

Knowledge of the Heart: Heart of Political Order  
al-Ghazālī on Mysticism and Politics

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Luke Yarbrough

*For my Dad,  
who shows me that faith drives faithfulness,  
and that hard work  
is sublime.*

## A Note on Transliteration

The only non-Western language transliterated in this paper will be Arabic, according to the following system, constrained by the fonts available to the author:

initial a = ا	medial a = ا	ā = آ	b = ب	d = د
ḍ/Ḍ = ض	dh = ذ	f = ف	gh = غ	h = هـ
ḥ = ح	initial i/I = ا	medial i = ا	ī/y = ي	j = ج
k = ك	kh = خ	l = ل	m = م	n = ن
q = ق	r = ر	s = س	ṣ = ص	sh = ش
t = ت	ṭ/Ṭ = ط	th = ث	u = و	ū/w = و
z = ز	ẓ = ظ	ʿ = ع	ʾ = ء	

- Doubled letters indicate a *shadda* ( ّ ).

- The *tā marbūta* ( ة ) is denoted by a final 'a.'

- When a single Arabic letter with a multi-letter transliteration occurs within a word, it will be underlined to distinguish it from two consecutive letters with a *sukūn* ( ْ ) on the first (ex. kh = خ, not كه).

- Certain Arabic words in common English usage (eg. Muhammad, Sufi, Islam) will not take transliteration.

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This author had the benefit of support from a number of individuals while writing his paper, to the degree that an observer might have mistaken the enterprise for a communal rather than an individual obligation (the *farḍ kifāya/farḍ ‘ayn* distinction is helpful here). Early last fall, my adviser Paul Heck dropped the offhand suggestion that I ought to look up a fellow named al-Ghazālī – for this introduction alone I am deeply grateful. Since that time Professor Heck has been careful, honest, and challenging in commenting on my work as it developed, and successful in resisting what must have been an awful temptation to straighten out my early ideas by force. He was also generous with his limited time at Princeton and forthright in suggesting some new sources and printing others. For these aids I am thankful.

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## Introduction

Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Muhammad Abū Ḥāmid al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī (d. 505 H./1111 A.D.) is among the most significant intellectual figures in Islamic history. Al-Ghazālī was a prolific writer and an insightful, complex thinker whose ideas defy facile synopsis. Though a jurist by training, he also wrote on philosophy, political theory, theology, logic, and Sufi mysticism. Al-Ghazālī's breadth of inquiry requires a correspondingly agile approach of any historian who would, as it were, peer over the shoulder of the original reader, observing al-Ghazālī's ideas in their native historical setting.

In this paper I will examine the relationship between two regions of al-Ghazālī's thought: religious epistemology and political theory. I will argue that al-Ghazālī's conception of religious certainty was the grounding principle of his vision for the Islamic polity. Al-Ghazālī promoted mystical experience as the ultimate foundation of religious knowledge for an Islamic elite. He evaluated political order based on the degree to which it enabled religious leaders to live out a mystical epistemic ideal in the public domain.

Past studies in al-Ghazālī have tended to detach religious-philosophical components of his thought from their corollaries in the historical-political domain, such as his political theory and the political reality of his day. Scholars like Henri Laoust, Carole Hillenbrand, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Leonard Binder have provided excellent interpretations of al-Ghazālī's political thought. Others, like Margaret Smith, Farid Jabre, W. Montgomery Watt, and R.M. Frank, have

developed his more abstract religious and philosophical views for a Western audience. Fewer scholars have charted the territory between the intellectual and political realms in al-Ghazālī's writings. Among them are George Makdisi, Farouk Mitha, and Mustapha Hogga. Without demeaning their work, I believe that there remains a need to situate al-Ghazālī's *mystical* thinking in relation to his political theory and political setting. This paper will attempt to meet that need.

I will first introduce al-Ghazālī as both thinker and historical figure. His story is best told amid the historical forces that shaped it—these were the forces with which he was in dialogue as a prominent intellectual. Among them were the community of religious leaders (*ʿulamāʾ*), the Sufi tradition, and the political power: the Seljuq Turks.

Next, I will frame al-Ghazālī's political theory within its historical context. In formulating his theory, he attempted to redeem the failings of the present political order in light of his religious commitments. In the *Kitāb al-Mustaẓhirī*, al-Ghazālī placed his political theory side-by-side with his polemic against the politico-doctrinal Ismaʿīlī threat. In choosing to aim his attack at the epistemic roots of his Ismaʿīlī opponents, he demonstrated that religious knowledge was closely tied to his notion of political order by way of Islamic law, the *sharīʿa*.

Al-Ghazālī articulated his theory of knowledge in several texts, most notably in the first book of his monumental *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*: the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* or "Book of Knowledge." Maintenance of political order was grounded in

knowledge of the law. Knowledge of the law was grounded in the broader corpus of religious knowledge, religious knowledge was grounded in religious certainty, and religious certainty was ultimately grounded in mystical experience. By transitive extension, mystical experience was the germ of political order. In consequence, al-Ghazālī's criticism of the *ʿulamāʾ*<sup>1</sup> for their worldly use of religious knowledge was also an indictment of the political order that they sustained as dispensers of law. To complete the cycle, however, mystical experience was grounded in obedience to the dictates of the *sharīʿa*, the same law guarded by political power.<sup>1</sup> For Sufi mystics, obeying the law was a key part of ascetic self-purification. In observing the law, they experienced the deeper significance of Muhammad's earthly acts in a corporeal exegesis regulated by revealed text.

Historians have often hailed (or dismissed) al-Ghazālī as a prodigious synthesizer. And so he was. Al-Ghazālī recognized that his multifarious religious ideas mixed freely with his thoughts about earthly events past and present. Awash in this cognitional flood, he craved solid certainty regarding propositions of eternal consequence. His craving often went unfulfilled. As a result, his approach to historical reality constituted a frank admission of human limitations in assimilating and understanding observable phenomena. In embracing Sufi mysticism, al-Ghazālī sought direct contact with the Source of certainty, with

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<sup>1</sup> For a visual synopsis of this relationship between mystical experience and political order in the thought of al-Ghazālī, see Appendix 1.

Truth itself: *al-Ḥaqq*. Yet Sufism was not his retreat or final solace. Lit with the certainty granted him by mystical experience, he set out to illuminate the ideational world around him. His concept of religious knowledge, grounded in mystical experience, conditioned his treatment of spiritual and physical realities alike. Al-Ghazālī was not a historian in the strict sense. He treated historical and religious knowledge as seamlessly interwoven, and struggled to situate external events within the framework of his Islamic belief system. For this reason, his approach is eminently apropos in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, among resurgent “fundamentalisms” of every description. I shall try to understand al-Ghazālī’s historical vantage point in this paper, by description, interpretation, and emulation.

## One

### **Al-Ghazālī Among Sufis and Seljuqs**

This chapter will follow the course of al-Ghazālī’s life, identifying the major forces that shaped it. As a keen observer of his surroundings, he was not only swayed by these factors but also reacted to them in his writings. I will first place al-Ghazālī in his proper geopolitical setting under the Seljuq Turks. The

Seljuq control apparatus was heavily engaged with the Islamic religious establishment via law and education, especially vis-à-vis the activities of the Seljuq vizier Nizām al-Mulk. I will look at al-Ghazālī's intellectual upbringing in light of these liaisons between knowledge and political power. In 488/1095, after he had attained the height of renown in the state-sponsored academy, al-Ghazālī suffered his well-known epistemic crisis.<sup>2</sup> He subsequently found peace in following the Sufi way, a tradition to which he had been exposed, but never so fully embraced. This Way of mystical experience would furnish the foundation of his thought during his most intellectually fertile years. Sufism was familiar and well established in Sunni Islam by al-Ghazālī's day, and increasingly formed the primary religious identity of its adherents.

Al-Ghazālī's birthplace—the city of Ṭūs in Khurāsān—lay in the historical heartland of Sufism, where “the shadow of God's favor rested,” according to the Sufi master Hudjwiri (d. c. 469/1077).<sup>3</sup> Khurāsān—now far northeastern Iran—was historically Persian and Sasanian. Al-Ghazālī's father died when his two sons were still young.<sup>4</sup> He left the boys with a Sufi friend and provided money sufficient for their early education. When this inheritance had been exhausted,

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<sup>2</sup> This crisis may have been composed of two or more episodes. I will treat it here as a single event, because of its overall consistent nature and the difficulty of identifying its components with certainty.

<sup>3</sup> Zwemer, Samuel. *A Moslem Seeker After God*. New York: Fleming H. Revel Company, 1920, p. 62. Abū Saʿīd Ibn Abī al-Khayr supposedly said that God had two armies, the one in heaven and one on earth which is “the Sufis who will conquer the whole of Khurāsān.” Ebn-e Monavvar, Mohammad. *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness*. English trans. John O'Kane. Costa Mesa, CA; New York: Mazda Publishers, 1992, p. 383.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ghazālī's younger brother Ahmed made his mark as a prominent Sufi.

the boys were committed to a traditional *madrassa*, a school where students were drilled in the revealed texts of Islam: the Qurʾān and the vast corpus of *hadīth*.<sup>5</sup>

Less than five years earlier, the Seljuq armies had swept through Khurāsān on their ride from the Central Asian steppes to the Islamic heartland. Al-Ghazālī's youth coincided with the Seljuq consolidation of power in all corners of their new empire. This militarization of society was marked by incessant campaigns, omnipresence of troops, replacement of civilian with military administrative personnel, and widespread establishment of garrisons. Barbaric tribal soldiers were a highly visible presence during al-Ghazālī's childhood in settled Khurāsān.<sup>6</sup> He could not have failed to be aware of their activities—and of the government they maintained—well before his official attachment to the Seljuq political establishment in 478/1085.

### I. Seljuq Ascendancy in the Central Lands of Islam

The Seljuqs were a branch of the Turkic Oghuz tribe that had ruled a Central Asian empire in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. In the early years of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, Seljuq tribal princes consolidated power in Persia. The character of Seljuq rule in the following decades would reflect Persian links forged during this period—the Seljuqs often endorsed Persian culture and language, even to the exclusion of their own Turkic roots and the Arab heritage so integral to the

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<sup>5</sup> Zwemer p. 65. The *hadīth* were the sayings of Muhammad, his Companions, and other important figures in the early Islamic community.

<sup>6</sup> Hogga, Mustapha. *Orthodoxie, Subversion et Réforme en Islam*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1993, p. 37.

Islamic faith.<sup>7</sup> In 447/1055, the Seljuq leader Tughril Beg replaced the last Shīʿī Būyid prince as military sovereign in Baghdad. As a Sunni partisan, at least in name, he was fêted with honorary titles by the ʿAbbāsīd caliph. Thus, in the official propaganda, the illiterate Seljuq warlords had become heroes by freeing Sunni Islam from the clutches of its Shīʿī opponent.<sup>8</sup>

Makdisi has argued that, contrary to the standard portrayal, Tughril Beg was no savior. In fact, the caliph did not need saving. Makdisi points out that the Shīʿī Būyid dynasty was fast disintegrating and harbored no animosity toward the caliphate. After all, the Būyids had refrained from molesting the caliph during their tenure in Baghdad (since 343/945).<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Tughril Beg was more than a cynical tribal warlord tolerating the caliph in order to legitimize his conquest. The Sunni Seljuq tribal warriors that he commanded were better equipped than apathetic Būyid princes—in military and ideological terms—to defend the caliph against external threats, especially the Fatimid-backed Ismaʿīlī insurgents. In actuality, the Caliph al-Qāʾim chafed under the Seljuq warlords. They allowed him even less freedom than had the feuding Būyids.<sup>10</sup> The Seljuqs officially recognized the primacy of the ʿAbbāsīd caliph, although they were firm

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bosworth, C.E. “Sāldjukids” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 8. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden: Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 938. The caliph was al-Qāʾim (d. 467/1075).

<sup>9</sup> Makdisi, George. “Les rapports entre Calife et Sultân a l’ poque Salj qide” in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 6 (1975), p. 233.

<sup>10</sup> Hogga p. 34.

in retaining coercive force for themselves.<sup>11</sup> Despite its shortcomings, the Seljuq arrival in Baghdad created a theoretical opportunity for the caliph to resume his historical role as the head of the Islamic community. In fact, this reinstatement did not occur, forcing theorists like al-Ghazālī to reckon with an imperfect reality.

The Seljuq offensive did not flag after the conquest of Baghdad. Tughril Beg marched on Mosul in the next year, laying siege to Tikrīt along the way. The caliph was a convenient legitimizing accessory to these campaigns, receiving protection in exchange for his blessing.<sup>12</sup> The Seljuqs maintained a strong military force to execute their ongoing operations. Unlike other Islamic powers, Seljuq leaders commanded fellow tribesmen.<sup>13</sup> While this uniformity lent vertical cohesion to the Seljuq command, tribal traditions, especially those of succession, sometimes troubled the Seljuq state. In the Oghuz tribal heritage, an office did not pass from father to eldest son, but instead to the oldest male family member. The tension between this arrangement and the hereditary model prevalent in Sunni regions contributed to several upheavals that disrupted al-Ghazālī's life,

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<sup>11</sup> By "coercive force" or "coercive power" I mean that component of political power that restrains unruly elements in society by armed compulsion. Coercive force is chiefly the province of the military and civil magistrates. By using "coercive force" rather than "political power" or another, broader term, I mean to identify that special element of political order that the Seljuqs monopolized during their period of rule. While they may have had to seek elsewhere for administrative acumen and legitimacy, coercive force was the proper domain of the Turkic tribesmen themselves.

<sup>12</sup> Hogga p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Bosworth "Sadjukids" p. 954. The Seljuq army eventually took on a more eclectic character that resembled other military forces of the day. By al-Ghazālī's heyday under Malikshāh, "its nucleus was the force of slave *ghulām* and freedmen troops, a large proportion of whom, though not all, were Turks. Supplementing this were the free troops, and here, as with the slave core for an army, the Saldjuks were following in the steps of other Middle Eastern imperial powers...by recruiting from a wide array of races."

notably in the years preceding his great crisis. These internecine conflicts disabused him of his intimacy with political power and deeply affected his thinking.

The Seljuq army was active not only in border regions, but also in territories already under firm Seljuq control. The court of the Seljuq rulers was primarily a military headquarters, though frequented by bureaucrats and *ʿulamāʾ*.<sup>14</sup> From his court, the sultan dispatched expeditions against enemies like the Ghaznavids in Persia, Byzantine Christians beyond *Adharbayjān*,<sup>15</sup> and internal rebels. He also deployed troops within Seljuq territory in order to demonstrate his power. Niẓām al-Mulk, vizier to Tughril Beg's successors, also favored this strategy of intimidation and preemptive suppression,<sup>16</sup> which was especially effective in al-Ghazālī's homeland, the Seljuq East.<sup>17</sup>

Hogga has laid heavy emphasis on this facet of Seljuq rule, arguing that a state of permanent war pervaded civil society.<sup>18</sup> New garrisons were installed in the towns, and military replaced civilian police. In many cases, the soldiers that composed these detachments were Turkic tribesmen, an unfamiliar element in the urban social fabric. Their presence was not always welcome. The 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lambton, Ann K.S. "The Internal Structure of the Saljuq Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Islam*. v. 5. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 224.

<sup>15</sup> Cahen, Claude. "Alp Arslan" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 1. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden : Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 420.

<sup>16</sup> Bowen, H. "Niẓām al-Mulk" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 8. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden: Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Bosworth, C.E. "Malik-Shāh" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 6. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden : Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 274. Here it was used to cow potential threats like the Karakhānids and Ghaznavids.

<sup>18</sup> Hogga p. 37-38.

century Arab historian Ibn al-Athīr relates that when Tughril Beg entered Baghdad, local mobs rose against his soldiers and inflicted casualties. The Seljuq troops responded by looting in the city. “The people were sorely oppressed and in great terror.”<sup>19</sup> Citizens throughout Seljuq domains experienced similar traumatic events whenever tensions rose with their occupiers.

As they continued their conquests, the Seljuq sultans needed sustainable mechanisms for controlling their far-flung holdings. Administration lay not in the hands of the tribal leaders themselves, but with the *‘ulamā’* and the existing educated Persian administrative class.<sup>20</sup> The great Seljuq viziers were eminent representatives of this class. They were often the real rulers of the Seljuq empire, even while paying lip service to the sultan and caliph. Nizām al-Mulk was only the most prominent of these men; he was not unique. His predecessor, the vizier of Tughril Beg, Amīd al-Mulk al-Kundūrī, gained fame and influence alongside his master.<sup>21</sup> Before al-Ghazālī’s day, the Ḥanafī al-Kundūrī decreed that Ash‘arī theologians be denounced from the pulpits of mosques in Seljuq lands. His decree drove al-Ghazālī’s famous teacher al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) from Khurasān, as well as al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), perhaps al-Ghazālī’s most direct Sufi forbear.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, ‘Izz al-Dīn. *al-Kāmil fī Ta’rīkh*. English trans. D.S. Richards, *The Annals of the Saljuq Turks*. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Lambton, “The Internal Structure of the Saljuq Empire” p. 203.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 57.

When Alp Arslan succeeded Tughril Beg in 455/1063 the vizierate passed to Niẓām al-Mulk, who had risen to prominence with Arslan. As Niẓām al-Mulk consolidated his administration, it grew unclear which of the two was actually master. After the assassination of Alp Arslan in 465/1072 and the accession of Malikshāh, there was no doubt that Niẓām al-Mulk held the reins of control. The story of Alp Arslan and Niẓām al-Mulk closely parallels the life of al-Ghazālī. Niẓām al-Mulk, like al-Ghazālī, hailed from the city of Ṭūs in Khurāsān; this commonality may have played a role in al-Ghazālī's appointment to the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya.<sup>22</sup> Alp Arslan had governed Khurāsān before his ascent to the Seljuq sultanate in 1063/453. Niẓām al-Mulk used his position to promote the religious factions that al-Ghazālī would later adhere to: Shafī'ī *fiqh* and Ash'arī *kalām*, both prominent in the Khurāsānī context. He also favored Sufism, of which Khurāsān was a hotbed.<sup>23</sup> These correlations hint at partisanship. They also demonstrate that religious allegiances penetrated the political domain in medieval Islam via the regional sectarian affiliations of political leaders. When Niẓām al-Mulk brought al-Ghazālī to prominence, he was privileging the young scholar's doctrinal convictions. These convictions could then be called upon to shore up

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<sup>22</sup> The Niẓāmiyyas were educational institutions founded and funded by the Seljuq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk. They taught primarily *fiqh* and *kalām*, but also subjects like medicine and *uṣūl al-dīn*. They were organized along the Islamic factional divides, and the students they trained supplied the Seljuq empire with what Hogga has called a "state orthodoxy" that could be mobilized against external doctrinal and political threats, like the Isma'īlīs that al-Ghazālī opposed in *al-Mustazhiri*.

<sup>23</sup> Bausani, A. "Religion in the Seljuq Period," in *The Cambridge History of Islam*. v. 5. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. p. 283. It is also quite possible that these movements had flourished in Khurāsān precisely because Niẓām al-Mulk had promoted them there.

the legitimacy of Seljuq control. Regional affinity was only one path by which religious knowledge entered the political scene.<sup>24</sup> The proliferation of sectarian *madrasas* under the Seljuqs cannot be divorced from the influence of sponsors like Niẓām al-Mulk, who had strong regional attachments that entailed doctrinal convictions.

## II. Seljuq Power and Religious Knowledge

Although al-Ghazālī's education preceded the full flowering of the Niẓāmiyya schools, it was directly funded by Niẓām al-Mulk. When Niẓām al-Mulk succeeded al-Kundūrī, he rescinded al-Kundūrī's ban on Ash'arī theology and invited the renowned "Imām al-Ḥaramayn"<sup>25</sup> al-Juwaynī to return from the Ḥijāz, where he had fled to escape persecution. He even set up a school for al-Juwaynī in Nisābūr. Al-Ghazālī spent years studying under al-Juwaynī, and remained in Nisābūr until joining Niẓām al-Mulk's court in 478/1085.

Before al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī had taken instruction from other noted scholars, some of whom were Sufis. Sufism was heavy in the air at the time and place of al-Ghazālī's education.<sup>26</sup> At least one early teacher in the *madrasa*, Yusuf Nassāj, was a practicing mystic. Al-Ghazālī pursued higher study after the *madrasa*, focusing on the field of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) under the tutelage of Aḥmad al-Radhkānī. *Fiqh* was to become his area of greatest expertise. After his

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<sup>24</sup> Bulliet, Richard. *Islam: The View From the Edge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 150. On the other hand, it was quite common to appoint Iranian scholars like al-Ghazālī to *madrasas*, simply because this institution was native to the Iranian context

<sup>25</sup> "Imam of the Two Sanctuaries," Mecca and Medina.

<sup>26</sup> Zwemer p. 73.

introduction to Islamic law, al-Ghazālī left Ṭūs to study with al-Juwaynī in Nisābūr, then the capital city of Khurāsān.

At the Nisābūr school, al-Juwaynī taught *fiqh*, *kalām* (systematic theology), and *uṣūl al-dīn* (fundamentals of Islam). He associated with the great Sufi al-Qushayrī and had mystical leanings of his own. Al-Juwaynī was among the first to apply Ashʿarī *kalām* to the study of *fiqh*.<sup>27</sup> In the decades following, and in some measure because of al-Juwaynī’s work, Ashʿarī *kalām* was the favored theological system of both Shafīʿī and Malikī *fuqahāʾ* (legal scholars). The Ashʿarī approach to *kalām* was to treat it as “a rational metaphysics,” hardly distinguished from philosophy. “Science” and systematic logical processes played a prominent role in the grounding of religious knowledge. Specifically, they were assigned the role of independently demonstrating the veracity of core Muslim beliefs.<sup>28</sup> As we will see, al-Ghazālī later attacked this approach to knowledge. Thus, his stance relative to mainline Ashʿarī *kalām* was quite ambiguous, for he repudiated those elements of Ashʿarism that advocated logic outside certain limits, but did not leave the Ashʿarī fold altogether.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Ghazālī excelled under al-Juwaynī’s tutelage. His earliest biographer, ʿAbd al-Ghāfir, told of tension between the teacher and student on account of al-Ghazālī’s precocity and even arrogance. Though the Imām al-Ḥaramayn “made

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<sup>27</sup> Brockelman, C. “Al-Djuwaynī” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 2. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden : Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 605.

<sup>28</sup> Frank, R.M. *Al-Ghazālī and the ʿAsharite School*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

an outward show of pride” in al-Ghazālī, he harbored in his heart a “dislike for his speed in expression and his natural ability.”<sup>30</sup> Reports of bad blood notwithstanding, al-Ghazālī spent a number of years studying under al-Juwaynī and inherited many of his teachings, notably his Sufi inclinations,<sup>31</sup> Shafīʿī legal allegiances, and Ashʿarī theology. While in Nisābūr, he began to instruct younger students, to write, and to form independent legal opinions.<sup>32</sup>

In 478/1085, the year that al-Juwaynī died, al-Ghazālī left Nisābūr at the invitation of Nizām al-Mulk. Based on al-Ghazālī’s own testimony, it appears likely that ambition for personal renown was a primary impetus for this relocation. Al-Ghazālī was foremost among the many leading intellectuals that Nizām al-Mulk drew into his schools. As al-Ghazālī later lamented in the *Iḥyāʾ*, these scholars often cooperated eagerly in exchange for recognition and wealth.<sup>33</sup> Al-Ghazālī soon distinguished himself in the frequent lectures and debates on *fiqh* and *kalām* that were held at Nizām al-Mulk’s court. Nizām al-Mulk was so taken by al-Ghazālī’s intellectual acumen that in 484/1091 he appointed the young scholar to head the most prestigious educational establishment in Seljuq territory, the Nizāmiyya of Baghdad.

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<sup>30</sup>cAbd al-Ghāfir. “cAbd al-Ghāfir’s Life of Ghazālī.” English trans. Richard J. McCarthy in *Deliverance from Error*. Boston, 1980, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Zwemer p. 80.

<sup>32</sup>cAbd al-Ghāfir p. 14. ; cf. Crone, Patricia. *God’s Rule: Government and Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 237: “Al-Ghazālī accepted most of his teacher’s premises.”

