

INTERNAL DISSENSIONS AMONG THE EARLY MUSLIMS: AL-GHAZZALI THE SAVIOUR OF TRUE ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: This paper shows that the works and thoughts of Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazzali(1058-1111 A.D) to save true Islamic philosophy against multifarious doctrinal groups at work among the Muslims in his times. Al-Ghazzali has sometimes been referred to by historians as the single most influential Muslim after Prophet Muhammad. Al-Ghazzali comprehensively studied not only Muslim philosophers but also non-Muslim philosophers. He tried to reconcile between Islamic beliefs and Neo-platonic philosophy, by interpreting Quran. He always illustrated the moderate approach to *sufism* within the framework of the *sharia*. In later life, he was viewed as the renewed (*Mujaddid*) of the faith in a period of turmoil and indeed much of his underlying intention was to avoid division within the Islamic community.

Keywords: Arab Philosophy, Al-Ghazzali, Al-Ashari's, Sufism, IIm-al-Kalām, Muslim theology

Introduction

The socio-religious and philosophical conditions were closely related with the political movements when Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazzali(1058-1111 A. D) came of age the Muslim world was in real turmoil, politically and spiritually the different forces were pulling it apart and the pieces were turning into a patchy pattern. The glory that was the Islam was fading into a multitude of facets and beliefs. Ghazzalian approach helped in unifying the majority of Muslim community. Though within less than a century of the death of the last prophet, which became the part of the Islamic empire from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean from Transoxiana to *Andalusia* (Spain) belonged to a new spiritual universe. Imam Al-Ghazzali's medieval times were rent with religious schism and political dissensions. Al-Ghazzali left such a profound mark up on the intellectual life of Islam. Rise and growth of various socio-religious movements were likely bound to appear sooner and later the whole

Islamic empire that the caliphate had become, having a countless number of heterogeneous groups of people and cultures. In the variety of causes, the immediate cause which splits up the Muslim fraternity and solidarity into rival sects was political. Greek philosophy accelerated the development of Islamic thought which is manifested itself in four main branches, *Mu'tazilism*, philosophy, scholastic theology and mysticism. Al-Ghazzali succeeded in compromising various sects by his books and scholarly knowledge. He altogether knew the psychology of each group. He realized that the high ethical standards of a virtuous religious life are not compatible with being in the service of sultans, caliphs and other official dignitaries. Al-Ghazzali's exceptional life and works continue to be indispensable in the study of numerous areas of social life of human beings

Groups and Movements

With Abu Hamid Ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazzali (450-505 A. H/1058-1111 A. D) we come to one of the greatest and most original thinkers, not only in the history of Muslim philosophy but also in the history of human thought. He was a profound jurist, theologian, philosopher and *sufi* known in the west as *Algazel*, has been acclaimed the proof of Islam (*Hujjat'ul Islam*), *Zain 'ddin* ('The ornament of faith), considered a renovator *Mujaddid* and reckoned on a par with the four Imams. There have been many philosophers and scholars in Islam and other religions, but the peculiarity of Al-Ghazzali is that his life and works are so intimately connected that it is difficult to separate one from the other. According to Mac.Donald, he is the equal of Augustine in the philosophical and theological discipline by his side the Aristotelian Philosophers of Islam seem beggarly compilers and scholiasts; only al-Farabi and he too by virtue of his mysticism approaches him with some degree of closeness.¹

The eventful life of Al-Ghazzali can be divided into three major periods. The first is the period of learning, in his home town of Tus in Persia, then in Gurgan and finally in Nishapur. After the death of his teacher, Imam al-Haramayn Al-Juwayni, Al-Ghazzali moved to the court Nizam al Mulk, the powerful vizier of the Seljuq sultans, who eventually appointed him head of the Nizamiyyah College at Baghdad in 1091 A.D.²

The second period of Al-Ghazzali's life was his brilliant career as the highest-ranking orthodox 'doctor' of the Islamic community in Baghdad (1091-5 A.D). This period was short but significant. During this time, as well as lecturing on Islamic Jurisprudence at the college, he was also busy refuting heresies and responding to questions from all segments of the

community. In the political confusion following the assassination of Nizam al Mulk and the subsequent violent death of Sultan Malikshah. Al-Ghazzali himself fell into a serious spiritual crisis and finally left Baghdad, renouncing his career and the world.

