

THE FAITH AND
PRACTICE OF
AL-GHAZĀLĪ



W. MONTGOMERY
WATT

Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111)—the Algazel of the Christian scholastics—was one of the great Muslim theologians. At the height of his career he abandoned his position in the university at Baghdad and sought, by Sufi mysticism, to overcome the scepticism aroused by his intellectual studies. In his great treatise *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* he attempted to reinvigorate Muslim theology and ethics and to make a critical examination of the accepted creed and practice.

The spiritual autobiography of Al-Ghazālī, which is one of the works translated in this volume, is closer to the modern Western outlook than any other of the great books of Islam. As a result of extensive reading of Greek philosophy, especially Neoplatonism, Al-Ghazālī passed through a phase of sheer scepticism. In his description of how he successfully emerged from this he partly anticipates the philosophical method of systematic doubt employed by Descartes. The other work translated here sets out his ideal of how the religious man should order his life from hour to hour and day to day.

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ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS CLASSICS
OF EAST AND WEST
NO. 8

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THE FAITH AND
PRACTICE OF
AL-GHAZĀLĪ

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CONTENTS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO SERIES	page 5
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	9
INTRODUCTION	11
<i>Deliverance from Error and Attachment to The Lord of Might and Majesty</i>	19
I Introduction	19
II Preliminaries: Scepticism and Denial of All Knowledge	22
III The Classes of Seekers	26
IV The True Nature of Prophecy and the Compelling Need of all Creation for it	63
V The Reason for Teaching again after my Withdrawal from it	68
<i>The Beginning of Guidance</i>	86
Part I Acts of Obedience	90
Part II The Avoidance of Sins	131
INDEX	153

is at a loss. 'Now that you have submitted this difficulty to me', he says, 'I shall search for a solution; my present object, however, is limited to what I have already said'. He knows that, if he were to attempt to proceed further, his shameful condition would be revealed and he would be unable to resolve the least of the problems—that he would be unable even to understand them, far less to answer them.

This is the real condition in which they are. As it is said, 'Try them and you will hate them'!—after we had tried them we left them also severely alone.

122 4. *The Ways of Mysticism.*

When I had finished with these sciences, I next turned with set purpose to the method of mysticism (or Sufism). I knew that the complete mystic 'way' includes both intellectual belief and practical activity; the latter consists in getting rid of the obstacles in the self and in stripping off its base characteristics and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom from what is not God and to constant recollection of Him.

123 The intellectual belief was easier to me than the
practical activity. I began to acquaint myself with
their belief by reading their books, such as *The Food of*
124 *the Hearts* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makki (God have mercy
upon him), the works of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, the
various anecdotes about al-Junayd, ash-Shibli and Abū
Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (may God sanctify their spirits), and
other discourses of their leading men. I thus compre-
hended their fundamental teachings on the intellectual
side, and progressed, as far as is possible by study and
oral instruction, in the knowledge of mysticism. It
became clear to me, however, that what is most
distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be

apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience (*dhawq*—literally 'tasting'), by ecstasy and by a moral change. What a difference there is between knowing the definition of health and satiety, together 125 with their causes and presuppositions, and *being* healthy and satisfied! What a difference between being acquainted with the definition of drunkenness—namely, that it designates a state arising from the domination of the seat of the intellect by vapours arising from the stomach—and being drunk! Indeed, the drunken man while in that condition does not know the definition of drunkenness nor the scientific account of it; he has not the very least scientific knowledge of it. The sober man, on the other hand, knows the definition of drunkenness and its basis, yet he is not drunk in the very least. Again the doctor, when he is himself ill, knows the definition and causes of health and the remedies which restore it, and yet is lacking in health. Similarly there is a difference between knowing the true nature and causes and conditions of the ascetic life and actually leading such a life and forsaking the world. 126

I apprehended clearly that the mystics were men who had real experiences, not men of words, and that I had already progressed as far as was possible by way of intellectual apprehension. What remained for me was not to be attained by oral instruction and study but only by immediate experience and by walking in the mystic way.

Now from the sciences I had laboured at and the paths I had traversed in my investigation of the revelational and rational sciences (that is, presumably, theology and philosophy), there had come to me a sure faith in God most high, in prophethood (or revelation), and in the Last Day. These three credal principles were firmly rooted in my being, not through any

heart', they said, 'and from there it has spread through the constitution; the only method of treatment is that the anxiety which has come over the heart should be allayed'.

