

# Guidance, Tolerance, and the Reverent Mindset in the Thought of al-Ghazzali and Symeon

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In this paper, I explain and compare issues important to Muslims and Christians, past and present, for whom compassion and tolerance were, and still are, founded on a reverent mindset.<sup>1</sup> Abu Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) and Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) have given important insights into how essential the right mindset is for spiritual growth and for true compassion and community. Each addressed issues related to this mindset uniquely, but generally they regarded it as a commitment to follow God's will regardless of the reaction of others and simply for itself. For each, I will discuss their accounts of spiritual guidance and transformation, and what they mean by turning from the world. My goal is not only to explain some of the intricacies of spiritual transformation in Muslim and Christian traditions,<sup>2</sup> nor merely to point out similarities, but to help establish the importance of a reverent mindset for current efforts to promote tolerance between faiths and, more importantly, true community.

I will begin with an analysis of Ghazzali's accounts of turning from the world to God. In an introductory chapter of the *Kimia-yi sa'adat*, Ghazzali related a story about travelers on a ship which stopped at a wooded island. The travelers left the ship to look around, but knew they would have to return. The first group to return found comfortable seats. The second group to return found seats which were not as comfortable as those of the first group. The third group collected colorful stones from the wooded island and then returned to the ship. Since all of the seats had been taken by the first two groups, the third group had to sit in the bottom of the ship where the stones, now not so pretty as they had seemed, caused them additional discomfort by

taking up extra space. The last group lingered on the island too long and was left behind in a condition of despair. Ghazzali commented:

The first group represents the faithful who keep aloof from the world altogether and the last group the infidels who care only for this world and nothing for the next. The two intermediate classes are those who preserve their faith, but entangle themselves more or less with the vanities of things present.<sup>3</sup>

Entanglement or attachment to material things is clearly portrayed as the cause of discomfort and great distress.<sup>4</sup>

The island-stop story suggests, on first reading, that the world is only a distraction from loving God. In another story, however, Ghazzali emphasized a different "world." It appears in the *Kimia* in a chapter on "Knowledge of the Next World." In this story, Ghazzali described a journey through dark woods. The main character observed his friends gathering glittering stones in the forest, but decided not to do the same. Ghazzali wrote, regarding the main character: "He, on the other hand, laughs at them [his companions] and calls them fools for leading themselves in the vain hope of gain while he walks free and unencumbered."<sup>5</sup> If the story were merely reiterating the island-stop story, it would then state that the stones had turned out to be not so pleasant outside the forest and had instead become a source of pain and misery.

But the difference between the two stories soon becomes apparent. When the group of friends left the forest, they discovered that the stones were, in fact, jewels. They were precious and should have been sought by everyone. The main character had had his chance to gather these jewels when he had been in the forest with his companions. Instead of following their good example, however, he had laughed at them.

Clearly, the story implies that the jewels were truly valuable. But why would Ghazzali state that stones were a source of pain and misery, in one story, and that they were truly valuable, in another story? He did so, I believe, to challenge the reader and to indicate the subtleties of loving God. We are to love God, not the world, and yet God 'appears' in the world at times, giving us signs and guides to help us. The world can be spiritually valuable. It may be difficult to find God among the other material aspects of the world, but he is there, and we are to seek him there.

Indeed, after the island-stop story, Ghazzali qualifies his criticism of the world:

Although we have said so much against the world, it must be remembered that there are some things in the world which are not *of* it, such as knowledge and good deeds. A man carries what knowledge he possesses with him into the next world, and though his good deeds have passed, yet the effect of them remains in his character.<sup>6</sup>

He distinguished between what was merely *of* the world and that which was *in* the world but not *of* the world, i.e., knowledge and good deeds. The latter are aids in our spiritual life: "Other good things there are in the world, such as marriage, food, clothing, etc., which a wise man uses just in proportion as they help him to attain to the next world."<sup>7</sup> They are the jewels we should seek in the forest of this world. Things which are merely *of* the world are like the stones gathered by the third group to return to the ship in the island-stop story. They seem pretty at first, but are later a source of discomfort. It is important to turn away from and avoid attachment to these things. Yet, to turn away from what is *in* but not *of* the world (i.e., the signs and guides of God), as well as what is *merely of* the world, throws the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak.