This event marks the beginning of the third period of his life, that of retirement (1095-1111 A. D), but which also included a short period of teaching at the *Nizamiyyah* College in Nishapur. After leaving Baghdad, he wandered as a *Sufi* in Syria and Palestine before returning to Tus, where he was engaged in writing, *Sufi* practices and teaching his disciples until his death.

Muslim Rival Sects in Politics As Well As Religion

A brief introduction to the historical perceptiveness of the sorry state of Islamic Brotherhood and solidarity before Imam Al-Ghazzali is necessarily be stated here. The works of Al-Ghazzali represent a very thoughtful exposition of Islam, and at the same time a critique of the anti-Islamic elements of his times, which had been gradually developing along with the political movements in the history of Islam. In order to appreciate Al-Ghazzali's writings we have to study the influences which were responsible for the various religious and philosophical systems in their historical perspectives. The religious and philosophical systems were closely associated with a political movement. We will trace the origin and development of these movements from the prophet's death to the time of Al-Ghazzali.

In the life time of the Prophet Muhammad(s) and his two immediate successors, the solidarity of the Islamic state remained intact. In the Caliphate of Uthman, third orthodox caliph a difference of opinion arose among the Muslims. This difference was bound to appear sooner or later in the large empire that the caliphate had become, comprising a countless number of heterogeneous people and cultures. In the complexity of causes, the immediate cause which splits the Muslim brotherhood into rival sects, was political as well as ideological. The movement led by Abd Allah bin Saba was responsible for the early civil and religious wars.³ It was due to the shrewd activities of this man that Islamic brotherhood came to be divided into three well-known sects, viz., the *Sunni*, the *shi'a* and the *khawarijite*. He went from place to place to spread misconceptions about Islam.⁴ Abd Allah bin Saba's doctrines were quite foreign to Islam. He formed secret societies and instigated conspiracies. The first achievement of his party was the assassination of Uthman, the third orthodox caliph. At the battles of the Camel (656 A.D) and *Siffin* (657 A.D) the members of this party played a prominent role in splitting the Muslim brotherhood.⁵

Ibn Saba was the founder and organizer of the *Shiite* sect. His doctrines gave a theological system to *Shiism*.⁶ He was the first (653 A. D) to attribute divinity to Ali, for which the latter rebuked him.⁷ Ali, according to him, was a divinely appointed caliph. Every prophet, he preached, had an executor (*wasil*). Ali was to Muhammad as Aaron was to Moses. The *Imamate*, according to him, belonged to Ali by right.⁸ "As God had appointed Muhammad as Prophet, so he had appointed Ali as his helper in life and his successor in death."⁹

The movement of the Saba proceeded triumphantly and succeeded in destroying the solidarity of Islam. After the assassination of Uthman, Ibn Saba's party succeeded in electing 'Ali (656-661 A.D) as caliph. Muawiya, governor of Syria refused to submit to his caliphate, hence there started a quarrel between Ali and Muawiya.¹⁰ After the fiasco of arbitration between Ali and Muawiya, a group of Ali's followers came to him and asked him why he had accepted the arbitration of men, when the right of arbitration was vested only in God. Some twelve thousand of his followers deserted the main body of Ali's camp for which reason they were called *Khawarijite* (The seceders). The people who remained with Ali were called the *Shi'as*, (The partisans of Ali). Henceforth, the *Khawarijite* did not give any peace to Ali to administer the affairs of the empire. At last Ibn Muljim, one of the party, assassinated Ali and thus put an end to the True Caliphate.¹¹

The *Khawarijite* were a political party that gradually turned into a religious sect. They were fanatics in theology and wanted to enforce their doctrines on other Muslims at the point of the sword. They admitted neither the claims of 'Ali nor, Muawiya and declared "there is no rule but the rule of Allah". Rebellion and anarchy became the key-note of their confounded philosophy. The *Khawarijite* ferment was thus one of the potent factors that dismembered the Islamic empire. After the death of Ali the caliphate passed to Muawiya and Damascus became the centre of Muslim empire.¹²

Muawiya converted the caliphate into a dynastic rule and struck a death-blow to the Islamic State founded by the Prophet and successfully maintained by the true caliphs. After Muawiya a number of events happened which alienated the sympathies of all good Muslims. The tragedy of *Karbala* was perpetrated in the first year of Yazid's reign. In the second year of his reign he sacked Madina, where eighty companions of the Prophet and seven hundred *huffaz* of the Quran (Quran by hearters) were slain. In the third year Holy *Ka'ba* was attacked.¹³ Again in the reign of Abd al Malik, *Ka'ba* was attacked, desecrated and burned

by Hajjaj ibn Yusuf."¹⁴ These misdeeds of the Umayyads led to open revolt against them. The insurgents divided themselves into four prominent groups as follows.

