

Sources
and
Studies
in World
History

the Alchemy of Happiness



Abû Hâmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzâlî

Translated by Claud Field

Revised and Annotated by Elton L. Daniel

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**To My Parents
and the Memory of My Grandparents**

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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

recognize the gulf that separates the sensibilities of the devout Sufi-influenced theologian from the secular scholarship of modern culture. As Daniel reminds us at the beginning of his preface, a reading of al-Ghazzâlî not only introduces us to the rich spiritual world of Islam, it also serves as one of many possible introductions to the world of intense religious feeling that we have lost.

Kevin Reilly

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 Hâmid 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

particularly Western, culture. Thus, Ghazzâlî's treatise is of exceptional value to those seeking insights into this ancient and very different understanding of the world.

The Life and Works of Ghazzâlî

Abû Hâmid Muḥammad, son of Muḥammad, al-Ghazzâlî was born to a family of spinners and sellers of wool in a small village in the environs of the city of Ṭûs in eastern Iran in the year 450 after the hijra (1058 A.D.).¹ Ghazzâlî, or alternatively Ghazâlî, the descriptive name (called in Arabic the *nisba*) by which he is generally known, may be explained as either a reference to his occupation in the wool trade (*ghazzâla*) or to the name of his home village (Ghazâl). His father having vowed that his son should be dedicated to the service of Islam, Ghazzâlî received the education appropriate to becoming a Muslim scholar, first at a mosque school to learn the rudimentary skills and then at an institution known as a *madrasa*, which was emerging as the main center for advanced formal instruction in the theory and practice of Islamic law. On his own, Ghazzâlî also developed an early interest in Sufism, the Islamic form of individual and organized religious mysticism, and received private instruction in the ways of its practitioners, the Sufis. It was, however, his command of Muslim jurisprudence which first brought him fame; after studying in madrasas in his native Ṭûs and the city of Jurjân (modern Gorgân), he became a protégé of the famous

¹ Modern biographical studies of Ghazzâlî include Duncan Macdonald, "The Life of al-Ghazzâlî," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20(1899):71-132; W. Gardener, *An Account of al-Ghazâlî's Life and Works* (Madras, 1919); S. M. Zwemer, *A Moslem Seeker after God* (London, 1920); Dwight Donaldson, "Mohammed al-Ghazzali," *Muslim World* 11(1921):377-88; Margaret Smith, *Al-Ghazâlî the Mystic* (London, 1944); and W. M. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual* (Edinburgh, 1963).

theologian and scholar of the Shâfi'î school of Islamic law, the Imâm al-Haramayn Abu'l-Ma'âlî 'Abd 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 jurists, a practice known as *taqlîd* or "imitation."

After Juvaynî's death, Ghazzâlî was sufficiently prominent to attract the attention of the powerful statesman Nizâm 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 Nizâmiyya 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 Nizâm 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

worldly fame and success rather than out of pure love of God. Consequently he gave up his position at the Nizâmiyya and moved from Baghdad to Damascus (where, probably not coincidentally, Tutush's supporters were strong). From 488/1095 to 499/1105 Ghazzâlî lived in private retreat, often working at menial jobs, writing, and spending time in contemplation and learning from various Sufis still more about a life of asceticism and mysticism. In addition to his stay in Damascus, he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca and visited Jerusalem, Hebron, the Hijaz, and Egypt.

Around 499/1105, shortly after the death of Barkyârûq, Ghazzâlî returned to public life, accepting a post at the Nizâmiyya Madrasa in Nishapur, where he had previously studied with Juvaynî. He later took charge of a madrasa and a Sufi retreat (*khânqâh*) near his native city of Tûs. It was there that he died in the year 505/1111.

Ghazzâlî is reputed to have written an enormous number of books.² Some of the works ascribed to him were merely brief epistles; others were duplicates of works known under variant titles; still others were incorrectly attributed to Ghazzâlî or were outright forgeries. Nonetheless, the corpus of his authentic works, many of which are still extant, included about seventy books dealing with such subjects as Islamic law and legal theory (*fiqh*), the theoretical and the practical aspects of Sufism, critiques of philosophy and theology, polemical tracts, and discussions of ethics and politics.³

² The corpus of writings attributed to Ghazzâlî has been surveyed and arranged in the probable sequence of composition by Maurice Bouyges (edited and revised after his death by M. Allard), *Essai de chronologie des oeuvres de al-Ghazali* (Beirut, 1959). See also G. Hourani, "The Chronology of Ghazâlî's Writings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 79(1959):225-33.

³ An excellent representative sampling of Ghazzâlî's various writings in English translation may be found in R. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Boston, 1980).

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* (*Ihyâ' 'ulûm al-dîn*), 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 *Ihyâ'* 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.