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# Al-Ghazali, a Muslim Seeker of Truth

Brian M. Hauglid

In conjunction with some noted Islamicists and under the leadership of Daniel C. Peterson, associate professor of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at BYU, several significant Islamic texts are being or will be translated into English and published in order to make these texts available to the West. The first published volume of the Islamic Translation Series: Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism is *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-Falasifa*), written by al-Ghazali (d. 1111).<sup>1</sup> It seems fitting to begin such a series with a work by al-Ghazali, as he holds an esteemed place in the Islamic world. However, Latter-day Saints will also find in al-Ghazali a remarkable individual who lived his life in the pursuit of truth and seems to have received a degree of spiritual enlightenment. After an initial discussion of al-Ghazali's autobiographical narrative, this essay will strive to illustrate the principle that the "light of truth" (D&C 88:6) is available to all sincere seekers.

## Dissatisfaction with Philosophy

Abu-Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) was born in a village near Tus in Khurasan (modern-day Iran).<sup>2</sup> His life falls roughly within the reign of the Seljuk Turks, who had converted to Islam and occupied the area in which al-Ghazali was born and raised as well as other areas of the Islamic empire. This period proved to be particularly productive: schools were established and great learning took place. In an age of outstanding scholarship, Al-Ghazali was noted for his remarkable intelligence, which was exhibited at a young age.<sup>3</sup>

In 1091 the famous Nizamulmulk made thirty-three-year-old al-Ghazali director of the equally famous Nizamiyyah *madarash* (college) located at Baghdad. There al-Ghazali taught Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*) and made significant contributions in several other fields. Although successful, Ghazali became increasingly dissatisfied "with his very acceptable expositions."<sup>4</sup> In addition, he had serious doubts about how the theologians and philosophers of his day relied on obtaining knowledge rationally. After his friend Nizamulmulk was assassinated in 1095, al-Ghazali left his teaching position for over a decade and did not return until he felt he had found the way to acquire knowledge of truth.<sup>5</sup> After his return, al-Ghazali wrote his autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* (Deliverance from error), detailing his experience. In his account, al-Ghazali describes the general atmosphere of his time (an atmosphere of



religious ferment and contradictory claims), which led to his intense search for truth and certainty:

You must know—and may God most high perfect you in the right way and soften your hearts to receive the truth—that the different religious observances and religious communities of the human race and likewise the different theological systems of the religious leaders, with all the multiplicity of sects and variety of practices, constitute ocean depths in which the majority drown and only a minority reach safety. Each separate group thinks that it alone is saved. . . .

From my early youth, since I attained the age of puberty before I was twenty, until the present time when I am over fifty,<sup>6</sup> I have recklessly launched out into the midst of these ocean depths, I have ever bravely embarked on this open sea, throwing aside all craven caution; I have poked into every dark recess, I have made an assault on every problem, I have plunged into every abyss, I have scrutinized the creed of every sect, I have tried to lay bare the inmost doctrines of every community. All this have I done that I might distinguish between true and false, between sound tradition and heretical innovation.<sup>7</sup>

The motivation behind al-Ghazali's quest for certainty is reminiscent of Jacob's statement in the Book of Mormon that "the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are" (Jacob 4:13). Al-Ghazali explained his search in similar terms: "What I am looking for is knowledge of what things really are, so I must undoubtedly try to find what knowledge really is." He affirmed that this type of knowledge must be a "sure and certain knowledge" in which "no doubt remains along with it, that no possibility of error or illusion accompanies it, and that the mind cannot even entertain such a supposition."<sup>8</sup>

Before leaving his position at Nizamiyyah, al-Ghazali experienced a period of extreme skepticism. During this time, al-Ghazali questioned even his senses. In a dialectic conversation with sense perception, al-Ghazali determined at one point that

only those intellectual truths which are first principles (or derived from first principles) are to be relied upon, such as the assertion that ten are more than three. . . .

Sense perception replied: "Do you not expect that your reliance on intellectual truths will fare like your reliance on sense-perception? . . .

. . . "Do you not see," it said, "how, when you are asleep, you believe things and imagine circumstances, holding them stable and enduring, and, so long as you are in that dream-condition, have no doubts about them? And is it not the case that when you awake you know that all you have imagined and believed is unfounded and ineffectual? Why then are you confident that all your waking beliefs, whether from sense or intellect, are genuine?"

