the Alchemy of Happiness

Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazzālī

Translated by Claud Field
Revised and Annotated by Elton L. Daniel

the Alchemy of Happiness

Abû Ḥâmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzâlî
Translated by Claud Field
Revised and Annotated by Elton L. Daniel

Printed in the United States of America

⊗

MV   10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Foreword

This volume introduces a series called *Sources and Studies in World History*. The series attempts to satisfy a variety of needs in the emerging field of world history. It will publish titles in global, comparative, and regional history as well as works of methodological or pedagogical value to teachers and scholars of world history. The series will include primary sources as well as secondary interpretations, anthologies as well as complete works, and the results of new research as well as classic studies in the field. Its intended audience embraces all who desire to make sense of human history, from the college classroom to the world stage.

The Alchemy of Happiness answers a need for important primary sources in the study of world history. While the canon of sources for Western history receives daily attention, historians have only recently begun to identify, translate, edit, and make available the significant works of non-Western cultures. Perhaps nowhere is the paucity of accessible sources more of a problem than in the study of Islam. Long simmering animosities, profound cultural differences, and problems of translation have left much of Islamic literature, philosophy, and culture unknown to the American public and unavailable to students.

Elton Daniel shows us here what we have missed. In revising and annotating the Claud Field translation of *The Alchemy*, Daniel presents al-Ghazzâlî with a clarity and directness that almost makes us forget that the text was written nearly one thousand years ago. We hear the great Muslim philosopher as he must have been heard by his students in Baghdad in 1092; we read him at the height of his persuasive powers, as he was read by untold followers in numerous languages. And yet, we also are able to

Preface

In studying the history of world civilizations, few if any concepts are more difficult for people of modern times to comprehend than the intense religiosity which characterized so many civilizations—medieval European, Byzantine, Islamic, Indian, East Asian—during the period from the fall of the classical empires to the beginning of the European expansion. Whether because of the pervasive secularity of modern civilization, or the blatant materialism of contemporary life, or simply because of the rigid compartmentalization of religious life (such as it is) well away from social and political existence, it is not easy to appreciate the spiritual sentiments that once impelled so many people to fight each other in the name of religion, to flock to monasteries or ascetic retreats, to pour their creative and artistic energies into religious works, or to govern every aspect of their lives with a piety founded on transcendent scriptural ideals.

One work which surely captures and vividly expresses the essence of the pre-modern religious spirit is *The Alchemy of Happiness*, written by perhaps the greatest and certainly one of the most original of Muslim thinkers, Abû Ḥâmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzâlî. In composing *The Alchemy of Happiness*, Ghazzâlî not only outlined a comprehensive world-view based on the religion of Islam, he also specifically attempted to demonstrate how all human behavior should be guided by a religious faith as intense and unshakably certain as it was all encompassing. It is precisely these two concepts—the extension of religious piety into all phases of life and the constant link between faith and action—which tend to be the most alien to contemporary, and

theologian and scholar of the Shâfiᶜî school of Islamic law, the Imâm al-Ḥaramayn Abu'l-Maᶜâlî ᶜAbd al-Malik al-Juvaynî, at the madrasa in Nishapur from 470/1077-78 down to the death of Juvaynî in 478/1085. In addition to continuing his interest in Sufism, Ghazzâlî also began to develop ideas not typical of the conventional legal scholar of his day, in particular his belief that such scholars should master a variety of academic fields of study, not just those necessary for law itself, and that guidance in problems of religious law should be based on something more than simply following the opinions of previous jurisconsults, a practice known as *taqlîd* or "imitation."

After Juvaynî's death, Ghazzâlî was sufficiently prominent to attract the attention of the powerful statesman Niẓâm al-Mulk and through his patronage to be admitted to the court of Malik Shâh, the Seljuk Turkish sultan who was the real political master of most of the eastern half of the Muslim world. This led, in 484/1091, to his appointment as a professor at the greatest institution of Sunni Muslim learning of the age, the Niẓâmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad. In this capacity, it was inevitable that Ghazzâlî would be caught up in the political affairs of the capital, and this may have led him into trouble after the assassination of his mentor Niẓâm al-Mulk in 485/1092 and the subsequent death of Malik Shâh. In the succession struggle between Barkyârûq and his uncle Tutush, Ghazzâlî probably favored Tutush. When Barkyârûq came to power in 488/1095 and put Tutush to death, Ghazzâlî's position would have thus become precarious.

