

Understanding Muslim Theology in the Works of Shaykh Muhammad Ghazali

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Abstract. This inquiry explores Shaykh Ghazali's perspective on Muslim belief and change, specifically his views on how faith can sustain commitment to holistic change while assuring a favourable interaction with the intellect, without jeopardising human freedom or the laws and patterns of the universe. This study also examines Ghazali's views on the intimate connection between life and Muslim belief, as well as his ideas on the reformation of theological instruction as an effective means of re-shaping Muslims' intellectual identities and actualising change in contemporary Muslim societies. The study of Ghazali's intellectual analysis of Muslim faith and change is vital to understanding aspects of the current debate on religion, reform and modernity, particularly as he addresses many problems and issues pertaining to the methodology of religious understanding and practice in the context of Muslim life.

Keywords and phrases: Muslim belief, Muhammad Ghazali, change, Muslim theology, *'aqidah*

Introduction

Muhammad Ghazali (1917–1996) was a prominent Egyptian Azharite scholar who grew up in an exploited rural neighbourhood that was subject to oppression and repression by Bashas and princes, exploitation at the hands of landlords and the regular abuse of peasants, who received meagre returns for their labour. These kinds of social injustices gave rise to privileged social classes while creating an economic chasm that caused some people to plant grain yet eat hay, grow cotton but dress poorly and build tall buildings yet live in poverty (Yusuf al-Qaradawi 1996, 12). These conditions caused Ghazali to empathise greatly with the suffering and maltreatment of the people (Ahmad 1996, 28), particularly when the annual per capita income was estimated at £E12.4 in 1913 and £E8 in 1937. The increase in man-to-land ratio also had a naturally depressing effect on average income and low income levels prevented Egyptian villagers from prospering or purchasing expensive agricultural land. The peasants at the bottom of the scale continued to suffer debilitating diseases, poverty and malnourishment due to the endurance of the status quo (Hopwood 1982, 17–18). These socio-

economic conditions profoundly impacted and shaped Ghazali's thinking, leading him to conclude that religion could not flourish in deplorable circumstances, namely poverty, disease and ignorance (Ghazali 2000c, 62). The harsh way of life also led him to pay greater attention to the relationship between religious progress and the environment and between religion and social welfare.

On a different note however, one cannot, on the basis of early Azhar education, describe Ghazali as a traditional Azharite scholar, for he was capable of broadly expanding his knowledge and of learning with an open attitude. Concurrently, Ghazali cannot simply be described as a committed disciple of the Muslim Brotherhood, the organisation founded and led by Hasan Banna. In reality, he left the movement early on to become a freelance, unaligned thinker. Ghazali's school of thought belonged to the post-Ottoman Caliphate era which followed the rise of modern pan-Arabian states. This period of contemporary Muslim thought witnessed the rise of many notable Muslim thinkers and reformers such as Hasan Banna (1906–1949), Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977), Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi (1903–1979), Sayyid M. Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980) and Shaykh Muhammad Ghazali (1917–1996). The works of those Muslim scholars reflect the decline of the post-Ottoman Caliphate era, the competition between France and Britain for sovereignty in the Muslim territories and the general collapse of the Muslim world, which was then prey to Western occupation ('Imarah 1982, 175).

The sociocultural context of the newly formed, secular, pan-Arabian states adhered to either liberal or socialist philosophies in affairs of legislation, institutions and systems. This partly explains Ghazali's profound interest in issues of Muslim identity and the defence of Islam's religious authority. Towards the seventies, however, this context appeared to have changed radically. Ghazali's exploits reflected this changing reality as well. The majority of his works tackled issues concerning Muslims' commitment to religion, Muslim identity and Islam and the West, while also engaging civilisational dialogue, orientalism, Muslim movements, the Islamic awakening and the future of Islam (Al-Sayyid 1986, 21). Muslim works of this era were imbued with a great deal of religious drive and ambition for change, as well as rational critiques of Muslim traditions and heritage. Ghazali's works, for instance, embarked on a series of critical reviews of ideas and concepts; examples include his works *al-Sunnah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa-Ahl al-Hadith* (The Sunnah between Jurists and Traditionalists) and *Qalaya al-Mar'a bayna al-Ta'alid al-Rakida wa al-Wafida* (Women between the Teachings of Religion and the Customs of Society). To escape the numerous intellectual and cultural dilemmas prevalent in Muslim societies, Ghazali adopted Ijtihad while discussing issues of Islamic reform. In fact, he reviewed many of his opinions while adopting an attitude of intellectual openness, especially pertinent given that Muslims were lagging behind in science. Ghazali's works

resonated deeply with the changing social conditions of Muslims, leading him to face issues of understanding; furthermore, the ways of application and practice only increased his conviction that reform, modernisation, realism and experimentation were imperative, as was the need to combine tradition with modernity and the past with the present and future.

