

AL-GHAZALI AS SUFI

ACCORDING to Al-Ghazali, religion consists of three parts: Belief, Works or Conduct, and Experience of Spiritualities. The two former make up what may be called formal religion. Each of them is necessary; but even both together are not sufficient to give a man a complete conception of truth, or fit him for the highest joys of the life to come. They do not afford even any reliable guarantee of *salvation*.

Now by *salvation* Al-Ghazali means absolute escape from the fires of hell. All true Moslems will attain to paradise, but most of them will attain to it only after passing for a shorter or a longer period through the fires which, while they are penal, are also purgatorial. Thus "the saved" according to Al-Ghazali, are the few who pass directly into paradise without first entering the fire.

To obtain this salvation far more is necessary than simply to be an orthodox and strict Moslem. It is possible that some may escape hell fire through a special and particular outpouring of the abounding mercy of God, or in virtue of the mediation of others; but such an escape is so problematic that one cannot wisely count upon it.

In holding that the most orthodox faith and the most strict performance of one's religious duties do not afford any guarantee that the believer will escape the torments of hell, Al-Ghazali is true to the convictions and beliefs of the early Moslems. None of them had any assurance that they would be "saved" in this sense of the word. And, in truth, there is no such assurance to be found anywhere in orthodox Moslem teaching. The true believer must simply submit himself to the divine will. If God please, of His grace, to give him entrance into paradise without first causing him to pass through the fires of hell, well and good. It will be a supreme act of grace and mercy. But he must be ever ready, should God will

it, to pass through the fire and there expiate the sins and evils of his earthly life.

Orthodox Islam holds out no "hope of salvation," and can therefore never be a religion of joy and confidence.* Nor does Islam point out to a man how he can overcome his sins and evil self, and thus qualify for direct entrance into heaven, and the enjoyment of the highest happiness of which he is capable.

For a means of such cleansing, Moslems in all times have turned to Sufism. In the time of Al-Ghazali, and for some time before and after his day, there was more than a tendency to distinguish and contrast Islam and Sufism. There was, of course, a Sufism which was non-Islamic, and there appears to have been a strong tendency on the part of Moslem Sufis to break away from formal Islam as soon as they had reached a certain stage in their Sufi life. In all times and in all religions there has been a similar tendency among those who have followed the path of the Mystic.

It must be put to the credit of Al-Ghazali that though he was not the first to realise that there could be a Sufism which was Moslem as well as a Sufism which was non-Moslem, he was, so far as we can judge, the principal agent in bringing about the public recognition of this fact. From the time that his books became generally known and his views were accepted, there was no further question of denouncing a man as an unbeliever simply because he was a Sufi; there was even no question of suspecting him solely because he followed the way of the Sufis.

But while Al-Ghazali may thus be said to have gained for Sufism a recognised place among Moslems, he insisted most strongly that there could be no true Sufism apart from revealed religion. There must be a historical foundation for belief and for one's knowledge of God's will, and nothing must be permitted or accepted by the Sufi which rang counter to this divine revelation. Sufi-

* It is true that for those who die fighting for the faith, the gates of paradise are said to be opened. And this expectation of immediate entrance into the gardens of delight and escape from the torments of hell fire has been the cause of much of the fanatical courage which has, from the earliest times, characterised Moslem warriors; but this belief is no real part of the faith as a theological system.

ism, he maintains, will never enable a man to dispense with revealed religion, or free him from the duty of performing its prescribed observances. Hell, he says, quoting a reported saying of the prophet, is full of Faqirs, who through wandering away from the truth of revealed religion have made shipwreck of the faith.

The freedom of the soul from all that fetters it and prevents it from rising, is the object of the Seeker; and according to Al-Ghazali one of the first things which a man must seek to understand is the mystery of his own nature. Besides the body and the animal spirit which gives the body life, and which man shares with the brute beasts, man has a spirit or soul which is akin to the divine.* It is this which distinguishes him from the lower animals: it is, in fact, the real man. To understand this is a primary necessity. Further, the seeker must learn the qualities, characteristics, and dispositions of this soul: wherein its nobility consists, and wherein lies the possibility of its defect and ruin. He must know what passions can possess it, what motives can influence it, and how these passions and motives may be purified and controlled. A man's life, then, must be a continual struggle. To begin with, he must have clear ideas and thoughts concerning realities and vanities, so that he may know which are the things that are enduring and which are those that are evanescent and temporary. He must know, in other words, that the world around him is a fleeting show: that there is an unseen world which deserves more truly the name of *real*. He must be able to see the difference between truth and falsehood in speaking: and he must know wherein consists the difference between virtue and vice.