In any event, it was in that very year that Ghazzâlî experienced what he describes in his famous autobiography, *The Deliverance from Error*, as his great spiritual crisis. Struck dumb while lecturing to his students, Ghazzâlî fell ill and gradually came to realize that his affliction was spiritual in nature: He had devoted himself to religious studies in hope of

All of Ghazzâlî's writings are of great merit and interest, but there are three particularly important works on which his reputation primarily rests. First of all, there is his quasi-autobiographical treatise, *The Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-ḍalâl)*,[4] a work often compared to St. Augustine's *Confessions* but quite unique in Islamic literature. In it, Ghazzâlî not only recounts the spiritual crisis he experienced in Baghdad (discussed above) but goes on to describe his subsequent search for a truth that would transcend all question and doubt. In doing so, he provides concise and remarkably clear descriptions of the major religio-intellectual trends of his day and his critiques or appreciations of each. As an introduction to the main features of Ghazzâlî's thought, it remains unexcelled. The basic concepts outlined in *The Deliverance from Error* are developed fully in two other texts. *The Incoherence of Philosophy (Tahâfut al-falâsifa)*, written while Ghazzâlî was teaching in Baghdad, is a thorough and rather merciless criticism from a Muslim perspective of the aims, methods, and conclusions of Hellenistic-style philosophy.[5] *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyâ' ʿulûm al-din)*, undoubtedly Ghazzâlî's greatest work, is well described as "a complete guide for the devout Muslim to every aspect of the religious life."[6] It offers a Muslim theory of knowledge,

---

[4] Available in a good English translation by W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazâlî* (London, 1953); it is also found in McCarthy's *Freedom and Fulfillment*.

[5] The *Tahâfut al-falâsifa* (edited by M. Bouyges; Beirut, 1927). There is an English translation by S. A. Kamali, *Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-falasifa: Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Lahore, 1963.

[6] W. Montgomery Watt, "al-Ghazâlî," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition; Leiden, in progress), 2:1040. The *Iḥyâ'* has been published many times, but it is an immense work and there is no satisfactory complete translation of it into English. Many of its individual sections, however, have been translated; see the bibliography at the end of this work.

Muslim critique of the belief in the divinity of Christ.[7] For the most part, Ghazzâlî seems to have been genuinely interested in and favorably impressed by what he knew of Christianity, especially its ethical thought. In *The Alchemy of Happiness* and other writings, he frequently cites material about Jesus found in Christian texts to support his arguments and even quotes from the gospels. In short, Ghazzâlî's writing is remarkably free of the jaundiced communalism which the Crusades helped introduce into Muslim-Christian relations.

For Ghazzâlî and his contemporaries a far more spectacular and urgent political issue than the Crusades was the bitter sectarian struggle within the Muslim world between the Sunni Abbasid caliphate, with its capital in Iraq, and the rival Fatimid Shi'ite rulers based in Egypt. Ever since the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, there had been a general consensus among Muslims that there should continue to be one charismatic leader of the entire Muslim community, variously known as the caliph or "successor" of the Prophet (*khalîfat rasûl allâh*), the "deputy of God" (*khalîfat allâh*) the "commander of the faithful" (*amîr al-mu'minîn*), or the "authoritative leader" (*imâm*). However, there had been profound and sometimes violent conflicts over who was entitled to hold this office and what its actual powers should be. After a period of rule by four close associates of Muḥammad (three of whom were assassinated), the office was held by various members of a clan known as the Umayyads (41-132/661-750). Although in many ways quite successful, these rulers were widely regarded by Muslims as little more than secular kings, or even as illegitimate usurpers, since they had seized the caliphate by force and in earlier times their clan