- (1) The true and righteous Muslims who could not find anything Islamic in their rulers.
- (2) The *Khawarijite*¹⁵ who militarily did more harm to Umayyads than anything else.
- (3) The *Mawali*, i.e., the subject races who were Muslims but not Arabs. They opposed the Umayyads because they were not treated as equals as enjoined by Islam.
- (4) The *Shiis* believed in the Divine Right of the Prophet's family to wield supreme authority in Islam, both temporal and spiritual. Before the tragic battle of *Karbala*, they had no enthusiasm.¹⁶ That lamentable tragedy galvanised the party into life and action.

The Persians also joined hands with the *Khawarijites*. They condemned the first three caliphs, especially 'Umar, because during his regime the Persian empire had been overrun and annexed by the Muslims.¹⁷ To avenge the tragedy of *Karbala*, Mukhtar, a Persian *shiite* led the rebellion against the Umayyads. The tragedy of *Karbala* was avenged by him in 689 A. D by putting to death thousands of people who owed fealty to the Umayyads. Henceforth, the Persians took up the cause of the Prophet's family. The rebelling elements broke up into different factions and groups.¹⁸

The Abbasids came into power, they put to death every member of the Umayyad family. The *Shi'as* were killed by them, even Abu Muslim who was solely responsible for the establishment of the Abbasid empire was put to death in 755 A.D. Thus ended the Umayyad rule, and with it the period of Arab imperialism. Thereafter, Persian culture and civilization asserted itself dominantly and triumphantly in the Muslim world.

But, while these political struggles were proceeding apace in the body politic of Islam, ground was being prepared for philosophical and religious sects. Madina, Kufa and Basra surpassed all the other cities of the empire in literary and scientific progress. From far and near people flocked thither to attend the lectures of the savants, Arabs, Persians, Magians, Jews, Christians, etc., and met here shoulder to shoulder. All the Muslim sciences took their birth here.¹⁹ During the period of the Abbasids a number of claimants, mostly in the name of Ali, asserted their rights for the leadership of the Muslim world, with the result that soon the whole of the Muslim empire became a battle-field. The process of disintegration set in and province after province was lost by the control of caliphate.²⁰

The Period is noted for religious toleration, free thought, scientific researches,²¹ philosophical and cosmopolitan spirit and the Persian ascendancy.²² The capital of the empire was moved from Damascus to Baghdad²³ which rapidly became the seat of learning and science. An academy of science was founded by Mansur. Important traditions from different languages into Arabic were quickly made. Free discussions between the followers of different religions were encouraged. The names of Harun al-Rashid and Mamun had a zeal for the cultivation of free thought and for the spread of learning and Science. It is mainly through his efforts that Greek Science and philosophy were preserved and the west once again became aware of them. Under his patronage the *Mu'tazilite* speculation reached its climax.

The *Mawali* movement created serious issues, all the non-Arab nations united in the struggle to prove that the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Persians, etc. were superior to the Arabs. The Persians formed *shu'ubiyyah* movement, *Bermakids* professed to be Persian *Shia* but were *Magian* at heart. The Persian *shiite* doctrines of the *Imamate*, two sects of the *Shias*; *Sevenites*, *Twelvers*, etc., *Ismailians* or *Sabiyya* doctrine *Ta'weel*, allegorical interpretation of the Quran also known as *Batinites*.²⁴

In this period many false prophets appeared after the fashion of the Abu Muslim Khurasani. Bin Afridh, Sinbadh, the Magian. Ibn al Muqaffa, Al-Muqanna, Babak, etc. introduced into Islam many Magian, Mazdakite and other heretical doctrines such as sun worship, return incarnation reincarnation, metempsychosis-doctrines which were opposed to the spirit of Islam and the Islamic tradition.