But beyond this struggle to think clearly and judge distinctly and act rightly, there is a further struggle awaiting him, namely, the struggle against the passions within; through victory in this struggle, he achieves continence and temperance, using the latter word in its

* The word *akin* must, however, be taken figuratively, for Al-Ghazali carefully states that when God breathed into man nothing passed out of the divine into the human. Man's soul is not something from God, it is created.

fullest meaning. And even here the contest on which he has entered does not cease; for he has yet to encounter all those sections of the soul which may be summed up under the one word *anger*. Through conquest of these he acquires *gentleness*. But all this, in the life of the Sufi, is but a means to an end, for even such a life of inward struggle and outward watchfulness does not of itself qualify him for the highest happiness of which man is capable.

In the world to come there are degrees and stages—not that one passes from one stage to another after entering therein: but that according as one has prepared and fitted himself in the course of his earthly life, so will he find his happiness in the life to come. The believer's happiness hereafter depends not so much on what he has believed, nor on the strictness with which he has fulfilled his religious duties, but on what he has *been* in himself.

Complete happiness is to be found by each soul in the full satisfaction of those needs and desires, the partial satisfaction of which give him pleasure here on earth. The true believer, who in this world has never advanced beyond the pleasures of the senses, will find his joy and pleasure in the life to come in the complete gratification of the senses; for the fullest and completest happiness of which he will be capable will consist in the full satisfaction of these sensuous desires and appetites.

Similarly, he who finds his chief joy here in intellectual attainments and pleasures, will hereafter find his complete happiness in the full satisfaction of his intellectual longings.

But the man who has advanced beyond these and, having realised that his real self is spiritual (akin to God Himself), has found his chief pleasure on earth in the purification of this spiritual nature, and the freeing of it from the trammels and fetters of this passing world and all its weaknesses and evils, has thereby attained to at least a partial understanding of spiritual attainments whereby he approaches the Deity and becomes like Him.

Such is a short and imperfect statement of Al-Ghazali's doctrine of happiness. Now, according to Al-Ghazali,

the means whereby a man can attain to this spiritual happiness is two-fold. There are, in other words, two paths which lead to true spiritual knowledge—that knowledge of spiritual realities which may be described as experience of them.

One of these paths is study: the other is the path of practice. Some may reach the goal by one path and some by the other. The former path is according to Al-Ghazali, the harder and the longer, and few among men are so gifted with intellectual attainments as to be able to traverse it without falling into one or other of the many pitfalls by which it is beset. Indeed, for most men it leads only to doubt and unbelief.

The other path, that followed by the Sufis, is, he states, the easier path for most men; for it does not depend on intellectual capacities and mental abilities. In itself, it is true, it is also a path of difficulty, and is likewise beset by many a pitfall; yet of the two it is the easier and therefore the more suitable for most men.

We have already said that the highest joy and pleasure of which man, who is a spiritual being, is capable lies in the realisation of spiritual truth—as Al-Ghazali puts it, "the knowing spiritual realities"; and the highest and ultimate goal of this knowledge is God Himself.

To understand what Al-Ghazali means by this we must consider a little more in detail his theory of knowledge, and his conception of existence. Knowledge is various. It may be divided into two main divisions: that which depends ultimately on revelation (*Shar'i* knowledge) and that which depends on reason (*Aqli* knowledge). It is not necessary for the purpose we have at present in hand to consider the divisions and subdivisions of the former; but it is to be noted that even in the matter of *Shar'i* knowledge reason comes into play. For some of the truths of this department of knowledge are inferences or deductions from the fundamental truths which have been received by divine revelation, that is, from the verbal statements of the Qur'an; while others are the outcome of analogical reasoning based on similarly established beliefs and convictions.

Under the second division ('*Aqli* knowledge) we find (1) Mathematics, Astronomy, Logic, etc. (2) Natural Sciences, and (3) Speculative Knowledge. One of the sub-divisions of this last is Speculative Theology.

