

## Al-Ghazālī's Concept of God: A Deity of Love or of the Intellect?

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### ABSTRACT

*The central theme of the discussion concerning al-Ghazālī's concept of God is to span over the contradiction of this concept according to al-Ghazālī's interpretation and apprehension of the same of other Islamic mystics. The study explicitly shows us that his conception of God is so influenced by the change and the development of his religious experiences and views of life. As a Muslim mystic, he shows the attitude of Muslim orthodoxy in forbidding any discussion and explanation of every forms of the highest mystical experiences, in a sense of preservation of the privilege of Tawhid and Tanzīh. As one of the philosophical intellectuals, he tries to bring the teachings of Islam back to the rich of lesser educated believers. Seemingly, to this extent, al-Ghazālī allowed the use of language game for their knowledge of God. These two different approaches introduced by al-Ghazālī reveal to us the distinctness of al-Ghazālī's own experience of God with the mystical experience of Rābī'ā who clearly used the direct expressions of her concept of God and His relation to man through the doctrine of love.*

### ABSTRAK

*Tema utama diskusi mengenai konsep ketuhanan Ghazali ialah untuk meninjau sejauhmanakah kontradiksi konsep ini menurut tafsiran beliau dengan kefahaman konsepsi ketuhanan oleh tokoh-tokoh mistik Islam yang lain. Ternyata perubahan dan peningkatan pengalaman agama dan pandangan hidupnya begitu mempengaruhi konsepsi beliau tentang Tuhan. Sebagai seorang ahli sufi, beliau mencerminkan sikap ortodok Islam iaitu membataskan perbincangan dan penghuraian ke atas sebarang bentuk pengalaman mistikal tertinggi individu; dalam ertikata memelihara konsep Tawhid dan Tanzīh. Sebagai seorang intelektual falsafah, beliau sedaya upaya cuba mendidik orang awam ke arah memahami pengajaran Islam yang sebenar. Di sini Ghazali membenarkan penggunaan dan permainan bahasa dalam mencapai pengetahuan mengenai Tuhan. Berdasarkan kedua-dua pendekatan Ghazali yang berbeza ini, kita dapat mengenalpasti kelainan pengalaman mistikal beliau dengan pengalaman kesufian Rābī'ā yang secara langsung dan jelas memakai pengungkapan bahasa bagi menzahirkan konsepsi ketuhanan dan hubungan manusia dengan Tuhan menerusi konsep cinta.*

## INTRODUCTION

The influence exercised by Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī in the development of Islamic thought from the fifth century A.H. up to the present day has been considerable, many would say pivotal, an assessment that can reasonably be argued from al-Ghazālī's contribution to Islam and the particular historical and religious context in which it was made. Given the centrality and overriding significance of the Muslim doctrine of God for all spheres of life within Islam it is clear that the concept of God expressed in the writings of one of Islam's most perceptive and influential thinkers takes on a particularly important character.

The subject under discussion can be approached from a variety of angles, and whilst I hope to touch on several of these in the course of this writing, the underlying thread which I take to be the most interesting issue is the question: to what extent is it useful or meaningful to speak of love (a mode of relation) in respect of what we might describe as an utterly other, transcendent deity? Of course, this question might be asked not only of the Muslim deity, as written about by al-Ghazālī, but of the deity of any religion involving transcendent monotheism. However, as Fadlou Shehadi spells out in a section of his book entitled *The Divine for Itself*, it is in Islam that this notion is given especial emphasis. Thus he writes: "how infinitely open, how shatteringly vast, how breathlessly mystifying is that world where goodness is alone, beyond any ken, beyond any relation, holy (*'muqaddasūn'*, sanctified above), majestic" (Shehadi 1964, 61).

It should be noted at this point that in addition to the more general linguistic aspects of the question which al-Ghazālī himself addresses, we need also to keep in mind the different meanings that can be attached to the word 'love' in both religious discourse and in discourse referring to love among human beings. Further, what is the nature of the relation of each discourse to the other?

