

ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE

BEING A TRANSLATION OF THE INTRODUCTION
TO AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S MASTERWORK, *REVIVING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE*,¹
IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING HIS "BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE"

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Introduction

In the Name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful

First and foremost, I praise God with an abundant, continuous praise, even though the praise of [His] worshippers is insignificant before the reality of His grandeur. Secondly, I pray for and salute His messengers with a prayer wholly occupied with humanity's chief [the prophet Muhammad], along with the rest of the messengers. Thirdly, I ask the guidance of God—be He exalted—in [the project] that has proceeded from my resolution to let loose a book on bringing the religious sciences back to life. Fourth, [to you,] O critic, excessive in censure

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1. While *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* is usually translated more literally as the "Revival of the Religious Sciences", "Reviving" or "Resurrecting Religious Knowledge" captures the active force of the verbal noun and the essence of the project more completely. Throughout this study, I will be basing all translations on the Arabic text annotated by al-Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ al-'Irāqī (Beirut: Dār al-khayr, 1993).
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even among the class of those who specialize in rejecting [the ideas and beliefs of others], immoderate in [the act of] scolding and disputing among the ranks of those negligent ones who [specialize in] criticizing, I give you permission to hold your astonishment in abeyance.

That blindness to the plain fact of the truth, [that blindness] in which you persevere, has loosed the knot of silence from my tongue and has placed the obligation of speech and the fetters of utterance around my neck. [This reason must be taken] together with the obstinate insistence upon advocating that which is worthless and making ignorance attractive, [not to mention your] riling against one who prefers to dispense a little with the ceremonial customs of humankind (*al-khalq*) and to incline a little bit away from the requirements of ceremonial formality [in order to devote himself] to the work that [real] knowledge requires. [The person against whom you rail is simply] hungry to attain that which is devoted to the service of God—be He exalted—by way of purifying the soul and reforming the heart, eager to compensate for that which has already slipped away from squandering [his] life, all the while despairing of [the possibility of] regaining completely [that which was lost] and of setting [the problem right] as he steers away from the hardships [awaiting] those about whom the Bearer of the Revelation (may God's prayers and peace be upon him) said, "the most severely punished person on the Day of Judgement will be the learned to whom God (be He exalted) gives no benefit on account of his knowledge."

By my life! Your persistence in arrogance is due solely to the disease that has now spread to [infect] a large number of people. Indeed, it has [now] enveloped the masses due to [their] inability to identify the heights to which this matter has reached [and due to their] ignorance of the fact that the situation is so and [that] the calamity is serious, and [that] the afterlife is before [us] and this life is behind, and [that] the moment of death is nigh and the journey is long, and [that] the provisions are slight and the danger immense, and [that] the road is blocked. [They cannot see the fact that] only that which is purified for the face of God by way of knowledge and deeds will [suffice] as a reply before the Examiner of keen vision. Wayfaring along the path of the afterlife is wearisome and toilsome, [for it] involves a great many dangers, [calamities] for which there are no instructions and no companion.

The guides for [this] road are the learned, who are [said to be] the heirs of the prophets. However, the age has become empty of them and all that remains are those who follow in their footsteps. Satan has overcome most of them; tyranny has seduced them; and each one, being enamoured [with himself], has started to rush after his own plan. And so that which is good has begun to be regarded as abominable, and that which is morally repugnant has begun to be regarded as good, so much so that the shelter of religious knowledge is now

wiped away, and the light of guidance is now incomprehensible in the quarters of the earth. [These pseudo-learned] have succeeded in leading humanity (*al-khalq*) to believe that there exists no knowledge apart from [three things]: (1) government ruling[s] upon which religious judges depend for period[s] of feuding, when the common people riot; (2) disputation with which the glory-seeking [scholar] arms himself in order to achieve supremacy and silence [over his opponent]; or (3) the elegant, adorned prose that the preacher uses to string along the common folk and gain favor with them. [This state of affairs] is because they could not see anything other than these three [kinds of learning] as ways to snare forbidden [fruits] and net the vanities [of this world].

