

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2021, Term 3.6

### Opening Comments

This evening we are looking at the discussion of the importance of meditating on death and the afterlife in one of the greatest theologians of the Muslim tradition, al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali is remarkable for the way he combined orthodox and Sufi theology, leading to the broader acceptance of Sufi thought and life in the orthodox Muslim tradition. In order to understand his contribution, it is important to gain a sense of the development of Sufi piety, to give us an appreciation of its central concerns.

The origins of the Sufi tradition are a topic of much debate, including the meaning of the name “Sufi.” The name could come from the wool that early Sufis wore, or it could come from their concern for purity. One thing that is clear is that the early figures in what came to be called the Sufi tradition were primarily interested in asceticism—radical self-denial—in protest of the wealth and corruption of the Muslim rulers in their time. Early figures in this movement were clearly influenced by the desert hermits of the Semitic Christian churches, though unlike the desert fathers and mothers, the Sufis did not practice celibacy.

We can see the concerns of the early Sufis in the hadith that they collected and transmitted, which are not recognized by the orthodox Muslim theologians. Along with self-denial, these hadith stress the importance of love in our relationship to Allah.

The Prophet said: “Poverty is my pride.”

“If you trusted in God as you should, He would sustain you even as He sustains the birds, which in the morning go forth hungry, and return in the evening filled.”

They also favored this passage from the Quran (5:59) “O believers, whosoever of you turns from his religion, God will assuredly bring a people He loves, and who love Him.”

The foundational figure in the development of the Sufi theology of love is Rabi’a of Basra (d. 801), who is the subject of much mythological thinking, and whose life and thought are hard to verify. We will discuss her in light of the voice she came to have in the subsequent tradition, even though we cannot be certain whether she actually said everything that has been ascribed to her. As we can see from her legacy, the goal of the Sufis is not to avoid Hell in order to enter into Heaven, for even these realities

veil and hide God from us. The goal is so to love God, and be loved by God in return, that the veil concealing God dissolves, and we are united to God in love.

“Love for the Creator has preoccupied me from love of created things.”

If I adore you out of fear of Hell, burn me in Hell!  
 If I adore you out of desire for Paradise,  
 Lock me out of Paradise.  
 But if I adore you for yourself alone,  
 Do not deny to me your eternal beauty.

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 I carry a torch in one hand,  
 And a bucket of water in the other:  
 With these things, I am going to set fire to Heaven,  
 And put out the flames of Hell,  
 So that voyagers to God can rip up the veils  
 And see the real goal.

Love for God leads to our passing into or even perishing into God, based on Sufi reading of Quran 55:25 “All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid.” Hence Al-Junaid of Baghdad (d. 910) tells us: Sufism means that “God should cause thee to die from thyself (*fana*) and to live in Him.” One of the favorite sayings of the Sufis is the hadith in which Muhammed tells his followers: “Die before you die.” Die to your attachment to the world before you die. Die to the ego before you die. Only in this way will the veil be lifted so that you can behold God and be eternally united with God in love.

### **Al-Ghazali (1058-1111)**

#### **Early Life & Education**

**1058 (450 AH):** Born in Tabaran, a town in the district of Tus, Persia (modern-day Iran).

- **c. 1070s:** Began his formal education in Islamic jurisprudence and theology under prominent scholars, including Al-Juwayni (Imam al-Haramayn) in Nishapur.

#### **Rise to Prominence in Baghdad**

- **1085 (478 AH):** Following the death of his teacher Al-Juwayni, Al-Ghazali moved to the court of Nizam al-Mulk, the powerful Grand Vizier to the Seljuk Empire.
- **1091 (484 AH):** Appointed as a professor of Islamic law at the prestigious Nizamiyyah madrasa in Baghdad. He quickly achieved fame as a brilliant debater and the foremost scholar of the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence.

#### **Spiritual Crisis & Retirement**

- **1095 (488 AH):** Experienced a major spiritual and epistemological crisis. He lost his voice, became physically ill, and realized his academic pursuits were driven by prestige rather than devotion to God.

I brought my mind to bear on the way of the Sufis. The aim of their knowledge is to lop off the obstacles present in the soul and to rid oneself of its reprehensible habits and vicious qualities in order to attain thereby a heart empty of all save God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God. I knew with certainty that the Sufis were masters of states, not purveyors of words, and that I had learned all I could by way of theory. There remained, then, only what was attainable, not by hearing and study, but by fruitional experience and actually engaging in the way. It had already become clear to me that my only hope of attaining beatitude in the afterlife lay in piety and restraining my soul from passion. The beginning of all that, I knew, was to sever my heart's attachment to the world by withdrawing from this abode of delusion and turning to the mansion of immortality and devoting myself with total ardor to God Most High. That, I knew, could be achieved only by shunning fame and fortune and fleeing from my preoccupations and attachments. Then I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige. So I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways. Thus I incessantly vacillated between the contending pull of worldly desires and the appeals of the afterlife for about six months, starting with Rajab of the year 488 (July, 1095 A.D.). In this month the matter passed from choice to compulsion. For God put a lock upon my tongue so that I was impeded from public teaching. He made it easy for my heart to turn away from fame and fortune, family, children, and associates. I departed from Baghdad after I had distributed what wealth I had, laying by only the amount needed for my support and the sustenance of my children. Then I entered Damascus and resided there for nearly two years. My only occupation was seclusion and solitude and spiritual exercise and combat with a view to devoting myself to the purification of my soul and the cultivation of virtues and cleansing my heart for the remembrance of God Most High, in the way I had learned from the writings of the Sufis. For ten years I remained in that condition. In the course of those periods of solitude things impossible to enumerate or detail in depth were disclosed to me. This much I shall mention, that profit may be derived from it: I knew with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest. In general, how can men describe such a way as this? Its purity — the first of its requirements — is the total purification of the heart from everything other than God Most High. Its key, which is analogous to the beginning of the Prayer, is the utter absorption of the heart in the remembrance of God. Its end is being completely lost in God.

