

4 Relationship with God through self-annihilation, *fanā'*, according to al-Ghazālī

Fanā', annihilation, is a mysterious concept which can be studied on many levels. Although it is in the first place an experience which a Sufi is able to obtain at the highest stage of the spiritual life, it is also a philosophical concept which reflects the relationship between the soul and the body and between the soul and the divine world. We noted above that *fanā'* is connected to Ibn Sīnā's concepts of the independency and separability of the soul from the body. It is also connected to his belief that God has a mystical and mysterious nature which combines His transcendence with His love and eternal light within an unchanging and undivided nature. In the study of *fanā'*, according to al-Ghazālī, we also need here to examine his concepts of the human and the divine nature which both allow such an experience to happen. However, before pursuing our study of Ghazālī's understanding of those concepts, we should here briefly refer to the problem of evaluating al-Ghazālī's overall system.

In their studies, recent scholars have often noticed great similarities between many elements in al-Ghazālī's works and those in Greek thought. Scholars such as A. Badawi, R. Frank and B. Abrahamov connect his output to philosophy rather than to mysticism showing his use of ideas from Ibn Sīnā and Greek philosophy in both his early and his late works. This problem, on the one hand, makes the study of his mystical works more challenging and, on the other, presents a possibility of reconsidering some of his works as authentic, which have been rejected in the past on the basis of their philosophical analysis. Al-Ghazālī as a theologian and philosopher became very famous through his well-known book *Tabāfut al-Falāsifa*, which was held to be the final and finest argument against those metaphysical concepts among philosophers which conflict with Islamic beliefs. Although Ibn al-Rushd in both his books *Tabāfut al-Tabāfut* and *Faṣl al-Maqāl* defended philosophy against most of the charges raised by al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut al-Falāsifa* remained the book which all theologians used to counter philosophers' claims. However, *Tabāfut* and *Maqāsid al-Falāsifa*, according to recent scholarship, are not considered the only books in which al-Ghazālī treats philosophical concepts. Lazarus-Yafeh, in her search for ways of identifying the authentic books of al-Ghazālī, concludes that after *Tabāfut* he abandoned the use of

technical philosophical terminology. However, in her book *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, she shows that Ghazālī, in many parts of *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* and other mystical works, adopts a Platonic cosmology in which he draws connections between the material world and the divine world. She identifies many passages which confirm the Platonic divine ideas and their shadows in the material world,¹ as will be shown in the section titled “Al-Ghazālī’s mystical approach to the relationship with God” of the present chapter. She shows also that al-Ghazālī uses many Neoplatonic images in explaining his mystical ideas, such as the image of the sun and its rays and the emanation of light (*ḥayāt al-nūr*) from God.² Frank in his work *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazālī and Avicenna* also identifies parallel cosmological concepts between Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī. He explains that although Ghazālī rejects the cosmology of the Muslim philosophers in *Tabāfut*, he explains the workings of God’s will in *Iljām*, his last book, as eternal and necessary.³ This means that God’s will is closely connected to His eternal knowledge about the world. This approach opens the door to accepting Ibn Sīnā’s concept of necessary creation, a concept which is totally rejected in *Tabāfut*. In addition, Abrahamov, in the article “Ibn Sīnā’s Influences on Al-Ghazālī’s Non-philosophical Works” explains that a number of recent scholars have shown connections between Ghazālī’s mystical concepts and those of Greek philosophical thought. Badawi shows that al-Ghazālī’s concept of light in *Mishkāt* has its parallels in Plotinus’ *Enneads*⁴; this is also precisely how Ibn al-Rushd understood it when he read *Mishkāt*, saying “what al-Ghazālī rejected in *Tabāfut* he accepted in *Mishkāt*.”⁵ Van den Bergh discerns relationships between *K. al-Shukr* in *Iḥyāʾ*, and some Stoic sources and Pines show that al-Ghazālī in his ethical discussions in *Iḥyāʾ* borrows parts from Miskawayh’s *K. Ṭabḥīb al-Akhlāq*.⁶

These remarks above raise a question about al-Ghazālī’s system and its final intentions as to whether the way to approach the knowledge of God, as shown in his later works, is mystical or philosophical. Abrahamov shows that in *Iljām al-ʿAwām*, Ghazālī’s last work, he considers that the supreme way to know God is the intellectual but this should not be preached to the masses. He explains that there are six ways to know God graded from the highest to the lowest: “the highest rank is attained through demonstrative proof (*burhān*) based on certain conditions (*shurut*), which are well exhausted, and principles (*uṣūl*) and premises (*muqaddimāt*) which are gradually built.”⁷ However, *Iljām* was, in the first place, probably written for the ‘Ulamāʾ of the Nizāmiyya School in Nīshāpūr after al-Ghazālī’s final return to Khurasān and therefore has the intention to identify the highest rational knowledge and to advise that this kind of knowledge should not be discussed with the general masses, *al-ʿawām*. In the last chapter of *Mishkāt*, however, we can see that, although al-Ghazālī regards philosophical knowledge as higher than theological in perceiving the reality about God, he considers that God can be finally known only in the mystical experience of *fanāʾ* when the Sufi realizes that God is the only real existence. At this stage the Sufi sees God through

the divine eyes. But this chapter of *Mishkāt* also raises a number of problems about whether al-Ghazālī's intentions should be interpreted as philosophical or mystical. This present work will attempt to show that in al-Ghazālī's late works it is not possible to separate the two ways. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to show that al-Ghazālī's approach to Sufism was mainly philosophical to the extent that he could be considered the first to have founded a mystical philosophy which subjects all mystical experiences to systematic rational analysis in the light of certain Platonic and Neoplatonic concepts and images.

In examining al-Ghazālī's concept of *fanā'*, first, I want to present here his understanding of the nature of God and of human knowledge. This study will lead us to understand how al-Ghazālī was able to present, in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, his most important mystical work and the subject of the section titled "Al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the relationship with God" of this chapter, his doctrine of *fanā'* and union, in a sophisticated philosophical image. This chapter has been divided into three sections. The first concentrates on al-Ghazālī's concept of God and contains two sub-sections: one outlining the problem of the divine attributes and showing the development of al-Ghazālī's concept of God and the other examining his belief in God as a willing creator and showing that al-Ghazālī did not doubt this fact.

The second section is concerned with al-Ghazālī's concept of human nature and knowledge. This section is divided into three sub-sections. The first explores his concept of the human intellect, the second examines the various ways of knowledge according to al-Ghazālī and the third examines his conviction that the human soul is composed of a substance which has similarities with God's nature.

The third part of this chapter examines mainly al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the relationship with the divine world. First, I shall discuss the problem of the inconsistency between some of his Sufi works and concepts. Having outlined this problem I turn to his way of approaching the mystical relationship with God, examined under three headings, first exploring his approach to the concept of *fanā'* in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, second, demonstrating his mystical teachings to the elite Gnostic mystics on understanding *fanā'* and mystical union according to his work *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and, last, attempting to picture the image of God according to *Mishkāt* and to compare it with his concept of God in some of his other works.

After this brief introduction, I first explore al-Ghazālī's concept of God through the different characteristics which he attributes to God and what they signify for his mysticism.

The features of God according to al-Ghazālī

The features of God according to al-Ghazālī are to be found scattered throughout his works and are difficult to integrate. The main reason is that al-Ghazālī does not demonstrate his view in one or two works; rather, one should read most of his works in order to achieve a fair understanding of his

views. In this regard, however, I will attempt to give an account of the features of God by outlining the problems that emerge from al-Ghazālī's different presentations of the divine attributes throughout his different works, and his understanding of God as a willing creator.

The problem of the attributes of God

In attempting to perceive the features of God as al-Ghazālī perceives them we find ourselves facing the problem that he presents the attributes of God differently in his various works. One difficulty here is that in his work *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-I'tiqād* he asserts the Ash'arite concept of God's attributes, though adding other attributes of the essence, while later in *Mishkāt al-Anwār* he rejects the attributes of God as a source from which His essence may be known. This inconsistency is probably an obstacle in dealing with his works. Are his works, as Lazarus-Yafeh maintains, addressed to different specific readers? Did he change his mind in the course of his writings? Or did his views develop, so that only the later works present his complete position? S. Donia, the editor of *Tabāfut*, considers that al-Ghazālī presents in some works an official version of his views and in other works his own position and concepts.⁸ Although Frank does not deny that al-Ghazālī wrote some books for popular purposes, he denies that al-Ghazālī writes differently for different kinds of readers but believes that the differences in his writing accord with the different topics in each work; he concentrates mainly on the subject and deals with other views only very briefly.⁹

It is probably true that al-Ghazālī, in general, writes for different kinds of readers. This is easy to verify when reading *Tabāfut* and *al-Iqtīṣād* which were written in the same period but have totally different styles of writing. In *Tabāfut*, al-Ghazālī uses the language and terminology of the philosophers while in *Iqtisad* he employs *kalām* terminology and arguments. It seems, however, that over a period of time al-Ghazālī's treatment of the attributes of God passed through many changes during the different stages of his life. Thus, the following section will examine his changing concepts of the attributes of God as found in the chronological order of his works.

Tabāfut and *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-I'tiqād*,¹⁰ which were written soon after one another, present the attributes of God in nearly the same way. Al-Ghazālī adds here ten other attributes, influenced by the philosophical treatment of this problem, to the seven Ash'arite attributes. He divides these 17 attributes into 2 parts. One part he calls the attributes of the essence; the other part – the seven Ash'arite attributes – the attributes of God.

The attributes of the essence are as follows: the existent, *mawjūd*, the eternal, *qadīm*, the everlasting, *abadī*, the one, *wāḥid*, and the visible, *mar'ī*. The first three attributes affirm certain qualities of the essence of God: first, that It exists and this existence is proved by being the creator of the world, not in the sense of being in itself necessary, as Ibn Sīnā maintains, but the fact that its necessity can only be known through the dependency of the world on the

existence of God. Thus, when we know and prove that the world must have been created, we conclude that He was the source of all created things. Therefore, He Himself must be eternal in the sense that He was not created or related to time and motion. His eternal existence is also everlasting.¹¹

The fourth attribute explains the oneness of God, which has two meanings: the first is His having no partner with Him in eternity and the second is being absolutely indivisibly one, in the sense of being simple and not combined – the kind of oneness, which Ibn Sīnā attributes to the first in the last chapter.¹² The fifth attribute affirms that God can basically be perceived (by sight), but this attribute seems to contradict the next five attributes, which affirm the immateriality of God. Al-Ghazālī admits this contradiction and explains that he does not mean perceiving in the sense of actually seeing, in the way that we see bodies and colours but the kind of seeing which is connected with perception. First of all, he insists that there is nothing in logic against the belief that God can be seen; the intellect denies only the materiality of God because if He is in any way connected with matter, then He must have been created, because matter is divisible and consists of parts. But most probably the importance of this point lies first in its Ash'arite background, and also in al-Ghazālī's belief that sight perception is the highest perception because of its connection with certainty. This, he believes, must be the situation of the believer in the last day – that he will be able to have full and certain perception of God.¹³ At the same time, the concept of witnessing God becomes very important in his Sufi works later on, as we will show in the section titled "Al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the relationship with God."

The other five attributes of the essence describe in a negative sense the immateriality of God. These attributes are as follows: not existing in a body, not an accident, being not defined, *ghayr mutahayyiz*, not limited in any of the six directions and finally not seated on the throne. Al-Ghazālī adopts here the philosophical belief that God is better described by negative attributes than positive and he uses this concept to disclose the attributes which must not be predicated of God. The first two confirm the philosophers' image of God that God is neither a substance nor an accident, though all bodies are one or the other and therefore He is not circumscribed. His existence is also not defined in any direction and He is not seated on the throne. The importance of these last two attributes for al-Ghazālī is to criticize those concepts which previous theologians had adopted. Theologians who attribute to God qualities which are inspired from some verses in the Qur'ān in their literal meaning, such as the al-Mushabbihā groups and some Ash'arites, believe that God can be defined by being in heaven seated on His throne. Here al-Ghazālī declares God's full immateriality which cannot be in any way defined. However, in his later Sufi writings, he further explains that saying "God is nowhere" means that He is everywhere and He is the only and the whole of existence, as will be shown below.¹⁴

Al-Ghazālī here gives God, on the one hand, similar attributes to those given by philosophers and, on the other hand, rejects other attributes which some theologians apply to God. However, the main difference here is that

while Ibn Sīnā believes that God cannot have a genus or differentia, al-Ghazālī affirms both propositions. Genus classifies the common features which many share; for example, the genus “animal” is shared among several beings. In contrast, differentia cover the attributes which differentiate one being from all others. Al-Ghazālī does not deal with this point in *Iqtīṣād* but mainly in *Tabāfut*. He shows in *Tabāfut* that the philosophers accept God’s genus and differentia but only when it comes to describing God’s existence; this means that His existence alone can be compared with other beings, not His essence. His main objection to this concept lies in his belief that each essence must have qualities and if the philosophers refuse to acknowledge all the qualities in the essence of God but identify them with His existence, then this would mean that God had no essence or divine qualities, which al-Ghazālī cannot accept.¹⁵ The importance of accepting genus and differentia is that it gives the grounds for accepting the Qur’ānic attributes of God, which are a basic element in Ash’arite theology.