In the context of this era and the extent to which it has affected contemporary thought, Moussa Marzouk describes Muslim thought in the 1960s and early 1970s as reactionary and a result of political trials and distress. This may be partly true for Ghazali, who began his career with the Muslim Brotherhood, although he soon dissociated himself from the movement and adhered to moderate Islamic rationalism with regards to a number of Muslim religious and cultural issues. It was Ghazali's belief that much of the intellectual extremism that occurred within the folds of the Muslim movement was a result of state violence and torture. Ghazali's later works, however, show an increased interest in global cooperation, particularly in areas vital to the development of Islamic thought; they would come to influence the shape of its theological and religious personality, as with Qur'anic exegesis, Islamic law, Islamic legal theory and Muslim scholastic theology. It is in this context that Ghazali devoted significant attention to examining the relationship between science and faith while condemning superstitions and fiction in religious thought. Ghazali's era also reflected the growing practice of critique, particularly in the eighties and nineties. This is particularly evident in the majority of his works, which continually invite the reader to the exercise of criticism and evaluation, particularly on issues subject to Ijtihad and free human reasoning. His works also reflect a decidedly serious interest in the future of Muslim societies as part of thinking about reform and consequently in Islamic moderation as a reaction to the violence and intellectual extremism shown in many parts of the Muslim world.

To this end, Ghazali wrote more than 50 works on a number of intellectual, social and cultural issues and challenges facing contemporary Muslims; he also wrote several rigorous critiques of Muslim heritage, traditions and customs. These works were accompanied by his repeated call for re-interpreting a number of narratives on topics ranging from Muslim women, politics, economics, education and *da'wah*, to non-Muslim minorities and Islamic religiosity in general. His unwavering efforts to revisit the many critical concepts and issues in Muslim tradition and his study of deteriorating Muslim societies effectively underlines his keen interest in exploring a new intellectual field of inquiry conducted in the light of Muslim revelation, namely *'ilm al-insan*, the discipline of the human being (in *Raka'iz*, Ghazali 1999a, 40). Moreover, it exhibits his wish to define a new Islamic methodology of exegesis, drawn primarily from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, as a means of minimising the effects of human and cultural influences.

In this study, we seek to explore Ghazali's perspective on Muslim belief, human nature and change, with particular focus on the factors holding back the effective interaction between the two. This, however, would be remarkable in view of Ghazali's consistent advocacy of the notion that the Islamic system of belief has historically proven to establish balanced change in the course of history, thus forming the shape and identity of Muslim civilisation. In this kind of civilisation-building process and through a new religious basis of intellectual and emotional societal modelling, beliefs were communicated in whole, with high regard for the essence of human nature and needs, as well as to the laws of the universe and their position in civilisational development. This highly dynamic change, Ghazali argued, waned and faded as a result of Islam's interaction with Hellenistic philosophy and using Greek analytical methods in Muslim theology. This caused Ghazali to believe that unless Muslims were able to regain a native understanding of their beliefs and to further protect their intellectual and social culture from dilution, their condition would only continue to deteriorate, while their beliefs would also lose their social purposiveness. In order to understand these interrelated issues pertaining to the reform and revival of the role of Muslim belief in change, we must examine Ghazali's perspective on the concepts of human nature, Muslim belief, the approach of the Qur'an to cultivating beliefs and the problem of theological instruction.

The Nature of the Human Being

Exploring Ghazali's view of the relationship between Muslim theology and human change requires us to first highlight his understanding of human nature. This conceptual framework facilitates better explorations of the relationship of religion with spiritual and moral development, human wellness and positive social and environmental engagement. It was perhaps with this in mind that Ghazali extensively analysed the fundamental role, mission and responsibilities of human beings, their present and prospective status, and the avenues leading to either their rise or decline (Ghazali 1999a, 38). Prior to discussing his ideas on human nature, it is worthwhile to mention that Ghazali's approach to the issue fully considers the understanding of life and the universe, as well as the comprehension of the physical, historical and social realities surrounding mankind (Ghazali 1999a, 38).

Ghazali's approach to the topic of man is built on the notion that humans are the most precious creation in the universe (Ghazali 1999a, 38) because they share attributes of the divine, such as life, speech, hearing and wisdom (Ghazali 1999b, 26), and represent a distinct creation to whom God granted all the necessary physical and moral characteristics, as well as capabilities, motivation, freedom and responsibility (Ghazali 1999b, 24). In addition to these divinely granted qualities, Ghazali's thesis shows a keen interest in understanding the cycle of

human growth. He argues that humans are born weak, with immature emotions and no prior knowledge, and that they only set the process of development and the acquisition of physical and moral strength in motion when they choose to ascend (Ghazali 2001a, 186). For instance, human wealth begins to accumulate when humans are able to understand the relationships of their own characteristics to the nature of the cosmos and it is only then that a greater potential for development will manifest itself (Ghazali 1999b, 60–61).

