

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S ENDURING LEGACY

Muzaffar Iqbal

With the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* you rejuvenate our hearts
 And remove our grief and sorrow
 A book containing useful knowledge
 Written by our teacher and physician
 A book with knowledge of the Qur'ān and the Sunna
 And what he said makes us lamentful and penitent
 It is the heritage of our ancestors and Imams
 Who passed away and whose footprints we follow
 When he unfurls his flags and spreads his knowledge
 The best who behold it are our learned and rightly guided
 It has been established that all knowledge is in it
 And our people of wisdom have no doubt in it
 And its qualities were praised beyond measure by
 the Shaykh, the Imam,
 the father of miracles, our beloved al-'Aydārūs himself
 How many such others are there, possessors of direct knowledge
 Certifiers of truth, most knowledgeable scholars!
 and Allah is sufficient for us
 And I conclude by invoking blessings of Allah
 in each and every moment
 On [Muḥammad] al-Muṣṭafā, the guide, the intercessor for
 our sins.

Imam 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Alawī al-Ḥaddād,
al-Durr al-manẓūm li-dhawī-l-'uqūl wal-fihūm
(Strung Pearls for those of Intellect and Understanding)

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Al-Ḥabīb ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Aydārūs taught that the first quarter of al-Ghazālī’s monumental *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, entitled *Rub’ al-‘ibādāt* (Acts of Worship), is about the rights of Allah Most High; the second quarter, *Rub’ al-‘ādāt* (On Daily Habits), addresses the rights of servants of Allah; the third quarter, *Rub’ al-muḥlikāt* (The Ways to Perdition) is about the purification of the heart from reprehensible qualities; and the fourth quarter, *Rub’ al-munjiyāt* (The Ways to Salvation) is about the embellishment of the heart by praiseworthy qualities. Ḥafiz al-Irāqī said that the first quarter is required for those who are dedicated to the Hereafter; the second, for those who want to live according to Islam; the third, for those who want to achieve purification of the self and the heart; and the fourth for those who want to be among those drawn near to Allah (*al-muqarrabīn*). He also held that the *Iḥyā’* is a medicine for the heart and soul, a means to achieve everlasting bliss in Paradise.

These are not isolated instances of praise for a book which has been the source of inspiration and guidance for countless human beings since it was written almost nine hundred years ago; there are numerous other high-ranking scholars, both in the East and the West, who have found in al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’* unmatched wisdom and guidance. For Muslims, it is not just the work of an individual scholar; rather, the importance of *Iḥyā’* stems from its unique ability to inspire and direct its readers to a life based on the Qur’ān and Sunna of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace. In the ninth/fifteenth century, Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-‘Aydārūs held that the *Iḥyā’* is a *sharḥ* (commentary/explanation) of the Noble Qur’ān and the blessed Hadith, and its study brings one the forgiveness of Allah Most High.

It is the wealth of the Qur’ānic material and Prophetic traditions in the *Iḥyā’* that provides for the faithful a vivid and inspiring model of life. What al-Ghazālī achieved in this regard has remained unsurpassed during the last nine hundred years, because he is able to evoke in his readers an experiential *hayba*—fear mixed with love and veneration of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace—and inspire them through this *hayba* to draw closer to him. Al-Zabīdī was to illustrate the Ghazālīan notion of *hayba* by recalling the tradition, “he who suddenly saw him (i.e. the Prophet) was struck with awe, but he who came to know him by [frequent] association, loved him.” Al-Ghazālī increases the believer’s attachment to the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, because he himself was immersed in the ocean of love for the Prophet when he wrote his magnum opus.

Another reason for the enduring legacy of al-Ghazālī is his ability to reconstruct the early days of Islam in a manner which allows his readers to breathe in the Prophetic era. The *Iḥyā’* is the best example of this, although many of his other works achieve similar effects. He is able to submerge the reader in

an otherworldly life by weaving an intricate web of ideas, vivid imagery, and lofty discourse on some of the most fundamental aspects of human existence and deep spiritual truths. Al-Ghazālī is a repository of living knowledge—the kind that infuses hearts and minds with the desire to live a life dedicated to the higher goals as exemplified by the Companions, may Allah be well pleased with them all.