Although al-Ghazālī defines God in philosophical terms, he also confirms in *Iqtīṣād* seven further attributes which are discussed among the Ash’arite theologians. These attributes are: knowing or omniscience, omnipotence, living, willing, seeing, hearing and speaking.¹⁶ Beside these attributes, al-Ghazālī even accepts the 99 names of God, but, as we will see below, they were to him mainly examples of what God can be. The reason for this acceptance lies mainly in their Qur’ānic source.

Al-Ghazālī, indeed, was interested in the question of the attributes from the standpoint of whether God can be knowable or, to put it more accurately, how far God can be knowable. However, he accepts the authority of the Qur’ānic attributes, but shows that they reveal or answer only the question of what God is like but not the question of who God is.¹⁷ He believes that these attributes and other names which are mentioned in the Qur’ān and the Hadith do indeed demonstrate some of the characteristics of God but do not disclose the whole truth about Him, as we will see later in this section.

In *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā*¹⁸ (The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names¹⁹) he sets out to explain how we can relate these attributes to God. To understand his theory here we need to examine his concept of the different levels of existence. He explains that there are three levels of existence: the existence of the thing (the being) in reality; its existence in our minds; and finally its existence in the language. If a thing exists in perceptible reality then our mind would have a similar image of it. But verbal explanations of the image, which we have in our minds, are different from the thing in reality.²⁰ Thus when we see snow we express it linguistically, using the word snow as a conventional name or we can say it is that which is cold and white. All three words, al-Ghazālī explains, cannot be identified with the image which we have in mind of real snow but only with the meanings which they offer, which evoke a similar picture to the one in our mind.

Here, al-Ghazālī is differentiating words from their meanings. The importance of the word lies only in the meaning it transfers to the mind; thus,

it is the meanings, not the words, which we look for in giving attributes to God.²¹ The words, therefore, cannot be fully identified with the thing in reality; they are only an expression of it. In this way, al-Ghazālī wants to show the inadequacy of language to give an identical explanation in words to what we see in reality or have in mind. In the case of describing God in language, we realize first of all that we obviously do not have an image of Him in the mind but only an image of who He is through His creation. The second difficulty is the inadequacy of language to express what we have or do not have in mind.²²

The question here is, when we attribute knowledge to God, do we have an image of what divine knowledge is or can be? Al-Ghazālī answers this question by showing that as everything has three stages of existence the attributes of God also have these stages: eternal knowledge in God, divine knowledge inspired in the human intellect and, at the third level, their existence in the language.²³ All three levels of knowledge are different from each other; therefore, our knowing of eternal knowledge as it is in God is not possible.²⁴ It seems here that, although al-Ghazālī realizes the limitations of human perception and language, he considers that the Qurʾān uses intentionally figurative language which presents God in terms of human attributes only as an example of what God can be like but not who He really is. From this we can see al-Ghazālī's train of thought in *Maqṣad*; although he gives a Sufi understanding of God's different names, he eventually presents a new vision of a mystical philosophy which Ibn Sīnā started, but did not complete.

In *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī comes to his final decision about the attributes, explaining that although God has attributes in eternity, we cannot know the reality of these attributes and therefore we can know Him only by relating Him to His creation.²⁵ In Chapter 3 he declares that the Qurʾānic attributes do not reveal who God is and at a certain level of knowledge one should reject giving attributes to God but should rather seek to know Him in relation to the world.²⁶ However, the ideal way to know God does not come through the rational study of His attributes but through conjunction with His divine presence, *al-ḥadra al-ilāhiyya*. We will refer to this point again in the sub-section titled "The God of the Sufi saints according to al-Ghazālī" in this chapter.

Therefore, it seems that al-Ghazālī moved away from being a theologian and drew closer to the philosophical understanding of God; yet, adding the mystical dimension here does open the door for the knowability of the essence of God but on another basis. We will see in the section titled "Al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the relationship with God" later in this chapter that Ghazālī in *Mishkāt* believes that the only way to have a certain image of who God is, *yaqīn*, is through a mystical vision, a conclusion which is also shared by Ibn Sīnā in the Sufi part of Remarks and Admonitions.

God: the creator of the world

The question of the creation of the world occupies an important place in Ghazālī's *Tabāfut*. The importance of the concept for this study is that it

discloses some features of God. However, this concept went through some modification as well and, although it is an article of faith in *Tabāfut*, in *The Alchemy of Happiness* it becomes more mysterious and less important for itself than for its disclosure of the reality of the world. But before examining his theory of the world in *The Alchemy* we will briefly here explain the importance of the creation *ex nihilo* concept as set forth in *Tabāfut*.

There are two main foundations for the creation theory in *Tabāfut*: the importance of the divine will and the significance of the divine act in creating the world.

God's will in creating the world

In *Tabāfut* al-Ghazālī attempts to show the importance of the concept of the creation of the world in disclosing the divine qualities of being willing and active. Al-Ghazālī shows that the philosophers start their argument about the eternity of the world from the First One who has certain qualities and from whom there is a descent to the existence of the world. In this case the world emerges under the conditions and with the qualities which Ibn Sīnā and the philosophers attributed to God, using the concepts of “from the one comes only one” and God’s incapacity to produce anything, such as matter, which is non-divine. This restricts God’s ability of bringing the world into being to that of only emanating the first intellect.²⁷

But for al-Ghazālī the world is there and has certain qualities, since the multiplicity of created bodies proves that they must at the end of the chain of causes have a creator, *muḥdith*,²⁸ who is the source of all causes. To al-Ghazālī, the world as it exists marks and discloses much of the character of its creator – for example, His great knowledge, and His willing to create the world in the form in which it exists – and it shows that it was a voluntary act which brought the world into existence. Therefore, al-Ghazālī asks repeatedly in this section of the *Tabāfut* what the basis might be for rejecting the view that God has eternal will, and that by an act of will He produced matter or plurality?²⁹

The argument about God’s will in *Tabāfut* runs as follows. The philosophers consider that the importance of the divine will lies only in the belief that the world originated at a certain time. They also hold that if God originated the world at a certain time this would posit a change in God from being unwilling to being willing and that this is impossible, for God’s knowledge and act are eternal, which to them means that they are unchangeable.³⁰

The assumption that God must remain absolutely constant and unchanging means for al-Ghazālī, however, that He is, in fact, not able to act at all, for any act has to have a before, a during and an afterwards. But although we believe that the argument about the eternal will of God was intended, in al-Ghazālī’s eyes, mainly to show that God’s act must be a willing act, he nevertheless constructs a long argument to prove that the eternal will does not cause a change in God.³¹ To do so, al-Ghazālī relates the will of God to his eternal knowledge: God knew in eternity that He would create the world and decided the time of

this action. Thus when He actually created it no change in His knowledge took place. The philosophers, however, wonder why God delayed His action? For al-Ghazālī this delay demonstrates that His act is an act of will and there must have been conditions which were to be satisfied in the future.³²

The significance of God's act in creating the world

One of the arguments raised by al-Ghazālī against the theory of emanation is its denial of God's willing act in bringing the world into existence. The philosophers, as al-Ghazālī presents them, consider that there are two kinds of act: acts of will and acts of necessity, *wājib*. Both kinds of act produce an effect; but when the wished effect is produced, it is not important whether the act of production was willed or necessitated.³³

In order to show the absurdity of this theory, al-Ghazālī gives the example of a person throwing another into the fire and killing him. We have here two causes: the actual cause is the throwing of the victim into the fire, but in fact death occurs not because of the throwing but because of the heat of the fire. Here, al-Ghazālī maintains, we accuse the person who did the throwing of killing the victim, not the fire.³⁴ Therefore an act, for al-Ghazālī, can only mean a willed act.

The second objection, for al-Ghazālī, depends on the nature of the act. An act means bringing something from non-existence to existence, but if the world is eternal then how can we conceive this as an act of God in any sense?³⁵ The philosophers assert that the act is attributed to the person after the act is produced and not before, meaning that the product is connected to its producer after it is produced and not in the process of producing it.³⁶ In other words, the important point is again that God is responsible for the existence of the world, whether He produced it from nothing or from something which was already in existence. Both of these alternatives make God the producer *ṣāniʿ*.³⁷

The importance of this highly intellectual discussion in *Tabāfut* is to show the difference between the religious active God whose will changes the history of the world and directs it where He leads it, and the God of the philosophers who generates the world but is not involved in its history. Therefore, for al-Ghazālī, anyone who believes in the eternity of the world must end by denying revelation, for revelation is part of God's activity.

The theory of the creation of the world in al-Ghazālī's late works

In *The Alchemy of Happiness*, Ghazālī seems to look to the creation of the world from a different angle, which puts this question in a wholly new light and brings it to a different conclusion. He explains that God delegates the creating process to the angels:

To understand God's method of working and governing and the delegation of power to angelic forces he explains, when God wills a thing it appears in the spiritual plane, which in the Qur'ān is called "the

throne”; from the throne it passes, by the spiritual current, to the lower plane called “the chair,” then the shape of it appears on the “Tablet of Destiny” *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, whence, by the mediation of the forces called “angels,” it assumes actuality and appears on the earth in the forms of plants, trees and animals, representing the will and the thought of God.³⁸

The passage above declares the existence of two worlds: our material world, which is open to sensible experience and which he therefore calls *‘ālam al-shāhid* or *al-mulk*, the visible world, and the invisible world of the angels, *‘ālam al-malakūt*. In the *Book of Tawḥīd in Ihya’* he tells us clearly that the angels, though they have this important role, are constrained to follow God’s will and instruction.³⁹

Al-Ghazālī explains in the above passage how a thing appears on earth. It is not clear whether it is fully created by God alone or through the assistance of the angels, though its product is in accordance with the plan of creation written on the Preserved Tablet. The nature of the divine world with its angels is also not specified as either created or eternal. Zaehner considers that the divine world, according to Ghazālī, is created but at the same time is unchanging and discloses the knowledge of God.⁴⁰ This, however, cannot be inferred from the above text. However, the knowledge which is expressed in the creation process is unveiled from the Preserved Tablet. This term, the Preserved Tablet, appears only once in the Qur’ān (Q. 85:22) and means the place where the Qur’ānic text is preserved in the divine world. Al-Ghazālī considers that the Preserved Tablet includes, besides the Qur’ānic text, the secret reality of all the created worlds and the decrees relating to all events. It is the source of eternal knowledge for the two worlds.⁴¹ The creation of the world seems, in al-Ghazālī’s late works, to take place on two levels: the real unchanging world, which is the basic reality of the universe, and the material world, which is created as a copy or shadow of the divine world.⁴²

Further, in *Mishkāṭ* he shows that the nature of the sun as the source of light and the centre of the world is similar to the nature of the angel who is closest to God; the nature of the moon as the second source of light is also a symbol of another angel – “among the high spiritual existents are those whose similitude is the sun, the moon and the stars.”⁴³ This idea, as al-Ghazālī hints in *Mishkāṭ*, is presented in the Qur’ān in the story of Abraham’s search for God. He worshipped first the stars, the moon and the sun and finally recognized the source of all creatures. Some Sufis seem to consider that Abraham worshipped different angels, whom he could associate with the stars, the moon and the sun. Al-Ghazālī probably considers this Qur’ānic story to be the representation of this concept. However, he explains that each element in the material world has another reality in the divine world, in the sense that this world is mainly the material existence of different angels or

ideas from the Preserved Tablet. Thus, the truth of this world cannot be found here but only reached through its connection with the divine world.⁴⁴ But since the ideas of the Preserved Tablet are eternal it is not clear whether this kind of creation is meant also to be eternal.

This basic cosmological idea is, as Lazarus-Yafeh remarks, very similar to the Platonic divine ideas and their shadow in the material world. Although al-Ghazālī still presents the belief that the divine world is created intentionally in this way in order that the human soul may be guided to reach the knowledge of God, this concept of creation seems to be more mysterious than his argument in *Tabāfut*. The emphasis here is not laid on creation *ex nihilo* but on the way in which the world was created in imitation of the preserved ideas of the Preserved Tablet.⁴⁵ Again we see that al-Ghazālī has moved away from his theological thinking to a philosophical and mystical concept of the world and its relation to God.

Thus, the question of how God created the world is another area where we can discover al-Ghazālī's turning towards a way of establishing the roots of a profound mystical philosophy. We turn here, however, to look at another angle in our study of al-Ghazālī and examine his concept of the human soul and intellect and the possibilities of reaching reliable knowledge of God.

The features of the human soul

Unquestionably the study of the human soul occupies a key role in al-Ghazālī's search to grasp the process of knowledge and in the mystical approach to knowing God. However, this study develops from following Ibn Sīnā's concept of splitting the human soul according to its different faculties to comprehending its esoteric function as being annihilated in the divine presence. He shows in his early work *Mīzān al-'Amal* that the soul dominates the body with its intellectual faculty and directs it to act in accordance with the religious laws which lead to moral human conduct. But in his later works he moves from this philosophical understanding of the human soul to a more esoteric perception of it.

Thus, al-Ghazālī studies the human soul differently in different contexts and periods of his work. First, in his work *Mīzān al-'Amal* he refers to the human intellect in his study of knowledge. In this context he describes the faculties of the soul in the same manner, following Ibn Sīnā's psychology. But he also studies the human soul in the context of his ethical interests in the first three volumes of *Iḥyā'* where, following al-Muḥāsibī, he provides different steps in the purification of the soul from its sinful behaviour. However, his mystical concept of the human soul, as something which plays a key role in the knowledge of the divine world, is mainly disclosed in his very late work *Kimyā' al-Sa'āda* (*The Alchemy of Happiness*). This section of the chapter will mainly concentrate on his study of the soul in the context of his study of knowledge and his mystical approach to it.