---

[7] The *Radd al-jamîl ʿalâ sarîh al-injîl*, edited and translated by R. Chidiac, *Réfutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus Christ d'après les Evangiles* (Paris, 1939).

made the more specifically Shi'ite argument that their right to rule was based on direct descent from Muḥammad through his daughter Fâṭima, who had married Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, ʿAlî. As such they claimed to be Shi'ite imâms, the only legitimate rulers in the Islamic world as well as infallible authorities on all religious and secular matters. Under circumstances which are still historically obscure, this straightforward doctrine of political legitimism was combined with a subtle and highly esoteric religious ideology to produce a revolutionary movement which, drawing on the strength of Berber tribal recruits, seized power in North Africa and installed one ʿUbaydallah al-Mahdî as the first Fatimid caliph (proclaimed publicly in 297/910). In both religious and political terms, the absolutism of the Fatimid caliphs was far more complete and their ideology far more coherent than that of their Abbasid counterparts. After conquering Egypt in 358/969, they established various centers of learning, including the Aẓhar "university," to propagate their brand of Shi'ism and to train missionaries to preach on their behalf throughout the Muslim world. In the very year Ghazzâlî began teaching in Baghdad, one of the most famous of the pro-Fatimid activists, Ḥassân-e Ṣabbâḥ, seized the fortress of Alamût in northwestern Iran and attempted to advance the Fatimid cause through political assassinations of its chief opponents. His fanatical followers, popularly known as the Assassins, were thought to be responsible for the murder of the minister Niẓâm al-Mulk and other prominent pro-Abbasid leaders. The Abbasid-Fatimid conflict thus involved many issues— theological, legal, political, economic, social, cultural, and geographic—and amounted to an all out contest for domination over the heartlands of the Muslim world.

Since the Abbasids had long since lost any real political power, the task of defending them and the cause of Sunni

lands is carried out by sultans, who owe allegiance to the caliphs... Government in these days is a consequence solely of military power, and whosoever he may be to whom the holder of military power gives his allegiance, that person is the caliph."[8] His arguments had the important effect of giving theoretical legitimacy and ideological support to what was the *de facto* political situation in the Sunni world.[9]

The Religious and Intellectual Milieu

Behind the political and military duel of the Fatimids and Seljuks, there also lay a profound religious and intellectual ferment. Even at the time Ghazzâlî was born, more than four centuries after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, Islam itself was in many ways still in the process of being elaborated as a coherent religious system. Broadly speaking, five general trends had established themselves in this regard, and the proponents of each were competing vigorously for the allegiance of Muslim rulers and/or the Muslim masses. These five trends or tendencies may, for convenience, be labelled

---

[8] In the *Revivification*, 2:124; cited by H. A. R. Gibb, "The Sunni Theory of the Caliphate," *Archives d'Histoire du Droit Oriental* 3(1939):402.

[9] Ghazzâlî's political ideas were developed in the *Mustazhirî* (an early defense of the Abbasid caliphate dedicated to the reigning caliph al-Mustazhir) and the *Golden Mean in Belief* (al-Iqtiṣâd fi'l-iʿtiqâd; edited Ankara, 1962). His most detailed discourse on the nature of kingship was in a Persian work of the *fürstenspiegel* genre dedicated to a Seljuk prince, the *Nasîhat al-mulûk*; translated by F. R. C. Bagley, *Ghazâlî's Book of Counsel for Kings* (Oxford, 1964). The same work exists in an Arabic version, the *The Smelted Ore* (al-Tibr al-masbûk). Another political treatise, *The Mystery of the Two Worlds* (Sirr al-ʿâlamayn wa kashf mâ fi'l-dârayn) has probably been attributed in error to Ghazzâlî. For an excellent survey of his political thought, see Ann Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 107-29; also Henri Laoust, *La Politique de Gazâli* (Paris, 1970).

