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AL-GHAZĀLĪ

In praise of Sufism

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Introduction

Al-Ghazālī was a true intellectual colossus. Indeed, he may be regarded as the major Muslim intellectual of the Middle Ages. He belongs with Augustine and Aquinas. Like Augustine, he wrote a riveting spiritual autobiography; like Aquinas, he mastered a huge body of book knowledge, and wrote at least 50 books; like both of them, he spent many years living the ascetic life. Over the centuries generations of scholars have made extravagant claims for him, likening him also to Pascal and Descartes.

A brief biography of Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī

Al-Ghazālī was born in 1058 in Tus in eastern Iran. At an early age he and his brother Aḥmad, himself to become a Sufi poet of distinction, are said to have been orphaned. They had a guardian, a Sufi called al-Fārmadhī. As is evident from these skeletal facts, there is very little that we know for certain about these crucial early years – but it requires very little imagination to realise that he was subjected to significant trauma at a very young age. What we do know is that he and his brother learnt at an early age about Sufism. We may speculate that Sufism was a precious source of comfort to the two boys.

Between 1077 and 1085 al-Ghazālī studied with the most celebrated theologian of the eastern Islamic world, al-Juwaynī, who was based at Nishapur in eastern Iran. He taught al-Ghazālī the rational sciences, Shafi'ite law, theology and logic. Al-Ghazālī's studies with al-Juwaynī continued until his master died. It is probable that he quickly proved himself to be a prodigy and even eclipsed his master. He must have attracted notice in the highest circles even at this early age, for before he was 30 he had also acquired a very powerful mentor, Nizām al-Mulk, the vizier of the supreme ruler, the Turkish Seljuq sultan Malikshāh. Nizām al-Mulk was, like al-Ghazālī, from Tus and this might have helped to forge a bond between them. At the remarkably young age of 33, al-Ghazālī was appointed to a most prestigious job, as head of the Nizāmiyya *madrasa*, the most famous theological legal college in Baghdad, which was then the capital of the entire Islamic world. Here was a Persian taking the top job in the Arab metropolis of Baghdad. It was like being both Archbishop of Canterbury and Regius Professor of Law at Oxford. In matters intellectual, he was the man of the moment.

His range was astonishing – he wrote on philosophy, ethics, theology and statecraft, on law and political thought. In short, he was a polymath. He moved with consummate ease between the Arabic-speaking court of the caliph and the Persian-speaking court of the sultan.

Four years of this high-profile life led to what would now be called a “mid-life crisis”. In 1095 he left Baghdad and for a long period, possibly as long as ten years, he wandered as an ascetic Sufi, visiting the holy cities of Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina. He meditated in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, he spent two years in the minaret of the Great Mosque of Damascus and he made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

He finally returned home to Tus and lived in seclusion with a circle of Sufi disciples. And then, all of a sudden, the world of high politics seemed to beckon him back again – but this time not to Baghdad. Instead, he was invited to Nishapur by the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar to take on an important teaching post but he stayed there for only two or three years. Thereafter, he went back to his birthplace, Tus, where he remained almost continuously until his death, at 53, in 1111. There he lived a retired life, staying – it seems – in a *khānaqāh* which he had founded, teaching disciples and meditating. Moreover, he wrote important books there, completing his last work in the month of his death.

Al-Ghazālī’s spiritual journey

In his spiritual “autobiography”, the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*The deliverer from error*) there is a very moving account of al-Ghazālī’s personal crisis in Baghdad in 1095. This mature work was written in Nishapur between 1106 and 1107 and it looks back at his time in Baghdad and thereafter.¹ Al-Ghazālī himself says that he wrote the book when he was in his fifties and around the time he returned to teaching.²

In this book, having finished his examination of three religious sciences – philosophy, theology and Ismā’īlī Shi’ite doctrines – al-Ghazālī says that he has now turned to the study of Sufism. In this moving analysis of his personal crisis, he finds the solution in the way of the Sufis. He says that for him knowledge of it has been easier than action. He has read classical Sufi books and learnt what can be learnt by study and listening. But that is not enough; the essence of Sufism can only be acquired by “tasting” (*dhawq*), experiencing mystical states and a change of personal attributes. He writes that the Sufi path aims at removing personal defects from the soul and at purifying a person’s heart so that it ends up being adorned only with the name of God.³ He makes an analogy between *knowing intellectually* the definition of something (such as sobriety/intoxication or health/illness) and actually experiencing intoxication or illness personally. The same applies to Sufism.