The human intellect and its functions

The faculties of the human intellect, as al-Ghazālī explains in *Mīzān*, are divided into the practical and the theoretical. The theoretical looks into abstract subjects such as knowing God and the divine world. The practical intellect conducts the behaviour of the soul in its relation to the body in order to direct it towards divine knowledge. The faculties of the imagination, *khayāl*, estimation, *wahm*, and memory serve the practical intellect. The imagination transfers material things to images, which are then worked out by the estimation and formed into notions and ideas which are partly abstract and partly still related to their sensible origin. These ideas are then saved in the memory.⁴⁶ Under estimation comes, therefore, the knowledge which depends on sensible experience. This according to Ibn Sīnā and Fārābī, is used for exploring ethics, politics and religion. Hence, al-Ghazālī considers the practical intellect to be unable to explore subjects of an abstract nature.

The theoretical intellect, for its part, has three qualities: the first is the potential ability to perceive abstractions, which everyone has to a different degree, the second is the perception of necessary and self-evident knowledge, and the third, its highest quality, is the ability to acquire knowledge about universal abstract notions such as humanity, God and the angels.⁴⁷ The knowledge of God and the divine world comes directly under the theoretical intellect, as al-Ghazālī demonstrates in *Mīzān*. He presents two different approaches to this knowledge: the first is that divine knowledge will be disclosed from the Preserved Tablet, mirrored to the human mind and united with it. This method acquires knowledge from outside and belongs to what al-Ghazālī calls revealed and inspired knowledge *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*.⁴⁸ The second method ensures that knowledge is recalled from inside. Al-Ghazālī explains that God has planted in all hearts before their existence the knowledge of Him and the Qur'ān in many verses speaks of knowing in the sense of remembering.⁴⁹ Here it seems to be that al-Ghazālī is influenced by the Platonic theory of innate knowledge which is obtained through memory of what the soul experienced before its earthly existence.

The rational acquisition of divine knowledge, however, is not available to everybody; there are only a few scholars in whom this knowledge is deeply rooted. The arrival at such a level of knowledge, according to al-Ghazālī, lies in freeing the soul from the five different veils which separate us from the truth. First of all, it depends on the level of our intelligence and maturity: here it seems that different portions of intelligence are decreed to human beings. The second difficulty is being immersed in worldly desires. The third is the lack of interest in contemplating the question of the nature of God and His relation to the world. The fourth veil is the veil of previous beliefs and convictions which have been inherited from parents or teachers. This difficulty prevents us from directing our faces fully towards searching for the truth of God and the divine world. Finally, it is also a problem for many seekers to find the direction from which to explore the truth; in other words, they

are ignorant of the kinds of sciences and methods which lead to the knowledge of God.⁵⁰ Having stripped away these veils, a soul could start to use one of al-Ghazālī's three different methods for obtaining divine knowledge, which will be examined in the next section.

The various ways of knowledge

Ordinary people, explains al-Ghazālī, are far from the rational path of knowledge, for they are handicapped by most of the veils mentioned on page 130. Nevertheless, they are not expelled from God's mercy; their belief can rest wholly on the assent of the heart to what the prophet and the first caliphs proclaimed. This assent must be on the basis of understanding the main pillars of religion and followed by sincere worship.⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī mentions at the end of *Mīzān* three ways of knowing God: through following teachers and parents, through following instructions in demonstrative methods, and finally through following what one believes in one's heart through direct disclosure.⁵² Watt identifies these methods with what al-Ghazālī elsewhere terms *taqlīd*, 'ilm and *dhawq*.⁵³ It may be helpful at this point to examine these three ways of reaching knowledge.

Knowledge through taqlīd

Frank, in his article "Al-Ghazālī on *Taqlīd*," explores al-Ghazālī's view of the acquisition of true knowledge.⁵⁴ He explains that knowing, to his mind, falls into three main methods: through the knowledge of others; through the demonstrative proofs which are produced by original thinking or through direct inspiration. Original thinkers, however, are very few; most people follow others, *muqallidūn*.⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, explains Frank, thinks that *Taqlīd* is a legitimate way of knowing,⁵⁶ contradicting the theory of the Ash'arite School, which required the individual to find his/her own rational convictions.⁵⁷ Al-Ghazālī's response to this concept is simply to recall the first Bedouin believers whose assent to the Prophet did not depend on rational demonstration but on a simple assent to what the Prophet proclaimed. As Frank points out, this simple assent probably lies in al-Ghazālī's belief in the soul's natural knowledge of God which is present in each soul through *fiṭra*.⁵⁸ However, this theory of *taqlīd* seems to be influenced by Ibn Sīnā's logical theory of *taṣawwūr* and *taṣdīq*. At the beginning of *Najāt*, Ibn Sīnā explains that *Taṣawwūr* means forming concepts on one's own account, whereas *taṣdīq* means granting assent to other concepts.⁵⁹ Also in his theory of intuition, Ibn Sīnā explains that most learned people get their knowledge from those who have the ability to receive a direct connection with the active intellect, as detailed above in Chapter 3.

Taqlīd, however, has many levels, al-Ghazālī maintains, the lowest of which is the simple assent of the believer to the prophet and the first caliphs,

al-salaf. Theologians and philosophers are also considered as *muqallidūn*, explains Frank. For al-Ghazālī there are very few theologians who have original proofs and demonstration methods supporting their knowledge. Most theologians are good followers of their teachers and the line of the school and do not themselves fully apprehend the counter-positions or examine the principles of their school.⁶⁰

Rational knowledge ‘ilm

In his study of the acquisition of rational knowledge, al-Ghazālī mentions the method of knowing through *fiṭra*, innate knowledge. In his view, recalling the knowledge which is implanted knowledge in each soul requires following the process of learning, which takes place in the theoretical intellect. It functions through self-evident knowledge and the acquiring faculty. This acquiring faculty, which al-Ghazālī calls *al-mufakira*, has the ability to acquire a result from two related ideas and a further one from two results.⁶¹ It follows the logical method of syllogism and for this reason the syllogistic manner of thinking is, for al-Ghazālī, somehow also implanted in the intellect. Al-Ghazālī in *al-Qiṣṣ al-Mustaqīm* goes further by demonstrating that this is also the manner of the argumentation of the Qur’ān.⁶² The highest ability of the intellect, however, is the prophetic faculty, which can possess acquired knowledge without going through the processes of learning.⁶³

Al-Ghazālī, unlike Ibn Sīnā but in line with al-Fārābī, believes that the human intellect itself has the ability, when it very carefully follows the demonstrated methods of logic, to get results without outside assistance. But his trust in the human intellect lies probably in his belief that it possesses knowledge through *fiṭra*, implanted knowledge. He demonstrates in *Mīzān* that human beings can possess knowledge by *fiṭra* and therefore they only need to transform this knowledge from the potential stage to the active one.⁶⁴ Thus the intellect, for al-Ghazālī, is never at the stage of the material intellect altogether devoid of information, as Ibn Sīnā held. Prophets, for example, seem to possess a strong *fiṭra*, which they never forget.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, this rational knowledge is not as clear as inspired knowledge, as we will show in the next section.

‘Ulum al-mukāshafa, revealed and inspired knowledge

Revelation and inspiration are two distinct ways of receiving direct knowledge but are closely connected and run parallel to the rational method of attaining knowledge. However, revealed and inspired knowledge both uncover the Preserved Tablet, which, as explained in the sub-section titled “God: the creator of the world” in this chapter, is the place in the divine world where a full account of the plan of creation and its destiny is to be found. Al-Ghazālī explains: “God wrote a copy of the sciences *al-‘ilm* from its beginning to its

end on a Preserved Tablet and then created the world according to this copy.”⁶⁶ In *jawāhir al-Qur’ān* he explains that this knowledge is not literally written in words and on a certain tablet, for God’s words are without letters and His pen is not made of wood; the whole idea is deeply spiritual.⁶⁷ There are two ways of understanding the idea of the Preserved Tablet: the first is that there exists a certain place in the *malakūt* where the idea of creation and its destiny are presented in some mysterious manner; the second is that this eternal knowledge flows from God to one of the angels, who in turn communicates this knowledge to the prophets and this is symbolized in the idea of the Preserved Tablet.⁶⁸ He says in one text of *Ihyā’* “the truth of things is written in the Preserved Tablet or rather in the hearts of some angels.”⁶⁹ However, nowhere can we identify that al-Ghazālī believed in eternal divine ideas in the sense that Plato did; instead, he considers that the *malakūt* consists mainly of angels who represent certain eternal ideas. Consequently, it is very probable that al-Ghazālī means by the Preserved Tablet one of (or some of) the angels.

The first way of unveiling the Preserved Tablet is through revelation. Al-Ghazālī points out in *Iqtīṣād* that prophecy is a free choice and a grace of God offered to whomever He chooses; it is not a result of a natural phenomenon, as Ibn Sīnā would claim. In this point, as Rahman maintains, al-Ghazālī follows the main line of orthodox theologians who believe that prophecy is a supernatural event fully intended by God for a certain purpose.⁷⁰ God is also not obliged to assist the human intellect in obtaining knowledge of the *malakūt*, as the Mu’tazilites believe, but His gift of prophetic message is pure grace.⁷¹ Al-Ghazālī’s theory of prophecy, however, has some affinity with Ibn Sīnā’s in considering prophecy the highest faculty of the theoretical intellect. Prophets of this rank, who are very rare in history, have the ability to receive the most direct knowledge in the clearest form from an angel. Prophets do not go through the process of knowledge as ordinary people do, but are privileged with divine enlightenment.⁷² Revelation, however, is the fruit of prophecy. Al-Ghazālī in *Mishkāt* calls it the light of prophecy which flows from the prophet over the human intellect and illuminates it with the certainty of divine knowledge.

Knowledge of God and of the *malakūt*, however, is revealed in figurative language on two levels: in abstract ideas and metaphorical passages, which present information parallel to the abstract divine world.⁷³ But also some esoteric ideas are expressed in words and verses, such as the secret meaning of light, the divine pen (Q. 68:1, 96:4), the chair, the throne and the Preserved Tablet (Q. 85:22).⁷⁴ He explains metaphor as follows:

We mean by metaphor or analogue, (*mithāl*) to render a meaning, (*ma’nā*), in an external form, (*ṣūra*). So if one seeks its inner meaning, he finds it true. But if he sees only its external form he finds it deceiving... The prophet can talk to people only by means of metaphor, (*mithāl*), since it is necessary to talk to people in accordance with their intellect.⁷⁵

The metaphors of the Qur'ān, however, can be mainly interpreted through inspired knowledge in the sense of returning the images to their original concepts in the Preserved Tablet. As for the philologists, they are mainly interested in the superficial literal meaning of the words.⁷⁶

The second form of uncovering the Preserved Tablet is inspiration. Lazarus-Yafeh points out a text in *Iḥyā'* where al-Ghazālī shows that the stage of prophecy is also attainable by some Sufis:

when this (prophecy) is possible for prophets then it is possible for others, for the prophet is a person to whom the realities of things are unveiled and who is involved with improving human morality. Therefore it is not impossible that there exists a person to whom the truth is uncovered but who does not have a mission to lead. We do not call him a prophet (*rasūl*) but a Saint (*walī*).⁷⁷

Inspiration differs from revelation in two main ways: in its clarity and in the way it is obtained. Inspiration as experienced among Sufis, as al-Ghazālī explains in *Mīzān*, is a flash of light, which comes and goes, sometimes staying longer than others.⁷⁸ This light reveals parts of the knowledge of the Preserved Tablet. In some of his Sufi works, such as *Iḥyā'*, *Mishkāt* and *Jawābir*, al-Ghazālī makes a link between inspiration and revelation through the interpretation of difficult verses or words in the Qur'ān. Since inspiration and revelation have the same source, the Preserved Tablet, they must both cover the same knowledge, but revelation is given as a whole while inspiration uncovers only parts.⁷⁹ Inspiration then is probably able to discover the meaning of difficult revealed parts, such as "everything is perishing except His face" (28:88) or about the angels "We are those ranged in ranks; we are they that give glory" (37:165–6) or esoteric metaphors, such as the chair, the throne, the pen, the Preserved Tablet.⁸⁰ This inspired knowledge is what al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā'* calls '*ulūm al-mukāshafa*'.⁸¹ In some of the deeply mystical passages of *Iḥyā'* he shows that the meaning of the divine pen in (Q. 96:4) – "He who taught with the pen, taught man which he knew not" – is the angel *Jibrīl*.⁸²

Inspiration, like revelation, is communication with an angel, which brings divine information. *Iḥyā'* seems to have entailed a development of the concept of angels; in some places al-Ghazālī gives them mainly the Qur'ānic role of communicating revealed messages. But in the last part of *Iḥyā'*, al-Ghazālī, like Ibn Sīnā, seems to widen their role from that of communicating certain messages to the concept of bringing down all kinds of information about the mystery of the divine world, *al-malakūt*. They seem also to illuminate the human mind by drawing a connection between the divine and the material worlds, revealing that the material one is a shadow of the real world, which is divine. In the *Book of Tawḥīd* in *Iḥyā'* al-Ghazālī explains that God has given His knowledge to the angels in different ranks but directs them to different roles. Though they have the same knowledge as God, they can do only what God wills.⁸³

In *Mīzān* and *Ihyā'*, al-Ghazālī also connects inspiration with the rational approach of the knowledge of God. He explains that the rational knowledge of the '*ulamā*' (who are deeply rooted in knowledge) is of the same nature as inspired knowledge.⁸⁴ Frank points out the difference between the two approaches as al-Ghazālī sees them: "the mode of presentation (between the two) differs and with it the clarity of the one as compared with the other. Insofar as they bear on one and the same proposition, however, they are equivalent as justified knowledge of a fact."⁸⁵ The decisive difference between the two is the removal of the veil, which in the case of inspiration gives certitude.⁸⁶ Al-Ghazālī considers also that rational knowledge is in a sense a preparation for inspiration. In *Ihyā'* he shows that Sufis should pass through the process of knowledge in order to understand inspired abstract concepts.⁸⁷

To conclude, for al-Ghazālī prophetic revelation is the highest knowledge obtainable about God and the divine world. Inspiration comes second and has the main role of uncovering the esoteric side of messages to humanity. This explains the dynamic conjunction with the truth of the Preserved Tablet which demonstrates dynamic divine guidance. Rational knowledge is in the third place and it prepares the mind to perceive inspired knowledge. Next we examine the mystical nature of the human soul in order to discover its role in the process of *fanā* and union with the Divine Presence, as will be explored in the section titled "Al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the relationship with God" later in this chapter.