We can hear echoes of Rabi'a in al-Ghazali's summary of the goal of the Sufis: "The gnostics therefore say: Our fear is not of hellfire, nor is our yearning for the maidens of paradise. Nay, what we seek is only the Encounter, and what we flee from—is the Veil. One who worships God seeking compensation is ignoble. He worships God as if out of the quest for paradise or for fear of hellfire. The gnostic, however, serves Him for His own sake, and seeks naught save God Himself."

**1095–1106:** During this period, he wrote his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), from which our reading for tonight is taken.

### Return to Teaching & Final Years

- **1106 (499 AH):** Pressured by the Seljuk rulers (specifically Vizier Fakhr al-Mulk), Al-Ghazali reluctantly returned to teaching at the Nizamiyyah in Nishapur.
- **c. 1110:** Retired from public teaching once again. He returned to his hometown of Tus to establish a private Sufi lodge (khaniqah) and a school for students.
- **December 19, 1111 (505 AH):** Died in Tus at the age of 52.

As I mentioned before, the transformative contribution of al-Ghazali was the way in which he harmonized Sufi theology with orthodox Muslim theology and law. We see evidence of this throughout tonight's reading. The very opening of the treatise on the remembrance of death highlights the theme of dying to self and the world which is at the center of the Sufi path, for "everything which spoils for man his pleasures and his appetites is one of the means of deliverance." The goal of remembering death is not fearing death, or even longing for death, but surrendering entirely to the will of God.

Thus it is that the penitent man may be excused the aversion he feels for death, while another is excusable in loving it and longing for it. And higher than either of them is the degree of he that has entrusted his affair to God (Exalted is He!) and no longer prefers death or life for himself, for the dearest of things to him is that which is beloved in the sight of the Lord. By virtue of profound love and loyalty this man has arrived at the station of absolute surrender and contentment, which is the goal, and the utmost limit.

We also learn in great detail the various stages the dead pass through from the time of their death to the Day of Arising. We see a summary of these stages at the top of p. 5 in tonight's reading:

In what preceded, you came to know how violent are a man's states during the agonies of death and how perilous is his condition as he fearfully awaits his fate, as he endures **the grave's darkness and worms**, and suffers the **Questioning of Munkar and Nakir** [two angels], to be followed, should he have incurred God's wrath, by the **perils of the Punishment of the Grave**. More fearsome than all of this, however, are the perils which shall confront him subsequently: the **Trumpet-Blast**, the **Resurrection on the Day of Arising**, the **Presentation before the Almighty**, the **Inquisition** regarding matters both important and minor, the **Erection of the Scales** in order that men's destinies might be known, and then [Muslim tradition adds **the Pool** which Muhammed offers to those approaching] the **passage over the Traverse** despite the fineness and sharpness of its edge. These things shall be followed by the awaiting of the **Summons to final judgement**, and **either bliss or misery**, [and ultimately the **Meeting** in which one sees the face of God.]

According to al-Ghazali, the soul remains in the grave with the body until the trumpets sound to start the resurrection on the Day of Arising. Moreover, the person in the grave is immediately interrogated by the Angel of Chastisement and the Angel of Mercy, and if the person lacks good works, then the grave will be a place of punishment (but not Hell), whereas for the righteous person the grave will be like a garden (but not Heaven).

Then he shall be told, ‘Rejoice! Good you have been in life and in death!’ Next, the Angels of Mercy come, and spread a heavenly cloth and resting place out for him, and his grave is widened around him for as far as the eye can see. A candle is brought from Heaven, and from it he has light until God resurrects him from his grave.

It is also clear that the grave itself executes judgment on the deceased.

“Not a single man dies without being called by the pit in which he is buried, which declares, ‘I am the house of gloom, and of loneliness and solitude! If you were obedient to God during your lifetime, then today I shall be a source of mercy for you; but if you were rebellious then I am an act of vengeance against you. The obedient who enter me shall come forth joyful, while the rebellious who enter me shall emerge in ruin.’”

The dead are also in need of our prayers, and are most appreciative of them, as our prayers can improve their status both in the grave, and at the Day of Arising.

The Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) said, “The dead man in his grave is like a drowning man shouting for help, as he waits for a prayer to come to him from his father, his brother or his friend. When it comes it is more beloved to him than the world and all it contains. Indeed, the gifts of the living to the dead are prayer and the petitioning of God for His forgiveness.”

Again showing the influence of the Sufis, al-Ghazali ends his meditation on the afterlife by focusing not on the terrors and agonies of Hell, but rather on the expansiveness of God’s mercy. “And it is related that when the Day of Arising comes, God (Exalted is He!) shall bring forth a book from beneath the Throne, in which it is written: ‘My Mercy has outstripped My wrath. I am the Most Merciful of all that show mercy.’” This leads al-Ghazali to say that the righteous place their hope in the mercy of God much more than in their own righteousness, which would make sense for one whose goal is to surrender completely to the love and compassion of God. After telling the story of the mother who recovers her son who was about to be sold into slavery, al-Ghazali says: “These traditions give us the glad news of the wide compass of God’s Mercy (Exalted is He!). It is our hope that He will not deal with us as we deserve, but will rather grant us that which is appropriate to Him, in His generosity, abundant indulgence, and mercy.”