He has learnt for certain that Sufis are not pedlars of words; they are possessor of mystical states. By studying both the religious and rational sciences he has acquired an unshakable faith in God, prophetic revelation and the Last Judgement. These three principles have become implanted in his soul, not by specific written proof but by other factors too numerous to list. But he has realised that he must flee all human attachments and ambitions and turn to God wholeheartedly if he can hope for happiness in the afterlife: “I saw clearly too that I could not hope for eternal happiness except by fearing God, removing my passions – that is to say, breaking the attachments of my heart with the world”.⁴ He goes on to praise the Sufi path: “Their conduct is perfect, their path is straight, their character virtuous”.⁵

He has scrutinised his lifestyle and realised that he is entangled in attachments on all sides. He has also examined his activities – the best of which is his teaching – and he finds them useless for the way to the afterlife. He has examined his motivation for teaching and found

it to be not directed towards God but towards the acquiring of fame and reputation. He records that he remained hesitating for a while, unable to decide whether to leave Baghdad or to stay.⁶ He vacillated: “I would put one foot forward, and the other backward”. Ambition pushed him towards remaining there; the call of faith urged him to leave. Satan would tempt him to stay in Baghdad, pointing out to him the dangers of leaving.

In July 1095, after six months of vacillation, the matter passed from choice to compulsion. He fell into a deep depression. He found that he could not digest food or drink. In the middle of a lecture he could not speak; as he says: “God put a lock on my tongue”. He felt himself to be “on the edge of a crumbling bank”. He would be consigned to the Fire if he did not put his situation right. On a personal level, this great intellectual had clearly realised that he must flee all human attachments and ambitions and turn to God if he could hope for happiness in the afterlife. For someone who has reached the very top of the tree in worldly terms, this is a life-changing insight. The doctors could not cure him of the malady that afflicted him. Sensing his powerlessness, al-Ghazālī sought refuge with God, who answered his prayer and made it easy for him to leave his fame, money, relatives, children and friends. While secretly planning to travel to Damascus, al-Ghazālī pretended publicly to be going to Mecca, out of fear that the caliph and his advisers would find out about his decision to go to Damascus. He left Baghdad, having resolved never to go back there again.

Al-Ghazālī stayed in Damascus for nearly two years, spending his time in solitude, retreat, spiritual discipline, and purifying his heart. He stayed for a while in the Damascus mosque, passing the day in the minaret with the door closed. From there he went to Jerusalem, visiting the Dome of the Rock every day and shutting himself inside it. After having visited (the tomb) of the Friend (i.e. Abraham) in Hebron, he then decided to go on the Pilgrimage and to seek help from the blessings of Mecca and Medina and visiting (the tomb) of the Prophet of God. Thereafter he felt called to return to his homeland to attend to his family affairs, despite his reluctance to leave his life of solitude. Worldly preoccupations then tended to obstruct his pursuit of the mystical path. Nevertheless, the mystical state was achieved, but only intermittently.⁷ He remained in this situation for around ten years, in the course of which innumerable and inexplicable things were revealed to him. But he will say this much: it is the Sufis who are especially on the path of God. Their way is the best one. He goes even further in his praise of them:

Indeed, were one to combine the insight of the intellectuals, the wisdom of the wise, and the lore of the scholars versed in the mysteries of revelation in order to change a single item of Sufi conduct and ethic and to replace it with something better, no way would be found! For all their motions and quiescences, exterior and interior, are learned from the light of the niche of prophecy. And beyond the light of prophecy there is no light on earth from which illumination can be obtained.⁸

Two medieval scholars have left biographical accounts of al-Ghazālī; ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d. 529/1134–1135), whose evidence is the earliest extant biography of al-Ghazālī, and al-Subkī (d. 771/1369). Al-Fārisī writes most favourably of al-Ghazālī:⁹

After studying the subtle sciences and applying himself to the books written about them, he was overwhelmed and followed the path of asceticism and godliness, and he gave up his entourage and cast away the rank he had attained to devote himself to the causes of piety and the provisions for the Afterlife.

