

DEEN (FAITH) AND DONYA (THE SECULAR): AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S THE ALCHEMY OF HAPPINESS

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Abstract

The 11th -12th century Abbasid philosopher al-Ghazālī is the center of controversy today in Western societies seeking to understand Islamic radicalism. The article initially examines the al-Ghazālī debate, split between popular images of al-Ghazālī as a fanatical enemy of rational thought, and scholarly depictions of a forerunner of postmodernism. After analyzing a principle example of the latter tendency, centered on the Persian term *dihlīz*, the article undertakes a sociological investigation of al-Ghazālī's *Alchemy of Happiness* within the historic context of the Abbasid crisis of political legitimacy. The troubled historic vista of Abbasid politics, the unique role of al-Ghazālī as representative of ideological power, and the crucial influence of the intercontinental Sufi revolution, are discussed. The analysis focuses on al-Ghazālī's central concepts of *deen* (faith) and *donya* (the secular), that he employed to stabilize and guarantee the continued political success of the multi-civilizational Abbasid state. Spurning the dogma of unified identity, al-Ghazālī recognized the civilizational pluralism underpinning Abbasid political survival. Reconciling multiplicity and unity, al-Ghazālī labored to integrate Islamic and non-Islamic intellectual traditions. Three elements are investigated: (1) Investing epistemology with social significance, al-Ghazālī opposed orthodox conformism; (2) Denouncing ignorance, the passions, and intellectual confusion, al-Ghazālī promoted the dialogic principle – not dogma – as the unique public guarantee of the universal truth; (3) This universal truth had an exclusively secular, not religious, dimension, based on the *deen/donya* distinction, separating universal secular truth from religious identity. An intellectual exploration of the secular dilemma, of corresponding imaginative magnitude, hardly existed in Western societies at the time. This casts doubt on the current academic enthusiasm for representing traditional Islam in the mirror image of French post-structuralism, and the false depiction of al-Ghazālī as the dogmatic enemy of reason. It opens an entire terrain of possible research that is barely tapped, which contradicts the confused dogmas of Islamic radicalism. A secular conceptual dualism pervaded the Islamic tradition, indeed pre-dating European secularism.

Keywords: al-Ghazālī, Abbasid Empire, Islamic philosophy, state-making, Sufism, secular

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The contemporary al-Ghazālī debate

The Abbasid-era Persian philosopher Abū Ḥamid Moḥammed ibn Moḥammed al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) figures colorfully in current public debate in the West. What makes the al-Ghazālī debate so significant in Western controversies on Islam? Source materials are diverse. They include Salman Rushdie's Magical Realist novel *Two Years, Eight Months, and Twenty Eight Nights* (2015), Abdul Latif Salazar's documentary film *al-Ghazālī: the Alchemist of Happiness* (2004), the American astrophysicist and public intellectual Neil de Grasse's depiction of al-Ghazālī as the catalyst of Islamic civilizational "collapse", and the 2010 CUNY Great Issues Conference panel "The Rise of Intellectual Reform in Islam", featuring scholars Baber Johansen, Ebrahim Moosa, Abdulkarim Soroush, and Talal Asad.

This article has two parts: (1) It examines CUNY conference panelist Moosa's 2005 *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, in which al-Ghazālī is a postmodern forerunner of Foucauldian anti-modernism, citing the liminality concept in the Persian *dihlīz*. As with Julia Kristeva's "abject", a border condition invokes a "strange land of border and otherness" (Kristeva, p. 192). Against Hegel's 'universal history' in 'absolute knowledge', the "abject" invoked the multiple confluences of stateless refugees scattered across post-Cold War Europe (Kristeva, pp. 229-63). Moosa's *dihlīz* has "everything" to "do with poetics and imagination, subjectivity and citizenship", "related to the past", while "equally related to the present and the emergent Muslim subjectivity" (Moosa, p. 24). Did al-Ghazālī portend Kristeva's view of the powerless everywhere and nowhere, as liberation from nation-state power fettered in inside/out imaginings? (2) To evaluate Moosa's *dihlīz*, this article analyses the 11th and 12th century Abbasid context, to interpret *The Alchemy of Happiness* through the alternative optic of *deen* (faith) and *donya* (the secular). *Donya*, in Farsi and Arabic, means "this world", or the "material" world. In *Dehkhoda Encyclopedia*, "*donya*" is explained as "the world we live in, not the other world" (Dehkhoda, p.275). Other meanings include "the material world," "being in the world", "on the earth", and "worldly existence." *The Alchemy of Happiness* uses the Persian *donya* for human life matters outside of *deen*.