With the spread of the knowledge of Greek philosophy and sciences, the votaries of Greek culture appeared. The philosopher al-Kindi and his follower, who founded a school of Greek philosophy in the hearts of Islam began to exalt *Hellenism* over *Arabicism*. They placed the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle on equal footing. Again it is this period which is responsible for the orthodox reaction which followed. The *Mutazilite* thinkers persecuted their opponents. Ma'mun's²⁵ persecution of non-*Mutazilites* offered great incentive to the orthodox party for vehement opposition. When the *Mu'tazilite* school fell, the theologians turned to combat the heretical theories of Greek Philosophy. The real Islamic spirit was smothered by the Persian and the Greek cultures. It is the heresies of this period and the obnoxious influences which philosophy and produced on the minds of the Muslims that Al-Ghazzali rose to combat.

The Turkish influence began in the reign of Mut'asin, Muttawakkil when orthodox reaction gets in and *Mutaziilites* were persecuted. The *Sasanids* in Bukhara and *Fatimids* in North Africa, Al-Farabi, Al-Bermuni and Ibn Sina were trained. The *Fatimids* dynasty Abdullah Ibn Maymun incorporated all sorts of heterogeneous elements and organized a mission of propaganda which was anti-Arab movement, a philosopher got license for free thinking in everywhere. *Ismailians*, known as the *Carmathian* appeared in Mesopotamia, etc. Its founder was Hamdan nick-named *Qarmat*. This sect spread terror through the Abbasid Caliphate. They frequently plundered pilgrims and slaughtered them whole-sale. In A.D. 930 they, to the horror of the Muslim world, carried away the 'Black Stone' from Holy *Ka'ba* and kept it with them for ever twenty years even the Holy *Hajj* Pilgrimage being stopped for some years.

This period Islam became stagnant,²⁶ the *Mutaziilites* began a suffer in prestige and orthodox theology held the field. Mamun and the *Mutaziilites* enforced their new ideas and beliefs on others, this resulted Ahmad bin Hanbal faced the inquisition instituted by Mamun. Abu Hasan *Al-Ashari*, the founder of the scholastic theology appeared in this period. He dealt a fatal blow to the *Mutazilites* and the philosophers. *Al-Ash'ari's* school of thought reached its climax in the person of al-Ghazzali in later times. Two anti-Islamic tendencies, viz., national sentiment and pantheistic *sufism* appeared in this period. The spirit of fraternity suffered a set back, Greek and Persian heresies now took a new turn and appeared under the garb of *sufism*. The *Buwayhids* were *Shi'as* and treated the *sunni* caliphs with little respect.²⁷ The *Fatimids* grew formidable in this period. They undermined the authority of the Abbasids. They established a great University at Cairo, where all sorts of heresies were taught. The *Ismailian* propagandists who were the backbone of this dynasty disseminated anti-Islamic doctrines all over the Muslim empire and thousands of Muslims turned heretical and skeptic.

The *Seljuqs* were *Sunnis*, they wielded the secular authority which they had duly received from the caliph. Next to the orthodox caliphate they were the greatest and the most religious Muslim monarchs.²⁸ Malik Shah's court was a great centre of attraction for those who yearned for recognition of their true merits. His name is immortalized by the foundation of the *Nizamiya* universities in Baghdad, Nayshabur, Isphahan and other prominent centres. Many scholars won their renown in these institutions. Al-Ghazzali was closely associated with Nizam al-Mulk and the *Nizamiya* universities of Nayshabur and Baghdad. The *Ismailians*, also called *Malahida* (heretics), *Batinis* (esoterics), the *Ta'limites* (doctrinaires) etc., who were founders of the *Fathimid* caliphate, and who had the secular power at their

disposal, were spreading their anti-Islamic doctrines in every part of the Muslim world.²⁹ They were a great danger to Islam, both in its religious as well as political aspects. They did not believe in the fundamentals of the faith. Their aim was to destroy the caliphate of Baghdad in particular and Islam in general. All these activities were carried on in the name of the Prophet's family.³⁰

A complete division took place between religion and morality. Religion became merely a name for performing certain formal practices and rituals. Their ethical significance was ignored and belittled. The theologians who were the professional defenders of the faith, mostly proved to be hypocrites. They acquired learning in order to secure wealth and position, and flocked to the courts of princes and flattered the rich in order to extract money and gain admiration both for their erudition and seeming piety. In fact, it became a fashion to pose as a philosopher in order to have an excuse for neglecting religion.³¹

