AL-GHAZALI'S "SPIRITUAL CRISIS"
RECONSIDERED

Mustafa Mahmoud Abu-Siwa'yi

There have been many speculations about the reality of al-
Ghażalī's unexpected abandonment of his professorial posi-
tion at the Nizāmiyyah college¹ and his departure from
Baghdad. It is the aim of this paper to question those spec-
culations in an attempt to present an impartial account of
what has become known in modern literature as the "spirit-
ual crisis"² of al-Ghażalī. However, the scope of this paper is
limited to certain works, selected wholly on arbitrary bases,
which, for the most part, relate an account distinct from
what al-Ghażalī himself has stated with regard to his "con-
version" to taṣawwuf and his renunciation of the world.

After the death of al-Juwayni in 478 A.H./1085 C.E.,³
his most prominent student, al-Ghażalī went to the Camp
(Al-Mu'askar) to see vizier Nizām al-Mulk, whose court was
a meeting place for scholars. There, he debated with other
scholars on various subjects and won their respect. About six
years later at Al-Mu'askar, Nizām al-Mulk assigned al-Ghażalī

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¹ Nizām al-Mulk built a college that was named after him in each
city in Iraq and Khurasan. These include Baghdad, Balakh,
Nishapur, Harāt, Asfahan, Al-Baṣrah, Marw, Taḥrīstān, and Al-
Muṣīl. Tāj al-Dīn al-Ṣubki, Taḥaqāt al-Shāfiʿīyyah al-Kubrā (Cairo:

² Cf. `Abd al-Amīr al-Aṣam, al-Fayyāṣif al-Ghażalī (Beirut: Dar al-
Andalus, 1981), 42; Al-Sharhṣi, 34; `Abd al-Rahman
Dimāshqīyāh, Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghażalī wa al-Taṣawwuf (Riyad:
Dār Tibah, 1988), 43.

³ `Abd al-Malik [Imām al-Haramayn] Ibn `Abd Allāh [Al-Shaikh
Abū Muḥammad] Ibn Yūsuf. He was the teacher par excel-
ence at the time.
to teach at the Niẓāmiyyah of Baghdad, where he lectured between 484 A.H./1091 C.E. and 488 A.H./1095 C.E. This position won him prestige, wealth, and "respect that even princes, kings, and viziers could not match." Al-Ghazālī, according to the Hanbalite scholar, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 A.H./1200 C.E.), who studied at the hands of al-Ghazālī’s student, the Mālikī judge Ibn al-ʿArabī, came to Baghdad directly from Aṣfāḥān where the Camp must have been located.

At the Niẓāmiyyah, several hundred students used to attend the lectures of al-Ghazālī. Some of those students became famous scholars, judges, and a few became lecturers at the Niẓāmiyyah of Baghdad itself. Also, according to Ibn al-Jawzī’s al-Muntaẓam fi Tārīkh al-Muḥā(pk was al-ʿUmmat, scholars such as Ibn ʿAqīl and Abū al-Khaṭṭāb, among the heads of the Hanbalite school of jurisprudence, attended his lectures and incorporated them in their writings.

4 Al-Subki, 6: 196-197.
7 They include: Judge Abū Naṣr al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 544 A.H./1149 C.E.); Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī al-Malīkī (d. 545 A.H./1150 C.E.), who was quoted frequently in criticism of al-Ghazālī; Abū ʿAbdullāh Shaffī Ibn ʿAbd al-Rashīd al-Jili al-Shāfiʿī (d. 541 A.H./1146 C.E.), whose lectures were attended by Ibn al-Jawzī; Abū Maṣṣūr Saʿd Ibn Muḥammad al-Bazzār (d. 539 A.H./1144 C.E.), who taught at the Niẓāmiyyah; Imam Abū al-Fath Ahmad Ibn ‘Ali Ibn Būḥān (d. 518 A.H./1124 C.E.), who taught at the Niẓāmiyyah for a short period; and Abū ʿAbdullāh Ibn Tūmār, founder of the Muwahhidūn state in Al-Maghrib, among many others. Al-Sharbāṣī made a mistake in listing Abū ʿAbdullāh al-Israʿīlī (d. 406 A.H./1015 C.E.), who was one of the heads of the Shaffī’s, among the students of al-Ghazālī. See Aḥmad al-Sharbāṣī, Al-Ghazālī (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1975), 32.
8 Al-Sharbāṣī, 31.