The core of the contemporary al-Ghazālī debate is in opposing views of "rationalism": (1) Eurocentric modernists (i.e. Hegel) declare Islam incompatible with Enlightenment reason, and (2) postmodernists see al-Ghazālī offering spiritual liberation

from modern instrumental reason (i.e. Moosa). Al-Ghazālī was the fanatical foe of Greek “rationalism”, Rushdie suggests. We see ‘philosophical’ dichotomies mystifying a sociological explanation of al-Ghazālī’s complex intellectual response to Abbasid social changes. Al-Ghazālī envisioned a new conceptual window (i.e. *deen/donya*) to Abbasid politics. Intellectual and political crisis haunted the 11th and 12th century Abbasid transition. Al-Ghazālī experienced proliferating institutions and populations as a crisis of faith. A blind spot pervaded the Abbasid debate, misrecognizing the need for freshly conceptualized social relations (i.e. individual Muslims to the multi-civilizational Abbasid state). Al-Ghazālī’s *deen/donya* tentatively engaged this unfamiliar and many-sided problematic, conceptually remapping objective knowledge through a dynamized optic.

Al-Ghazālī, we argue, *at some moment in his lifetime* recognized the need for a new secular optic to secure the political success of the multi-civilizational Abbasid state. However, al-Ghazālī shrank into a mystical solution, thereby avoiding the critical reflection required to crack the state-individual conundrum. Yet the al-Ghazālī case shows the secular question as part of the Islamic intellectual legacy, rather than derivative of Western discourse. There are three elements: (1) al-Ghazālī opposed orthodox conformism and hypocritical Abbasid power, making *deen* everyone’s natural entitlement (i.e. naturalizing revelation) using conceptual resources of the popular Sufi movement to socialize epistemology; (2) Denouncing ignorance, the passions, and intellectual confusion, al-Ghazālī promoted the dialogic principle – not dogma - as the unique public guarantee of universal truth; (3) Universal truth had an exclusively secular, not religious, dimension, in the *deen/donya* distinction, separating universal secular truth from religious identity. Al-Ghazālī mistrusted ontological arguments from identity: because I am a Muslim (or Christian, etc.), I am therefore right. This posed a risk to universal truth. He urged the dismantling of arguments to examine their distinct elements. Truth was raised over religious identity, to secure secular knowledge crucial to the functioning of the Abbasid Empire as an economic-technological ensemble. This implied a critical epistemology grounded in self-knowledge. Al-Ghazālī emphasised the use of reason to make a good society. Ultimately, he argued for the blamelessness of secular knowledge, in a historic interval where many violently rejected opinions from different religions or sects.

In Search of the Anti-Modern

Contemporary postmodernist dogma occludes the state-individual problematic in al-Ghazālī's *deen/donya* distinction. One example, *Al-Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, by Ebrahim Moosa, richly analyses al-Ghazālī's thought through multiple intellectual traditions. *Dihlīz*, the "third space", explains al-Ghazālī as a "frontier thinker", on the "threshold (*dihlīz*) of multiple narratives of thought" (Moosa, p.34). Al-Ghazālī certainly was a frontier thinker. However, *dihlīz* illustrates the limits of al-Ghazālī's intellectual horizon. In Persian literary tradition, *dihlīz* is ambiguous, being the transitional space between "home" (private, individual, or other-worldly) and the public or this-worldly space. One may feel neither at home nor among community in *dihlīz*. It is therefore unlikely, as Moosa contends, to provide the fountainhead of modern Islamic community revival. Still, *dihlīz* offers an imaginative gaze back into self and community from afar. It anticipates Adam Smith's "impartial spectator", in the 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where alien viewpoints unsettle local parochial prejudice. Perhaps, therefore, it opens the possibility of reconfiguring home and the world.

Poetics of Imagination reproduces postmodern anti-Enlightenment dogmas that obstruct this possible view. The "anti-modern dream" is coiled within Islamic studies, uncritically assuming the Enlightenment project has failed the Islamic experience. Its inside/out claims to authentic cultural identity have deeper, unspoken roots in 20th century intellectual thought, traceable to Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*. *Poetics of Imagination* exemplifies this utopian sensibility, colorful and magical, epitomized in the potentially tragic search for an alternative to modernity from *within* the Islamic tradition: pure, untainted by colonialism or modernity, intriguingly "other", far from drab supermarkets and TV news, a separate reality. This intellectual romanticism is as remote from the lived reality of contemporary Muslims as from the life and career of al-Ghazālī.