Al-Ghazzali was trying to prove that the understanding of the Muslim followers and commentators of Greek philosophy was not correct and reliable. So, he was not opposed to philosophy as such but to the distorted version of it. In the same direction Al-Ghazzali wrote his first book *Maqasidul-Falasifah* (The Aims of Philosophers) in which he has tried to explain and classify the different branches of philosophy.³² In the Preface to *Tahafut-al-Falasifah*, Ghazzali says that even the great Greek philosophers did not disbelieve in God and the life hereafter. But their blind followers claim to disbelieve in God so as to be regarded as superior to others.³³

Ethics in Islam

To Muslims ethics like other Islamic sciences, takes its origin from the Quran. The Quran lays down the foundation of a religious system on purely ethical principles, hence there is not much to distinguish between Islam as such and Islamic ethics. The moral, civil, canonical and criminal laws of Islam are not rigidly separated from one another and cannot be identified as isolated systems or sciences. The Muslims started the study of ethics along with the study of the Quran.

The preachers of the doctrines of *Batiniyah* and *Ismaliyah* were spread throughout the Muslim cities in west and eastward. They all used to organize meetings and conferences to elaborate and explain the teachings of their particular sects and at the same time refute the arguments of their opponents, in which all problems concerning religion, politics and

Philosophy came into discussion. It was not possible for a person, who was living in Khorasan or Iraq to remain aloof from philosophy, (at least to defend oneself demanded study of philosophy) in those times. This was the situation in which Al-Ghazzali was brought up.³⁴

Al-Ghazzali comprehensively studied not only Muslim philosophers but also non-Muslim philosophers. He got full hold of Greek philosophy, oriental philosophers, views of the schools of Alexandria as he became well versed in the philosophy of peripatetic for this study, pondering and meditating Philosophical problems. He has give full details of this study in his "*Al Munqidh*". In this way he became quite well versed and fully acquainted with new and old philosophers.³⁵ But in case of physics Al-Ghazzali says that truth and falsehood are equally included in it. Metaphysics is full of beliefs of philosophers which go contradictory to the truth as accuracy in this branch of philosophy is very rare.³⁶

The second philosophical treatise of Al-Ghazzali is *Tahafatul-al-falasifah*, which is very famous among all his books. This book is, without doubt, one of remarkable books of medieval period also. It was Ibn Rushd who after about hundred years of Al- Ghazzali's remarkable book had appeared, felt need to defend philosophy against Al-Ghazzali's attacks. "But there is no doubt that Al-Ghazzali was more original, clear, explicit and free in his '*Tahafut*' than Ibn Rushd."³⁷

The last book in the realm of philosophy was Al-Ghazzali's *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. In this book Al- Ghazzali criticised *Mutakallimeen*, refuted philosophers and *Batinniyah* The spiritual knowledge according to Al- Ghazzali emerges from heart which is absolute light and the highest stage of certainty.³⁸

Al-Gazzali is a figure of towering personality in the Arab world. His contribution to philosophy, culture and education one had marks of enlightenment for all ages....³⁹

He was the first person to reconcile between Islamic beliefs and Neo-platonic philosophy, by interpreting Quran. He presented these Neo-Platonic views in an Islamic garb, Al-Ghazzali provided his views especially in "*Mishkat al-Anwar*," which is one of his important philosophical works. He drew the conclusions and thoughts which were implicit in Neo-platonism. In this way, it was Al-Ghazzali, who gave a fuller chance to philosophy to become a part of Islamic civilization.⁴⁰

Al- Ghazzalis' thoughts are universe and he will certainly leave on and grow through the centuries as the impact of his genius increases with the passage of time. The author who had nine centuries before raised his voice in deference of reason and social justice, and freedom of thought.⁴¹ In the lines of Imam Al-Ghazzali., we are confronted with the situation that the pristine Islamic thought was covered with the cobwebs of allies philosophers and it had become necessary to separate truth from falsehood.⁴²

The exalted idealism which breathes in the teachings of Al-Ghazzali, did not only inspire the actions of his contemporaries but during the century following his death, it also modeled the times of noblest men in Islam.⁴³ Sovereign like Salahuddin Ayyubi and heroes like Nuruddin Zangi have found in it their guiding star.⁴⁴

Al- Ghazzali considers that there is no contradiction between revealed *sharia* and rational truth, as to rely on authority (*Taqlid*). He did not attach to reason the absolute authority as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina had done. But he showed the limit of human reason and proved quite convincingly that reason needs a complete reliance on the religion in order to arrive at the true picture of the things.⁴⁵

Notes and References

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