thinking to a most rigid examination, with a genuine attempt to find out whether or not he was prejudiced by ideas, which were acquired by imitation and passive allegiance. This examination of his own inner world led him to question not only the validity of his acquired opinions, but also of his sense perceptions. His account of this sceptical procedure in "al-Munqidh" reminds us of the later work of Descartes,—"Discours de la Méthode."

The main goal of al-Ghazālī, like that of Descartes, was not to give expression to scepticism or to question the established tenets of religion, but rather to conduct a search for knowledge, which was both constructive and sincere. This search was the result of a real love of truth. He had a thirst or *ta'aṭṭush* for learning, with the well-defined goal of attaining the truth. In the introduction to "al-Munqidh" he clearly described this spontaneous search for truth when he wrote:—"A thirst for perceiving the truth of things has been my state of mind and wont since the first youthful days of my life." It was because of this genuine inner purpose that al-Ghazālī was able to study and master almost all of the branches of knowledge of his period in an astonishingly comprehensive way. In fact in his own

person he combined the outlooks and problems of the life of his time.

Even more significant was the fact that he was able to discover the way of life for a truly religious man to follow, so as to be prepared to attain that stage, when the supreme truth, the truth of God, becomes evident in the soul. The quest of al-Ghazālī for this supreme truth meant the spiritual ascent of a faithful enquirer, who diligently sought the truth for its own sake. It is hardly necessary to recall that for him the highest attainment of knowledge was the spiritual or divine truth. All other truths were of secondary importance.

One of his cardinal conditions for searching after the truth was to have a mind which was entirely independent. Truth cannot be acquired unless there is a free and spontaneous spirit of investigation. Few scholars have, like al-Ghazālī, set themselves against blind imitation. In almost all of his leading works he renounces slavish and imitative thinking. In *Al-Munqidh* and *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and especially when refuting the Bāṭiniyah in works like *Fadā'iḥ al-Bāṭiniyah* he renounces imitative knowledge and recommends an investigation which is free and unbiassed. He even concludes his work on logic, *Mi'yār al-'Ilm*, by inviting the reader to study it, not with imitation but with understanding.

#### III. THE VIA MEDIA, HIS WAY

One may boldly claim that no other Islamic thinker has equalled al-Ghazālī in successfully reconciling the contradictory doctrines of his day, for by finding a reasonable middle way he established harmony. He renounced extremes and one-sidedness. In fact such a surprising state of harmony was attained in his own inner world, that al-Ghazālī the dogmatist and al-Ghazālī the mystic became one. The following paragraphs explain the meaning of the "Via media" in his life.

1. He approved of theology (*kalām*) as the means of rationalistic thinking, to explain and defend faith, and he wrote *Al-Mustasfā* and *Al-Iqtisād* about it. But he vehemently criticized the idea of regarding *kalām* as an end in itself or as a part of religion. In fact he felt that if used only in the spirit of dialectic, *kalām* might be harmful, leading to zealotism. For him faith was far above the structure of logically demonstrated facts. He even considered hair splitting scholastic theology, based on the subtleties of formal syllogism, to be deceptive, and possibly harmful.

2. He was a master of jurisprudence and compiled three works about it:—*Al-Wajiz*, *Al-Basit*, and *Al-Wasiṭ*. Although he considered jurisprudence to be useful for the conduct of daily life, he felt that as a canon law it was only a means and not an end. It deals with *'Ilm al-Mu'āmalah*, that is with the practice rather than with the purpose of life.

Thus he removed jurisprudence (*fiqh*) from the position which it had usurped and exposed its casuistry, for it is heartfelt faith which is truly decisive:—"Pectus est quod dicit."

3. He studied philosophy and wrote his *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah*, (The Purposes of the Philosophers). Thus he brought a hitherto aristocratic science into the open and made it accessible to a diligent reader, who might not have understood the technical phrases of Ibn-Sinā and Al-Fārābī.

Thus he admired philosophy as an intellectual attempt to solve the riddle of the universe. At the same time he dispelled the mystery which gave it glamor. He made it clear that the supreme truth, the unconditional, the ultimate, cannot be attained by philosophy, for not only reason but also intuition is needed to find the truth.

4. Like the Bāṭiniyah he believed that, although authoritative and divinely inspired leaders can do much to guide our thinking, we must use our own judgment. Imitation prevents originality and slavish knowledge is not real knowledge.

5. In the second quarter of the *Ihyā*, when speaking about enjoyment of the blessings of our physical world, he referred to the moral and habitual duties of life. In giving this example he said that although we should not neglect the attractions and passions of '*Ālam al-Mulk* (the physical world), we should not overdo them so as to forget '*Ālam al-Malakūt* (the spiritual world). These two worlds are connected, even as the body is connected by some spiritual bond ('*alāqah*') with the soul.

Thus when discussing music in the second book of the *Ihyā* he repudiates what is passionate and worldly, but recommends solemn and spiritual music as a means of awakening noble emotions and helping to attain the stage of exaltation and ecstasy.

6. Even when attempting to explain the higher realm of contemplation about the essential unity of the real universe and the "Unio Mystico," our great thinker assumed a position intermediary between the immanence and the transcendence of God.