The end of al-Ghazālī’s career at the Niẓāmiyyah of Baghdad was unexpected. He discussed the reason for the relinquishment of his position in his autobiographical work, Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl), in the section on taṣawwuf. The aim of this book was to show his lifetime preoccupation with, and quest for, knowledge of certitude (ʿIlm al-yaqīn), an occupation which required him to study numerous sects and groups of his time, culminating in his declaration of taṣawwuf as the only path that quenched his epistemological thirst through direct experience. After discussing the methods of the Mutakallimūn, the philosophers and the Bāṭınītes respectively, al-Ghazālī chose the method of the Sufis as the right method for the attainment of true knowledge. His rejection of these three groups was not equal; he declared the philosophers as non-believers, the Bāṭınītes as being empty except from some Pythagorean notions, and while he cherished the Mutakallimūn as the guardians of faith, he believed that their method fell short of achieving his goal. Indeed, in the last few lines of al-Munqidh, he declares that his objective was to criticise the philosophers and the Bāṭınītes; he did not mention the Mutakallimūn.

The method of the Sufis, however, had a major prerequisite—one should abandon all worldly attachments. Al-Ghazālī thought that, in order to implement this, he should “shun fame, money and to run away from obstacles.” He made it clear that any deed which was not for the sake of
Allah, \( \text{\footnote{11}} \) was an obstacle. Al-Ghazâlî scrutinized his activities, including teaching, and decided that his motivation was not for the sake of Allah, \( \text{\footnote{12}} \) Although he could have simply changed his motivation—which he eventually did upon his resumption of public teaching at the Niẓâmiyyah of Nishapur in 499 A.H./1106, al-Ghazâlî wanted to abandon those obstacles but the temptation was very strong. He spent six months struggling to stop teaching, until he no longer had a choice. Of this he said:

For nearly six months beginning with Rajab, 488 A.H. [July, 1095 G.E.], I was continuously tossed about between the attractions of worldly desires and the impulses towards eternal life. In that month the matter ceased to be one of choice and became one of compulsion. [Allah impeded my tongue] \( \text{\footnote{15}} \) so that I was prevented from lecturing. One particular day I would make an effort to lecture in order to gratify the hearts of my following, but my tongue would not utter a single word nor could I accomplish anything at all. \( \text{\footnote{14}} \)

The fact that al-Ghazâlî could not speak caused him grief, which eventually affected his ability to digest food. Soon his health deteriorated and the physicians gave up any hope and stated that the only way to cure him was by solving his problem, which they described as an affair of the heart.

\( \text{\footnote{11}} \) I used the word “Allah” instead of “God” because the latter has various connotations, in different religions and cultures, that might not represent the Islamic concept.

\( \text{\footnote{12}} \) Al-Ghazâlî, \textit{al-Munqidh}, 134.


\( \text{\footnote{14}} \) Hayman and Walsh, 277.

\( \text{\footnote{15}} \) Hayman and Walsh, 278.

\( \text{\footnote{16}} \) Al-Shâm usually refers to what later on became known as Greater Syria which includes Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. It is also used to indicate the city of Damascus; Al-Ghazâlî used it in the latter sense.

\( \text{\footnote{17}} \) Al-Ghazâlî, \textit{al-Munqidh}, 137.

\( \text{\footnote{18}} \) Al-Zubaydi, 1:7.

