

Al-Ghazzali: Reviving the Islamic Sciences as a Viable Paradigm

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Introduction:

This paper reconsiders the viability of Al-Ghazzali's *Ihya' `Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Islamic Sciences) and his other works as a paradigm for contemporary Islamic thought. It assesses Al-Ghazzali's works in order to formulate an overview of what might be described as the *Ihya'* project. Al-Ghazzali attempted to revive the lost ethos and to renew the original message of the Shari`ah. This was in response to a specific context that he witnessed during his times. Therefore, the questions that need to be answered in the course of this paper are: To what extent does that context correspond to our times? Is Al-Ghazzali's response or rather solution to the problems inherent in this context still applicable? And if yes, who is following suit amongst contemporary Muslim thinkers?

In order to be able to answer these questions, one has to be familiar with the entire corpus of Al-Ghazzali who was prolific, albeit that such knowledge will always be limited. One has also to know the chronological order of his works. In addition, one has to be aware of the dramatic developments that took place in his life, because they led to important changes in Al-Ghazzali's worldview.

Not knowing Al-Ghazzali's works might lead to misrepresentation of his thought. It is wrong, for example, to reflect his position on science solely on the account of *Ihya' `Ulum al-Din*! There are important different positions in his other works such as in *Al-Mankhul fi `Ilm al-Usul*, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* and *Al-*

Mustasfa min 'Ilm al-Usul. Not knowing the chronological order of the books and the major stations of Al-Ghazzali's life blocks a sound representation of the various stages in his intellectual development and to what stage does each book belong?

I would like to stress that this paper will steer away from the discussion of specific minor issues, such as the spelling of Al-Ghazzali's name which, though legitimate, does not contribute to the understanding of his thought.

In addition, wherever Al-Ghazzali states his position regarding any issue it will be considered as such. Constructing scenarios is a very creative art yet they represent mere personal conjectures when opposing straightforward statements. One such example is the creation of the reasons that prompted Al-Ghazzali to leave Baghdad and to abandon his position at the Nizamiyyah School. Al-Ghazzali declared in *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* that leaving Baghdad was done for spiritual purposes.¹ It was the climax that marked the beginning of a very long journey, both physical and spiritual. Undermining this particular statement is tantamount to discrediting his autobiographic reflections and, therefore, his spiritual path altogether. His spiritual journey forms the essence of his post-Baghdadian thought that is rightly described as Sufi.

Moreover, studies in Al-Ghazzali, at times, suffered from friend and foe. The first deals with Al-Ghazzali as if he was infallible and therefore rejecting the slightest criticism directed at him. The latter renders him a non-believer [*k_fir*], therefore disqualifying his works all together. The first is usually a Sufi admirer and the second is usually a Salafi who obviously does not share that kind of admiration. In both

cases, however, they depart from constructed ideologies, failing to recognize and reflect the Islamic ethos that cares for the affairs of the heart without colliding with the Shari`ah. It should be noted that rendering other Muslims as non-believers is not restricted to Salafis. Though such a position is unacceptable, it is most dangerous when whole societies are declared as non-believers, a recipe for bloodshed. It remains that the antagonism between the Salafis and the Sufis is almost as old as the history of Islam itself.

Al-Ghazzali's works, like those of any other Muslim scholar, are open for criticism and evaluation. Their works should always be treated with the utmost respect but it is really a disservice to Islamic thought if one highlights only the merits.

The Context of the *Ihya'* Project:

The political scene at the time of Al-Ghazzali reflects a disintegrated caliphate. The provincial governors gained considerable powers that left the `Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad virtually powerless.² In 450 AH, the year in which Al-Ghazzali was born, the Fatimids were capable of toppling the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. Al-Basasiri ruled over Baghdad in the name of the Fatimid Caliph. His rule spanned for a one whole year during which he systematically killed Sunni leaders and scholars. It was the Seljuks who saved the `Abbasid Caliphate and the Sunni creed. The Fatimids, afterwards, had an alliance with the Batinite movement. The Batinites continued to cause havoc and assassinate Sunni leaders and scholars until the Moghuls destroyed them in 654 AH.³

Al-Ghazzali wrote many books against the Batinites. He systematically defended the Sunni faith and supported the Caliph Al-Mustazhir against the Batinites. Al-Ghazzali wrote *Al-Mustazhiri fi al-Rad `ala al-Batiniyyah*, which he named after

the Caliph. He wrote at least seven polemical books and treatises against them. In addition, he devoted a chapter as a critique of their epistemology in *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*.⁴

The vizier Nizam al-Mulk established the Nizamiyyah schools in many major cities as part of this defense of Islam and the Sunni political institutions. Nizam al-Mulk himself and, subsequently, his son vizier Fakhr al-Mulk were assassinated at the hands of the Batinites.

Becoming a Sufi:

Al-Ghazzali admitted in the introduction of the *Ihya'* that the *fiqh* content of this book is not intended for itself, rather because *fiqh* was very much liked by students, it was the dress in which he presented *'ilm al-mu'amalah*, the primary goal of this work.

Al-Ghazzali had a deep insight into the nature of scholarship during his time. He realized that students approaching the Islamic sciences were preoccupied with minute details of jurisprudence, losing sight of the greater picture and the original aims of the Shari'ah. He was also aware of the impact of the borrowed philosophies on Islamic thought. Al-Ghazzali's project was an attempt to restore the original meaning of both, science and action.

The dramatic shift in Al-Ghazzali's life in the direction of mysticism is responsible for the new worldview. The opposite argument is equally valid.

This paper will also compare Al-Ghazzali's notion of *Ihya'* with the "Islamization of knowledge" with special reference to the works of Professor Al-'Attas.

The paper argues that based on this Gazzalian paradigm, there will always be borrowed cultural influences that are not open for assimilation. In addition, Islamic scholarship itself will continue to accumulate unwarranted meanings, due to the

context in which it exists. This necessitates a project of *Ihya*’, one after the other. The names differ, yet the essence of the project remains the same.

Al-Ghazzali used different levels of rhetoric. He addressed the intellectuals and the masses using different levels of sophistication. In our contemporary language, we would say that he had a popular version of his project of *Ihya*’.

Establishing a school towards the end of his life/the role of the scholar

¹ See Mustafa Abu Sway, *Al-Ghazzali's Spiritual Crisis Reconsidered, Al-Shajarah (JISTAC)* vol. 1, 1996, 77-94

² Mustafa Abu Sway, *Al-Ghazzali: A Study in Islamic Epistemology* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1996) p. 2.

³ Majid `Irsan al-Kilani, *Hakadha Dhahara Jil Salah al-Din wa Hakadha `Adat al-Quds* (Jeddah: Al-Dar al-Saudia, 1985) pp. 63-64.

⁴ For a list of their names see Abu Sway, *Epistemology*, p. 11.