

Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1128 C.E.)

(May Allah Have Mercy On Him)

Abu Hamid Ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Al-Tusi Al-Shafi'i Al-Ghazali Was Born In 1058 C.E. In Khorasan, Iran. His Father Died While He Was Still Very Young But He Had The Opportunity Of Getting Education In The Prevalent Curriculum At Nishapur And Baghdad. Soon He Acquired A High Standard Of Scholarship In Religion And Philosophy And Was Honoured By His Appointment As A Professor At The Nizamiyah University Of Baghdad, Which Was Recognised As One Of The Most Reputed Institutions Of Learning In The Golden Era Of Muslim History.

After A Few Years, However, He Gave Up His Academic Pursuits And Worldly Interests And Became A Wandering Ascetic. This Was A Process (Period) Of Mystical Transformation. Later, He Resumed His Teaching Duties, But Again Left These. An Era Of Solitary Life, Devoted To Contemplation And Writing Then Ensued, Which Led To The Authorship Of A Number Of Everlasting Books. He Died In 1128 C.E. At Baghdad.

Ghazali's Major Contribution Lies In Religion, Philosophy And Sufism. A Number Of Muslim Philosophers Had Been Following And Developing Several Viewpoints Of Greek Philosophy, Including The Neoplatonic Philosophy, And This Was Leading To Conflict With Several Islamic Teachings. On The Other Hand, The Movement Of Sufism Was Assuming Such Excessive Proportions As To Avoid Observance Of Obligatory Prayers And Duties Of Islam. Based On His Unquestionable Scholarship And Personal Mystical Experience, Ghazali Sought To Rectify These Trends, Both In Philosophy And Sufism.

In Philosophy, Ghazali Upheld The Approach Of Mathematics And Exact Sciences As Essentially Correct. However, He Adopted The Techniques Of Aristotelian Logic And The Neoplatonic Procedures And Employed These Very Tools To Lay Bare The Flaws And Lacunae Of The Then Prevalent Neoplatonic Philosophy And To Diminish The Negative Influences Of Aristotelianism And Excessive Rationalism. In Contrast To Some Of The Muslim Philosophers, E.G., Farabi, He Portrayed The Inability Of Reason To Comprehend The Absolute And The Infinite. Reason Could Not Transcend The Finite And Was Limited To The Observation Of The Relative. Also, Several Muslim Philosophers Had Held That The Universe Was Finite In Space But Infinite In Time. Ghazali Argued That An Infinite Time Was Related To An Infinite Space. With His Clarity Of Thought And Force Of Argument, He Was Able To Create A Balance Between Religion And Reason, And Identified Their Respective Spheres As Being The Infinite And The Finite, Respectively.

In Religion, Particularly Mysticism, He Cleansed The Approach Of Sufism Of Its Excesses And Reestablished The Authority Of The Orthodox Religion. Yet, He Stressed The Importance Of Genuine Sufism, Which He Maintained Was The Path To Attain The Absolute Truth.

He Was A Prolific Writer. His Immortal Books Include Tuhafut Al-Falasifa (The Incoherence Of The Philosophers), Ihya Al-'Ulum Al-Islamia (The Rivival Of The Religious Sciences), "The Beginning Of Guidance And His Autobiography", "Deliverance From Error". Some Of His Works Were Translated Into European Languages In The Middle Ages. He Also Wrote A Summary Of Astronomy.

Ghazali's Influence Was Deep And Everlasting. He Is One Of The Greatest Theologians Of Islam. His Theological Doctrines Penetrated Europe, Influenced Jewish And Christian Scholasticism And Several Of His Arguments Seem To Have Been Adopted By St. Thomas Aquinas In Order To Similarly Reestablish The Authority Of Orthodox Christian Religion In The West. So Forceful Was His Argument In The Favour Of Religion That He Was Accused Of Damaging The Cause Of Philosophy And, In The Muslim Spain, Ibn Rushd (Averros) Wrote A Rejoinder To His Tuhafut

Intellectual Background

Abu Hamid Ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Al-Tusi Al-Shafi'i Al-Ghazali, By Virtue Of His Singular Background In Various Different Aspects Of Muslim Thought, Is Known To Some As The Greatest, And Most Complete, Muslim Thinker Of His Era. Al-Ghazali Was Conversant With All Three Major Disciplines Of Eleventh Century Muslim Thought--Islam, Iman, And Ihsan. Translated Roughly As Practice, Doctrine, And

Realization, These Three Components Made Al-Ghazali's Breadth Of Expertise Impressive, As Well As Invaluable For The Modern Student Attempting To Grasp The History And Discourse Of This Philosophical Era. He Wrote Specialized Doctrines Examining Each Aspect, As Well As Broader Explications Of Their Relationship And Interdependency.

In Addition To His Personal History, Al-Ghazali Was Greatly Influenced By The Aristotelian Methodology And Conclusions Of A Group Of His Contemporaries, Specifically As Embodied In The Work Of Al-Farabi (Alfarabi) And Ibn Sina (Avicenna). His Reaction To The Works Of These Two Individuals, Specifically, Was Overtly Negative. He Believed That Islam (And Religious Belief In General) Could Neither Be Proven Or Disproven, And That The Effort To Do So Resulted In Little More Than Incoherent Pseudo-Justification For Belief. He Divided Philosophical Thought Into A Few Sub-Categories: Mathematics, Logic, Physics, Politics, Ethics, And Metaphysics. While He Had No Major Problem With The First Five, He Was Disturbed By Al-Farabi And Ibn Sina's Conviction That They Could Investigate, And Reach Logical Conclusions, About Issues Dealing With Metaphysical Concerns. Initially, Al-Ghazali Had Chosen To Reject Philosophical Methodology As A Whole, But He Later Tempered This Extreme View, Attempting To Utilize A Framework Which Would Make Use Of His Own Personal Faith And Conviction, As Well As The Tools Of The Philosopher.

When One Understands Al-Ghazali's Concerns, It Is Easy To See Why He Was So Enamored With Sufism. If, That Is, One Understand (At Least Roughly, As I Do) What Sufism Is. The Sufi Believed That It Was Not Enough To "Obey The Words" Of God, But Rather To Work Towards The Experience Of Him. To, As He Put It Strive Towards "Looking On The Face Of God." As David Buchman States, In His Introduction To The Niche Of Lights: "Only A Person With A Pure And Beautiful Heart-The Soul's Center-Can Become Aware Of God's Presence And Obtain Direct Knowledge From Him."(Buchman, Xxv) Through A Sincere Personal Experience Of Islam, The Sufi Attains A Different Kind Of Knowledge Than It Is Even Possible To Attain By Use Of The Philosophical Method. When, However, This Kind Of Experience Is Combined With More Rational Exploration Of The Physical And Logical World, As Al-Ghazali Ultimately Believed That It Should, A More Total Kind Of Understanding Of Both The Temporal World Around Us, And The Spiritual World Within, Could Be Attained.