

## Social justice and education of the soul in Islam: Al-Ghazālī's approach

by Tayeb Chouiref

We just celebrated the ninth centenary of the death of the great Muslim thinker, Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī. Throughout the Muslim world and the West, there were during 2011 conferences, symposia and seminars to reflect on his work and the impact of his thought in our contemporary societies.

Can the message of an author as old as Ghazālī, who lived in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, throw any light on the problems of the contemporary world and particularly those experienced by the predominantly Muslim societies?

The great spokesmen of wisdom in Islam have managed to combine their demand for authenticity in their inner spiritual journey with the sense of balance and harmony in society. As such, the case of Ghazālī is particularly noteworthy.

Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) lived in an era marked by the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate. The Seljuk sultans, supported by powerful viziers, were those who exercised the real power. Let's first emphasize that the questioning of Ghazālī on his politically and socially turbulent times has had a decisive impact on his written work during and after his spiritual retreat, which stretches between 1095 and 1105. His masterpiece entitled *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of Religions' Sciences*) can be read as an attempt to provide both

an epistemological and religious base to an intellectual and spiritual recovery.

The title of this book with impressive dimensions is particularly significant: for Ghazālī, only an intellectual recovery<sup>1</sup> could assist in overcoming difficulties of all kinds suffered by the Muslim community. For the author of the *Ihyā'*, it is because the understanding of what the reality of Islam has become all too rare that all sorts of excesses and fanaticism become possible. We know that Ghazālī has fought hard against obscurantism in all its forms and especially against the sectarianism of the *Batinids* who did not hesitate to resort to murder to impose their ideas. Thus the protector and friend of Ghazālī, the vizier Nizam al-Mulk, was assassinated by a young *Batinid* in 1092. This event, painfully experienced by Ghazālī, has certainly sharpened the awareness he could have about dangers of ignorance, and the fanaticism it can cause.

Through what we have just mentioned, we see that reflection on the political and social justice have played such a big role in the development of his thought, which had a strong influence on many authors in both the Arab and Muslim world and the West.<sup>2</sup>

For Ghazālī, the question of social justice in all its forms is not structural: it is not a matter of changing *a priori* external conditions that constitute the social context in which the believer

lives. The foremost thing is to first orient him towards the purification of the soul and, to do so, it is necessary to offer him sufficient knowledge of human nature.

As taught by the Qur'ān, human nature is fundamentally dual. In every soul is a part of good and of a part of evil. In the Qur'ān, this duality is clearly stated: "[By the] soul and He who proportioned it and inspired it its part of perversity and its part of righteousness..."<sup>3</sup>.

Ghazālī summarises all the negative possibilities of the human soul to four fundamental skills:

1. The first and most serious dark tendency of the soul is the temptation to attribute oneself the *rubūbiyya*, sovereignty that actually belongs to God alone.

A related tendency is pride (*al-kibr*), vanity (*al-fakhr*), the love of power (*al-jabarūt*) and the desire to be above everyone. For Ghazālī, the best example of this tendency is the personification of Pharaoh who said: "I am your supreme lord"<sup>4</sup>.

2. The second negative possibility of the soul is the properly satanic tendency (*al-sifa al-shaytāniyya*) that gives rise to many vices like jealousy (*al-hasad*), cunning (*al-hila*), the betrayal (*al-khidā'*), love of deviant and perverse innovations, etc.

3. The third negative possibility of the soul is bestiality (*al-sifa al-bahīmiyya*). Ghazālī means by that all manifestations of animality that is in man: gluttony (*al-sharah*), greed (*al-kalab*) and sexual immorality in all its forms.

4. The fourth and final negative possibility of the soul is aggression (*al-sifa al-saba'iyya*). The latter gives rise to various attitudes such as anger (*al-ghadab*), hatred (*al-hiqd*), cruelty by words or actions, etc.

We just saw the four negative possibilities of the soul in the order in which Ghazālī presents them. However, it should be noted that this does not match the order they appear in the psychological development of man and mental maturation. According to Ghazālī, the child is first subject to bestiality, and the role of education will help to channel the force of desires. Without such assistance, the child may indulge in aggressiveness and develop destructive attitudes, either for himself or for his entourage. In this case, he will reach adulthood by being dominated by the satanic tendency, which is none other than the use of reason in the service of aggressiveness and bestiality. It is only in a soul where reign those fatal first three tendencies that may appear the worse negative possibilities of the soul, namely the search for power and strength.