\( \text{\footnote{19}} \) Al-Ghazâlî, \textit{al-Munqidh}, 137.
safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which [Allah] Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge.20

Nevertheless, the relationship between these two periods is very strong; the end of the period of skepticism brought with it the establishment of divine light as a metarational source of knowledge. Its eminent sign, according to al-Ghazālī, is distancing oneself from the affairs of this world in favor of the hereafter, the climax of which, in his case, was abandoning his distinguished professorial position at the Nizāmiyyah and leaving all the worldly affairs of Baghdad as a requirement to tread on the path of the hereafter.

Although al-Ghazālī used clear and simple language in describing the reason why he left the Nizāmiyyah, many scholars challenged his straightforward account, which he recounted in his al-Munqīdh, and presented various interpretations of the nature and reason for his departure from Baghdad. Not only was al-Ghazālī’s version questioned, but according to Nakamura in An Approach to Ghazālī’s Conversion, a host of scholars including Carra de Vaux, Samuel M. Zwemer, Margaret Smith and R. J. McCarthy were all skeptical about the contents of al-Munqīdh as a source material: ‘Abd al-Dā’il al-Baqārī adopted an extreme position towards al-Munqīdh by dismissing it as fictional.21 ‘Umar Farrūkh, echoing al-Baqārī’s dissonant voice, alluded to the “story of skepticism and certitude” as


an artistic play (masrahīyyah fanniyyah).22

As for Carra de Vaux, he considered al-Ghazālī’s internal struggle before leaving Baghdad real. Yet he considered al-Ghazālī’s dialogue with the sensibles an intellectual play.23 Zakariyyā al-Imām objected to Carra de Vaux’s latter notion, and expressed his astonishment.24 I would say that if Carra de Vaux was denying that al-Ghazālī went through skepticism, this would raise more than eyebrows. But if he was referring to the style in which it was written, this statement has a grain of truth, for al-Ghazālī never claimed that al-Munqīdh was a spontaneous outcome of that period. Suffice it to mention that al-Munqīdh, as al-Ghazālī himself stated at the very beginning of this book, was written towards the end of his life when he was more than fifty years old, that is, about fourteen years after his departure from Baghdad. Then it is clear that this work, like his others, was a product of al-Ghazālī’s well-organized thought.

In addition, the position of Margaret Smith regarding al-Ghazālī’s “conversion” reflects her acceptance of the reasons he declared in al-Munqīdh—she said: “The reasons for the abandonment of his career and for the rejection of all that the world had to offer him—a decision which astonished and perplexed all who heard of it—al-Ghazālī sets forth in his apologia pro vita sua [al-Munqīdh].”25 Thus, we

find her statement inconsistent with Nakamura’s above-mentioned account.

In the introduction to *Freedom and Fulfilment*, McCarthy discussed the position of al-Baqari, in which he relied heavily on *Autour de la sincérité d’Al-Ghazâli*, a useful article by ‘Abd al-Jalil. According to McCarthy, Al-Baqari stripped *al-Munqidh* of all its historical values based on the fact that al-Ghazâli pointed out in *Ihya* (Book XXIV) that lying is not intrinsically wrong and that, indeed, sometimes it is even obligatory. Thus, the main thesis of al-Baqari is that the structure of *al-Munqidh*, despite reflecting some experienced realities, is essentially a lie. McCarthy sided with ‘Abd al-Jalil in stating that “al-Baqari uses this teaching of Ghazâli, but unfortunately with certain lacunae which seem intentional and which permit him to insinuate as a general principle what Ghazâli did not really claim as such.”26 In addition, McCarthy agreed with ‘Abd al-Jalil that none of al-Baqari’s arguments “authorizes a doubt about Ghazâli’s sincerity. The human, intellectual and spiritual value of the *Munqidh* remains firm, though it cannot of itself alone serve as an historical source.”27