Ghazzali also referred to this theme of spiritual guides in his *Ihya'* *'Ulum al-din, Disciplining the Soul, Refining the Character, and Curing the Sicknesses of the Heart, and Breaking the Two Desires, Books XXII and XXIII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*, tr. T. J. Winter, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 56, hereafter cited as *Ihya'*, in a chapter that makes reference to the island-stop story described above. Though he warned aspirants to turn from the world, it is clear after a careful reading that the "world" he meant was a world of selfish desires and self-directed habits. His primary concern in discussing spiritual guides is that the aspirant be changed inwardly, with concern about the outside world always secondary to this aim.

For example, in section eight of book 22 of the *Ihya'*, Ghazzali asserted that faith is aimed at resisting one's desires. Fighting enemies in the world may be important, but it is not the most important struggle in which we should engage. As he explained,

And our Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) said to some people who had just returned from the *Jihad*: 'Welcome! You have come from the lesser to the greater *Jihad*.' 'O Emissary of God!' he was asked. 'And what is the greater *Jihad*?' 'The *jihad* against the soul,' he replied.<sup>8</sup>

One might imagine people coming fresh from a battle, probably exhausted by the fight, hearing their spiritual leader tell them the outer battle in which they just exerted themselves was less important than spiritual discipline.

Ghazzali cited al-Razi's more specific account of such spiritual warfare:

'Fight your soul with the swords of self-discipline. These are four: eating little, sleeping briefly, speaking only when necessary, and tolerating all the wrongs done to you by men. . . . And when the wish to indulge your desires and sin stirs in your soul, and the delight of superfluous discourse is aroused, you should draw the sword of eating little from the

scabbard of the midnight prayer and sleeping briefly, and smite them with the fists of obscurity and silence and until they cease to oppress you . . .”<sup>9</sup>

While the advice is inwardly directed, it also suggests a lack of concern or care for anything outside oneself. When grouping all people into four classes, Ghazzali described a member of the highest group as one “whose heart is so engrossed in the remembrance of God that he pays no heed to the world, apart from the bare necessities of life.”<sup>10</sup> Since the other three classes mention people who follow religion only mechanically or not much at all, and do not include people who follow the requirements of religious law, such obedience to law should not be ruled out from a life wholly absorbed in the remembrance of God.

Indeed, though Ghazzali reserved higher praise for one who is completely immersed in the meditative practice of remembrance of God, he described a role for others who are not yet ready for such practice: “For a man who is unable to participate in the front lines of battle in the *Jihad* should provide water for the warriors and look after their mounts . . .”<sup>11</sup> He described these soldiers of lesser rank living lives engaged in activities with others in the world, not just serving those in retreat. He commented on a directive spoken by the Prophet: “By this he meant taking the fundamentals of faith and the exoteric doctrine by imitation [*taqlid*], and busying oneself with good works; for to diverge from this is a thing perilous indeed.”<sup>12</sup> So good works are a part of such a life of remembrance of God.

It may be argued that by making a life of retreat and meditation of higher importance than a life of good works, Ghazzali is ultimately not interested in such good works *per se*, but only as they make one ready for a life of complete retreat. Such an argument is not wholly without merit, but I believe it overlooks how important Ghazzali felt that a reverent mindset was to practicing anything, from good works, to prayer and meditation. He condemned the hollow following of religious duties throughout the *Ihya'* and other works as well. To prevent practices from becoming hollow or mechanical, the right mindset is essential. Otherwise, all so-called “good works” run the risk not only of lacking sincerity, but of turning bad because the person is not committed to seeing the action through properly to its end, to acting without harming others in the process. How many good works have become the justification for the horrible means used to achieve them?

