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HPPD7001: Methods and Approaches in Interfaith Studies

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BOOK REVIEW

Freedom and fulfillment: an annotated translation of Al-Ghazālī's *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* and other relevant works of al-Ghazālī, *International Studies and Translations Series, Volume 4 of Library of classical Arabic literature, Ghazzālī, Richard Joseph McCarthy, Twayne Publishers, 1980, 420 pages, ISBN 0805781676, 9780805781670*

Al- Ghazali's spiritual autobiography' *al Munquidh min al dalal* has been translated by various authors as, 'Freedom and fulfillment' and 'Deliverance from error'. Written between 1106-09, it is considered as one of the most remarkable pieces of literature descended from medieval Islamic civilization. This self-confessional autobiography is a result of a phase of an intellectual dilemma; self-doubt between his rational intellect and faith. A child prodigy, he was among the most influential *hujjat* (religious teacher) at the school of Nizamiyya; a religious school in Baghdad considered among the epitome of learning centers of medieval Islam. Encountering a state which he refers to as a spiritual malady which brought about a paralyzing depression, probed him to resign from his prestigious position and embark on a spiritual quest which lasted about 10 years. This piece is significant as he authored it between 1106-09 after he returned from his self- imposed seclusion, a couple of years before his demise. Thus, this volume of literature spells the fruition of his experiences and learnings.

Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1056 -1111 AD) was born in Tus in Khurasan, a province of Persia. Al-Ghazali is hailed as one of the most celebrated scholars in the history of Sunni Islamic thought. He was a highly renowned theologian, jurist, thinker, mystic and religious reformer. He is even referred to as the third teacher after Aristotle and al-Farabi (Griffel, 2019, par. 2). His literary works included astronomy, ethics, history, jurisprudence, logic, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, theology, poetry, and popular sciences.

In contemporary times, where spiritual materialism is pandemic, this narration of an intimate spiritual conversation propels the reader in the realm of pure consciousness. It implores the reader to awaken to the signs of the sacred “the light gushes forth from the divine liberality at certain times and one must be on the watch for it.” (McCarthy. p. 5). He necessitates the reader to muse beyond the obvious and interpret the world above the shadows “Withdraw from the mansion of delusion and turning to the mansion of immortality” (McCarthy, p. 5). He critically scrutinizes his own faith while peering down the alley of beliefs and philosophies of other faith structures unpacking their tenets and myths to deliver the fallacies of their own constructs.

The conflict that revolutionized al- Ghazali life was the doubt between faith and intellect. Facing doubts is the first sign of falling out of blind faith which he terms as ‘inherited beliefs. Words of the prophet have informed him that every child was born with a ‘nature’ (*fitr*), and it is the parents' initiate him to becoming a Jew, Christian or a Muslim. He was distressed and sought to detect the true nature of man to acquire true knowledge of faith which would, in turn, construe the truth of God or salvation. However, skepticism and rationality gave rise to doubts. It is this conflict between the belief and rationality that motivated al-Ghazali to give up his position, status, family and everything he owned to embark on his spiritual quest.

In this book, Al- Gazali investigates four traditions which according to him could potentially lead to salvation. They are, (1) The Theologians (2) The philosophers, (3) The Batiniyah (Ismailis), and (4) the Sufis or Mystics. As a judge, Ghazali expresses his disappointment for all except one as he analyzed each doctrine to attain the ultimate truth or true knowledge of God.

Al – Gazali accused the theologians of inadequacy. According to him, the theologians either indulged in ‘Naive belief’ and conceded with the community by accepting the Quran without deep thought. He arraigned them of not thinking through the problem to find a