Thereupon, perceiving my impotence and having altogether lost my power of choice, I sought refuge with God most high as one who is driven to Him, because he is without further resources of his own. He answered me, He who 'answers him who is driven (to Him by affliction) when he calls upon Him' (Qur'an 27, 63). He made it easy for my heart to turn away from position and wealth, from children and friends. I openly professed that I had resolved to set out for Mecca, while privately I made arrangements to travel to Syria. I took this precaution in case the Caliph and all my friends should oppose my resolve to make my residence in Syria. This stratagem for my departure from Baghdad I gracefully executed, and had it in my mind never to return there. There was much talk about me among all the religious leaders of 'Iraq, since none of them would allow that withdrawal from such a state of life as I was in could have a religious cause, for they looked upon that as the culmination of a religious career; that was the sum of their knowledge.

130 Much confusion now came into people's minds as they tried to account for my conduct. Those at a distance from 'Iraq supposed that it was due to some apprehension I had of action by the government. On the other hand those who were close to the governing circles and had witnessed how eagerly and assiduously they sought me and how I withdrew from them and showed no great regard for what they said, would say, 'This is a supernatural affair; it must be an evil influence which has befallen the people of Islam and especially the circle of the learned'.

I left Baghdad, then. I distributed what wealth I had, retaining only as much as would suffice myself and provide sustenance for my children. This I could easily manage, as the wealth of 'Iraq was available for good works, since it constitutes a trust fund for the benefit of the Muslims. Nowhere in the world have I seen better financial arrangements to assist a scholar to provide for his 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. I used to go into retreat for a period in the mosque of Damascus, going up the minaret of the mosque for the whole day and shutting myself in so as to be 131 alone.

At length I made my way from Damascus to the Holy House (that is, Jerusalem). There I used to enter into the precinct of the Rock every day and shut myself in.

Next there arose in me a prompting to fulfil the duty of the Pilgrimage, gain the blessings of Mecca and Medina, and perform the visitation of the Messenger of God most high (peace be upon him), after first performing the visitation of al-Khalil, the Friend of God (God bless him).¹ I therefore made the journey to the Hijaz. Before long, however, various concerns, together with the entreaties of my children, drew me back to my home (country); and so I came to it again, though at

¹ That is, Abraham, who is buried in the cave of Machpelah under the mosque at Hebron, which is called 'al-Khalil' in Arabic; similarly the visitation of the Messenger is the formal visit to his tomb at Medina.

one time no one had seemed less likely than myself to return to it. Here, too, I sought retirement, still longing for solitude and the purification of the heart for the recollection (of God). The events of the interval, the anxieties about my family, and the necessities of my livelihood altered the aspect of my purpose and impaired the quality of my solitude, for I experienced pure ecstasy only occasionally, although I did not cease to hope for that; obstacles would hold me back, yet I always returned to it.

132 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. This much I shall say about that in order that others may be helped: I learnt with certainty that it is above all the mystics who walk on the road of God; their life is the best life, their method the soundest method, their character the purest character; indeed, were the intellect of the intellectuals and the learning of the learned and the scholarship of the scholars, who are versed in the profundities of revealed truth, brought together in the attempt to improve the life and character of the mystics, they would find no way of doing so; for to the mystics all movement and all rest, whether external or internal, brings illumination from the light of the lamp of prophetic revelation; and behind the light of prophetic revelation there is no other light on the face of the earth from which illumination may be received.

In general, then, how is a mystic 'way' (*tariqah*) described? The purity which is the first condition of it (*sc.* as bodily purity is the prior condition of formal Worship for Muslims) is the purification of the heart completely from what is other than God most high; the key to it, which corresponds to the opening act of

adoration in prayer,¹ is the sinking of the heart completely in the recollection of God; and the end of it is complete absorption (*fanā*) in God. At least this is its end relatively to those first steps which almost come within the sphere of choice and personal responsibility; but in reality in the actual mystic 'way' it is the first step, what comes before it being, as it were, the ante-chamber for those who are journeying towards it. 133

With this first stage of the 'way' there begin the revelations and visions. The mystics in their waking state now behold angels and the spirits of the prophets; they hear these speaking to them and are instructed by them. Later, a higher state is reached; instead of beholding forms and figures, they come to stages in the 'way' which it is hard to describe in language; if a man attempts to express these, his words inevitably contain what is clearly erroneous.