As for the Science of the Way of the Afterlife and for that which is in keeping with our righteous forebears (*al-salaf al-ṣālih*), [being] part of what God—be He exalted—calls in His Book understanding (*fiqh*), wisdom (*ḥikma*), knowledge (*‘ilm*), luminescence (*diyā’*), light (*nūr*), guidance (*hidāya*), and right direction (*rushd*), [over time]² it became a thing folded up [and forgotten] among people, became a “thing utterly forgotten.”³ Inasmuch as this constituted a disastrous fissure in [the bedrock of] the religion and an [utterly] dark affair, I came to view the publication of this book as a [very] important thing, as [a way of] bringing back to life the [true] sciences of religion, revealing the ways of the spiritual leaders (*al-a’imma*) who came before, and elucidating for the readers⁴ the beneficial sciences [that have been handed down] from the prophets and the righteous forbears.

I have set up [the work] in four quarters—acts of worship (*al-‘ibādāt*), habitual acts (*al-‘ādāt*), mortal vices (*al-muḥlikāt*), and saving virtues (*al-manjīyāt*)—and I begin the whole thing with the Book of Knowledge because it is of the utmost importance. First of all [I do this] in order that I make known the knowledge that is devoted to the service of God according to the words of His Prophet (may God bless him and grant him salvation), the [kinds of knowledge that are] required to be sought. [To this effect] the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him salvation) said, “the pursuit of knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim.” [Secondly, I begin with this book] in order that I may distinguish the beneficial knowledge from the harmful, since the

2. The temporal lapse is indicated here by the particle *ف* (*fā’*).

3. Literally, “became a thing utterly lost, forgotten.” His Qur’ānic language here and apocalyptic tone are worthy of note; any reader familiar with the Qur’ān cannot help but notice a powerful idiom of despair borrowed from Q *Maryam* 19:23.

4. This word is somewhat tentative. Literally, it seems to read “for those who are reached [by the book]...” I take it to be a broken plural of the rather rare active participle from the passive voice verb *nūhiya*, which is synonymous with *balagha* (to reach/come to/come to the knowledge of someone).

Prophet (may God bless him and grant him salvation) said, “I seek refuge in God from knowledge that has no benefit.” [All this is] in order that I correct the present generation in their inclination away from the way of what is right, in their willingness to be duped by glimmering phantoms, and in their [total] contentment with sciences [that treat] the outer husk [rather than] the essential core.

The quarter [treating] the acts of worship contains ten books: the Book of Knowledge; the Fundamentals of Belief; the Secrets of Purification; the Secrets of Prayer; the Secrets of Almsgiving; the Secrets of Fasting; the Secrets of Making Pilgrimage; the Etiquette of Reciting the Qurʾān; the Book of Invocations and Supplications; and the Book of Ordering the Supererogatory Devotions According to the [Proper] Times.⁵

As for the quarter [devoted to] the etiquette of habitual actions, it is comprised of ten books: the Etiquette of Eating; the Proper Manners of Marriage; the Legal Rulings (concerning) the Acquisition [of Wealth]; the Book of the Permissible and the Prohibited; the Etiquette of Friendship and Social Interaction with the [Various] Kinds of People; the Book of Private Retreat⁶; the Etiquette of Travel; the Book of Audition and Ecstasy; the Commanding of the Good and the Prohibiting of the Bad; and the Etiquette of Living⁷ and the [Moral] Character Traits of Prophecy.

As for the quarter [treating] the mortal vices, it [also] contains ten books: the Commentary on the Wonders of the Heart; the Disciplining of the Soul; the Book of the Harmful Effects of the Two Desires ([that of] the belly and that of the genitals); the Harmful Effects of the Tongue; the Harmful Effects of Anger, Harboring Resentment, and Envy; the Book Reproving the World; the Book Reproving Wealth and Miserliness; the Book Reproving High Social Standing and Hypocrisy; the Book Reproving Arrogance and Conceit; and the Book Reproving Delusion.

As for the quarter on the saving virtues, it [likewise] consists of ten books: the Book of Penitence; the Book of Forbearance and Thanksgiving; the Book

5. Such *awrād* involve specific supplications, recitals, and meditations assigned to each of the twelve parts of the day and night (seven throughout the day and five throughout the night). See Kojiro Nakamura's *Ghazali and Prayer* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001), 110-137; a much briefer reference to this practice can be found in Nakamura's *Al-Ghazali: Invocations & Supplications* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1990), xxxv-xxxvi.