Commenting on the reliability of *al-Munqidh*, Nakamura said that al-Ghazâli’s account is “by and large” genuine and reliable and that his two crises are historical facts beyond doubt with no evidence to the contrary.28 In fact, there are established accounts by many contemporaries of al-Ghazâli who witnessed him going through the various stages and changing his lifestyle in favour of *tasawwuf*, which confirm the description in *al-Munqidh*. One of these reliable accounts is that of ‘Abd al-Ghâfir Ibn Ismâ’il al-Khatib al-Farsi (d. 551 A.H./1156 C.E.), who personally visited al-Ghazâli several times before and after he changed his way of life to *tasawwuf*, and he verified the reality of al-Ghazâli’s changes before attesting to their truthfulness.29 He stated that after reaching a rank and reputation which superseded that of the princes and the Caliph, al-Ghazâli turned away from all that in exchange for the path of mysticism and preoccupied himself with the affairs of the hereafter.30 It is imperative to know that before quoting al-Farisi’s narration,31 al-Subki stated in the *Tabaqat* that he was “trustworthy [thiqah], contemporary [i.e., of al-Ghazâli] and knowledgeable”.32 The latter statement is a clear indication of the authority of al-Farisi. It should be known that ‘thiqah’ in this context is a technical term, which is considered by many scholars of *hadith* as the highest rank attributed to a Muslim narrator.33

Al-Ghazâli’s candid description of his innermost feelings, thoughts and physical conditions, which preceded his withdrawal from public teaching, tempted some contemporary scholars to “diagnose” his sickness.34 These scholars left the realm of philosophy for medicine in their attempt to diagnose and evaluate al-Ghazâli’s physical and mental fitness during the period leading to his departure from Baghdad. Although it is not the aim of this paper to define

26 McCarthy, xxvi–xxviii.
27 McCarthy, xxix.
28 Nakamura, 49.
29 Al-Subki, 4: 208.
30 Al-Subki, 4: 206.
31 For the full text of al-Farisi’s narration, see Al-Subki, 4: 203–214.
32 Al-Subki, 4: 203.
33 These scholars include Ibn Abû Hatim al-Razi, *al-farh wa al-Ta’dil*, Abû Bakr al-Khatib, *al-Kifâyah* and Ibn al-Salâh, *Ulum al-Hadith*. ‘*Thabî*’ and ‘*huğâh*’ are interchangeable with ‘*thiqah*’. Al-Dhahabi differed in considering a repetition of ‘*thiqah*’ or a combination of it with any of the other two as higher; Al-Iraqi (d. 806 A.H.) agreed with him. See Al-Iraqi, *al-Taqyid wa al-Idâh limâ Ulliqa wa Ughliqa min Muqaddimât Ibn al-Salâh* (Beirut: Dâr al-Fikr, 1993), 152.
34 Al-Sharhâsi, 37.
what the job of philosophy is, looking for symptoms in autobiographical works is certainly not philosophy per se. One cannot but criticize such unphilosophical attitudes.

The most awkward “diagnosis” is that of ‘Umar Farrūkh in Ṭarrīkh al-Fikr al-‘Arabī illā Ayyām Ibn Khaldūn. After making reference to al-Ghazālī’s description, he said:

We undoubtedly declare that al-Ghazālī was sick with ‘al-kanz’ or ‘al-ghanz’, a psychological disease which appears, mostly, among those who have extreme religious orientation [dhaawi al-itti-jāh al-dini al-mutawarrīf].

Even if Farrūkh were a physician or a clinical psychologist, which he is not, none of al-Ghazālī’s statements warrants the decisive terms that he applied in his “diagnoses”. To complicate things further, Farrūkh decided, without citing any reference and without any justification, that al-Ghazālī must have been sick for three years prior to the date he stated in al-Munqidh. In addition, his statement, which suggests that al-Ghazālī was an extremist, uses a language that is alien to Arabic, and which reflects the semantic shift, or rather the adulteration, of contemporary Arabic by Western concepts.