It is interesting to speculate whether the question in the title of this writing would make sense to al-Ghazālī himself, that is, whether it is a meaningful one within the terms of reference of both his sufism and his philosophical thought concerning the nature of human being. We will suspend judgement on this issues and let the question stand as a useful guide towards a closer understanding of al-Ghazālī's concept of God.

## SOME CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both al-Ghazālī's personal biography and his position in the development of Islam are pertinent to the present discussion and will be dealt

with briefly here. In his *Deliverance From Error (Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl)*, al-Ghazālī provides a fascinating retrospective insight into his development through various stages of intellectual engagement with theology and philosophy which led eventually to a kind of breakdown and the renunciation of his privileged position as a teacher and scholar in Baghdad in order to devote himself to sufi practice, after which period he returned to for a short while to teaching before retiring in his native Tus where he died in 505 A.H./1111 A.D.

H.A.R. Gibb's summary of al-Ghazālī's religious pilgrimage' indicates how the successive stages in this development are linked to our consideration of the nature of al-Ghazālī's concept of God: "...he found himself in revolt against the casuistry of the theologians and set out to seek the Ultimate Reality through all the Muslim religious systems and philosophies of his time, and ...after a long struggle, bodily, mental and intellectual, he fell back in sheer philosophic agnosticism on personal experience of God and found it in the Sufi path" (Gibb 1984, 94). This may seem to imply that once al-Ghazālī set off along the sufi path he ignored or rejected all intellectual inquiry in favour of a purely experiential approach to God. That this is by no means the case will become clear presently.

In terms of al-Ghazālī's position in the development of Islam, it has often been noted that one of his major contributions alongside that of bringing the teachings of Islam back within the reach of ordinary (i.e. lesser educated) believers, was to effect a lasting reconciliation between orthodoxy and mysticism. The former had over the centuries become encoded in the most highly elaborate and complex philosophical terms such that only the very learned could claim access to the finer truths of the faith. The origins of mysticism as a phenomenon within Islam are most certainly not monocausal, and it may be acknowledged that certain verses in the Qur'an and certain episodes from the life of the Prophet gave rise to Muslim asceticism which laid the groundwork for the development of mysticism (Gibb 1984, 87).

#### AL-GHAZĀLĪ AND MYSTICAL UNION

In his book *Ghazālī's Unique Unknowable God*, Fadlou Shehadi deals at length with the various philosophical problems associated with 'the doctrine of the uniqueness or utter difference (*mukhālafah*) of God, and the consequent view of the mystery or unknowability of His nature.' (Shehadi 1964, 1). It is arguably in respect of this all-important doctrine that al-Ghazālī's orthodoxy is put to its most stringent test in light of his enthusiasm for and belief in the merits, and indeed the superiority, of the

sufi way (*ṭarīqa*) above all others.

Shehadi begins his chapter on the possibility of mystical union in al-Ghazālī's thought with the following crucial questions: "If God is unique and unknowable how could man attain mystical union with Him (or it)? Is such a relation – or any other religious relation (including love) – possible?" (Shehadi 1964, 23).

He goes on to distinguish between what he calls the factual and the logical versions of the question, arguing that the logical version (concerning the compatibility of the notion of mystical union with that of God as utterly unique and unknowable) arises prior to the factual version (whether mystical union is factually possible given a unique and unknowable God).

Yet before being in a position to consider the logical version of the question it is necessary to clarify what is meant by 'mystical union'. On one level, it can be said: "The union is the climax of a journey of spiritual and moral self-purification for the mystic" (Shehadi 1964, 24). However, it must then be asked, is 'union' being used in a literal sense, as when two distinct substances become merged, or is it to be considered as a metaphor? Shehadi established the logical impossibility of 'mystical union' being understood literally. This is because, firstly, it is impossible for two separate and distinct identities to become unified while yet retaining their respective identities (Shehadi 1964, 25). Secondly, given the utter uniqueness of God, literal 'union' is impossible because by definition God cannot share His nature with any other thing or person (Shehadi 1964, 27).