theological solution. Next, the group to be confuted was the Philosophers. Al-Ghazali divided the philosophers into three classes. (i) Naturalist, (2) Materialist and (3) Theists. He refuted the philosophers on three grounds. They are, first, the philosophers believed that there shall be no physical resurrection, but only a spiritual resurrection. Al-Ghazali disagreed with this clause, as this contradicted the Quran. Second, that the philosophers believed that God does not have knowledge of particulars but only of universals. Again al- Ghazali refuted their claim as this theory would limit God's authority. And finally, the philosophers believed that the creation is eternal which was blasphemous claim as it suggests that creation co-exists with God. According to the Quran, God created this world thus it cannot be equated with God. The third group was the *Batiniya* (Ismailis). They believed in the presence of divine authority, their *Imam* being the manifestation of God's authority on earth, as their spiritual and worldly guide. Al-Ghazali rejects their injunction on the grounds that the followers of the tradition whom he contended, did not seem to have learned from their infallible guide, the Imam. He equated this through the analogy of taking the thirsty to the river but the individual instead of drinking the water yet remains thirsty. He also did not believe in the need for a living spiritual guide as according to him God had sent his word- the *kalam* and the prophet was their final guide. The Quran thus had to be interpreted according to the time by men through their own understanding.

Al- Gazali's primal criticism comes from the Ismailis or the group he prefers to term as '*batiniyya*'. Literally translated as the 'esoteric', the Ismailis find this term pejorative by the 'self-styled polemicist'; al Gazali, working under the patronage of Seljuk sultan Nizam al Mulk of Sunni Abbasid banner (Mitha, 2001, p. 19). According to Mitha, the antipathy towards the Ismailis of Iran was a political response by the Sunni Seljuks through al- Gazali. The Ismailis had infiltrated the Seljuk empire and challenged not only their political power but also with their '*ta'lim*' ideology of the infallible guide challenged the Sunni religious tradition. The Ismaili position believes in turning to the living guidance for spiritual direction, however, this

proposition is opposed to the Sunni tradition of referring to the Prophet for spiritual guidance. The Shi'i theology suggests it may be inappropriate to seek a solution for present-day issues only through the words and actions of the Prophet. Thus, there is a possibility that the Sunni sect too may be misguided. It could be concluded that this tradition of 'turning back' to the Prophet is as flawed as believing in the tradition of a living spiritual guide (ibid, p. 26). Hence Mitha argues that commissioned to defend the Sunni school of thought, al Gazali denounced the Ismailis by demonizing their tradition and proclaiming them as heretics. According to Mitha, all who did not fit into the mould of Sunni tradition suffered similar treatment (Mitha, 2001, p. 26).

Towards the end, readers would find an interesting reversal of event and philosophy. As a proselytizer of Sunni Islam, and an ardent refuter of the Shi'i philosophy of guidance through an Imam, al-Gazali confesses, to have found the "true nature and special character of prophecy" (McCarthy 1980, 96) in the Sufi's way of practicing religion. Al-Gazali progresses to disclose and that he had realized the truth in direct experience as opposed to reading it in theory. He convinces the reader that having studied and experienced Sufism, he realizes the difference between possessing knowledge about health as opposed to being healthy and the difference between being drunk as opposed to having the knowledge about drinking. Here, it is significant to remind the reader that the Sufism also necessitates a living guide who serves as a master for the adherents of that community. This part indeed paradoxical! Al Gazali spent a considerable part of his life writing against the Ismaili sect as he disapproved of their religious tradition of believing in a living spiritual guide. After all his writings had caused upheaval against the sect and almost led to discrediting the Ismaili sect from the larger community of Islam. It is indeed unfortunate that al-Gazali never championed his final conviction for the Ismaili in any of his other theoretical writings. According to historians, al Gazali founded a

school for the Sufi sect adherents and until the end of his life, he practiced Islam under the guidance of his Sufi master (Griffel, 2019, par. 2).

It is one of the most remarkable literature from the medieval Islamic civilization, from one of the best influential thinkers of his time. The metaphoric articulation is abundant with representation from various branches of knowledge which educates the reader on the miracles and depths of philosophy, rationalism, and theology. It leads the reader into a world of enlightenment, a glimpse of a vision in which he himself has found conviction. Through this literature, one also gets an initiation into his other books that he has authored and points to the reader the way for a deeper evaluation if they prefer to probe further. The translation by Mc Cathy is lucid and with some occasional unusual use of literary devices. A spiritual literary ladder, this piece calls upon the reader to ascend the heights of the inner world to attain the ultimate truth, 'the sacred'.

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