<sup>33</sup>cAbd al-Ghāfir wrote of Nizām al-Mulk: “His Excellency was the stopping-place of the ulema and the goal of the imāms and the literary men.”

Nizām al-Mulk made the promotion of intellectual life a priority during his long vizierate (455/1063-485/1092). His eponymous Nizāmiyyas attracted prominent scholars in the fields of theology, law, philosophy, and medicine. These institutions have been romanticized as spontaneous outgrowths of a cultural and intellectual flowering around this time. In this view, they sprang up to meet a heightened demand for knowledge and education.<sup>34</sup> An alternative thesis, which takes greater account of political conditions and the vizier's likely priorities, views the Nizāmiyya schools, and especially the Nizāmiyya proper at Baghdad, as bastions of Sunni "orthodoxy." In this capacity, they were key strongholds in the struggle against the subversive Ismaʿīlī politico-religious threat.<sup>35</sup>

As the reigning religious scholar at the Nizāmiyya, al-Ghazālī was on the front lines of ideological resistance to such groups, whose religious teachings were as inimical to Sunni orthodoxy as their political agenda was to the stability of Seljuq rule.<sup>36</sup> Al-Ghazālī's appointment, far from freeing him to pursue a quiet life of teaching and contemplation, made him a key player in the battle for doctrinal and political supremacy in Seljuq lands. His state-sponsored authorship of works denouncing the Ismaʿīlīs, like *Fadāʾih al-Bāṭiniyya wa Faḍāʾil al-*

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<sup>34</sup> For example, see Smith, Margaret. *Al-Ghazālī, the mystic*. London: Luzac & Co. 1944, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Hogga, also Talas, Asad. *La madrasa nizamiyya et son histoire*. Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Guenther, 1939.

<sup>36</sup> Lambton "Al-Juwayni and al-Ghazali: The Sultanate" in *State and Government in Medieval Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 107-108.

*Mustaẓhiriyya* (*Kitāb al-Mustaẓhirī*), constitutes *prima facie* evidence that al-Ghazālī was an active participant in this battle.

Religiously motivated conflict was not confined to this struggle; factional strife was rampant even within Baghdad. Doctrinal affiliations had major significance in the political realm. In fact, from the perspective of Islamic theorists at the time, political theory was a subset of religious knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Political rivalries were inevitably communicated in the language of doctrinal distinction. Bloody conflicts over doctrinal points were frequent, even among small groups within cities. Ibn al-Athīr recounts one such outbreak in 475/1082-3, between Shafīʿī and Hanbalī *fuqahāʾ* in Baghdad. He relates how the Ashʿarī preacher Sharīf Abūʾl-Qāsim al-Bakrī al-Maghribī disparaged Hanbalīs from his well-salaried post at the Baghdad Nizāmiyya, to which Nizām al-Mulk had personally appointed him.

One day [Abuʾl-Qasim] went to the house of the chief Cadi Abu Abd Allah al-Damghani, on the Qallaʾin canal. An argument occurred between some of his followers and a group of Hanbalis which led to a riot, and the crowd that assembled was large. He broke into the houses of the Banuʾl-Farraʾ and took their books. One of the books was *The Book of Attributes* by Abu Yaʾla. Later, passages from it would be read in his presence, while he sat on his chair to deliver his homilies, and he would use it to attack them. He had many disputes and confrontations with them.<sup>38</sup>

The urban climate in Seljuq lands was marked by such factional tensions. The participants in these struggles were fervently attached to their doctrines—mutually exclusive dogmatism played the leading role in fueling animus

<sup>37</sup> Berkey, Jonathan. *The Formation of Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 127.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 207.

between groups, and religious affiliation was the leading component of personal identity.<sup>39</sup>

The same *‘ulamā’* who participated in these doctrinal squabbles were indispensable to the maintenance of Seljuq authority. In the absence of strong, indigenous local governments, they were the only visible leadership in many towns under Seljuq rule.<sup>40</sup> There had developed a “caste-like local domination by families of ulama.”<sup>41</sup> Their authority was based on their knowledge of the Qur<sup>’</sup>ān and the *sunna*, the model of the Prophet’s behavior as related in *hadīth*.<sup>42</sup> *Ḥadīth* were transmitted orally by respected *‘ulamā’*. Although important written collections of *ḥadīth* had been compiled long before,<sup>43</sup> oral transmission remained the accepted mode. This practice preserved for each *ḥadīth* the crucial seal of its veracity: the *isnād* (chain of transmission). During al-Ghazālī’s lifetime, the tradition of oral transmission was fading, but had not died altogether—there was still a strong sense that one ought to learn under a respected instructor rather than on one’s own from a book.

The *‘ulamā’* shaped the corpus of law for the community on the prescriptive basis of the Prophet’s life as documented in the *hadīth*. They

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<sup>39</sup> Bausani p. 284-285. Note especially the quote from an anonymous poet of Ray, “Truly man is distinguished only by religion, and piety (*taqwā*) cannot be abandoned on account of racial reasons.”

<sup>40</sup> “As in other regions and at other times of the pre-modern age, the cities and towns of the Saldjuk empire had no corporate or autonomous life of their own within the concept of divinely-dispensed authority in Islam.” Bosworth “Saldjukids” p. 955.

<sup>41</sup> Bulliet *Islam* p. 106.

<sup>42</sup> Berkey p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Most notably those of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj (d. 261/875).

interpreted the *sharīʿa* and decided legal questions using syllogistic logic, settling disagreements by formalized disputation. The *sharīʿa* applied to all aspects of Muslim life, from property transactions to personal hygiene. Its implementation as well as its formulation lay in the hands of the *ʿulamāʾ*, in their capacity as judges (*qāḍīs*) who settled disputes between parties. Under the Seljuqs, a parallel legal system operated alongside the *sharīʿa*. It consisted of the *mazālim* courts, which dispensed a sort of secular justice deputized by the sultan. In practice, the jurisdictions of Seljuq administrators and indigenous *ʿulamāʾ* overlapped considerably, requiring cooperation and sometimes resulting in conflict. Nevertheless, the core of the legal system remained *sharīʿa* law.<sup>44</sup> In his well-known treatise on government, the *Siyāsat-nāmā*, Nizām al-Mulk juxtaposed the pragmatic demands of rulership and the *sharīʿa*. “Since God... has given us His consummate grace and bestowed... the kingship of the world upon us and subdued all our enemies, henceforward nothing in our empire must exist or happen that is deficient or disordered or contrary to the religious law.”<sup>45</sup> In theory, all judges exercised their authority as deputies of the caliph, though in practice it was the sultan who was guarantor of the system of justice by force of arms. Attempting to integrate both parties, Nizām al-Mulk wrote that the “reputation and dignity [of judges] must be above reproach because they are the

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<sup>44</sup> Bosworth “Saldjukids” p. 954. “The mass of judges were local officials in the towns of the empire and thus served as a link between the central government and the local urban communities.”

<sup>45</sup> Nizām al-Mulk. *The book of government, or rules for kings*. English trans. Hubert Darke. London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 2.

lieutenants of the caliph and wear his badge. At the same time they are appointed by the king and are his agents." Yet even the king had to have "learnt the precepts of the *sharīʿa*" in order to hear and judge cases.<sup>46</sup> When the Khurasānī vizier referred to "kingship" and its prerogatives, he had Sāsānian kingship in mind. By promoting Iranian legal scholars steeped in the Sāsānian heritage, like al-Ghazālī, he was attempting to ensure that the leading *fuqahā*<sup>2</sup> would not oppose his secular legal system based on the sultanate, but would accept it in a limited parallel capacity.<sup>47</sup>

Judges were usually members of the religious establishment. The *ʿulamā*<sup>2</sup> were not a precisely demarcated class within society, but instead an amorphous category of individuals with varying degrees of legal-religious expertise. At the fringes of their membership, the *ʿulamā*<sup>2</sup> blended seamlessly with the social system over which they presided. However, there certainly existed a core cadre of recognizable, highly respected scholars like al-Ghazālī.

The ruling that a *qāḍī* gave in a particular case might vary depending upon which of the four schools (*madhāhib*) of Sunni law he adhered to. The tenets peculiar to each school were inherited in the same personal, linear fashion as the corpus of *hadīth*. The established channels by which religious knowledge was transmitted lent themselves to the formation of a continuous "genealogical"

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Actually, the Sāsānian plan for government was quite amenable to the incorporation of revealed law. See Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*. v. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 316. "The Sāsānian empire...represented a serious attempt to order all society in terms of religious insight." This heritage may have impelled Nizām al-Mulk's promotion of the religious establishment.

chaining of *‘ulamā’*.<sup>48</sup> Especially in Iran, the “genealogical” aspect of religious scholarship was quite literal—the sons of religious scholars were in the best position to receive the requisite training to become scholars for the next generation.

Nizām al-Mulk and his administrative corps were well aware of the established network of *‘ulamā’* that administered the law in Seljuq lands. The vizier needed to gain the services of that community, or at least ensure that it was favorably disposed to his goals for Seljuq-ruled society, namely the efficient exercise of his administration’s power. He courted the Sunni *‘ulamā’* by showing favor to prominent scholars within select religious factions. His reinstatement of Ash‘arīs like al-Juwaynī and al-Qushayri exemplified the way in which he selectively promoted *‘ulamā’*. Many of these Ash‘arīs, including al-Ghazālī, belonged to the Shafī‘ī *madhhab*. The Shafī‘ī/Ash‘arī combination, though by no means dominant across Seljuq territory, was especially active in Nizām al-Mulk’s native Khurāsān.

The main way in which Nizām al-Mulk carried the favor of the *‘ulamā’* was by establishing and funding educational institutions. These were the Nizāmiyyas, where notable legal scholars and theologians held well-endowed chairs. They attracted and supported the most promising students among the next generation of *‘ulamā’*, who would defend Sunni society against competing

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<sup>48</sup> Berkey 150.

politico-doctrinal options, especially the Ismaʿīlī *daʿwa*.<sup>49</sup> The *ʿulamāʾ* were best placed to combat the *daʿwa*, for the Ismaʿīlī *daʿīs* (“missionaries”) targeted individuals at the grassroots level, well beneath the reach of Seljuq armed force. Religious leaders intimately familiar with their communities were best equipped to obstruct the proselytizing of these secret agents.

The Nizāmiyya schools also constituted a convergence of interest between Nizām al-Mulk and the scholars he supported. In most cases, the schools were endowed in perpetuity by means of *awqāf* (sing. *waqf*).<sup>50</sup> The *awqāf* given to maintain the Nizāmiyyas did not come from the Seljuq state, but were taken from Nizām al-Mulk’s personal property. He and his descendants (many of whom were also officials under the Seljuqs) maintained personal influence over appointments to the Nizāmiyyas. Thus the leading religious scholars were directly, personally beholden to the Seljuq administration.

Yet the Nizāmiyya schools were not simply tools for cultivating support. Their curricular emphases reflected Nizam al-Mulk’s *personal* religious leanings. His avid interest in religious scholarship was remarked by his contemporaries. He made a habit of patronizing men of religion rather than poets or other courtiers.<sup>51</sup> One historian of the Nizāmiyyas has argued that he was not only a

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<sup>49</sup> The *daʿwa* was a loosely organized underground network of “missionaries,” supported by the Fatimid caliph in Cairo, who spread Ismaʿīlī teachings.

<sup>50</sup> A *waqf* was a deeded grant of property, the income from which was dedicated to the maintenance of some institution, usually one with charitable or philanthropic purposes.

<sup>51</sup> Bowen “Nizām al-Mulk” p. 71.

shrewd political leader, but also “un erudite brilliant.”<sup>52</sup> Ibn al-Athīr described the vizier as

A scholar, a man of religion, generous, just, mild-mannered, very forbearing of miscreants, and given to long silences. His salon was bustling with Koran readers, lawyers, leading Muslim scholars, and men of charity and piety...Whenever he heard the muezzin, he stopped whatever he was doing and performed his ablutions...For keeping to the due times and for assiduity at prayers this equals the highest degree of those who devote themselves to worship.<sup>53</sup>

Nizām al-Mulk was even known to give *hadīth* recitations and to engage successfully in theological disputation.<sup>54</sup> Just as the *‘ulamā’* he sponsored were enmeshed in the struggle for power, Nizām al-Mulk crossed into their world of doctrinal disputation and *hadīth* transmission. “He used to say, when engaged in [reciting *hadīth*], ‘I am not one of the experts in this field, but I like to attach myself to the train of the transmitters of the Tradition of God’s Messenger.’”<sup>55</sup>

The Nizāmiyyas were not the only educational institutions in Seljuq lands that received state support. Under Alp Arslan, the Seljuq leadership made an effort to promote competing socio-religious factions simultaneously.<sup>56</sup> In order to maintain good relations with various sects, *madrasas* were founded under diverse doctrinal banners. Alp Arslan’s minister of finance, Abū Sa’d, sponsored the building of a Ḥanafī *madrasa* in Baghdad even as Nizām al-Mulk was promoting Ash‘arī theology across town. Alp Arslan himself, like Tughril Beg, was a strong

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<sup>52</sup> Talas p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 257.

<sup>54</sup> Talas p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 257.

<sup>56</sup> Makdisi, George “Les rapports entre Calife et Sultân a l’époque Saljûqide” in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 6 (1975), p. 234.

Ḥanafī partisan. As a result Nizām al-Mulk was not completely free to promote his Ashʿarī/Shafīī leanings until after Arslan’s death. Even Twelver Shīʿīs were allowed to exist peacefully and serve in administration, provided that they joined the Seljuq government in resisting the Ismaʿīlīs.<sup>57</sup> Nizām al-Mulk was not attempting to grant his favorite factions a repressive monopoly on instruction. He saw the Nizāmiyyas as part of a wider program of state-supported, state-supporting religious knowledge. There is no doubt, however, that he favored the contributions of his own parties to politico-religious life.

The official head of the religious establishment was the ʿAbbāsīd caliph in Baghdad. The word “caliph” is an Anglicization of the Arabic *khalīfa*, meaning “deputy.” In theory, and even in practice for short a time after Muhammad’s death, the caliph acted as the Prophet’s direct successor, the deputy of God on earth. He was empowered by the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the Muslim community (*umma*) and presided over its important political and religious affairs. Fond recollection of these halcyon days retained a great deal of attraction in the Seljuq period. Imperfect reality, however, militated against this ideal vision of the caliph as puissant fount of authority. By al-Ghazālī’s time, the caliph had lost clout in both the religious and the political domains. The accession of the Sunni Seljuqs only highlighted his impotence. Under the Shīʿī Buyids, at least, there had been

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

doctrinal reason for the caliph's weakness.<sup>58</sup> When, under Sunni rulers, the caliph continued to lack the power that theory accorded him, scholars like al-Ghazālī scrambled to make sense of the situation and, if possible, to redeem it by reformulating traditional theories surrounding the caliphate.

The weakening of the caliph paralleled a long trend of dissociation between religious and political domains.<sup>59</sup> When the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833) attempted to impose normative doctrine<sup>60</sup> on the 'ulamā', he was staking the authority of his office on this gambit, known to history as the *miḥna*. Under the *miḥna*, any who opposed the caliph's doctrinal position faced persecution. With the *miḥna*'s abandonment by the caliph al-Mutawakkil in 232/847, the *umma* witnessed "the definitive triumph of the ulama, rather than the caliph, as the principal locus of religious authority in Islam."<sup>61</sup> From that point it was clear that battles for the soul of Sunni Islam would be waged not by the ostensible head of the community, the caliph, but instead in decentralized fashion amid the ranks of the 'ulamā'.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the preponderance of political theory before al-Ghazālī touted the caliph as the foundation of the legitimate exercise of power in the *dār al-islām*. It would have been highly problematic, from a pragmatic as well as an ideological perspective, to discard

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<sup>58</sup> Shī'īs did not regard *ijmā'* as the deciding factor in appointing the imām, but deferred to 'Alīd succession.

<sup>59</sup> Berkey p. 126.

<sup>60</sup> In this case the particular doctrine was the created nature of the Qur'ān.

<sup>61</sup> Berkey p. 127.

<sup>62</sup> Bulliet p. 36. "A dispersed and uninstitutionalized locus of religious authority grew up outside of caliphal jurisdiction or control."

the caliph. So ensued a period in which the caliph functioned, officially at least, as foremost *‘ālim* in the broader community of *‘ulamā’*. He maintained unique status and was recognized by *‘ulamā’* and rulers alike. His existence was used to legitimize the viability of the Muslim community—thus the guiding authority of Muhammad maintained a defined terrestrial locus, which could be tapped by the *‘ulamā’* who wielded this authority.

The Seljuq conquest was indicative of a recurrent trend: a newly Islamicized, warlike group from the East attains military ascendancy over the agricultural bases and urban population centers of Islam, pays homage to the caliph in order to appease its new subjects, and keeps firm control over the apparatus of coercive power in its territories. Without discounting the possibility that the Seljuqs desired to recognize the caliph as the bearer of the Prophet’s heritage out of a sense of religious duty, it is fair to say that a major factor that restrained them from ending the caliphate was that institution’s ideological importance to the *‘ulamā’*. As we have seen, the *‘ulamā’* continued to exercise considerable influence among the populace. Thus, although the Seljuqs had the strength to divest the caliph of his office, this would have endangered their legitimacy in the eyes of their Muslim subjects. The authority of the caliphs had to be handled gingerly, for it was the Seljuqs’ chief currency in their bid to expand in Islamic lands.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

On several occasions, the Seljuq sultan attempted to bridge the gap between power and legitimacy by contracting a marriage alliance with the ʿAbbāsid caliph. As early as 448/1056-57, the caliph married Tughril Beg's niece, Arslan Khātun. Five years later, Tughril Beg attempted to marry the caliph's daughter. The caliph initially refused this unseemly proposal, threatening to leave Baghdad if the sultan forced the marriage. Al-Kundūrī, meanwhile, had lied to Tughril Beg about the caliph's will in the matter. The sultan "was delighted. He assembled his court and told them that his ambition had soared to union with this lady of the Prophet's lineage, and that he had attained what no ruler before him had attained."<sup>64</sup> When he learned the truth, he was furious and threatened to take back the caliph's Turkic wife. In the end, the marriage was ratified in accordance with the sultan's will, though Tughril Beg died soon after.<sup>65</sup> More marriages followed, involving Alp Arslan, Malikshāh, and the caliphs al-Qā'im and al-Muqtadī.<sup>66</sup> Caliphate and sultanate—legitimacy and coercive force—were never united in one individual, though the feat was attempted on more than one occasion.

The tone of relations between caliph and sultan varied during the Seljuq period. Tughril Beg, as mentioned, paid honor to the caliph in the course of subjugating Iraq.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 137.

<sup>65</sup> Hallaq, Wael B. "Caliphs, jurists and the Saljuqs in the political thought of Juwayni," in *Muslim World*, 74 (1984), p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> Lambton, Ann K. S. *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, p. 412-413.

When Tughril Beg heard of the caliph's arrival in the territory of Badr, he sent his vizier, al-Kunduri, and the emirs and the chamberlains to take large tents and pavilions, and gifts, such as mounts with gold saddles...The Caliph came to Nahrawan, where the Sultan came out to wait upon him. When he met him, he kissed the ground before him.<sup>67</sup>

The caliph's word carried some weight among the Seljuq warlords. When Tughril Beg's brother Da'ūd wanted to sack Nisābūr, the Seljuq leader "stopped him and urged the caliph's embassy and letter as the reason why."<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, in this time of upheaval and internecine strife, the caliph was at the mercy of the sultan. "The Caliph personally invested him with a sword, and said, 'Nothing is left to the Commander of the Faithful from his palace but this. It has been a blessing to the Commander of the Faithful.'"<sup>69</sup> Alp Arslan, meanwhile, ruled from Khurāsān, avoiding disputes with the caliph by never once visiting Baghdad. Nizām al-Mulk played an important mediating role as envoy between Alp Arslan and the caliph. He pursued a conciliatory policy with the caliph's vizier, Fakhr al-Dawla. As a result, the caliph grew disgusted with Fakhr al-Dawla's pliant sycophancy and dismissed him, only to bow to Nizām al-Mulk's displeasure and reinstate his deposed vizier soon afterwards. During the reign of Malikshāh, Nizām al-Mulk pursued a more aggressive policy. Relations became so strained that at points Nizām al-Mulk seems even to have considered doing away with the caliph.<sup>70</sup> Judging by his insinuations in the *Siyāsat nāmā*, he continued to be skeptical of the caliphate: "Now in the days of some of the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 126

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Bowen "Nizam al-Mulk" p. 70.

caliphs, if ever their empire became extended it was never free from unrest and the insurrection of rebels; but in this blessed age...there is nobody in all the world who in his heart meditates opposition to our lord and master [the sultan].”<sup>71</sup> Partisans of the caliph, for their part, thought the sultan a rustic.<sup>72</sup>

### III. Al-Ghazālī and the Sufi Tradition

Al-Ghazālī’s close affiliation with the Seljuq state in Baghdad came to an abrupt end in the year 488/1095.<sup>73</sup> An epistemic crisis shook the foundations of his certainty, even his confidence in the reliability of sense perceptions and rational data. While he kept his post as official bastion of state orthodoxy, he

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<sup>71</sup> Nizām al-Mulk p. 11. This statement is almost certainly tongue-in-cheek, for Nizām al-Mulk had only recently weathered a scandal in which he had sent a rather bald message to the Sultan, with the words: “If you have not known that I am your partner in power, then know it now. You only gained this position by my policy and my counsel.” Ibn al-Athīr p. 254. Nizām al-Mulk’s mock-obedience to the sultan does not detract from the significance of his jab at the caliphs.

<sup>72</sup> Makdisi “Les rapports” p. 232. “Il y a donc assez clair que le titre de *sultan* ne désignait pas les seuls princes saljûqides qui d’ailleurs restaient, aux yeux des partisans Baghdadiens du calife, rien d’autres que des *malik*, c’est-à-dire des rois étrangers.”

<sup>73</sup> He gives an autobiographical account of this sudden development in his book *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (Delivery From Error). Though it is accepted that al-Ghazālī authored this work, the veracity of his claims about his own life have been questioned. Those who doubt his sincerity suspect that he had strong reason to fabricate a spiritual crisis and subsequent awakening. For now, we will side with the majority of scholars in accepting al-Ghazālī’s account as essentially reliable. The dissenting position will be addressed in Chapter Three.

descended into a state of secret skepticism.<sup>74</sup> He feared for his salvation, and berated himself, saying

“Away! Up and away! Only a little is left of your life, and a long journey lies before you! All the theory and practice in which you are engrossed is eyeservice and fakery! If you do not prepare now for the afterlife, when will you do so? And if you do not sever these attachments now, then when will you sever them?”<sup>75</sup>

Yet he could not tear himself free from his endowed chair at Baghdad. His internal torment lasted fully half a year, until, he relates, “the matter passed from choice to compulsion. For God put a lock on my tongue and I was impeded from public teaching...my tongue would not utter a single word: I was completely unable to say anything.”<sup>76</sup> Al-Ghazālī was quite literally paralyzed with a doubt that none of his great learning or powerful associates could remove. His deliverance, he claimed, came in the form of a divine “light” that reestablished his certainty.

Under the pretext of making the *ḥajj*, al-Ghazālī left Baghdad. He turned his face toward Damascus, not as a touring scholar but as a solitary traveler. In Syria his “only occupation was seclusion and solitude and spiritual exercise and combat.”<sup>77</sup> In Baghdad he had been a Seljuq courtier. Now asceticism and complete devotion to God filled his days, passed alone in a minaret. Desire

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<sup>74</sup> al-Ghazālī. *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*. English trans. Richard J. McCarthy in *Deliverance from Error*. Boston, 1980, p. 57. (henceforward *al-Munqidh*)

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

consumed him to concentrate on remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and purifying his soul from worldly passions. These practices were hallmarks of Sufism.