In general what they manage to achieve is nearness to God; some, however, would conceive of this as 'inherence' (*ḥulūl*), some as 'union' (*ittiḥād*), and some as 'connection' (*wuṣūl*). All that is erroneous. In my book, *The Noblest Aim*, I have explained the nature of the error here. Yet he who has attained the mystic 'state' need do no more than say: 134

Of the things I do not remember, what was, was;

Think it good; do not ask an account of it.

(Ibn al-Mu'tazz).

In general the man to whom He has granted no immediate experience at all, apprehends no more of what prophetic revelation really is than the name. The miraculous graces given to the saints are in truth the beginnings of the prophets; and that was the first

¹ Literally, the 'prohibition', *taḥrīm*; the opening words of the Muslim Worship, 'God is great', are known as *takbīrat al-taḥrīm*, the prohibitory adoration, 'because it forbids to the worshipper what was previously allowable'. Cp. Calverley, *Worship in Islam*, p. 8, etc.

135 'state' of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) when he went out to Mount Hīrā', and was given up entirely to his Lord, and worshipped, so that the bedouin said, 'Muhammad loves his Lord passionately'.

Now this is a mystical 'state' which is realized in immediate experience by those who walk in the way leading to it. Those to whom it is not granted to have immediate experience can become assured of it by trial (*sc.* contact with mystics or observation of them) and by hearsay, if they have sufficiently numerous opportunities of associating with mystics to understand that (*sc.* ecstasy) with certainty by means of what accompanies the 'states'. Whoever sits in their company derives from them this faith; and none who sits in their company is pained.

Those to whom it is not even granted to have contacts with mystics may know with certainty the possibility of ecstasy by the evidence of demonstration, as I have remarked in the section entitled *The Wonders of the Heart* of my *Revival of the Religious Sciences*.

Certainty reached by demonstration is *knowledge* ('ilm); actual acquaintance with that 'state' is *immediate experience* (*dhawq*); the acceptance of it as probable from hearsay and trial (or observation) is *faith* (*īmān*). These are three degrees. 'God will raise those of you who have faith and those who have been given knowledge in degrees (*sc.* of honour)' (Q. 58, 12).

136 Behind the mystics, however, there is a crowd of ignorant people. They deny this fundamentally, they are astonished at this line of thought, they listen and mock. 'Amazing', they say. 'What nonsense they talk!' About such people God most high has said: 'Some of them listen to you, until, upon going out from you, they say to those to whom knowledge has been given, 'What did he say just now'? These are the people on whose

observation, or by hearsay as a matter of common knowledge. For example, if you are familiar with medicine and law, you can recognise lawyers and doctors by observing what they are, or, where observation is impossible, by hearing what they have to say. Thus you are not unable to recognise that al-Shāfi'i (God have mercy upon him) is a lawyer and Galen a doctor; and your recognition is based on the facts and not on the judgement of someone else. Indeed, just because you have some knowledge of law and medicine, and examine their books and writings, you arrive at a necessary knowledge of what these men are.

142

Similarly, if you understand what it is to be a prophet, and have devoted much time to the study of the Qur'an and the Traditions, you will arrive at a necessary knowledge of the fact that Muhammad (God bless and preserve him) is in the highest grades of the prophetic calling. Convince yourself of that by trying out what he said about the influence of devotional practices on the purification of the heart—how truly he asserted that 'whoever lives out what he knows will receive from God what he does not know'; how truly he asserted that 'if anyone aids an evildoer, God will give that man power over him'; how truly he asserted that 'if a man rises up in the morning with but a single care (sc. to please God), God most high will preserve him from all cares in this world and the next'. When you have made trial of these in a thousand or several thousand instances, you will arrive at a necessary knowledge beyond all doubt.

By this method, then, seek certainty about the prophetic office, and not from the transformation of a rod into a serpent or the cleaving of the moon. For if you consider such an event by itself, without taking account of the numerous circumstances accompanying

143 it—circumstances readily eluding the grasp of the intellect—then you might perhaps suppose that it was magic and deception and that it came from God to lead men astray; for ‘He leads astray whom He will, and guides whom He will’. Thus the topic of miracles will be thrown back upon you; for if your faith is based on a reasoned argument involving the probative force of the miracle, then your faith is destroyed by an ordered argument showing the difficulty and ambiguity of the miracle.

Admit, then, that wonders of this sort are one of the proofs and accompanying circumstances out of the totality of your thought on the matter; and that you attain necessary knowledge and yet are unable to say specifically on what it is based. The case is similar to that of a man who receives from a multitude of people a piece of information which is a matter of common belief . . . He is unable to say that the certainty is derived from the remark of a single specific person; rather, its source is unknown to him; it is neither from outside the whole, nor is it from specific individuals. This is strong, intellectual faith. Immediate experience, on the other hand, is like actually witnessing a thing and taking it in one’s hand. It is only found in the way of mysticism.