Shehadi next discusses the metaphorical connotations of the word 'union', arguing that in al-Ghazālī's writing 'mystical union' is as good as synonymous with 'mystical goal', defined in three progressive stages of mystical intuition. (Shehadi 1964, 29 – 34).

Nonetheless it is equally clear that at some point, sufism became not just the medium of "...expressions of the anguished soul longing for an answer in the loneliness of this world" (Schimmel 1962, 38), but more specifically a reaction against dry (and, for many, incomprehensible) scholasticism, and source of "living 'experience' of God" (Gibb 1984, 94). As these two forms of religious expression grew further and further apart from one another, adherents to the sufi path claiming that religious knowledge was to be found not in *ʿilm* (rational knowledge) but in *maʿrifa* (personal experience of the divine). It was clear that for Islam as a whole to benefit from each insight a reconciliation of the two would be required.

The various aspects of the reconciliation effected by al-Ghazālī are alluded to in a lengthy footnote by Shehadi (Shehadi 1964, 70). At this point in our discussion it will suffice to summarise by saying that while al-Ghazālī affirmed orthodoxy in terms of its infallible revealed content,

he also asserted that sufism is a way of experiencing this given content even if ultimately the climax of the mystical experience cannot (and should not) be communicated or expressed in language. In his *Deliverance from Error* al-Ghazālī makes plain which he believes to be the best path to God: "This much I shall say ... 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, where 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" (Watt 1970, 60).

In order to shed a little more light on al-Ghazālī's concept of God it will be useful first to look at the way he deals with the issue of mystical union (or *fanā*, complete absorption in God) and the divine-human relation he envisages through that. And then we will look briefly at another great sufi figure who lived three centuries prior to al-Ghazālī, Rābi'ā al-Adawīyya of Basra, who is credited with having ... for the first time introduced the question of love into the vocabulary of the stern ascetics of the 8th century A.D (Schimmel 1962, 39). The comparison may help to clarify the roles that 'love' and 'intellect' played in al-Ghazālī's concept of God.

These need not detain us here, since the main point which emerges from this discussion and which links in with our theme is that the question of whether mystical union with a unique, unknowable God is possible needs logically to be reformulated: the mystical goal, even as metaphor, implies that God is in some sense knowable. Yet now can God be at once knowable and unknowable? This problem is answered by the recognition that in al-Ghazālī's scheme, these two propositions do not have the same reference. God in God's essence is unknowable, without qualification. However, through Revelation, God's acts and attributes (the Merciful, the Compassionate, and so on) have been made known, and it is to this aspect of the divine reality which the mystic (and indeed any believer) relates. Lest this might be taken as implying some 'back door' means of gaining access to an utterly inaccessible God, al-Ghazālī asserts that all such knowledge of God is inadequate, "... since God's attributes (the knowable aspect) are utterly unlike their human counterparts. Thus to know God amounts to understanding the authoritative language about God which is expressed in human terms" (Shehadi 1964, 75).

As Shehadi concludes towards the end of his essay, the remaining paradox in al-Ghazālī's concept of a unique unknowable God about whom it can nonetheless be said that He is in some sense knowable and can therefore be approached by means of sufi devotion, revolves around

the doctrinal unquestionability, the infallibility and ultimate priority of Revelation. The existence of divine Revelation on which the faith is based requires the possibility of divine self-communication (through the mediation of the Prophet). This does not square, however, with the notion of an utterly unique unknowable deity. It is this issue which al-Ghazālī himself did not address. For him, Revelation stands as given. Furthermore, the language of Revelation about God's attributes (the knowable aspect) is to be understood in terms of religious function rather than as descriptive with respect to God. Shehadi quotes the following out of al-Ghazālī's writings: "And what appeared of these words (the attribute words) in the Qur'ān should be explained in terms of their fruits and goals not their meaning or etymology" (Shehadi 1964, 111).