Al-Fārisī adds more positive comments about al-Ghazālī once he was back in Nishapur and Tus:

I often visited him and I did not find in him what I had formerly been familiar with in his regard, namely maliciousness and making people uneasy and regarding them disdainfully.... He had become the exact opposite and had been cleansed of those impurities.¹⁰

Al-Subkī also has laudatory comments to make about al-Ghazālī:

His heart enclosed a piety and a solitude in which his chosen companion was none other than obedience to God... He left the world behind him and devoted himself to God, dealing (only) with Him privately and publicly.¹¹

Al-Ghazālī's writings on Sufism

When writing about Sufism, al-Ghazālī draws on the concepts and symbols used by his predecessors, including Ḥaṣan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) and al-Qushayrī (d. 1074). He is especially influenced by two important Sufis, al-Muḥāsibī (d. 837) and al-Makkī (d. 996). The name al-Muḥāsibī is concerned with self-discipline (*muḥāṣaba* means self-examination) and this term describes very well the nature of his writing with its emphasis on the examination of one's conscience.¹² Al-Ghazālī actually acknowledges his debt to al-Muḥāsibī; indeed he says at one point in the *Munqidh* that he has copied sentences word for word from a passage in the work *Kitāb al-naṣā'ih* of al-Muḥāsibī.¹³ It is quite likely that the autobiographical introduction to this book of al-Muḥāsibī may well have influenced al-Ghazālī when he came to write the *Munqidh*. Al-Muḥāsibī writes: "With all my heart I sought the path of salvation".¹⁴ Another important source for al-Ghazālī was the work of al-Makkī (d. 996), who composed a work called *Qūt al-qulūb* (*The food of hearts*) in which he wrote about Islamic ritual practices from a mystical standpoint, laying emphasis on the three major doctrines of *ṣabr* (patience), *maḥabba* (love) and *ma'rifa* (gnosis).¹⁵

Al-Ghazālī's admiration for the Sufi way is summed up in moving terms in the *Munqidh*:

I learnt with certainty that it is above all the mystics who walk on the road of God; their life is the best life, their method the soundest method, their character the purest character.¹⁶

It became clear to me, however, that what is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience (*dhawq* – literally "tasting"), by ecstasy and by a moral change.¹⁷

Al-Ghazālī strives for a Sufism based on sober piety, a mingling of the teachings of Islamic law and the profound inner spirituality of the Sufis. There should be a natural harmony between Sufism and the Law.

In addition to his famous so-called spiritual autobiography, the *Munqidh*, there are many other writings of al-Ghazālī; they number at least 60. A good number of these are short treatises, such as the *Mishkat al-anwār*¹⁸, *Al-Qiṣṣas al-mustaḥqīm*,¹⁹ and *Al-Arba'īn fī uṣūl al-dīn*.²⁰ Whatever their length, al-Ghazālī's books emphasise the importance of Sunni Islam and the *sharī'a*, while often highlighting the overarching mystical dimension of the Sufi path. Clearly, then, he is seeking to unite the path of orthodoxy with that of Sufism; he does not see one as excluding the other.

The following discussion about al-Ghazālī's thoughts on Sufism will focus only on two major books of his, the massive *Revivification of the Sciences of Religion* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*) which is written in Arabic and the *Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kīmīyā-yi sa'ādat*) in Persian.

To turn first to the *Iḥyā'*. This is undoubtedly al-Ghazālī's longest, most impressive and grandiose work. Arberry calls it "in many ways the greatest religious book composed by a Muslim".²¹ It is constructed as a book of jurisprudence. Nevertheless – and this is a remarkable feat – it is permeated with the mystical dimension. He constantly stresses the role of the heart; this is no dry, legalistic treatise. It offers a Muslim theory of knowledge, followed by detailed guidance on matters of faith, ritual, daily life, virtue and vices, and the mystical experience of God. The *Iḥyā'* consists of four sections – 'ibādāt (cult obligations to God), 'adāt (customs), 'ajā'ib al-qalb (wonders of the heart) and munjiyāt (religious virtues); each of these is divided into ten chapters.