The Sufism that was widespread in Sunni lands by al-Ghazālī's day had its roots in ascetic self-denial (*zuhd*), a trend that had begun centuries earlier. While Western scholarship has tended to emphasize extra-Islamic stimuli in the rise of this movement, writers within the Sufi tradition averred that Islamic asceticism and its later development, Sufism, were organic outgrowths of the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān and the *sunna* of Muhammad.<sup>78</sup> The early forerunners of Sufism prefigured staples of Sufi practice in striving

to achieve a psychological and experiential proximity with God through self-imposed deprivations..., self-effacing humility, supererogatory religious practices, long vigils, pious meditation on the meaning of the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>anic text and a single-minded concentration on the divine object.<sup>79</sup>

These individuals stripped the external life of its material refinements in order to magnify the vibrancy of the soul within. The ascetic impulse took a reactionary form after the Arab conquests, when luxurious plunders circulated among the victors. By contrast, the early ascetics developed the habit of wearing rough woolen garments to distinguish themselves from ordinary believers and to mortify the bodily desire for comfortable dress in a dusty, sweltering climate.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mutahhari, Murtada. *Understanding Islamic Sciences*. London: ICAS Press, 2002, p. 100. One modern author reconciles the two approaches: "In his early age Muhammad had come in contact with Christian monks from whom he learnt many things relating to the 'purgative life' and ascetic practices." Bhatnagar, R.S. *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought*. London: East West Publications, 1984, pp. 34-35.

<sup>79</sup> Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic Mysticism, a short history*. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 1999, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> The Arabic word *tašawwuf* derives from a root that refers to rough woolen garments.

While in some ways the ascetics' manner of life was novel and extreme, they did not abandon the historical foundations of Islam. Proto-Sufi writers were quick to affirm that their tradition was consistent with the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān and *sunna*, and Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ānic recitation and memorization remained central to their practice. However, ascetic masters derived a certain authority from their putative connection with the divine. This authority tended more and more to displace the transmitted authority of *hadīth*. *Ḥadīth* lost some of their perceived immediacy as the life of the Prophet faded into the past, and ascetics—figures of demonstrable spiritual prowess—filled the resultant authority void.<sup>81</sup> This authority adjustment was marginal; none of the early spiritual masters was known for claiming authority from God *directly opposed* to authority transmitted via the Prophet. Nevertheless, this perceived tension occasioned one of the major enterprises of early Sufi writings: the presentation of asceticism as continuous with the Muslim mainstream.<sup>82</sup>

Until roughly the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, the name “Sufi” was not associated with ascetics of this stripe. The first ascetic to be called a Sufi was probably Abu Hāshim al-Kūfī (d. early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century), and the medieval author al-Qushayrī

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<sup>81</sup> Bulliet p. 90.

<sup>82</sup> I use the term “Muslim mainstream” guardedly. I have attempted to avoid invoking a nonexistent “Islamic orthodoxy,” while conceding that there existed, at least in the minds of medieval Muslims, widely acknowledged doctrines and practices. Hamid Algar stated: “It is fair to say that [al-Ghazālī] exemplifies the codification of the Sunni Islamic tradition in its classical form.” Algar, Hamid. *Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: an exponent of Islam in its totality: a lecture*. Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2001, pp. 5-6.

(d. 465/1074) affirmed that the name was current before 200/815.<sup>83</sup> It is important to note that Sufi mysticism differed from earlier practices of self-denial in important ways; the historical progression from asceticism to Sufism was neither smooth nor seamless. Arberry suggested that Sufism added to basic asceticism “an ardent fervour rejoicing in hardship and delighting in ecstatic experience,” which lent the formerly “joyless” asceticism attraction and staying power.<sup>84</sup>

Sufi writings from before al-Ghazālī’s lifetime pointed to several figures that blazed the trail for ascetic mysticism. Earliest and most often cited was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), a “successor” of the Prophet.<sup>85</sup> Al-Ḥasan gained many followers by the force of his own firm personal devotion. His rigorous, genuine religious commitment as well as his reputed abstemiousness made him a natural anchor onto which later Sufis could fix their tradition. Al-Ghazālī cited him frequently in the *Iḥyāʾ*.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that al-Ḥasan’s reported attitude toward political power prefigured that of al-Ghazālī.<sup>86</sup>

The narrative form of Sufi history in the centuries following al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī often took the form of apologetic biographical accounts of the lives of individual Sufis. These accounts depicted noted Sufis expressing their mystical

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<sup>83</sup> Mutahhari p. 104.

<sup>84</sup> Arberry p. 45.

<sup>85</sup> Alexander Knysh labeled al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī “the archetypical proto-Sufi.” Knysh p. 10-11

<sup>86</sup> Knysh p. 11. “al-Ḥasan’s judgments of the Umayyad state and its representatives are not, as is usually the case, confessions of allegiance to a political party. Rather, they flow naturally from his religious principles.” An approach to worldly power as firmly grounded in personal religious conviction was to be a recurring characteristic in Sufi thought, as we will see.

inclinations within accepted Sunni tradition. Self-discipline and the training of the soul maintained their prominent place in the writings of the Sufi masters, notably those of al-Harīth b. Asad al-Muhāsibī (d. 243/837). Ascetic themes would maintain pivotal importance not only in Sufi *writings*, but in mystical *practices* as well.<sup>87</sup>

Yet Sufism effected more than an expansion on the ascetic theme. Many important ideas that arose within Sufism built upon ethical and moral dictums to describe direct encounter with God, the ultimate Sufi goal. Sufism engendered a new vocabulary to describe this experience, giving new meaning to words such as *ʿirfān* (mystical knowledge of the divine), *tarīqa* (the path traveled by the seeker [*murīd*]), *ḥāl* (an elevated mystical state granted by God), *fanāʾ* (annihilation of the self in God), *dhikr* (repetition of the divine names or another mantra in order to attain mystical awareness),<sup>88</sup> *khalwa* (seclusion), and *mukāshafāt* (unveilings). Al-Ghazālī made heavy use of this vocabulary when discussing religious knowledge; each of these words carried inescapable Sufi connotations. By deploying this vocabulary, al-Ghazālī could valorize Sufism without aligning himself explicitly with the emerging Sufi sects.

These terms corresponded to a common set of Sufi practices. Simply put, Sufi practice combined ascetic mortification with scrupulous attention to the

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<sup>87</sup> Arberry p. 46.

<sup>88</sup> *Dhikr* was central to al-Ghazālī's Sufi practice. See Laoust, Henri. *La Politique de Ghazālī*. Paris, 1970. p. 296: "Le *dhikr*, ou mention du nom de Dieu,... est une des œuvres les plus recommandées.... Le *dhikr* en effet, quand il est pratiqué avec la concentration d'esprit voulue, développe en l'homme l'amour de Dieu et le détache des choses de ce monde."

dictates of the *sharīʿa*,<sup>89</sup> usually above and beyond its basic requirements. These supererogatory acts included protracted, prayerful sleep deprivation, constant recitation of the Qurʿān,<sup>90</sup> service and submission to others (one Sufi master swept his mosque constantly while subsisting on meager rations),<sup>91</sup> and, in some cases, the use of music, dancing, and poetry to induce mystical experience. Al-Ghazālī was suggesting this sort of lifestyle in advocating mystical experience as the foundation of certainty.

Sufi masters increasingly developed ecstatic or erotic themes and poetic forms of expression. These practiced an “intoxicated” mystical devotion, which at times drew stern censure from other Sufis. Al-Ghazālī, like other Sufis with ties to the Muslim mainstream, did not espouse “intoxicated” Sufism, but neither did he condemn it outright.

Sufism was not an atomized individualistic quest to find God. The Sufi masters depicted in the biographical literature mapped out a fixed path that all had to follow, leading via stages of purification to ultimate ecstatic encounter with God. Each obligatory “station” (*maqām*) of ascent toward God was

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<sup>89</sup> “The road of the mystic community is one of scrupulosity...shaikhs impose upon themselves, by way of self-mortification, practices, some of which are from Tradition, while others are works of supererogation.” Ebn-e Monavvar p. 84.

<sup>90</sup> Qurʿānic recitation was sometimes performed as a part of mortification; the reciter might be suspended in a pit by one foot or standing on his head until his eyes bled. Ibid. 102.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 98.

prescribed in a sequence that had to be followed scrupulously by struggle and self-denial.<sup>92</sup>

Major Sufi writers undertook to systematize their practice in an apologetic form that would be palatable to Muslims who might look askance at mystical tendencies, especially “intoxicated” mysticism.<sup>93</sup> They emphasized their own continuity with the Prophet, and their maintenance of the external law alongside inner purification.<sup>94</sup> This project had reached full maturity by al-Ghazālī’s entrance in the late 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century.

These apologetic and summary accounts reflected the solidifying presence of Sufism in Sunni religious culture. Hudjwirī divided Sufism into twelve groups, each of which had its neatly formulated doctrines and uniform practices.<sup>95</sup> While the divisions were probably not quite as clean as Hudjwirī’s account would imply, the proliferation of Sufi “summas” reinforced Sufism’s growing uniformity and institutional cohesion. The *Kitāb al-Lumā’* of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) differed from the standard biographical paradigm in setting out the theological tenets and common practices of the movement. Less “theosophical” and more unitive in its approach was al-Makkī’s *Qut al-Qulūb*,

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<sup>92</sup> N.B. They maintained the possibility that God could grant any *murīd* intimate vision of Himself at any time.

<sup>93</sup> Sufi writers had been especially zealous to present their doctrines in conciliatory packaging since the execution of the mystic al-Hallāj in 309/922. Al-Hallāj had been crucified for claiming *ḥulūl* (essential union with God) in his proclamation *ana al-haqq*, “I am the Truth.”

<sup>94</sup> Knysh p. 117.

<sup>95</sup> Arberry p. 65.

which was quoted extensively in the *Iḥyāʾ*. Like al-Ghazālī, al-Makkī rained opprobrium on the contemporary religious establishment.

Probably the most important Sufi work of this era was al-Qushayri's *al-Risāla fī ṭ-tasawwuf*, which was similar to the *Iḥyāʾ* in its synthesizing tendencies and its care to maintain the *sharīʿa* alongside Sufism. As we will see, the *sharīʿa* played an important role in facilitating mystical experience.<sup>96</sup> Already at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, glimmers of a nascent political consciousness were emerging in some Sufi writing. The Sufi biographer Abū Bakr Muhammad al-Kalabādhī (d. 385/995) undertook to convince his readers that Sufis were concerned only with the personal and spiritual, and had no political ambitions.<sup>97</sup> Even absent an overt Sufi political agenda, al-Kalabādhī's statement implied the suspicion that Sufis *were* political agitators, or could very well have been. In other words, Sufism shared superficial similarities with Islamic movements that had strong political dimensions. Sufi authors were conscious of these appearances, and quick to deny the charge of political intrigue. Al-Ghazālī had no interest in mobilizing the Sufis as a politicized revolutionary sect, but instead showed that religious knowledge grounded in Sufi experience ought to form the heart of the Islamic politico-religious order as it already existed.

Also sinister in the eyes of some Muslims was the superficial resemblance between Sufism and Shīʿism, with regard to esoteric doctrines, the concept of

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<sup>96</sup> Halm, Heinz. "al-Kushayrī" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 5. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden: Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 527.

<sup>97</sup> Knysh p. 124.

special friendship with God (*wilāya*) and a particular attraction to the figure of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Crudely put, Shīʿīs maintained the “mysterious” alongside the “revealed” aspect of Islam by maintaining a living conduit between man and God: the Imām. Sufis, guided by their masters, opened as many such conduits as there were mystical seekers.<sup>98</sup> Confession of a Shīʿī liaison on the part of the Sunni Sufis would have met quick and violent denunciation, as it would have implied political as well as doctrinal treason.<sup>99</sup> Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, the relationship of al-Ghazālī’s thought to that of the Ismaʿīlīs cannot be reduced to simple antagonism; the two shared important similarities while remaining essentially incompatible.

Through the writings of prominent Sufis, Sufism became a major force in the Sunni community well before the life of al-Ghazālī. However, the communal aspect of Sufism was still in its emergent stage. Sufi communities of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century remained “collections of individuals” drawn to Sufi masters for personal instruction.<sup>100</sup> In the later 12<sup>th</sup> century, great international fraternities would develop around teachings inherited from well-known Sufis.<sup>101</sup> Sufism at the time

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<sup>98</sup> Trimingham, J. Spencer. *The Sufi Orders in Islam*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 133. cf. Bakar, Osman. *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998, p. 194. “Al-Ghazzali wishes to reserve [the Ismaʿīlī Imām’s] prophetic light for the Sufi saints. By virtue of carrying the prophetic light within their own beings, the Sufi saints possess the knowledge of the inner meaning of revelation.”

<sup>99</sup> Berkey p. 234.

<sup>100</sup> Trimingham p. 5. For the individualized nature of this instruction see Massignon, Louis. “Tasawwuf” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. v. 8. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Leiden: Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2002, p. 315.

<sup>101</sup> Fakhry, Majid. *A short introduction to Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism*. Oxford; Rockport, MA: Oneworld, 1997, p. 82.

of al-Ghazālī had begun to display the institutional tendencies that would later mark Sufi “convents” as a force on the political scene.<sup>102</sup>

The men who fixed the Sufi tradition in the constellation of acceptable Islamic expression were not exclusively mystics. They were often quite involved in the *fiqh* and *kalām* discussions of their day—Sufism was simply a component of their sophisticated Islam.<sup>103</sup> Conversely, many notable Muslim figures of the time who are not generally thought of as “Sufis” were inclined toward mysticism, and were members of the fast-developing Sufi community. Al-Ghazālī’s case was paradigmatic: a period of withdrawal and Sufi dedication followed by a return to involvement with the community.<sup>104</sup>

After he left Baghdad, according to ‘Abd al-Ghāfir, al-Ghazālī lived in Damascus, Jerusalem, and Mecca, and spent years “wandering about and visiting the venerated religious shrines.”<sup>105</sup> There is some uncertainty as to where exactly his wanderings led him—it is possible that he went as far west as Alexandria. It was during this period that he wrote many of his most enduring works, including the *Iḥyā’ fī ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences).

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<sup>102</sup> Babs Mala, S. “The Sufi convent and its social significance in the medieval period of Islam,” in *Islamic Culture*, 51, (1977), p. 31. One important forerunner of institutional Sufism in this day was Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr (d. 967/1049), who prescribed a set of rules for the Sufis who studied under him. He was initiated and guided by a *pīr* in a community setting. The *pīr* was deemed indispensable to the aspiring Sufi. Abū Sa‘īd was quoted as saying: “Whoever has not been trained by a teacher is worthless....though a man reaches the highest spiritual ranks and stations..., if he has no supervisor and teacher, absolutely nothing will come of him.” Ebn-e Monavvar p. 443. See also Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921.

<sup>103</sup> Knysh p. 139.

<sup>104</sup> Algar p. 22.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Abd al-Ghāfir p. 15.

The needs of his family drew him back, eventually, to Khurāsān.<sup>106</sup> There, his struggle for purity and encounter with God was disrupted by quotidian demands that, he confessed, “troubled the serenity of my solitude.”<sup>107</sup> After some prodding, he was at last prevailed upon by Fakhr al-Mulk, vizier of the Seljuq governor Sanjar, to resume a teaching post at the Nisābūr Nizāmiyya (499/1106). The summons of the vizier was impossible for him to refuse, as he considered imparting his considerable wisdom to be a religious obligation. His didactic manner upon return was deeply changed; ‘Abd al-Ghāfir writes that his old ways of “seeking honor and wrangling with his peers and condemning the headstrong” were gone, replaced by piety and true wisdom, which he imparted “to everyone who repaired to him and visited him.”<sup>108</sup>

He founded a *madrasa* and a Sufi dwelling (*khanqah*) near his home, and dedicated his last days to pious practice, study of the Qurʾān, and a newfound attention to the recitation of *ḥadīth*. Al-Ghazālī continued to write during this period. His deeply personal autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* was written between 500/1106 and 503/1109. Only slightly earlier came the *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk*, a manual for kingship addressed to the Seljuq sultan Muhammad b. Malikshāh.<sup>109</sup> Both of these works elucidated al-Ghazālī’s views on the mystical

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<sup>106</sup> He did not return directly to Khurāsān and stay there, but spent short periods in Baghdad, Nisābūr and elsewhere teaching.

<sup>107</sup> *al-Munqidh* p. 81.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Abd al-Ghāfir p. 16.

<sup>109</sup> This work may have been addressed to a different Seljuq prince, Sanjar. See Laoust pp. 144-145 for a survey of scholarly opinions on this question.

foundations of religious knowledge and its relationship to political order. Al-Ghazālī died in Khurāsān in 505/1111, at the age of fifty-three.

### Chapter One Summary

In this first chapter, I have narrated the life of al-Ghazālī in the midst of its most influential forces: the Seljuq state, the religious establishment, and the Sufi tradition. I showed that the Seljuqs relied on *sharīʿa* law to maintain order in their conquered domains, and that the *ʿulamāʾ* were the interpreters and dispensers of this law. As a result, the state and the religious establishment were closely intertwined via the legal and educational system, especially the Nizāmiyya *madrasas*. I then explained important features of the Sufi tradition that al-Ghazālī embraced upon fleeing worldly attachment in Baghdad. Sufism was familiar and well-established in the Islamic community by al-Ghazālī's day, and had developed its own distinctive practice rooted in ascetic self-purification. Thus al-Ghazālī's advocacy of Sufism did not need to be excessively pedantic; he could gesture to the Sufi way simply by deploying Sufi vocabulary in its proper context. Although Sufism was fast developing cohesive communities, it was not yet a politically important faction. As we will see, al-Ghazālī did not envision politically active Sufi sects, but instead pointed to Sufi ways of knowing religious truth as indispensable to a rightly constituted political order. In the next chapter, I will outline al-Ghazālī's explicit political theory, showing the implicit way in which religious knowledge was foundational to his conception of political order.

## Two

### **Political Prescription and Epistemological Polemic**

Like most medieval Islamic political theorists, al-Ghazālī identified the leading purpose of government as the maintenance of peace and security. In a secure environment, Muslims would be free of the worrisome exigencies of

survival and able to practice salvific Islam. Without security the *sharīʿa* would crumble, tempting people to sidestep right practice in order to protect their interests in a violent, uncontrolled situation, jeopardizing their salvation in the process. In al-Ghazālī's conception of political order as expressed in the *Kitāb al-Mustaẓhirī* and echoed elsewhere, the caliphate was the cornerstone of law and of government. In this chapter I will show that al-Ghazālī envisioned the caliph as a crucial mediating link between (1) the Islamic community guided by the *ʿulamāʾ*, (2) Seljuq coercive force,<sup>110</sup> and (3) God's authority. Both *ʿulamāʾ* and rulers acknowledged the authority of the caliph; this mutual acknowledgement tied the Seljuq rulers to the Islamic community via the *sharīʿa*, valued by both parties. The legitimacy of Islamic government depended on the maintenance of the caliphate, even if the caliph commanded only nominal obedience from the secular rulers and the *ʿulamāʾ*. The primary threat to the fragile political order in al-Ghazālī's day was the infiltration of Ismaʿīli missionaries. Al-Ghazālī inveighed at length against the Ismaʿīlis before outlining his thoughts on the caliphate and offering advice to his young patron, the caliph al-Mustaẓhir. I will conclude this chapter by outlining al-Ghazālī's objections to Ismaʿīlism, especially regarding the faulty roots of Ismaʿīlī religious knowledge and the implications of knowledge for the

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<sup>110</sup> See note 11 above to review the use of the term "coercive force."

constitution of an Islamic polity.<sup>111</sup> Al-Ghazālī's polemic brings his own views on knowledge and politics into sharp relief.

### I. The *Kitāb al-Mustazhirī* Response to Crisis

The *Kitāb al-Mustazhirī* was among the last works that al-Ghazālī wrote before his 488/1095 crisis and flight from Baghdad. The circumstances surrounding its composition were marked by political tumult of a kind unseen in Baghdad since the Seljuq invasion. On 14 October 1092,<sup>112</sup> an Ismaʿīlī “Assassin” “in the guise of a suppliant or a petitioner” fatally stabbed Nizām al-Mulk. Sultan Malikshāh probably abetted the murder, for he had been on bad terms with his vizier in preceding weeks.<sup>113</sup> A month later, Malikshāh succumbed to an illness contracted while hunting. A period of civil unrest and upheaval followed his demise. Bedouins, “emboldened by the death of the sultan and the absence of the army, waylaid and fell upon” pilgrims making the Hajj.<sup>114</sup> Rival Seljuq princes Barkyārūq and Tutūsh struggled for supremacy, neglecting the maintenance of peace and order in the interest of gaining personal ascendancy. Barkyārūq triumphed by 487/1094. The caliph al-Muqtadī signed the new sultan's diploma.

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<sup>111</sup> I will not treat the Ismaʿīlī response to al-Ghazālī's polemic in the *K. al-Mustazhirī* or the extent to which his charges corresponded to real Ismaʿīlī doctrine. For a treatment of this subject, see Corbin, H. “The Ismaʿīlī response to the polemic of Ghazali” in *Ismaʿīlī contributions to Islamic culture*, Edited by S. H. Nasr. Tehran, 1977, pp. 67-98. My concern is with the significance al-Ghazālī's thought and writing to his Sunni audience.

<sup>112</sup> 10 Ramadan 485.

<sup>113</sup> Ibn al-Athīr p. 253. See note 71 above for some of the hot words exchanged during this imbroglio.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p. 264.

Moments later, he began hallucinating and promptly died. In the space of a year and a half, the leading lights of al-Ghazālī's society had been snuffed.

In this bleak hour, al-Ghazālī attended a small, private session of condolence held for the new caliph al-Mustazhir, the son of al-Muqtadi. The Baghdad notables present swore their allegiance to the new caliph, a callow youth of sixteen. Among his first acts in office was to commission from al-Ghazālī, then the preeminent religious scholar in Baghdad, a work refuting the doctrine of the Isma'īlīs, whose politically and doctrinally subversive activities had flourished amid the recent upheaval.<sup>115</sup>

The *K. al-Mustazhirī* was not intended for the caliph's personal consumption but instead as an apologetic tool, a rallying point for Sunni *'ulamā'* combating the Isma'īlī challenge while reckoning simultaneously with the alien Seljuq Turks. The book attempted to navigate the fragile vessel of the caliphate between these twin challenges to its future. Its intended audience certainly included the caliph and the *'ulamā'*, who alone were sufficiently educated to trace the efflorescent style of al-Ghazālī's arguments.<sup>116</sup> But al-Ghazālī also claimed to address a broader audience, "to follow the *via media*" between abstruseness and oversimplification, "for the need of this book is general, with respect to both the elite and the common folk, and embraces all the strata of the adherents of Islam." He sought to write a book that would be "pleasing to men's

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<sup>115</sup> Hogga p. 142.

<sup>116</sup> Hillenbrand, Carole. "Islamic orthodoxy or realpolitik? Al-Ghazali's views on government" in *Iran* 26 (1988), p. 86.

ears,” even those of modest intelligence who had not “delved deeply into the sciences.”<sup>117</sup> Thus al-Ghazālī intended *portions* of his work, read aloud, to reach a broad segment of the population as inoculation against the Ismaʿīlī appeal, though the full text and the sequential thread of his argument might be accessible only to the educated, especially the *ʿulamāʾ*?

### A. Why Keep the Caliph?

In light of the dismal recent record of leadership in Seljuq lands, it is not surprising that al-Ghazālī’s overriding concern was order and the rule of the *sharīʿa*. As we have seen, the *sharīʿa* regulated every aspect of Muslim life, and grounded the Seljuq government in the Islamic community it ruled. According to al-Ghazālī in the ninth chapter of *al-Mustaẓhiri*, the existence of the caliphate undergirded the validity of the *sharīʿa*. To do away with the caliph,<sup>118</sup> wrote al-Ghazālī,

would call for the clear declaration of the invalidity of all administrative posts and the unsoundness of the judging of Qadis and the ruin of God’s rights and prescriptions and the invalidation of [retaliation for] blood and wombs and property and the pronouncement of the invalidity of marriages issuing from Qadis in the regions of the earth and the remaining of the rights of God Most High in the custody of creatures.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> al-Ghazālī. *Faḍāʾih al-Bāṭiniyya wa faḍāʾil al-Mustaẓhiriyya*. Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya al-Ṭibāʿiyya, 1964. English trans. Richard J. McCarthy in *Deliverance from Error*. Boston, 1980, p. 155. (henceforward “*al-Mustaẓhiri*”)

<sup>118</sup> The words “caliph” and “imam” are used interchangeably by al-Ghazālī with reference to the ʿAbbasid religious leader. I will stick with “caliph.” The Ismaʿīlī rival will always be referred to as “imam,” with the added specifier “Ismaʿīlī,” “Bāṭinī,” or “Taʿlimī.”