Al-Ghazali concluded that "perhaps life in this world is a dream by comparison with the world to come."<sup>9</sup> Hence, al-Ghazali reached a critical point of questioning even axiomatic truths, such as the mathematical

assertion that ten is more than three. During this two-month period of complete skepticism, al-Ghazali felt as if he were suffering a disease from which he needed to be healed.<sup>10</sup>

He subsequently limited his search for truth to the teachings of four groups that he viewed as seeking sure knowledge. Al-Ghazali hoped one of these groups would provide certainties that could also possibly cure him of his disease. These groups were (1) the Theologians, “exponents of thought and intellectual speculation”;<sup>11</sup> (2) the Batiniyah, who derived truth from an infallible leader (imam);<sup>12</sup> (3) the Philosophers, “exponents of logic and demonstration”;<sup>13</sup> and (4) the Sufis or Mystics, who “possess vision and intuitive understanding.”<sup>14</sup> According to al-Ghazali, “the truth cannot lie outside these four classes.”<sup>15</sup>

For several years before leaving teaching, al-Ghazali carefully investigated the first three of these groups of seekers. After reading all of the theological works extant in his day and writing a few of his own, al-Ghazali concluded that

theology was not adequate to my case and was unable to cure the malady of which I complained. . . . [the Theologians] did not deal with the question [of attaining certain knowledge] thoroughly in their thinking and consequently did not arrive at results sufficient to dispel universally the darkness of confusion due to the different views of men.<sup>16</sup>

Turning to the Batiniyah, al-Ghazali concluded that these seekers could not know for certain whether the imam was infallible and therefore could not fully rely on what the imam said. According to al-Ghazali,

the astonishing thing is that they [this group’s adherents] squander their lives in searching for the “instructor” and in boasting that they have found him, yet without learning anything at all from him. They are like a man smeared with filth, who so wearies himself with the search for water that when he comes upon it he does not use it but remains smeared with dirt.<sup>17</sup>

In philosophy, al-Ghazali encountered a science with which he was less familiar. Realizing “that to refute a system before understanding it and becoming acquainted with its depths is to act blindly,” he “set out in all earnestness to acquire a knowledge of philosophy from books, by private study without the help of an instructor.” He was able to make this study only in his free time, but, he claimed, within two years he had a “complete understanding of . . . the philosophers.”<sup>18</sup> His refutations of philosophy are contained in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Al-Ghazali did not see this science as a vehicle for attaining certain knowledge.

### Search for the Light

When al-Ghazali turned to mysticism (defined here as “a spiritual experience that depends upon neither sensual nor rational method”<sup>19</sup>), he



again studied all of the material available to him but found that “what is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience . . . by ecstasy and by a moral change.”<sup>20</sup> Al-Ghazali’s investigation into mysticism demonstrates his profound spiritual nature—his sincere desire to please God and to determine the best possible course for attaining certainty:

It had already become clear to me that I had no hope of bliss of the world to come save through a God-fearing life and the withdrawal of myself from vain desire. It was clear to me too that the key to all this was to sever the attachment of the heart to worldly things by leaving the mansion of deception and returning to that of eternity, and to advance towards God most high with all earnestness. . . .

. . . One day I would form the resolution to quit Baghdad and get rid of these adverse circumstances; the next day I would abandon my resolution. . . .

For nearly six months . . . I was continually tossed about between the attractions of worldly desires and the impulses towards eternal life. [In July 1095] the matter ceased to be one of choice and became one of compulsion. God caused my tongue to dry up so that I was prevented from lecturing. . . .

This impediment in my speech produced grief in my heart, and at the same time my power to digest and assimilate food and drink was impaired; I could hardly swallow soup or digest a single mouthful of food. My powers became so weakened that the doctors gave up all hope of successful treatment. . . .

. . . [After openly expressing a desire to leave] I distributed what wealth I had, retaining only as much as would suffice myself and provide sustenance for my children. . . .

In due course I entered Damascus, and there I remained for nearly two years with no other occupation than the cultivation of retirement and solitude, together with religious and ascetic exercises, as I busied myself purifying my soul, improving my character and cleansing my heart for the constant recollection of God most high, as I had learnt from my study of mysticism. . . .

At length I made my way from Damascus to the Holy House (that is, Jerusalem). . . .

Next there arose in me a prompting to fulfil the duty of the Pilgrimage, gain the blessings of Mecca and Medina. . . .