Ghazzali was concerned that some aspirants might become so impressed by “renouncing the world” that they would completely turn away from good works in a self-centered manner, thereby harming their own spiritual struggle. He explained:

Many an aspirant has busied himself with self-discipline only to be overcome with some unsound imaging which he proved unable to renounce, so that the Path became blocked for him and he occupied himself with a vain and distracting idleness, and followed the way of antinomianism [ibaha], which leads to complete destruction.<sup>13</sup>

In his note to this passage, T.J. Winter reminds us that, of the *ibaha* that Ghazzali warned against, the most dangerous was that of one “who claims that when the love of God supplants every other love in the heart, the legal obligations and interdictions can no longer be of value.”<sup>14</sup> These legal obligations include caring for the poor and less fortunate. Perhaps, then, Ghazzali’s high praise for renunciation of the world is directed against such dangers.

For instance, he continually reminds his reader that the heart’s true function is to love God such that “. . . one should prefer none of the things of this world over Him.”<sup>15</sup> He discussed at length character traits and spiritual discipline meant “to cut the love of this world away from the soul and to set firmly therein the love of God (Exalted is he!)”<sup>16</sup> But when he gave examples of the love of the world, Ghazzali emphasized desires based on reputation and self-pride, e.g.: “The man who rejoices in wealth or fame, or an audience receptive to his sermons, or in a high position in the judiciary or the government, or in the great number of his pupils, should firstly renounce this thing in which he takes such pleasure and delight.”<sup>17</sup> He mentioned how the desire of kings and gamblers for wealth was a source of their misery, even in this life.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, when he discussed renouncing one’s desires for this world, he did not mean that we should have no motivation for acting in the world. His discussion of changing character traits and achieving equilibrium echoed Aristotle’s emphasis on means between extremes. But more importantly, Ghazzali asserted that the usual way of life in this world tends to pull us to one or another extreme. He even referred to success the discipline of renunciation not as a complete renunciation of the world, but as “the salvation of the heart from the vicissitudes of this world.”<sup>19</sup> Though in his clarification of this statement he referred to the most preferable state as that which is beyond even that of moderation,<sup>20</sup> he also explained that while in this world we cannot simply live without desires that affect others. For example, in describing the *Jihad* against unbelievers, Ghazzali argued that Muslims were not supposed to eliminate their anger and rage, but moderate and suppress it so that it is controlled by the intellect. Though this may sound like the kind of desire for the world that militant Muslims would cherish, Ghazzali was careful to qualify what he meant by a moderate kind of rage by describing how the Prophet, who when his face became red in anger “. . . would never say anything but the truth, from which anger never caused him to diverge.”<sup>21</sup>

So while it is clear that renouncing worldly desires still meant involvement in the world in a certain way, it is equally clear that Ghazzali was describing a more peaceful and intelligent standpoint for engaging others in the world. This standpoint issued from a reverent mindset, focused on remembering God and the field of duties into which God has placed us. Such a mindset keeps its balance amid the turbulence of the world.

Furthermore, Ghazzali's emphasis on the importance of the aspirant's unique condition highlights his concern to warn against a hollow and vain renunciation of the world. Each aspirant has attachments, bad habits of thought and action, but none of these are exactly the same in each person. So each person's path will be slightly different. Those attachments that are less firm and easier to overcome, whatever they are, should be dealt with first, so that it will be easier to take on the more entrenched ones. This can only be done by understanding one's circumstances and undergoing a training process.

Some will argue that the result of such a process does not sound appealing. It sounds like having no compassion for anything, even though love of God is to remain. Yet Ghazzali described the training process as one in which one kind of attachment is eventually replaced with another; in which one way of life is replaced with another; in which one kind of pleasure and passion is replaced with another. Familiar desires and pleasures must be cut off, so that the soul may become familiar with those of God, namely "the habit of praise, remembrance and prayer."<sup>22</sup> He explained this change of familiarity from one to the other in an analogy with the weaning of a child. A child finds the weaning process bitterly distasteful, but soon starts to like eating food and eventually prefers it to breast milk. And this is a good thing for all concerned.<sup>23</sup>

So the end result of this training process is the cultivation of familiarity with a different kind of compassion. It is not compassion for "exuberance, arrogance and taking pleasure in the delights of the world. . . ."<sup>24</sup> but a compassion that takes the place of these, like that of parents who deny themselves the pleasures of sleep and food to better care for and feed their children. Such a compassion requires commitment and endurance. We cannot become angry or depressed because we have given up passions with which we were once familiar. Such a compassion requires the cultivation of a reverent mindset so that it may be sustained, so that the familiarity may grow strong. As asserted earlier in the discussion of good works and legal obligations, this does not mean being wholly disconnected from our duties to friends, family and other human beings.