<sup>119</sup> *al-Mustaẓhiri* p. 235. Brackets in original translation, some omitted here. Patricia Crone writes: “In al-Ghazālī’s view, one needed a legitimate imam in order to have a valid public sphere.” In her opinion, this was a rather “extreme” attachment to the caliphal institution, which al-Ghazālī saw as a “religious figurehead” without political power. Crone argues that al-Ghazālī wanted in the Sunni caliphate a counterforce to the Ismaʿīlī Imām, making him “a Sunni of an unusually imamocentric type.” This analysis is quite correct; I argue that the idea of caliph as placeholder

The legitimate law was a gift from God; without God's deputy (*khalīfā*) on Earth, the edifice of law would crumble into disarray. The subtext to this statement, of course, was that God's law was indispensable to community life. Ultimately, the legitimacy of God's law rested on God's authority. Al-Ghazālī implicitly argued that this divine authority could be conducted only through the caliph. Maintaining order thus required that the caliph be maintained in office. Here al-Ghazālī claimed to be defying the current trend among political writers, many of whom denied that any qualified candidate existed. According to these writers, the office must needs "remain inactive without anyone exercising it."<sup>120</sup> Al-Ghazālī predicted that without a caliph in office "to preserve order" and "keep a watchful eye on men and to nip danger in the bud," anarchy would prevail. "The conflict of wills and passions would lead to the neglect of the afterlife and the triumph of vice over virtue, and of the lowly over the learned with the consequent dissolution of religious and secular checks."<sup>121</sup>

To avoid such conflict and resultant chaos, it was necessary that the authority of the caliphate—which was derived directly from divine authority—reside with a specified individual, the earthly instantiation of divine authority. This justification was really based in *ijmāʿ*, the consensus of the community on

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mediating between Seljuqs and *ʿulamāʾ* is helpful in understanding al-Ghazālī's vision. *God's Rule* p. 238-243.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p. 234-235.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p. 235. Whether such calamity would in fact have followed the removal of the caliph is immaterial – the point is that al-Ghazālī made a strong argument for the inevitability of such catastrophe. The question of whether he actually believed the point he was arguing is also left open here.

the necessity a caliph.<sup>122</sup> It was crucial that all members of the community submit to the caliph, who “is quit of obligation to his subjects at the turning over to him of God’s rights...he is God’s vicegerent over men...obedience to him is a duty incumbent on all men.”<sup>123</sup> Yet, as we have seen, the caliph could *not* exercise the authority vested in him by political theories like this one. It seems that this “obedience” was simply a notional assent to the proposition that al-Mustazhir was indeed the rightful caliph, the Deputy of God. With this minimal affirmation in place, the rule of law could operate unhindered. In a sense, the caliph was simply a necessary formality.

Al-Ghazālī gestured to the precedent of the early Islamic community as further justification for upholding the caliphate. He recalled “the haste of the early Companions, after Muhammad’s death, to set about appointing an Imam.”<sup>124</sup> Surely if the Companions prioritized unitary leadership for the *umma*, men in al-Ghazālī’s uncertain times should not presume to dispense with it. In *Iqtisād fi l-ʿIqād*, where al-Ghazālī also discussed the caliphate, he pointed out that it was a *revealed* office, not an institution prescribed by independent reasoning.<sup>125</sup> Thus it was a religious obligation to support the maintenance of the caliphate.

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<sup>122</sup> Hillenbrand p. 83. This consensus existed despite disagreement on the particulars of that individual’s appointment.

<sup>123</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 235.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisad fi l-ʿIqad*, Hogga trans. p. 251.

## B. Political Theory in Dialogue with Political Reality

On an abstract plane, al-Ghazālī's theory framed the caliphate primarily as conduit of divine authority and dispenser of that authority among the obedient trustees of societal stability. Yet his theory departed from this model wherever it made contact with the real political situation of his day. Al-Ghazālī's arguments on key points upheld the *status quo*, citing the current situation as its own justification. This shows his absolute commitment to the caliphate, and his fear of the chaos that would follow its dissolution. This fear of chaos had been confirmed by recent experience.

The first dialectic challenge that al-Ghazālī posed to his own argument went something like this: "There might conceivably be more than one candidate suited for the caliphate. Why is al-Mustazhir particularly qualified?" Al-Ghazālī did not expend ink extolling the superior virtues of al-Mustazhir. Instead, he admitted only those challengers who had actually claimed caliphal authority in direct opposition to al-Mustazhir. As it turned out, only one such challenger existed: the Ismaʿīli Imām. Having just spent the first eight chapters of his book proving the invalidity of the Ismaʿīli Imām, it was no leap for al-Ghazālī to dismiss his competing claim and conclude that al-Mustazhir was indeed the rightful caliph.<sup>126</sup>

This bifurcated maxim formed the crux of the issue: "The source of the Imamate is either textual designation [*našš*] or choice." The former option—

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<sup>126</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 235.

“textual designation”—was that adopted by the Ismaʿīlīs, along with all Shīʿīs. Al-Ghazālī argued in the seventh chapter of *al-Mustaẓhirī* that it was impossible to prove the validity of particular ʿAlīd Imams from unimpeachable textual sources (Qurʾān or sound *hadith*). Thus remained “choice [*ikhtiyār*: election] by the people of Islam and their agreement on submission.”<sup>127</sup> Here al-Ghazālī’s argument waxed majoritarian: “Could an impartial man doubt that the Batinite extremists do not equal a tenth of a tenth of those who support this conquering state [government of the ʿAbbasids]?—If the Imamate is by might [power], and might is by mutual help and the plurality of followers, etc., then this is a most powerful argument for preferring our Imamate!”<sup>128</sup> Of course, this “might” was not the caliph’s own, but instead represented the Seljuq armies that he (theoretically) commanded by proxy. Al-Ghazālī anticipated the “might does not make right” objection: “Truth does not follow plurality, but is hidden and is attained only by a minority, whereas error is plain and the majority hasten to submit to it.” His rejoinder only reaffirmed *ikhtiyār* as the sole admissible procedure for appointing the caliph, charging that those who denied *ikhtiyār* held a faulty conception of its meaning. It did *not* mean “the consensus of all men,” nor had it ever meant this.<sup>129</sup> It did not even mean the consensus of some limited group of men. Instead, al-Ghazālī chose “to hold that one person can suffice if he

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p. 235-236.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p. 236

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

is on the side of the multitudes: his agreement is theirs.”<sup>130</sup> It was unmistakable to al-Ghazālī’s reader that the one person with the force to command the agreement of the multitudes (*de facto ijmāʿ*) was the Seljuq leader. Appointment by an individual was al-Ghazālī’s key move in reconciling the caliph’s theoretical position with his actual weakened state.

This move has struck some scholars as intellectually weak. Binder implicated al-Ghazālī’s theory of the caliphate in expressing his general discontent with the justifications offered for that office. Binder identified these arguments as “historical legislation.” The Sunni theorists, wrote Binder, “reason from the prescribed duties, deducing the executive institution. The weakness of their argument is manifest, for...the Caliphate existed in fact before any of its duties were defined.”<sup>131</sup> There is a great deal of merit to Binder’s position; more than four centuries after Abū Bakr, al-Ghazālī was still struggling to anchor the caliphate in a sound theoretical mooring. If reasoning from necessary premises—removed from historical circumstance—is to gauge the merit of a theory, the Sunni justifications for the caliph fell quite short. However, Binder was probably taking an overly critical view of the Sunni theorists. Their objective was not simply to legally encode whatever practices history had generated around the office of the caliph, but instead to redeem the imperfections of historical

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p. 237.

<sup>131</sup> Binder, Leonard. “Al-Ghazali’s Theory of Islamic Government,” in *Muslim World*, 45, (1955), p. 233.

circumstance using the tools of their trade.<sup>132</sup> In doing so, they were protecting the order in the community by perpetuating—albeit in modified form—its primitive model of leadership, which Farouk Mitha identified as “the charismatic authority and example of the Prophet.”<sup>133</sup> It was from this authority that al-Ghazālī claimed legitimacy for the caliph,<sup>134</sup> and thus for the whole system of judges and religious leaders operating in the central lands of Islam. For this reason it was incumbent upon Sunni judges to verbally invoke the caliph’s authority when passing their decisions.<sup>135</sup>

By professing obedience to the caliph, argued al-Ghazālī, the Seljuq sultan could also harness this authority. This is the precise nexus of al-Ghazālī’s theory of the caliphate: just as the caliph was the link between divine authority and the human structures that dispensed that authority in the form of law, so also was he the link between divine authority and coercive force on earth. The caliph represented the figurative meeting place of (1) the powerful foreign invaders, (2) the *‘ulamā*<sup>2</sup>—militarily weak but integral to society, and (3) the divine mandate that lent legitimacy to both. The caliph’s placeholding presence lent moral sanction to the *public sphere*.<sup>136</sup> Unlike the Isma‘īlī Imām, he did not dispense infallible religious knowledge.

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Crone *God’s Rule* p. 245.

<sup>133</sup> Mitha, Farouk. *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*. London; New York, 2001, p. 94.

<sup>134</sup> One indication that the caliph participated in Muhammad’s authority is the later stipulation that he trace his descent through the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh. This requirement was al-Ghazālī’s one concession to *naṣṣ* (textual designation). Crone *God’s Rule* 237.

<sup>135</sup> Laoust p. 83.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. Crone *God’s Rule* p. 238.

In reality, the sultan's endorsement was *de facto* indispensable to the validity of the caliphate. Al-Ghazālī encoded this reality in his political theory. One of the ten qualifications for a caliph was *najda*, which means bravery, courage, or, more broadly, the military wherewithal to keep order. Al-Ghazālī wrote quite frankly that al-Mustazhir's *najda* was "through power based on the Turks."<sup>137</sup> Of the ten qualities required of a potential caliph, six were innate: maturity, intelligence, freedom, male sex, Qurayshite descent, and sound hearing and sight. The remaining four were acquired: *najda*, competence, knowledge, and piety.<sup>138</sup> The first six were minimum qualities that would have been nominally shared by many. Of the last four, all but *najda* were difficult to quantify and easy to claim, rightly or wrongly, for any candidate. There could have been no ambiguity, however, about the fact that the Seljuq warlords were the only proximate dispensers of *najda*. *Najda*, then, was the pivotal attribute, for good reason the first listed among the acquired four.<sup>139</sup>

Yet al-Ghazālī did not fully concede the deciding vote to the Seljuq sultan—he staved off this dangerous compromise by pointing out that no man could command *ijmāʿ*.

Apparently, we have reduced the specification of the Imamate to the choice of a single person; but really we have reduced it to God's choice and appointment. The real justification of the choice is that all follow and

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<sup>137</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 238.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 237.

<sup>139</sup> Hillenbrand p. 83.

obey the Imam—a grace and gift of God, unattainable by any human contriving.<sup>140</sup>

Even the very fact that one elector could suffice was a divine gift. Al-Ghazālī ultimately rested his argument neither on reasoning from the necessity of societal order, nor on the precedent of the Companions, nor even on his absolute commitment to maintain the *status quo* (i.e. maintain the caliph), but on God’s continually and directly dispensed sanction among the community of believers.<sup>141</sup> It is noteworthy that al-Ghazālī, chief among the *‘ulamā’*, functioned as mouthpiece of that divine sanction, declaring precisely where and how God’s gifts were distributed—in this case, he restrained the Seljuqs’ ratifying vote by invoking God’s direct role in societal order.

He admitted that the Turks were slaves to “the bonds of their innate bestial nature,” ardent only in obeying their passions.<sup>142</sup> Their one redeeming virtue was that they “offer friendship” to the caliph. “Even if they disobey one of the commands which it is incumbent to obey, they believe that disobedience is a sinful act and that obedience is a virtuous one.”<sup>143</sup> What mattered was that they accorded the caliph his place, with or without granting him any real clout. That maintenance represented a tacit truce with the *‘ulamā’* and the *umma*, an affirmation of the enduring role of religious authority, *sharī‘a*, and its interpreters in the affairs of government. Actual obedience was of only marginal importance;

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> As Henri Laoust notes of al-Ghazālī’s political theory, “directement ou indirectement, c’est à Dieu seul que l’on obéit.” Laoust p. 364.

<sup>142</sup> Hillenbrand trans. p. 84.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

notional assent was paramount. The risk that this assent might be withdrawn was not merely theoretical. Just before Malikshāh's death, the sultan had delivered a message expelling the caliph al-Muqtadi from Baghdad, intending to replace him with his five-year-old grandson, Ja'fār. The sultan's sudden death averted the disaster that such an arrangement might have begun. Even some Sunni political theorists had cooled to the caliphate in light of the caliph's impotent state. Al-Juwaynī advocated the absorption of the caliphate by the sultan. He "seems to have lost hope in the revival of the caliphate and thus attempted to maintain the solidarity of the community through...the sultan, the real wielder of power."<sup>144</sup>

### C. The Caliph: Immovable Axis of Societal Stability

For al-Ghazālī, however, the Seljuq sultan was of only *circumstantial* necessity to the caliph. If the caliph were to acquire sufficient military force, no theoretical obstacle prevented him from getting rid of the Turks altogether.<sup>145</sup> Al-Ghazālī saw the caliph as an immovable placeholder, an indispensable mediator between *umma* and coercive force. The role of the *'ulamā'* within this structure was free to evolve, just as it had emerged gradually and organically from the

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<sup>144</sup> Hallaq p. 30.

<sup>145</sup> This fact belies the theory, propounded by Binder and more loosely favored by Laoust, that "the term Caliphate stands for the whole of Islamic government." Binder saw the Caliphate as tripartite: the sultan provides the coercive force, the caliph provides legitimacy, and the *'ulamā'* advise the caliph and apply Islamic law – the germ of societal order – in communities. This reading of al-Ghazālī goes far to explain the functionality of government in his day. However, it fails to account for al-Ghazālī's highly intentional allowance for future change. Cf. Crone *God's Rule* p. 246 "One was *not* to envisage...the king as forming a continuum with the imam, the Prophet and God. Unlike the caliph, the king was *not* the leader of the community founded by Muhammad, or his representative, just a crude soldier."

Muslim community.<sup>146</sup> The Seljuqs were also expendable, though currently important. The caliph represented a permanent compromise between these two wings of control.<sup>147</sup> Thus the caliph personified order and stability, the very ends that al-Ghazālī held most dear. In a sense, it seems best to take a position opposite Binder’s when he wrote: “We must be satisfied then with the conclusion that the authority of the Caliph is primarily circumstantial, i.e. he has authority for what he does rather than what he is.”<sup>148</sup> The caliph did not “do” very much, but to al-Ghazālī and others his existence was as crucial as the stability he represented.

Al-Ghazālī advised the young caliph al-Mustazhir to take no action that might endanger that stability. This principle applied firstly to holding fast to his office. Even if a more distinguished candidate should appear, al-Mustazhir should maintain his position in order to avoid succession disputes. “For we know that knowledge lends luster to the Imamate, but that the fruit sought from the Imamate is to extinguish dissensions.”<sup>149</sup> Thus the *K. al-Mustazhirī* may represent “a warning to the young caliph,” not to rock the boat by attempting to reclaim power for his office.<sup>150</sup> Nowhere in the *K. al-Mustazhirī* did al-Ghazālī advise that the caliph take military leadership, though he did recognize the

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<sup>146</sup> Mitha p. 96.

<sup>147</sup> According to Crone, al-Ghazālī was “the first clearly to articulate the fact the Muslim world had developed something similar to the division between state and church in medieval Europe.” *God’s Rule* p. 248.

<sup>148</sup> Binder p. 231.

<sup>149</sup> *al-Mustazhirī* p. 238.

<sup>150</sup> Hillenbrand p. 86, cf. Mitha p. 75.

Turks' military defense of the caliph's interests.<sup>151</sup> Al-Ghazālī deemphasized the *necessity* of independence in legal decisions (*ijtihād*) and legal acumen on the part of the caliph, though strongly *preferring* that he develop these skills as part of a broader program of piety and purification of the heart. In the meantime, al-Ghazālī stipulated that al-Mustazhir “not settle any problem except after exploiting the talents of the ulema and seeking their help, and, in doubt, choose to follow the best and most learned.”<sup>152</sup>

There was a minor element of self-promotion here—al-Ghazālī was favoring his own class, and certainly considered himself among “the best and most learned” of the *‘ulamā’*. This advice indicates clearly that the caliph, though the foundation of the *sharī‘a*, was not its authoritative interpreter. The task of interpreting and applying the revealed law was to be a communal endeavor undertaken by the best religious scholars, not a unilateral decree of the caliph.

Ideally, however, the caliph should be personally pious and well versed in *fiqh*. After enjoining that al-Mustazhir heed his advisers, al-Ghazālī then required that the young caliph strive to gain *ijtihād* by application to his studies. Ideally, the caliph was to be eminent among the *fuqahā’*, though not necessarily *preeminent*.

His own salvation depended on the purity of his heart. The achievement of this purity meant ridding himself of worldly attachment. “One who thinks he

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<sup>151</sup> Hillenbrand trans. p. 84.

<sup>152</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 239.

can combine enjoyment of this life and greed for its luxuries with the bliss of the afterlife is deceived.”<sup>153</sup> This advice reverberated with ascetic Sufi undertones.<sup>154</sup> In Baghdad the caliph must have been tempted to live the luxurious and dissipated life of a Turkic tribal prince. Al-Ghazālī counseled against such indulgence, as it would violate not only the sanctity of his person, but also his crucial role as figurehead and nominal leader of the *umma*. “The meaning of being God’s viceregent over men is the betterment of men; and only he will be able to better men of the world who is able to better the people of his town and the people of his household and himself.”<sup>155</sup> The ultimate role that al-Ghazālī set for the caliph—“the betterment of men”—did not place the caliph in competition with the Seljuq sultan. The caliph was not to be a rival to the sultan in wielding coercive force, but instead his complement, representing the sovereign place of authentic, personal Islam at the apex of political order.

## II. Combating the Ismā‘īlī Threat

Al-Ghazālī contrasted the Sunni caliphate with the Ismā‘īlī Imām, whose heresy and invalidity he spent the greater part of the *Kitāb al-Mustazhiri* demonstrating. Al-Ghazālī’s objections to the Ismā‘īlī Imāmate rested on the theory of knowledge that its followers espoused. I will examine al-Ghazālī’s attack on the Ismā‘īlīs for two reasons. First, it was an important expression of

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p. 240.

<sup>154</sup> “These so-called leitmotifs and the vocabulary in which they are conveyed carry obvious Sufi provenance.” Mitha p. 82.

<sup>155</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 241.

the role of leading intellectuals in Seljuq society: defending the government that paid their salary. Second, his objections to the Ismāʿīlī system highlight some of his own emerging convictions about religious knowledge and its implications for right order in society.

Al-Ghazālī did not call his opponents Ismāʿīlīs,<sup>156</sup> but rather Bātinīs or Taʿlīmīs.<sup>157</sup> In so naming them, he referred to the two aspects of Ismāʿīlī belief to which he most strenuously objected in the *Kitāb al-Mustaẓhirī*. The first was the exclusive emphasis on the internal, secret aspect of revelation, the *bātin*, to the complete neglect of revelation's manifest legal aspect, the *ẓāhir*. Just as vitriolic was al-Ghazālī's indictment of the Ismāʿīlī doctrine of *taʿlīm*, which identified the infallible Imām as the sole conduit of true religious knowledge, to the exclusion of personal reasoning (*rāʾy*).<sup>158</sup>

By undermining the foundational beliefs communicated by the Ismāʿīlī *daʿīs*, al-Ghazālī's intended to topple their entire multistoried enterprise, which at its political summit intended to supplant the delicate balance of Sunni society. Al-Ghazālī argued that Sunnis should attack Bātinī ground-level dogmas rather

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<sup>156</sup> The term Ismāʿīlī refers to the fact that this Shīʿī group traced the line of their ʿAlid Imāmate through Muhammad b. Ismāʿīl, who had entered a period of *satr* (concealment). The Imām reemerged in 910/297 in the form of the Mahdi ʿAbd Allah, who ruled initially from North Africa (Qayrawan and Mahdiyya). In 358/969, the Mahdi's successor, supported militarily by the Kutama Berbers, established the Fatimid state in Egypt, from which they supported missionaries (*daʿīs*) proselytizing at large among Sunnis.

<sup>157</sup> Al-Ghazālī actually listed ten different names under which his enemies are known; these were the two that he used most often.

<sup>158</sup> "Taʿlīmītes believe that...knowledge can only be acquired through the spiritual and divinely guided teaching (*taʿlīm*) of the Imāms who are the inheritors of the Prophet's esoteric function of interpreting the inner meaning of the Qurʾān." Bakar p. 191.

than attempting to refute the multifarious doctrines of their duplicitous missionaries. According to al-Ghazālī, the first mistake that the Bātinīs made was to abrogate the *ẓāhir*, the clear significance of revelation. In short, he accused the Ismāʿīlīs of rank antinomianism.

#### A. The Jurisprudential Sensibilities of al-Ghazālī's Polemic

This accusation was in keeping with the supremely *legal* orientation of the *K. al-Mustaẓhirī*. Al-Ghazālī characterized the approach of earlier Sunni heresiographers as long-winded and vague. Instead, “those learned in the Law should be restricted to the important religious matters and to establishing apodictic proof of what is the clear truth.”<sup>159</sup> To wit, al-Ghazālī undertook to establish “legal apodictic demonstrations of the holy, prophetic, Mustazhirite positions on the basis of rational and juristic proofs.”<sup>160</sup> Al-Ghazālī's heresiography was founded on necessary premises arranged in logical syllogistic proofs.<sup>161</sup> This approach mirrored that of *fiqh*, his area of expertise. Appropriately, he used *fiqh* methodology to attack what he portrayed as an extralegal and even anti-legal sect.<sup>162</sup>

According to al-Ghazālī, the Bātinīs circumvented the law by denying revelation its true, vital outer significance, its *ẓāhir*, and instead fabricating spurious inner meanings, necessitating “the abandonment of the bases of

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> This, of course, revealed Aristotelian influence in his thought, via Muslim Aristotelians like Ibn Sina.

<sup>162</sup> “Al-Ghazali handles the law as an instrument of power.” Mitha p. 70.

religion.”<sup>163</sup> The destruction of revealed Laws would be inimical to peace and order in society. This was the practical sense of al-Ghazālī’s concern. It was also a doctrinal objection, for denying the outer significance of revelation—the veracity of the literal narratives of the Qur’ān, for example—entailed giving the lie to the Prophet (*takdhīb*).<sup>164</sup> Needless to say, this was outright heresy, grounds for expelling the Ismā‘īlīs from the embrace of Islam.

### B. Al-Ghazālī’s Anti-Ismā‘īlī Innoculation

Al-Ghazālī directly linked the abrogation of the *sharī‘a* to the apologetic strategy of the *da‘īs*. In doing so, he was writing a handbook for deflecting their appeals. He first identified their aim as antinomian—rendering their alleged ideology distasteful to any law-conscious Sunni.<sup>165</sup> Once the underlying Bātinī objective had been demonized, al-Ghazālī pinned it on the *da‘īs* operating covertly among his audience. Because the proselytizing *da‘ī* denied the manifest legal side of Islam, wrote al-Ghazālī, he could be all things to all people: stern and ascetic if that was the tendency he sensed in a prospective convert, frivolous and lascivious to ensnare another. The *da‘ī* bridged the gap between the Sunni’s inculcated reverence for the law and his own antinomianism by clever deception based on false inner meanings.

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<sup>163</sup> *Al-Mustazhirī* p. 157.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178, 228, *Mitha* p. 69.

<sup>165</sup> Al-Ghazālī’s Sunni audience was in constant dialogue with the boundaries of the revealed *sharī‘a*, and viewed law as indispensable to – not to say synonymous with – Islam.