We have in the four negative possibilities exposed, what Ghazālī calls the roots of sin (*ummahāt al-dhunūb*). It is easy to see that for our author, man of power is only succumbing to the Pharaonic temptation because he lets himself become trapped by satanic, aggressive and bestial tendencies. To practice justice in exercising power necessarily implies to have received a spiritual education that goes in the direction of the purification of the soul.

The Qur'ān says that - and it could be said so of other spiritual traditions - all these evil tendencies sit within the heart (*al-qalb*). Referring to those who rejected the faith and do not follow their lascivious desires, the Holy Book says: "There is a sickness in their heart, and God increases this sickness..."<sup>5</sup>.

But the spiritual meaning of the word 'heart' is not easy to grasp. Properly speaking, the knowledge of the interiority of man is not referring to a science accessible to every believer that Ghazālī calls (*'ilm al-mu'āmalā*) but to an unveiling of the reality given by God to he who follows the path of His proximity. The knowledge obtained by an inner illumination is called *'ilm al-mukāshafa*. In this regard, Ghazālī writes: "Know that there are two types of science: *'ilm al-mukāshafa* and *'ilm al-mu'āmalā*. The first is the inner science (*'ilm al-bātin*) and is the goal of all knowledge (*ghāyat al-'ulūm*)... The term *'ilm al-mukāshafa* refers to a light that appears in the heart after its purification from blameworthy character traits. This light enables us to understand in depth what we only knew outwardly"<sup>6</sup>.

The Qur'ān insists on the heart as an organ of spiritual knowledge, particularly in the field of recognition of the truth. Referring to those who reject the message of the Prophet, the Qur'ān declares: "For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the breasts"<sup>7</sup>; "Indeed in that is a reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [in mind]"<sup>8</sup>.

However, as it is not easy to understand what the heart is, since by definition access to the heart is a divine grace, Ghazālī describes in many parts of his writings what he means by "heart" in its spiritual sense: "The heart is a subtle element, both divine and spiritual (*latīfa rabbāniyya rūhiyya*), which fits with the physical heart. This subtle element represents the reality of man; in it man grasps, understands, knows..."<sup>9</sup>.

### **Foundations of political power and spirituality**

The foundations of political power are based, for Ghazālī as for the entire *Ash'arite Sunnism*, on the theory of the Imamate. Abū l-Hasan al-Asharī (d. 324/935) opposed the Mutazilism who founded the obligation of the Imamate on reason. He rejected the idea of founding the obligation of the Imamate on rational arguments. As the legitimacy of power cannot be but divine, he developed a doctrine of political authority based on scriptural evidence (*dalā'il shar'iyya*). Asharism also had to fight Shiite ideas, which reserves Imamate to the descendants of the Prophet. The theory of the Imamate is certainly more sophisticated in *Kitāb al-al-Ahkām al-sultāniyya* of the famous Māwardī (d. 422/1031). For him, the Imamate was established to succeed to the Prophecy (*nubuwwa*) in defending religion and ruling the affairs of this world. Ghazālī does not quote this definition although he had known it. Probably because he reproaches it to forget an important part of the heirs of the Prophets, namely what he calls "the scholars of the



Hereafter” which are the real scholars because they have abandoned worldly ambition.

### ***The qualities of the statesman***

Unlike Ismaili *Batinids*, Ghazālī rejects the idea of impeccability and infallibility (*‘isma*) of the Imam, the leader of the Community. For those followers, only the inspired teaching of the Imam can get the mass of ordinary believers out

of doubt and uncertainty. Thus, the *Batinids* believe that only the Imam and his missionaries are able to convey the true teaching that they simply call *al-ta’līm*.

Ghazālī devoted two books to the genre referred to as the “Counsel for Princes”. The first of the two is chronologically *al-Mustazhirī fi l-radd ‘alā al-bāṭiniyya*<sup>10</sup>. This book was written at the request of the young Abbasid Caliph Abū l-Abbās Ahmad called *al-Mustazhir bi-l-lāh*, who was only sixteen at the death of his father in 487/1094.