The pure identity fantasy tallies with political Islamism, an all too real destroyer of countless Muslim lives, and, to a lesser extent, other lives. An elective affinity links certain "harmless" academic discourses and tragic political currents in the wider world. In the Kashmir catastrophe, the population is torn between two toxic political fronts. Local madrasas combine anti-infidel hate with the Ottoman Empire glorified as holy

perfection lost, while the deadly guns of the Indian state pound down. The Spring of 2016 saw a multitude blinded by bullets and brains awash with toxic convictions. Thousands had learned that secular analysis – the only pragmatic solution for this festering geopolitical crisis – was a sacrilegious imperialist plot. Meanwhile, ensconced within the pleasures, boredoms, and frustrations of academic parlor life, loquacious denunciations of vacuous modernity in similar - if more sophisticated - terms proceeded apace. The anti-modern dream has roots in 1960s French post-structuralism. Michel Foucault, with initial obscure Avant Garde dreams of the “death of man” (i.e. Western modernity), made a similarly tragic 1979 journalistic foray to celebrate Iran’s Islamic State (Foucault, p. 397). These streams obstruct recognition of the state-individual problematic in al-Ghazālī’s thought, a missed historic opportunity to rethink fundamental political categories.

Moosa sees al-Ghazālī’s “third space” between dogmatic theology and rational ethics, the liminal and magical mode of *dihlīz*. *Dihlīz* is ethics informed by aesthetic imagination (Moosa, p.27-34). Ethics is thereby spared what Mahatma Gandhi called “the acid test of reason and universal justice” (Chandra, pp. 3-29). Moosa argues the relevance to the contemporary crisis of Islamic countries in the following terms:

“The issues that preoccupy Muslim communities in the twenty-first century relate [to] the revolution in knowledge—questions of identity, and the place and role of ethics. New forms of knowledge are a direct result of the hegemony of modernity.” (Moosa, p.25)

Moosa’s *dihlīz* is an alternative to “hegemonic modernity”. Two scholarly concepts of “modernity” currently circulate: firstly, Heideggerian anti-modernism, widespread since *Being and Time*; secondly, sociological modernity, rooted in Marxian, Weberian, and Durkheimian sociology, examining post-industrial power dynamics. Moosa embraces the first: “In our time, the dominant paradigm is the imperium of modernity, in which liberal capitalism predominates, a capitalism that marginalizes traditions other than the one from which it emerged in unprecedented ways” (Moosa, p.264). Capitalism is reduced to a univocal mono-culture, its uniquely Western “rationality” seeking total control – precisely Heidegger’s anti-liberal view. Modernity, here, is not modern institutional forms of power distribution, or an analytical grid for demystifying real-world power configurations. While al-Ghazālī did not have a modern sociological optic, he was certainly very remote from Heideggerian anti-modernism.

Poetics of Imagination presents a culturalist “Modernity” as a totalizing system. Once vanquished, a new world of pluralism and cultural autonomy (i.e. *dihlīz*) shall flower. This is highly fanciful. It derives not from Islamic tradition, but European counter-Enlightenment ideology. In condemning “modernity” as an agent of “epistemicide”, Moosa lapses into a vague politicizing:

“We are better at knowing what we do not want than we are at fully knowing what we want. However, we do know that we desire a paradigm shift and seek emergent knowledge, both of which will facilitate transitions to alternative futures.” (Moosa, p.264)

The highly ambitious vagueness rings with Heideggerian triumphalism: “alternative ways of knowledge and knowing” are “part of the strategy for ending epistemicide” (Moosa, p.264). Al-Ghazālī’s “liminality” will magically solve contemporary crises – of poverty, inequality, power abuse, corruption, gender issues, famine, and war - while excluding the institutional lessons of modernity (i.e. democratic power organization, social reform of capitalism). The re-grounding of public meaning in hermeneutically conceived religious revelation is the solution: “A crucial difference [from “modernity”] was that it was not an ego-centered notion of the self,” but “related to tradition, revelation, knowledge, and society” (Moosa, p. 264). Moosa calls for creative holy revivalism: “The need to stem this epistemicide is self-evident, as is the necessity to rehabilitate and articulate subaltern modes of knowledge” (Moosa, p.263). The formula follows *Being and Time*: “The past is made present”, “as a creative problem susceptible of opening up new possibilities” (Moosa, p. 264). In *dihlīz*, Moosa elevates a feature of Ghazālīan thought to a Foucauldian metaphysic of universal epistemic indeterminacy.