The 'ajā'ib al-qalb section is focussed on Sufi symbolism. Al-Ghazālī describes the heart as follows: "It is a subtle tenuous substance of an ethereal spiritual sort, which is connected with the physical heart. This heart is the part of man which perceives and knows and experiences".²²

For al-Ghazālī, it is the heart that equips man for knowledge of God. In this context, the heart is an organ through which the human being may gaze upon the beauty of the Divine Presence; this is the culmination of happiness.

In the *Iḥyā'* al-Ghazālī explains the difference between the way in which the Sufis discover the truth and how those who use reasoning and the process of learning attempt to do so. This is a very important and moving description:

Know that the preference of the men of taṣawwuf (the Sufis) is for inspirational rather than for instructional cognitions. Hence they are not intent on the study of a science and the acquisition of what authors have written and the investigation of the teachings and proofs set forth. Rather they affirm that the (right) way is to give preference to spiritual combat and eradicating blameworthy qualities and cutting off all attachments (to human beings) and applying oneself with utmost ardour to God Most High...When God takes charge of the heart's affairs His mercy floods it and His light shines in it and man's heart is dilated and there is disclosed to him the mystery of the Kingdom and there is lifted from the face of his heart by the favour of the (Divine) mercy the veil concealing God's glory and there gleams in it the realities of the divine things.²³

If this advice is followed, the disciple will experience the wonders of proximity to God. The Sufi path, he says, aims at removing personal defects from the soul and purifying a person's heart until it is adorned only with the name of God. The Sufi strives to "see" God with the "inner eye", the "eye of the heart". There are several terms in Arabic which refer to the human organ used symbolically for spiritual communication with God – heart (*qalb*), spirit (*rūh*), secret (*sirr*) and jewel (*jawhar*). The Sufi tries to remove "obstacles" (i.e. earthly desires) on the path to God. Another metaphor to help explain this is that Sufism involves tasting. Just one single aspect of the conduct and morals of the Sufis cannot be surpassed by the total accumulated intellect of the intellectuals, the wisdom of the wise and the knowledge of the 'ulama' who are experts in the secrets of revelation.

Al-Ghazālī attempts to describe the Sufi way. He says it begins with purifying the heart and then with its being totally absorbed in the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. The final stage is being completely lost in God. Yet this final stage is really only the beginning, as the hall (of a house) is only the entry to it.

Revelations and visions are possible from the very beginning of the Sufi path. Then later, levels of revelation are achieved which are beyond the power of speech to explain:

Then one retires alone ... and confines oneself to the religious duties and rituals. One sits with heart empty and attention concentrated ... And after one sits down in seclusion one unceasingly says with the tongue “Allah, Allah” without interruption concomitantly with the presence of the heart until one reaches a state in which he gives up moving his tongue and see it as though it were flowing on his tongue.²⁴

This is an eloquent and sensitive attempt by al-Ghazālī to describe the way in which Sufis carry out the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance [of God]). The culmination of this deep contemplative process will be that gleams of light will shine in the believer’s heart. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a practising Sufi himself, *dhikr* is the “primary spiritual technique of Sufism, through which man returns to God”; it is “prayer unified with the rhythm of life itself”.²⁵ *Dhikr* involves remembrance, the constant repetition of the name Allah, accompanied by rhythmic, controlled breathing.

Al-Ghazālī’s writings in Persian

It was perhaps inevitable that most of al-Ghazālī’s writing is in Arabic, since that ensured its wide dissemination throughout the Muslim world, from Spain to Central Asia. But he also composed several works in Persian. It is highly likely that it was after his journeys in Syria and the Holy Land and his return to eastern Iran that he began writing works in his native language. Once home in Iran, he nevertheless continued to compose major books in Arabic, and above all the *Munqidh* and his legal masterpiece, the *Kitāb al-muṣtaṣfā*.²⁶

A fundamental problem in studies of al-Ghazālī is that most scholars in this field have focussed on the works in Arabic that account for most of his literary output. Fair enough. But a good many of them do not know Persian, and so his Persian works have been unfairly neglected or – worse still – misunderstood and undervalued.