Now the knowledge of the Sufis is not solely either *Shar'i* or '*Aqli*, but is a compound knowledge, for it depends on revealed truth and partly on speculation.

For the individual, the two sources of knowledge are (1) Human teaching, and (2) Divine teaching. This latter is of two grades or degrees: Inspiration (*Wahyun*) and Enlightenment (*Ilhám*). Through Inspiration God taught the prophets; but after Mohammed the door of Inspiration was closed. Enlightenment, however, which is the means whereby God teaches the saints (*Al-Awliyá*) persists. In one passage Al-Ghazali defines this Enlightenment (*Ilhám*) as the awakening of the human soul by the Universal Soul in proportion to the purity and degrees of receptivity and preparedness of the former.

Now, every man can know spiritual truth, but every one cannot know it in the same degree, because all have not arrived at the same degree of purity or receptivity or preparedness. Every man is "*alá fitratia*," which may be translated "with right religious feelings and disposition" and therefore has potentially the power of knowing because of the original purity and the original attributes of the soul. But the souls of all men are more or less sick through evil.

We speak of a man's knowing, but it is the soul which knows. Indeed, knowledge is the one thing which the soul desires for itself; all else that the soul seeks or desires, it seeks or desires for the sake of the body with which it is associated in this present life, or, as Al-Ghazali would rather put it, in this present visible world, but from which death releases it.

But after all, we must still ask the question: What is knowledge? To answer this question, Al-Ghazali falls back on figure and metaphor. The soul is like a tablet on which things are written. For the purified soul which has separated itself from all evil, and turned away from the world and all its passing desires, looks

towards its maker and creator alone; and God, in His good providence approaches such a soul completely and gives it a divine look, and takes a pen and engraves on it all His various knowledges, and the Universal Reason becomes the teacher and the sanctified soul becomes the taught, and all knowledge arises in the soul (*yahsubu linnafsi*), and there is engraved on it the picture of everything without learning and without thought.

A more favourite figure with Al-Ghazali, however, is that of the mirror. The human soul is a mirror. It reflects the realities of the spiritual world. On account of its imperfections and on account of the spots and blemishes which mar its originally bright surface, it reflects these imperfectly or even in a distorted fashion.

Thus, knowledge is the image of the soul of the realities which it reflects. And the highest knowledge of the soul and that which alone causes it true joy, is the reflection of God Himself.

What prevents men from knowing God, is not that God is far away or that He hides Himself, but that the mirror which ought to reflect Him is for some one of many reasons unable to give a correct image of Him.

It is impossible in the space at our disposal to say more on this subject here.

But what of this world of realities which the soul reflects more or less clearly? There exist, according to Al-Ghazali, two worlds: the seen and the unseen. Speaking generally, the seen is symbolical of the unseen. All that is apprehended by the senses and the intellect is but a type, as it were, of the unseen—a parabolic representation of something which is more truly deserving of the name of "real," the *haqíqa*, the true being. These types do not necessarily resemble the unseen reality in form or shape or even nature; but they stand to these things as illustrations, and have in themselves such powers and attributes and qualities of action that in a certain sense they represent them.

The Qur'an, so Al-Ghazali says, is full of such symbols, and uses throughout symbolic and figurative language to represent spiritual truths. Such language is employed

because in no other way could man understand the divine relations, and he admits that even at times figurative language is employed with the object of hiding, as though through a veil, the unseen, which man could not understand were it revealed, at least most men, and concerning which he would but argue and contradict had any further revelation of the truth been given.

Man lives as in a dream. Death is the awakening. As one interprets his dream on awakening, and thus learns the reality of the things which were typified by it, so when man awakes at death, he will understand the true reality of those things which were on earth bound by the trammels of the body and the animal life-desires which form part of his composite nature. In this life one can never attain to a full or uninterrupted knowledge of the divine realities.

Now all knowledge of spiritual truth comes from God, and in imparting it God may use means; and with regard to its attainment man stands in one of three grades. There is first potential knowledge. As the infant has the capacity to learn to write, for instance, but cannot yet write, so man, at the outset, has the capacity to know spiritual truth. Following this, there comes the grade in which a boy has a knowledge of the letters and has not attained its maximum. He has not become practiced or skilled. So it may be with man in regard to the truths of the spiritual world. Finally there comes the grade of the skilled clerk which may be compared with the position of the man who is well conversant with spiritual realities. Yet even here in this last grade there are degrees or stages, and according to the degree or stage reached there are to be distinguished the prophets, the saints, the wise, and the learned.