Poetics of Imagination, however, contains two important arguments: (1) al-Ghazālī detaches truth from identity; (2) al-Ghazālīan philosophy is inclusive of diverse cultures, with a political-epistemological function. These features of al-Ghazālī’s thought – based on *deen/donya* - provide democratic and even secular ethical resources. Against political forms, i.e. institutions and conditions, Moosa emphasizes political content. Political content arguments center the “good will” of the ruler, the “purity” of the cultural source, the “natural goodness” of a class, or emancipatory “modes of thought”. The *Poetics of Imagination* espouses the final category. No one “new mode of thought” (*dihlīz*) is a remedy in modern politics. Rather, the problem concerns institutional arrangements, which must permit organized public dialogue for seeking pragmatic solutions to problems

facing dynamic modern societies. Neither excessive modernism nor secularism, liberal institutions or rationalist thought, cause the crisis in Muslim majority societies. One core problem, however, is the entrenched intellectual tradition (i.e. in Iran, Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shari'ati, Ahmed Fardid, etc.) reproducing the utopian template articulated in *Poetics of Imagination*. The consequence is a dearth of sociologically concrete solutions from intellectuals in positions of trust and responsibility.

Al-Ghazālī's lifetime: economic, political, ideological and military power

The Alchemy of Happiness offered an ethical system for individual and community, to overcome the political and moral crisis of Abbasid growth in social complexity. Al-Ghazālī's argument that "the key to the truth about the divine is knowledge of the self" contained a social meaning (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 13). Densely populated centers of commerce and industry were composite societies. Al-Ghazālī's theory is a pluralistic effort to accommodate diversity: "God is one, but He will be seen in many different ways, just as one object is reflected in different ways by different mirrors" (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.44). Al-Ghazālī sketched a broadly open ethical ideal of good citizenship within the Muslim community. His preoccupation was not epistemic indeterminacy as a postmodern metaphysic. The focus was the 11th century market and state-law nexus, crystalizing with the expansion of the Abbasid Empire, and the attendant social identity crisis. Al-Ghazālī asked: "if you do not know who you are, how can you know others?" Knowing others is also knowing the self. A worldly shift transpires where religious knowledge "is possible by knowledge of God's creation, which is the world". Empirical knowledge is valued: "knowledge of the wonders of the world is achieved by the senses. And these senses are the essence [*ghavam*] of the body." The body is not merely natural, but a social metaphor, its "hands and feet" like "the craftsmen's city", while "the heart is the monarch and reason the vizier" (al-Ghazālī, 1991, pp. 13-20).

A centrifugal moment for *economic power* destabilized the foundations of judgment about the self and the world. Changing orders of wealth and power subverted public trust: "the love of wealth and esteem become diseases of the heart which attract men to hypocrisy, falsehood, deception, enmity, and jealousy" (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 992). There were those "pretending to be Sufis, and misguiding people is their forte" (al-Ghazālī, 2001,

p. 655). Con artists donned religious mantles in a rapidly transforming society of strangers. A fissure ruptured the reliable surface of public stability, trust, and intelligibility.

It was a centrifugal moment, also, for burgeoning *political power* ensnared in patterns of inter-sectarian violence. Al-Ghazālī was born in Tabaran, a district of Tus, Persia, in 1058, in the new Seljuk Empire. The nomadic Seljuk Turks, staunchly Sunni converts, had overrun central Asia through Persia, smashing the Turko-Persian kingdoms. An Amir overran Baghdad, hoisting the green Shi'a Fatimid banner over the Abbasid capital, removing its black flag. The Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty of Cairo challenged the Abbasids for the titular authority of the Islamic ummah, supported by Shi'a sections of Baghdad. Until 1135, following al-Ghazālī's death, political crisis immobilized the Abbasid caliph amidst feuding warlords. The Seljuk outpost of al-Ghazālī's upbringing was one of many imploding fronts. Following the Abbasid Golden Age (775–861), the Empire had splintered into dynasties.