Al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the human soul

The Alchemy of Happiness provides al-Ghazālī's mystical understanding of the human soul. Although the human soul exists in the material world, it does have another origin. He maintains in this work that the human soul was created in eternity before the body and was sent to earth in order to gain knowledge and experience. He bases his idea on the Qur'ān 7:171:

then the Lord drew forth from the children of Adam from their loins their descendants and made them testify concerning themselves: am I your Lord? They said: yea we do testify; lest ye should say on the day of judgement: of this we were never mindful.

The idea of the celestial origin of the soul derived from this Qur'ānic verse is used by the Sufi school of al-Junayd and is discussed among Sufis such as al-Hallāj and al-Bisṭāmī. As explained above, al-Junayd believed that the human soul was an idea in the divine mind before it had an independent existence.⁸⁸ Al-Ghazālī brings in this verse in order to disclose the relationship between the soul and the heavenly world of the *malakūt* and its natural yearning to return to its origin.⁸⁹ At the same time he refers here to the origin of the *fiṭra*, innate knowledge, which discloses that human nature in its purity knows God.

The body, however, veils the human soul from this knowledge and therefore it needs purification to recall its origin. Al-Ghazālī declares in *The Alchemy of Happiness* that the purpose of creating the human soul in this material world is to enable it to receive knowledge and experience.⁹⁰ At the same time, he admits that the ability to obtain true knowledge is granted only to some mystics and few scholars, as will be demonstrated below.

Al-Ghazālī attributes different qualities to the human soul; all are very close to the qualities which he attributes to God (see the section titled “The features of God according to al-Ghazālī” earlier in the chapter). The following passage shows these similarities:

No one can understand a king but a king; therefore God has made each of us a king in miniature, so to speak, over a kingdom which is an infinitely reduced copy of His own. In the kingdom of man God’s “throne” is represented by the soul; the Archangel by the heart, “the chair” by the brain, the “tablet” by the treasure chamber of thought. The soul, itself, unlocated and indivisible, governs the body as God governs the universe. In short each of us is entrusted with a little kingdom, and charged not to be careless in the administration of it.⁹¹

In this beautiful passage al-Ghazālī says that the role which the soul plays in the body is analogous to the role which God has in the world. Its nature is also invisible, indivisible and unlocated, similar to the nature of the essence of God, as discussed in the sub-section titled “The problem of the attributes of God” earlier in this chapter. This nature is nevertheless created by God and does not emanate from Him, as al-Ghazālī carefully shows in his explanation that God has made us like Him in order for us to be able to perceive His nature. In *Mishkāt* he explains that this nature is also the nature of the angels and that they are the closest creatures to God.⁹² The main difference between angels and the human soul is that the angels are constrained to obey God while the human soul is impeded from obedience through the desires of the body.⁹³ These similarities between God, the angels and the human soul are expressed by the repeated Ḥadīth: “he who knows himself knows God”⁹⁴ or the Ḥadīth “God created Adam in His likeness”⁹⁵ in many of his writings.⁹⁶ Such Ḥadīths seem to have influenced Sufis as well as philosophers, as we saw in the case of Ibn Sīnā in Chapter 3, pp. 102–3.

Another quality of the soul is mentioned in the treatise “On the Meaning of the Intimate Knowledge of God.” Al-Ghazālī, like Ibn Sīnā, emphasizes in this the individuality of each human soul. He explains that it is not possible for any two persons to become identical even if they reach the same knowledge and the same level of mysticism.⁹⁷ Each human soul, he believes, is an individual entity which can never be identical to any other entity. We will demonstrate the importance of this point later on, when al-Ghazālī explains the difficulties of union with God, given that no two entities are absolutely the same.

After providing the above basic knowledge of the nature of God and of the human intellect and soul we turn here to the main task of this chapter, to examine the concept of *fanā'* in al-Ghazālī's mystical works.

Al-Ghazālī's mystical approach to the relationship with God

After the introduction of al-Ghazālī's thoughts on the nature of God and of human beings in the previous sections, we approach the point of considering his mystical approach to the relationship between the two. This section, in the main, will focus on al-Ghazālī's concept of *fanā'* through his works *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, because they present details of his mystical concepts. *Iḥyā'* presents mainly the basic methods and *Mishkāt* is intended for those few of the elect, as al-Ghazālī declares in its introduction, who wish to experience the ultimate truth about God. Through reading these two works, however, the reader discovers some contradictions in al-Ghazālī's concepts, not only between these two works but also between them and his other mystical works. This inconsistency leads to confusion about his actual mystical belief. Is he a sincere follower of orthodox Sufism established by the school of Muḥāsibī or did he in his heart adopt the heterodoxy of Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī's mystical annihilation and union? This section of the chapter will attempt to clarify this problem and will start by pointing out some of the main contradictions that give rise to this problem. In the sub-section titled "The concept of *fanā'* in *Iḥyā'*" we will then go on to examine his approach to the concept of *fanā'* in *Iḥyā'* and in the sub-section titled "The concept of *fanā'* in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*" its modification in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.

In interpreting al-Ghazālī's concept of *fanā'* we are confronted with two kinds of Sufism at the same time, one which in its highest stage aims to achieve the love of God and the other which is directed towards annihilation, *fanā'* and union with God. Al-Ghazālī considers in *Iḥyā'* that the highest stage of the mystical path is perfect love, which is a longing to see the Beloved, but this vision is granted only in the life to come.⁹⁸ It is the reward for those who longed to witness God in this life.⁹⁹ This is similar to the kind of Sufism which is presented by Muḥāsibī, who considers that the vision of God is the hope of the mystics in the life to come, the ultimate pleasure of paradise.¹⁰⁰ Al-Ghazālī repeats this concept in the fourth volume of *Iḥyā'* in a very short section with the title "The vision of God." In this he confirms again that the vision of God is only possible in paradise.¹⁰¹

In discussing the unity of God, in the book of *Tawḥīd* in the same fourth volume of *Iḥyā'*, however, al-Ghazālī reveals that the witnessing of God discloses the highest form of unity in which the mystic sees only God (and not the world). He divides this concept of *tawḥīd* into four levels, the highest of which is a kind of unification with God. This level can only be reached by the

Sufis: "in this level he (the mystic) does not see any thing in the universe save the One. This is the witnessing of the Sufis."¹⁰² In addition he explains that this vision of God could come as a flash of light or as a permanent state: "this vision in which nothing exists except the existent One and only Truth. Sometimes it remains and at other times it comes as a flash of lightning."¹⁰³ At this point al-Ghazālī confesses that this kind of discussion does not belong to the science of *mu'āmalā*, the topic of human behaviour but is a secret among the esoteric subjects of *'ulūm al-mukāshafa* "this fourth (stage of *tawhīd*) should not be further disclosed here."¹⁰⁴

However, in *Mishkāt al-Anwār* he claims confidently that the Sufi saints, *al-'arīfīn*¹⁰⁵ will have a vision of God in this life. At the end of the *Mishkāt* he describes this vision as "the august glories of His face – the First, the Highest – burned up everything perceived by the sight and the insight of the observers."¹⁰⁶ Only through this vision can the Sufi experience the reality of who God is, al-Ghazālī explains. "They have arrived at an existent (thing) that is incomparable with everything that their sight had ever perceived... thus they found Him too holy for and incomparable with all that we described earlier."¹⁰⁷ He acknowledges a kind of unification between God and the Sufi: "the Sufi saints, having ascended to the heaven of reality, agree that they see nothing in existence save the One."¹⁰⁸ Al-Ghazālī connects this kind of Gnosticism with al-Bisṭāmī, al-Ḥallāj and al-Junayd, who consider that the highest stage of mysticism is a total unification with God, as will be outlined in the sub-section titled "The concept of *fanā*' in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*" later in the chapter.

In order to understand this inconsistency we need to return to the introduction of *Iḥyā'* where al-Ghazālī declares that the first aim of Sufism is to obtain inspired visions of *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*; however, the preparation for this aim is through the sciences of the conduct of human behaviour called by him *'ulūm al-mu'āmalā*, which aim to purify the human soul.¹⁰⁹ Although al-Ghazālī informs us in the introduction that he intends in *Iḥyā'* to present mainly the preparatory stages of the science of human behaviour, *'ulūm al-mu'āmalā*,¹¹⁰ he discloses a great deal of the inspired sciences, *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*, which he sees as esoteric and only to be revealed to a few Sufis. In addition, he tells us that the prophets mainly taught the first science of human behaviour and only hinted at the themes of the second.¹¹¹ The reason for concealing the concepts of inspired knowledge, *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*, is their abstract nature which is beyond, and sometimes contradicts, the common orthodox beliefs of the ordinary masses, which are mostly based on empirical experience. As Lazarus-Yafeh puts it, "in the *Maqṣad* al-Ghazālī even stated explicitly that truth seems almost like a contradiction of the belief of the masses, a belief to which they have become accustomed and from which they cannot be deterred."¹¹²

Thus, the dual procedure of presenting *'ulūm al-mu'āmalā* in a direct manner and hinting at *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*, not only in *Iḥyā'* but in most of al-Ghazālī's mystical works, inevitably caused some contradictions between

his Sufi works. Lazarus-Yafeh observes:

the contradictions between his various books are due partly to the fact that he directed different books to different classes of readers. In books destined for perusal by the initiated (such as *al-Maḡṣad* or *Mishkāt*) he divulged more of the one and only truth, while in books addressed to the masses he had a more reserved manner.¹¹³

However, this problem of the dual procedure becomes even more difficult when al-Ghazālī addresses the two kinds of reader in one and the same book, as Lazarus-Yafeh points out in connection with his work *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. These inconsistencies make for confusion in understanding al-Ghazālī's mysticism. We can present here at least two reasons for these inconsistencies in order to shed light on his interpretation of the Sufi system.

The first reason lies in al-Ghazālī's belief that there are secrets which should not be revealed to ordinary believers or orthodox Sufis. These secrets, Lazarus-Yafeh says, can be revealed only to the elite who grow in their knowledge to the level of perceiving them.¹¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī admits in *Iḥyā'* that besides addressing the ordinary believer who wishes to be pious, he gives hints to the elected ones of the secrets of the inspired knowledge '*ulūm al-mukāshafa*'.¹¹⁵

The second reason for this duality is probably al-Ghazālī's adoption of two different trends in mysticism: the first mainly emphasizes the ethical side of purifying the soul, whereas the second emphasizes the relationship with God through witness, annihilation of all other things in the vision and unification. We observe that al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā'* gives the name of travelers, *al-sālikīn*, to the Sufis who follow the first path but from time to time he refers to another kind, whom he calls the Sufi saints. He addresses each section of *Iḥyā'* Volume 4 to the *sālikīn*¹¹⁶ and sometimes he refers to some views of the Sufi knowers *al-'arīfīn*. In *Mishkāt*, however, he refers only to the Sufi knowers, *al-'arīfīn* which suggest that *Mishkāt* represents mainly the second trend of Gnostic mysticism.

He mentions in *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* that he has read the Sufism of al-Muḥāsibī and al-Mikkī which belongs to the first tendency, and also that of al-Bistāmī, al-Ḥallāj and al-Junayd, who emphasize the second, that of annihilation and union.¹¹⁷

Thus, it seems that al-Ghazālī's Sufism is divided into two levels: the first level of the traveller, *al-sālikīn*, consists, on the one hand, of the purification of the soul from evil habits through worship and meditation, and, on the other, of the ascent of the soul towards isolation from the world, the increase of love and the longing to witness God. The second level of the Sufi knowers *al-'arīfīn* is the level of annihilation in the vision of God and unification with Him, which can only be obtained after the above preparatory stages. This level is only available to a few of the Sufi elite; al-Ghazālī hints at this in *Iḥyā'* and gives more details in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. This kind of mysticism depends fully on receiving inspired knowledge, '*ulūm al-mukāshafa*'.

