

Architects of Civilisation

1. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali – Joining Mind and Heart

The great Islamic thinker AL-GHAZALI died almost nine hundred years ago, yet his teachings continue to provide a model for contemporary humanity. His life and thought still pose a challenge for us: How to integrate scientific and rational activity with inner experiencing of truth in a balanced and harmonious way. – *from the keyboard of Ghurayb*

In the year 478 of the Hijri calendar (1085 CE) the lawyer-theologian Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (b. 1058—d. 1111) left his hometown of Tus in Khurasan (N.E. Iran) to enjoy the patronage of the powerful Persian statesman Nizam al-Mulk at the Saljuq court in Isfahan. Thereby the rising star of one of the great classical Muslim thinkers renowned as *Hujjat al-Islam* ‘The Proof of Islam’ became linked to the service of the powerful Saljuq Sultans. Ghazali remained committed to Ash‘ari theological teachings (*kalam*) and to Shafi‘i principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) throughout his life, making this form of Sunni orthodoxy the doctrinal basis for his intellectual and religious thought.

Abu Hamid recalled an event in his early travels for religious knowledge that taught him a fundamental lesson. Crossing the high peaks with his donkey laden with study notes, his caravan was robbed by brigands. Abu Hamid pleaded with the robber chief to leave him the writings containing all his knowledge he had painstakingly gathered over years. Mockingly the brigand chief instructed him: “*Knowledge lies not on the back of a donkey; knowledge resides in the heart of man!*” The search for ‘certainty’ in the heart became the hallmark of his life work, leading Ghazali along the well traveled byways of legal methodology into the steep paths of rational theological and philosophical systems — and beyond onto the narrow peaks of trans-rational experience (*kashf*).

In 1091 the Vizier Nizam al-Mulk appointed Ghazali as chief professor of the Shafi‘i legal school at the central college of the ‘Abbasid empire, Madrasah Nizamiyyah in Baghdad, where he taught for over four years. Ghazali was present at the accession ceremony in 1094 of the ‘Abbasid Caliph AL-MUSTAZHIR BI-LLAH (reigned 1094–1118). As a leading intellectual at both the caliphal and vizieral courts, his close association with the Caliph, Sultans and viziers allowed him to appreciate the corruption and immorality of power.

Abu Hamid's own political ideas matured from such experience and observation.

He formulated a pragmatic position defending the necessity of legitimate religious authority (the Caliph) and of autocratic central power (the Sultan) as a bulwark against disorder, while insisting on the duty of educating and reforming the power-possessors by the light of ethical and spiritual ideals. The Caliph and the Sultan both had to co-operate to ensure social peace and harmony in Muslim realms; and any revolt was illegitimate – even against an oppressive and evil ruler. In his letters to leading office holders, as well as his political manual *Nasihah al-Muluk / Advice to Kings*, Ghazali sought to moderate the brutal excesses and injustices common during his era.

In his remarkable autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal / Deliverance From Error*, Abu Hamid describes his painfully sincere search for true knowledge, leading him through a crisis of radical doubt of the truth of sense perception, into a deep study of his contemporary scientific-philosophical systems, and finally to the spiritual discipline of experiential unveiling. Ghazali was strongly attracted to the logical and psychological teachings of *Falsafah* in explaining rationally such aspects of religious practice as the validity of prophecy and mystic experience, and the nature of sacred Love. But he attacked three major doctrines that contradicted essential religious beliefs in his famous work *Tahafut al-Falasifah / Collapse of the Philosophers*.

He condemned their doctrines of the eternity of the world (first taught by Aristotle), and the impossibility of God having knowledge of particular things and events (taught by Ibn Sina), as well as their denial of the physical resurrection of the body in favor of a spiritual resurrection (a view held by certain Sufis as well). Ghazali held these doctrines lead many people “to refuse the details of religions and creeds and to believe that they are human constructed laws and artifices” (in *Tahafut*). He argued cogently that the philosophers cannot demonstrate God's creation of the world, nor the spiritual substance of the human soul.

In his work on ethical philosophy *Mizan al-'Amal / The Balance-Scale of Action*, he boldly outlined the three levels of belief a teacher of truth should embrace: 1) the level of belief of the generality of people, who cannot comprehend higher rational or spiritual teachings and embrace only outward formal doctrine; 2) the level the teacher shares with a select circle of pupils who have acquired the preparation to grasp higher teachings; and 3) what he privately holds within himself as true, to be withheld from those incapable of understanding and for whom such knowledge might be harmful. Otherwise

rather than being beneficial, knowledge might become destructive and impair spiritual aspiration.

In 1095, at the peak of discharging the teaching duties of his office, Ghazali experienced a profound inner spiritual crisis marked outwardly by an inability to speak that forced him to abandon his eminent public position, turning to the Sufi upbringing of his youthful years. Abu Hamid left Baghdad spending almost three years in Palestine and Syria as a wandering Sufi dervish or 'seeker of truth' practicing intensive self-work. It is clear that Ghazali was driven by the inner logic of his own intellectual and spiritual search for 'certain truth' / *yaqin* to dedicate his remaining life to the Sufi path pursuing 'experiential knowledge' of GOD and nature and Self.

The practices cultivated among Sufis enable humans to purify their physical and psychic functions until their perceptive and knowing faculties attain such clarity and intensity that reality may be directly grasped – the state of *kashf* / 'unveiling' of truth utterly transforming one's being. It was this hunger for inner certainty and cognition of real truth that propelled Ghazali onto the path of the Heart.

In Ghazali's masterpiece *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din / Reawakening the Religious Sciences* he aimed to integrate Islamic Law, Tradition and Ethics with mystic psychology and a deep metaphysics. While the *Ihya'* is limited to the sciences of religious praxis (*mu'amalah*), it also provides glimpses of disciplined experiential awareness (*mukashafah*), especially in its second half treating the spiritual virtues. During the years of withdrawal from public office until his death, Ghazali produced significant works intended to renew the relevance and application of Islamic religious thought by means of a mature synthesis of traditional religious disciplines, the rational sciences, and a creative spiritual metaphysic grounded in 'inner interpretation' (*ta'wil*).

Abu Hamid's profound contribution to the unfolding of Islamic thought in a number of intellectual and religious disciplines shaped the growing synthesis between rationality and spiritual experience which became typical of mature Islamic teachings. By joining the mind with the heart Ghazali's writings have guided generations of Muslims in their worldly affairs, personal devotions and their intellectual and spiritual efforts. His teachings continue to pose an important challenge for humans today:

How to integrate scientific activity and rational thought with meaningful inner experience in a balanced harmonious way.

