

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali/ Khalid Williams (translator); Muhammed Isa Waley (editor) • *Treatises of Imam al-Ghazali* (5 Volume Box Set) • ISBN 9781939256232 • Ihya Publishing, 2024; pp.1238

This Ghazālian bouquet of multi-colored flowers consists of carefully selected books which cover the entire spectrum of Ḥujatul Islām's main concerns for his fellow Muslims at a time of great strife and upheavals, many resembling the multiple levels of intellectual, spiritual, and psychological maladies of our time. Most of the works in this selection were written for the common believer, although it also has some which Imam al-Ghazālī wrote for the advanced travelers on the Path to the Ever-Merciful.

Brilliantly conceived under five broad headings ("Advice from Imam al-Ghazali," "Imam al-Ghazali on Sufism," "Imam al-Ghazali on Cosmology," "Imam al-Ghazali on Truth," and "Imam al-Ghazali on Knowledge"), richly produced in two hues, and bound in five volumes, totaling some 1,238 pages, this collection merits the title of "Ghazālian Publishing Event". The aesthetic quality of these volumes is a joy for the hearts; eyes scan beauty and the minds receive the soothing waves from the text gently flowing on the paper.

Here we have some of the Imam's shorter masterpieces translated into English for the first time, along with retranslations of several of his foundational texts. This collection is an essential reading for all Muslims because we are now living at a time when fundamentals of faith have been shaken in many minds, even in many hearts. The seat of faith—the heart—which was Imām al-Ghazālī's focus throughout his life to such an extent that when he recognized a certain malady in it at the height of his fame and career, he left his prestigious teaching position in Baghdad for a life of seclusion and self-correction. That personal odyssey of discoveries is now available to readers in the short autobiography included in this set, comprising the first book of volume 4—a volume that has been appropriately called "Imam al-Ghazālī on Truth".

The autobiography of the Imam, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, is a tale of one man's deep dive into the dark ocean of loss of certitude and re-emergence with a new level of certitude through the rediscovery of Truth. This tale transcends

both time and space and universalizes the dilemmas he faced in his personal life in a milieu infected which was infected with all kinds of intellectual and spiritual decay; there was even outright terrorism; life and honor were not secure and intellectual and spiritual levels of existence had reached new levels of decay in the empire that was going to be destroyed one hundred and forty-seven years after his passing into the mercy of his Lord through the destructive winds carried by the Mongolian wrath which devastated the entire geographical region of al-Ghazālī's residence on earth, leaving in its wake corpses hung from trees, decapitated torsos, and burnt fields of grain under the vast blue winter skies.

Our times have many features of that strife and dislocation which Imam al-Ghazālī faced and tried to correct with the force of his faith and God-granted power of his pen. The texts translated in this collection are all a must-read, but Volume 4 of the set stands out, as it includes Ghazālī's advanced works on quest and the means through which one cannot only find Truth—for that is only the beginning of the path—but also internalize and live that Truth, which was the main concern of this remarkable man who is rightly called the Proof of Islam, a living testimony of faith, a guide to those who wish to traverse the Path to their Creator.

Imam al-Ghazālī lived a millennium ago, but his wisdom and works are perhaps more needed in our own times than when he composed *The Just Balance* (*al-Qistās al-mustaqīm*) and advised that Knowledge should be withheld from the unqualified (*al-Maḍnūn bih 'ala ghayr ahlih*). Volume 4 also includes one of his best works *The Criterion of Distinction* which clearly sets criteria to distinguish between belief and unbelief in Islam (*Faysal al-tafrīqa bayn al-Islām wal-zandaqa*). Here we have a luminous example of how to travel on the Path with certitude and strength. It was in the fading light of the eleventh century when, instead of being dismayed by the impugnation of some of his works by certain jealous individuals, he invoked praises of Allah Most High, “surrendering to His might, awaiting the fullness of His favor, hoping for His grace and aid” that he may obey Him, “seeking refuge from being forsaken by Him and disobeying Him, anticipating the downpour of His bounty”—thus he wrote to a dear and zealous brother:

I see that your heart is disquieted and your thoughts are disjointed because you have heard how certain jealous people have impugned some of our writings regarding the secrets of religious practice. They claim that these books contain things that contradict the teachings of the forerunners and senior theologians, and that to stray so much as a hand's span from the Ash'arī school is tantamount to unbelief, and that to disagree with it on anything at all is to fall into error and ruin. Dear zealous brother, go easy on yourself and do not be disheartened. Dull your blade a little, and Bear with patience what they say,

and part from them graciously. (Book 4, p. 211-212).