Al-Ghazālī laid out the graded strategy of the *da ʿī*: “discernment and scrutiny [of a potential initiate],” “putting at ease,” “inducing doubt,” “suspending [his help to the doubting, fearful initiate],” “binding...[the initiate’s] tongue with sacred oaths,” “swindling,” “duping,” and “stripping.”<sup>166</sup> The last three artifices represented the final evisceration of the initiate’s right belief and its replacement with heresy. Al-Ghazālī’s model of Bātinī *doctrinal* deception and secrecy—their distortion of proper religious knowledge—was once again applied to their *practice*. For example, the scheming *da ʿī* gave “no personal indication that he is opposed to the whole Community and that he has cast off the Religion and the Creed, for hearts would shun him.”<sup>167</sup> The *da ʿī* insinuated himself into the initiate’s affections by parroting acceptable doctrinal positions. In other words, the *da ʿī* was being slippery about presenting a doctrine that treated religious knowledge in a slippery way. Al-Ghazālī’s enterprise was to immunize his audience—the caliph, *ʿulamāʾ*<sup>2</sup> and the populace they shepherded—against the appeal of the Bātinīs.

By erecting these defenses, al-Ghazālī—in the role of eloquent counter-propagandist—was performing an invaluable service for the Seljuq state. He was aware of the political ambitions of the faction he was opposing, and turned these ambitions against them. Their material purpose in adopting heresy “was power

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid. p. 159-165. Brackets in cited translation.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

and domination and making free with the wealth and women of the Muslims.”<sup>168</sup> The dishonesty that al-Ghazālī pins on the Ismāʿīlīs was all the more insidious for “masking a political drive in the name of religious learning.”<sup>169</sup> Perhaps the irony here was not lost on al-Ghazālī—he too was aligned with a specific political body. The fundamental distinction between al-Ghazālī and the Ismāʿīlīs, from al-Ghazālī’s perspective, was that his own beliefs accorded with right Islam. The state that sustained true beliefs against false ones merited the ideological support of these true beliefs when faced with external threats. This is, of course, a vast oversimplification, but hints at the symbiosis of doctrine and politics in medieval Islam. Al-Ghazālī seems to have suggested that there was something distasteful in the mixing of political ambition and religious teaching. Given his own political affiliation, it seems likely that he was implying *not* the immiscibility of religion and politics—later he would write that “the state and religion are twins”<sup>170</sup>—but the materially erroneous quality of the Bātinī doctrines with which they attacked the properly ordered Community of Muslims. Also objectionable was the secretive, covert nature of the Ismāʿīlī threat, which mirrored the *bātinī* bent of Ismāʿīlī doctrine.<sup>171</sup> While he valued the utility of political power in keeping order, he violently resisted its encroaching power over the religious community. Ismāʿīlī political power was especially objectionable in that it shaped the doctrine

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<sup>168</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 159.

<sup>169</sup> *Mītha* p. 40.

<sup>170</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*, in *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*. Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 195?. English trans. Nabih Amin Fāris. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963, p. 40.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

that the *daʿīs* whispered to their initiates—al-Ghazālī argued elsewhere that political power should not inform the substance of doctrine, but instead respond to doctrine. Most ominously, Ismāʿīlī political power provided a platform for antinomian heresies that threatened to destabilize Sunni society by dismantling its legal structure.

### C. Al-Ghazālī’s Use of Syllogistic Reasoning Contra the Ismāʿīlīs

Al-Ghazālī did not counter Ismāʿīlī esotericism with flat literalism, but instead gave logic—syllogistic reasoning—the leading role in *taʿwīl* (interpretation of revelation).<sup>172</sup> Reason was the arbiter that maintained a balance between internal and external religious truth. In *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, al-Ghazālī wrote: “the annulment of the outward and visible sign is the tenet of the...Bāṭiniyya, who looked, utterly one-sidedly, at one world, the Unseen, and were grossly ignorant of the balance that exists between it and the Seen.”<sup>173</sup> The Bāṭinī invalidation of reasoning prevented them from striking this balance. Instead they polarized to the esoteric extreme of textual interpretation. Al-Ghazālī here reassumed the basic polemic methodology of his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, where he did not directly attack the *conclusions* of the philosophers, but instead their misapplication of the tools of reason to certain issues of religious

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<sup>172</sup> “When reasoning and its proof show the falsity of a literal meaning of a text we know of necessity that what is intended is something different.” *al-Mustazhiri* p. 178.

<sup>173</sup> Al-Ghazālī. *Mishkāt al-Anwār* W.H.T. Gairdner. London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1924. p. 77. (henceforward *Mishkāt*)

relevance.<sup>174</sup> In the *Kitāb al-Mustazhirī*, al-Ghazālī again takes aim at the foundational religious knowledge of his opposition. The constant refrain of the work is the self-refuting nature of *ta'lim*.<sup>175</sup> The gist of the self-refutation ran like this: The Ismā'īlī claims that he must follow the infallible Imām because his independent reasoning (*ra'ī*) cannot lead him to certainty of religious truth. But it is impossible for him to know that reasoning is untrustworthy or the Imām trustworthy without reasoning his way to this truth. Nor can he believe in the necessity of following the infallible Imām on the basis of another's testimony, for such testimony is fallible and therefore, according to him, untrustworthy. If he cites textual proof, he is doubly damned, for he cannot interpret that proof save with reason, and he has no guarantee that his proof text does not bear an esoteric meaning that abrogates its apparent significance.<sup>176</sup>

On the contrary, argued al-Ghazālī, it is obligatory to use reason to specify the content of religious truth. In fact, he used syllogistic arguments in the *K. al-Mustazhirī* to defend the syllogism. The Bātinī abrogation of the *sharī'ah* was the necessary result of "swindling" men of their independent reasoning,<sup>177</sup> for the teachings of the infallible Imām were drawn from the esoteric *bātin* that only he

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<sup>174</sup> See al-Ghazālī. *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*. English trans. Michael E. Marmura, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997.

<sup>175</sup> Readers will remember that *ta'lim* was belief in the infallible Ismā'īlī Imām as the cornerstone determinant of religious truth. Al-Ghazālī enunciated the doctrine only to disprove it. Not surprisingly, his articulation was inaccurate from a contemporary Ismā'īlī standpoint. For more on this, see Corbin. For a good secondary discussion of the self-refuting character of *ta'lim*, see Mitha p. 48.

<sup>176</sup> *al-Mustazhirī* p. 177, 213.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* p. 164, 168.

could access. Here the premises of truth were sealed off from the rational faculty of individuals. Al-Ghazālī understood syllogistic reasoning as a technique taught by the prophets, but transmitted to succeeding generations by humans.<sup>178</sup> Thus one of al-Ghazālī’s primary charges against the Ismā‘īlī Imām was that he usurped the Prophet’s position in Sunni epistemology. The Bātinīs stood accused of “imposing the following of the infallible Imām and putting him, with regard to the necessity of believing him and following him—on a par with the Apostle of God—God’s blessings and peace be upon him!”<sup>179</sup> One important element that distinguished the two was Muhammad’s apologetic miracle, the Qur’ān. Muhammad’s “infallibility is known by his apologetic miracle, whereas the infallibility of him who you claim is known by your senseless jabber.”<sup>180</sup>

#### D. Al-Ghazālī’s Equivocal Approach to Reasoning, *ta‘līm*, and *taqlīd*

The way that al-Ghazālī followed the Prophet was substantially different from the way that the Ismā‘īlīs obeyed their Imām. In both cases the believer followed the dictates of his respective infallible source. However, al-Ghazālī’s following was regulated by syllogistic reasoning, while that of the Ismā‘īlīs was *taqlīd* groundless belief.<sup>181</sup> As Farouk Mitha put it:

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid. p. 212.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p. 177. See Laoust p. 364 for a perspective that emphasizes this perceived fault.

<sup>181</sup> This term, often translated as “servile conformism” has great significance for the argument of this paper. In al-Ghazālī’s context, *taqlīd* meant belief that was grounded in accepting the testimony of another on the basis of his authority, without seeking deeper foundations for that belief. Anyone whose religious knowledge was grounded in *taqlīd* was *muqallid*, a “servile conformist.” R. M. Frank wrote that “*taqlīd* i.e. unreflected or uncritical acquiescence to the teaching and beliefs of others, cannot, as such, form a basis for knowledge and therefore is not a

Al-Ghazālī's aim here is twofold: on the one hand, he wants to equate the *ta'wīm* doctrine with the negative (servile conformist) connotation of *taqlīd*, and on the other hand, he wants to infuse the positive (legal) connotation of *taqlīd* with a sense of dynamic learning which accommodates the use of reason.<sup>182</sup>

Reason was the key differentiator. Al-Ghazālī mustered proofs to ground his following of Muhammad, proofs that he claimed could not be matched by the Ismā'īlīs. Muhammad established the validity of his "mission" largely by "manifesting apologetic miracles which violated custom."<sup>183</sup> The truth of his claims was established by syllogistic and analogical reasoning from those miracles.

Al-Ghazālī claimed that this sort of reasoning was important in establishing one's certainty regarding the truth of Muhammad's testimony. While the common folk who were born Muslim and accepted the truth uncritically did not need reasoning, he who "doubts and knows the risk of servile conformism [*taqlīd*]" must seek a deeper, firmer understanding. This man "will not know the proclamation of God's unity and the prophetic mission save by reasoning about the proof which the Companions indicated and by which the Apostle called men. For he did not call them by pure arbitrariness and naked force, but rather by disclosing the ways of the proofs."<sup>184</sup> "The way to know [the

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basis for valid Belief either." "Al-Ghazali on taqlīd: scholars, theologians, and philosophers," in *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften / Majallāt Tārīkh al-'Ulūm al-'Arabiya wa l-Islāmiya*, 7 (1991-92), p. 207.

<sup>182</sup> Mitha p. 62.

<sup>183</sup> *al-Mustazhiri* p. 211.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

Apostle's veracity] is reasoning on...the apologetic miracle to deduce from it the veracity of the Apostle."<sup>185</sup>

In the *K. al-Mustazhirī*, al-Ghazālī stressed syllogistic reasoning as a route to verifying true religious beliefs primarily in the *legal* domain, as befitted the work's jurisprudential sensibilities. Al-Ghazālī first acknowledged that for a whole class of religious propositions—like the text of the Qur'ān, acts of worship, and basic obligations of the law, there ought to be no doubt among Muslims. These were *uṣūl*, the static bases of Islam and, crucially, al-Ghazālī did not here address the question of *how* one might arrive at certainty regarding these propositions. In contrast to the *uṣūl*, a vast second class of propositions “cannot be known for certain, but is open to doubt.” The particulars of the law were among these. Because the corpus of revelation was finite, it could not explicitly address all possible situations. Thus it was necessary to reason from revealed and necessary premises to solve novel problems. Al-Ghazālī identified the *‘ulamā’* as those to whom this task was entrusted. “We unquestioningly follow the ulema of the law, who are the emissaries of Muhammad...who was confirmed by dazzling apologetic miracles. So what need is there of an infallible one in this regard?”<sup>186</sup>

The domain of knowledge that was subject to reasoning—and thus a degree of uncertainty—was knowledge affecting the public sphere and the general good, especially law. “Conjecture is of no help at all to truth. But in

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid. p. 199.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 201. cf. Ebn-e Monavvar 84, where Abū Sa‘īd cited the Qur’ānic passage: “Difference of opinion within my community is a divine mercy.”

juridical matters one must follow conjecture, and this is...necessary—as in commercial and political matters and in deciding disputes for the general advantage—for all matters touching the general advantage are built on conjecture.”<sup>187</sup> In these matters, it was proper to say “I am right,” but *not* to claim absolute certainty that one knew the truth of a juridical matter (“I am certain that I am right”). The prohibition on claiming certainty in legal matters was *not* a matter of conjecture, but rather was classed among the non-negotiable fundamentals of Islam.<sup>188</sup> By subjecting legal, commercial and political matters to syllogistic/analogical reasoning, al-Ghazālī rejected the Ismā‘īlī polity and valorized his own, whose welfare depended on ‘*ulamā*’ to interpret and apply the law.<sup>189</sup>

Al-Ghazālī argued that reason was to be exercised by individuals, not by aping the reasoning of others. “As for the one who exercises personal judgment following another—it is an error, for God prescribes for him that he follow his own conjecture—and this is certain. So if he follows another’s conjecture, he errs in a decisive *uṣūl* question, and that is known by decisive consensus.”<sup>190</sup> This key “decisive consensus,” highlights the fact that syllogistic reasoning was not

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p. 202. “Conjecture” here is *ẓann* (*al-ẓann lā yughnī ‘an al-ḥaqq shay’an. w’al-faqīhāt lā budda fihā min itbā‘ al-ẓann fa huwa ḍarūra*. Arabic from al-Ghazālī. *Faḍā’ih al-Bāṭiniyya wa faḍā’il al-Mustaẓhiriyya*. Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya al-Ṭibā‘iyya, 1964, p. 96.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. Again, al-Ghazālī skirts the issue of how to arrive at certainty regarding these foundational beliefs.

<sup>189</sup> Mītha p. 63.

<sup>190</sup> *al-Mustaẓhiri*. p. 203. However, “decisive consensus” did not provide compelling reason to believe the *uṣūl*. In fact, al-Ghazālī condemned many prevalent beliefs and practices among the ‘*ulamā*’ and, as we will see, advocated mystical experience as the highest route to religious certainty.

atomized, but instead a *community* effort: reasoning individuals in dialogue to arrive at religious-legal knowledge, subject to the parameters agreed upon by their community. Relatively speaking, the Ismāʿīlīs were overly individualistic.

Mitha writes:

The *taʿlīm* doctrine places sole emphasis on the authority of a living teacher...al-Ghazālī sought to connect the Prophet's *taʿlīm* with that of a living, historical community, so that the cumulative experience of the Sunni community becomes the repository and continuing guarantor of truth for every individual believer.<sup>191</sup>

Thus al-Ghazālī viewed syllogistic reasoning as a God-given instrument by which the *ʿulamāʾ* were to regulate the life of the community via law.

#### E. The Boundaries of Reason's Domain

Al-Ghazālī's advocacy of reasoning was not an unconditional glorification of the ratiocinative faculty—this was the philosophers' mistake that he condemned in *Tahāfut*. In reading the *K. al-Mustaẓhirī*, it is vital to remember al-Ghazālī's purpose in writing, and also to take note of the limited role he grants syllogistic reasoning. On its own, logic could not provide absolute certainty regarding the truth of fundamental religious propositions. Al-Ghazālī was writing firstly to the caliph, a mere boy who had only chanced into his office by birth, and secondarily to the *ʿulamāʾ* at large. Thus one ought not to expect a frank exposition of his beliefs on a broad range of epistemological issues. His approach here was that of a legal scholar, and the problem that he addressed was framed as a threat to the legal-political underpinnings of Sunni society. Al-Ghazālī's advocacy of

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<sup>191</sup> Mitha p. 99.

reasoning did not extend beyond the boundaries of this legal-political context, and certainly did not encompass those matters of the heart that were so central to his conception of authentic Islam. However, since following the law was indispensable to interior purity and mystical experience, logic played a vital though indirect role in facilitating the Sufi way.

The *K. al-Mustaẓhirī* was written during a period in al-Ghazālī's life when, by his own account, he was "immersed in attachments which had encompassed [him] from all sides.... instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige."<sup>192</sup> This fame and prestige, as we have seen, was won in the arena of formalized disputation about arcane legal questions. These were essentially contests in applying syllogistic reasoning to *hadīth* in order to better one's opponent. While al-Ghazālī seems to have had a nagging sense that his condition was morally compromised, he remained trapped in the Baghdad bubble of wealth and power. The *K. al-Mustaẓhirī* was a product of this period, with its opposing internal tensions. His emphasis on reason reflects the current trend toward rationalistic disputation—a trend which al-Ghazālī would later condemn.

In sections of the *Kitāb al-Mustaẓhirī*, we catch glimpses of al-Ghazālī's latent dissatisfaction with reasoning, or at least his persistent awareness that its conclusions did not constitute the acme of religious knowledge. He made indirect reference to the Sufi "knower" (*al-ʿārif*), who "tastes" (*yadhūq*) certainty,

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<sup>192</sup> *al-Munqidh* p. 78-79.

“and when he is certain he does not doubt about it nor is he made to doubt by the inability of others to grasp.”<sup>193</sup> One who knew in this way was immune to the doubts and objections to his faith, for he had an unshakeable foundation to his certainty. This foundation will prove pivotal to al-Ghazālī’s conception of religious knowledge. It is difficult to say whether this Sufi sensibility was intentionally subdued elsewhere in the *K. al-Mustaẓhirī* or whether it was in a latent or emergent stage in al-Ghazālī’s mind at the time of writing.

It is possible that al-Ghazālī suppressed mystical themes in this work because of a curious correspondence between Sufism and Ismā‘īlism that he wished to obscure. Scholars have seen the two movements as products of the same basic impulse in Sunni religious culture. In his introduction to al-Ghazālī’s *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk*, F.R.C. Bagley wrote that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, “thanks in part to the work of al-Ghazālī, believers whose faith meant more than compliance with the laws and rituals of a state religion were finding another refuge, less objectionable than Ismā‘īlism, in the organized mysticism of Sufi fraternities.”<sup>194</sup> Both Sufism and Shī‘ī Ismā‘īlism were attentive to the esoteric aspect of revelation. Both developed an acute consciousness of “mystery” in Islam alongside Muhammad’s terminal revelation. Encounter with the esoteric promised deeper religious participation and privileged understanding. In some sense, for both Sufism and Shī‘ism, the door to direct interaction with God was

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<sup>193</sup> *al-Mustaẓhiri* p. 216.

<sup>194</sup> *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk* English trans. F.R.C. Bagley, *Ghazālī’s Book of Counsel for Kings*. Oxford, 1964, p. xxxii.

not slammed shut after Muhammad, but left slightly ajar. For Shī'īs, it was the Imām who maintained this connection, for Sufis the link was available to individuals through self-purification and following the *tarīqa*. Trimmingham wrote:

The Sufi guides, like the Imāms, also possess esoteric knowledge, but, unlike the Imāms, their esoteric knowledge has come to them, not by genealogical, but by spiritual progression. In fact, it came to them by a twofold action of God : by transmission from Muhammad, through a chain of elect masters, and also by direct inspiration from God.<sup>195</sup>

In the *Iḥyā'* al-Ghazālī divided all religious knowledge into two categories, as the “science of practical religion” and “science of revelation.” The *Iḥyā'* dealt only with the former, averring that “one is not permitted to record in writing” the science of revelation, “although it is the ultimate aim of saints and the desire of the eyes of the Sincere. The science of practical religion is merely a path which leads to revelation.”<sup>196</sup> The special place that al-Ghazālī granted to ineffable revealed religious knowledge is striking. He did not discard the outer law, but viewed it as groundwork upon which the elite were to build a loftier noetic or meta-noetic edifice of directly revealed knowledge, which because of its experiential character was impossible to communicate fully.

It is quite likely that al-Ghazālī's interaction with Ismā'īlī doctrines had an influence on his own thought. Of course, he did not adopt their teachings wholesale. Rather, these teachings sculpted the way he structured the basic tenets of his Sunni creed. Mitha claimed that the “ideas and ethos” of al-Ghazālī's Sunni

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<sup>195</sup> Trimmingham p. 135.

<sup>196</sup> *Kitāb al-'Ilm* p. 6.

reformation were guided by the idea of *taʿlīm*.<sup>197</sup> In the *K. al-Mustazhirī*, in opposition to Ismāʿīlī doctrine, al-Ghazālī advocated interpretation of the *sharīʿa* via syllogistic reason by individuals within a community setting. His subsequent retreat from that community and immersion in Sufism may represent a displaced attraction to the individualistic *taʿlīm* doctrines that he had condemned. As he matured, al-Ghazālī distanced himself in his writings from any religious sect, even organized Sufism, displaying a marked individualism and a strong sense of the individual's relation to God rather than to any factional denomination.<sup>198</sup> While the community was indispensable to facilitating the quest for certainty, it was peripheral to the highest goal of the *ʿālim* mystical experience. This participation in the divine was the realm of the science of revelation, beyond the ken of the common—though important—practical religious sciences

### Chapter Two Summary

In this chapter I outlined al-Ghazālī's political theory, centered on the place of the caliph as a mediating tie between (1) the Islamic community guided by the *ʿulamāʾ*, (2) Seljuq coercive force, and (3) divine authority. The revealed law (*sharīʿa*) was the material that constituted this tie. In al-Ghazālī's opinion, the law was worthless without the caliph. The wings of control that met at the caliph each played a different role with respect to law (1) the *ʿulamāʾ* interpreted and

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<sup>197</sup> Mītha p. 101.

<sup>198</sup> Hamid Algar has taken a strong stance on this point: "Very probably Ghazali was among those rare Sufis who had a valid and comprehensive entry onto the path without the benefit of a living human master. In other words, he was among those we may classify as *uwaysi*. The *uwaysi* Sufis are those whose initiation into *taṣawwuf* is directly by means of the spiritual personality of the Prophet." Algar p. 20.

applied law, (2) the secular rulers used law to maintain order and guaranteed it by force of arms, and (3) divine authority had originally generated law and continued to sanction the community that it ordered. Following the *sharīʿa* was a necessary component of the Sufi way, and thus of the mystical experience that, al-Ghazālī believed, grounded religious certainty. The Ismaʿīlīs, on the other hand, had a faulty conception of religious knowledge, which invalidated personal reasoning (*rāʾy*) and entailed blindly following the Ismaʿīlī Imām. Their flawed epistemic approach threatened the Sunni polity by allegedly abrogating its code of law, the *sharīʿa*, which was crucial both for public order and for personal piety.

In the next chapter I will examine al-Ghazālī's conception of religious knowledge, especially the privileged place of mystical experience in his epistemology.

## Al-Ghazālī's Religious Epistemology

I have begun the work with the book of knowledge because it is of the utmost importance to determine first of all the knowledge which God has, through his Apostle, ordered the elite to seek....and also to show the deviation of the people of this age from right conduct, their delusion as by a glistening mirage, and their satisfaction with the husks of knowledge rather than the pith.

*Iḥyāʾ fī ʿUlūm al-Dīn*—I.1.3

In this chapter I will outline al-Ghazālī's hierarchical taxonomy of religious knowledge. In his ideal epistemic scenario, the knower becomes certain of his knowledge through mystical experience, on a model heavily informed by Sufi theory and practice. The goals of knowledge for al-Ghazālī were intimacy with God on earth and beatitude after death. Though the body, earthly life, and governmental structures were adjuncts to achieving these goals, they were not expendable. The story of al-Ghazālī's crisis of certainty as related in *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* is an ideal point of entry for this analysis. I will also rely heavily on the opening section of the *Iḥyāʾ*, the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* or *Book of Knowledge*. This text lays the epistemological foundation for al-Ghazālī's greatest work, and makes explicit connections between religious epistemology and politics. I will also refer to portions of al-Ghazālī's heavily mystical *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār*, as well as a small section of *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn* that explores the relationship between mystical experience and lawful conduct.

## I. *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*

### A. Certainty Under Siege

Early in his putative autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, al-Ghazālī introduced the dominant theme of the work: his personal quest for absolute certainty.

I began by saying to myself: “What I seek is knowledge of the true meaning of things. Of necessity, therefore, I must inquire into just what the true meaning of knowledge is.” Then it became clear to me that sure and certain knowledge is that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility or error and deception, nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility....whatever I did not know in this way and was not certain of with this kind of certainty was unreliable and unsure knowledge...I then scrutinized all my cognitions and found myself devoid of any knowledge answering the previous description except in the case of sense-data and self-evident truths.<sup>199</sup>

It struck al-Ghazālī that even data from his own senses sometimes deceived him, as in the case of optical illusions. Doubt began to assail his rational faculty as well, for he could not prove that there did not exist another faculty, higher than reason, which presided over reason just as reason presided over sense perception. As examples of such potential extra-rational faculties, he cited dreams and the sleep of death. He even suggested the possibility “that this state beyond reason is that which the sufis claim is theirs.”<sup>200</sup> Stripped of his most basic indices of certainty, al-Ghazālī resolved to fight back, but he could not depend on his rational faculty to construct a trustworthy proof that might

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<sup>199</sup> *al-Munqidh* p. 55-56.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57.

demonstrate its own reliability. The greatest mind in Sunni Islam was confounded, reduced to skepticism “in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine.”