At thirty-three, al-Ghazālī, jurist and theologian, attained the summit of academic life in the new Abbasid university system. The centrifugal moment extended also to *ideological power* through multiplying intellectual networks. Al-Ghazālī's state sponsors saw an intellectual champion capable of renewing universal Abbasid legitimacy (El-Hibri, p. 16). In the late 9th century, weakening Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad had provoked disintegration anxiety across the Islamic Empire. Al-Ghazālī, the foremost Abbasid intellectual, confronted an epistemological crisis: stabilizing knowledge meant the survival of Islamic civilization, and the cosmic plan of God. Spurning dogma, al-Ghazālī recognized the *de facto* civilizational pluralism underpinning Abbasid political survival. Reconciling multiplicity and unity, he labored to integrate Islamic and non-Islamic intellectual traditions, imaginatively reconfiguring the relation between the divine source of the Islamic past, and the multi-centered compromises permitting Abbasid survival in the chaotic *donya* of the political present.

This involved a critical component. Al-Ghazālī harshly judged theologians, as “lacking in integrity and intellectual independence”. They were “sycophants groveling at the feet of political leaders”. Al-Ghazālī charged that, although the “learned” are the “guides to the road” to salvation, the “times are devoid of them”. The “learned” believed “there is no knowledge except government decrees”. They sought “through polemics

[to] attain glory” (Moosa, p.8). The Islamic world endured a political legitimacy crisis. The interconnected problems of fragmentation, economic change, and the Islamic encounter with foreign traditions of scientific knowledge, formed a circulatory process, in which *military* power was also critical. Al-Ghazālī differentiates self-knowledge and an external order depicted in military allegory: “your truth is inner essence; everything else is Their consequence, army, and servant” (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 15). In a military metaphor, al-Ghazālī differentiates *zاهر* and *باطن* as components of self-knowledge, embedding the empirical within a new universal culture:

“If you would know yourself, know that They created you from two things: the outer shell (*kalbad-e zاهر*) called the body, visible with the eyes; and the inner essence (*ma’ni-e baten*) called the spirit (*nafs*), life (*جان*), and the heart (*دل*), which is knowable through the inner eye (*basirat-e baten*)” (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 15).

Military and technological expansion was revolutionizing Abbasid self-knowledge. Subject populations, from Sub-Saharan Africa to China, included heirs to rich traditions of scientific knowledge. The militarily expansive Islamic Golden Age excelled in the civilizational arts of science and philosophy, incorporating the diverse cultural legacies of Persia (architecture, textiles), Greece (Aristotelian philosophy), China (paper) and India (astronomy, mathematics). Scientific knowledge initially signified status. It became a political necessity for maintaining vast populations through mechanics, physics, hydraulics, agronomy, and medicine. Expanding military costs, constructing new capitals, and heavier tax burden on rural populations, led to abandoned fields, and disrupted Mesopotamian irrigation works. Peasant land flight produced banditry, while dissident religious sects organized peasant uprisings. The circulatory dynamics of Empire building, with technological capacities restricting movement, produced a governance crisis within the large and expanding Abbasid empire, encompassing South, East, Central and Western Asia, the Mediterranean, and East Africa (Brown, p.90). Al-Ghazālī was concerned with reconciling civilization-building powers with a worsening crisis of Abbasid political legitimacy. He articulated these political anxieties in the quest for self-knowledge:

“[The path to] getting to know the heart’s army is long. Its objective will become clear with an example. Know that the body is like a city. The hands, feet and body-parts are like the city’s workers. Lust is like a tax, anger is like the city police, and the heart is the city’s king, while the intellect is the king’s

minister. The King's sole wish is to put the country in order." (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 20).

All was not well in the metaphorical city. Espionage, obtaining secret information without the permission of the holder, implies conflict and power struggle: "They created the senses as spies for the intellect. They created the intellect for the heart so that it may be its candle and its light" (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 20). Why should the senses need to spy on the outer world, unless it posed an existential threat, while also offering important information? Al-Ghazālī implies "spying" here as "explorers" or "messengers". The uncertainty is resolved in emphasizing reason in making a good society. Intuitive knowledge, *elm-e ghalb*, is the path to the truth. However, as we will see, rational knowledge is important in knowing God, and living rightly in the world. They are not reduced to one. Al-Ghazālī cares deeply about establishing a meaningful connection between the body, mind, and human soul, which requires recognizing their differing domains.

