6.4 Al-Ghazālī on theological reasoning

Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī was born at Tus near the modern city of Mashhad in 450/1058. He went to Nishapur, where he was a pupil of al-Juwaynī, traditionally referred to as Imām al-Ḥaramayn, until the latter's death in 478/1085. In that year he came to the attention of Niẓām al-Mulk, and in 484/1091 he became a professor at the Niẓāmiyya *madrasa* in Baghdad. He privately pursued the study of philosophy and wrote several books. In 488/1095, he withdrew from teaching and made the pilgrimage to Mecca, but in reality he was abandoning his professorship and his whole career as a jurist and theologian. He returned to teaching at Nishapur in 499/1106, in the meantime having lived as a Ṣūfī, and written his most significant work, his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* ('The revival of the religious sciences'). He died in 505/1111.

It was not long after returning to Nishapur that he wrote *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* ('Deliverance from error') which appears to be, and has usually been interpreted as, a spiritual or intellectual autobiography. It is probably better understood as a work of epistemology. Right knowledge is that which, in the end, is shown to deliver one from error. In the course of coming to that conclusion al-Ghazālī portrays the major epistemological categories of his day. He begins with radical doubt and its cure. He then considers, in turn, the achievements of the theologians (the *mutakallimūn*), the philosophers, the Ismā'īlīs (the Ta'līmiyya) and the mystics (the Ṣūfīs). The last two sections of his book are entitled 'The truth of prophecy' and 'The return to teaching'. In the first of these, he denies that the intellect is the highest faculty of the soul and puts forward a theory of a higher faculty that is concerned with the unseen. This, in brief, is his reply to the philosophers; for him, prophecy is a faculty of perception grounded in this part of the soul. The essential characteristics of the prophetic experience can be understood by non-prophets through 'taste' (i.e., direct experience) by following the path of the Ṣūfīs. In the last section al-Ghazālī defends his decision to return to teaching, a process he sees as one of correcting the errors of those who deviate from truth (i.e., Ismā'īlīs, philosophers, etc.) and guiding people to the truth of prophetic knowledge.

The discussion of *kalām*, which is presented here, reveals that al-Ghazālī considered its primary function to be defending the religion from innovation, perhaps referring to the Mu'tazilites, and that he found it inadequate for the discovery of knowledge of necessary truths.

Further reading

Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite school*, Durham NC 1994.

Richard Joseph McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment. An annotated translation of al-Ghazālī's* al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl *and other relevant works of al-Ghazālī*, Boston 1980; contains an extensive bibliography, pp. 383–92.

Farouk Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis: a debate on reason and authority in medieval Islam*, London 2001.

Source text

Farid Jabre, *Al-Munqid min aḍalāl (Erreur de délivrance)*, Beirut 1959 (Collection UNESCO d'oeuvres representatives, série Arabe), pp. 16–17 of the Arabic text.

Chapter: The science of **kalām***: its aims and achievement*

1. I began with the science of *kalām*, gathering it and considering it. I studied the works of the adepts of this science, and composed works on it according to my desire. I found it a science adequate to its own aims, but not adequate to mine.

2. The aim of this science is to defend the creed of the orthodox and to guard it from the confusion of the innovators. For God has given to his servants, through the words of his prophet, a creed which is the truth. Upon it depends the welfare of their spiritual and secular life. Qur'ān and *akhbār* articulate knowledge of it. Subsequently the devil introduced, through the murmurings of the innovators, matters opposed to orthodoxy (*sunna*). They became besotted with these matters and almost corrupted the true creed of those who possessed it. Hence God sent the group known as *mutakallim*s (or theologians) and He moved them to defend the *sunna* through systematic theology which revealed the contrived obscurities of the innovators that were in opposition to the established *sunna*. Thus the science of *kalām* and its practitioners grew up.

3. A group of them undertook the task to which they had been appointed by God: they skilfully defended the *sunna*, struggled on behalf of the creed received through acceptance from prophecy, and changed what the innovators had introduced. But they relied, in all this, upon principles which they had accepted from their adversaries, being compelled to do so by either *taqlīd*, or consensus of the community, or simply acceptance from Qur'ān and *akhbār*. Most of their activities were concerned with demonstration of the contradictions of their adversaries or with criticism of the conclusions which necessarily followed from their (adversaries') assumptions.

4. This was of little use to one who accepts only necessary truths; and so *kalām* was of little use to me and constituted no cure for my malady.

5. When the skills of *kalām* developed, and the practice of it increased and time passed, the *mutakallimūn* developed a taste for defending [the *sunna*] through investigating the true nature of things. They plunged into discussion of 'essences' and 'accidents' and their attendant rules. However, since this was not the aim of their science, their investigations did not achieve their ultimate target. And they did not achieve [an understanding] which could completely remove the darkness of confusion that lies in human dispute.

6. I do not consider it impossible that this was achieved for others, indeed I do not doubt that for a certain group of people it was achieved; but it was an achievement mixed with *taqlīd* in areas other than first principles. My aim at present is to tell of my own state, and not to contradict those who look for a cure in *kalām*.