This could arguably be seen as the key both to al-Ghazālī's understanding of God and to his deep concern for the welfare and unity of the religious community of Muslim believers, especially regarding those who are dependent upon the language of Qur'anic revelation for their 'knowledge' of God and who are unable to attain to the heights of the sufi mystic experience.

In summary it can be said of al-Ghazālī that in much of his writing (not least in the *Ihyā'*) he makes use of the language of analogy when speaking of the devotee's love for God and of God's love towards the believer. Such language, however, is not descriptive but functional in the sense that it is an aid to the believer in their religious development. As we have seen, this is necessarily so on account of al-Ghazālī's strictly orthodox view of the utter uniqueness and otherness of God. Nonetheless, in much of his writing about the mystical goal, it might be argued that the very reticence he expresses in discussing the various aspects of *dhawq* (lit. 'tasting', experiencing God) itself points to an understanding that there is indeed a point of direct confrontation between the sufi and God which not even metaphorical language should attempt to define, and that this admission impinges on his concept of an utterly unknowable God. Take, for example, this passage from the *Deliverance*:

The degree of proximity to Deity which they (the mystics) attain is regarded by some as intermixture of being, by others as identification, by others as intimate union. But all these expressions are wrong ... Those who have reached that stage should confine themselves to repeating the verse – What I experience I shall not try to say; Call me happy, but ask me no more. (Reid Upper 1952, 30)

The paradox implied by all this is aptly expressed by Claudia Reid Upper thus; "Al-Ghazālī feels pantheism, but he reasons the otherliness of God" (Reid Upper 1952, 32).

Fadlou Shehadi is rather more one-sided in his assessment: "... Ghazali cannot and does not in the end maintain the view that man confronts God" (Shehadi 1964, 59).

Before commenting any further on this and addressing more general issues raised by the apparent contradictions in al-Ghazālī's sufi practice and philosophical reflections, let us now turn to look briefly at the kind of language attributed to Rābi'a al-Adawīyya in relation to her sufi experiences.

### RĀBI' A ON LOVE

While for al-Ghazālī in the fifth century the doctrine of the utter unknowability of God was paramount, the emphasis for Rābi'a three centuries earlier, that is, at the early stages of development of the sufi movement, was on the doctrine of love.

Margaret Smith quotes the following comment from R.A. Nicholson's work:

With Rābi'a.... Love, the unquenchable flame smouldering in the ashes of ceremonial religion and kindling the torch of Mysticism through the darkest ages began its conquest of Mohammedan hearts. (Smith 1974, 97)

What appears to have distinguished Rābi'a from other sufis of her time was her emphasis upon disinterested love for God, a significant innovation for many whose service of God had been motivated either out of a desire to reach the eternal Paradise or out of fear of hell (Smith 1974, 97). This aspect of disinterest is shown to derive from Rābi'a's strong sense that love of God on the part of the sufi must be all absorbing and must exclude all potential distractions and diversions; thus Smith quotes an answer given by Rābi'a to the question how she had attained to such lofty heights in the spiritual life:

By constantly saying this: I take refuge in Thee from everything which has distracted me from Thee, and from every hindrance which has hindered me from Thee. (Smith, 101).

Rābi'a apparently shows no hesitancy in describing her relation to God through love in the most direct and confrontational terms, and it was surely this uncompromising directness and obvious passion which was so attractive to others, eliciting their affection and reverence for her, and which encouraged many to embark along the sufi path (*ṭarīqa*). An appropriate example of such directness is found in the famous verses attributed to Rābi'a by Abū Tālib, concerning the two types of love of God:

I have loved Thee with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worth (of Thee),  
As for the love which is selfish, I occupy myself therein with remembrance of  
Thee to the exclusion of all others,

As for that which is worthy of Thee, therein Thou raisest the veil that I may see Thee. Yet there is no praise to me in this or that. But the praise is to Thee, whether in that or this. (Smith 1974, 102 – 103)

It is interesting to note that in al-Ghazālī's own commentary on these lines, he interprets the second and higher of the two loves in terms of Prophetic revelation ("I have prepared for my faithful servants what eye hath not seen nor ear heard and what has not entered into the heart of man") (Smith 1974, 104).