Throughout his work, it is obvious that few things disturbed him more than any antinomian tendency which would lead to disregard of the sharî'a. Although the *'ulamâ'*, the group of religious scholars responsible for expressing, guarding, and implementing the sharî'a, enjoyed considerable popular support and moral authority (at least in the major urban areas of the Muslim world),[11] Ghazzâlî was well aware of their potential vulnerabilities. He saw, for example, that there was sometimes a hypocritical disparity between the worldly life style of some of the scholars of the religious law and the demands of the code of pious conduct they taught; indeed, he had noted and worried about this tendency in his own life. Moreover, if the law was regarded simply as a set of intricate rules and regulations accepted on the basis of scholarly authority, without a firm foundation of faith and spirituality, it might appear terribly cold, austere, and empty to many ordinary Muslims. Ghazzâlî thus had no quarrel with the importance of the holy law in Islam; he simply recognized that taken alone it could easily seem spiritually incomplete and intellectually unconvincing.

One way in which some Muslims sought to fill precisely this kind of void was through metaphysical philosophy. Works of

---

[11] The 'ulamâ' were uniquely positioned to influence the Muslim populace. As legal authorities, they were involved in numerous matters pertaining to daily life (business transactions, marriage contracts, etc.). They dominated private education and religious instruction, both in the home and in the mosque. The Koran and the traditions were also easily accessible to the masses, even those who were illiterate, since the Koran was frequently memorized and recited and oral transmission of traditions was a common activity. This facilitated popular appreciation of the 'ulamâ's command of these fields of knowledge, and we hear of huge crowds coming to hear famous scholars teach about the Koran and the ḥadîth. These points are brought out fairly well in Munir-ud-Din Ahmad, *Muslim Education and the Scholars' Social Status up to the 5th Century Muslim Era* (Zurich, 1968).

denial of the resurrection of the body in direct contradiction to Koranic doctrine. It is not necessary here to describe the many complicated Ghazzâlî arguments developed to rebut these notions. As a practical matter, it was sufficient for him to bring to public attention the fundamental conflict of the teachings of the philosophers with Koranic doctrines. The cause of the philosophers against Ghazzâlî was not helped by their frequent arrogance, elitism, and antinomianism, as when Ibn Sînâ taught that the soul of the philosopher was superior to the soul of an ordinary person or that the philosopher, being superior to the prophet by virtue of greater understanding, was freed from the bonds of the holy law that applied to common people.[14] However convincing or unconvincing Ghazzâlî's critique may have been to later philosophers,[15] there is no doubt that in the court of Muslim popular opinion it prevailed, forever altering the intellectual climate of the Islamic world.

The trend represented by the study of rational theology (*kalâm*) was similar to that of philosophy except that it wanted to use reason in defense of a religious framework, not as an end in itself. In the early centuries of Islam, a purely rationalist theology known as Muʿtazilism had been a powerful movement, at times backed by the Abbasid government. Muʿtazilî theologians had emphasized the importance of correct belief and utilized the concepts and methodology of philosophy to concentrate on the formulation of doctrine. In this they emphasized that in discussing the attributes of God

---

[14] Ibn Sînâ and Fârâbî are singled out for criticism of this sort in the *Deliverance*; see Watt, *Faith and Practice*, pp. 72-73. An English translation of some of the passages that Ghazzâlî would probably have regarded as offensive may be found in A. J. Arberry, *Avicenna on Theology* (London, 1951), especially pp. 9-24, 64-76.

[15] The best known attempt by a Muslim philosopher to rebut Ghazzâlî was by Ibn Rushd (Averroes); see Simon van den Bergh, *Averroes' Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)* (London, 1969).

theologians were still overly influenced by the methods of non-Islamic philosophy, were dangerously close to allowing reason to supplant reliance on revelation and prophetic tradition, and were all too eager to co-operate with the authorities of the state in enforcing doctrinal conformity.