Religious synchrony between human potential and the character of the cosmos demonstrates the humanity of humans while validating their spirituality and morality through the process of populating the earth and ascending to the divine. Ghazali argues that even if the universe was made subservient to the human race, human honour and dignity should not be perceived as tools to control and exploit the universe, but rather as the development of the highest forms of human skill and faculties (Ghazali 1999a, 39). This implies that humans should not let their intellectual capabilities become means of serving short-lived desires; nor should morality become subsidiary to lower human physical aspirations (Ghazali 2005a, 90.) His understanding, however, reflects the standing of the Qur'an on the need to explore the universe and enjoy its resources (Qur'an 71:19–20; 67:15).

What appears to be germane to this discussion, however, is Ghazali's perspective on true humanity, which, in his opinion, only occurs with man's return to his original nature, *fitrah*, as per the instruction of God in the Qur'an:

So, set your face toward the religion in uprightness. That is the *fitrah* of Allah, upon which He has created mankind. (Let there be) no changing of Allah's creation). (Qur'an 30:30)

Ghazali advances an interesting connection between belief on the one hand and education and social responsibility on the other, contending that human creation, as shown through the Qur'anic narrative, began with knowledge, hence marking the beginning of an intelligent movement in the universe (Ghazali 2005a, 90). This beginning, however, requires exploring all sorts of knowledge, the most important being awareness of the Creator (Ghazali 2005a, 90). According to the Qur'an, the story of human creation underscores the theological and ethical principles of human honour, as well as mastery over the universe, which probably led Ghazali to describe belief in God as an association with dignity rather than with humiliation, fear or subjugation (Ghazali 2003a, 160).

Nevertheless, Ghazali's perspective on innate human nature (*fitrah*) is set according to a theological framework in which it may be nurtured, prepared and developed. Ghazali places *fitrah* in an influential position of inspiration and

guidance where it has the potential to determine the degree and nature of one's religiosity in addition to the development of one's character and worth. For Ghazali, there exists a proportionate relationship between human nature, the environment and change. Yet, to better understand Ghazali's perspective on *fitrah* and human change, as well as its implications for theology and spirituality, it is vital to examine his standpoint on the rapport between Islam as a religion and *fitrah* as a human predisposition.

For Ghazali, the religion of Islam cannot be properly understood without drawing on the concept and implications of *fitrah* (Ghazali 2004b, 53; 1999a, 39). Ghazali even reaches the point of considering the religion of Islam as second nature to human beings and as nothing less than a response to human nature (Ghazali 2005a, 20). In his view, Islam merges *fitrah* with reason in such a manner that religious understanding lacking in those basic characteristics becomes distorted and deficient (Ghazali 2004b, 53). Ghazali views *fitrah* as a positive life choice made by upright people, which implies that a positive course of humanity cherishes the call of reason, consciousness and a pure heart (Ghazali 2005a, 20). Interestingly enough, Ghazali draws a line of distinction between a *fitrah*-oriented religious content and one that is tainted with human desires. Such a perspective, however, implies that the judgments the intellect would reject and the course the sound human would decline, would similarly be rejected by *fitrah* and hence cannot be viewed as part of religion (Ghazali 2005a, 20).

Ghazali valued the position of *fitrah* to the extent of viewing religiosity affected by corrupt *fitrah* and a handicapped intellect as being valueless. The reason for this is that in such cases, *fitrah* exterminates the human truth, planting religious seeds in barren lands (Ghazali 2004b, 53). Yet, in view of the broad scope of approval or rejection associated with the course of *fitrah*, he believes that humans' sound predispositions are not confined to Muslims, but are essential to the nature of healthy and reasonable people overall. This idea appears to have further enhanced Ghazali's interest in the notion of a sound and healthy character and the ideas and opinions of bright and positive minds, viewing them as fundamentally Islamic. This task, however, requires the exploration of human knowledge and wisdom and the adoption of a sound standpoint (see Ghazali 2004c). For Ghazali, when humans are guided to the course of *fitrah*, they will eventually be guided to religion (Ghazali 1999c, 13). Corrupt environments, however, can potentially distort *fitrah*, causing distaste for beauty and an inclination towards corruption. This in turn explains why some choose to refuse faith and piety and adhere to disbelief instead, despite their awareness of the fact that many of those religious opinions infringe reason, violate the premises of thinking or even go against the very fundamental principles of creation (Ghazali 1999c, 13).

Ghazali's keen interest in the position of *fitrah* in the process of religiosity forced him to further seek all the possible existing similarities between Islam as a religion and the sound substance of *fitrah* in the actions of some Western elites, whom he considered to have essentially served religious belief and the divine oneness. On this note, Ghazali argues that some Western elites were able to attain truths that are only accessible through intellect and human intelligence and are ordinarily drawn from revelation. Despite this optimistic and positive approach towards Western thought and contributions, however, Ghazali notes a discrepancy between contemporary lifestyles and the ambition of goodness set by Western elites themselves, which is found in the discontinuity between religion and sound human knowledge and the dissociation of religion from knowledge and science (Ghazali 2001a, 189).