Moreover, Farrūkh admitted that available lexicons do not have a clear definition of this disease. Nevertheless, contrary to the latter statement, he came up with a three-page description of ‘kanz’, including its influence on the physical and mental abilities, and the various bodily functions. For comparison, al-Ghazālī’s own account of his physical and mental conditions occupied three lines, he said that he reached the point where he could not speak anymore, and that this condition caused him grief, which in turn led to loss of appetite and indigestion of food, only to be followed by general weakness. Farrūkh, on the other hand, unwittingly left the door wide open for the inexperienced reader to accept his long list of kanz symptoms in toto, for he never mentioned which parts of it apply to al-Ghazālī, although I am sure none would include irregular menstruation, which he included in the impact of kanz on women! This list, which is preceded by a statement describing kanz as a hereditary disease, includes, but is not restricted to, melancholy, weakened memory, inability to think properly, fear of taking responsibility, being haunted by memories of the past, despair, severe depression, indecisiveness, having frequent illusions, developing inferiority complex, withdrawal from public life, feeling humiliated, insomnia, eating disorders, weakness of sexual desire and blowing minor mistakes out of proportion. Farrūkh, who blew al-Ghazālī’s conditions out of proportion, ended his rather lengthy description by stating that, as a result of this disease, the patient would be inclined to become religious and pious. The latter statement misleads the reader to conceive al-Ghazālī’s “conversion” as a symptom of a disease rather than a genuine religious experience.

Al-Ghazālī’s declared motives for his departure from Baghdad in al-Munqidh have been challenged by many scholars. Duncan Black Macdonald argued that al-Ghazālī left Baghdad because he felt that he was persona non grata

35 Farrūkh, 494.
36 Farrūkh, 493.
38 Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh, 131.
39 This statement was accepted by Dimashqīyāh, who is an avid critic of al-Ghazālī, without any qualifications. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Sa‘īd Dimashqīyāh, Abū Hamīd al-Ghazālī wa al-Tasawwuf (Riyād: Dār Tibā‘, 1409 A.H.), 45.
40 Farrūkh, 494–496.
with the Sultan Bakyāruq.\textsuperscript{41} According to Macdonald, this was because al-Ghazālī sided with Tutush (d. 488 A.H./1095 C.E.), uncle and rival of Bakyāruq. In fact, this opinion goes back in history to the time of al-Ghazālī who mentioned it essentially in \textit{al-Munqidh}. It contradicts, however, al-Ghazālī’s own account of his relationship with those in authority at the time. It is quite clear, rather, that he was courted by them. He was convinced that the Caliph would not understand his reasons for leaving Baghdad and thus would prevent him from doing so.\textsuperscript{42} Besides, if his only goal was to disappear from Baghdad in order to escape political difficulties, he could have done so without the trouble of becoming a Sufi, the hardships associated with the distribution of his wealth and leaving his family behind in Baghdad.

Another challenge to al-Ghazālī’s account was set forth by Farid Jabra who claimed that al-Ghazālī fled Baghdad for fear of assassination by the Bātunites.\textsuperscript{43} The above-mentioned criticism of Macdonald’s opinion also applies here. In addition, one could argue that if it were true that al-Ghazālī feared for his life, he would have looked for places located far away from the influence of the Bātunites. However, he went to Damascus and Jerusalem which were under the direct influence of the Fatimids. Furthermore, at the end of his journey, he returned to Nishapur, which was very close to the strongholds of the Bātunites, during the peak of political assassinations.\textsuperscript{44} Among the many dignitaries who were systematically assassinated by the Bātunites was Fakhr al-Mulk, son of Nizām al-Mulk and vizier for Sanjar in Nishapur, who met the same fate as his father in 500 A.H./1106.\textsuperscript{45} The same year al-Ghazālī resumed public teaching at the Nizāmiyyah of Nishapur. The description of his return reflects his awareness of the great danger awaiting him in Nishapur, for he wondered in \textit{al-Munqidh} whether he would be able to fulfill his duty of spreading knowledge or be cut off by death. He faced the latter possibility with a faith as certain as direct vision that there was no might for him and no power save in Allah, the Sublime, the Mighty.\textsuperscript{46} He believed that Allah facilitated his movement to Nishapur and, indeed, that it was He who was moving him.\textsuperscript{47}

Another fact that can be cited against Jabra’s claim is that the teachings and the activities of the Bātunites prompted al-Ghazālī to devote at least seven books and treatises to what appears to be a systematic confrontation of their positions, which ironically commenced in Baghdad by writing \textit{Fadā‘i al-Bātiniyyah wa Fadā‘il al-Mustazhiriyah} and continued throughout the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{48} Obviously, such a commitment and determination to undermine the Bātunites’

\textsuperscript{41} W. Montgomery Watt, \textit{Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazālī} (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh University Press, 1963), 140.