Legitimacy Crisis as Personal Experience

Perhaps al-Ghazālī's outpost provenance encouraged pragmatic analysis of the Caliphate, a patchwork of multiple military conquests interwoven by symbolic allegiance vows to the Abbasid caliph. The Empire was like a puzzle, not pieced yet. Al-Ghazālī wrote: "Government these days is a consequence solely of military power, and whosoever he may be to whom the holder of military power gives his allegiance" (Rizvi, 2002, p.356). Violence, truth, and Providence perplexed him. The legitimacy crisis had roots in the Prophet Muhammad's death. Opposing sects had struggled over leadership rights, linked to eternal salvation, from Abu Bakr and Ali, the roots of the Sunni-Shi'i conflict. The unified Abbasid Empire should have reflected divine unicity, the Empire of Sharia, where the most insignificant act fell within its domain. Baghdad, "the City of Peace" (b. 762), was round with four gates, intended to reconcile the disc of the heavens with the four quarters of the known world, as the political and religious center of worldly fate (Amir-Moezzi, p. 820).

Al-Ghazālī's professional experience was a visceral reaction to these elevated expectations. The Sharia, embryonic in the Qur'an, required hermeneutic labors, the Islamic science of *Fiqh*. As caliphal authority strained under ceaseless leadership struggle, the *Sunna* (i.e. social and legal custom) officially contracted to the Prophet,

ending the early caliphal days of routine divine inspiration remaking Sharia law. Sunni jurists now fulfilled the interpretative labors of the Abbasid state. Al-Ghazālī, at the summit, faced his responsibility with the dread of walking on a wire – with the civilization that trusted him - above Hell. He struggled intellectually within a whirling circle: “[first principles] can only be repelled by demonstration; but a demonstration requires knowledge of first principles ... it is impossible to make the demonstration”. It is as if sister faith and sister chance were fighting. Al-Ghazālī recalled this interval as an “unhealthy condition”, a “malady”, and a “baffling disease” where, for “two months”, he “was a sceptic, in fact though not in theory nor in outward expression” (Watt, p.13). Faith faltered in intellectual confusion, while strangers of uncertain motivation populated the metropolis.

Enter the paranoiac compulsion of the phantom interrogator: “Perhaps behind intellectual apprehension there is another judge who, if he manifests himself, will show the falsity of the intellect in judging, just as, when intellect manifested itself, it showed the falsity of sense in its judging” (Watt, p.12). Al-Ghazālī became anxious over infinite regress, the malignant potential of invisible horizons. This labyrinthine skepticism is far from systematic scientific doubt. The imaginary interlocutor “heightened the difficulty by referring to dreams”. In the Qur’an, dreams link prophets to the divine. Abraham saw himself in a dream sacrificing his son, Joseph was a dream interpreter, and several dream experiences of Muhammad are recounted. In sleep, God collects the souls of the living, along with those of the dead, but the souls of the living return for a time ordained. Tradition divided dreams into three categories: Satanic destabilization, inconsequential, and divine messages. Al-Ghazālī gives this tradition an unusual twist. Dreams represent the collapse of all certainties. His inner interrogator said: “it is possible that a state will come upon you whose relation to your waking consciousness is analogous to the relation of the latter to dreaming” (Watt, p.13). How do you know that, at this second, you are not asleep in your bed? Dreams, by this account, are an imperfection of waking. Waking is an imperfection of higher levels of hidden reality.

The Sufi Exit

The popular Sufi movement was expanding, from India to Spain, against sectarian controversy and elite theological wrangling. In inner torment, al-Ghazālī first

seriously considered the Sufi path as a means to regaining “health and even balance” (Watt, p.13). The Sufi-turn involved “turning away from wealth and position, and fleeing from all time-consuming entanglements”. Al-Ghazālī’s life became a “veritable thicket of attachments”. His “teaching and lecturing” involved “sciences that were unimportant and contributed nothing to the attainment of eternal life” (Watt, 30). Weary of the Abbasid intellectual establishment, the appeal of the Sufi alternative grew. Upward self-transcendence circumvented the tangle of pointless legal disputes among jurists. Sufism viewed the first four caliphs as “pious”, while Umayyad and Abbasid activities were of no interest to them. Nor did the Sunni/Shi’a sectarian split matter (Rizvi, 2003, pp.24-25). What an open horizon, to al-Ghazālī, on the road to paradise. Al-Ghazālī had already contributed an original knowledge theory to Islam’s rich rationalist tradition, threading back through the Mu’tazila-Ash’ari controversy, and the philosophers al-Farabi (878-980) and Ibn Sina (980-1037). This Helleno-Christian intervention was behind him now. Intellectual labors, for the Sufis, distracted from the quest for upward self-transcendence. Life must be lived from one moment to the next, for God is ceaselessly remaking the world at each instant.