Nature and Functions of Muslim Belief

On the one hand, Ghazali seeks to establish theological education in Islam in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which would ward off all intellectual or cultural accruals attached to belief. On the other hand, he raises the question of the position of Muslim beliefs in view of sharpening human creativity and enhancing prosperity and also in relation to factors that could unleash human potential, talent and curiosity. Throughout his discussions of Muslim belief, Ghazali persistently draws on a number of theological issues, such as the position of revelation relative to humanity, innate human nature, human destiny and responsibility, intellectual and religious freedom, the implications of the unseen and the laws of the universe. Ghazali primarily seeks to restore the position of belief in human life. He argues that belief should exemplify the human lifestyle, convey the substance of the heart and express the profound interaction of humans with existence. Belief is simple, as there is no need to complicate the knowledge of God and is handy and accessible because it is the right of all to know God. Belief bears fruits in life proportionate to the level of human understanding (Ghazali 1999c, 63).

Deliberation concerning human nature and changes in social realities appears to be continually present in Ghazali's theological thesis. For example, Ghazali argues that the declaration of faith is a testimony and commitment to certain behaviours and transcends the field of the divine to the mundane world, thus shaping the soul and life together. For him, belief represents the source of the renewal and reformation of human life. Thus, theological creeds should not simply express ideas or opinions, judgments, philosophy or art, but rather provide a way for humanity to connect to God. In effect, this means that humans would acquire a new birth in their own selves, thoughts and behaviour when they act in accordance with their relationship with God (Ghazali 1999b, 75). Belief also

represents a culture and knowledge base that leads one to acquire a degree of certainty in conforming to one's reality (Ghazali 2003a, 37). Based on this concept of social theology, Ghazali viewed religiosity as a reflection of human ascension, the exercise of intellect and emotion, and knowledge, combined with manners and examination (Ghazali 2004a, 30). Muslim beliefs enfold a movement, a life decision and an acknowledgement of the unity of God. This implies that people of faith do their work, drive forward, show commitment to life and hold on to certain things while rejecting others. This is understood in light of the fact that the testimony of faith, while freeing humans, also empowers, motivates and further enhances their moral character (Ghazali 2003a, 50).

Using the same analogy, Ghazali argues that humans must cast off superstition in their search for perfection in their lives because knowledge is both real and absolute and stands on the foundations of science and proofs (Ghazali 2003a, 123). To substantiate his point, Ghazali draws on a number of Qur'anic references condemning the violation of or hostility to belief while establishing the character of servitude in humans and simultaneously precluding all routes to the glorification of creatures (Ghazali 1999c, 3). Moreover, human idolatry permits divergence from the path of the truth and enhances negative control over minds while impeding intellectual freedom (Ghazali 1999c, 3). It was this understanding that allowed Ghazali to contend confidently that he would prefer irreligiosity had religiosity been a sort of stupidity (Ghazali 2004a, 19).

Ghazali distinguishes between knowledge that yields positive action and behaviour that simply leads to the accumulation of mental data. According to Ghazali, genuine belief produces healthy individuals and guided nations. An example of the aforementioned may be seen in the human knowledge of qualities such as patience, piety or trust in God, although humans' use of those qualities may be contrary. For Ghazali, it is only when human emotions rise to the standards of those qualities and when their souls are affected and simultaneously shaped with their impact to the point that their entire being becomes dominated, that they can shift to a condition of working knowledge. Ghazali shares Ibn Khaldun's view on the concept of knowledge in his *Muqaddimah* or Introduction (to History). Earlier on, Ibn Khaldun distinguished between two types of knowledge, one relating to the knowledge of the letter (*rasm*) and the other concerned with the context, thus raising the issue of correspondence between knowledge and its recipient or more simply, knowledge and practice. For Ibn Khaldun, knowledge should be transformed from abstraction to reality or as he puts it,

...knowledge acquired through embodiment is a necessity and is more reliable than knowledge acquired earlier on. (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 27)

For Ibn Khaldun, actual knowledge (*ma'rifah haliyah*) can be obtained through the acquisition of formal knowledge (*ma'rifah suriyyah*) or abstract information and the occurrence of, as well as the repetition of, the action, until skills and talents (*malakah*) are acquired (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 3: 28).

