

Imam al-Ghazali on 'ilm (knowledge)

A brief biography of Imam al-Ghazali

Undoubtedly, Imam al-Ghazali was one of the greatest scholars ever to have lived in the Islamic Ummah. A thousand years later, his works, legacy and thinking continues to inspire Muslims young and old, in all corners of the world.

Hujjat al-Islam, al-Imam Zayn al-Din Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali al-Tusi, al-Nisapuri, al-Shafi'i al-Sufi was born in the town of Tus, the second major town of Khurasan (after Nisapur) in 450.

According to Ibn Asakir, he began studying Fiqh in his youth and then moved to Nisapur, where he continued his studies under Imam al-Haramyn al-Juwayni. Whilst occupying himself with the formal studies in the morning, he coupled this with learning the inner sciences in more informal settings in the afternoon. In other words, he walked both paths, the outer and the inner sciences of Islam.

He left Nisapur and then joined Nizam al-Mulk at the tender age of 28. Many approached him to debate with him and he triumphed over them. As a result, they gave him the post of professor of the Nizamiyya in Baghdad, where he became famous as a brilliant mind.

Then in the year 488, gave up this revered post to seek refuge in solitude and renunciation. He performed the Hajj, and then journeyed to Damascus, Egypt, Jerusalem before returning to his native Tus in 492. It is here is compiled most of his literary works and taught in the Sufi Khanqahs.

He passed away on the 14th of Jumada al-Akhira in 505/1111.

Imam al-Ghazali (d.505) was a contemporary of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani. There is no doubt that this era was considered a golden period of Islam. It was important because of the academic work going on, not because of material riches the Ummah was experiencing.

Ihya Ulum al-Din

Ihya Ulum al-Din is the *magnum opus* of Imam al-Ghazali's literary legacy. For many, it is considered the best Islamic work after the Qur'an and Sunna and the ultimate Sufi treatise. Imam al-Nawawi stated that 'were the books of Islam all to be lost, except the *Ihya*, it would suffice to replace them all.'

The opinion of Imam al-Nawawi is perhaps not an exaggeration, since the *Ihya* is instrumental in covering all areas of Muslim life. The work can be divided into four broad areas, (i) acts of worship (ii) norms of daily life (iii) the destructive matters of life (iv) the saving matters of life. Each of these four sections are divided into ten sub-sections and thus the *Ihya* consists of forty chapters in all. Perhaps the main difference between this work and other great works is the depth Imam al-Ghazali explores in each section. He investigates the outer and the

inner. Not only does he explore how to perform Sajda but what it entails spiritually. He does not treat death as a biological occurrence but a whole philosophy of life. This is perhaps the reason why the *Ihya* is like no other Islamic literature in the world.

The Book of knowledge

The *Ihya* consists of forty chapters on subjects such as Faith, Cleanliness, Salah, Zakah, Hajj, Death, Halal and Haram, Companionship and so on. Perhaps it is an indication of its importance that he commences the *Ihya* with a chapter on *ilm*. In this extensive section, he covers discussions such as the superiority of knowledge, an explanation of the recommended knowledge and the abhorred one (and the difference between Fard Ayn and Fard Kifaya), an explanation that not all disciplines are recommended, (namely sorcery, astrology and philosophy), the etiquettes of the student and teacher and the difference between the scholars of the next world and the evil scholars.

It is impossible to give an overview of the entire chapter. However, an attempt will be made to cover the important aspects of this opening chapter in *Ihya*.

The definition of *ilm*

Imam al-Ghazali says that '*ilm* is fear [of Allah] owing to the verse 'only the scholars fear Allah.' In other words, Imam al-Ghazali is defining *ilm* according to its ultimate aim and objective. If the knowledge you usurp is leading to the fear of Allah, then it is *ilm*. If it is not bringing the fear of Allah into your heart, then it is not *ilm*, but mere facts and data.

Given the vast amount of information in front of us today, we need to question how much of it is actually *ilm*. Most of it is being used to question Allah, His religion and His very existence so it cannot be called *ilm*. True *ilm* reminds you of Allah.

*If *ilm* is being used to create doubt about Allah's existence then this is ignorance. Richard Dawkins is a professor at the University of Oxford and his books have been translated into over thirty languages and have sold in their millions. In 'The God Delusion' he argues that a supernatural creator almost certainly does not exist. This makes him ignorant, because his knowledge has taken him away from God, not brought him closer.