The second book is shorter and was written in Persian. It is entitled *al-Tibr al-masbūk fī nasīhat al-mulūk*.<sup>11</sup> With a few differences, being more of a way to present things than content,

Ghazālī gives the same advice to men of power in both books. However, he wants to expand the scope of its recommendations he intends also to any person to whom the Law gives the right and duty to impose a constraint to another. The *Nasīhat al-mulūk* was initially aimed at the Seljuk Sultan Muhammad ibn Malikshāh and might be written only a few years before the death of Ghazālī.

In both works, all of Ghazālī recommendations are organized around two main axes, one of the fundamental beliefs (*al-‘aqā‘id*) and the rules of conduct (*al-mu‘āmalā*). This division into two axes is justified by the principle, often reminded by Ghazālī, that knowledge precedes action and determines it; any action, before being carried out, is rooted in the heart as an internal state (*hāl*), but the state itself is generated by an intellectual content (*ma‘rifa*). For our author, evil deeds are necessarily caused by misconceptions. Reforming the behaviour of a person or a group of individuals is only possible by a prior intellectual reform.

### **The fundamental beliefs**

In addition to the core beliefs of Islam, such as the Oneness of God, Ghazālī distinguishes between four fundamental beliefs without which right conduct is not conceivable:

1. The first of these beliefs is that the man of power must assimilate is that the world is not a place of permanent residence (*maqarr*) but a simple crossing point (*mamarr*). From birth to death, life is a preparation for installation in the Hereafter. However, this is only possible by preparing one’s luggage (*zād*), which is nothing else than piety (*taqwā*).<sup>12</sup>

2. The necessary piety for this journey sits within the heart, the man of power must thus begin with reforming it. Only a reform of the heart (*islāh al-qalb*) is able to make the reform of the organs of action (*islāh al-jawāriḥ*) possible. Knowledge of the transience

of the world, when it is deep and real, anchors in the heart detachment from earthly life (*al-zuhd fī l-dunyā*)<sup>13</sup>. Now, according to a famous hadith, he who achieves detachment is loved by God and mankind: “Detach yourself from this world, and God will love you. Detach yourself from what is with the people, and the people will love you”.

3. It should be noted that the spiritual reform must be based on dual compliance with religious law (*shar‘*) and intellect (*‘aql*). For Ghazālī this dual compliance is the only way to manage to control one’s passions, especially anger. This default is a trap even more dangerous than believing that the power held is great. In this perspective, self-control is the only way to exercise an authority that is not tyrannical. This is the reason why Ghazālī writes: “No one can reform the people of his country, if he is not able to reform his own house. But no one could reform its own house if he is not capable of reforming himself”<sup>14</sup>.

4. The power holder must know, and also perceive in himself, that man is torn between two major tendencies: the angelic nature (*al-sifāt al-malakiyya*) and the animal nature (*al-sifāt al-bahimiyya*). Man thus occupies an intermediate position between the angel and the beast. According to his ideas and his life choices, man approaches the one or the other. However, the bestiality of the man of power will have all the more serious impacts since his possibilities of acting are great.<sup>15</sup>

### *The rules of conduct*

To show the man of power which route to take to exercise his authority with the greatest justice possible, he asks him to return to the “heart of the faith” which is nothing else than the intimate relationship with God. While God forgives easily a breach of duty that we have to Him, the injustices committed against the creatures must one way or another be repaired.<sup>16</sup> Ghazālī then gives the man of power ten recommendations that are all benchmarks for the practical exercise of power. The three most important recommendations are:

1. Placing oneself in the place of one’s subjects and not imposing what one does not wish to have imposed.<sup>17</sup>

2. The man of power must be able to surround himself with men of religion of great quality and urging his subjects to follow their advice. Religious men that Ghazālī has in mind here are mostly men who are completely detached from the honours and with a deep mystical and spiritual life. He quotes, among others, the example of the relationship of the caliph al-Rashid with the Sufi Shaqīq al-Balkhī and the one with Ibn al-Fudayl Ibn ‘Iyād.<sup>18</sup>

3. The man of power must be able to show greatness of soul and magnanimity (*hilm*). Ghazālī points out that the princes are generally arrogant, prone to anger and revenge. However, forgiveness (*al-’afw*) is a necessary quality to safeguard the unity of society. Thus, Ghazālī points out that the Prophets and the Saints are always magnanimous with their community.