I continued at this stage for the space of ten years, and during these periods of solitude there were revealed to me things innumerable and unfathomable.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Ghazali found that in mysticism the certainty he was seeking “did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshaled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast.”<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, this sounds very much like the language of revelation. In fact, Joseph Smith’s experience in some ways parallels that of al-Ghazali. The Prophet was also confronted by the contradictions of the various religions of his day and

sought the light of revelation. Furthermore, Joseph Smith, like al-Ghazali, received the answer to his question, not through rational processes, but in a revelation experienced beyond the intellectual level.

After his spiritual experience, al-Ghazali struggled with his decision to return to his profession. At length he felt divinely prompted to move back to Nishapur (just south of Tus) and continue teaching. However, he knew he was a different person from the one who had left many years earlier:

Now I am calling men to the knowledge whereby worldly success is given up and its low position in the scale of real worth is recognized. This is now my intention, my aim, my desire; God knows that this is so. It is my earnest longing that I may make myself and others better. . . . I believe . . . there is no power and no might save with God, the high, the mighty, and that I do not move of myself but am moved by Him, I do not work of myself but am used by Him.<sup>23</sup>

### Al-Ghazali's Spiritual Odyssey

Al-Ghazali wrote many books that have had an enormous impact on Islam. One of his most influential contributions is the seminal multi-volume *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (The revivification of the religious sciences). In this work, al-Ghazali sought to share his insights in order to infuse into the religious practices of his day (which he felt were more mechanical than sincere) a stronger emphasis on the meanings behind worship and duty. Al-Ghazali desired that Muslims worship God in their hearts and not just in their actions. In his introductory book to the *Ihya'*, the *Bidayat al-hidayah* (The beginning of guidance), al-Ghazali counseled the worshipper to perform numerous practices to keep religion alive in the heart. Here are just a few examples:

*On Waking from Sleep.* In waking from sleep endeavor to be awake before daybreak. Let the first activity of the heart and tongue be the mention of God most high. . . .

*On Ablutions.* [Al-Ghazali cited many prayers to be performed while washing in preparation for any of the five mandatory prayers.] . . . If a man says these prayers during his ablution, his sins have departed from all parts of his body, a seal has been set upon his ablution, it has been raised to beneath the throne of God and unceasingly praises and hallows God, while the reward of that ablution is recorded for him to the day of resurrection. . . .

*Going to the Mosque.* . . . When you walk to the mosque, walk easily and calmly, and do not hurry. Say as you go: "O God, by those who beseech Thee . . . I ask Thee to deliver me from the Fire and to forgive my sins, for there is none that forgiveth sins save Thee."

*Going to Sleep.* When you want to go to sleep, lay out your bed pointing to Mecca, and sleep on your right side, the side on which the corpse reclines in the tomb. Sleep is the similitude of death and waking of the resurrection. Perhaps God most high will take your spirit this night; so be prepared to meet Him by being in a condition of purity when you sleep. . . .



*The Worship.* . . . If your heart is not attentive and your members not at rest, this is because of your defective knowledge of the majesty of God most high. [He counseled worshipers to picture themselves being watched by servants of God.]

*Fasting.* . . . When you fast, do not imagine that fasting is merely abstaining from food, [and] drink. . . . Rather, perfect fasting consists in restraining all the members from what God most high disapproves. . . .

. . . When you have understood what it means to fast, do so as much as you can, for it is the foundation of devotional practices and the key to good works.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Beginning of Guidance*, al-Ghazali also gave counsel, still pertinent today, on identifying and avoiding the worst sins of the heart. The eyes, ears, and tongue of every person, he declared, will witness for or against them on the Day of Judgment. Therefore, he warned, we should guard against certain actions. Among the eight related to the tongue are these:

*Lying.* Keep your tongue from lying, whether in earnest or in jest. . . .

*Breaking promises.* Take care not to promise something and then fail to perform it. . . .

*Backbiting.* . . . The meaning of backbiting is the mention of matters concerning a man which he would dislike, were he to hear them; the person who does this is a backbiter and wicked, even if what he says is true. . . .

With respect to the sins of the heart, al-Ghazali wrote:

*Envy.* . . . The envious man is the one who is pained when God most high out of the treasures of His might bestows on one of His servants knowledge or wealth or popularity or some piece of good fortune, and who therefore wants that favour taken away from the other person, even though he himself will not obtain any advantage from his removal. This is the depths of evil. . . .

*Hypocrisy.* . . . It consists in your quest for such a place in the hearts of people that you thereby obtain influence and respect. The love of influence is one of the “desires given rein to,” and through it many people go to destruction. Yet people are destroyed only by themselves. . . .