*If *ilm* is used to create a sense of smugness, exaltedness and show, then this is not leading to the fear of Allah.

*If it is not benefitting people, then it is not knowledge. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) sought refuge from knowledge 'that does not benefit'.

a. The superiority of knowledge

Understandably, Imam al-Ghazali starts the chapter by reminding the readers of the importance and superiority of knowledge in Islam. To do this, he cites verses from the Qur'an, prophetic reports and sayings from the pious ancestors.

In the commentary of the verse 'Allah will raise those who have believed amongst you; and those who have been given knowledge will be raised [much] further' (58: 11), he cites Ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) who said, 'The Ulama are further ahead from the believers by seven hundred stages. There is a distance of five hundred years (travelling) between each stage (*Mukhtasar Ihya Ulum al-Din*, 18).

Allah says that there are certain things that can never be equal, namely the blind and the seeing, light and darkness, the inhabitants of the fire and the inhabitants of paradise, shade and non-shade and so on. In this manner, Allah informs us that the learned can never be equal to the ignorant. Amongst the *ahadith* he cites are:

*The Ulama are the heirs of the prophets.

*On the Day of Judgement the prophets will perform intercession, then the Ulama, then the martyrs.

*Certainly the angels place their wings for the seeker of knowledge in pleasure of what they do.

*When the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) sent Mu'adh to Yemen, he said 'that you guide one, sole person is better than the world and everything in it.'

Fath al-Musli commented that 'Do you see how the ill one dies if he is denied food, water and medicine? The same is with the heart; if it is deprived of hikma (wisdom) for three days, it dies' (*Mukhtasar Ihya Ulum al-Din*, 18). Imam al-Ghazali adds to this:

'Whosoever is deprived of knowledge, then his heart is ill and his death is imminent. But he does not feel this is the case, since the preoccupations of the Dunya have rendered his senses useless. But when death does unveil itself, those senses only then realise the pain it had endured and only then will he show great remorse. This is the interpretation of the Prophet's saying (peace be upon him) 'The people are sleeping. When they die they will awake.' (*Mukhtasar Ihya Ulum al-Din*, 18-19).

Ibn Abbas reports that Sulayman (peace be upon him) was asked to choose between knowledge, wealth and power. He chose knowledge. As a result, he thereby was blessed with wealth and power too.

b. In the explanation of the recommended knowledge and the abhorred one, and the difference between Fard Ayn and Fard Kifaya

After a Muslim reaches the age of maturity, then it is necessary to know the Kalima Sharif and understand its meaning. At this stage, the Muslim needs to believe in the Kalima wholeheartedly and without any doubt. The Muslims at this

stage does not to know the evidence and proof for *Tawhid* and *Risala*. This is what the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) used to do.

The different fields of knowledge rank according to their closeness to the knowledge of the afterlife.

c. On the etiquettes of the disciple

Imam al-Ghazali lists the following as the important etiquettes a student should take on in order to gain *ilm*:

i. To purify oneself from impurities. This does not just mean ablution and cleanliness. It means the purity of the heart, by ridding oneself of bad characteristics, since *ilm* is the worship of the heart. A dirty body cannot digest clean knowledge and cannot fathom the *nur* of *ilm*.

To make us understand this point, Imam al-Ghazali cites the hadith in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, 'The angels do not enter a home in which there is a dog.' The heart is also a home, Imam al-Ghazali explains, where the angels descend and their effect is felt. How can they enter where abhorred traits like anger, desires, envy, arrogance and the likes reside? Ibn Mas'ud once commented that *ilm* is not amassing lots of narrations, but rather it is a light (*nur*) that enters the heart.

ii. To lose contact with the outside world and to be far from one's home. This is so one's heart can be totally dedicated to seeking knowledge. *Ilm* cannot benefit you until you give it full attention. Allah has only given you one heart, so a student should dedicate it to seeking knowledge only. No one has become a millionaire sitting at home, without stepping outside one's comfort zone. Likewise, no has become a great scholar without leaving his home town.

iii. That the disciple does not show arrogance and pride. Rather he should seek knowledge humbly, just like a patient seeks medicine humbly. Part of this teaching too is to respect the teachers wholeheartedly. This includes standing for the teacher, kissing his hands and to refrain from sitting in front of him.

iv. That the student should avoid listening to the differences of opinions from the people. By nature, a student will become immersed in this, in particular when the issues raised by the people talk about loopholes that may lead to apathy and laziness. Pupils of Dars Nizami (seminaries) will tell you that for the first few years, they never read disputed opinions (*Hazir Nazir*, *Bid'a*, *Mawlid* and so on). They stick to the *usul* (core principles).