Hence, al-Ghazālī's mysticism seems to form a link between the two trends of al-Muḥāsibī and al-Mikkī, on the one hand, and al-Bisṭāmī, al-Ḥallāj and al-Junayd, on the other, by demonstrating that one is a continuation of the other. The first addresses the stages of the purification of the soul and its ascent to a certain level, and the second emphasizes the ultimate relationship of vision and unification with God, which only a few can reach, as will be shown in the following sub-sections.

The concept of fanā' in Iḥyā'

Al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā'* presents a kind of mysticism which in its main concern aims at purifying the soul by following different stages through which the Sufi will ascend to the stage of love and the longing to see the Beloved. Al-Ghazālī considers that there are stages which are desired for their own sake and others which are stages leading to the ultimate aim. Love and fellowship with the divine presence are the highest stages, the ultimate aim of the path of mysticism.¹¹⁸ All other stages, *maqāmāt*, are preparatory stations for gaining the ultimate love of God.

The method which al-Ghazālī uses here for ascending these preliminary stages is to recognize in each stage three dimensions: knowledge, feeling and action. Knowledge, al-Ghazālī explains, examines the deep and genuine meaning of each stage, which produces a certain feeling in the heart. This feeling in turn initiates an action, which helps the seeker to climb to the next stage. This act assists the soul to withdraw from its love for this world. He follows this method in exploring each of the preparatory stages.

A. Schimmel explains that the mystical path consists of *maqāmāt*, stages, and *aḥwāl*, states:

A state is something that descends from God into a man's heart without his being able to repel it when it comes, or to attract it when it goes... the *maqām* is a lasting stage which man reaches, to a certain extent, by his own striving. It belongs to the category of acts, whereas the states are gifts of grace.¹¹⁹

Al-Ghazālī follows this concept that mysticism depends to a great extent on God's choice, but the chosen one has to make an effort in order to reach the highest stages. We notice that al-Ghazālī in his explanation of the difference distinguishes between ordinary seekers who wish to limit their path to the law *al-sharī'a* and the others who direct their face towards God Himself. The latter group are again divided into beginners, whom he calls *al-sālikīn*, and those who climb to the highest stage of self-annihilation and union. This second group, consisting of Sufi saints, al-Ghazālī calls *al-ʿarīfīn*, those who wish only to devote their life to observing the divine beauty, as will be discussed. We observe that al-Ghazālī addresses mainly *al-sālikīn* at the

beginning of each stage¹²⁰ but points out that the highest rank is that of the Sufi saints.

Schimmel notes that the mystics identify three parts of the religious life: the law, *sharī'a*, the path, *ṭarīqa*, and Gnosis, *ḥaqīqa* and *ma'rifa*. The *sharī'a* is expressed as "what's yours is yours and what's mine is mine"; *ṭarīqa* is "yours is yours and mine is yours too" and *ḥaqīqa* is "neither mine nor yours but all is God's." Thus Sufi saints see everything in unity with God and move towards self-annihilation and union in which they end their own individuality in their observation of the divine beauty.¹²¹ In this way, al-Ghazālī explains the levels of the *ṭarīqa* but aims at the *ḥaqīqa* by hinting at it in *Iḥyā'* and unveiling it in *Mishkāt*.

Although al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā'* does not aim to deal with the concept of *fanā'* and union, *Ittiḥād*, he gives a good explanation of *fanā'* in examining the stage of trust *tawakkul*. This stage is composed of three levels: in the first level the Sufis delegate all authority to God and let Him be their deputy and represent them in all things. The second level is to depend on God as a child fully trusts and relies on his mother. The third and highest stage of trust is to submit oneself fully to the will of God as the dead body submits to those who wash it before the funeral. Al-Ghazālī admits that both the second and the third levels are very rare, because human choice will be very limited in the second and wholly absent from the third level. This is the level of the Sufis and the saints.¹²² This kind of mysticism, therefore, is based on the denial of the self and its interests, on the one hand, and on a profound belief in the absolute divine decree, on the other. This is an elementary level of experiencing *fanā'*. At this stage the seekers reach the full trust of believing that by the power of God they could walk on water or fly in the air. This trust is built on the metaphysical concept of *tawḥīd*, the unity of God with the world. Al-Ghazālī sees four levels of this concept: in the first are those who believe only literally that there are no other gods save God; the second level contains those who give assent to this belief with their hearts and the third level, those who see that everything is God's product and creation. The highest of all is the level of the Sufi saints, *al-ʿarīfīn*, who believe that nothing actually exists except the One. They call this level the annihilation of the self in unity.¹²³

Al-Ghazālī admits that those stages should not be explained in *Iḥyā'* for they belong to the revealed sciences of *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*.¹²⁴ Hence, al-Ghazālī makes it clear at this point that there is a certain level of mysticism which he does not wish to discuss publicly but only to hint at. He declares that love and the longing to see the Beloved is the highest stage that he addresses in *Iḥyā'*. Only at this stage can we deal with revealed and inspired knowledge, *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*. Thus, he repeats here several times that it is not possible to reveal this knowledge but rather "in this place we have to bring our writing to a close."¹²⁵

At this highest stage of love the soul experiences a longing to return to its origin. Al-Ghazālī here collects the following Qur'ānic verses and Ḥadīths,

which all point to this mysterious relationship: “I breathed into man of My spirit” (15:29), (38:71–2) “if they ask you about the soul, say the soul is from God” (17:87), “I am setting in the earth a vicegerent” (2:30) and others. There are also different Ḥadīths such as “God has created Adam in His likeness” or the one that says that when God loves a person then He becomes “the hearing by which he hears, the seeing by which he sees, and the tongue by which he speaks” or “he who knows himself knows God.”¹²⁶ We will see that he uses these Ḥadīths and the Qur’ānic verses in *Mishkāt* to express a certain unity between God and the Sufi.

However, at this stage al-Ghazālī discloses a different level of defining God. He is not a lover who has emotions and feelings but is above all human descriptions and similitudes. His love towards humans is utterly different from theirs. Since love as analysed above is an attraction towards perfection, al-Ghazālī considers it inapplicable to God, “This however is impossible for God because all perfection and love and beauty is present in Him.”¹²⁷ He is probably influenced here by the idea of love which Ibn Sīnā introduced in *The Treatise on Love* (see Chapter 3).

But al-Ghazālī goes beyond Ibn Sīnā, who shows that God’s love is mainly towards Himself, to make it clear that God, as pure perfection in Himself, loves His perfection and the autonomous actions of this perfection which means that He loves the world as His own action and a part of His existence; “He loves the all in Himself because He is the all.”¹²⁸ God’s love, for al-Ghazālī, is mainly shown in the perfection and beauty of His creation, in the love of goodness which human beings have by their nature, and finally by the way in which He draws good mystics near and unveils Himself to them.¹²⁹

Thus, as noted in the discussion above, the dualism of *Iḥyā’* is due to the wish of al-Ghazālī to address *Iḥyā’* to the ordinary pious as well as directing the elite, through short or detailed hints, towards the Sufism which aims at annihilation and union. Lazarus-Yafeh observes:

while perusing the book (*Iḥyā’*) the reader would get the impression that a section had been penned by two different authors simultaneously; or that the author had addressed the average reader in a loud and confident voice, while in the meantime whispering additional hints to that reader who belonged to the chosen few.¹³⁰

Al-Ghazālī, however, addresses to the reader who is keen to involve himself in the search for divine eternal knowledge some other works about the reality of the divine world, the inspiration of the Sufis. Thus, we turn here to examine his view of the deepest knowledge of God, in his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.

The concept of fanā’ in Mishkāt al-Anwār

Al-Ghazālī declares at the beginning of *Mishkāt* that he will deal in this book with some of the inspired subjects in response to a friend who asked for an

interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān which describe light. He begins his reply:

I see you as one whose breast has been opened up by God through light and whose innermost consciousness has been kept free of the darkness of delusion. Hence in this discipline I will not be niggardly towards you in alluding to sparks and flashes or giving symbols of realities and subtleties, for the fear of holding back knowledge from those worthy of it is not less than that of disseminating it to those not worthy of it.¹³¹

Here al-Ghazālī shows that he will disclose some of the secrets of *'ulūm al-mukāshafa*. These secrets probably demonstrate the kind of mysticism which he follows, because at the end of *Mīzān al-'Amal* he says that every person has three sorts of belief: what he has learned from his parents, what he has learned through acquiring it and what he really believes in his innermost heart and can only disclose to others who share his belief.¹³² In the introduction of *Mishkāt*, we notice that al-Ghazālī's intention is to reveal some of the visions concerning the subject of God as the highest light and the different kinds of veil which obscure this vision. His aim in this discussion is mainly to demonstrate, on the one hand, the reality and the different dimensions of the concept of annihilation and union (Chapter 1) and, on the other, to reveal the real image of God through personal vision and the veils which conceal this vision (Chapter 3).

In *Iḥyā'* al-Ghazālī declares that the actual vision of God is mostly to be obtained in the next life. Here al-Ghazālī presents a type of mysticism which is fully dependent on this vision. His mysticism here is very closely related to his theory of knowledge and to the knowledge of cosmology. Thus, in this level of mysticism here he no doubt has in mind the elite Sufis who have acquired knowledge before or during their mysticism.¹³³ His concept of *fanā'*, as is unveiled in *Mishkāt*, is closely related to his theory of the metaphysics of light and the different veils which obscure our vision of it. Thus, in order to reach the experience of *fanā'* we should first examine the concept of light explained in his first chapter.

In this chapter al-Ghazālī meditates on the motif of light through which he attempts to elucidate and evaluate the mystical experience of God. He distinguishes two main kinds of light: the sensible light which shines on things and causes their appearance to the eye and spiritual light, which reveals the reality of things and the unseen world. In parallel to these two lights exist two kinds of eye, the outward and the inward. The outward eye receives the first kind of light and the second is perceived and apprehended by the inward one or the intellect. Light is attributed to both the intellect and the eye, for they transfer the reality of the world to the human soul. In its perception of divine knowledge the intellect depends on necessary knowledge and the learning of wisdom. The highest wisdom for al-Ghazālī, however, is the speech of God in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān, therefore, is the light which links

the human intellect – at its highest level, the prophetic intellect – with the light of the divine world.¹³⁴ Light is attributed to angels also, according to al-Ghazālī, because they have the role of illuminating the human intellect with revealed knowledge from the Preserved Tablet.¹³⁵ Al-Ghazālī here builds a hierarchy of light ascending from the light of the prophetic intellect to the different ranks of the light of the angels, and further, to reach the source of all lights, God the One.

However, the way in which al-Ghazālī sets out the relations between the different lights in this hierarchy has caused uncertainty among scholars. He explains:

the low lights flow forth, *fā'id* (*fayḍ*), from one another just as light flows from a lamp. The lamp is the holy prophetic spirit. The holy prophetic spirits are kindled from *muqtabas* (*iqtibās*), the higher spirits, just as the lamp is kindled from the light. Some of the high things kindle each other, and their hierarchy is a hierarchy of stations (ranks). Then all of them climb to the Light of lights, their origin, their first Source... all other lights are borrowed *musta'āra* (*isti'āra*). The only true light is His.¹³⁶

In this passage he uses three words, all conveying Neoplatonic images, which are used by philosophers. These words are *ista'āra*, borrowing, *iqtibās*, taking over from, and *fayḍ*, emanate. Al-Ghazālī uses these words to explain the relationship of the different lights to one another and of all of them to God, describing them in a manner which could be interpreted as emanation.

Gairdner in his article "Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and the Ghazālī problem" explains that Ibn al-Rushd considered that al-Ghazālī accepted as the theory of emanation in *Mishkāt* some of the concepts which he rejected in *Tabāfut*. Gairdner seeks to explain this saying that al-Ghazālī uses a form of *fāḍa*: *fāḍa min...* 'ala, which could have a different meaning from "emanation."¹³⁷ But Lazarus-Yafeh interprets al-Ghazālī's use of the word *fāḍa* and other Neoplatonic words, which mean flowing over or emanating, with a moral or literary rather than a metaphysical meaning.¹³⁸ Since light in this context is a symbol of knowledge, then the flowing over of light means here the pouring out of knowledge from God to the angels and the human race. This kind of emanation does not refer to the way in which the world originated from God but rather shows how humans reach eternal knowledge.¹³⁹ Lazarus-Yafeh counts the many passages from *Ihyā'* and other works which use direct Neoplatonic words or images and maintains that al-Ghazālī uses them mainly to express Neoplatonic ideas which do not contradict the tenets of Islam.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī mentions them in the context of the Ḥadīth: "God has created the world in darkness and then He poured upon them some of His light."¹⁴¹ He deliberately chooses here a pseudo-Ḥadīth in order to present an image of emanation which shows that real existence became possible when God poured His light upon the world, and this clearly relates emanation to the existence of the world.

At all events he explains here that as knowledge has its source in the eternal knowledge of God, existence too is borrowed in full from the necessary eternal existence of God. There are two kinds of existence, he continues: borrowed existence and self-existence. The world is divided, therefore, into God as the only self-existent and the universe as the reflection of His existence. The only real existence, consequently, is the existence of God, which reiterates the idea that the existence of the universe is poured out of or emanates from God, the only possessor of existence.¹⁴²

This metaphorical existence is proved to the Sufi in his experience of annihilation. When the Sufi saints, at the end of their stages of ascent, experience God as the only existent One, they experience the reality of the temporal world as non-existent in itself. In their ascent they move from the material multiplicity to the universal truth, through which they loose their ties with the material world. At this stage they experience the verse "every thing is perishing except God's face" (28:88),¹⁴³ which al-Ghazālī here explicates to show that all things have no independent existence, for the basis of their existence is only borrowed. This again shows here that al-Ghazālī is moving away from the concept of creation *ex nihilo* for creation means something concretely appearing from nothing, which is difficult to reconcile with its being only a shadow and an illusionary existence.