The *Kīmīyā-yi sa’ādat* (*The Alchemy of Happiness* – an allusive and challenging title) is his longest extant work in Persian.²⁷ This still relatively little-known book of al-Ghazālī, written in Persian, has been described as a summary of his Arabic *magnum opus*, the *Iḥyā’*. This is partly true. However, the *Kīmīyā* is much more than this. It is replete with many beautifully expressed and valuable insights into the Sufi path; these reflections, which are often lengthy, are not to be found in the *Iḥyā’*. It is a masterpiece of Persian religious literature. This seems to be al-Ghazālī’s first work in Persian. It was written for those living in areas where Persian was the language of the majority – Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Northern India. The work was probably completed between 1102 and 1106 after al-Ghazālī had finished the *Iḥyā’*. It is addressed to a new audience. It is written in a simple style at a time when Persian was enjoying a renaissance as a cultural language in the eastern Islamic world. Al-Ghazālī tells his readers that he wishes to explain his message in understandable, accessible words.

The work comprises 40 books. These are divided into four quarters, each containing ten books. To distance the *Kīmīyā* from the *Iḥyā’* and to reinforce the new emphasis and independent nature of the *Kīmīyā*, al-Ghazālī gives this latter work a new title. As in other medieval cultures, the “science” or pseudo-science of alchemy presented writers with a potent set of images. Alchemists believed that metals formed a hierarchy of increasing purity until one attained the mystical perfection of gold. The transformation of base metals, which were imperfect, into gold can serve as an evocative symbol of humanity’s spiritual regeneration

through travelling along the Sufi path. Al-Ghazālī was no stranger to these symbols. Indeed, it is very likely that his brother Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, as a well-known Sufi, exerted an important influence on him throughout his life.

Al-Ghazālī is positive in his analysis of why and how human beings have been created; he writes that, although their bodies are made of clay and are lowly, the essence of their spirit is sublime and godly. Initially their substance is mixed and “contaminated with beastly, ferine and devilish qualities”,²⁸ but when they are placed in the crucible of conflict they are cleansed of this pollution and contamination and they become worthy of proximity to the threshold of God. Human beings should rid themselves of the grip of lust and anger. At that point they become worthy to contemplate the beauty of the Divine Presence. Al-Ghazālī’s spiritual crisis is a paradigm for all Muslims seeking experiential knowledge of God.

Alchemical imagery is expressed in the introduction to the *Kīmīyā*:

Just as that alchemy that transforms copper and bronze to the purity and beauty of pure gold is difficult and not known by everyone; so too the alchemy that will transform the essence of man from his baseness and bestiality to the purity and preciousness of the angelic state, in order to achieve eternal happiness, is also difficult to find and not known by all.²⁹

The opening part of the *Kīmīyā* is especially important, for here al-Ghazālī bares his heart and defines what he regards as true Muslim spirituality. This prelude is written in praise of God, who has created the heavens and the earth; it is addressed especially to those who seek knowledge of Him as they move along the Sufi path in their striving towards proximity with Him:

Abundant gratitude and thanks, in the number of the stars in the sky, the droplets of the rain, the leaves of the trees, the grains of sand in the desert and the particles of the earth and the sky, to that God Whose attribute is Oneness and Whose special nature is Majesty and Grandeur, Greatness and Superiority, and Glory and Goodness. No one other than He may penetrate the true reality of His knowledge.³⁰

Addressing the Sufis specifically, al-Ghazālī stresses that “the ultimate end of the journey of the wayfarers and disciples in their search for proximity to His awesome beauty is astonishment”.³¹ This prelude in the *Kīmīyā* which is devoted to extolling the glory and splendour of God reaches a magnificent climax in the following words:

Let no-one reflect upon the Nature and the What of the vastness of His essence! Let no heart neglect for one moment the wonders of His creation and (question) the nature and origin of His existence, so that one necessarily recognizes that all are signs of His power and the lights of His grandeur. All these are the inventions and marvels of His wisdom. All are the rays of the beauty of His presence.³²

Certain symbols recur often in the *Kīmīyā*. First among them is the image of the heart. Al-Ghazālī believes that faith has its outward and inner aspects, both of which are necessary and interdependent to achieve balance; the inner aspects he calls “the activities of hearts”. Faith based on inner certainty, attained through “unveiling”, is better than faith based on tradition and reason. It is the “heart”, a delicate transcendental entity, that equips humanity for knowledge of God. In this context, the “heart”, as al-Ghazālī says, is not the organ of

flesh, situated on the left side of the chest. It is an organ through which human beings may gaze upon the beauty of the Divine Presence; this is the culmination of their happiness: "It is the heart which knows God, which draws near to God, which strives for God, which speeds towards God and which discloses what is in and with God".³³

Like other Sufi writers al-Ghazālī used the symbol of the mirror, which in medieval times was often made of metal. The heart is usually dirty, rusty and soiled with sin and human passions. It must be cleansed of the rust (of this material world) and polished to become the receptacle for knowledge of God.