Nor is it permissible for novice students to follow the actions of those who are experienced students. It could be that Imam al-Ghazali is asking students to be patient and not to indulge in detailed matters that they cannot understand. Some have said, 'Whosoever visits us at the beginning becomes a friend. Whosoever visits us at the end becomes a Zindiq (heretic).' In short, it seems Imam al-

Ghazali wants students to concentrate on what is being taught by the teacher, not what people think are important religious and theological discussions.

v. He should approach all of the fields with equal zeal and interest. Students want to learn *Seerah*, *Tafsir* and hadith but they take a lesser view of *Sarf* and *Nahv*. This is not the right way.

vi. He should give utmost attention to the most important disciplines, which are those that are closest to the knowledge of the next world. Moreover, he should only proceed to the next book or subject area when he has become proficient in the earlier one.

vii. He should seek knowledge purely for the sake of Allah, not for the sake of money and fame. If someone seeks knowledge for the fame, then he will be penniless. If someone seeks knowledge for the sake of Allah, then Allah will automatically make him rich.

d. On the etiquettes of the teacher

A rich man can be in the state of earning. When he hoards what he has earned, then he has ensured he does not have to ask or depend on others. When he spends on himself, then he is benefitting himself. When he spends on others, then he is a *sakhi* and is also now benefitting himself.

The same is the case with knowledge. The best case of a scholar is when he learns, acts upon it and passes it on to others. He is 'like the sun which is illuminated itself and happily helps to bring warmth and illumination to others too.'

Other qualities include:

i. Compassion on the students. He should intend to save his students from the fire of the next world, which is more than what parents do in saving their children from any fire (or calamity) of this world. In the same way the teacher should show affection to his pupils, all the pupils should mutually respect and love one another.

ii. He should not demand any payment, reward or recompense for his services.

iii. To never tire from offering advice to the student.

iv. To teach and speak according to the students' understanding.

How the Islamic disciplines have been misrepresented

Imam al-Ghazali writes that there are five Islamic terms that have been changed and distorted from their true, original meaning. As a result, they do not reflect

what the first generations of Muslims understood by them. He offers the true meaning of these terms:

a. *Fiqh*

Early generations understood this term to mean 'deep understanding' to rulings and principles that lead to peace in the afterlife and the refraining from evil traits in this life. Like the Qur'an indicates, the scholars indulge in *Fiqh* so that they 'can warn the people.' Imam al-Ghazali writes that in his age, *Fiqh* basically became about divorce, freeing of slaves, cursing and business rulings.

Sa'd ibn Ibrahim al-Zuhri was asked 'Which city has the best *Fiqh*?' He replied, 'the one whose inhabitants fear Allah the most' (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*, I: 52).

Imam al-Ghazali himself asserts that he has not advocating *Fiqh* has nothing to do with decrees and Fatwas. Rather he is advocating that in early Islam, *Fiqh* was more about the knowledge of the next world.

b. *Ilm*

Imam al-Ghazali writes that in the past, this term was exclusive for the knowledge of Allah, His signs and His actions towards His servants and creations. Today, he writes, the term is associated with a being who can dispute, debate and argue. Moreover, these people try to dispute and argue with those who truly are scholars.

c. *Tawhid*

Here Imam al-Ghazali gives a more Sufi perspective of what *Tawhid* means. In its simple form, *Tawhid* means the 'oneness of Allah.' He argues that the true meaning of *Tawhid* is to look beyond this simple definition and to ponder what it results in. He writes that *Tawhid*:

'...is to see that all matters stem from Allah, hence dropping the need to depend on others. It means that a person acknowledges that all good and bad comes from Allah, and hence becomes utterly dependent on Him alone. The benefit of such belief is that one does not blame people, does not show anger and resentment and instead submits wholly to the fate of Allah. Whereas today, some Muslims suggest that the biggest infringement of *Tawhid* is when people believe in prophets, martyrs and the pious saints of Allah. Imam al-Ghazali says that the biggest infringement of *Tawhid* is following one's desire. He cites a report ascribed to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that 'the most severe deity of a person on earth according to Allah is *hawa* (following one's desire) (1: 54).'

d. *Dhikr*

It seems here that Imam al-Ghazali is referring to the *Dhikr* gatherings conducted by the Sufis in his time.