Then, abruptly, he wrote,

my soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge. Therefore, whoever thinks that the unveiling of truth depends upon precisely formulated proofs has indeed straitened the broad mercy of God.”<sup>201</sup>

Having regained his footing, al-Ghazālī drew himself up to survey the epistemological terrain, assessing the knowledge offered by the philosophers and the Ismāʿīlīs. He found that both lacked the immovable certainty for which he hungered; they had “no cure which saves anyone from the darkness of conflicting opinions.”<sup>202</sup> Only in the ways of the Sufis did he find a hope for intellectual security, for being certain of truth by experience rather than simple knowing about such certainty.<sup>203</sup> Al-Ghazālī realized that he had stretched cerebral methods to their limit—what he lacked could be achieved only “by fruitional experience and actually engaging in the way.”<sup>204</sup>

The first step in this direction was the most painful. Sufism, as we have seen, was built upon ascetic purification. Only by excising worldly attachment

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. p. 76.

<sup>203</sup> “Then it became clear to me that their most distinctive characteristic is something that can be attained, not by study, but rather by fruitional experience and the state of ecstasy...How great a difference there is between your *knowing* the definitions and causes and conditions of health and satiety and your *being* healthy and sated!” Ibid. p. 78.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

could the seeker hope to harvest the fruits of mystical experience. In Baghdad, al-Ghazālī confessed, “I was applying myself to sciences unimportant and useless in the pilgrimage to the hereafter.” Moreover, as a teacher he was “instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige.”<sup>205</sup>

These were the internal factors that prompted al-Ghazālī’s flight from Baghdad, after a momentous struggle to sever his attachments. He described the years that followed as a time devoted to “the purification of my soul and the cultivation of virtues and cleansing my heart for the remembrance of God Most High, in the way I had learned from the writings of the sufis.”<sup>206</sup> Such attention to personal sanctification in light of impending death and judgment was to inform all of al-Ghazālī’s subsequent work.

### B. Extrinsic Factors in the Crisis: *al-Munqidh* Under Siege

How ought readers to regard al-Ghazālī’s account of his life in *al-Munqidh*? Critics have voiced serious doubts about the book’s sincerity. The strongest critique of this sort has come from Dr. ‘Abd al-Dā‘im al-Baqarī, in his 1943 book *I‘tirāfāt al-Ghazālī*. According to a survey of this work undertaken by J.M. ‘Abd al-Jalīl, al-Baqarī accuses al-Ghazālī of fabricating his dramatic tale, with the intent to launch himself into the pantheon of great Muslim intellectuals. At best, he concocted a fictional autobiography to provoke self-examination and reform among his readers. At worst, he indulged in self-aggrandizement of the very sort

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

that he supposedly renounced upon fleeing Baghdad. Al-Baqarī interpreted al-Ghazālī's *Munqidh* in light of a passage in the *Ihya'*<sup>207</sup> that excused lying when it was the only means to achieve a worthy end.

ʿAbd al-Jalīl rejects the most acerbic accusations of al-Baqarī's thesis as simplistic and manifestly polemic. However, he applauds al-Baqarī for having raised the important issue of al-Ghazālī's sincerity in *al-Munqidh*.<sup>208</sup> ʿAbd al-Jalīl acknowledges that al-Ghazālī did not disclose the whole story in his account, but rather omitted the determining political factors that coincided with the major events of his life. This fact alone, however, "*ne suffit pas pour déposséder al-Ghazālī de sa réputation de probité intellectuelle et de sincérité morale.*"<sup>209</sup>

Momentous political circumstances did, in fact, surround his epistemic crisis. Hogga emphasizes al-Ghazālī's role as complicit ideologue for the Seljuq state prior to 488/1095, and points out that his epistemological wobblings coincided with the disintegration of that state, which had so faithfully promoted his religious partisans under Nizām al-Mulk. Upon the successive deaths of the vizier, sultan, and caliph and the uncertainty that ensued, al-Ghazālī's snug tie to the power apparatus was rudely ruptured. Not only was his future in doubt, but the new sultan, Barkyārūq, made common cause with the Ismāʿīlīs in order to

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<sup>207</sup> *Ihya'* (Cairo 1933/1352), III, 199ss.

<sup>208</sup> ʿAbd al-Jalīl, J.-M. "Autour de la Sincérité d'al-Ghazālī," in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, Damascus: L'Institut Français de Damas, 1956, p. 65.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67. Emphasis in original.

augment his military might.<sup>210</sup> While al-Ghazālī may have been an accomplice to Seljuq rule, he was no sycophant. In this situation al-Ghazālī faced a choice: either continue in state service and compromise his doctrinal allegiances, or repudiate his attachment to the state and admit his complicity in the current debacle. He chose the latter.<sup>211</sup>

The self-criticism engendered by this trying period was recorded in *al-Munqidh*. It is quite likely that al-Ghazālī wrote the book with didactic goals in mind.<sup>212</sup> He may have omitted the context of his crisis in order to drive home his main points. Happily, any intentional didactic distortions in *al-Munqidh* only assist in highlighting the major vectors within al-Ghazālī's thought. Whether a real epistemological crisis revolutionized his approach to knowledge, was a revisionist tale indicative of later influences, or only served to temporally localize thoughts that al-Ghazālī held all his life, it matters here only that during the height of his scholarly production he espoused theories of knowledge consonant with the story he tells in *al-Munqidh*. There is no reason to doubt that this was the case.

### III. The *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*

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<sup>210</sup> Hogga p. 145. "Alors que Muhammad et son frère Sanjar étaient des sunnites convaincus, respectueux de l'orthodoxie seljūqide, Barkiyārūq avait des sympathies pour les bātinistes avec lesquels il noua alliance. Celle-ci portait un coup grave au compromis entre le califat et le sultanat, puisque le premier défenseur de la dynastie ʿabbaside, le sultan seljūqide, adoptait une attitude littéralement subversive pour l'État qu'il était chargé de protéger."

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>212</sup> Note that the *Munqidh* was penned more than a decade after the events that it described.

The theory of knowledge that al-Ghazālī enunciates in *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* structures and expands the epistemological suggestions of the *Munqidh* narrative.<sup>213</sup> It also confirms al-Ghazālī’s commitment to the factual nature of that narrative by frequently alluding to his regrettable pre-crisis life. His unfurled theory of knowledge rested upon several key concepts. Chief among these was the foundational supposition that the present life with all its physical trappings was only a way station on the path to the hereafter. The body “serves the same purpose...on the path of God as the she-camel does for a man on the pilgrim route.”<sup>214</sup> Like many of al-Ghazālī’s writings, the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* evinced an abiding consciousness of death and the reckoning immediately to follow.

#### A. The Importance of Certainty for Every Muslim

In order to situate oneself favorably in the hereafter, it was necessary to know how to conduct one’s life. “The greatest achievement in the opinion of man is eternal happiness and the most excellent thing is the way which leads to it. This happiness will never be attained except through knowledge and works, and works are impossible without the knowledge of how they are done.”<sup>215</sup> This knowledge could not be based on shallow, passive awareness, but required certainty commensurate with the individual’s capacity for doubt. Religious, law-

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<sup>213</sup> Like many contemporary writers, al-Ghazālī began his great work with a discourse on knowledge. This tactic displayed the prevalent belief that the way one framed one’s epistemology would affect the treatment of each succeeding topic. The jeremiad-like decline theme of the *Ihyāʾ* was also a familiar fixture of the genre, but one that al-Ghazālī developed to an extraordinary degree in accordance with his renewing goals.

<sup>214</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*, p. 142.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

abiding common folk had no need of subtle justifications for their belief, and ought to be let alone in their blissful ignorance.<sup>216</sup> Bombarding them with unsolicited apologetic justifications, al-Ghazālī believed, would only undermine their religious certainty and their hope of beatitude.

What al-Ghazālī was referring to was broad, underlying certainty of religious truth. Those with more inquiring minds and a higher level of education would not be satisfied with hearing and believing. They would require more satisfying demonstrations in order to instill certainty of their beliefs.<sup>217</sup> A basic level of knowledge was obligatory on every Muslim, such as knowledge of the five pillars and of the ordinances of worship. If one's mind questioned the principles of Islam, it was obligatory to see one's doubts satisfied. "Thus if one should feel any passing thought (*khātir*) of doubt as to what the...words of the confession of faith mean, it would be obligatory upon him to acquire the knowledge of whatever would remove that doubt."<sup>218</sup> Such an event was nothing out of the ordinary. Al-Ghazālī believed that the Muslim life was one of constant inquiry, an incessant quest to quell the skeptical thoughts from which "every servant suffers, in the course of his life, both during the day and the night... in the performance of his acts of worship and daily transactions."<sup>219</sup>

### **B. Particular Knowledge and Underlying Certainty: Legal and Mystical**

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

Thus the preoccupation of al-Ghazālī's epistemology was not the inner workings of the intellectual mechanism, but instead certainty that the propositions that one believed were in fact true.<sup>220</sup> Al-Ghazālī did not, however, dismiss the importance of knowing the particular precepts of Islam. As we have mentioned above, al-Ghazālī divided the sciences<sup>221</sup> of the hereafter into the science of revelation and the science of practical religion. The *Iḥyā'* dealt only with the science of practical religion, which included "knowledge as well as action in accordance with that knowledge."<sup>222</sup>

The science of practical religion was divided into outer and inner branches, representing the body and the heart respectively. The outer branch forked into (1) acts of worship and (2) usages of life, the inner into (3) praiseworthy and (4) blameworthy portions.<sup>223</sup> These four divisions provided the structure of the *Iḥyā'*. The work's first half (1 & 2) dealt with legal and ethical matters—ritual and behavior. The latter half (3 & 4), more directly associated with Sufism, was divided into discussion of destructive practices and of salvific practices. Yet the *Iḥyā'*, so often regarded as a Sufi work, did not even begin to address the mystical half of religious knowledge, the indescribable "science of

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<sup>220</sup> According to Jabre, al-Ghazālī himself makes abundantly clear that certainty was "le grand problème de sa vie." Jabre, Farid. *La notion de certitude selon Ghazali*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958, p. 21.

<sup>221</sup> Note that the word "sciences" (علوم) is simply the plural of "knowledge" (علم). The "sciences of the hereafter," and for that matter "*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*" could be translated "knowledges." This translation would misconstrue the disciplinary nature of the concept in question (علوم could also be "branches" or "fields") but the etymological affinity between the terms is worth pointing out.

<sup>222</sup> *Kitāb al-'Ilm* p. 6.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

revelation,” which according to al-Ghazālī was the goal of the science of practical religion. Many of the topics treated in the first half of the *Ihya*<sup>2</sup> were eminently practical in character, dealing with the specific content of knowledge and its application to life. Some such sections were “Mysteries of fasting,” “Rules for reciting the Qur<sup>3</sup>ān,” “Rules of eating,” “Rules of travel,” and “Rules of earning one’s livelihood.” These topics were not oblique to mystical knowing. Rather, properly ordered conduct was a crucial concomitant of mystical experience.

Following the laws of Islam remained important to al-Ghazālī even at his most otherworldly moments. Knowledge of the science of practical religion necessarily preceded approaching the science of revelation, which he linked with Sufism (though never explicitly equating the two). “He who first acquires versatility in tradition and learning and then turns to Sufism comes off well, he who takes to Sufism before learning exposes himself to danger.”<sup>224</sup> Al-Ghazālī here applied the progressive Sufi pedagogical theme, in which new knowledge was to be acquired only in “the proper time and season.”<sup>225</sup> Most minds were not equipped to deal with the most sublime secrets. By building upon the foundation of practical religion, however, the seeker could begin his approach to knowing God.<sup>226</sup> Attention to ethical matters and practices of worship was part of the larger process of ascetic purification that readied the seeker for mystical experience.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. p. 131.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. p. 135. “The goal of the science of practical religion is revelation and the goal of revelation is to know God.”

By the science of the road of the hereafter we mean the knowledge of how to remove from the surface of this mirror that filth which bars the knowing of God, His attributes, and His works. The mirror is cleansed and purified by desisting from lust and emulating the prophets in all their states. Thus to whatever extent the heart is cleansed and made to face the truth, to that same extent will it reflect His reality. But there is no way to this except through discipline..., learning, and instruction.<sup>227</sup>

Even the slightest details were important, as al-Ghazālī made clear in the *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn*. “When you accustom yourself to pay attention to equity in niceties (*daqāʾiq*) of movements, uprightness and soundness will become a mode rooted in your heart and its forms will be right, in which way you will be ready to receive the form of happiness.”<sup>228</sup> In the present life, the most important obligation for Muslims was aligning the heart toward God and turning it away from the world. In part, this was an *outside-in* process. “The only way for the heart to have freedom of action is by means of adjusting the members of the body and adjusting their movements; and for this reason this world has become the place where the harvest to be reaped in the next world is produced.”<sup>229</sup> The law enjoined a whole set of regulations based on the practice of Muhammad, right down to the order in which one clipped one’s fingernails.<sup>230</sup> In al-Ghazālī’s view, these were not arbitrary obsessions, but rather had momentous hidden significance.

Among deeds there are some which have an effect on preparation for happiness or misery in the next world by an immeasurable property

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid. p. 48.

<sup>228</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿArbaʿīn*. English trans. Robson, James. as “Al-Ghazali and the Sunna,” in *Muslim World*, 45 (1955), p. 329.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. p. 328.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. p. 325.

which cannot be known apart from the light of prophecy. So when you see that the Prophet turned away from one of two things which were permissible to the other and preferred it to it in spite of his ability to choose either, know that by the light of prophecy he became acquainted with a property in it and received a revelation about it from the world above.<sup>231</sup>

There was an important sense in which the experiential, mystical nature of Sufism actually *magnified* the injunctions of *sharīʿa* the rather than transcending them. Most of al-Ghazālī's "learned men of the hereafter" had a knowledge "obtained through works and continued [sic] self-mortification."<sup>232</sup> Thus when the Ismaʿīlīs abrogated the *sharīʿa*, they did not lose a merely superficial or practical aspect of Islam. They were demolishing the platform on which authentic, inward-looking Islam was built. Al-Ghazālī's emphasis on right practice can be viewed as a jurisprudential riposte to Ismaʿīlī esotericism. Following the footsteps of the Prophet by imitating his practice was a sort of corporeal exegesis that tapped the rich inner meaning of these actions, knowledge of which was transmitted *not* in textual form, but by the *action* of speaking the *hadīth*.<sup>233</sup> Such deeply meaningful conduct was indispensable to the seeker after mystical experience. Since, as stated in Chapter Two, the law was

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid. p. 330

<sup>232</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* p. 191.

<sup>233</sup> This "corporeal exegesis" paralleled Qurʾānic interpretation, which remained central to Sufism and to al-Ghazālī. His most mystical work, the *Mishkāṭ*, is an exposition of one Qurʾānic verse. The laws that governed the actions of corporeal exegesis were often described in revealed text. The matter is further compounded by the fact that al-Ghazālī's own text often exegeted Qurʾānic passages, and was itself complex enough to be in need of exegesis. ; Note Algar p. 30: "For Ghazali...*taṣawwuf* is something that grows directly out of an immersion in the Qurʾān and in the Sunna and does not in any way displace adherence to the Shariʿa. On the contrary, it is a form of deeper loyalty and adherence to the Shariʿa."

interpreted and applied using syllogistic reasoning, there was an indirect but important sense in which such reasoning contributed to mystical experience in al-Ghazālī's view.

This emphasis on orthopraxy looked askance the arcane accretions of the scholarly community. "If dependence on hearsay is unsatisfactory imitation, dependence on books and compositions is worse, because they are a recent novelty, none of which existed during the time of the Companions and the early days of the followers."<sup>234</sup> Al-Ghazālī's schema vilified misdirected erudition, which often took the form of paying unwarranted tribute to the faculty of human reason.

### C. The Place of Reason

Al-Ghazālī regarded syllogistic/analogical reasoning as useful in several ways. It was to be applied in interpreting and applying the law, and managing public affairs for the general good, as we saw in Chapter Two—this was the domain of the jurists, the community of *fuqahā'* of which al-Ghazālī was by training a leading member. Reasoning was also important to the discipline of *kalām*, which al-Ghazālī viewed primarily as an apologetic tool. *Kalām* used rational argumentation to show that it was reasonable to believe in the tenets of Islam. "As to theology (*al-kalām*), it is solely designed to safeguard the articles of faith which the followers of the Usage of the Prophet and righteous Fathers transmitted down to us, and nothing else. Anything beyond this would be an

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<sup>234</sup> *Kitāb al-'Ilm*. 210.

attempt to reveal the truth of things in other than its proper way.”<sup>235</sup> Al-Ghazālī severely circumscribed the domain of *kalām*

The theologian is not distinguished from the common folk except through the art of argumentation and safeguarding [the law]. However, to know God, His attributes, and His works as well as all that we referred to under the science of revelation does not result from theology--in fact, theology is almost a veil and a barrier against it. These are not obtained except through self-mortification which God has made the pre-requisite for guidance.<sup>236</sup>

Al-Ghazālī did not discard reason altogether, but relegated it to a second tier of importance because it could not provide the most acute minds with certainty of their beliefs.

#### D. *Yaqīn*: Homonymous Bedrock of Certainty

Al-Ghazālī associated this certainty with the term *yaqīn*, which Faris translates as “certainty.” *Yaqīn*, wrote al-Ghazālī, was a homonym that referred to two different types of belief working in tandem. They were subject to a clear relative hierarchy.

##### 1. Reason-Based Certainty

The first *yaqīn* was possessed in some degree by all believers. It can be loosely described as belief founded by syllogistic reasoning upon tangible proofs. Al-Ghazālī partitioned this *yaqīn* into four strata, representing progressively stronger levels of certainty. (1) (*shakk*) The evidences for and against a proposition are balanced, resulting in a state of indecision. (2) (*ẓann*) A

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid. p. 55.

preponderance of evidence points to one conclusion, but leaves the alternative open.<sup>237</sup> (3) (*i 'tqād muqārib li-l-yaqīn*) One is so convinced of a belief that “he is taken up by it to such an extent that nothing else seems possible to him.” This stratum of reason-based belief presupposed shallowness of inquiry, for if the believer would only look more closely he would find occasion for doubt. As it is, however, he remains dogged in his beliefs, often in the context of a supportive community that “is certain of the authenticity of its own system (*madhhab*) and the infallibility of its own *imām* or leader. Should any one member of these groups be reminded of the possibility that his *imām* might be mistaken he would resent it very much and refuse to admit it.”<sup>238</sup> (4) (*ma 'rifah haqīqiyah*) The believer in this condition has “definite knowledge resulting from evidence which leaves no place for doubt or any possibility of doubt.” Al-Ghazālī’s explanation of this stratum of reason-based belief was strangely vague. He cited an example of this “definite knowledge”—the existence of the eternal—that seems at first glance to undermine it. He pointed out that there is nothing axiomatic about the existence of the eternal, unless one is inclined to accept beliefs on hearing them, like the “common folk.”<sup>239</sup> Another class of believers in this category believes in the eternal on the basis of evidence. They have an axiomatic belief that there can be no effect without a cause, and trace the cause-effect chain back to a first cause. Al-

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<sup>237</sup> Note that this was the category of thought that dealt with rules surrounding the caliphate, about which there was plenty of room for difference of opinion. Crone *God’s Rule* p. 237.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. p. 193.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. p. 194.

Ghazālī did not deny the real certainty of this sort of belief—indeed, it is free from doubt, and so constitutes *yaqīn*. “Both the philosophers and the scholastic theologians require the lack of doubt before they use this term. Every part of knowledge which is free from doubt is called certainty (*yaqīn*). Consequently certainty is never described with weakness because there are no degrees in the negation of doubt.”<sup>240</sup> In other words, this *yaqīn* is binary—either one has it completely, or not at all

The examples that al-Ghazālī offered of *maʿrifa ḥaqīqīyya* were curiously trivial, almost mocking. The example of knowledge known by tradition is that Mecca exists. The example of knowledge known by experimentation is “that cooked scammony is a laxative.”<sup>241</sup> This was certainly undeniable, though hardly the sort of sublime truth in which one might prefer to invest hope for the afterlife.

## 2. Certainty Based on Mystical Experience

With an understated flourish, al-Ghazālī turned to the second definition of *yaqīn*. This is the faith that belongs to “the jurists and the Sufis as well as most of the learned men. In it, no attention is paid to either conjecture or doubt but rather to the fact that it takes hold of and prevails over the mind.” This *yaqīn*, unlike the first, is not binary, but “may be described with either strength or weakness.” Al-Ghazālī argued that *both* the first and the second definitions of *yaqīn* are operative

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid. p. 195.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

in the belief structures of the knower.<sup>242</sup> The two are unequal in value, however, for “the second *yaqīn* is the nobler of the two and it is the fruit of the first as well as its life and value.” It utterly transcends the mere absence of doubt that is established by proofs, and takes on a life of its own that is the fruit of its *experiential* interaction with the believer. It also transcends reliance on the rational faculty, so that the believer need not feel frustration when “secondary causes...fail him,” for he sees them as mere “instruments in the hand of God.”<sup>243</sup> This *yaqīn* is not a composite knowledge, but instead an underlying current of complete confidence that grounds its particular appurtenances. The method of attaining this *yaqīn*, said al-Ghazālī, partakes in the prophetic mode of transmission. “What the prophets handed down belongs in its entirety to the means whereby the *yaqīn* is secured. For the *yaqīn* represents a specific knowledge while its appurtenances are the bits of information which are contained in the law, and there is no hope of ever counting them.”<sup>244</sup>

Al-Ghazālī made it clear that *yaqīn* was the basis of knowledge. It did not encompass all valid forms of knowing, except insofar as they would topple if not for *yaqīn*. “The *yaqīn* is like the tree ; these qualities of the heart are like the branches which shoot out from them ; and the good works and acts which result

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid. p. 195-196.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. p. 197-199. For the sake of clarity I have removed some brackets from the translation transcribed here. In Faris’ translation, these brackets indicate manuscript inconsistencies, not the translator’s addenda.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid. p. 197.

from these qualities are like the fruits and blossoms which sprout out from the branches. The *yaqīn*, then, is the origin and the foundation.”<sup>245</sup>

With this second *yaqīn*, we approach the heart of al-Ghazālī’s epistemology: the ultimate basis of certainty regarding religious propositions. This basis was the “light” of *al-Munqidh*, the “key to most knowledge.” It was also tied to the “science of revelation,” and similar to the knowledge possessed by the prophets, who were qualitatively different from those who attempted to ratiocinate their way to certainty. In short, the summit of knowledge for al-Ghazālī was mystical encounter with God.

The science of revelation is the science of esoterics which is the goal of all sciences. Furthermore, the science of revelation is the science concerned with the saints and the favourites of God. It stands for a light which shines in the heart when it is cleansed and purified of its blameworthy qualities....Through it, these truths are clarified until the true knowledge of the essence of God is attained.<sup>246</sup>

While from a human perspective certainty followed an ascetic struggle toward God, in reality certainty was a divine gift, as al-Ghazālī experienced in *al-Munqidh*. “It is not possible for any man to have any communication with God except through revelation or through a veil or through a messenger whom God sends and instructs to declare His will. Whatever knowledge is sent by the grace of God to the human heart is transmitted by the angels.”<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid. p. 200. One might point out that fruits and blossoms are the means of regenerating trees. “Good works and acts” are indispensable to the maintenance of the *yaqīn* tree species. Nevertheless, *yaqīn* is clearly primary.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid. p. 46-48.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid. p. 126-127.

Innumerable examples from al-Ghazālī's work could be cited in praise of this mode of knowing. One additional passage will serve to show that for al-Ghazālī, the foundation of religious certainty was mystical knowledge arrived at by following a path of purification and contemplation. It was likened to light or direct vision.