Muslim Belief in the Framework of Revelation

According to Ghazali, the Qur'an stimulates the intellect and transforms human knowledge towards the glorification of God, awakens human consciousness, develops fear and prepares people for the day of reckoning (Ghazali 2000a, 16). To illustrate some of these concepts, Ghazali draws on the Qur'an's introduction of God, which calls for reflection on the signs of the universe (Ghazali 2005b, 109). This style, Ghazali argues, implies that in addition to their belief in revelation, people need to take life as a journey of inquiry and research into the signs of the universe, their own selves and their lives (Ghazali 2005b, 109). In essence, the Qur'an seeks to strengthen the human soul and unleash its potential, thus generating the spiritual energy necessary for human consciousness while reinforcing goodness by way of motivation and holding off instigations of evil via education and guidance (Ghazali 2005c, 154).

Ghazali perceives the Qur'an as a source of understanding and culture from which all concepts responding to the fundamental questions of life flow. In his work *Kayfa Nata'amal ma'a al-Qur'an?* (How to Approach the Qur'an?), Ghazali seeks to remedy the distorted connections affecting human thought, emotions and life, while setting them in the light and context of revelation. For Ghazali, Qur'anic discourse removes all barriers standing between humans and nature so as to sustain exploration of the patterns of cosmic malleability and the keys of discovery, as well as exploration of the universe. The latter leads to the discovery and knowledge of the Creator because all knowledge and exploration guides humans to the knowledge of God (Ghazali 1999a, 56). Following a deeper analysis, many verses in the Qur'an particularly address legal issues, while many others deal extensively with the realities of inner life, sincerity and piety.

There appears to be a substantial link between belief and the law of natural causality in the Qur'an. It was perhaps with this idea in mind that Ghazali rejected all interpretations of the Qur'an resulting from belief in luck or miracles, as promulgated in popular Muslim religious culture. Ghazali feels that humans will benefit from the Qur'an as long as they take it to action after becoming guided by its illuminating signs. This implies that the Qur'an does not profit those who neglect contemplation, the deceased who failed to advance any deeds in life or the reciters who enjoy the beautiful melody of the Qur'an while their insides are barren (Ghazali 2003b, 18). Ghazali further explains that the Qur'an pursues the

reconnection of humans with their Creator through raising levels of human curiosity about the creation of the heavens and earth, day and night, sun and moon, cloud and rain, death and life and the world of animals. The Qur'an also prompts believers to explore the highest states of life and the hereafter and to regard human deeds and actions as a form of worship, wealth as a foundation and protection for life and religion as a means for establishing civilization (Ghazali 2004a, 108).

In his work *al-Mahawir al-Khamsah li al-Qur'an al-Karim* (The Five Themes of the Qur'an), Ghazali draws significant attention to the physical sciences (Ghazali 2004a, 49), showing a great admiration for modern empirical knowledge (Ghazali 1999a, 50). One of his themes is entitled The Universe Proves (the Existence) of Its Creator (Ghazali 2004a, 49). In this theme, Ghazali maintains that sound belief is unattainable without analysing God's creation (Ghazali 2004a, 46–47) and that a sound intellect must read the divine signs in the universe in the same way it would read the Qur'an (Ghazali 2004a, 118). This conclusion is justified in light of the fact that belief entails respect for the laws of causality and the physical world (Ghazali 2005d, 4: 84). Ghazali's attempt to re-establish a viable theological connection between belief and the study of the universe as a way to enhance research and exploration led him to conclude that knowledge does not weaken faith and that belief does not occur in an impenetrable mind (Ghazali 1999c, 20). This indicates that there should not be any conflict between religious knowledge and science and that there cannot be any clash between revelation and God's creation. Hence, atheism does not speak for scientific scepticism; rather, it speaks of a psychological disease. Disbelief, on the other hand, implies an inefficient intellect, irregular thinking, defective *fitrah*, misled opinion and confusing measures (Ghazali 1999a, 45).

Ghazali argues that understanding the human relationship with the Qur'an is an essential requirement to ascending towards the highest levels of dignity. This, he reasons, is because the Qur'an continually seeks to acquaint humans with their Creator, as well as to provide them with a life system for the individual, family, society and government, and the preservation of the essence of both human beings and the nature of *fitrah* (Ghazali 2003b, 18). According to the Qur'an, belief is not simply an intellectually luxurious theoretical abstraction (Ghazali 2000a, 16), nor should it be accepted without certainty; rather, it should be attained through struggle (Ghazali 2005b, 25–27). For Ghazali, the Qur'an supplies a description of the Creator who urges humans to discover and examine the attributes of God that are spread in the universe and to build human behaviour on the foundations of belief (Ghazali n.d., 25). Thus, belief need not draw people to God by way of force; the story of human creation clearly shows that God wishes humans to be honoured and not abased, thereby granting them mastery over the whole universe. This means that belief should be connected to human

dignity and not to humiliation, fear or subjugation (Ghazali 2003a, 160). Humans enslaved by their lower desires are never free; those who are boastful or seek the satisfaction of others are not free either. The absolute freedom humans yearn for results only from absolute submission to God (Ghazali 2003a, 95).