Al-Ghazālī never fully reconciled with the Sufi view, ultimately, returning to the Abbasid establishment after dropping out for eleven years. His Sufi encounter inspired him to a broad and public reformulation of the Sharia for Abbasid times. Al-Ghazālī admired Sufis as “men who had real experiences, not men of words”. Sufism involved immediate experience, a “tasting” which embraced the “knowing” and “being” distinction: “What a difference there is between being acquainted with the definition of drunkenness ... and being drunk! Indeed, the drunken man while in that condition does not know the definition of drunkenness nor the scientific account of it” (Watt, 29). In 1091, al-Ghazālī had undergone an existential crisis, physical and religious. “God”, he wrote, “put a lock upon my tongue so that I was impeded from public teaching”. An “inability to digest” made “food and drink unpalatable”, and he felt “on the verge of falling into the Fire” (al-Ghazālī, 1980, pp. 19-20). The drama unfolded in a Baghdad of multiple nations, colors, and creeds, teeming with traders, military recruits, and slaves, the center of the Hanafi and Hanbali schools of Islamic law, and of translation and scientific experimentation. Commerce, industry, and the banking system made Baghdad the civilizational fountainhead of the Arab Islamic Empire. Yet the metropolis was

polarized between localized and tribal military powers, while the ulama lacked the executive power to impose religious uniformity. The Empire thus strained under institution-building failure. Believing “the choice still remained open”, he resolved to “quit Baghdad” (Watt, p.30).

At the grey terminus of life’s road, death awaited al-Ghazālī, where, like a prison gate, choice would be cosmically eradicated. A “voice of faith was calling, ‘To the road! To the road!’” The devil spoke seductively: “‘This is a passing mood’, he would say, ‘do not yield to it, for it will quickly disappear’”. The devil grasped the implications of fallen social status: “if you leave this influential position, these comfortable and dignified circumstances where you are free from troubles and disturbances, ... then you will probably come to yourself again and will not find it easy to return to all this” (Watt, p.30). A man abandoning family and professional occupation for an itinerant life, yet who feels guided by a higher power, must traverse alternating resolution and indecision. Al-Ghazālī “lost his power of choice”. God “made it easy for my heart to turn away from position and wealth, family and friends” (Watt, p.31). Contemporaries thought he fled in fear of “action by the government”. Others thought an “evil influence” was possessing the “circle of the learned”. Most felt perplexity: “There was much talk about me among all the religious leaders of Iraq, since none of them would allow that withdrawal from such a state of life ... could have a religious cause” (Watt, p.31).

For about ten years, al-Ghazālī lived the Sufi life. He would revive Islam’s former pristine purity (*mujaddid*). Al-Ghazālī undertook an inner “annihilation” process, ridding himself of the intellectual clutter of the philosophical “absolute”, single minded prayers leaving only inner emptiness to be filled by the presence of God (Rizvi, 2003, p.87). For two years, he had “no other occupation than the cultivation of retirement and solitude”, with “religious and ascetic exercises” (Watt, p.31). In the mosque of Damascus, isolated in the minaret, or alone at the Rock of Jerusalem, al-Ghazālī believed “it is above all the mystics who walk the road of God; their life is the best life, their method the soundest method” (Watt, p.32). Towering spiritually above his old Abbasid clerical colleagues, the Sufis’ every moment, asleep or awake, pursued *fana* (complete absorption through ceaseless recollection of God). The learned scholars had “no way of” improving either the Sufis’ “life or character”. Al-Ghazālī started to “behold angels and the spirits of the prophets”, before reaching “stages in the way” that are “hard to

describe in language". At intervals, however, he was stung by "anxieties about my family", "the entreaties of my children", "though at one time no one had seemed less likely than myself to return" (Watt, p.32).