*Pride, arrogance, boastfulness.* This is the chronic disease. It is man’s consideration of himself with the eye of self-glorification and self-importance and his consideration of others with the eye of contempt. . . . Every one who considers himself better than one of the creatures of God most high is arrogant. . . . Your belief that you are better than others is sheer ignorance. Rather you ought not to look at anyone without considering that he is better than you and superior to you.<sup>25</sup>

## Concluding Observations

In September 1832, the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith at Kirtland that “the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that

hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit” (D&C 84:46). As I have studied and written about al-Ghazali, the truth of this scripture has become ever clearer to me: the Lord has touched and inspired many individuals, in Islam as in many other religious traditions. On February 15, 1978, the First Presidency under the direction of President Kimball issued an official statement titled “God’s Love for All Mankind,” which affirms this truth:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

Similarly, Alma 29:8 teaches, “For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true.”

Much like the religious leaders mentioned in the First Presidency’s statement, al-Ghazali was a sincere individual who “received a portion of God’s light.” His search for truth and religious certainty parallels the spiritual yearnings of many religious figures—including Joseph Smith—who, dissatisfied with their circumstances and environment, sought heavenly guidance. This brief glimpse into al-Ghazali’s life demonstrates yet again the love and wisdom the Lord sheds upon all who diligently seek his aid. Furthermore, individuals such as al-Ghazali invariably serve a higher purpose: to lift and bless as many of God’s children as possible.

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1. Abu-Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1997). For more information, see Giles H. Florence Jr., “Making Sense of the Incoherence,” *Brigham Young Magazine* 52 (spring 1998): 26–29. This volume is reviewed by David Paulsen later in this issue of *BYU Studies*.

2. Located at approximately 34°N 58°E in northeastern Iran.

3. He spent some years of study with one of the greatest theologians of his day, al-Juwayni.

4. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:180.

5. Al-Ghazali did not leave his family penniless but provided sustenance in the form of public *waqfs* (usually land grants from which to receive monies). See Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:180.

6. Probably written some time after 1106. See George F. Hourani, “The Chronology of Ghazali’s Writings,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 79 (1959): 232.

7. Abu-Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1994), 18.



8. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 19–20. The idea of certainty comes from the Arabic word *yaqin*, which can also signify an instinctive or inferential knowledge. See Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8 parts (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1956; Lebanon: Librarie du Liban, 1980), 8:3063–64. Note also the context in the Arabic original, in which one can read this word either way. See *Munqidh min al-dalal* (Damascus: n.p., 1960), 61.

9. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 22–23.

10. Al-Ghazali said that his was a “baffling” private disease that he did not exhibit in any outward expression. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 24. Hence, this sickness was most likely related to an emotional illness such as severe depression.

11. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 26. In Islam this is referred to as the science of *kalam* (rational theology). Questions concerning the origin of the Qur’an (created or uncreated), freedom of will, and the attributes of God (eternal or not) were discussed. For a good treatment of these issues and pertinent Muslim theologians, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979). See also Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). For a study dealing with al-Ghazali and Islamic theology and earlier theologians in particular, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963), 87–125.

12. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 26. This name is from the word *batin*, which means belly, interior, inside, or inner portion. It was thought by the adherents of this group that the imam possessed access to an inner or special knowledge. However, the name most commonly associated with this group is Isma‘ili, which connotes its genealogical origination. Its most distinguishing characteristic is its reliance on the concept of infallible leadership and the authoritative teaching (*ta‘lim*) of the imam. Hence, this group can also be referred to as the Ta‘limiyya. For more information, see Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Isma‘ilism: A Study of the Historical Background of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Cambridge: AMS, 1975).

13. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 26. With the translation of numerous Greek philosophical materials into Arabic during the early ninth century, many notable Muslim philosophers emerged who made significant contributions to philosophical thought. See Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 37–48; and Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 25–71.

14. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 26. For a very good introduction to Islamic mysticism, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

15. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 26.

16. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 28.

17. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 55.

18. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 29.

19. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 57.

20. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 58–63.

21. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 4.

22. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 24. Compare this statement with Doctrine and Covenants 9:8, which says, “If it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right,” and with the discussions of the light of Christ in Doctrine and Covenants 84:45 and 88:11.

23. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 82–83.

24. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 101, 103–7, 110, 127, 130–31, 142–43.

25. Al-Ghazali, *Faith and Practice*, 147–48, 159–62.