For non-Muslims, al-Ghazālī performs a different function. Since he delves deep into the human condition and writes about those fundamental aspects of existence which transcend race, religion, and language, he is able to address universal human issues, although in his own way and from within his own tradition. It is the universality of his vision which makes al-Ghazālī a thinker who has attracted countless non-Muslims over the last ten centuries. He was translated into Latin and later into other European languages and compared to various European thinkers—but above all, his charisma is in his ability to address universal human existential realities. For him, Man is the noblest being on earth (*ashraf mawjūd ‘alā-l-arḍ*), primarily because of the most distinct Divine attribute—knowledge—to which He has opened his heart. Since human dignity stems from knowledge, all activities connected with preservation and transmission of knowledge, such as teaching and learning, are noble; in fact, they are the very act of worship, *‘ibāda*, in Islamic terminology. Since every human being is endowed with intellect (*‘aql*)—the basic means to achieve knowledge—al-Ghazālī is able to address all humanity in his discourse on knowledge, even though he remains firmly rooted in Islamic sources. For instance, in the various discussions on intellect in the *Ihyā’*, al-Ghazālī describes it as that interior faculty which leads Man to faith and certitude, and which enables human beings to become recipients of inspiration from beyond the human realm. In his commentary on *Ihyā’*, al-Zabīdī lists twenty-seven faculties and functions which derive from the intellect, including cognition, reflection, memory, imagination, prediction and speech.

It is inner, realized knowledge, not the bookish knowledge of the academic kind, which is al-Ghazālī’s focus. His systematic study of various kinds of knowledge, internal and external means of acquiring it, and the relative usefulness of each remains one of the most essential discourses on knowledge. For al-Ghazālī, the highest form of knowledge which a person can acquire is *‘ilm al-mukāshafa*, a kind of intuitive knowledge that directly transforms the heart, like when a light appears and dispels darkness. It produces clarity of a kind that is unattainable through any other means; it is the ultimate goal of all sciences (*ghāyat al-‘ulūm*); it encompasses all knowables—from the Most Beautiful Names of Allah to the realms of the heavens and the earth. It is not theoretical learning; rather, it involves practical striving (*riyāḍa*) and daily exercises which illuminate the heart, remove its successive coverings, and open it for Divine guidance.

Al-Ghazālī is ultimately concerned with what happens to Man once he departs from this transitory world. On the path of the Hereafter, the intellect is the agent whose goal it is to purify the soul (*nafs*). He outlines a program of life based on the Qurʾān and the Sunna in a manner which makes the reader conscious that each breath taken is irrecoverably lost; thus in one's movements and rest, in speech and silence, in happiness and sorrow, no breath should be spent in vain, for this priceless treasure cannot be bought with anything in human possession. No intelligent person would trade his breaths for a lowly gain. It therefore behooves people, he writes in *Kitāb al-Murāqaba wal muḥāsaba* (*Holding Vigil and Self-Examination*), Book 38 of the fourth quarter of *Ihyāʾ*, to sit quietly in the morning after the obligatory prayers—like a trader sits privately with his partner to settle terms and conditions of their mutual trade without any outside interference—empty the heart so that it becomes receptive, and then to say to one's soul (*nafs*): listen, this life constituted by breaths is my only real treasure; when it is spent, all trading will stop. And in this day of mine, Allah Most High has granted me a respite by delaying my death and He has bestowed His bounties on me; for had He given me death, I would have wished for one more day to be spent in the world so that I could do good deeds. So, consider this day to be that additional day granted after death and do not waste it; remember, each breath is a precious pearl and there are only twenty-four hours in the day.

WaʾIlāhul-mustaʿān, wa mā taʾwfiqī illā biʾIlāh.



Wuddistān

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