As we have seen Revelation for al-Ghazālī is the non plus ultra of faith, providing the solid foundation both for rational inquiry into and mystical experience of the nature of God. One almost sense an impulsive reaction on al-Ghazālī's part to Rābi'a's "therein Thou raisest the veil that I may see Thee", a need to rationalize what Rābi'a herself seems quite comfortable to assert without rationalisation or qualification. The passage quoted above from the *Deliverance*, moreover, might easily be directly applied to yet more explicit utterances attributed to Rābi'a, such as

My hope is for union with Thee, for that is the goal of my desire, and I have ceased to exist and have passed out of self. I am become one with Him and am altogether His. (Smith 1974, 110)

What emerges from a comparison of al-Ghazālī's with Rābi'a's approaches to mystic experience is that there are different levels of discourse and meaning at work. A superficial comparison between the two might lead one to maintain that, obviously, it is Rābi'a's concept of God which is rather more compatible with notions of love that al-Ghazālī's tortuous attempts to hold on, in spite of his own mystic experiences, to the orthodox doctrine of God which effectively denies the possibility in any meaningful sense of any relationship between human beings and an utterly different deity. However, as indicated above, there is another level on which one could equally argue for al-Ghazālī's basic belief in the centrality of love to religious experience.

Returning to the questions raised at the start of this writing concerning the nature of 'love' in religious and in interhuman discourse, it might be said with regard to both types of love that the object towards which they are directed is ultimately unknowable, or, put another way, ever elusive. Love for someone or something is based on what is known about that person or thing, but the attempt to define just what it is towards which we direct our love will always fail because our knowledge is based on an image – the particular reality behind the image remains elusive, and evades our grasp or control. In this sense, *islām* or submission, is the only possible response, in the sense of letting go of what we would desire to possess and delighting in the other's growth and

autonomy within the relationship. It is at this point, however that the analogy between the two discourses breaks down and where it becomes clear that on this reading of love, human's love for God and God's for humanity are in two separate categories in accordance with the extreme dualistic metaphysics espoused by all monotheistic religions and expressed most explicitly in Islam.

Al-Ghazālī's concept of God (as opposed to his experience of 'God'), to some extent, agrees with a Neoplatonic metaphysics which sees reality as a whole as divided into two spheres; the higher sphere, related to spirit, is where God dwells and is in a sense the 'more real' of the two; the lower sphere is that of temporal, material reality which according to Islam is the sphere in which humanity acquires knowledge of God on its journey back to its original home, the world of 'amr, or spirit. The utter difference between the two spheres is expressed, in all its paradoxicality, by Shehadi thus: "God created the Heavens and Earth. He cares for man. But God is also above creating, above caring, above relation" (Shehadi 1964, 61). So while it is incumbent upon humanity to love (submit to) God, it is not incumbent upon God to return the kindness, since God is not only 'above relation' from the perspective of divine reality, God is above all 'above' in the sense that His knowable aspect, the acts and attributes, creates what might be called a 'substitute relation' of Power over powerlessness, Control over submission, and a kind of 'love' in which all traces of mutuality becomes necessarily submerges, if not eradicated, by the all-consuming majesty of the deity.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one might argue that al-Ghazālī's journeyings through the maze of different approaches to God in fact tell us rather more about his own searching integrity than about the nature of God, however God may be conceived in different times and places. Within the context of his own historical and cultural setting, al-Ghazālī provided Islam with an ample and inclusive foundation (vis-a-vis both orthodoxy and mysticism) upon which the implications of the doctrines of *Tawhīd* and *Mukhālafah* might be worked out in successive generations for the good of all Muslim believers.

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