When the Sufi, however, experiences this truth and sees only God, which means that his own existence is melted in God, he becomes totally amazed and therefore only aware of God's existence. Al-Ghazālī had hinted in *Iḥyā'*, as we showed above, that God's unity does not simply mean that there are no other gods but that He is the only real Existent, *al-mawjūd al-ḥaqīqī*.¹⁴⁴ This experience is metaphorically called union, al-Ghazālī maintains, but in reality it is the experience of God's unity as the One and the only real Existent.¹⁴⁵ However, these facts may be perceived either through an intellectual Gnosticism, '*irfān*' '*ilmī*', or tasted in a mystical experience.¹⁴⁶ Of those who have tasted it, their "plurality is totally banished from them and they became immersed in sheer singularity. Their rational faculty becomes so satiated that in this state they are, as it were, stunned."¹⁴⁷ Some of them become intoxicated and cannot think of themselves as distinct from God, al-Ghazālī reports, so they say, "I am the Real" or "Glory be to me, how great is my station." However al-Ghazālī interprets these statements with the following words:

the speech of the lover in this stage of intoxication should be concealed and not spelled out. When this intoxication subsides, the ruling authority of the rational faculty – which is God's balance on earth – is given back to the mystic. They come to know that what they experienced was not the reality of unification but that it was similar to unification.¹⁴⁸

Thus, the question which presents itself here is: how could al-Ghazālī reject the experience of union, when he showed in some parts of *Iḥyā'* and in

Mishkāt that the highest mysticism is that of the Sufi saints such as al-Bisṭāmī and al-Ḥallāj, whose aim is annihilation and union?

In many of his writings al-Ghazālī rejects the concept of union because of the impossibility of two entities becoming one unless they are totally equal, in which case one of the two must lose its existence and become a third one.¹⁴⁹ This, however, is impossible in the case of union between humans and God because although they have similarities, nothing is equal to God (Q. 112:4). Therefore, for him the difficulty of this union lies in its technical impossibility. Here al-Ghazālī probably refers to al-Bisṭāmī's idea of the total identification with the divine essence, as was outlined in Chapter 1.

In commenting on the experiences of al-Bisṭāmī and al-Ḥallāj, he first of all shows the difficulties which are connected with them by referring to some kinds of visual illusion which everybody experiences: when we see a bottle of wine, we suppose that the bottle has the colour of the wine because the two are unified. The light of the sun, too, is unified with things when we recognize only the things and not the light. But when the sun sets, we realize the function of the light. This illusion of the unification of two things can be observed as long as we can perceive their opposite:

when the sun sets, when the lamps are put away and when the shadow falls, the deniers perceive a self-evident distinction between the locus of the shadow and the place of brightness. Hence they confess that light is a meaning beyond colour and is perceived along with colour.¹⁵⁰

But in the case of Sufi saints, when they see God, the light of their hearts becomes unified with the divine light; they see everything through the divine light. This light, says al-Ghazālī, never sets as the sun does, and therefore it is difficult to realize oneself in this experience except when the vision comes to an end.¹⁵¹ In the above examples al-Ghazālī does not deny the integration of the bottle and the wine or the light and the things seen by it. This integration, however, does not imply that the two have become one; he says that they remain two although we are aware only of one.

Thus, al-Ghazālī here gives two explanations of this experience: the first is that when the Sufis depart from the material world and enter the divine world, they see the truth that this material world is only illusion and the truth is that God is the only real existent. This is a philosophical fact which can only be experienced and perceived when the Sufi reaches the divine knowledge and sees the world through God's eyes. The second explanation is that there is a kind of unification between the souls of the Sufis and God. By the sentence "it was not *ittiḥād* but similar to *ittiḥād*", al-Ghazālī wants to distinguish between identification and (similar to *ittiḥād*). *Ittiḥād* refers to two things absolutely becoming one but integration seems to be, from the examples above, one thing's circumscribing or embracing another thing so that the one can be seen through the other. In this case one of the things can be greater than the other which it circumscribes. Here we may recall al-Ghazālī's concept of the essence of God mentioned above. Al-Ghazālī

explains elsewhere that God's immaterial essence exists everywhere and is not restricted in any direction. He also says in *Iljām* that the presence of God is like a kingdom in which the throne is the closest location to the king and the outside square is the furthest, but all exist within the royal kingdom.¹⁵² Thus, it seems that *malakūt* for al-Ghazālī means mainly the divine presence, which embraces all things (probably also the whole universe). This means that the human does not become a God but that he/she disappears in the Divine.

Thus, when the souls of the Sufis, which are isolated from the body through annihilation, leave the material world and enter the *malakūt*, they enter into the divine presence. In this case, it is not possible to distinguish the boundary of the individual self, which has perished, in the divine presence.

It seems that al-Ghazālī wishes to present here a different dimension of the idea of "union" and explains that it does not simply mean that two become one but that the two remain two, because in fact only the real One ever really existed. Thus, he interprets this experience as being beyond the limitation of the intellect, but in a philosophical manner. Al-Ghazālī accepts the Sufi experience of al-Hallāj and al-Bisṭāmī but does not interpret it as a human becoming a god. Thus, humans are not in his view unified with God's essence but mainly with God's knowledge or presence. Therefore, although al-Ghazālī considers the experience of union a secret, which is known only to those who have experienced it, he endeavours to understand but cannot intellectually accept a full identification with God.

The highest stage of mystical experience for al-Ghazālī, therefore, is the soul's annihilation in the divine presence and integration in the divine eternal knowledge, which, as he mentioned earlier, flows from God and is one with the angels and the prophetic intellect. It results in the Sufi saints' observing the world through the divine eyes: "one of them might add to this and say 'I never see a thing without seeing God before it'. This is because this one can see all things through God."¹⁵³

After exploring the main features of al-Ghazālī's mysticism, we conclude this section by discussing the characteristics of God as they are known to the highest rank of the mystics.

The God of the Sufi saints according to al-Ghazālī

In the first chapter of the *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī contemplates God as the source of light which leads to gnosis, *ma'rifa*; this light is cast into the heart of the mystics and gives them their knowledge of God and the divine world as they really are. Through complete self-denial the Sufi saints reach a union with the divine light and obtain a vision and a perception of who God really is. In the third chapter¹⁵⁴ of the *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī resumes his discussion from the first chapter of the essential characteristics of God. He intends in this chapter to comment on the Ḥadīth "God has seventy veils of light and darkness, were He to lift them the august glory of His face would burn up every one whose eyesight perceived Him."

Al-Ghazālī asserts at the beginning of this chapter that God in Himself is always manifested to all beings but humans veil themselves through darkness, light mixed with darkness or a veil of light. Lifting up these three kinds of veil in order to see God comes through the ascent from the sensible world to the divine world of light. The first veil consists of being immersed in all material desires without reference to an after-life or to a divine world. The second veil is the first stage of ascending from the sensible to the spiritual and abstract. All the groups under this veil have the desire to know and worship God; but some acquire this knowledge through the faculties of the imagination in which they draw an analogy between God and what they sensibly experience. Others infer knowledge about God through the faculty of estimation, *wahm*.¹⁵⁵ *Wahm* is the highest faculty of the practical intellect which draws abstract ideas from sensible experience, for instance, the idea of enmity, which is experienced in moments of perceptible danger. Therefore, the members of this group, probably the theologians, know God through drawing analogies with the human qualities of knowledge, ability, generosity and the like. They are not able to perceive any abstract, al-Ghazālī explains, which goes beyond some analogy with what they know.¹⁵⁶

The third veil is a veil of light, which probably means the closest knowledge to the saint's vision of God. Al-Ghazālī presents here the different metaphysical theories among the Arab philosophers of his time who had the ability to see God through the abstract thinking of the theoretical intellect. Some connect Him with the movement of the world and others consider Him moving only the outermost sphere but a third group raise Him above direct contact with the cosmic system to the role of the One who commands it. They identify Him with *al-Muṭāʾ*.¹⁵⁷ This role of creating through commanding the cosmic system, as Zaehner points out, is the role which God takes in the Qur'an. He commands the creation through His uttering of the word "*Kun*" (Be) (Q. 3:59).¹⁵⁸ The theory of *al-Muṭāʾ* probably comes from the Ismāʿīlī who consider *al-Muṭāʾ* in the role of the Universal Intellect of Plotinus. Zaehner explains that *al-Muṭāʾ* is a Qur'anic character who appears only once in the Qur'anic verses (81:19–21) "It is verily the speech of a noble messenger, powerful beside Him of the throne established, obeyed (*Muṭāʾ*) there and trustworthy." Some commentators consider here that the *Muṭāʾ* is *Jibrīl*, though Zaehner considers him to be Muḥammad, the "transcendent prophetic spirit." However the Ismāʿīlīs consider that the *Muṭāʾ* represents God in that he commands the creation of the world through the commanding word "*Kun*."¹⁵⁹

But why does al-Ghazālī consider that the Ismāʿīlīs worship *al-Muṭāʾ* as God? Probably, he is hinting here that in the Ismāʿīlī system God does not have any role except that of one from Whom the *Muṭāʾ* emanates, similar to the Neoplatonic One, and that the divine role is given to the *Muṭāʾ* alone. Here he points out that the Sufis distinguish between the role of God and that of the highest Archangel, whom they call *al-Muṭāʾ*.¹⁶⁰ However, al-Ghazālī considers that these groups of thinkers, though they present God in a highly abstract form, are veiled from His ultimate truth. Thus,

al-Ghazālī here rejects the Aristotelian Prime Mover and the emanated *al-Muṭāʾ* of the Ismāʿīlīs and identifies God with the one who is beyond any connection to the world. God is not the one who gives the command but is superior. Is He then the God of Ibn Sīnā whose *tajallī* is the absolute reality and who stands beyond all connections but through whom everything receives existence and love? Or does he mean here that God is the one who is responsible for all existence without the use of commands such as humankind uses but in a mysterious, wholly immaterial manner? However, although al-Ghazālī's description of God is similar to that of the Neoplatonic philosophers, especially Ibn Sīnā, he decides at the end of *Mishkāt* that only the Sufi saints possess real knowledge of who God is.

Now, however, he explains that human beings veil themselves in their wish to know God through the different faculties of the intellect. The problem lies, in his opinion, rather in the immateriality of God, which cannot be defined by moving in any known direction: "because something that is not related to directions and is not described as outside or inside the world is not, in their view, an existing thing."¹⁶¹ Even the philosophers who can perceive such a being confuse His role with that of the angels.

At this point al-Ghazālī starts to present God as a Being who is "neither inside the world nor outside."¹⁶² This Being cannot be perceived by the faculties of the soul mentioned the section titled "The features of the human soul," but only by the prophetic holy intellect. This faculty, he explains in Chapter 2 of the *Mishkāt*,¹⁶³ is beyond rational perception and is the only faculty capable of perceiving the secrets behind the material world.¹⁶⁴ Thus, for al-Ghazālī, the reality about God can only be disclosed through the prophetic experience of the vision of God. As he explains in *Iḥyāʾ*, the vision of God is a vision of the heart and not the sight; here in addition he illustrates that this vision is only through the highest faculty of the heart, which is not available to ordinary people. This faculty is, however, not restricted to prophets alone; he encourages the Sufis to "strive to become one of those people who taste something of that spirit (prophetic spirit), for the Sufis (saints) *al-awliyāʾ* have an ample portion of it."¹⁶⁵

It seems here that al-Ghazālī does not aim to describe God in an esoteric manner, showing the unknowability of the Divine, but rather to state that the sensible, imaginative and rational faculties are not able to know reality, whether about God or about the divine world, the same conclusion that he reaches in *Tabāfut*. Thus, in *Mishkāt*, God's features, to al-Ghazālī's mind, do not differ from those in the *al-Iqtisād fī al-ʾIṭiqād*, or in the Book of Love of *Iḥyāʾ*.

The main emphasis in all these texts on *al-Iqtisād*, *Iḥyāʾ* and *Mishkāt* lies in the concept of the otherness of God. His love is different from ours because His qualities are perfect, while ours are longing for perfection. He is not in need of gratitude or worship but all his commandments are made so that humans can enjoy the truth about God through avoiding its opposite in this life.

This truth, however, is experienced only through the prophetic souls of prophets and Sufi saints and is delivered to the pious. We have shown above

that these descriptions have affinities with the Neoplatonic God, as formulated by Ibn Sīnā. For him, God plays mainly the moral role of being always manifested, *mutajallī*, attracting the whole world through love and knowledge and giving each thing existence.¹⁶⁶

However, al-Ghazālī demonstrates that God does more than attract the universe to His light; He is active in all events and in the acts of all beings. He is aware of the world in loving the whole of it in Himself as His own act, in drawing the Sufi saints to have full unification with His will and knowledge, and in His eternal divine plan to create the world in the way that it exists and to control it through His divine decrees.