As in the *Iḥyā'*, al-Ghazālī emphasises in the *Kīmīyā* the symbolism of the heart as a mirror. He writes as follows:

The actions from which bad qualities come are called disobedience, and those from which good qualities come are called obedience... The heart is just like a shining mirror. The ugly qualities are like smoke and darkness which on entering it (the heart) darken it, so that tomorrow it cannot see the Divine Presence and it becomes veiled from it. The good qualities are like a light which on entering the heart polishes it clear from the darkness of rebellion.³⁴

The role of music is also stressed in the *Kīmīyā*. Al-Ghazālī believes that music is in some way able to affect man's inner being, the jewel of the heart. He writes in the *Kīmīyā*:

The heart of man has been so constituted by the Almighty that, like a flint, it contains a hidden fire which is evoked by music and harmony, and renders man beside himself with ecstasy. These harmonies are echoes of that higher world of beauty which we call the world of the spirits.³⁵

Al-Ghazālī wrote a number of other works in Persian after his return home to Eastern Iran. They are much shorter than the *Kīmīyā* and are heavily dependent on the ideas found in that great work. They are nevertheless worthy of mention, since they demonstrate al-Ghazālī's wish to express his views regularly in public to guide the faithful along the right path. These works are homiletic in tone and they are addressed to sultans, governors, military commanders as well as to his own Sufi disciples. The principal theme of these shorter works in Persian is the absolute necessity of upholding the *sharī'a*. Islamic law and stable government are inextricably linked.

One such work of al-Ghazālī in Persian attacks those Sufis who dispense with the Law; it is called the *Ḥamāqat-i ahl-i Ibāḥiyya* (*The folly of the Ibāḥiyya*). For Sufis the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* are believed to contain a *bāṭin*, a secret spiritual meaning. Some Sufis felt that following the *bāṭin* allowed them to dispense with observance of the precepts of the *sharī'a*. Within the spectrum of Sufism, there were those like al-Ghazālī who still upheld the importance of following the *sharī'a* and who attacked all those who accepted any sort of antinomianism (*ibāḥa*). Al-Ghazālī vehemently attacks this lawless group:

As for these free-thinkers (*Ibāḥatiyyūn*) and these useless wearers of tall hats (*mutawaqqan*),³⁶ who have appeared nowadays ... who have got hold of a few fraudulent phrases from the incoherent speech of the Sufis... they deserve to be put to death. They are utterly devilish people and enemies of God and the Messenger.³⁷

Given the earthly and escatalogical dangers of straying from the "straight path" it is clear that al-Ghazālī sees the need to write about the importance of "true Sufism", that which is

conducted within the framework of the *sharī'a*. It should be noted that just because al-Ghazālī spoke a great deal about Sufism, this does not mean that he ceased to be a jurist. As late as 1109 he wrote an impressive work, a masterpiece of jurisprudence, the *Kitāb al-muṣṭasfā*.³⁸

Al-Ghazālī explicitly states that he wishes the *Kīmīyā* to have wide circulation and to be understood with ease:

We shall withhold our pen from lengthy, obscure expressions and subtle, difficult meanings, so that it (the book) may be understood ... This aim of this book is people at large (*'awamm-i khalq*) who have asked for this subject (to be explained to them) in Persian, and beyond the limit of whose understanding the discussion will not pass.³⁹

It would be naïve to assume that al-Ghazālī really does mean the “common people” in this context. It is much more likely that he is referring here to the Persian-speaking urban elites in Khurasan, as well as their Turkish overlords who were more likely to know Persian rather than Arabic. And of course the *Kīmīyā* is also directed to his disciples. The style of the *Kīmīyā* is typical of the Persian prose produced in Khurasan in the fifth/eleventh century and the early sixth/twelfth century. It is beautiful, pellucid language.⁴⁰

Concluding remarks

Mysticism in Islam – for that is what Sufism is – existed from the earliest period. At times it encountered difficulties, hostility and persecution. Certain figures within Sufism were perceived to have gone too far in their ecstatic utterances and were condemned, such as al-Hallāj, who was executed in 922, accused of claiming that he was God. However, many of the greatest Muslim thinkers were indeed followers or admirers of Sufism. Above all, it was the Sufis who served as the major emotional focus for ordinary people, those unable to understand the legal and theological intricacies of religious debates.