Imam al-Ghazali reminds the reader that a true form of *Dhikr* 'benefits the believers' and are greeted by the angels. He comments that *Dhikr* gatherings should not consist of mere story-telling. He reminds Muslims that this is a clear *bid'a*. Story-tellers would find weak, rare and often baseless Islamic stories in order to arouse the audience. Likewise, Imam al-Ghazali warns that the only

purpose behind reciting poetry is to promote wisdom. It should not be done for entertainment purposes. People leaving the gathering should feel a sense of accomplishment, not a sense of confusion.

This section is very important for a reason. There was perhaps no one in history who advocated *Tasawwuf* more than Imam al-Ghazali. He was the poster boy for Sufism. Yet, like this section indicates, he was also critical of it. Importantly though, he was not critical of Sufism but the Sufis. Sometimes the Sufis – with their over emphasis on music, dancing and intoxication – were turning their backs on the very ideals of *Tasawwuf*. Ibn al-Jawzi (d.597) and Ibn Taymiyya (d.728) were two known critics of Sufism. Ibn al-Jawzi was critical of Sufis in his book *Talbis Iblis*. But again, they were more critical of the Sufis rather than the *Tasawwuf*. In many places, Ibn al-Jawzi praised *Tasawwuf*:

‘The term ‘Sufi’ appeared before the second century...according to the early Sufis, the term was used to denote nurture the soul, to perform Jihad against the self, to repel lowly traits and to adopt excellent ones such as *Zuhd*, tolerance, patience, sincerity, truthfulness...This was the early foundation of the discipline; adherence to the Straight Path (*Sirat Mustaqim*).’¹

e. *Hikma*

Imam al-Ghazali expresses his sense of horror that a man of *Hikma* in his time was being used to describe Hakims, poets and astronomers. Instead it should be used for people who pass on useful wisdom.

Perhaps Imam al-Ghazali is criticizing the fake pirs of his time.

The Ulama of the world and the afterlife

Despite the high rank of the learned in Islam, Imam al-Ghazali is also keen to warn of the dangers associated with knowledge and the men of knowledge. Certainly, he is highlighting a very important point, something which the Quran and Sunna indicate too.

In his own terms, he says there are two types of scholars, the scholars of the world and the scholars of the hereafter. The former can be identified (and thus must be abhorred) by the following traits:

*Scholars whose intention is to turn the head of fellow scholars, make the stupid argue with him, and make themselves the centre of attention. According to the hadith (reported by Ibn Maja) such people are in the fire (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*, I: 89).

*Scholars whom conceal their knowledge and do not make steps to teach others at every moment.

¹ Page 242. *Ibid*.

*Scholars who do not act upon what they know and preach.

*Love for the Dunya. Al-Hasan said that 'the punishment of the scholars is the death of the heart. And the death of the heart comes about via seeking the world with the actions of the hereafter.' (*Mukhtasar Ihya Ulum al-Din*, 28).

In short, inclination to this world is the difference between the fake and genuine.

Imam al-Ghazali cites al-Khalil ibn Ahmad who said, 'There are four types of people (i) A man who knows and he knows he knows – he is a scholar so follow him (ii) A man who knows and he does not know he knows – he is sleeping so awake him (iii) A man who does not know and he knows that he doesn't – he is a seeker so guide him (iv) A man who does not know and doesn't know he doesn't – he is ignorant so be vary of him.

In short, Imam al-Ghazali writes that a genuine scholar diverts to five things:

- From doubt to certainty
- From showing off to sincerity
- From need to content
- From arrogance to humility
- From animosity to *Nasiha* (good counseling)

Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari

@hafiz_ather

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadiyah Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.

BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.