But in another way, this training process cannot be a complete retreat from the world. Ghazzali, though he bemoaned the lack of true spiritual guides in

his own time, nevertheless stressed how essential such a guide, a Shaykh, is for an aspirant's spiritual combat. After he described ways to overcome the barriers of wealth, status, imitation and sin, Ghazzali explained that further progress requires a Shaykh: "whom [the aspirant] will follow under every circumstance to guide him to the Straight Path."<sup>25</sup> Without a guide, the aspirant will get lost or will be led by the Devil. Ghazzali gave an analogy to express the importance of the Shaykh: "Similarly, someone who treats his soul by himself is like a tree which grows without husbandry, which must soon dry up; even should it survive for a while and put out leaves, yet will it not bear fruit."<sup>26</sup>

Finding a Shaykh is not an easy matter, and Ghazzali suggested that it should only occur after one has taken some of the more rudimentary steps on his or her own. He described ways of lifting the barriers of wealth, status, imitation and sin, but then recommended that after such veils are removed, the aspirant should seek a guide to follow without question. This is a difficult matter, since here and elsewhere, Ghazzali warned against imitation, *taqlid*. Regarding the veil of *taqlid*, Ghazzali asserted that, "Should a fanatical devotion to some doctrinal position so dominate him that he has no space in his heart for any other thing, then this likewise will become a tie and a veil, since it is not a requirement of aspirancy that one adhere to any particular school of thought."<sup>27</sup> Yet here he urges the aspirant to follow a guide blindly:

Let him [the aspirant] hold fast to him in the way that a blind man might clutch his guide on a riverbank, putting himself entirely in his hands and never contravening his instructions whether in the matter of his regular religious duties or of anything else. He should leave nothing outside the compass of his aspirancy, since he must know that he would benefit even more from a mistake of his Shaykh (were he to make one) than from any correct opinion or act which might proceed from his own soul.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, following doctrine and following a person can be different enterprises. Presumably, also, one who has removed the veil of *taqlid* will be able to know the false from the true spiritual guide.

Knowing such a distinction was imperative for Ghazzali. At one point in his life, he had seen himself becoming one who advised people improperly in matters of faith.<sup>29</sup> Ghazzali did not believe that merely teaching others to say the *Shabada*, or advancing religious doctrine, constituted faith. Both can be, and sometimes are, done without a reverent mindset. Both can be part of worldly ambitions and pleasures. True faith is to such worldly pursuits as a gem is to a bauble. Ghazzali explained:

I do not mean by 'faith' the 'discourse of the soul' and the movement made by the tongue when pronouncing the Two Testimonies in a way



which is devoid of any sincerity or single-heartedness, for this would be equivalent to believing that the gem were better than the bauble while knowing its name alone, and not its reality.<sup>30</sup>

He believed that many religious scholars and leaders are too caught up in bitter disputes and the love of arguing to guide an aspirant to knowledge of spiritual reality. Such knowledge does not come from winning arguments, but from the spiritual warfare.

But because this is a combat against one's own desires, desiring the combat is itself dangerous, since it is, nevertheless, a desire of one's own. This is why a spiritual guide is so important, and Ghazzali emphasized this. The unique state of each aspirant's heart has to be dealt with uniquely, and few of us are so mindful that we can see all of our faults on our own. Ghazzali explained that, "the guiding Shaykh, who is the physician of his aspirants' souls and the treater of the hearts of those who wish for guidance, should not impose any specific duties and forms of self-discipline upon them until he has learnt about their characters and ascertained the diseases from which they suffer."<sup>31</sup>