To conclude, al-Ghazālī's understanding of the relationship between God and mankind is influenced by some Neoplatonic concepts, the Sufi experiences of such different Sufis as al-Ḥallāj, al-Bisṭāmī and al-Junayd, and many esoteric Qur'ānic verses and Aḥādīth.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazālī's Sufi writings form an original system which is heavily influenced by prophetic revelation, philosophical knowledge and mystical knowledge and experience. Already in *Tabāfut* he had declared that philosophical principles are not able to explain the whole truth about God and he shows that many of these principles are only prior assumptions which the philosophers cannot prove. Thus he shows that certainty requires revelation. Yet his discussion in *Tabāfut* and in *al-Iqtīṣād* shows the importance of learning philosophy in order to perceive the main features of God. In *al-Iqtīṣād* he explains the unity of God in a way very similar to the Neoplatonic description of the essence of God. Later in the *Mishkāt* he asserts the knowledge of God through His acts rather than His attributes because God as He is can only be witnessed through His acts.

It seems, then, that even after al-Ghazālī rejected philosophy in *Tabāfut* he assimilated into his system some philosophical ideas and concepts. He also transformed philosophical terms, for example, Universal Intellect, the Universal Soul and the like, using other esoteric Qur'ānic words such as Preserved Tablet, *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, or the divine pen or the throne.¹⁶⁷

The main structure of his Sufi thought is that deep knowledge needs a purified soul, which on the one hand prepares it morally to approach closer to God and on the other directs the intellect to the highest divine knowledge. *Iḥyā'* is the reference book for this purification. Moral purification depends mainly on a profound understanding of worship and religious habits. The scattered esoteric ideas and concepts of God and the divine world in *Iḥyā'* form another kind of preparation for the elite Sufis who do not only wish to be near God but desire a vision of Him. *Mishkāt al-Anwār* is the work where al-Ghazālī leads the elite to recognize the importance of the vision of God as the only possible way to know the essence of God and who God really is. He also explains the idea of union and shows all its dimensions.

The main features of al-Ghazālī's mysticism, however, are his use of philosophy, his thorough philosophical analysis of Sufi knowledge and experience and his use of metaphorical Qur'ānic material. Al-Ghazālī explains in *Jawābir al-Qur'ān* that the Qur'ān has a direct message to the ordinary believer but also contains quantities of metaphors and esoteric ideas. These secrets are given only for the elite who are able and willing to have intimate knowledge of God and the divine world. The depth of these secrets has, on the one hand, affinity to some philosophical concepts such as the Neoplatonic concepts of necessary existence and knowledge, as shown above.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, it is also in accordance with the experience of many Sufi saints, who have witnessed the meaning of Qur'ānic secrets such as "every thing is perishing except His face" or the reality of the Preserved Tablet and so on. These affinities lie in the fact that, for al-Ghazālī, all knowledge has its source in the eternal knowledge of the Preserved Tablet.

However, the relationship between God and humans has, for al-Ghazālī, three levels:

1 The level which is presented directly in parts of the Qur'ān, lying mainly in the five pillars of Islam. At this level ordinary believers give assent to what the prophet revealed and have the hope of a future life in paradise.¹⁶⁹ At this level there is no direct relationship with God.

2 The second level, expressed in the metaphorical passages of the Qur'ān concerning God and the divine world. At this level the ordinary Sufi travellers, *al-salikin*, are able through the purification of the soul to be granted some visions about such things as the meaning of repentance, the unity of God and the nature of love. The hope of the Sufis at this level is to enjoy love, friendship and nearness to God.

3 The third and highest kind of relationship, where the Sufi saints are able to analyse, through their previous acquired knowledge, and experience, the esoteric secrets of the Qur'ān about the essence of God and the angels in such terms as "every thing perishes except His face" (28:88), or the true and deeper meaning of the concept "there is no god save God" or the Ḥadīth "I become his ears by which he hears and his sight by which he sees."¹⁷⁰ At this level the Sufi unveils the meaning of the divine Throne, the Chair and the Preserved Tablet as different ranks in the hierarchy of angels. The main hope of the Sufis at this level is to have a unified fellowship with the divine presence and to meet God face to face.

Some scholars with sufficient depth of knowledge reach a similar level through their unremitting pursuit of acquired knowledge, as al-Junayd probably did. However, they do not enjoy an actual sight of God but rather a full understanding of who He is.

Thus, acquiring philosophical knowledge in al-Ghazālī's system is perfected through the mystical experience of *fanā'* and *ittiḥād*.

- 173 Inati, *Mysticism*, p. 81.
- 174 Ibid.
- 175 Ibid.
- 176 L. Gardet, "La Connaissance Mystique chez Ibn Sīnā et ses Presupposés Philosophiques," *Mémorial Avicenna*, 2, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1952, pp. 39–40.
- 177 Ibid., p. 15.
- 178 Ibid., pp. 86–9.
- 179 Ibid., p. 89.
- 180 Morewedge, "Emanation and Sufism," 1, pp. 467–76, 2, 1–18.
- 181 Ibid., 2, pp. 1–3, 5–6.
- 182 Ibid., 2, pp. 3–5, 6–8.
- 183 L. Gardet, "Mystique chez Ibn Sīnā", p. 16.
- 184 Goodman, *Avicenna*, pp. 164–5.
- 185 Ibid., p. 169. See also Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Isbārāt wa al-Tanbihāt* (Remarks and Admonitions) ed. S. Donia, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969, pp. 272–5.
- 186 Ibid., p. 166.
- 187 Ibid., pp. 298–9.
- 188 Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt*, pp. 218–19, 224–8.
- 189 Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Isbārāt*, p. 272.
- 190 Inati, *Mysticism*, p. 89.
- 191 J. L. Kraemer, *Humanism in Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age*, Leiden: Brill, p. 170, see also Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Imtā' wa al-Mu'ānasa*, ed. Ahmad Amin, Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Asriya, 1953, Vol. 2, p. 6.

4 Relationship with God through self-annihilation, *fanā'*, according to al-Ghazālī

- 1 H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975, pp. 308–9.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 R. M. Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: al-Ghazālī and Avicenna*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter University Press, 1992b, pp. 84–5.
- 4 B. Abrahamov, "Ibn Sīnā's Influence on Al-Ghazālī's Non-philosophical Works," *Abr-Nabrin* 1991, 29, pp. 1–3.
- 5 W. H. Gairdner, "Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and the Ghazālī Problem," *Der Islam*, 1914, 5, p. 138.
- 6 Abrahamov, "Ibn Sīnā's Influence on al-Ghazālī," p. 2.
- 7 B. Abrahamov, "Al-Ghazālī's Supreme Way to Know God," *Studia Islamica*, 1993, 77, p. 143.
- 8 Al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut al-Falāsifa*, ed. S. Donia, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1972, pp. 63–5.
- 9 R. M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 93–101.
- 10 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-I'tiqād*, Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Maṣriyya, 1902.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 13–20.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 36–8.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 26–36.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 28–9.
- 15 Al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut*, pp. 183–5, see also *Iqtīṣād*, p. 64.
- 16 Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtīṣād*, pp. 38–60.
- 17 F. Shehadi, *Ghazālī's Unique Unknowable God*, Leiden: Brill, 1964, pp. 101–3.

- 18 F. Shehadi, *Al-Maqṣad al-Asna fī Sharḥ al-Asmā' al-Husna*, Beirut, 1971. But I will use only the English translation here.
- 19 D. B. Burrell and N. Dahr, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 20 Ibid., p. 6.
- 21 Burrell, *Ninety-Nine Names*, p. 18.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 18–19.
- 23 Ibid., p. 19.
- 24 Although his discussion in Chapter 1 of the *Ninety-Nine Names* is rather long and complicated, it seems that he wants to show three main points. First, the meaning or the notions which these attributes create in our minds are what is meant here, not the words of the attributes. Second, he wants to show the inadequacy of language to reflect the ideas which we have in mind. The third point is that he wants to emphasize the difference between eternal reality and its reflection in the Qur'anic images.
- 25 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. Do Buchman Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998c, pp. 44–53.
- 26 Ibid., p. 50.
- 27 Al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut*, pp. 143–6.
- 28 Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtisād*, pp. 13–14.
- 29 Al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut*, p. 146.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 90–1.
- 31 Ibid., *Tabāfut*, pp. 90–128.
- 32 O. Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 42.
- 33 Al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut*, p. 135. Ibn Sīnā says in *Najāt* that the important conclusion for religion is that the world is dependent on God the Necessary Existent and not on the way in which it was produced. Al-Ghazālī's protest is to ask how we can call the world God's act if it was produced naturally by necessity and beyond His control. If this were true, we should say that God was no different from any of the other elements in the chain of causes of the universe.
- 34 Al-Ghazālī, *Tabāfut*, p. 137.
- 35 Ibid., p. 139.
- 36 Ibid., p. 140.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness by al-Ghazālī*, tran. E. L. Daniel London: Octagon Press (for the Sufi Trust), 1980, pp. 18–19.
- 39 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Cairo: al-Mugald al-'Arabi, 1998a, Vol. 4, (*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*), pp. 304–5. Here in this passage al-Ghazālī gives a kind of symbolic recital in which the seeker speaks to the divine pen whom al-Ghazālī identifies with the angel Jibrīl and at the end of the passage he says that he is controlled by God as the pen is controlled by the writer. See also *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 8. Here he says that although the angels are under constraint they are aware of, and happy in, what they are doing.
- 40 R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, Oxford: One World, 1994, p. 159. See also al-Ghazālī, *Jawābir al-Qur'ān*, Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1988a, pp. 29–37. Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 25–7. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, pp. 503–17. and al-Ghazālī, *Imlā' (part of Iḥyā')*, Vol. 5, p. 51.
- 41 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), pp. 25, 27.
- 42 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 26.
- 43 Ibid., p. 29.
- 44 Ibid., pp. 25–8.

- 45 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 504. See also K. Nakamura, "Imam Ghazālī's Cosmology Reconsidered," *Studia Islamica*, 1994, 80, p. 34.
- 46 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān-al-'Amal*, ed. S. Donia, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1965, pp. 202–3.
- 47 Ibid., pp. 203–6.
- 48 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, pp. 206–8.
- 49 Ibid., pp. 334–6. See also R. M. Frank, "Al-Ghazālī on *Taqlīd*," in *Zeitschrift Für Geschichte der Arabische-Islamischen Wissenschaft*, 1991–2, p. 225.
- 50 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 1 (*Kitāb al-'Ilm*), pp. 18–19.
- 51 Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām al-'awāmm*, in *Majmu'at Rasā'il al-ilmām al-Ghazālī*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994a, pp. 65–6.
- 52 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, p. 406.
- 53 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 361.
- 54 Frank, "*Taqlīd*," pp. 209, 215. Frank refers here to the work of F. Jabre, *La notion de Certitude selon Ghazālī dans ses Origines Psychologiques et Historiques*, Paris: J. Vrin, 1958.
- 55 Frank, *Taqlīd*, pp. 207–8.
- 56 *Taqlīd*, al-Ghazālī explains, is related to the faculty of *wabm*, estimation. This faculty is the highest in the practical intellect and although it abstracts images and transfers them to ideas, these ideas are very much related to sensible experience. It presents ideas which are dependent on empirical experience as true rational concepts. They are easy to accept because of their natural appeal to the human mind. This faculty, therefore, is quite deceptive because it makes people believe that their reflections are purely rational, whereas they are in reality wholly dependent on empirical experience. Frank explains that al-Ghazālī shows in *Munqidh* that even the philosophers are misled by this faculty in their metaphysical principles when they depend on concepts which the mind can accept merely on the basis of familiarity. See Frank, "*Taqlīd*," p. 248.
- 57 Ibid., p. 219.
- 58 Ibid., p. 213. See also *Iqtīṣād*, p. 15 and *Iljām al-'awāmm*, p. 77.
- 59 Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Najāt fi al-Ḥikma al-Manṭiqiyya wa al-Ṭabī'iyya wa al-Ilābiyya*, ed. M. al-Kurdi, Cairo: no name, 1938, pp. 3–4.
- 60 Frank, *Taqlīd*, p. 241.
- 61 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 37.
- 62 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Qiṣṣas al-Mustaqīm*, in *Majmu'at Rasā'il al-ilmām al-Ghazālī*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1986.
- 63 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, p. 207, and *The Niche*, p. 37, also *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*) p. 12.
- 64 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, p. 334.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 206–7, 257. In p. 257 he says that it is possible for a person to be born with the highest knowledge without any learning, as Jesus the son of Mary and other prophets were.
- 66 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 27.
- 67 Al-Ghazālī, *Jawābir*, p. 30.
- 68 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 13–14.
- 69 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 27.
- 70 F. Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1958, pp. 93–4.
- 71 Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtīṣād*, p. 88.
- 72 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, pp. 257, 206–7.
- 73 Al-Ghazālī, *Jawābir*, pp. 28–9. He says the Qur'ān is full of metaphorical ideas which aim to preserve certain wisdom veiled.

