

Al-Ghazālī and Mystic Expression:

An Analysis of His Life and Works

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REL 405: Religion and Literature

April 26, 2019

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī, commonly known as al-Ghazālī, was one of the most influential writers on mystic expression.<sup>1</sup> He is hailed as "the Proof of Islam (*hujjat al-Islam*), the Ornament of Faith (*zain al-din*) and the Renewer of Religion (*mujaddid*)."<sup>2</sup> As a mystic of Sunni Islam, he was confronted with contradictions between reason and revelation. He sought to resolve these contradictions for the sake of his followers as well as himself in *āl-Madnūn bihī 'alā ghair ahlihī* (*The Mysteries of the Human Soul*).<sup>3</sup> This short but comprehensive work describes al-Ghazālī's psychological understanding of the soul, and, consequently, his basic understanding of the world and religion.

Al-Ghazālī was born in 1058 CE in Tabaran-Tūs (modern-day Iran), where he received his early education. He then studied with al-Juwaynī, an Ash'arite theologian, at the Nizāmyiya madrasa in Nishapur. It was here that he became closely connected with the political elite, specifically the caliphal court in Baghdad. However, he realized that the "high ethical standards of a virtuous religious life [were] not compatible with being in the service of sultans, viziers, and caliphs" because "benefiting from the riches of the military and political elite implies complicity in their corrupt and oppressive rule and will jeopardize one's prospect of redemption in the afterlife."<sup>4</sup> It was this realization that caused him to leave Baghdad in 1095 and vow at the tomb of Abraham in Hebron to never serve political authorities or teach in state-sponsored schools again.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Mysteries of the Human Soul*, trans. 'Abdul Qayyum "Shafaq" Hazarvi (Lahore: Ashraf Printing Press, 1991), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Hozien, "Metaphysics," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Ghazali (website), accessed July 30, 2020, [www.ghazali.org/articles/hmp-4-30.htm](http://www.ghazali.org/articles/hmp-4-30.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazali," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive*, Winter 2016 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/al-ghazali/>; al-Ghazali, *Mysteries*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> Griffel, "Al-Ghazali."

In 1096, shortly after a pilgrimage to Mecca, he founded a small private school and Sufi convent (*khanqah*). During this time, he continued writing. Many of his most influential writings were written during this time. Unfortunately, it did not last, and he broke his vow in 1106 to teach at the Nizāmiyya madrasa in Nishapur, where he was once a student. He cited political pressure and theological conflicts for breaking his vow. He taught at small schools until 1111, when he died in Tūs.

*The Mysteries of the Human Soul*, one of his most influential works on mystical expression, examines the intricacies of the soul and its connection to the body. Though the exact date is unknown, it was most likely written sometime between 1096 and 1106, after al-Ghazālī's revelation caused him to leave Baghdad. He spent the majority of this period at his private school and Sufi convent in Tūs. *Mysteries* is useful for Sufi converts due to its emphasis on emptying oneself of earthly desires and feelings to attain unification with God.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's works were widespread and made their way from West Africa to Oceania. However, his teachings were not always readily accepted. His use of philosophical language, his mode of argument, and his preoccupation with Sufism led many to label him as "one of the misguided."<sup>6</sup> Qadi abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Hamdin of Cordova issued a decree (*fatwa*) against al-Ghazālī's work and had it destroyed throughout Spain. Marrakush sultan 'Ali ibn Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn Tashifin, an Almoravid ruler, also ordered the destruction of al-Ghazālī's philosophical writings in North Africa during his reign from 1084 to 1142 CE.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Mysteries*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Hozien, "Influence," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*.

<sup>7</sup> Hozien, "Influence," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy; Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn," accessed July 30, 2020, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Yusuf-ibn-Tashufin#10750.hook>.

Al-Ghazālī lived in a post-golden age when exact sciences lost importance, and the caliphate that the Islamic state had grown into faced destruction as more provincial governors gained power. In fact, soon after Al-Ghazālī was born, the sultan was forced on Baghdad, and a split in power between the sultan and the caliph occurred. It was a time marked by wealth and power but also separation from tradition. This resulted in a movement back to the roots of Islam, in which Sufism dominated.<sup>8</sup>

Sufism heavily influenced much of al-Ghazālī's work, as demonstrated by *The Mysteries of the Human Soul*. The work focuses on the soul and how it is the basic connection to God and mystical knowledge, the "highest thing to which a man can attain."<sup>9</sup> According to al-Ghazālī, diving into the purity of the soul and separating oneself from the earthly desires and feelings is the only way to achieve the purpose of returning the soul to its creator.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Abu Sway, "Muhammad al-Ghazālī," Center for Islamic Sciences (website), accessed July 30, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Mysteries*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Mysteries*, 44, 80.

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