The above recommendations are certainly not easy to achieve. Ghazālī is aware of the difficulty of what he calls the leaders of his time to live this ideal. That is why he devotes an entire chapter to the sages’ aphorisms that can help a man of power to be able to meditate on the exercise of political authority.<sup>19</sup>

### *A spiritual sociology*

But the more significant help that Ghazālī wishes to provide to statesmen remains, in our opinion, what we call “spiritual sociology”. By this we refer to the classification of individuals based on their spiritual abilities. There are in the Qur’ān and the Hadith a lot of teachings on this area. For instance, *Sūrat al-Wāqī’a* has a clear distinction between three categories of men based on the guidance they have received and followed: the Companions of the left (*ashāb al-mash’ama*), the Companions of the right (*ashāb al-maymana*) and the Forerunners (*al-sābiqūn*) who are none but the ones brought near [to Allah] (*al-muqarrabūn*).

This tripartite division is the subject of a lengthy letter to the vizier Fakhr al-Mulk who was one of the viziers of Sultan Sanjar from 500/1106 to 511/1117<sup>20</sup>. Ghazālī addressed in depth the issue of human diversity in the field of spiritual vocation.<sup>21</sup> Especially, he adopted the tripartite division of humanity, as developed in the Sufi tradition, which is based on meditation from the Qur’ān. This tradition recognizes in fact three kinds of men: the common believers (*al-’amma*), the elite

of believers (*al-khāssa*) and the elite of the elite (*khāssat al-khāssa*).

Ghazālī begins his letter with a quotation from the Qur'ān: "to everyone there is a direction presided over by God, so vie in doing good deeds (*khayrāt*)"<sup>22</sup> In his analysis of this verse, he shows that no man applies himself to a matter without it being his objective, his *qibla*. This is precisely the objective of each man in his life that permits to know the group he belongs to. Ghazālī says: "The first are the vulgar masses (*āmma*) who are the people of heedlessness (*ghafla*). The second are those elite (*khāssa*) who are characterized by intelligence and perspicacity (*qiyāsa*). The third are the elite of the elite (*khāssat al-khāssa*), who are the people of true perception and understanding (*basīra*)".<sup>23</sup>

The vision of the people of heedlessness is limited to transient goods, for they think that the greatest blessings are the blessings of this world which one harvests by seeking wealth and prestige. They devote themselves to this quest, and wealth and prestige become the most beloved objects in their eyes (*qurrat al-'ayn*). Ghazālī bases his arguments on the spiritual teachings of the Prophet: "there are no two wolves let into a pen of sheep more destructive than the love of money and honour released into the faith of a believer". Of this misfortune the Prophet once said: "Woe unto the slave of the *dinār*, woe unto the slave of the *dirham*".<sup>24</sup>

In the second group, we find the elite who have grasped the nature of the world through intelligence and perspicacity and are sure of the superiority of the afterlife. Ghazālī writes that

the verse "the life to come is better and more enduring"<sup>25</sup> has manifested itself to them. Through intelligence "they turn their faces from the world and make the hereafter their *qibla*". Yet Ghazālī points out the imperfection of this attitude and invites the Vizier to ascend more in the area of spirituality: "Although these people are at fault for not seeking only the Absolute Good, they have at least contented themselves with something better than this earthly world".<sup>26</sup>

As for the third group, the elite of the elite who are the people of truly perceptive understanding, they realize, according to Ghazālī, that everything that is possessed of good cannot be the ultimate good. Such things are therefore transitory, and no discerning person is pleased with things that fade<sup>27</sup>: "They realize that this world and the next are both created, and they understand that the best aspects of these two realms are the twin pleasures of eating and conjugal intercourse, both of which animals also enjoy. This could never be a sufficient station [for them], for the Lord and Creator of the world and the Hereafter is greater and more lofty. For [the elite of the elite] the verse "and God is better and more enduring" (Qur'ān, 20: 73) has become manifest and they have chosen a place in "an assembly of truth in the presence of an omnipotent Lord" (Qur'ān, 54: 55), for "the Companions of the garden are ever occupied with joy" (Qur'ān, 36: 55)".<sup>28</sup>