Having said this, Ghazzali recommended that when these unique aspects of the aspirant are given care, the Shaykh should encourage a way of life that will act as a fortress against dangers to the training process. Generally, this way of life consists of hunger, sleeplessness, silence and solitude. Ghazzali's reasons are important. Hunger is not important as a sacrifice to prove one's determination. Hunger, as well as the sleeplessness which comes from not over-eating, makes the heart soft and tender. It becomes more aware of and sensitive to God. As in the weaning process, something is taken away so that the aspirant may become more familiar with something else. This may sound contradictory since many people become grouchy and self-centered when they have missed a meal or lost sleep. But Ghazzali is not advocating complete loss of sleep or food. Some amount is required. But as he says of sleep: "Sleep hardens and deadens the heart, unless, that is, it be done only in that amount which is needful."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to be aware of anything important when our lives are focused on acquiring more than is necessary of food and sleep. The fast of Ramadan is, in some ways, a practice which seeks to awaken individuals and the entire community to compassion for those who have no food. The sacrifice, in this sense, is not a loss at all; it is the harvest of new insight, of clearer thought, and of familiarity with God.

Through silence, Ghazzali explained, the aspirant is less likely to be distracted. Solitude also helps in this matter. When we live continuously with others, their concerns and complaints tend to become ours. They want us to side with them in some disagreement; they want us to share in their habits. It is difficult to avoid people altogether, but Ghazzali explained that the aspirant



should speak “no more than is necessary, for speech distracts the heart, which is possessed of a tremendous greed for it since it is made relaxed thereby, and finds it a burdensome thing to apply itself exclusively to contemplation and the remembrance of God.”<sup>33</sup>

By “solitude” Ghazzali also meant holding our character above involvement in unhelpful actions and inclinations. He implied this in section eight of Book 22, when he quoted al-Razi’s description of four things necessary for disciplining oneself for spiritual combat. The last and most important of these is described not as solitude, but as “. . . tolerating all the wrongs done to you by men.”<sup>34</sup> There is an inner solitude to such tolerance. In all of these matters, the goal that the Shaykh is imparting to the aspirant is not proving resolve, but cultivating a heart that is soft and receptive to God and to a life that remembers God in all it does. For most everyone, the guidance of a Shaykh is necessary at some stage or other.<sup>35</sup> This is the reverent mindset, as I have called it, which Ghazzali finds more important than doctrine or any of the outer aspects of faith.

The cultivation of a reverent mindset is also central to the spiritual advice of Symeon the New Theologian, a mystic from the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Like Ghazzali, Symeon often advised people to flee this world and focus on the spiritual world instead. But such a focus does not preclude, and indeed encourages, service and caring for others in the world. Symeon also stressed the role of a spiritual father in cultivating a reverent mindset.

His advice, taken from *The Practical and Theological Chapters*, often described two worlds which seemed incompatible with one another: the sensible and the intelligible. The sun brings light to the former, while God brings light to the latter.<sup>36</sup> But Symeon also points out that while distinct, these worlds are not separate. The intelligible sun (which is God) is not separate from the sensible world: “It is complete in all places, yet nowhere, and complete in all visible creatures yet completely outside them. . . . It is completely present everywhere, yet never completely in any place.”<sup>37</sup>

Symeon came from a monastic tradition which had brought the monasteries back into the cities, so it is not surprising that he described those who have “abandoned the world” living in the midst of worldly society. At the same time, such spiritual people are living with a mindset different from that of many others. In the *Chapters*, he wrote that “. . . spiritual persons cannot see the evil deeds of wicked and profane men, or understand their words of passion. In their turn they look upon the things of the world, but do not see and listen to the traffic of the world as if they did not hear.”<sup>38</sup> They are not deaf or blind; they are aware of the world. But they are not caught up and distracted from a life of virtue and submission to God’s will.

Indeed, such people need not be members of a monastic order. Despite his repeated explication of being “dead to the world” and not having any feelings for its affairs,<sup>39</sup> Symeon acknowledged that the monastic lifestyle is only one of many in which it is possible to serve God; he named government, teaching and church administration as others, specifically.<sup>40</sup> He wrote that, “whatever our works or activities, the most blessed life of all is one that is [lived] for God and according to God in each single act and deed we do.”<sup>41</sup> Whether we live in physical separation from others or in the midst of society is not the central issue. Different lifestyles can lead to the same spiritual goal. Symeon gave examples of those who have forgotten that goal, despite living away from society.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, he explained that one’s way of life may have to change in order to follow God’s will: “God does not wish us to be idle or to remain until the end in the self same activity in which we started. . . . We must march along in step with God’s will, not ours.”<sup>43</sup>