According to al-Ghazālī, Sufism should be seen not as an alternative to, but as a complement to, or completion of, Islamic worship. In the opinion of al-Ghazālī – a man who was an absolute master of the written word in both Arabic and Persian – Sufis are not pedlars of words; they have experienced mystical states which are beyond words. And al-Ghazālī's practice of holding his tongue about the details of Sufi closeness to God is not surprising. It is integral to the entire Sufi tradition, and also fits in with the millennial practice of Christian mystics.

Sufism is more a way of life than a school of thought. Sufis emphasised the importance of asceticism, sincere piety, self-purification, genuine love of God. They believed that every single person was capable of some direct experience of God. Everything the Sufis do is learnt from the light of the niche of prophethood. It is only from that niche that enlightenment can be found on the face of this earth.

Al-Ghazālī was, above all, a Sunni Muslim through and through. He regards the religio-legal role of the Sunni caliphate in the lands of Islam as an absolute necessity, seeing it as a sure foundation for the stability and health of the whole community. He cannot, he will not, contemplate the idea of there being no Sunni caliph – that way lies disaster. Although he is a great supporter of mysticism – remember his early exposure to its doctrines – Sufi practice must, in his view, remain within the safe framework of Sunni Islam. It cannot replace Islamic law, the *sharī'a*. It can only complement and perfect it.

To what extent can it be said that al-Ghazālī himself was a practising Sufi? Al-Ghazālī has certainly had a few opponents in the academic world. A relatively recent attack on him

was made by Julian Baldick in his book, *Mystical Islam*, published in 1989. He writes that al-Ghazālī “has received a vast amount of attention in the West, which he hardly deserves since his work has neither the spirituality nor the philosophical rigour with which it has been credited”.⁴¹

However, while there may be some doubt as to whether al-Ghazālī himself actually experienced the mystical dimensions of Sufism which he describes so eloquently in the *Ihyāʾ*, the *Munqidh*, the *Kīmīyā* and other lesser-known works of his, it is abundantly clear that he thought that the Sufi path was the right one for Muslims to follow, provided, as already mentioned, that it was situated within the bounds of Islamic law (the *sharīʿa*). In particular, while his spiritual “autobiography” has a definite didactic purpose, its tone is eloquent, persuasive and moving. As Knysh shrewdly writes:

In al-Ghazālī’s view, together with a meticulous observance of the ordinary rules and routines of Muslim piety, Sufi moral and spiritual discipline is essential in leading the believer to religious truth, intellectual serenity and, eventually, to salvation.⁴²

According to al-Ghazālī, all Muslims, in short, should observe the outward signs of the faith. Yet al-Ghazālī is well aware that this is not sufficient without the direct, ecstatic contemplation of God in the divinely illuminated heart – the inner fire of Sufism. Al-Ghazālī believes that faith has its outward and inner aspects, both of which are necessary and interdependent to achieve balance; he calls the inner aspects “the activities of hearts”. Faith based on inner certainty, attained through “unveiling”, is better than faith based on tradition and reason. So, like al-Makkī and other scholars before him, al-Ghazālī examines the five pillars of Islam and tries to invest them with inner significance.