For Ghazālī the distinction between belief and disbelief is not as fundamental as that between the Absolute and relative, or if one prefers, between the

Uncreated and the created. But, even Paradise is part of Creation, and God alone is uncreated. Ghazālī is aware of the elitist nature of this distinction but it is for him the only way to fully understand the doctrine of Divine Unity (*tawhīd*) and realize the virtues of detachment and impartiality which are fundamental in the faith in general and in the exercise of power in particular: "Since the Grand Vizier, may God most high grant him the loftiest of stations, calls me from a lower position to a higher one, I also call him from the 'lowest of the low'<sup>29</sup> to the 'highest of the high' (*a'lā l-'iliyyīn*). The lowest station is that of the first group, and the highest of the high is that of the third

group... [The vizier should] make preparation to move with all due haste from the depths of the masses to the acme of the elite of the elite."<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the message of Ghazālī to men of power reuses much of what he taught throughout his work in spiritual matters. The difference lies in the fact that he warned people against the spiritual danger that awaits them when their capacity for action is multiplied by the power they hold. In other words, the purification of the soul, which is binding on every man is a *sine qua non* to remain faithful to the demand of justice and give others what God expects from the man of power by giving him the authority over his fellows.

## Notes

1 We know that this expression was used by René Guénon (d. 1951) to describe the contribution that he wanted the traditional East should bring to the modern West. The revival that Ghazālī calls for is obviously linked to a very different environment but, in our opinion, this does not prevent some similarities. It is in both cases to fight against intellectual dryness by esotericism and initiatic doctrines.

2 In this connection, reference may be made to the detailed study of Naseem Hamid Rafiabadi entitled *Emerging from darkness. Ghazzali's Impact on the Westerner Philosophers*, New Delhi, 2002. In this book, the author also analyzes the impact of Ghazālī on the thought of Ibn Tufayl (see pp. 170-190) and that of Ibn Rushd (see pp. 213-321).

3 *Qur'ān*, 91: 7-8.

4 See *Ihyā'*, VII, p. 58.

5 *Qur'ān*, 2: 10.

6 See *Ihyā'*, I, p. 75-76.

7 *Qur'ān*, 22: 46.

8 *Qur'ān*, 50: 37.

9 *Ihyā'*, I, pp. 75-76

10 This book was published under the title *Fadā'ih al-bātiniyya* by 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, Cairo, 1383/1964. We quote this edition by the abbreviation *Mustazhiri*.

11 This book was translated into English by F.C.R. Bagley: *Ghazālī's Book of Counsel for Kings*, Oxford University Press, 1964. We quote this book by the abbreviation *Counsel*.

12 See *al-Mustazhiri*, p. 195 and *Counsel*, pp. 9-10.

13 See *al-Mustazhiri*, p. 198.



- 14 *al-Mustazhirī*, p. 198.
- 15 *al-Mustazhirī*, p. 201.
- 16 *Counsel*, p. 12.
- 17 *al-Mustazhirī*, p. 202.
- 18 *al-Mustazhirī*, p. 202.
- 19 See *Counsel*, ch. V, pp. 135-148.
- 20 C. Edmund Bosworth, "Fakhr al-Molk," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983–present), 9:164–5
- 21 This letter was translated from Persian and analyzed by Jonathan A.C. Brown: "The Last Days of al-Ghazzālī and the Tripartite Division of the Sufī World. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzālī's Letter to the Seljuq Vizier and Commentary", in *The Muslim World*, vol. 96, January 2006, p. 89-113. We will quote it by the title: "Letter to the Seljuq Vizier".
- 22 *Qur'ān*, 2:148.
- 23 "Letter to the Seljuq Vizier", p. 92.
- 24 This hadith was a staple in Ghazālī's writings.
- 25 *Qur'ān*, 87: 17.
- 26 "Letter to the Seljuq Vizier", pp. 92-93.
- 27 *al-'āqil lā yuhibbu al-āfilīn*, based on *Qur'ān* 6: 76.
- 28 "Letter to the Seljuq Vizier", p. 93.
- 29 *Asfal al-sāfilīn*, *Qur'ān*, 95: 5.
- 30 "Letter to the Seljuq Vizier", pp. 93-94.