In this sense, abandoning the world is, again, to be free from what the world might expect or want from us, and prefer and joyfully take up what God expects instead. It cannot simply be a selfish disregard for others and the environment. In order to truly turn away from the world’s plans for us, we must have the love of God.<sup>44</sup> We cannot love our own whims. Indeed, Symeon explained, repeatedly, that this required eliminating our selfish ways of life, “killing the will” and following God’s will instead.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of implying a dichotomy between a present world to be disregarded, on the one hand, and a world of the afterlife to be valued, on the other, Symeon directed his listeners from a “world” of slavery in our selfish desires, to a “world” of freedom in God’s will. He used various concepts and metaphors to express this dichotomy, describing an effort to pass:

from slavery of the passions to the freedom of the Spirit, from unnatural obsessions (which the spiritual law speaks of as a captivity) to the transcending of nature, . . . from the bitterness of the cares and sorrows of this life to a joy that cannot be described and the banishment of all care. . . .<sup>46</sup>

The “world” or way of life he promoted is a *caring for* people in the world,<sup>47</sup> but it does not become bitter when that compassionate activity is returned with animosity or hatred. Though the terms sound contrary, to “care for” others in the world, following God’s will, requires a certain lack of care:

When a man’s thoughts are filled with anxiety about the affairs of life, he is not free. He is oppressed and enslaved by these anxieties, and worries either about himself or about others. But a man who is free from these things worries about neither his own life nor that of others. . . . Nonetheless he does not forget or neglect anything at all, even the least and most insignificant details.<sup>48</sup>

Symeon distinguished “useless worry” from “carefree action,” as well as “anxious inactivity” from “carefree work.”<sup>49</sup> Abandoning the world, then, still requires caring for people in the world and caring for the world in general, but doing so without concern for reward or even thankfulness from those you have helped. It requires a mindset reverent to God, reverently carrying out God’s will, not dependent on the reaction of those helped.

Symeon called this mindset “stillness” or “*hesychia*.” Such stillness implies keeping oneself balanced and focused on one’s duties to God despite the world’s distractions, and caring for others selflessly. He explained “. . . we should make it our care to work without care, and that once we are free from anxiety we should avoid all activity that does not help us.”<sup>50</sup> But *hesychia* is not easily achieved. Much like Ghazzali, Symeon understood the difficulty of willing to have a mindset that opposes one’s own will. Also like Ghazzali, Symeon recommended the guidance of someone experienced in such a mindset, above most all other means.

Even when he stressed the need for a spiritual father, Symeon qualified his exhortation with a warning about false teachers and deceivers.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the example and guidance of a spiritual father is essential for Symeon. He described the relationship of aspirant to guide as a “golden chain” in which each is a link between their spiritual father and the person they, in turn, lead through spiritual transformation.<sup>52</sup>

Symeon lived such a relationship, and was often in seclusion with his spiritual father.<sup>53</sup> He explained this relationship as more important than usual monastic life, more important than theological discussions.<sup>54</sup> An aspirant must obey the spiritual father in most every way. Symeon explained: “Never ask for water to drink even if thirst is burning you up. Wait until your spiritual father decides to offer you a drink. Do violence to yourselves! Overcome in all things!”<sup>55</sup>

While part of the reason for this silence and obedience is to overcome one’s selfish will so one is ready to follow God’s will instead,<sup>56</sup> another reason relates to the place of silence and eating in the transformation process.<sup>57</sup> Symeon noted the importance of humility early in that process, and explained that not noticing the taste of food is a sign of it.<sup>58</sup> More importantly, he asserted the detrimental effect of eating more than necessary: “It is impossible to stuff your body to the limit with food and enjoy spiritually the intelligible consolation of God. You move away from it the more you look after your belly.”<sup>59</sup> Silence, especially in the face of insults and indignity, is also part of this humility. Symeon explained: “If your heart is inordinately distressed by insults and injuries, you must recognize the sign that you still carry the ancient serpent in your heart. If, then, a man keeps silent or answers back with great humility, he weakens the serpent and breaks its grip.”<sup>60</sup>