He rejected ideas of crude pantheism, such as identification or unification (*ittihād*), incarnation (*ḥulūl*), inherence, or joining (*wuṣūl*). At the same time he was convinced that in the vision of an illuminated (gnostic) mystic only God and no one else was the actual reality. Such sublime unification can only be attained when the mind of a mystic reaches ecstatic exaltation.

In *Al-Munqidh* he says:—"The degree of proximity to Deity which they attain is regarded by some as incarnation of being, by others as union and by others as joining, but all of these expressions are wrong. Those who have reached that stage should confine themselves to saying:

"What I experience, I shall not try to describe.  
Call me happy, but ask me no more."

or:

"There has happened to me what has happened, I shall not speak,  
Think of the good and ask me not for an account of it."

To illustrate the proximity of the external to the internal, of the physical to the spiritual world, in mystic vision, he resorts more than once in the *Ihyā* to beautiful verse. He likens the physical world to a glass and the spiritual to the wine it contains. Both are so transparent that they seem to be either a glass without wine or else wine without a glass.

Thus even in his chosen way of life, in the way of the mystic, he held to his unique course, that of the Via Media.

7. As a follower of the Shāfi'i School he also took a middle stand in discussing the part consensus (*Ijmā'*) and free judgment (*Qiyās*) should play in Islam. On the one hand, the fundamentals of the faith must not be altered, but on the other hand, the welfare of the public and the exigencies of each generation cannot be neglected. In his classification of the sciences in the opening part of the *Ihyā* he therefore included *Ijmā'* and *Qiyās*, as parts of religion.

Thus there can be derived from the teachings of al-Ghazālī a sound and reasonable approach to the laws and practices of the faith, so as to meet the needs of every age.

#### IV. FORMALISM WITHOUT SPIRITUALITY HAS NO MEANING

It is true that al-Ghazālī was the last person to deny the importance of the formal and external performances and even of the rituals of the Faith. Forms of worship, fasting, the pilgrimage, almsgiving, and prayers are all necessary and obligatory for every true believer. But it must be borne in mind that these things are only the outer forms of an inner world. They are merely expressions. It is the innermost inclination, the really sincere faith, faith in truth, faith in God, which is decisive. Of what use are numerous and formal rites without the great inner experience, which is spiritual? Religion is a sincere inner life. Rites and forms are only its outward symbols.

In the opening section of *Al-Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī combats pure formalism and condemns those formalists (*al-Mutarassimūn*) who employ lengthy expressions for prayer, dialectical defense of faith and other pious exercises, without the light of an inner life. In the *Ihyā* and other works he repeatedly returns to this great theme.

#### V. RELIGION IS A WAY OF LIFE, NOT A SYSTEM OF FORMALITIES AND RITUALS

Although al-Ghazālī was not the only Muslim authority who considered that work and deeds were the most decisive expressions of the

religious life, he was surely the most emphatic supporter of this truth. Many Western writers have confined their opinions of Islam within the narrow limits of expressions such as,—confession of faith, fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and pilgrimage.

Actually few religions in the world have placed so much emphasis upon the importance of good deeds and usefulness as has Islam. It is unfortunate that this aspect of the doctrine of Islam has not been given due consideration. There are no less than forty-seven verses in twenty-four different Surahs of the Qur'ān in which faith (*al-Imān*) is mentioned along with works (*al-A'māl*). The usual form of these verses is—"Those who believe and do good works." (*Inna alladhīna āmanū wa 'amilū al-ṣāliḥāt.*)

The reiteration of this truth by al-Ghazālī is conspicuous throughout his works, but especially when he discusses the nature and classification of knowledge in *Bāb al-'Ilm* of the *Ihyā*. Over and over again he emphasizes the fact that truly useful work and genuine faith are inter-dependent. Even if a Muslim spiritual leader possesses all knowledge about law, philosophy and eschatology, his life will be worthless—perhaps sometimes harmful, unless he acts in accordance with the cardinal teachings of the Faith.

I shall conclude by recapitulating briefly what I have said about al-Ghazālī's doctrines as a whole.

Religious knowledge does not consist in logical and hair-splitting arguments or in the subtleties of Scholastic Theology. It is not the casuistry of formal jurisprudence or the rationalization of philosophy. It is attained by the truly sincere efforts of a mind, which earnestly seeks to discover the truth.

The last stage of this quest can only be reached through the deeply personal and innermost experience of a vision of God, when the human mind is in a state of ecstasy. It is more a matter of gnosis (*'irfān*) than of syllogistic knowledge (*'ilm*). It must be centered in the heart rather than in the intellect.

It was in fact chiefly due to al-Ghazālī that the vision of the mystic and the concept of knowledge through intuition became accepted by official Islam.

Religion calls man to search for the truth with an open heart and clear vision, rather than with blind imitation or prejudice. Religion is neither the verbal confession of some creed nor a series of ritualistic acts. These things are merely the expressions of religion, which are necessary as means, but are not themselves the ends.

Worship (*'ibādah*) is sincere service and usefulness throughout a life time. True religion is thus sincere faith in God, devotion to God and his truth, and useful work.