The highest stage is that of the prophet who knows by divine inspiration, without learning or acquiring knowledge.

This knowledge of spiritualities brings one near to God. Now the only way to receive this knowledge—for it comes from God as a gift, and is not, strictly speaking, *acquired*—is to be prepared to receive it by the puri-

fyng of the spirit as a mirror must be cleaned and polished if it is to reflect aright the image of what is before it.

This brings us to speak of the obstructions or veils of various kinds which may prevent the light from falling on the mirror of the soul.

It is in the *Mishkat al-Anwar*, especially in the last section of the book, that we find Al-Ghazali's explanation of these veils which hide the face of God from man.

He divides men into three main classes according to the nature of these veils.

1. The first class includes all those who are veiled by *pure darkness*; and in it we find (1) Professed Atheists, who look upon the world and regard it as all in all: they deny that there is any God and any life to come. (2) The Practical Atheists, who are so concerned with the present life that they never realise that there is anything more, and who thus by their life and deeds, though not in word, deny the existence of God and the life hereafter. This second subdivision may be distinguished as (a) Sensualists, (b) Worshippers of Power and Brute Force, (c) Mammon Worshippers, (d) Worshippers of Fame and Glory.*

All in this first class, whether belonging to one subdivision or the other, are veiled by pure darkness because they have no conception of the existence of a spiritual world at all. No ray of spiritual light has reached them. Many of them (it must be of the second subdivision) may indeed be professing Moslems, who say "There is no God but God," but who make such a profession from false motives and incentives such as fear of the authorities, or pressure of public opinion, or even mere fanatical adherence to the faith of their fathers.

It is most interesting and instructive to note that Al-Ghazali here admits that outward profession of Islam without inward spiritual knowledge puts one no higher than this first division of those who are veiled by pure darkness.

2. The second class are those who are veiled by light and darkness mixed. In this class are included all who

* In this classification the word *worshipper* is used figuratively.

have some conception of the existence of God and of a spiritual world, however imperfect or mistaken this conception may be, as well as all those who, while they have accepted the revelation of the Qur'an have for various reasons gone astray in their theology. Thus we find in the first division of this class all who have taken as the object of their worship some object of Sense, and they may be subdivided into (a) Worshippers of inanimate objects of beauty (image worshippers, for instance), (b) Worshippers of animate objects of beauty, be they human beings, animals or trees, (c) Fire-worshippers, (d) Star and Planet Worshippers, (e) Sun Worshippers, (f) Light Worshippers, among them are to be included Dualists.

The second division of this class includes all who are veiled by light mixed with darkness arising from Imagination. Al-Ghazali probably intends by such all who because they cannot conceive or imagine anything wholly different from the outward forms and shapes of material objects or anything wholly dissociated from the circumstances and relations and accidents with which material objects are always associated, have therefore held views of the deity which are tinged by these preconceptions.

Here we find (a) The Anthropomorphists (*Mujassima*) (b) The various sects of the *Karramiyya* or of those who deny all accidents to the Deity except "*jihat sawq.*"

All these are unable to conceive of a Deity whom they cannot present to their imagination. He must have some form or shape, or at least have some relation which can be defined only in terms of form and shape. Their conception of God cannot therefore be purely spiritual. They are thus misled by their imagination.

The third division of this class includes all those who while they accept the revelation of the Qur'an, and its teachings, fall into error through some false inference or deduction of the intellect. Here come in all those who not being able to understand that the attributes of God may be described by words which cannot be taken (when used in speaking of the Deity) in the exact sense in which they are used when speaking of man, fall into the

error of limiting the attributes of God by the corresponding attributes of man.

3. The third class are those who are veiled by Light alone.

This class includes all who have found themselves from all anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity and have understood truly the *spirituality* of God, and who have understood further that in describing or defining the attributes of the Deity we employ such terms as *speech, will, power, etc.*, in a different sense from that which the words have when used to describe the attributes and powers of human nature, but who from the very glory of the light itself are unable to comprehend the true relation of the First Cause to the World which He has created.

(a) The first subdivision of this class includes those who hold that God directly moves the heavens (spheres).