Ghazzâlî certainly became aware of the limitations of theology and began to distance himself from it. In *The Deliverance from Error*, he noted that theology, like logic in philosophy, was a useful tool, but neither an end in itself nor a path to certain knowledge. Above all, it was no more appropriate to base matters of faith on the blind acceptance of authoritative theologians than it was to limit knowledge of the holy law to mere imitation of the legal experts: "Whoever claims that theology, abstract proofs, and systematic classification are the foundation of belief is an innovator. Rather is belief a light which God bestows on the hearts of His creatures as the gift and bounty from Him, sometimes through an explainable conviction from within, sometimes because of a dream in sleep, sometimes by seeing the state of bliss of a pious man and the transmission of his light through association and conversation with him, sometimes through one's own state of bliss."[17] He was also appalled by the intolerance and exclusivity of some theologians as seen in their readiness to demean the simple faith of others: "Among the most extreme and extravagant of men are a group of scholastic theologians who dismiss the Muslim common people as unbelievers and claim that whoever does not know scholastic theology in the form they recognize and does not know the prescriptions of the Holy Law according to the proofs which they have adduced is

---

[17]   In *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam and Unbelief* (*al-Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayn al-islâm wa'l-zandaqa*; ed. Cairo, 1381/1961), p. 202; translated by Bernard Lewis, *Islam* (New York, 1974), 2:20-21.

far more important than its literal and outward aspects (the *ẓâhir*), (2) that the ordinary believer had to be gradually initiated into an understanding of the bâṭin, (3) that for this he absolutely required authoritative guidance from an infallible imâm who was divinely entrusted with knowledge of the deepest secrets of the faith, (4) that these imâms had appeared in cycles of seven going back to Adam, each seventh imâm bringing a new revelation to supplant that of his predecessors, and that this would continue until a future imâm, the Qâ'im, propagated a final and perfect revelation of the bâṭin; (5) that in its current phase the imâmate belonged to the lineage of the seventh Shi'ite imâm, Ismâ'îl b. Ja'far al-Ṣâdiq, reputed ancestor of the Fatimid caliphs, and (6) that the authority of certain imâms thus extended even to the point of abrogating Koranic revelation and prophetic tradition, rendering the holy law and obedience to it redundant.

If Ghazzâlî was ever vehement about anything, it was in his rejection of this system of thought, which he felt was as dangerous as it was unconvincing. He derisively referred to its adherents as *bâṭinîs* (owing to their fascination with religious obscurities) and *ta'lîmîs* (misguided and gullible people who allowed reliance on a supposedly infallible imâm to substitute for real spiritual understanding). As he noted in the *Deliverance*, insofar as anyone needed an infallible instructor, that need had already been fulfilled by the Prophet Muḥammad. Beyond that, the bâṭinîs themselves could not always agree on who such an infallible teacher might be or claimed that he was "hidden." Finally, most of what these supposedly infallible teachers produced seemed to Ghazzâlî little more than half-baked Pythagoreanism which he regarded as "the dregs of philosophy."[22]

---

[22] See Watt, *Faith and Practice*, pp. 43-54 for the appropriate passages from the *Deliverance*. Ghazzâlî provided more sustained critiques of this type of

of fear. They also clearly believed that each individual was capable of some direct experience of God (or even union with Him), independent of any transmitted revelation, authoritative teaching, or intellectual exercise. People who attained this goal were regarded as "friends of God" and often idolized as saints and miracle-workers by the masses. Many began to act as spiritual guides (*murshids* or *pîrs*) to assist others in the mystic journey towards God. They often espoused unconventional methods for achieving this intensely personal, passionate, and ecstatic condition and described the mystical experience with poetical metaphors praising intoxication and eroticism. Some of their ceremonies and practices, such as various forms of *dhikr* (group meetings for songs, dances, or chants, often including both men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims together) or the visitation of the tombs of saints, were at variance with the established rituals and practices of formal Islam. Occasionally, mystics claimed to have reached an actual union with God and in their exuberance made no secret of their disregard for conventional religious practice and law. One of the most famous and popular of the mystics, al-Ḥallâj, was executed in 309/922 on just such charges of blasphemy.[24]

The circumstances surrounding the martyrdom of al-Ḥallâj showed that Sufism was immensely appealing as a popular form of religion, but that it could also arouse the animosity of theologians, bâṭinî ideologues, and some members of the traditionist/legal establishment. The Shi'ites were particularly hostile to the Sufis because the substitution of personal experience and a host of "friends of God" for the charisma of a