Ghazali again draws attention to the Qur'an's four arguments for encouraging belief. The first is the argument of creativity (*dalil al-ibda'*), which raises questions related to creation, life, death, resurrection and sustenance (Ghazali 1999c, 14). This argument is intended to awaken intellectual capabilities for critical thinking and contemplation about human creation and existence so as to lead humans to come to terms with and realise the creative creation of the universe (Ghazali 1999c, 34). The second is the teleological argument (*dalil al-'inayah*), which draws human interest into a broader horizon, dealing with characteristics of the matter and laws of life, while pointing to the divine attention to creation, drawing people nearer to the essence of the divine (Ghazali 1999c, 14). The third is the argument of movement (*dalil al-harakah*), according to which humans' interest is drawn to the various movements around them, some of which are much larger than their own minute existences, including the orbits of planets and galaxies. The Qur'an appears to be more interested in the question of who monitors the movements in the universe, those of the planets, for example. This explains the Qur'anic discourse drawing on the cosmic laws that point to their Maker (Ghazali 1999c, 16). The fourth is the argument of the newness or temporality of the universe (*dalil al-huduth*), in which the Qur'an addresses humans in a way they can easily comprehend while drawing on the logic of science and experimentation to illustrate the Creator. This proof stimulates human reason and ideas, as well as the hearts and emotions they enfold, while touching on the physical bodies organs and systems in order to illustrate the interference of the divine in the innumerable complex creations throughout the system of the universe (Ghazali 1999c, 34).

In his efforts to understand the character of belief in the framework of revelation, Ghazali also draws on the position of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Prophethood (*nubuwwah*) for Ghazali is the highest form of human ascension in the ladder of humanity. This would explain why the lives of prophets are set as the prime examples for human change and perfection. It was the prophets who planted the idea of changing human thought and emotions, resulting in smooth interactions with revelation (Ghazali 1999c, 188). The office of prophethood is shown in that very position, concerning the process of change in individuals and societies, cleansing hearts of ills and vices, and enlightening minds (Ghazali 1999c, 188). The prophetic change, however, was neither an easy nor a cost-free miracle. Ghazali's point is that while Prophet Muhammad displayed the highest form of belief and piety and was associated with God, his association was not

achieved solely through prayers and rituals, but also through his association with his people (Ghazali 2005a, 136). The life of the Prophet Muhammad awakens and enriches the soul. Yet in view of the deteriorated concept of emulating the Prophet (*ittiba'*), many Muslim works on the Prophet's biography showcase a state of stagnancy. Muslims have excessively used specific practices of the Prophet Muhammad to cover up failings of far more critical responsibilities pertaining to social action and spiritual perfection (Ghazali 2003a, 10).

Instruction in Muslim Theology

Ghazali observes that Muslims' conceptions of the divine decree, destiny, freedom, life and universal patterns are defective (Ghazali 2005b, 67; 73) due to poor religious learning in the field of scholastic theology (*'ilm al-kalam*), transmitted from the early periods of stagnancy (Ghazali 2005b, 67; 73). Theological instruction was initially intended to meet the holistic needs of Muslims, effectively integrating belief, worship, morality, transactions and behaviour (Ghazali 2005b, 67; 73). 'Abdul Majid Najjar, a contemporary Muslim thinker, supports this viewpoint. He believes that the taxonomy of Islamic studies was not purely abstract, but was rather committed to the actualisation of religion in the fields of intellectual persuasion and implementation. The very division of knowledge into praiseworthy and blameworthy fields illustrates this fundamental idea in Islamic studies, namely, the service of religious truth (Najjar 1992, 70–73). Al-Najjar puts forth the notion that in their development and interaction, religious writings were subject to social reality and not to abstract reasoning and logical codification. In his opinion, the new scholastic taxonomy broadly embraced human knowledge while espousing a number of intellectual disciplines in consideration of a new intellectual context, thus allowing it to harmonise with other branches of knowledge, all of which, however, were set to reinforce the religious truth (Najjar 1992a, 80).

Ghazali's studies lead him to the conclusion that Muslim religious and educational institutions are poor and disorderly due to outdated reasoning. He feels that belief cannot be transmitted through imitation and blind following (*taqlid*) and that they cannot lack profound thinking (Ghazali 2005e, 94–95). Ghazali points out that Muslim worship has instead turned into symbolic metaphysical rituals held without consideration of God's signs in the universe. As an example, the worldly life is being approached with negligence because the hereafter is seen as deserving the most attention and preparation (Ghazali 2005e, 94–95). The appreciation of the laws of causality waned in Muslim life, which is the reason many Muslims still solicit help from graves (Ghazali 2005e, 94–95).