- 74 Ibid., p. 33. He says the secrets of the Qur'an should not be known by those who are not able to perceive them. Here he goes beyond the philosophers to claim that there is an esoteric side of the Qur'an which only those deeply rooted in knowledge and mysticism can reach.
- 75 Nakamura, "Ghazālī's Cosmology", p. 34, and Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 4 (*Kitāb al-Tawba*), p. 31.
- 76 Al-Ghazālī, *Jawābir*, pp. 18–19.
- 77 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, pp. 304–6, see also *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 33.
- 78 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, p. 223.
- 79 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 1 (*al-'Ilm*), p. 32, here writes a passage outlining the role of inspiration *'ilm al-mukāshafa* and gives a long account of interpretations of the meaning of prophecy, the meaning of angels, the *malakūt* of heaven and earth, the balance, judgement etc.
- 80 Al-Ghazālī, *Jawābir*, p. 30. See also *The Niche*, pp. 16–18.
- 81 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 29–33.
- 82 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 4 (*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*), p. 304, and *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 27.
- 83 Ibid., Vol. 4 (*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*), pp. 304–5.
- 84 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 25.
- 85 Frank, *Taqlīd*, p. 230.
- 86 Ibid., also *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3, (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 25.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Zaehner, *Hindu*, p. 139. See also M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd edn, London: Longman, 1983, pp. 237–9. See also Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, p. 335.
- 89 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 1, pp. 116–17 (*Kitāb al-'ilm*). See also *Mīzān*, p. 335, and Daniel, *The Alchemy*, p. 35.
- 90 Daniel, *The Alchemy*, p. 35.
- 91 Ibid., p. 19.
- 92 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 13–14.
- 93 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 3 (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*), p. 8.
- 94 This Ḥadīth is found in al-Asīrī, *Al-Ḥawī li-l-fatāwī*, 2:412 (*al-Sa'āda* printer).
- 95 See *al-Bukhārī: Bāb al-Isti'dhān* and *Muslim: Bāb al-Birr wa al-Ṣila*.
- 96 These two Ḥadīths are often repeated in *Iḥyā'* and he gives an explanation for them in *Imlā'*, pp. 51–2. They are also repeated in al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy*, pp. 5, 15, 17.
- 97 Al-Ghazālī, "On the Meaning of the Intimate Knowledge of God," in J. Renard, *Window on the House of Islam*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988b, pp. 355–8.
- 98 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 4 (*Kitāb al-Maḥabba*), pp. 374, 375, 386.
- 99 Ibid., p. 374.
- 100 'Abd al-Halīm Mahmoud, *'Uṣṭādh al-thā'irīn*, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1973, pp. 317–18, 160.
- 101 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, Vol. 4 (*Kitāb Dhikr al-Mawt*), p. 641.
- 102 Ibid., p. 298.
- 103 Ibid., p. 299.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 We follow here Buchman in translating the word *'arīf* as Gnostic; we believe, however, that the kind of Sufism which al-Ghazālī is introducing mainly in *Mishkāt* has similarities with the early Christian Sufi saints who had the following beliefs: (1) true knowledge is inspired by the divine world, (2) the human soul belongs to the divine world and its role in this world is mainly to recognize its origin and (3) the material world is to be denounced. See R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, New York and London, 1959, pp. 10–13.

However, we are mainly using the term “Gnostic” here in order to distinguish the kind of Sufism which he describes in *Misbkāt* from that of the *sālikīm* of *Iḥyāʾ*.

106 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 51.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid., p. 17.

109 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 1 (*Kitāb al-ʿIlām*), p. 12.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 361.

113 Ibid., p. 362.

114 Ibid. p. 362.

115 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 4 (*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*), p. 297. In addition he explains that some parts of the revealed sciences are related to “the science of *muʾāmalā* and will not be complete except by explaining it, therefore we will explain only the amount which relate to the science of *muʾāmalā*.” Therefore, Lazarus-Yafeh considers that the nature of these two sciences and al-Ghazālī’s wish to address both groups of readers have caused the duality and the resulting contradictions. See Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 364.

116 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 4, pp. 79, 175, 263.

117 M. Smith explains that al-Ghazālī had absorbed much from al-Muḥāsibī in his theory of prayer and trusting in God and his view that listening to music and singing is permissible for the seeker. See M. Smith, *Al-Ghazālī, the Mystic*, London: Luzac, 1944, pp. 124–5. He was also influenced by al-Mikkī’s division of the different stages of mysticism into repentance, patience, gratitude, hope, fear, asceticism, trust, satisfaction and love. At the same time, Smith shows that al-Ghazālī accepts the fellowship and the vision of God as the basis of man’s ultimate relationship. In *Iḥyāʾ* he quotes the following saying of al-Bisṭāmī:

if it were granted unto you to talk with God face to face as Moses did, and to be filled with the spirit, as Jesus was, and to enjoy the divine friendship, like Abraham, yet should you seek what is beyond that, for infinitely more to be given by Him, and if you rest content with that, you are veiled thereby, and this is the test for such as these, and one who is like them, for they are in the highest rank.

Bisṭāmī probably here refers to the relationship of unity with God (ibid., pp. 128–9).

118 Al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-ʿArbaʿīn*, Beirut: Dār al-Jiyl, 1988, p. 204.

119 A. M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 99.

120 Ibid., pp. 79, 175, 263.

121 Schimmel, *Dimension*, p. 99.

122 Ibid., pp. 314–6.

123 Ibid., p. 298.

124 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 4 (*al-Tawḥīd*), p. 297.

125 Ibid., p. 367. There are three levels of love: at the first, one experiences love towards oneself and what brings happiness. The second level is composed of love towards those who are generous and kind to oneself. The third level is the love of beauty and goodness; at this level of love the mystic experiences the attraction of the soul towards its perfection. Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 4 (*al-Maḥabbā*), pp. 355–9.

- 126 Ibid., p. 367.
- 127 Ibid., p. 391.
- 128 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 3 (*al-Maḥabba*), p. 392.
- 129 Ibid., p. 393.
- 130 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 363.
- 131 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 1.
- 132 Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzan*, p. 406. See also Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 361.
- 133 Although al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyāʾ* and *Mīzān* says that most Ṣūfīs are not interested in learning sciences, many Ṣūfīs before al-Ghazālī studied philosophy and oriental mysticism, for example, al-Junayd, al-Bisṭāmī and al-Ḥallāj, as the section titled “the concept of *fanā*” in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*” of Chapter 4 shows.
- 134 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 1–10.
- 135 Although al-Ghazālī in some parts of *Iḥyāʾ* explains that the angels in general are all constrained to obey, here in *Mishkāt* he shows that they have different ranks according to their degree of light or knowledge. He identifies in Chapter 1 the two angels closest to God as *Isrāfil* and *Jibrīl*. *Isrāfil* is in a higher rank than *Jibrīl*, as he says in the following passage:
- know that it has been unveiled to the possessors of insight that the lights of the dominion are likewise only to be found in hierarchy and that the light “brought nearer” is the one that is closest to the furthest light. Hence, it is not unlikely that the level of *Isrāfil* is above that of *Jibrīl*; that among the angels is the one who is the most near because of the nearness of his degree to the lordly presence, which is the source of light.
- (Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 14)
- See also *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 3 (*ʿAjāʾib al-Qalab*), p. 8.
- 136 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 20.
- 137 W. H. Gairdner, “Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-Anwār*,” p. 138.
- 138 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, p. 308–9.
- 139 Ibid.
- 140 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, pp. 249–59.
- 141 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 12, 63. This Ḥadīth is a sound one, Buchman explains, and is found in al-Termithī, *Imān*, 18 and Aḥmad 2:176.
- 142 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
- 143 Ibid., p. 16.
- 144 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, Vol. 4 (*al-Tawḥīd*), pp. 297–8.
- 145 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 18, paragraph 48. It seems to us that al-Ghazālī here divides the Sufis into scholars who are rooted in the mystic science, such as al-Junayd, and Sufis with deep mystical experience, such as al-Bisṭāmī and al-Ḥallāj.
- 146 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 17, 23.
- 147 Ibid., p. 17.
- 148 Ibid., p. 18.
- 149 He also explains in his treaty *On the Meaning of the Intimate Knowledge of God* that it is not possible to know people as they know themselves. He says, “no one can know the prophet but a prophet” and “no one can know God but God.” Union in this sense means for al-Ghazālī identifying fully the essence of God with the essence of the Sufi, which is technically impossible. See also the discussion on the union of the divine attributes with human attributes in *The Ninety-Nine Names*, pp. 151–5.
- 150 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 22.

151 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 23.

152 Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām*, pp. 91–2.

153 Ibid., p. 23.

154 This chapter has caused a number of arguments; the first to point out the ambiguity of this chapter was W. H. T. Gairdner in his article “Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-Anwār*,” pp. 121–53. He singles out the problem of the image of God at the end of the chapter. This made M. Watt doubt the authenticity of this part in his article “A Forgery in al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt*” in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1949, pp. 5–22. Since then many scholars have argued about it and scholars such as ‘Afifi, Davidson, Landolt and Lazarus-Yafeh find Watt’s assertion unconvincing. Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. xxvii.

155 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, pp. 49–50.

156 Ibid. This group is probably the theologians, *al-mutakallimūn*. In many of his writings al-Ghazālī considers that the knowledge which the theologians had about God is not higher than that of the ordinary person because they are not able to perceive a God who is different from what they know, as explained in the discussion on *taqlīd* above. See above, pp. 29–30.

157 Landolt, in his article “Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft,” identifies this group as the Ismā‘īlī theologians. Landolt is thinking here of such Ismā‘īlī theologians as al-Sijistānī and al-Nasāfī from the ninth and tenth centuries. They recognize three main figures: God, the predecessor or the obeyed one, *al-Muṭā‘*, and the follower. The predecessor is the one who gives the commands and the follower is the one who carries them out. God in their theology does not have any clear role. The predecessor and the follower are two Archangels who are close to God who are symbolized by the sun and the moon, one illuminating the other. They are also symbolized in the role of the prophethood and Imamate in illuminating the human mind. Landolt, “Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft”, in *Asiatische Studien*, 1991, 45, pp. 43–52. See also Netton, *Allāh*, pp. 210–24.

158 Zaehner, *Hindu*, p. 156.

159 Ibid., p. 157. He explains that the Ismā‘īlī consider that the relationship between God and the world is through the word “Be.”

God in the Ismā‘īlī metaphysics is the One of Plotinus, which being absolutely one, cannot be the source of multiplicity: the necessity of the creative Word which forces both ways, so to speak – one with the One as its sole effect when it faces inward, but the cause of all multiplicity when it faces outward and similar to the idea of the Christian Logos.

160 Here, however, we should refer to a text in *The Alchemy of Happiness*, mentioned above, where al-Ghazālī also considers that the angels create the world as deputies of God:

when God wills a thing it appears in the spiritual plane which is called in the Qur’ān “the Throne”, from the throne it passes by a spiritual current to a lower plane called “the Chair.” The shape of it appears in the “Tablet of Destiny” whence, by the mediation of the forces called angels it assumes actuality and appears on earth in form of a plant or a tree.

God’s eternal ideas are transferred to the angels through one or two Archangels and they in turn carry out the actual creation in accordance with God’s plan. The important point for al-Ghazālī here is the divine will which constrains and controls all the events of the world, as he shows in his descriptions of the different stages of mysticism above.

- 161 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 49.
- 162 Ibid., p. 49.
- 163 In the second chapter of *Mishkāt* al-Ghazālī explains how to deal with a metaphorical text. He says that the content of revelation is of the upper world of the *malakūt* expressed in human language and parables. Hence, a text consists of utterances and meanings; if we try to understand these meaning through understanding the words as the utterances we could come to different kinds of meaning because the text, according to al-Ghazālī, is written to express metaphorical ideas. Thus the words are used only as a bridge to explain facts from the divine world; consequently their uttered meaning is not what the text aims at. The only way to interpret the text is by searching out the meanings and the facts, which the utterances seek to depict.
- 164 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 37.
- 165 Ibid., p. 38.
- 166 See Chapter 3, sub-section titled "Ibn-Sīnā's concept of the individuality of the human soul" above, and *Najāt*, pp. 245–6, 266.
- 167 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, pp. 249–59.
- 168 However, al-Ghazālī claims that these concepts could be taken from earlier revelations.
- 169 Al-Ghazālī considers, as shown above, that all *muqallidūn* theologians are ordinary believers.
- 170 This is part of a sound Ḥadīth; see al-Bukharī Sahih, *Riqāq*, 38, See Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche*, p. 63.

5 Comparison and evaluation

- 1 Ibn Sīnā differentiates between eternal *qadīm* and necessary *wājib*. "Necessary" means that which does not depend on another and is necessarily itself, but an "eternal" thing, though it might have no point of beginning in time, could still depend on another for its existence. Thus the eternity of God is necessary while the eternity of the world is contingent. See *Najāt*, pp. 218, 224–5.
- 2 For this reason, we believe, Ibn Sīnā explored mainly the eternal knowledge and eternal existence of God but not His ability, will or perception because they imply change and therefore cannot be eternal: perception perceives a thing in its changing states, while ability and will are attributed to acts which undergo processes before, during and after other processes; therefore he does not predicate them of God.
- 3 See Chapter 1 sub-section titled "Early political development in Persia."
- 4 See Chapter 3, sub-sections titled "The essential attributes of God" and "The function of religious knowledge."
- 5 G. F. Hourani, "The dialogue between Al-Ghazālī and the Philosophers on the Origin of the World," Part 2, *Muslim World*, 1958, 48, pp. 308–14.
- 6 Probably this argument for 'Abd al-Jabbār means that only material beings can be changed because of the inherence of the different accidents, but God as immaterial, cannot be subject to change since all His activities are due to His kind of essence.
- 7 See Chapter 2, sub-section titled "'Abd al-Jabbār's understanding of God's activities."
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 See Chapter 1, sub-section titled "Ibn Sīnā."
- 10 See Chapter 2, sub-section titled "Warning through pain and suffering."

God and Humans in Islamic Thought

‘Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and
al-Ghazālī

Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth

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