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Faith and Reason Essay

Al-Ghazali’s Deliverance From Error and Mormonism

Jade Stocks

In the Doctrine and Covenants, we are encouraged to “seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom.” While this recommendation comes from Mormon scripture, no group or individual has a monopoly on wisdom or knowledge—these “best books” clearly include works by those of other faiths. One of history’s most prominent religious writers is Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, who studied and wrote during the 1100s on many topics, including the relationship between religion and the various forms of science. In his thesis Deliverance from Error, Al-Ghazali proposes that there are three levels of knowledge, each more concrete than the previous: faith, belief, and personal experience. Regardless of doctrinal differences, Al-Ghazali’s Deliverance from Error and the LDS faith share similar views on obtaining knowledge.

LDS theology teaches that individuals should find out for themselves what things are true. Even though it is generally expected of members to believe all church doctrine, there are differences between what a person knows with absolute certainty and what they rely on faith to believe. Scripture teaches that some are blessed with the gift of the knowledge of Christ, while others have the gift of believing those with the prior gift. Al-Ghazali describes this same thing in

1. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.
2. Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14
the beginning of his essay, stating that both forms of obtaining knowledge are essential.

However, Al-Ghazali believes, as I do, that it is extremely important that we constantly question what we learn about religion. This is not to prove religious beliefs wrong, but to learn more about specific doctrines. In other cases, one might learn from questioning and studying that what they thought was doctrine was in fact an error of man, a rumor, or simply an accepted cultural norm. Although everybody learns differently, I personally gain a more certain knowledge of things I have questioned and researched, because when even after putting that topic through tests and reasoning it still comes out on top, it shows infallibility. This is what Al-Ghazali explains at the beginning of his Deliverance from Error—for knowledge to be certain, it must be irrefutable. To know if it is reliable, however, you must test knowledge to see if it remains intact under criticism and pressure.

Al-Ghazali is insistent that science and religion—specifically Islam, but including other religions as well—go hand-in-hand. As long as a valid scientific finding does not directly contradict the Qur’an or Sunnah, it should be accepted as legitimate and embraced as valuable new knowledge about God’s creations. Mormonism deals with science in the same way. For the most part, science, philosophy, and reason do not contradict our religion. Instead, they provide us with new information on the doctrines of the world we already knew a little bit about. It simply expands on the strictly religious side. We learn through science how effective the Word of Wisdom is in preventing disease and keeping us strong and healthy. Prior to that scientific research, Latter-day Saints knew through faith and through personal experience that the guidelines were correct. Science simply explains why it is effective to live in that way.

However, many people of all religions (including those of the LDS faith) often feel that science is a threat to their faith or that of others. For whatever reason, they believe that even learning about the theory of evolution would damage belief in God, despite the many around the world who believe that God and evolution are not mutually exclusive. As Al-Ghazali said, for knowledge to be certain it must be able to stand up against all other opposition. If the theory is never tested out, how will you know what knowledge of yours is certain or not? Al-Ghazali analyzed this in an experiment where he attempted to cause doubt in his mind concerning his physical senses, as he considered that the most basic certain knowledge he could think of. He successfully showed that our senses can play tricks on us, and thus are not infallible enough to constitute a certain knowledge.
Al-Ghazali thus cautions against automatically accepting a statement without checking it out first. He warns that evil often works in deceptive ways—lacing lies with the occasional truth to deceive people into believing wickedness because of the inaccuracies hidden within. This trap can be easily avoided by seeking out truth and separating it from the lies.

After significant research into different sects and religions, Al-Ghazali holds up Islamic mysticism as the ideal form of worship and means of obtaining truth. Mystics strive for "absorption" into God and to become as completely near to him as possible. Means of achieving this include meditation, song and dance, and recitation. These practices bring worshipers closer to the divine, allowing them to better understand God's nature and will. Mysticism does not have a mainstream equivalent in the LDS church, but there are some ways that we can see the parallels. For example, when we go to the temple or personally pray for inspiration and contemplation, we are attempting to draw as spiritually near to God as possible by pushing away outside influences and noise, and focusing solely on the feelings of the Spirit.

Al-Ghazali proposes that this nearness or oneness with God is the best way to gain certain knowledge. While faith or spiritual discernment is good, it can be disputed and questioned and is thus fallible. As taught in the church, knowledge is a higher level of testimony than simply believing or having faith that something is true. True knowledge cannot be disputed and is thus more desirable.

While exercising faith and relying on observation are great ways to obtain knowledge, the highest way, according to Al-Ghazali, is actual personal experience. For example, a person may hear victims of a hurricane discussing what it looked and felt like and accept their experience as true. They may then watch a scientist demonstrate through computer simulation what causes a hurricane, what it is, and what its effects are. They would certainly believe that the scientist was correct, but that knowledge is still open to further scientific study and refutations. When that person actually experiences a hurricane, however, there will be nothing on earth that can successfully dispute their experience. This is what Al-Ghazali means when he argues that actually experiencing God and a higher state of being is the highest form of obtaining knowledge.

Obtaining knowledge is a concept that is applicable to everyone, whether they believe in Islam, Mormonism, or neither. Everyone can follow Al-Ghazali's example in determining good from evil and how best to gain absolute knowledge. We can also learn to critique the scientific and philosophic claims we hear every day and realize that they are not automatically contrary to faith. Religion and reason not only can exist together, but can complement each other.