The quoted text not only lets us taste Ghazālī's peculiar circumstances, it also provides an insight into his writing style, expertly captured by Khalid Williams in a flowing language that remains true to the original without sounding Arabish (English laden with Arabic spices). Note the eloquence of the translation which is perhaps only a notch short of the marvelous Arabic of the original as it opens like a flower, strands of the luminous inner thoughts of a master wordsmith who knew how to blend the Speech of his Creator with his own lofty thoughts and whose certitude, when combined with his power of reasoning, made his antagonists utterly helpless: "Indeed," he continues to advise his dear friend,

one might disparage those who are never envied or vilified, and think little of those who are never accused of unbelief or misguidance! For was there ever a better or wiser preacher than the Master of Messengers himself? Yet they called him a madman! And is any discourse finer or truer than the Word of the Lord of the Worlds? Yet they called it fables of the ancients (Qur'ān 6:25)! Beware of becoming obsessed with debating them in the hope of silencing them, for that is a vain hope and a cry falling on deaf ears. Remember what the poet said:

You may hope to make peace with any foe,
Except one who's hostile because of envy.¹

"How do we acquire knowledge?" is undoubtedly one of the—if not the—most important questions of our time, because we are drowned in billions of free-floating, disconnected shreds of information impacting all the realms of our existence—from the external senses to the innermost recesses of our beings. Acquisition of knowledge has two aspects, al-Ghazālī tells us in Chapter 4 of his *al-Risāla al-laduniyya*, translated as "God-Given Knowledge" (Volume 5), a title which could perhaps be better called "Knowledge of the Presence".

Chapter 4 of this important treatise, entitled "The Methods of Acquiring Knowledge", can easily be deemed a "required reading" for anyone who really wants to understand anything about acquisition of knowledge, which is entirely based on that which is "planted in the soul in potentiality, like a seed in the earth, a pearl in the depths of the sea, or a precious mineral in the heart of a mine". Learning is the attempt to extract that thing from potentiality into actuality, and instruction is the process of extracting it (p. 33).

Iljām al-ʿawāmm (Protection of the Masses From Theology), which has a better

1. Book 4, p. 212; the translator has noted that the couplet is attributed to Imam al-Shāfiʿī.

title in a previous citing, *Warding off the Masses from Theology*, is recognized as al-Ghazālī's last work, and thus is his final statement on many of the questions of his time, which are—not surprisingly—also the main questions of our time.² This work is exquisitely translated and, for those serious in grounding their faith in the 'Way of the Salaf', it provides clear insights about how to proceed:

The salvation of mankind lies in firm belief in what is true, so that the image of truth is engraved upon their hearts. Then when they die and the veil is lifted, and they see that things are just as they had believed they were, they will not be disgraced and burned by the fire of disappointment and shame first, and by the fire of Hell second. When the image of truth is engraved upon the heart, it does not matter it got there. Whether it was by true proof, formal proof, convincing proof, acceptance based on high opinion of someone, or no more than blind conformity, does not matter. What matters is that the belief is true. If someone believes the truth about God and His Attributes, His Scriptures, His Messengers, and the Last Day, as they really are, then he will be saved, even if this belief is not based on reasoned theological proof. God Most High asks no more of His servants than that.

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Nicolai Sinai: *Key Terms of the Qur'an* • Princeton: Princeton University Press • 2023 • ISBN 978-0691241319.

Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary could have been a major contribution to the field of academic study of the Qur'ān if Nicolai Sinai had actually produced the content befitting the title; as it is, the grand scheme elaborated in the introductory pages, promising “a historically oriented dictionary of key Qur'ānic terms and phrases”, dissolves into vacuous and tiringly old discussions on whether a certain term has pre-Qur'ānic valence or Biblical precedent. When one digs into the actual content of the *Key Terms*, one finds a well-planned structure of the selected Qur'ānic key terms, but very little content, because the author's actual sources are not the rich ocean of scholarly

2. For a comprehensive study of the manuscript tradition of this work, see, Fiazuddin Shu'ayb, “Al-Ghazzālī's Final Word on Kalām” in *Islam & Science*, Vol. 9 (Winter 2011) No. 2, pp. 151-172; online at https://www.cis-ca.org/_media/pdf/2011/2/A_afwok.pdf, accessed July 24, 2024.