Through the spiritual father's guidance, humility brings about and accompanies a great sense of sorrow and fear.<sup>61</sup> But both are accompanied, ironically, with greater confidence, security and, ultimately, joy. He explained that, "The more a person thinks in his soul that he is the most sinful of men, the more does hope increase and flourish within his heart by this humility, giving us the confidence that it will be our salvation."<sup>62</sup> True humility and sorrow are essential therapies for the transformation process. They are not so much overcome as they are made the soil from which joy grows and draws sustenance. Symeon explained the weight of this sorrow as one in which one no longer cares for food or drink and only eats enough to survive, following the spiritual father's direction.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, he also described the aspirant feeling "a spring gushing out, an endless river of tears, and he will understand it intelligibly as peace, sweetness, and unspeakable tenderness. It is also a course of manly strength and freedom [which enables us to] run without hindrance in complete obedience to the commandments of God."<sup>64</sup>

For Symeon, spiritual transformation was impossible without these experiences. He explained that without the tears that come from such sorrow, "our withered hearts could never be softened and our souls could never achieve spiritual humility or be strong enough to be humble."<sup>65</sup> Like Ghazzali, Symeon understood that words alone could not soften one's heart and bring strength in following God's will. So, for both Symeon and Ghazzali, a reverent mindset enabled the aspirant to better worship God, follow God's will and care for others in the world. It could only be acquired by softening the heart, through experienced guidance, discipline in diet, silence, humility and sorrow, which were, at the same time, a source of joy.

From this mindset, discipline does not preclude tolerance of other traditions of spiritual transformation, despite the fact that guidance is almost always described within one tradition. Since spiritual guidance is described by both Ghazzali and Symeon as a kind of therapy or medicine which is tailored to the difficulties of individual people, each instance of guidance will be unique. Each instance of guidance will, however, use whatever therapies are most effective. In many cases, these therapies will be from the tradition most familiar to the person being helped. But because the goal that Symeon and Ghazzali describe is a reverent mindset, not any one set of beliefs or practices; their views imply a recognition of the value of the spiritual therapies in different traditions. As such, they lay a cornerstone for respect and friendship between Muslims, Christians, and people of other faiths generally.

Both thinkers remind us that the spiritual struggle is not a struggle against the world or against believers from other faiths, but a struggle within each person against his or her own shortcomings and bad habits. It is a struggle not for a worldly peace, but for a true peace. The key is to turn away from

worldliness, not from the world *per se*. Life in the world can draw us in different directions and scatter our energies. This makes it difficult to focus on any activity. It is not peaceful. But spiritual struggle is an effort to order our thoughts and desires as we aim to cultivate a reverent mindset. Indeed, the implication of this article is that this is the key to true peace, true community. Despite the fact that beliefs and some practices differ profoundly in their formal aspects, the destination is very much the same.

Ghazzali and Symeon thus teach us that spiritual guidance is an experience that allows us to cultivate the reverent mindset and enables us to truly follow God's will and care for others in the world without anxiety. Since the reverent mindset and actions that follow from it are the goal of such guidance, Muslims, Christians and followers of other faiths should praise the quest for such a mindset in all religious traditions. By doing so, they not only promote tolerance but build compassion and community among believers of many different faiths.

## Endnotes

1. "Reverent mindset" is my term, but terms used by others include: soft heart, warm heart, light of the heart, sacred sanctuary.
2. These are important representatives of their respective traditions, but there are many others.
3. *Kimia*, 3/31.
4. He called this love "excessive," and in one sense it is excessive in that love can be described in terms of deficiency, excess and mean. But, in another sense, it might be better to use a different verb altogether, such as lust, since this love is directed solely to things of the material world, while the kind of love Ghazzali will advocate is directed toward God. This would not imply two different forces, but two different directions for one force, our desire.
5. *Kimia*, 4/40.
6. *Kimia*, 3/31–32.
7. *Kimia*, 3/32.
8. Abu Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazali, *Disciplining the Soul, Refining the Character, and Curing the Sicknesses of the Heart, and Breaking the Two Desires, Books XXII and XXIII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences, Iḥyā' 'Ulum al-dīn*, tr. T. J. Winter, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 56. Hereafter cited as *Iḥyā'*, [book].[section]/[page#]; e.g., *Iḥyā'*, 22.8/56.
9. *Iḥyā'*, 22.8/57.
10. *Iḥyā'*, 22.8/60.
11. *Ibid.*, 22.11/97.
12. *Ibid.*, 22.11/96.
13. *Ibid.*, 22.11/95.
14. T.J. Winter, note "A" for *Iḥyā'*, 22.11/95.
15. *Iḥyā'*, 22.6/47.
16. *Iḥyā'*, 22.4/33.
17. *Iḥyā'*, 22.8/65.