(b) The second subdivision includes those who have advanced beyond this and have recognised that the spheres being many the One God cannot be the Mover of all; for this would be to deny the Unity of God in Action. They therefore understand that each sphere must have its own Mover (or Angel), and that there is an outer sphere containing all the others, and that God is the Mover of this outer sphere, and that he does this at the command of God *Al-Muta.* God is therefore the Mover of all, not directly, but by way of Command. This supreme Angel stands to God in the relation in which the moon stands to the sun.

All these are veiled by pure light alone.

4. A fourth class, *Al-Wásilún* (those who have attained) are alone unveiled. It has been revealed to them in addition to all the foregoing that to the *Obeded One* (*Al-Muta.*) there has been attributed even by those in the preceding subdivision something irreconcilible with Absolute Unity and Complete Perfection. (But Al-Ghazali most tantalisingly adds that the explanation of how their position involves this is a secret mystery which cannot be divulged in this book.) They therefore, recognise that this *Muta.* is not God, but stands in a relation to God (*Al-Wujúd al-Haqq*) similar to that of the sun to Absolute Light or of the glowing coal to the Pure Essential fire.

The *Wasilûn*, therefore, turn away from the Mover of the outer sphere, and from him who commands it to be moved (*Al-Muta'*) and reach out to a Being who transcends all that is to be apprehended by the perception or by the conception of those who look for Him; for they have found Him to be transcendent, separated from all the Beings and spheres and all else that has been previously inscribed.

God, then, is not the immediate Agent either in creation or in the providential government and direction of the universe. He does not even give the word of Command whereby the world is created and ruled. What He is and how He acts man cannot know, but that He is and that He acts man can realise through experience.

It is only, according to Al-Ghazali, when this absolute transcendence of God is realised that the true spirituality of the Deity is conserved.

Thus it is not enough to remove from the mirror of the soul all its blemishes and imperfections. However pure and clean the soul of man may become, a man cannot attain to a true realisation of God so long as he endeavors to *conceive* what the nature of God is for in such a case he will still be held down by the bonds and fetters of *imagination*, which is quite unable to free itself from the ideas associated with form and shape and space and the various relations which these imply. Imagination cannot reach God.

Nor can the *intellect* grasp Him; and every attempt to say What or Who God is in His nature and being must be avoided: for to employ words to describe or define Him only leads to misconception, seeing that these words, however carefully one may define their use, necessarily retain something of the meaning which they have when they are used to denote human powers and attributes, seeing that from their very essence, being human speech, they describe the relations and powers of embodied men.

Even the desire after spiritualities in preference to the vanities of this world must be avoided. To bring out this point Al-Ghazali employs the illustration of the position of the lover in the presence of his beloved. The

lover who in the presence of the object of his affection compares his experiences with the lesser joys and pleasures of life, is not for the moment whole-hearted in his devotion. The true lover, when in the presence of his beloved, knows nought else. His whole being is absorbed by the object of his affection; and, for the moment, nought else for him exists. His every thought and feeling and emotion must be so absorbed by the beloved that he is indifferent—unconscious indeed—whether ought else exists. He must even lose consciousness of his very joy; lose himself, in fact, in his beloved. Similarly, the seeker after God must lose himself in God; he must not even be conscious of the greatness of his desire after God, for that would mean that he is comparing this desire with other desires and realising that this is greater than these. He must be solely receptive, not desirous, and then God Himself will do all, and the seeker will experience—"taste" is Al-Ghazali's word—the blessedness of beholding God, a blessedness which cannot be described for no words or figure of speech can truly express it: it is a mystic union of spirit with Spirit which, however, according to Al-Ghazali, must not be described as oneness. The seeker loses, as it were, his consciousness of self as apart from God, yet never comes to that state which some falsely or mistakenly claim to have reached and which they describe as finding consciousness in God. The seeker who thus claims, "tastes and sees that God is good," yet knows not that he tastes and sees—knows not even while he tastes and sees that it is he who enjoys this experience. Thus all sense of a Personal God is lost.

Through such experiences, fleeting and intermittent here on earth, the soul, according to Al-Ghazali, is prepared for the absolute and ultimate joy of the continuous and unending experience which is spoken of as beholding the Face of God.

Islam shows a man how to walk with acceptance before God here on earth; Sufism teaches him how to enjoy God hereafter.

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