This is a sufficient discussion of the nature of prophetic revelation for my present purpose. I proceed to speak of the need for it.

144 V. THE REASON FOR TEACHING AGAIN AFTER MY
WITHDRAWAL FROM IT

I had persevered thus for nearly ten years in retirement and solitude. I had come of necessity—from reasons which I do not enumerate, partly immediate experience, partly demonstrative knowledge, partly acceptance in faith—to a realization of various truths.

I saw that man was constituted of body and heart; by 'heart' I mean the real nature of his spirit which is the seat of his knowledge of God, and not the flesh and blood which he shares with the corpse and the brute beast. I saw that just as there is health and disease in the body, respectively causing it to prosper and to perish, so also there is in the heart, on the one hand, health and soundness—and 'only he who comes to God with a sound heart' (Q. 26, 89) is saved—and, on the other hand, disease, in which is eternal and other worldly destruction—as God most high says, 'in their hearts is disease' (Q. 2, 9). I saw that to be ignorant of God is destructive poison, and to disobey Him by following desire is the thing which produces the disease, while to know God most high is the life-giving antidote and to obey Him by opposing desire is the healing medicine. I saw, too, that the only way to treat the heart, to end its disease and procure its health, is by medicines, just as that is the only way of treating the body. 145

Moreover, the medicines of the body are effective in producing health through some property in them which the intellectuals do not apprehend with their intellectual apparatus, but in respect of which one must accept the statement of the doctors; and these in turn are dependent on the prophets who by the property of prophethood have grasped the properties of things. Similarly I came of necessity to realize that in the case of the medicines of formal worship, which have been fixed and determined by the prophets, the manner of their effectiveness is not apprehended by the intellectual explanations of the intellectuals; one must rather accept the statements (*taqlid*) of the prophets who apprehended those properties by the light of prophecy, not by intellectual explanation.

Again, medicines are composed of ingredients dif-

fering in kind and quantity—one, for instance, is twice another in weight and amount; and this quantitative difference involves secret lore of the same type as knowledge of the properties. Similarly, formal worship, which is the medicine for the disease of the hearts is compounded of acts differing in kind and amount; the prostration (*sujūd*) is the double of the bowing (*rukūʿ*) in amount, and the morning worship half of the afternoon worship; and such arrangements are not without a mystery of the same type as the properties which are grasped by the light of prophecy. Indeed a man is very foolish and very ignorant if he tries to show by intellectual means that these arrangements are wise, or if he fancies that they are specified accidentally and not from a Divine mystery in them which fixes them by way of the property.

Yet again, medicines have bases, which are the principal active ingredients, and 'additions' (auxiliaries or correctives), which are complementary, each of them having its specific influence on the action of the bases. Similarly, the supererogatory practices and the 'customs' are complements which perfect the efficacy of the basic elements of formal worship.

In general, the prophets are the physicians of the diseases of hearts. The only advantage of the intellect is that it informed us of that, bearing witness to prophetic revelation by believing (*sc.* the trustworthiness of the prophets) and to itself by being unable to apprehend what is apprehended by the eye of prophecy; then it took us by the hand and entrusted us to prophetic revelation, as the blind are entrusted to their guides and anxious patients to sympathetic doctors. Thus far may the intellect proceed. In what lies beyond it has no part, save in the understanding of what the physician communicates to it.

much time and energy to the study of their sciences and methods—I mean those of the mystics, the philosophers, the ‘authoritarian instructionists’ (*ta’limiyah*) and the outstanding scholars (*mutawassimun*)—that to show up their errors was easier for me than drinking water. As
151 I observed all this, the impression was formed in me: ‘That is a fixed and determinate character of this time; what benefit to you, then, are solitude and retirement, since the sickness has become general, the doctors have fallen ill, and mankind has reached the verge of destruction?’ I said to myself, however: ‘When will you busy yourself in resolving these difficulties and attacking these obscurities, seeing it is an age of slackness, an era of futility? Even if you were to labour at summoning men from their worthless ways to the truth, the people of this age would be united in showing hostility to you. How will you stand up to them? How will you live among them, seeing that such a project is only to be executed with the aid of time and through a pious sovereign who is all-powerful?’