\textsuperscript{42} Al-Ghazālī, \textit{al-Munqidh}, 137.

\textsuperscript{43} Watt, 140.

\textsuperscript{44} Watt, 140–143.


\textsuperscript{46} McCarthy, 107.

\textsuperscript{47} Al-Ghazālī, \textit{al-Munqidh}, 146.

position could only be an expression of a deeply motivated, knowledgeable and courageous scholar.

The basic problem of Jabre’s claim is his interpretation of a statement reported by ‘Abd al-Ghaffar al-Farisi in which al-Ghazali professed that, before leaving Baghdad, “the door of fear was opened for him” [futuha ‘alayhi babun min al-khawf] and that it preoccupied him, so much so, that he could not pay attention to anything else.49 According to Jabre, this statement reflected al-Ghazali’s fear of being assassinated at the hands of the Batinites, and not his fear of Hellfire as he confessed in al-Munqidh. After citing Jabre’s argument, Nakamura criticized it by stating that he simply did not “understand why this ‘fear’ cannot be that of Hellfire as Ghazali himself confesses.”50 The context in which al-Ghazali mentioned his fear of Hellfire in al-Munqidh, reflects Sufi themes and terminology. Indeed, it is mentioned in the introduction to the section on “the Ways of the Sufis”, after he declares his preference for their path which, by definition, requires him to be detached from worldly affairs, and his intention to follow it. It took al-Ghazali six months, beginning Rajab 488 A.H., to reach the level where he severed his ties with worldliness. One can only ask: why would he wait for a total of six months in Baghdad, before embarking on his journey, if there was imminent danger and if he was preoccupied with his personal safety? He expected the scholars of Iraq neither to accept nor to understand the religious reasons behind his action; he blamed their position on their level of understanding.51 Thus, it is untenable that al-Ghazali’s fear of assassination could have played any role in his departure from Baghdad. His own account, on the other hand, is perfectly comprehensible.

Among those who appear to have reconciled the positions of Macdonald and Jabre is al-Uthman who thought that it is not strange to interpret al-Ghazali’s “excessive fear” in terms of the “choking political crises” that prevailed during that time.52 He was only to be followed by al-A’sam who cited both Macdonald and al-Uthman in concluding that “al-Ghazali saw himself, beyond doubt, threatened by the danger that encircled him.” He added that al-Ghazali’s increasing anxiety, due to his fear, was accompanied by his “consciousness of the threatening political danger.”53 It should be noted that there are two possibilities for interpreting “beyond doubt” in the above statement as it is read in Arabic.54 The first is that al-Ghazali did not have any doubt in seeing himself encircled by danger, and the second is that al-A’sam did not have any doubt that Al-Ghazali saw himself encircled by danger; there remains nothing, understandably, in al-A’sam’s account to substantiate any of the two possibilities. In addition, al-A’sam cited Watt regarding the same notion, yet he failed to mention that, on the same page he cited, Watt considered that Macdonald’s position that al-Ghazali was persona non grata with Barkyaruq “was probably not intended to do more than call attention to a secondary factor, since he accepted al-Ghazali’s “conver-

sion” to the mystic life as genuine.” It is obvious that such a citation would have undermined al-A’sam’s straightforward conformism to the position handed down by Macdonald.