In Ghazali's opinion, it was from the fifth century onwards that Muslim theology, through its interaction with Greek philosophy, turned into abstract intellectual art

and became preoccupied with complex questions to the point that it completely lost touch with social reality. Muslim scholastic theology indulged in highly abstract debates over existence and non-existence, the cause and the caused, essence and accident, possibility and necessity, and eternity and newness. Additionally, it exhibited a damaging deviancy from the methodology of the Qur'an. Specifically, Aristotelian logic brought heavy abstraction to Muslim theology, causing it to become far more removed from the spirit of the Qur'an (Ghazali 2001b, 72). For Ghazali, Hellenistic thought caused Muslim theology to lose its focus (Ghazali 1991, 125), especially while espousing the Greek imagination and myths beginning with the age of translation, which brought it to a stage of deterioration and decline (Ghazali 2000a, 56). Muslim theology became preoccupied with questions of the unseen and the Greek style of discussing divinity, thus rendering belief as a symbol beyond the grasp of the intellect (Ghazali 1998, 92).

Muslims' interactions with Greek philosophy resulted in a number of detrimental events, bearing down upon the effectiveness of belief to the point that they became alien to the original nature of Muslim belief as well as to the Qur'an's methodology (Ghazali 2003a, 83). One of the many criticisms levelled at Muslim theology is its thrusting of Muslims into the field of the unseen and the imagination, thus giving focus to God's physical descriptions such as the face, hands, eyes or movement, which only lead to an increasing number of unanswered questions (Ghazali 1999c, 36). Such deviations also created a passive stance towards society and discouraged progress in the field of belief. Muslim theology was no longer capable of fitting within its original themes because it had lost its vital connection to *tawhid*, not to mention the deleterious effects of sectarian fanaticism and the negative political interference that occurred in later times (Ghazali 1999c, 6). One cannot forget the effects of political and sectarian clashes, through which it became extremely difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood, especially with the abuse or manipulation of terms using Aristotelian logic. Worst of all were the Muslim theologians' mutual accusations of blasphemy and aspersions of disbelief or evil-doing.

According to Ghazali, Muslim belief condemns all excessive human exaggerations and imagination in the realm of the unseen. To substantiate this view, Ghazali stresses the Qur'anic discourse concerning jinns. His analysis led him to deplore Muslims for turning the reality of the jinn into fictive accounts resulting in the spread of unnecessary fear. The merging of questions of the world of the seen with those of the world of the unseen germinated corrupt religiosity, paving the way for increasing superstition (Ghazali 2003a, 94). Those superstitions, however, weakened Muslim belief, morals and behaviour and blinded Muslim minds in affairs of religion, science and knowledge (Ghazali

2005a, 100). These remarks are easily understood in light of Ghazali's concept of belief as a concern with the future of humans and the stages following death. Belief is thus seen as an extension of life, while death is not an impediment to humanity (Ghazali 1999a, 59–61). Such a conception actually raises the position of human beings and it would require only that humans respond the fundamental questions of existence in order to achieve protection from superstition and myth (Ghazali 1999a, 59–61).

Ghazali asserts that the instructive material used for teaching Muslim theology resembles mathematical equations in the way they were set to train the mind away from emotion and feelings (Ghazali 1999c, 6), with their poor content and style failing to achieve the objective of belief. The field of Muslim theology is apparently saturated with philosophical terms and styles (Ghazali 1999c, 10). This, Ghazali argues, was the reason that many Muslims became adherents of Sufism, so as to cultivate emotions of divine love and to fill in the resulting lacunae theology has caused (Ghazali 1999c, 6). The inclination to Sufism, however, also generated disorders of blind love, unity of existence and emotional illusions (Ghazali 2004a, 28). In Ghazali's opinion, the blame lay first at the door of Qur'anic pedagogy and the production of audio tapes that lacked the capability to comprehend the Qur'an or understand its highest objectives. This poor theological instruction was the major problem afflicting the development of Islamic personality (Ghazali 2005b, 55).

The concept of divinity shown in the Qur'an, however, inclines neither to abstraction nor to objectification (*tajsid*) of the divine essence, as seen in the following verse, "There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him and He is the One that hears and sees (all things)" (Qur'an 42:11) (Ghazali 1999c, 46). Ghazali's argument is that the extensive theological debate concerning God's physical attributes has negatively affected Muslim culture. Ghazali questions the basis for interpreting the divine bounties and blessings as purely spiritual where there is no supporting text or evidence for such an endeavour. He argues that numerous explicit Qur'anic verses cannot be metaphorically interpreted, as that would affect their educational implications, as exhibited in the following verse, "Say: Lo! If I should disobey my Lord, I fear the doom of a tremendous Day" (Qur'an 39:13) (Ghazali 2004a, 57). Other problems concern the ambiguous ideas surrounding God. God is neither in heaven nor on earth and possesses neither hands, nor eyes, nor face (Ghazali 1999c, 39). For Ghazali, this goes against the very method of the Qur'an, according to which God should have a space in the human mind in order that He may become known and familiar (Ghazali 1999c, 41). The debate over the question of predestination and human free will also emerged as a result of the understanding that God wrote and decreed all things, which humans must forcibly execute. This caused Muslims to carry out their duties and

responsibilities with reluctance as people being forced, with no power, freedom or will to change (Ghazali 1999c, 103–104; 2001b, 68).