6. Or “seclusion/withdrawal”.

7. Here the translation corrects a printing error in the edition: the second consonant, ع (*ʿayn*), is missing in *maʿīsha*, “way of living”. As this is printed properly in the context of the book itself (vol. 3), it is easily corrected here.

of Fear and Hope; the Book of Poverty and Asceticism; the Book of Affirming Divine Unity and Relying [upon God]; the Book of Love, Yearning, Intimate Friendship, and Contentment⁸; the Book of [Right] Intention, Truthfulness and Sincerity; the Book of Attentive Observation and Self Examination; the Book of Contemplation; and the Book of the Remembrance of Death.

In the Acts of Worship quarter I mention some of the hidden secrets of their proper performance, the fine points of their customary practices, as well as the secrets of their meanings—whatever the practicing scholar feels obliged to perform. Indeed, there is not a single one among those steeped in the knowledge of the afterlife who is not apprised of [these things]. Most of these [points]⁹ are among the things neglected by the craft of the jurisprudential craft (*fann al-fiqhiyāt*).

In the section on the habitual practices, I mention the hidden aspects of the forms of social interaction that naturally take place among human beings, the depths [of these interactions] and the fine points of their customary practices and the hidden aspects of the sacred nature of their courses [of occurrence]. And [these guidelines for habitual interaction] are among the things that no religious person can do without.

In the [books discussing] the mortal vices, I discuss every blameworthy character trait whose avoidance is mentioned in the Qurʾān, [along with] the soul’s cleansing from it and the heart’s purification from it. And for every one of these character traits I mention its reality and its limit.¹⁰ Then I mention the cause by which it was generated; then the harmful effects that result from [each of] them; then the signs by which they are recognized; then the various treatments by which one can deliver himself [from] them. All of this is tied to the testaments of [Qurʾānic] verses, [Prophetic] Reports, and Traditions [relating to the Prophet and the Companions].

In the [final] quarter [dealing with] the saving virtues, I mention every praiseworthy character trait and desirable quality among the qualities of those [saints] who have been brought nigh [unto God] and of those who are truthful, the qualities by which the servant is able to draw nigh unto the Lord of the Worlds. In the discussion of each and every quality, I mention its reality and its limit¹¹ and the reason for which it is [sought after and] appropriated, as well as its fruit through which it benefits [people], the [distinctive] signs by which it is known and its virtue for the sake of which it is desired. [And all this is] in

8. This points to the wayfarer’s station of “contentment with the decree of God—be He exalted” and is “one of the highest stations of those [pilgrims] who have been brought nigh [unto God].” See *Ihyāʾ* 5:240.

9. Literally, “most of that (*akthar dhālika*)...”

10. Here, “limit” might suggest parameter or even definition.

11. See *supra*.

the context of what is related about each [virtue] from the testaments of the Religious Law and the intellect.

People have composed books about some of these meanings; however, this book is distinguished from these books by five factors: 1) it unravels what they have concluded and reveals what they have [skipped over as they] summarized; 2) it puts in order what they have scattered and organizes what they have strewn about; 3) it states succinctly what they have said in a long-winded way while doing precisely what they affirm; 4) it omits what is redundant in them and records what they have taken out; and 5) it examines obscure matters that are difficult for [peoples'] understandings, [matters] which had not originally been dealt with in the [aforementioned] books. [This book treats such obscurities] since, even if the entire population were to follow the same approach (*manhaj*), there should be no objection to each one of the wayfarers elucidating an [obscure] matter in his own unique way, [a puzzle] which his own companions single out but are [nevertheless] ignorant of. Or, contrarily, [his companions] may not be ignorant of the indication but they overlook its intention in the books; or, they may not be inattentive [of its intention], but one wishing to distract them turns the indication away from the unveiling of [its true meaning]. These, then, are the special characteristics of this book, together with its being a collection of the points where these [religious] sciences intersect.