This, according to the learned men ... is the "certain truth," a truth which they have perceived inwardly through contemplation. This contemplation is more real and clearer than seeing with the eye. In it they rose above the stage of accepting truth on authority.<sup>248</sup> They are like those who having heard, believed then having seen for themselves were confirmed in their belief....Happiness lies beyond the science of revelation which in turn comes after the science of practical religion, the last being the following of the path of the hereafter.<sup>249</sup>

The knowledge that mystical experience provided was compatible with proper syllogistically reasoned conclusions or with the revealed law. The discoveries that the *murīd* made about the Qurʾān were often new to the "books of commentary and remain unknown to the best commentators." But the traditional commentators would surely accept such discoveries with praise as "the outcome of the workings of a pure heart and the gracious blessings of God on the high mind which aspires to Him."<sup>250</sup> Here we find another exegetical mode, an exegesis of direct mystical experience that returns always to the Qurʾān. Conversely, when some Sufis "disparage the intellect and reason as well as the

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<sup>248</sup> The original here reads: *taraqū fihu ʿan ḥadd al-taqlīd li-mujarrad al-samāʿ*, emphasizing that mystical knowers excel those who "know" by *taqlīd*. *Taqlīd* was fine as an initial condition, but after first hearing, those who wonder must seek direct vision. Arabic from al-Ghazālī. *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*. Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubra, 195?, p. 54.

<sup>249</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*, p. 140.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

rational and the reasonable,”<sup>251</sup> al-Ghazālī calls their attack misguided. They understand “reason” (*ʿaql*) to mean the “argumentation and debate over contradictions and requisites which is scholastic theology.” This, according to al-Ghazālī, was the term’s “current and well-established usage.”<sup>252</sup> If these Sufis understood that real intellection denoted a properly functioning rational intellect grounded in the certainty of mystical experience and supporting that experience via the law, they would not disagree.

### III. *Mishkāt al-Anwār*

*Mishkāt al-Anwār* (*The Niche for Lights*) is widely recognized al-Ghazālī’s most mystical work. It is structured around the exposition of the “Light Verse” (S. 24, 35).<sup>253</sup> Al-Ghazālī maps this verse onto the human mind by anagogy, where the different items (niche, lamp, glass, oil, tree, light) represent grades of intellection. He explores this taxonomy, linking it closely to Sufi mysticism.

#### A. Mystical Knowing in the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*

In the *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī made clear that the highest mode of certainty is mystical and experiential in character, not arrived at by syllogistic reasoning but instead by a light poured into the soul. This very same light had illuminated the prophets (though not to the same degree). In the *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī tied vision,

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid. p. 235.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> “God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance. It is lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; God guides to His light whom He will.” Dawood, N.J. Trans. *The Koran*. New York: Penguin, 1999. p. 249.

the intellect, revealed Scripture, and God by reference to the idea of light. The term “light” refers truly to God alone,<sup>254</sup> though in a derivative way one can speak of the light of vision in the eye. Further, “intelligence is more properly called Light than is the eye.”<sup>255</sup> The Qurʾān activates the intelligence by shining truth upon it, “therefore the Koran is most properly of all called Light, just as the light of the sun is called light.”<sup>256</sup> The subtext to al-Ghazālī’s epistemology again turns out to be a revealed text.

It is vital to note that in *Mishkāt* al-Ghazālī recognizes that one can approach certainty from a rational, non-mystical “scientific” standpoint, which he subordinates to the experiential. This hierarchical distinction comes out in reference to the intoxicated mysticism of al-Hallāj, which al-Ghazālī is careful to skirt.

These gnostics, on their return from their Ascent into the heaven of Reality, confess with one voice that they saw nought existent there save the One Real. Some of them, however, arrived at this scientifically, and others experimentally and subjectively. From these last the plurality of things fell away in its entirety. They were drowned in the absolute Unitude, and their intelligences were lost in Its abyss. Therein became they as dumbfounded things.<sup>257</sup>

It is appropriate to this stage of dumbfounded divine experience that it “be hidden away and not spoken of,” thereby transcending language among the

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<sup>254</sup> *Mishkāt al-Anwār* p. 45.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* p. 47.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60. The word here translated “gnostics” (*ʿarīfūn*) might be better rendered “knowers” to avoid misleading associations with Neo-Platonic Gnosticism.

“mysteries which we are not at liberty to discuss.”<sup>258</sup> Those of mystical experience “have the direct intuition of Allah,” those of the scientific approach “infer Him from His works. The former is the rank of the Saint-Friends of God, the latter of the Learned ....After these two grades there remains nothing except that of the careless, on whose faces is the veil.”<sup>259</sup>

Al-Ghazālī established the relative worth of the different grades of knowledge in a hierarchy towards the end of the *Mishkāṭ*. This taxonomy of mental faculties lists and ranks “the gradation of human Spirits,” all of which in themselves are lights of varying brightness.<sup>260</sup> Most elementary is the “sensory spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-ḥisās*), which represents sensory apperception. Above this is the “imaginative spirit,” (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*), which stores data gathered by the senses and re-presents them on command. The third grade is the “intelligential spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-ʿaqlī*). It is possessed only by adults, and grasps supersensory concepts. Fourth is the “discursive spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*), which “takes the data of pure reason and combines them, arranges them as premises, and deduces from them informing knowledge.”<sup>261</sup> It can reapply itself to its own conclusions, using them as premises from which to deduce new conclusions and continue thus “multiplying itself *ad infinitum*” (*ilā ghayr nihāya*). In short, this is syllogistic reasoning.

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

The fifth and highest faculty of the human intellect is the “transcendental prophetic spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*). In explaining this most sublime mode of intellection, al-Ghazālī foreshadowed his doubt of the rational faculty in *al-Munqidh*.

And here, a word to thee, thou recluse in thy rational world of the intelligence! Why should it be impossible that beyond reason there should be a further plane, on which appear things which do not appear on the plane of the intelligence, just as it is possible for the intelligence itself to be a plane above the discriminating faculty and the senses.... Beware of making...ultimate perfection stop at thyself!<sup>262</sup>

He encouraged his audience to

strive earnestly to become one of those who experience mystically something of the prophetic spirit ; for *saints* have a specially large portion thereof. If thou canst not compass this, then try, by the discipline of the syllogisms and analogies... to be one of those who have knowledge of it scientifically. But if this, too, is beyond thy powers, then the least thou canst do is to become one of those who simply have faith in it....Scientific knowledge is above faith, and mystic experience is above knowledge. The province of mystic experience is feeling; of knowledge, ratiocination ; and of faith, bare acceptance of the creed of one’s fathers, together with an unsuspecting attitude.<sup>263</sup>

Here we can correlate the “prophetic spirit” with the second *yaqīn* described above, in that both may be possessed to greater or lesser degree; neither is binary.

“Mystical experience” in the above passage is *al-dhawq al-khaṣṣ al-nabawī*, and those who take part<sup>264</sup> in it are the *ahl al-dhawq*. This group excels the *ahl al-‘ilm*, those who know “scientifically.” As we saw in Chapter Two, *dhawq* (taste)

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid. p. 83. “bare acceptance” is, of course, *taqlīd*

<sup>264</sup> “become one of those who experience mystically something of the prophetic spirit” = *an yuṣīra min ahl al-dhawq bi-shay’in min dhālik*

represented experiential interaction with the divine, while *ilm* was a term specific to cerebral intellection.

### B. A Challenge to al-Ghazālī's Elevation of Mystical Knowledge

In an article entitled "al-Ghazālī's Supreme Way to Know God," Binyamin Abrahamov has argued that al-Ghazālī considered syllogistic reasoning to be the "best means" of knowing religious truth.<sup>265</sup> If correct, this thesis is fatal to mine. Abrahamov makes several valid and important points: (1) al-Ghazālī did not regard conclusions arrived at by mystical experience as incompatible with those deduced by a properly-functioning reasoning spirit, and even implied that in very rare cases—one or two a century—individuals might arrive at certainty through perspicacious use of reasoning.<sup>266</sup> (2) in some texts (notably the *Iljām al-ʿAwām* and *al-Qistas al-Mustaqīm*, which are not discussed here) al-Ghazālī advocated reasoning without explicitly subordinating it to mystical experience, (3) mystical experience could not occur in a vacuum, but was the culmination of study and discipline that prepared the seeker to receive it,<sup>267</sup> (4) al-Ghazālī sometimes crafted his arguments to suit his audience, and usually did not reveal his fully developed thinking, (5) al-Ghazālī often referred to the Sufis as a third

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<sup>265</sup> Abrahamov, Binyamin. "Al-Ghazali's supreme way to know God," in *Studia Islamica*, 77, (1993), p. 141.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. p. 143. cf. Frank "Taqīd" p. 218.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p. 151.

party, and avoided aligning his views exactly with theirs,<sup>268</sup> (6) skill in reasoning can be God-given or honed by practice and instruction.<sup>269</sup>

On the whole, however, Abrahamov's argument is misguided. It amplifies the portions of al-Ghazālī's writings that do not explicitly subordinate reason to mystical experience. It then interprets passages that mention reason *and* mystical experience in light of those that discuss reason alone. Abrahamov arrives at conclusions—for instance, that “al-Ghazālī regards the syllogism as the best way to attain knowledge of God,” or that many prophets were “persons that have the inborn quality to use syllogisms, which enable them by stages to reach the rank of prophets”—that that are diametrically opposed to the spirit of al-Ghazālī's arguments in texts of uncontested authenticity such as those I have cited in this chapter. I will counter Abrahamov's argument where it touches his analysis of the *Mishkāt*.

Abrahamov concedes that the fifth spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*) is super-intellectual and is described using mystical terms like *dhawq*. This, he writes, “may lead us immediately to the conclusion that al-Ghazālī regards the last spirit as mystical experience, which has no connection with the other spirits.”<sup>270</sup> He goes on to argue that this is not the case. To do so, Abrahamov quotes his own

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid. p. 163. The last part of this statement is a *non sequitur*. If the fifth spirit is mystical experience, it *does* have a vital connection with the other spirits, in providing an experiential foundation of certainty on which the particular appurtenances of knowledge can rest. For instance, in the *Munqidh*, once the light entered al-Ghazālī's soul, his faith in the reasoning spirit was rehabilitated and resumed its function.

translation of another passage, which reads: “the discursive spirit (*al-rūḥ al-mufakkira*) is divided into that which requires instruction, stimulation and assistance from the outside so that it may continue [to deal with various] types of knowledge, and that which is absolutely pure as if it were stimulated by itself with no assistance from the outside...For there are saints whose light almost shines that they almost could dispense with the prophets’ assistance, and there are prophets who almost could dispense with the angels’ assistance.”<sup>271</sup> Earlier, Abrahamov posited that all prophets are syllogistic reasoners, only some are so preternaturally gifted at that they syllogize their way to knowledge very quickly. He applies this model of prophecy to the passage quoted here. He argues that the first division of *al-rūḥ al-mufakkira* is his lower grade of prophecy, which corresponds to the fourth spirit. The second division, which needs no help, corresponds to the fifth spirit and his higher grade of prophecy. Abrahamov’s sleight of hand comes in the translation. When outlining the five spirits a page earlier, he translated the fourth spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*) as “the discursive spirit.” He uses the very same term to translate *al-rūḥ al-mufakkira*, which in fact subsumes both the fourth and fifth spirits. This permits the claim that both involve syllogistic reasoning, only the fifth is *really good* syllogistic reasoning. “Thus the difference between the way of the prophets and saints to reach the utmost truth, on the one hand, and the way of the wise or the philosophers, on the other hand, is not an essential, since both parties obtain knowledge through the same device;

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid. p. 164. Brackets, parentheses, and ellipses in original.

that is, the discursive spirit.”<sup>272</sup> It seems more likely that “*al-rūḥ al-mufakkira*”<sup>273</sup> comprised both the fourth and the fifth spirits (the fourth needs outside help while the fifth is pure, independent and directly illuminated). By placing the two side-by-side under the umbrella of *al-rūḥ al-mufakkira*, al-Ghazālī showed that they represented competing modes of knowing. He recognized the tension between the two, and preferred the fifth. There exists a clear and essential distinction between fourth and fifth spirits.

While Abrahamov reminds us that syllogistic reasoning was very important to al-Ghazālī, it is just as important to consider passages like the following, from *al-Munqidh*:

I knew with certainty that the sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest. Indeed, were one to combine the insight of the intellectuals, the wisdom of the wise, and the lore of 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 to do so 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.<sup>274</sup>

#### IV. Al-Ghazālī’s Audience

Abrahamov’s article also brings up an important question: To whom was al-Ghazālī writing? For whom was he advising mystical experience? Al-Ghazālī

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<sup>272</sup> In other words, Abrahamov is begging the question by translating both *al-rūḥ al-mufakkira* and *al-rūḥ al-fikrī* as “discursive spirit.”

<sup>273</sup> The term *mufakkira* carries a more passive, “contemplative” sense than *fikrī*, which more directly refers to intellection or ratiocination. Thus *mufakkira* is an ideal term to refer generally to the higher regions of the human mind, and is well-translated by Gairdner as “thought-spirit.”

<sup>274</sup> *al-Munqidh* p. 81

was certainly not urging the common folk to take up mysticism en masse. He warned against sharing privileged knowledge with those not prepared to receive it.<sup>275</sup> His strong statements about the importance of learning and ascetic preparation indicate that he favored limiting information about the mystical way to a relatively circumscribed elite. Thus when he discussed the ecstatic utterances of the “intoxicated” mystics, he did not explicitly condemn the substance of the utterances (ex. “I am the Truth!”). Instead he condemned the fact that this idea was let loose among the general public. “This is, in truth, a type of speech which, to the common folk, is of great harm....To destroy the person who comes out with such words is, according to the religions of God, better than sparing ten lives.”<sup>276</sup> Al-Ghazālī’s attitude here is ambiguous; he censures such speech, but allows a nameless interlocutor to say that the *disapproval* of intoxicated speech “has been the outcome of knowledge and disputation, the one is a veil and the other is the work of the self, while their words are not understood except from within through revelation by the light of the Truth.”<sup>277</sup>

In writing the *Iḥyā* al-Ghazālī was addressing primarily the ‘*ulamā*’, whom he criticized roundly in its pages. Thus his exhortations to purify the heart and to know by mystical experience must have been calculated to entice his peers. At

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<sup>275</sup> Al-Ghazālī looked down on common people who had not the inclination or ability to grasp higher truths, and sometimes indicated that they were worse than animals and ought to serve the Sages. “He repated [sic] the extremist Sufi idea, that the ‘*Amiyy*’ should commit adultery or steal rather than study ideas which he neither understood nor deserved.” Lazarus-Yafeh, Hava. *Studies in Al-Ghazzali*. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1975, p. 354.

<sup>276</sup> *Kitāb al-‘Ilm*. 92-93.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* p. 92.

the very least, al-Ghazālī sought to convince the reader that following the mystical path was admirable and fruitful, and to instill in him a respect for those who sought mystical encounter, even if he himself did not.<sup>278</sup> As noted above, al-Ghazālī thought that *taqlīd* was sufficient for the common people who did not question what they were told—these were called the *‘awām*. This majority was distinguished from the *khawāṣṣ*, whose station or intellect occasioned doubts that made them seek truth beyond *taqlīd* or syllogistic proofs based on apologetic miracles. It was to the *khawāṣṣ* that al-Ghazālī directed his mystical theory of knowledge.<sup>279</sup> Thus al-Ghazālī wrote in variable registers, now advocating mystical experience, now syllogistic reasoning or even, in the case of the rude uneducated folk, blind following of those who taught truth.

Those who, like al-Ghazālī, founded their certainty in mystical experience were the true elite, the *‘awliyā’*<sup>2</sup>—saints or friends of God. It was these individuals who purified their souls from the passions of the flesh and directed their hearts to God. In return they experienced a foretaste of the blessing they would enjoy in the hereafter. The depths of the “science of revelation” were plumbed by the man who “devotes the greatest part of his attention to esoteric knowledge, the observation (*murāqabah*) of the heart, the path of the hereafter and how to journey

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<sup>278</sup> In the *Mishkāt*, for example, al-Ghazālī exhorts those who can believe only by blind faith to respect those who aspire to higher knowledge. (*wa ḥassin al-ẓanna bi-ahl al-wijdān aw bi-ahl al-‘irfān*) “*al-wijdān*” and “*al-‘irfān*” are, of course, terms fraught with mystical connotation. Arabic *Mishkāt* p. 83. He advised his readers to “Be, therefore, one of two things : either a man who possesses these qualities, or a man who, while acknowledging them admits his failure to live up to them.” *Kitābal-‘Ilm* p. 220.

<sup>279</sup> He “considered the discussion of certain subjects to be esoteric, and did not favour their wide promulgation.” Lazarus-Yafeh. p. 349.

thereon, as well as to an abiding faith in finding that path through self-mortification (*mujahadah*) and observation,” not through “books and formal education.”<sup>280</sup>

Such men boast of the smallest number but in worth they are the greatest. They have no equals among men; their strength lies in their hearts. Through them God will preserve the proofs of His existence until they entrust His testament to their successors and plant its seeds in the hearts of their fellow-saints.<sup>281</sup>

This was the purified, elite cadre of religious leaders that al-Ghazālī envisioned as advisers to the holders of power.

### Chapter Three Summary

In this chapter I traced the outlines of al-Ghazālī’s epistemology. I pointed out his preoccupation with achieving absolute certainty of his religious beliefs. The Islamic elite could not be satisfied with blind following (*taqlīd*) or facile rationalistic proofs (like those offered by *kalām*). Instead, mystical experience on the Sufi model was the highest mode of knowing. The certainty achieved by mystical experience grounded the broader corpus of doctrines peculiar to Islam, which included legal knowledge. Although it could not provide the highest degree of certainty, the rational faculty had a vital role in interpreting and applying the *sharīʿa* for the general good.

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<sup>280</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* p. 189.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.* p. 191.

In the final chapter, I will show the way in which rightly oriented epistemology played a crucial part in ordering the political domain. Al-Ghazālī criticized the present political order by pointing out that its guardians (the *‘ulamā’*) were irresponsible in their use and transmission of religious knowledge. Their negligence and corruption threatened to damage both Islam and the political power that both protected it and relied upon it for support.

## Four

### **The Political Corollaries of al-Ghazālī’s Epistemology**

In this final chapter, I will highlight the political consequences of the epistemic vision that al-Ghazālī laid out in the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* and the *Mishkāṭ*. He saw mystical experience as the proper foundation of knowledge, and warned the wayward *ʿulamāʾ* not to neglect this crucial component lest they endanger authentic Islam and its guardian political order, which they supported via the *sharīʿa*. To conclude, I will look at the first portion of *Nasīḥat al-Mulūk* showing how al-Ghazālī’s advice to secular rulers echoed and neatly complemented the mystical ideal that he enjoined on the *ʿulamāʾ*.

### I. Al-Ghazālī’s Indictment of the Religious Establishment

In al-Ghazālī’s opinion, the religious establishment had lost its way. The *ʿulamāʾ* had strayed from the path to the hereafter and become entangled by worldly cares. Instead of using knowledge to improve their own souls in God’s sight and to communicate the tenets of Islam to others, they sought fame and influence by their knowledge of the law and their skill in disputation. The key link was that a certain branch of religious knowledge—namely legal knowledge—was of use to the rulers.<sup>282</sup> By reducing all religious knowledge to narrowly defined legal knowledge, the *ʿulamāʾ* had failed to live up to their billing as learned men of religion. It was for this reason that al-Ghazālī so often repeated the Prophet’s saying: "The most severely punished of all men on the day of resurrection will be

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<sup>282</sup> "Its fruits in this world, however, are power, dignity, influence over kings, and reverence from all to an extent that even the ignorant Turks and the rude Arabs are found naturally disposed to honour their teachers because the latter are distinguished by a great deal of knowledge derived from experience." *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* p. 26.

a learned man whom God had not blessed with his knowledge."<sup>283</sup> This worldliness had unbalanced their way of knowing toward rationalistic proofs and factional strife over minor legal points. As a result, their position in the public sphere had been degraded. The Islamic polity had been infected by the misconduct of corrupt men of religion. Al-Ghazālī's advocacy of authentic Islam via mystical experience entailed an attempt to disentangle the leaders of the Islamic community from their corrupt involvement with the Seljuq rulers. This unholy collusion undermined the integrity of religion, and as a result threatened the entire polity based on religious law. I will outline al-Ghazālī's impeachment of the 'ulamā' by recounting the historical decline and fall of the Islamic establishment as he narrates it at several points in the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*.

#### A. The Eden of Early Islam: Religio-Political Symbiosis

In the pristine setting of the early Islamic community, natural, divinely ordained order prevailed. Muslims understood the broader purpose of life, and acted in accordance with their station in its teleological progression.

God made Adam from earth and his offspring from clay and running water. He brought them out from loins to womb, then to life, and finally to the grave ; from the grave He raised them to judgment and from there to Paradise or to hell-fire....Furthermore, God has created this world in preparation for the hereafter in order to gather suitable provisions therefrom. If these provisions were gathered justly, dissensions would have ceased and the jurisprudents would have become idle.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

The early jurists concerned themselves with matters of the heart. What attention they paid to legal cases was moderated by their consuming concern with purification and beatitude in the hereafter. "In the early period of Islam the term jurisprudence was applied to the science of the hereafter and the knowledge of the subtle defects of the soul, the influences which render works corrupt, the thorough realization of the inferiority of this life, the urgent expectation of bliss in the hereafter, and the domination of fear over the heart."<sup>285</sup> The famous legal scholars like al-Shafī'ī, Ibn Ḥanbal, and Malik, for whom Sunni *madhāhib* were named, were pious ascetics who sought the face of God. Their legal teachings were sacrosanct because their hearts were turned away from the world and directed toward knowing God by direct encounter. Of al-Shafī'ī, al-Ghazālī relates:

See therefore, how he had fainted and how he had preached, and see how his asceticism and extreme fear of God are thereby revealed. Such fear and asceticism, however, are the result of nothing but knowing God, and no one of His servants fear Him except the learned. Nevertheless, al-Shafī'ī acquired this fear and asceticism not through...books of jurisprudence, but through the sciences of the hereafter which are derived from the Qur'an and the tradition wherein ancient and modern wisdom lie.<sup>286</sup>

Al-Shafī'ī was a seeker after God even when scrutinizing the details of the law.<sup>287</sup>

Malik also spurned worldly attachments for the face of God.<sup>288</sup> His "generosity reveals his asceticism and his meagre love for the world. Asceticism, however, is

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

not the lack of wealth but rather the lack of any desire for wealth in the human heart.”<sup>289</sup>

Their rarefied spirituality established the sanctity and legitimacy of the political order that their legal codes undergirded, for “the science of how to preserve harmony among men in their affairs and transactions is jurisprudence.”<sup>290</sup> Then, sadly, the corrupt hearts of men introduced disharmony. Because of their greed and worldliness, a ruler became necessary to maintain order—this ruler depended on the *fuqahā’* for instruction in the “knowledge of the rules of government. The *faqīh* thus became the teacher of the magistrates and their guide in government and control, that through their righteousness the affairs of men in this world may be set in order.”<sup>291</sup> As a result, “the state and religion are twins. Religion is the foundation while the state is the guard.”<sup>292</sup> In other words, it was the task of the state, through its coercive power structures, to escort men safely along the path to the hereafter. The *‘ālim* was concerned with governmental affairs only insofar as they smoothed the path to beatitude by maintaining order through the *sharī‘a*. At most, he was “a counsellor to him that wields the sword.”<sup>293</sup>

### B. Where Did the *‘Ulamā’* Go Wrong?

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid. p. 40. N.B An explicit statement that the *personal* sanctity of the *‘ulamā’* effected order in society.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

By al-Ghazālī's day, however, the *ʿulamāʾ*<sup>294</sup> had subverted their wisdom for worldly ends.<sup>294</sup> In practice, this entailed (1) obsequious complicity with the power structure, (2) a warped epistemological sensibility that allowed legal minutiae to invade the broader domain of religious knowledge, (3) vicious factionalism along *madhhab* lines, expressed in formalized rationalistic disputation about trivia irrelevant to authentic Islam, and (4) blind following (*taqlīd*) of these factions in the hope of worldly gain. The result was a twisted pedagogical culture in which the transmission of knowledge was perverted by its proximity to power.