According to Ghazali, in the present day, Muslims display deficiency, mediocrity and chaos despite Islam's clear emphasis on perfection, distinction, diligence and dedication, which culminates in the ideal atmosphere sought by the Qur'an in order to ensure proper human development (Ghazali 1997, 49). Most atrociously, in Ghazali's opinion, is that the religion of Islam is being exposed and presented from behind a veil of false customs and contaminated cultures interspersed with polytheistic and materialistic inclinations (Ghazali 1997, 32). Ghazali's examination of the prevailing cultures in Muslim societies led him to the conclusion that most ideas and thoughts underlying social practices possessed no sound basis and instead, were only a cause for the formation of imaginary shackles, thereby hampering the development of human potential and even confusing Muslims' directions.

In his attempt to supply a fresh definition of Muslim belief, Ghazali was fully aware of the need to explore the sciences (Ghazali 2004a, 110), as Islam longs for an atmosphere of understanding and trust while discarding all forms and avenues of intellectual coercion so as to ground belief in freedom rather than the suppression of reason. According to Ghazali, Islam's rejection of compulsion is the only legitimate reason leading to human persuasion (Ghazali 1999b, 66–67). In areas of conflict, however, people should resort to the Qur'anic principle stating, "Unto you your religion and unto me my religion" (Qur'an 109:6). In Ghazali's perspective, the logic of science is the only cure for many of the negative complexities of those cultural misconceptions (Ghazali 1999a, 33). This requires the review of legal rulings, customs and traditions in the light of revelation (Ghazali 2001a, 60). Muslim culture requires a comprehensive review considering the fundamental sources of revelation and critical scrutiny, both theoretical and practical, of the ways in which Muslim societies have progressed. The return of Muslims to belief through the Qur'an, however, requires purification of Muslim theology from foreign infiltrations and an exposition of the relationship of the divine to the human environment in an attempt to forge an effective interaction and presence. Ghazali states "We hope that opinions, suggestions and schools of thought are treated with utmost sincerity, intelligence and freedom provided to human beings. Current superstitions are numerous. Would the scientific, social and religious assumptions fall from human heads as the tree leaves would fall during the fall, many minds would be simply barren" (Ghazali 1999a, 34).

In his work entitled *'Aqidat al-Muslim* (Beliefs of the Muslim), Ghazali sought to introduce a simple yet clear way for nurturing Muslim beliefs. He drew primarily

on revelation in a way that meets the social and emotional needs of Muslims; he also drew on the consideration of scientific logic and socio-historical patterns while attempting to open up human insight to universal patterns and reconnect humans with their Creator. Ghazali relied heavily on the texts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah as opposed to the poorer forms of Muslim theology (Ghazali 1999c, 5). In his introduction to belief, Ghazali examined emotions and reason together, giving each due attention while providing similar attention to moral values as practical translations of belief. All of these were set to counter social and moral ills with the hopes of developing a stable foundation for a healthy life while identifying and scrutinising any Muslim customs that had violated belief (Ghazali 2000b, 204). Ghazali proposes that belief cannot be held without due consideration of the social and psychological challenges facing humans, nor without the proper moral upbringing or the supply of necessary human knowledge (Ghazali 2003a, 20). This, according to Ghazali, provides the fertile platform required for the growth of belief, as belief cannot be cultivated in environments of ignorance or superstition or in atmospheres where learning is dual or dichotomous, i.e., religious or sacred versus secular or scientific (Ghazali 1999b, 26).

Conclusion

From Ghazali's perspective, it was the impactful interaction between belief, thought and life that effectively sparked Muslims' intellectual and scientific creativity while maintaining their spiritual motivation and sustaining their driven commitment to religiosity and morality without imperilling the rational needs of life. A review of Muslims' socio-cultural, political and economic conditions, however, led Ghazali to question a number of interrelated issues associated with Muslims' life and learning, their theory and practices, theology and society, and more importantly, their understanding of the role of Muslim belief in change and reform. His critique also led him to further question the methodology through which they would cultivate faith and piety, instruct and share belief or even approach and understand the Qur'an. Ghazali's inquiry led him to the conclusion that the system of belief that later came to be known as scholastic Muslim theology no longer played an effective role in bringing change to human life, for humans could no longer produce the understanding or motivation necessary for reform. The assumption therefore is that the interpretation and instruction of Muslim theology has gone awry. In this view, the solution lies in establishing both the review and reform of Muslims' understanding of theology within the original framework of revelation and in light of the early original experience of Muslims.

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