I believed that it was permissible for me in the sight of God to continue in retirement on the ground of my inability to demonstrate the truth by argument. But God most high determined Himself to stir up the impulse of the sovereign of the time, though not by any external means; the latter gave me strict orders to hasten to Naysābūr (Nishāpūr) to tackle the problem of this lukewarmness in religious matters. So strict was the injunction that, had I persisted in disobeying it, I should at length have been cut off! I came to realize, too, that the grounds which had made retirement permissible had lost their force. ‘It is not right that your motive for clinging to retirement should be laziness and love of ease, the quest for spiritual power and preservation from worldly contamination. It was not

because of the difficulty of restoring men to health that you gave yourself this permission'.

Now God most high says: 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Alif, Lām, Mīm. Do the people think that they will be left in the position that they say, 'We have believed', without their being tried? We tried those who were before them' (Q. 29, 1), and what follows. He (may He be exalted!) says to His messenger, who is the noblest of His creatures: 'Messengers have been counted false before thee, but they patiently endured the falsehood laid to their charge and the insults done them, until Our help came to them; no one can change the words of God, and surely there has come to thee some information about those who were sent (as messengers).' (Q. 6, 34). He (may He be exalted) says too: 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Yā', Sīn. By the Qur'an that decides . . . Thou wilt only warn him who follows the Reminder' (Q. 36, 1 and 11).

On this matter I consulted a number of men skilled in the science of the heart and with experience of contemplation. They unanimously advised me to abandon my retirement and leave the *zāwiyah* (hospice). My resolution was further strengthened by numerous visions of good men in all of which alike I was given the assurance that this impulse was a source of good, was genuine guidance, and had been determined by God most high for the beginning of this century; for God most high has promised to revive His religion at the beginning of each century.¹ My hope became strong, and all these considerations caused the favourable view of the project to prevail.

¹There was a well-known Tradition to the effect that at the beginning of each century God would send a man to revive religion. The events in question took place a few months before the beginning of the sixth century A.H.

God most high facilitated my move to Naysābūr to deal with this serious problem in Dhu'l-Qa'dah, the eleventh month of 499 (=July, 1106 A.D.). I had originally left Baghdad in Dhu'l-Qa'dah, 488, (=November, 1095), so that my period of retirement had extended to eleven years. It was God most high who determined this move, and it is an example of the wonderful way in which He determines events, since there was not a whisper of it in my heart while I was living in retirement. In the same way my departure from Baghdad and withdrawal from my position there had not even occurred to my mind as a possibility. But God is the upsetter of hearts¹ and positions. As the Tradition has it, 'The heart of the believer is between two of the fingers of the Merciful'.

✓ In myself I know that, even if I went back to the work of disseminating knowledge, yet I did not go back. To go back is to return to the previous state of things. Previously, however, I had been disseminating the knowledge by which worldly success is attained; by word and deed I had called men to it; and that had been my aim and intention. But 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.

154 ✓ 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 do not know whether I shall reach my goal or whether I shall be taken away while short of my object. I believe, however, both by certain faith and by intuition that 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. I ask Him first of all to reform me and then to reform through me, to

¹ *Muqallib al-qulūb*—with a play on the words.

guide me and then to guide through me, to show me the truth of what is true and to grant of His bounty that I may follow it, and to show me the falsity of what is false and to grant of His bounty that I may turn away from it.

We now return to the earlier topic of the causes for the weakness of faith, and consider how to guide men aright and deliver them from the perils they face.

For those who profess perplexity as a result of what they have heard from the party of *ta'lim*, the treatment is that prescribed in our book, *The Just Balance*, and we shall not lengthen this essay by repeating it.

As for the fanciful assertions of the Latitudinarians (*Ahl al-Ibāḥah*), we have collected their doubts under seven heads, and resolved them, in our book, *The Chemistry of Happiness*.

In reply to those who through philosophy have corrupted their faith to the extent of denying prophecy in principle, we have discussed the reality of prophecy and how it exists of necessity, by showing that there exists a knowledge of the properties of medicines, stars, and so forth. We introduced this preliminary study precisely for this purpose; we based the demonstration on medical and astronomical properties precisely because these are included in the science of the Philosophers. To every one who is expert in some branch of science, be it astronomy (? astrology) or medicine, physics, magic or charm-making, we offer proof of prophecy based on his own branch of science. 155

The man who verbally professes belief in prophecy, but equates the prescriptions of the revealed scriptures with (philosophic) wisdom, really disbelieves in prophecy, and believes only in a certain judge (*v.l.* philosopher) the ascendancy of whose star is such that it determines men to follow him. This is not prophecy

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