One last odd addition, to what seems to be the scholars’ ever-mounting reasons for al-Ghazâlî’s “conversion” and abandonment of Al-Nizâmiyâh, came from Victor Sa’îd Bâsîl, who said, in his Manhâj al-Ba’ith ‘an al-Ma’rîfah ‘ind al-Ghazâlî—which was introduced by Fârîd Jâbrî—that among other reasons “al-Ghazâlî was also bored of teaching.”

Al-Ghazâlî’s abandonment of almost everything he possessed and his choice of the spiritual path of tasawwuf should not come as a surprise. He read the books of Sufis such as Abu Tâlib al-Makki’s Qût al-Quîbû (Food of Hearts), the books of al-Hârîth al-Muhasibi, and the writings of al-Junayd, al-Shibli, and Abu Yâzîd al-Bisîmî. Al-Ghazâlî’s position was consistent with those of the above-mentioned Sufis. He chose their methodology as the one that could best fulfill his quest for knowledge. Al-Muhasibi (d. 243 A.H./857 C.E.), for example, withdrew from public life and died in want. Likewise, al-Junayd (d. 298 A.H./910 C.E.), a student of al-Muhasibi, had doubts whether he was worthy of giving lectures. Al-Shibli (d. 334 A.H./946 C.E.), a student of al-Junayd, was the governor of Dunhavind, canton of Rayy, and also denounced the world and asked of the inhabitants forgiveness for his past conduct. He then submitted his resignation. Al-Bisîmî (d. 261 A.H./874 C.E.) stated that he gained knowledge of the world by means of a hungry belly. Following suit, al-Mâkî (d. 386 A.H./996 C.E.) advocated self-mortification: he lived for a considerable time on nothing but wild herbs. Their influence on al-Ghazâlî is visible.

Al-Ghazâlî’s internal struggle might have been triggered by the visit of Abu al-Husayn Ardashîr Ibn Mansûr al-‘Abbâdi to the Nizâmiyâh of Baghdad in 486 A.H./1093 C.E. His preaching, which al-Ghazâlî attended, was so influential that “more than thirty thousand men and women were present at his circles, many people left their livelihood, many people repented and returned to mosques, wines were spilled and instruments of play [i.e. music] were broken.”

Furthermore, al-Ghazâlî’s departure from Baghdad was consistent with the activities of a typical Sufi. It was a part of the path of the Sufi to travel from one place to another and to visit tombs of good people. Visiting cemeteries was intended to help the Sufi purify his soul, since the sight of the graves teaches one a lesson about the temporal and limited nature of life on earth, and that one should treat it as a passage to the hereafter. A different perspective concerning al-Ghazâlî’s journey came from Zwemer, who said: “When Al-Ghazâlî determined to abandon the world and set out as a pilgrim he was only following the custom of the time.” To “prove” his point, Zwemer narrated the travels of al-Tabrizi and the Persian poet Sa’âdî; both narrations, although full with adventures, are devoid of any religious connotations.

55 Watt, Muslim Intellectual, 140.
57 Al-Ghazâlî, al-Muqaddidh, 131.
59 Ibn Khallikân, 1: 338.
60 Ibn Khallikân, 1: 511.
61 Ibn Khallikân, 1: 662.
62 Al-Ghazâlî, al-Muqaddidh, 131.
Thus, describing al-Ghazâlî’s journey as a “custom” reduces it to a this-worldly affair!

It is theoretically possible that a certain text can be proven forged, or it may not reflect historical facts; however, this does not apply to the case of "al-Munqidh," whose authenticity has already been demonstrated on sound grounds. In addition, my acceptance of al-Ghazâlî’s account contained therein, on its own merit, as an authentic source, does not entail accepting every idea mentioned in it. Thus, proving the authenticity of "al-Munqidh" renders the interpretation and criticism of al-Ghazâlî’s description as mere conjectures, or at best as an intellectual exercise. Al-Ghazâlî accounted for the people of his days who, once they learned of his departure from Baghdad and rejected his declared religious reasons, became confused and entangled in devising explanations for his conduct. Moreover, it is amazing that this is still the case, nine centuries later!

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65 McCarthy, 93.