18. *Ihya'*, 22.4/33.
19. *Ihya'*, 22.3/29.
20. *Ihya'*, 22.3/29.
21. *Ihya'*, 22.3/28.
22. *Ihya'*, 22.8/64.
23. *Ihya'*, 22.8/64; Ghazzali also used the analogy of training falcons and horses, but in those analogies it is not clear that the training process is done for the animal's good, whereas in the case of weaning a baby to eat food instead of the mother's milk, the process is for the good of both baby and mother.
24. *Ihya'*, 22.8/64.
25. *Ihya'*, 22.11/88.
26. *Ibid.*, 22.11/88.
27. *Ihya'*, 22.11/86–87.
28. *Ihya'*, 22.11/88.
29. I am referring to the spiritual crisis Ghazzali underwent when teaching at Baghdad, discussed in his *Munqidh min al-dalal*.
30. *Ihya'*, 22.11/84.
31. *Ihya'*, 22.5/41.
32. *Ihya'*, 22.11/90.
33. *Ihya'*, 22.11/90.
34. *Ihya'*, 22.8/57.
35. Ghazzali makes an exception of the prophets, such as Jesus (regarded as a prophet second only to Muḥammad in Islam) who Ghazzali describes, along the lines of the Muslim view of Jesus, as self-taught. See *Ihya'*, 22.4/31 and 22.7/54.
36. Symeon, the New Theologian. *Symeon The New Theologian: The Practical and Theological Chapters and The Three Theological Discourses*. trans. and intro. by Paul McGuckin (Michigan: Cistercian Publication: Kalamazoo, 1982), 69–70. Hereafter cited as *Chapters*, [section#].[chapter#]/[page#], e.g. *Chapters*, 2.22/69–2.25/70.
37. Symeon the New Theologian, *Chapters*, 2.25/70.
38. *Ibid.*, 3.41/83.
39. *Ibid.*, 3.36/62, 3.37/82.
40. *Ibid.*, 3.65/91.
41. *Ibid.*, 3.65/91.
42. *Ibid.*, 3.68/92, 3.69/92.
43. *Ibid.*, 3.73/94.
44. Symeon uses stronger language than I am using in the text, but I do not believe it weakens my assertion: "If a man wants to hate the world, he must have the love of God in the depths of his soul. . . . There is nothing better than these virtues to make us abandon all things joyfully and cast them away like dross." *Ibid.*, 1.18/37.
45. *Ibid.*, 3.74/94–3.76/94–95.
46. *Ibid.*, 1.78/55–56.
47. *Ibid.*, 3.92/100–3.97/102.
48. *Ibid.*, 1.81/56–57.
49. *Ibid.*, 1.82/57.
50. *Ibid.*, 1.82/57.
51. *Ibid.*, 1.49/45–46.
52. *Ibid.*, 3.4/73.
53. *Ibid.*, 1.24/39; 1.28/40.
54. *Ibid.*, 1.22/38–39.
55. *Ibid.*, 1.26/39.

56. *Ibid.*, 3.74–5/94.
57. I will quickly describe this process with the caveat that more could be said and that, for Symeon, descriptions are meaningless without guided experience.
58. *Ibid.*, 1.32/41.
59. *Ibid.*, 1.42/44.
60. *Ibid.*, 1.47/45.
61. Symeon also noted and described false humility; *Ibid.*, 3.10/74–3.11/74.
62. *Ibid.*, 3.7/74; see also 3.8/74.
63. *Ibid.*, 3.17/76.
64. *Ibid.*, 3.20/77.
65. *Ibid.*, 3.23/78.



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