A major milestone in the history of Sufism came with the career of al-Ghazālī, who is probably the most famous scholar in classical Islam. Even today, he is much respected not only in the Arab world and in his homeland of Iran, but also in the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia and Indonesia. His engagement with Sufism is significant not because his ideas are especially new – for they are not – but because he is able to present them in a systematic, structured and eloquent way. For al-Ghazālī, the Sufi path towards true knowledge should not imply a divorce from the *sharīʿa*, the well-trodden path of the revealed law of Islam. Indeed, a scrupulous observance of outward religious practices is a necessary part of inner piety. He underlines this point in his long masterpiece, the *Ihyāʾ*, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, where he explains that Sufism is not an alternative to formal Islam, but a completion of it. The *Revivification* is directed not just at the majority of Muslims; it is also addressed to certain groups of Sufis, who had dared to express the opinion that Islamic law could be ignored. Al-Ghazālī’s passionately positive advocacy for the Sufi way formed the culmination of the work of his predecessors al-Muḥāsibī and al-Makkī, and he helped to integrate a moderate form of Sufism into Islam.

In retrospect, much of his importance seems to lie in the fact that his Sufism was embedded in the *sharīʿa*, the wide path for all Muslims to follow, rather than in the *tariqa*, the narrow and often controversial path trodden by Sufi adepts. So his teaching is fully integrated into the life of the Muslim community. It does not require prodigies of self-denial, but it does require living in the presence of God, and it shows very pragmatically how that can be done. So his teaching not only challenges the believer but also provides abundant hope.

Nearly all the attention devoted to al-Ghazālī in Western scholarship has been paid, not surprisingly perhaps, to his numerous works in Arabic. These do, indeed, form the overwhelming majority of al-Ghazālī’s oeuvre. It is important, however, to note that al-Ghazālī

was a Persian who also composed works in his native tongue and these have been largely neglected by all but a few scholars – although all seem to accept *en passant* that al-Ghazālī did write in Persian too. A symptom of this neglect is that for a long time now a body of scholars have alleged that the *Kīmīyā* is merely a Persian summary of the *Iḥyāʾ*. Thanks to frequent repetition, this assertion has become deeply entrenched, so much so that the *Kīmīyā* is rarely, or more often, never, consulted by those who are specialists on al-Ghazālī and who on the whole until recently have not even bothered to learn Persian. It is high time for this situation to be recognised so that al-Ghazālī's work and his spiritual evolution can be assessed in their full context.

For al-Ghazālī Sufism is the path of choice towards true knowledge, gnosis (*maʿrīfa*). In one of his surviving letters he writes: “Gnosis or *maʿrīfa* is a knowledge given in ecstasy to saints who behold God with their hearts”.⁴³ He does not believe that the truth lies either with theology or with philosophy, let alone with the charismatic authoritarianism of the new Shiʿite missionary teaching of Ḥasān-i Ṣabbāḥ, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī in Alamut. Al-Ghazālī is also irrevocably opposed to extreme forms of Sufism, such as those antinomian tendencies which dispense with adherence to God's Revealed Law, the *sharʿa*. For al-Ghazālī, the Sufi path towards true knowledge should not imply a divorce from that well-trodden path. Indeed, it is worth repeating that in his view, scrupulous observance of outward religious practices is a prerequisite of inner piety.

Al-Ghazālī examines the five pillars of Islam and tries to invest them with inner significance. It is the “heart”, that elusive entity, which equips man for knowledge of God. Like others who attempted to theorise Sufi doctrine, al-Ghazālī feels that the heart is the entity which allows the human being to progress along the path of spiritual exercises which leads to greater proximity to God. For al-Ghazālī Sufism should not be an alternative to the usual formal rituals of Islam but a completion of them. He is passionate about Sufism – that is clear enough – but he is equally passionate about the law and its abiding importance. And so, in the last decade of his life the two most formative influences in his early years came together and found expression in his native tongue. The *Kīmīyā* is a lasting monument to Sufism, to the law, and its author's commitment to the public good. And for that reason al-Ghazālī's moral stature has remained undimmed across the centuries.

Notes

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- 3 Ibid., p. 35.
- 4 Ibid., p. 97.
- 5 Ibid., p. 39.
- 6 Ibid., p. 36.
- 7 McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment*, pp. 93–94.
- 8 Ibid., p. 94.
- 9 ʿAbd al-Ghāfir al-Fārīsī, in McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment*, p. xvi.
- 10 Ibid., pp. xvii–xviii.
- 11 Al-Subkī, *Tabaqat al-Shafiʿiyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Fattah Muḥamad Hilw and Muḥammad al-Tanahi, vol. 6 (Cairo: n.p., 1967), pp. 210–211; McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment*, p. xiv.
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