They duped the people into believing that there was no knowledge except such ordinances of government as the judges use to settle disputes when the mob riots ; or the type of argument which the vain-glorious displays in order to confuse and refute ; or the elaborate and flowery language with which the preacher seeks to lure the common folk. They did this, because apart from these three, they could find no other ways to snare illegal profit and gain the riches of the world.<sup>295</sup>

While the theme of woe and decay was frequently invoked at the opening of religious works of al-Ghazālī's day, his continual revival of the accusation marks the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* as a jeremiad of a more purposeful stripe. Al-Ghazālī hammered persistently on the faults of his contemporaries. I will gesture to his four chief complaints and then suggest some of the political implications that inhered in al-Ghazālī's critique.

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<sup>294</sup> Again, the religious decline theme was not unique to al-Ghazālī, but was particularly developed in his writings, which carried greater weight because of his fame and erstwhile entanglement with the state.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

(1) **Complicity with political power** This complicity was all the more objectionable because it involved submission to an alien (Seljuq) ruling class that was only superficially Islamicized. Al-Ghazālī envisioned *‘ulamā’* who were intentionally dissociated from the rulers, and even served to check its excesses:

Another characteristic expected of the learned man is that he keeps away from the magistrates and, as long as he can help it, not to come near them at all, and rather avoid their company despite any efforts on their part to seek him out, because the world is attractive and inviting while the power to dispense with its riches is in their hands... It is, then, the duty of every religious man to censor and twit [sic] them by exposing their tyranny and decrying their practices. For he who frequents their palaces will either seek their favour and consequently [sic] forget the blessings which God has bestowed upon him, or hold his peace and allow their misdeeds to go uncensored.<sup>296</sup>

(2) **Distortion within the spectrum religious knowledge** According to al-Ghazālī, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) originally occupied only a segment of the corpus of religious knowledge. In fact, he places *fiqh* among the secular sciences, because it teaches “methods of government and control.”<sup>297</sup> It is religious only insofar as it conduces to the protection of Islam. Here we can trace a parallel with the caliphate discussed in Chapter Three—both *fiqh* and the caliph lubricated the points of friction between state and religion.<sup>298</sup> Lured by the magistrates, however, the learned men of al-Ghazālī’s day had chosen to focus on legal minutiae, excluding not only the sciences of the hereafter, but also earthly

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid. p. 179.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>298</sup> Thus it is not coincidental that al-Ghazālī saw the caliph’s most important role as foundation of *sharī‘a*.

demands like the practice of medicine. This distortion was intimately related to the neglect of esoteric, mystical knowledge.

Could there be any other reason for this except that medicine does not lead to...judicial and governmental positions through which one exalts himself above his fellowmen and fastens his yoke upon his enemies? Indeed the science of religion has been destroyed because the learned men have espoused evil...The pious among the learned men in exoteric knowledge used to acknowledge the excellence of the learned men in esoteric knowledge (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*) and the advocates of the inward knowledge of the heart.<sup>299</sup>

This distortion was a misrepresentation of the original significance of the word *fiqh*. While the early *fuqahā*<sup>2</sup> directed their hearts towards God, in al-Ghazālī’s day *fiqh* was “limited to the knowledge of unusual legal cases, the mastery of the minute details of their origins, excessive disputation on them, and the retention of the different opinions which relate to them.”<sup>300</sup>

**(3) Factionalism and disputation** Having reduced religious knowledge to legal trivia, the religious scholars turned to vainglorious rationalistic disputation as a means of securing personal prestige. The most renowned of the religious scholars were noticed by those in power, as al-Ghazālī was noticed by Niẓām al-Mulk and appointed to a comfortable position at the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya. Consequently, men began to take up the study of religion merely in pursuit of benefit. Al-

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid. p. 51. Note that “esoteric” (*bāṭinī*) is the same word used in condemning the Ismā‘īlīs. As we have seen, al-Ghazālī’s conception of the mysterious side of revelation was Sufi in character, not Shī‘ī, though the two outlooks had a non-trivial affinity. Also key here is the distinction between *farḍ ‘ayn* and *farḍ kifāya* duties – the former was an individual obligation of unlimited benefit, the second a communal obligation “praiseworthy only within a certain limit. Medicine and *fiqh* were both *farḍ kifāya* duties, while securing religious certainty was *farḍ ‘ayn*. Bakar p. 210-211.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

Ghazālī uses his own situation before his crisis as an example of the sort of *faqīh* *not* to be.

You have stumbled upon one who knows ; accept, therefore, this advice from one who has wasted his life in controversies and surpassed the ancients in composition, research, argumentation, and exposition until God inspired him with His righteousness and made known to him the flaws therein. Consequently he abjured controversies and turned his attention to himself....[For legal] wranglings are not only useless for the science of religion, but are also harmful and corrupting to one's taste and judgment in jurisprudence....Whoever is familiar with the syllogisms of controversy will submit to the rules of debate rather than follow legal taste.<sup>301</sup>

(4) *Taqlīd* Because religious knowledge had become a means to worldly ends, learners in al-Ghazālī's day ignored the proper means of acquiring knowledge. One of al-Ghazālī's most virulent attacks on the *'ulamā'* concerns their blind following (*taqlīd*) of their teachers, who were often themselves *muqallid*. Because governmental blandishments were distributed along factional lines (ex. the *madhāhib*), *'ulamā'* clumped around these groupings and slavishly compiled a corpus of ideological beliefs that would certify them as *bona fide* members of their *madhhab*.

As we have seen, al-Ghazālī affirmed that for the common folk (*'awāmm*) who did not face doubts, *taqlīd* was acceptable.<sup>302</sup> However, for those who went by the name of *'ulamā'*—learned ones—learning must come as part of a process of authentic struggle after truth for truth's sake, grounded in mystical experience.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. p. 105. "Legal taste" = *dhawq al-fiqh (Iḥyā'*, Cairo 195?). This linkage of mystical and jurisprudential vocabulary supports the thesis that al-Ghazālī wished "to make jurisprudence mystical and mysticism juridical." Bausani 286.

<sup>302</sup> Cf. Frank "*Taqlīd*" p. 218.

As a result, he urged those who sought knowledge not to believe because of a *madhhab* imprimatur, but instead humbly to gather truth wherever it was found.<sup>303</sup> Many *‘ulamā’* happened to be *muqallid* to true Islamic beliefs. However, this represented no virtue of their own, but instead only their good fortune to have been born Muslim. Their true beliefs were not founded on certainty, but instead on “social and psychological factors that may operate as efficaciously in fostering and reinforcing false beliefs as true belief.”<sup>304</sup> *Taqlīd*, according to al-Ghazālī, was the uncritical way that Jews and Christians acquired knowledge.<sup>305</sup>

Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, in her discussion of *taqlīd*, asks a crucial question regarding the man who, following al-Ghazālī, eschews *taqlīd* in order to seek out truth. Her discussion merits direct quotation here:

But does everybody really know if he has the intellectual and moral powers to find the right path? Will he not stray away from the right path or deduce false deductions regarding dogmas and tenets of belief? This gives rise to a difficult problem: Al-Ghazzālī’s religious experiences combined with his mental exertions have enabled him to regain the traditional truth, and he demands as much of his readers and disciples, especially from people of understanding and comprehension.

However, if al-Ghazālī was licensing free inquiry, wasn’t he opening the doors to subjectivity and pluralism? This was most certainly not the case. By virtue of what might be regarded today as a lacuna in his thought,

to Al-Ghazzali the sense of religious certainty which he acquired was not only a subjective (personal) truth, but it was to him the only certain

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<sup>303</sup> “Wisdom, therefore, is the aim of every believer ; he seizes it wherever he finds it, and is under obligation to anyone who imparts it to him, no matter who the person may be.” *Kitāb al-‘Ilm* p. 130.

<sup>304</sup> Frank “Taqlīd” p. 233.

<sup>305</sup> Lazarus-Yafeh p. 489.

objective truth, and it is, therefore, inconceivable to him that anyone who troubles to study the truth or who is granted a religious experience or vision by God, can arrive at wrong conclusions or stray from Islam....Thus in the case of 'Taqīd', as in other cases, if Al-Ghazzali uses certain terms and contradicts himself as it were with regard to them, there is no reasons to accuse him of lack of logic or dishonesty and lack of integrity. He certainly was quite sincere and consistent in his writings; it is only we, living in the twentieth century, who find it hard to accept his somewhat naïve combination of religious faith and free reasoning.<sup>306</sup>

Al-Ghazālī praised the teaching and learning of truth as a deeply meaningful activity. He accused contemporary teachers and students of undertaking the educational process with suspect motives and flawed methodology. As we have seen in the case of the Nizāmiyyas, education often occurred under the aegis of coercive power. Al-Ghazālī emphasized that mystical certainty must accompany legal teaching, underscoring that the outwardly experiential (*daqāʿiq* of the *sharīʿa*) was intimately tied to the inwardly experiential (mystical experience), and that the neglect of one undermined the other, leading to collapse of right Islam. Religious knowledge could not be strictly intellective—the experiential was indispensable.<sup>307</sup> The teacher must not be *muqallid*, but instead be able to form his own legal opinions (be a *mujtahid*) without obeisance to any *madhhab*. The student, while he was always to obey the worthy teacher, also had a responsibility to see “if his teacher is not capable of reaching independent opinions but is in the habit of repeating the opinions of the different schools and

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid. p. 497-498.

<sup>307</sup> “The first duty of the student is to purify his soul from impure traits and blameworthy characteristics because knowledge is the worship of man’s heart as well as the prayer of his inmost self (*sirr*) and the oblation of his inward being to God.” *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*. 126.

the comments which have been made concerning them, because the influence of such a teacher is more misleading than it is helpful.”<sup>308</sup>

The teacher was to receive “no remuneration for his services.”<sup>309</sup> This statement implicitly condemned the well-salaried Nizāmiyya posts. Al-Ghazālī’s envisioned the teacher as a personal mentor rather than one who delivered lectures before large audiences, as al-Ghazālī had done in Baghdad before his crisis. This model is suggested by al-Ghazālī’s recommendation that the teacher go about “dissuading the student from his evil ways...by suggestion rather than openly, and with sympathy rather than with odious upbraiding. Open dissuasion destroys the veil of awe, invites defiance, and encourages stubbornness.”<sup>310</sup> This advice presupposes a personal, familiar teacher-protégé arrangement, a didactic model that closely resembled that of 11<sup>th</sup> century Sufism.

In many passages al-Ghazālī described Sufism as a third party. He wrote of “the Sufis,” making it clear that he was assessing them from without. Given his explicit encomia of the Sufi way<sup>311</sup> and heavy appropriation of Sufi themes, it is unlikely that al-Ghazālī was completely dissociating himself from Sufism. The vocabulary of his writings clearly linked him to the Sufi tradition. It seems more likely that al-Ghazālī wished to avoid the appearance of participating in the factionalism that he condemned. While the Sufis (as such) had not joined the pitched rationalistic battles over legalities, many of the *fuqahā*<sup>2</sup> that al-Ghazālī

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid. p. 146.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>311</sup> See *Munqidh* quote above contra Abrahamov p. 85.

derided had at least dabbled in mysticism, and some legal factions tended to align with Sufism. Moreover, in al-Ghazālī's day Sufism was coalescing as a societal force in its own right. In some cases it may have begun to exhibit the same objectionable qualities that al-Ghazālī highlighted in the legal factions. Al-Ghazālī described the Sufis as a third party to avoid the appearance of partisanship, or of *taqlīd* to a certain stratum within the religious community.

## II. The Converse: al-Ghazālī's Advice to Rulers in *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk*

In the *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk*, al-Ghazālī addressed the other party to the unholy liaison: the Seljuq ruler (the Seljuq sultan Muhammad b. Malikshāh).<sup>312</sup> I will examine only the first part of this work, as Patricia Crone has raised doubt about the authenticity of the second portion, which abruptly modifies its tone to that of Sasanian *Fürstenspiegel*.<sup>313</sup> The first section of the book mirrors al-Ghazālī's strident words to the *'ulamā'* in the *Kitāb al-'Ilm*. His complementary counsel to ruler and religious scholar creates a symmetrical elegance that hints at al-Ghazālī's concern for Sunni society in all its aspects, not merely for the *'ulamā'*.

Now an elder scholar, al-Ghazālī adopted a timeless, paternal tone that was not without an edge of warning. Above all, he urged that the sultan look to personal piety and purification, and hearken constantly to the approach of death

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<sup>312</sup> Lambton, Ann K. S. "The Theory of Kingship in the *Nasīḥat ul-Muluk* of Ghazali" in *Islamic Quarterly*, 1, 1954, p. 48. As stated above, some scholars believe he was writing to Sanjar. Either way, he was writing to a Seljuq prince.

<sup>313</sup> Crone, Patricia. "Did al-Ghazālī Write a Mirror For Princes?" in *JSAI* 10, 1987. pp. 167-191. If we accept Crone's conclusion, her article has rendered much of the secondary literature on the *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk* partially irrelevant. Lambton's "The Theory of Kingship in the *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk* of Ghazālī" and Bagley's extensive introduction to his 1964 translation both go to great lengths to reconcile the two halves.

(the “last breath”) and judgment. This advice had strong Sufi connotations. God’s judgment of the ruler will be especially severe, al-Ghazālī warned, for He has “granted you this gift and sown the seed of faith in your pure and steadfast heart; but He has left the tending of the seed to you.”<sup>314</sup> Rulership offered great potential for reward if the king was just and pure, but also awful risk if his heart was twisted and his rule unjust.

In an illustration reminiscent of the *yaqīn* tree in the *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*, al-Ghazālī described the “tree of faith” that represented the ruler’s dominion.<sup>315</sup> The tree sinks ten roots of faith in the heart, which anchor the ten branches of faith in action. Here we recall the importance of a genuine faith foundation in the heart. While al-Ghazālī did not explicitly recommend Sufism to the sultan, the ten roots of faith he described were all facets of knowing God, such as “the Purity of the True God,”<sup>316</sup> and God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and will.<sup>317</sup> These roots tap knowledge of God to nourish right conduct in the public sphere. The ruler must be

always thirsting to meet devout *ʿulamāʾ* and ask them for advice; and that he should beware of meeting *ʿulamāʾ* with worldly ambitions .... The devout *ʿālim* is not one who has covetous designs on the treasury, but one who gives his knowledge just measure.<sup>318</sup>

Here al-Ghazālī posited a curious ideal for the sultan-*ʿulamāʾ* relationship: the best *ʿulamāʾ* ought to flee association with the ruler, therefore the ruler must seek

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<sup>314</sup> *Naṣīḥāt* p. 4.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.* Based on Q. 14, 29.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

those who least want to be sought. This tension described the proper interface between coercive force and the religious establishment.

Along with attention to justice and submission to the religious law—outward expressions of authentic Islam—al-Ghazālī touted control of the passions and personal purification, from which, in turn, would spring right conduct. Weak branches (conduct) were a sign that the root (faith in the heart) was decayed.<sup>319</sup> “Nobody...can [act justly] unless he first observes justice in himself.”<sup>320</sup> Al-Ghazālī urged mindfulness of God at all times,<sup>321</sup> for death and reckoning could come at any moment. In fact, the second spring from which the roots of faith were watered was knowledge of “the last breath.” The first spring, meanwhile, was understanding the realities of the present world. Al-Ghazālī framed the first spring as a way-station on the path to the hereafter.

[The first spring] is knowledge of this lower world, of what it is and why man has been brought into it. You should understand that a stopping-place is not a fixed abode, and that man is in this world in the role of a traveler... His home is in the abode (which comes) after that.<sup>322</sup>

Ideally, the sultan was to conduct his rule with this knowledge in mind. His attention was to remain fixed on the imminence of death and his own readiness for judgment. In short, al-Ghazālī gave the sultan the same ascetic-Sufi personal advice that he recommended for the *‘ulamā’* and all the *khawāṣṣ*. His recommendation for the sultan’s conduct in the public sphere sought to reconcile

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

that conduct with a righteous religious establishment. The ruler should facilitate its spiritual goals and seek out its holiest members for advice: *‘ulamā’* who forsook worldly attachment for authentic religious knowledge based in mystical experience.

Conversely, al-Ghazālī charged the sultan with upholding religious law in all his public dealings. “The ruler should not give satisfaction to any person if a contravention of God’s law would be required to please him.”<sup>323</sup> Through the coercive force that he wielded, the secular ruler had a responsibility to abide by and to defend the *sharī‘a*. By guaranteeing external Islamic law, the ruler allowed his subjects to live out the rich inner meaning of lawful conduct. Thereby the ruler encouraged inner fruitional experience, which in turn anchored the legal expertise that sustained his rule.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid. p. 31. “God’s law” = *shar‘* = Islamic law

<sup>324</sup> See Appendix 1.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I set out to explain the relationship between religious knowledge and political power in the writings of al-Ghazālī. It was my goal to frame the historical context in such a way that the implications of al-Ghazālī's epistemology within that context—i.e. to his readers—would be readily apparent.

I first introduced al-Ghazālī as a historical figure and as a thinker influenced by and responding to his unique historical moment. Most heavily influential in al-Ghazālī's life were Seljuq power, religious scholarship, and Sufi mysticism. The Seljuq state had an enormous effect on al-Ghazālī's intellectual development. At the state-sponsored Nizāmiyya, al-Ghazālī played a leading role in propounding state orthodoxy, thereby lending religious legitimacy to the Seljuq state in its struggles against "heretical" political opposition. Sufism had an established presence in the religious community of al-Ghazālī's day, though it was not universally adhered to. His frequent references to mystical knowledge would have immediately connoted Sufism among his readers.

I then outlined al-Ghazālī's political thought as expressed alongside his anti-Bātinī polemic in the *Kitāb al-Mustaẓhiri*. The goal of this section was to

determine how al-Ghazālī understood Islamic government, providing his religious epistemology with a politico-theoretical structure on which to map. Al-Ghazālī viewed the caliph as a mediating link between Seljuq coercive force and the *‘ulamā’*. The caliph was a placeholder who represented the peace and security that Islam required. He was a conduit of divine sanction upon any ruling order that provided this stability by upholding the *sharī‘a*, interpreted and applied by the *‘ulamā’* using syllogistic reasoning.

The heresiography of the *Kitāb al-Mustaẓhiri* indicated that political theory in Islam was based upon religious knowledge. The Isma‘īlīs constituted both a political and a doctrinal threat to the stability of al-Ghazālī’s society. However, he chose to attack them at their roots—namely their unbalanced esotericism and *ta‘līm* of the infallible *imām*. In this attack, al-Ghazālī revealed something of his own approach to religious knowledge. For instance, he situated the reasoning faculty within its proper domain: matters pertaining to the general good, like law and politics.

Religious certainty was not ultimately grounded in syllogistic reasoning, but in mystical experience on a Sufi model, facilitated by adherence to Islamic law. Al-Ghazālī articulated this epistemology in the *Kitāb al-‘Ilm* of the *Iḥyā’* and in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. He accused the contemporary *‘ulamā’* of distorting religious knowledge by courting worldly power. They had been lured away from their roles as guardians of authentic Islam, subverting the legal subset of religious knowledge for worldly advancement. In doing so, they corrupted religious

knowledge and its modes of transmission, placing both in the unworthy hands of the Seljuq rulers. Their neglect of the heart of religion endangered the state of their own hearts, as well those of the *umma* that they led.

Al-Ghazālī's emphasized mystical experience in order to free the religious establishment from the Seljuq rulers and their administrative apparatus. He had likely become disillusioned with political power after the bloody, tumultuous events of the early 1090s, and the consequent alliance of the sultan with the Isma'īlīs. This is not to say that al-Ghazālī's epistemology was a political ploy. On the contrary, it was an attempt to recover the autonomy of authentic Islam by awakening its bewitched guardians: the *'ulamā'*. Al-Ghazālī did not urge revolution, which would have threatened the stability that was the *raison d'être* of Islamic government. As we saw in *Nasīḥāt al-Mulūk*, al-Ghazālī envisioned a complementary relationship between three parties: (1) personally religious temporal rulers who upheld *sharī'ah* and were mindful of their role as guardians of Islam, (2) pious *'ulamā'* who shunned worldly temptation and sought certain religious knowledge grounded in mystical experience, and (3) the God whose mercy sanctioned both, and whose face was acknowledged as the ultimate goal of every Muslim.

Living under a foreign military power whose presence threatened the sanctity and continuity of historic Islamic society, al-Ghazālī used his prominent status to redeem the shortcomings of the present condition. "The Seljuqs had arrived as wielders of brutal and destructive power without anything that

counted as a moral purpose from the point of view of the world they overran.”<sup>325</sup> He condemned forcible opposition to the alien usurpers, which would cause more harm than good. Instead, he undertook to free Muslim leaders from their injurious involvement with worldly power and wealth by a return to an authentic, inward-looking Islam that was attentive to the condition of the heart. Al-Ghazālī pleaded for the maintenance of religious law, whose formulation was grounded in certain religious knowledge achieved by tasting the transcendent: God. His story is not without its parallels—and lessons—in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

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<sup>325</sup> Crone *God's Rule* p. 245.

## Appendix 1

## Al-Ghazālī's Conception of Religious Knowledge and Political Order

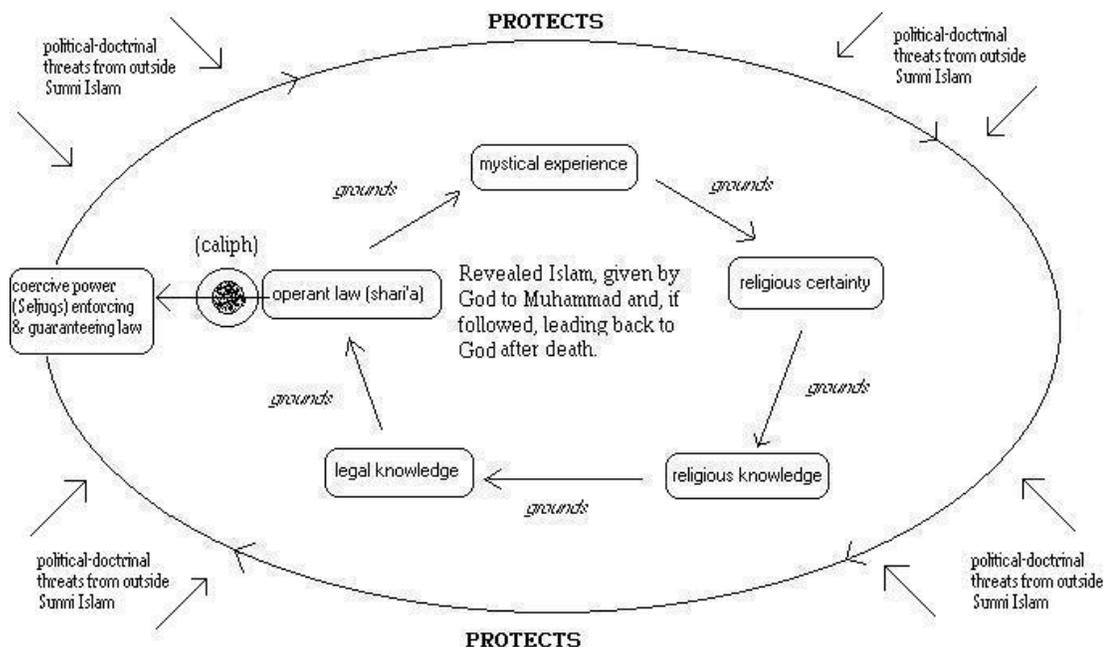


Figure 1. This flow chart outlines the relationship of mystical experience and political power in al-Ghazali's thought. It is intended to link the broad themes of his approach, not to be fully representative. The caliph instantiated the link between the inner and outer circles, between "operant law" and Seljuq coercive power. For al-Ghazali, the outer circle (Seljuqs) only existed to ensure the unhindered operation of the inner cycle (Islam). The caliph was an indispensable "ball bearing" that mediated between the two, conducting divine legitimacy from the inner circle (revealed, God-centered religion) to the outer (political order) via mutual recognition of the law. Syllogistic reasoning was the human faculty that regulated interpretation and application of the shari'a. Personal observance of the shari'a was necessarily prior to receiving mystical experience. However, logic and the law failed without a foundation in religious certainty, which could only be provided by mystical experience. Al-Ghazali attacked the 'ulama' of his day for gaining and using religious knowledge in a faulty way. Their negligence threatened both salvific religion and political stability.

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