---

[24] Al-Ḥallâj is the subject of one of the greatest works of Islamic scholarship, Louis Massignon's *La Passion de Ḥusayn Ibn Manṣûr Ḥallâj* (second edition; Paris, 1975); now available in an English translation by Herbert Mason, *The Passion of al-Hallâj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton, 1982).

were not just "men of words" but rather of purity and action whose every step was guided by "the lamp of prophetic revelation." The true mystic might attain to an indescribable absorption in God (*fanâ'*), but not to a pantheistic union or connection with him. Above all, the true mystic would realize that any sin was a "deadly poison": No real mystic would think his knowledge of mysticism elevated him above the duties of worship or the requirements of the law.[27] Ghazzâlî consistently strived for a Sufism based on sober piety and masterfully buttressed the outward teachings of the law with the deep inner spirituality of the mystic. This insistence on the natural harmony of Sufism and the law pervades all of Ghazzâlî's finest writings and marks his greatest contribution to Islamic thought.

Ghazzâlî's Influence and Significance

In the history of Islamic civilization, Ghazzâlî can best be understood as a great reconciler of the diverse trends of thought just discussed. Although in a sense he attacked and discredited the philosophers and the bâtinî Shi'ites, and diluted the importance of the theologians, he also incorporated some of their best ideas into his own work. He certainly did not shy away from use of logic and rational argument in defense of religion, from looking for the deep inner meanings in religious texts and practices, or even from employing metaphorical

---

[27] Ghazzâlî's most direct criticism of radically antinomian tendencies of this type was in a work on people he called "Latitudinarians" (*ibâḥiyya*); the tract has been translated by Otto Pretzl, *Die Streitschrift des Gazâlî gegen die Ibâhîja*, Munich, 1933. His comments on the ecstatic state found in the *Alchemy* (below, Chapter Six) show that he had a broad tolerance for the eccentricities of the Sufis, but not to the point of disregard for the explicit requirements of the law.

barren land of the fruitful rain... If there had been a prophet after Muḥammad, it surely would have been al-Ghazzâlî."[29]

Ghazzâlî's influence also extended well beyond the Arabo-Persian Islamic world. Parts of his work have since been translated into Turkish, Urdu, Pushto, Bengali, Malay, Hebrew, Latin, English, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Russian, thus reaching a vastly larger Muslim and non-Muslim audience. Not only can his influence be traced in the thought of numerous Muslim mystics and pietists, it can be found in the works of Jewish philosophers and mystics such as Maimonedes, Alemanus, or Ibn Habib; among Eastern Christians like the Jacobite Bar Hebraeus; and in the writings of Europeans as diverse as Aquinas, Dante, and Pascal.[30]

The Alchemy of Happiness

There has been much confusion about the text in Persian by Ghazzâlî known as *The Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kîmîâ-yi saʿâdat*) and its relation to his magnum opus, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyâʾ ʿulûm al-din*).[31] The confusion has not been helped by the fact that there is a treatise in Arabic with the same title.[32] The *Revivification*, written in

---

[29] In Subkî's *Ṭabaqât al-Shâfiʿiyya al-kubrâ* 4:101-2; cited in Smith, *Ghazâlî*, p. 215.

[30] On Ghazzâlî's influence outside the Muslim world, especially through his concepts of Muḥammad's ascension to the seven heavens and the beatific vision, see Smith, *Ghazâlî*, pp. 198-226; also the more technical articles by S. de Beaurecueil, "Gazzâlî et S. Thomas d'Aquin," *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 46(1947):199-238; M. Alonso, "Influencia de Algazel en el mundo latino," *Al-Andalus* 23(1958):371-80.

[31] See Bouyges, *Essai de Chronologie*, pp. 59-60 for discussion of the various views.

[32] See Bouyges, *Essai de Chronologie*, pp. 136-137. The Arabic treatise has been edited by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAlîm (Cairo, n. d.); it is actually an Arabic translation of part of the opening of the *Alchemy*.