Moreover, two matters have charged me with the task of setting up this work in four quarters. The first of them, being the primary cause, is that this set-up in analyzing [the religious sciences] and making them understandable is similar to something mandatory, because the science by which one is turned to face the Hereafter divides into two: the Science of Right Practice, and the Science of the Unveiling. By the "Science of the Unveiling," I mean whatever is sought exclusively [for the purpose of] laying bare the object of knowledge; by the "Science of Right Practice," I mean whatever is sought [with reference to] the works by which [the unveiling is won], along with the unveiling [itself]. The sole aim of this book is the Science of Right Practice, without the Science of the Unveiling, for which there is no license for putting it in books, even though it is the highest goal of those seeking [knowledge] and the highest aspiration in the eyes of the righteous. Now the Science of Right Practice is the way to it.

However, the prophets—may God's prayers be upon them—have only spoken with humanity about [the knowledge of] the way and the true guidance [leading one] to it. As for the Science of the Unveiling, they did not speak of it except by way of symbol and gesture by way of example and brief summarization: [this] being a kind of knowledge on their part of the inability of people's understandings to bear [the Unveiling]. However, the learned are the heirs of the prophets, and so they have no means of turning aside from the path of consolation and emulation [of the prophets].

Thus the Science of Right Practice divides into an exterior science, by which I mean the knowledge of the bodily actions, and an interior science, by which I mean the knowledge of the actions of hearts.¹² That which is in accordance with the bodily extremities is either an act of worship or a habitual act. That which is received by the hearts—which are, by virtue of their concealment from the senses, from the realm of the *malakūt*¹³—is either praiseworthy or blameworthy. It is thus necessary that this science divide into two halves: an outer and an inner. The outer half, [which is] connected with the [movements of the] limbs, divides into a habitual act and an act of worship. The inner half, connected with the states of the heart and the character traits of the soul (*akhlāq al-nafs*), divides into a blameworthy [state] and a praiseworthy [state]. Thus all of them together [form] four divisions, and any theoretical investigation into the Science of Right Practice must not go outside of these divisions.

The second reason [for setting up the book into quarters] is that I came to see that the desire among those seeking [traditional] knowledge is wholesome in the [field of] jurisprudence, which is [also] organized according to four quarters. [Jurisprudence has, however,] become quite useful for those who do not fear God, [its scholars] making use of it to arm themselves, [finding it useful] for their pursuit of vanity and showing off by way of their [proving] rank and standing in competitions. Since he who is adorned in the attire of the beloved is [likewise] beloved, I did not hesitate¹⁴ to shape the book in the form of [the books of] *fiqh*, in order to gently win over the hearts and lead them along. For this [same reason], some of those desiring [to evoke] an inclination of the hearts of prominent people toward the [science of] medicine tenderly won [their hearts] by explaining it¹⁵ according to the structure of astronomical calculation (*taqwīm al-nujūm*), a subject concerning charts and numbers; and so they called [the science of medicine] “health calculation” (*taqwīm al-ṣiḥḥa*),

12. The entire *Ihyāʾ* is clearly designed to be a detailed and accessible handbook for human perfection, beginning with the outer, action-oriented perfection of the person’s worship and social dealings and culminating in the inner, disposition-oriented perfection of the mind or heart. This gradual journey, al-Ghazālī explains, entails both the outer and inner aspects of the Science of Right Practice; as an exterior science, it deals with human actions within a social context, and this essentially takes up the first half of the *Ihyāʾ*; as an interior science, it treats the states and orientations of the human heart, the topics treated in the latter half of the *Ihyāʾ*.

13. A detailed discussion of this psycho-spiritual “realm” to which the true nature of the heart belongs is given in chapter five of my book, *al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the Ihyāʾ* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001).

14. Literally, “I did not keep away from...”

15. Literally, “setting it up” or, alternatively, “putting it down” (*fa-wada’ahu...*).

so that [these prominent people] would take a liking to that kind [of science]. [All this was] in an effort to win them over to the study [of medicine]. The gentle persuasion of hearts for the sake of enticing them to knowledge, which benefits eternal life, is more important than enticing them to the [study of] medicine, which only benefits the health of the body, for the fruit of the [former] science is the doctoring of hearts and spirits, [a kind of spiritual medicine] that gains access to a life that goes on for ever and ever. What a difference there is between it and the medicine that treats bodies, which necessarily turn to decay in the shortest of time. So we ask God—be He exalted—to grant us success by way of good reason and appropriate speech. Verily He is Gracious, Generous.