Donya was all but eclipsed by *deen*. Yet al-Ghazālī returned from the world of Sufi illumination with a message for humankind that *donya* might be redeemed. He again became a mouthpiece for the Abbasid regime, in its propaganda war against the Fatimid and other opponents. He would do so proactively, resisting corruption, while revolutionizing the Abbasid sense of divine mission. Al-Ghazālī declared:

"[Corruption] is a fixed and determinate character of this time; what benefit to you, then, are solitude and retirement, since the sickness has become general, the doctors have fallen ill, and mankind has reached the verge of destruction?" (Watt, p.39)

It was no relapse: "I myself know that, even if I went back to the work of disseminating knowledge, yet I did not go back." He reasoned that "previously I had been disseminating the knowledge by which worldly success is attained; ... But now I am calling men to the knowledge whereby worldly success is given up and its low position in the scale of real worth is recognized" (Watt, p.40). Al-Ghazālī would reconcile himself with power by reconceptualizing *donya*, incorporating all erstwhile adversaries: the philosophers, the *ta'lim*, popular prejudice, and even mysticism. An external show of faith, for keeping order among the common people, is not adequate for restoring Islam to its original purity. The many who simply conform religiously to protect wealth and family, and scale the power summits, are in error. Backsliding, as in wine drinking, is gravely serious, requiring a "pious sovereign who is all-powerful" (Watt, p.39).

Return to the Sciences

Al-Ghazālī manifestly does not privilege statelessness as a moral optic, as in the quasi-anarchism of Kristeva's "abject". He envisions the state as the instrument of public virtue. Yet his dogma, far from rigid, sprang from the primordial encounter with incommensurable alien reality. Objectivity and self-knowledge unite in an existential road: "You must seek the truth about yourself, of what you are, whence you came, where you're going, what your purpose is, and for what purpose you were created. This involves both in what your happiness consists, and in what your hardship consists" (Al-

Ghazālī, 1991, pp. 13-14). Al-Ghazālī had always combined an inquiring mind with a will to truth: “To thirst after comprehension of things as they really are was my habit and custom from a very early age”. He claims: “I have poked into every dark recess, I have made an assault on every problem, I have plunged into every abyss, I have scrutinized the creed of every sect”. He was open to diverse views: “Whenever I meet one of the Batiniyah [i.e. Isma’ilis], I like to study his creed”. Al-Ghazālī critically engaged received convention: “as I drew near adolescence the bonds of mere authority (*taqlid*) ceased to hold me and inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me, for I saw that Christian youths always grew up to be Christian, Jewish youth to be Jews and Muslims youths to be Muslims (Watt, p.11).”

Al-Ghazālī, using an empirical and comparative perspective, bordered on a secular epiphany concerning the universality of cultural indoctrination. A given community is wedded existentially to its customary religious identity, much as it is uniquely bound to its common language. From a comparative perspective, he might have concluded, the cultural and linguistic roots produced by indoctrination are quite relative. Al-Ghazālī, however, undertook his enquiry from a prior dogmatic framework. A pure religious origin to Islam (*fitra*) had been corrupted. Al-Ghazālī aspired to differentiate “between sound tradition and heretical innovation” (Watt, p.10). He hence retreated from the sociological epiphany, aspiring to rebuild the initial religious certitude that his community alone possesses the unique truth, while all others wander in error. This explains his “inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original *fitra* [original nature], and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping of parents and teachers”. He aimed to “sift out these uncritical beliefs, the beginnings of which are suggestions imposed from without, since there are differences of opinion in the discernment of those that are true from those that are false” (al-Ghazālī, 1980, p. 3).

Yet al-Ghazālī’s reconstruction of *fitra* was historically conditioned. In redefining the belief-transgression frontier, using *deen* and *donya*, he rescued precious secular knowledge imperiled by fanaticism, while making Sharia a partly prescriptive and partly-rational dialogic force governing all human affairs. Al-Ghazālī’s middle way concluded that the transcendental Sufi world was, after all, perfectly in accord with a rational explanation of events. Al-Ghazālī made Revelation part of a logical progression of natural mental capabilities. Tracing a phenomenology of human growth, al-Ghazālī

located the senses of touch, sight, and hearing, the mental powers of discernment, and the elevation to intellect, as unfolding features of God's "original condition" (*fitra*). Beyond the intellect was "yet another stage" (i.e. prophecy), where "another eye is opened, by which beholds the unseen, what is to be in the future, and other things which are beyond the ken of intellect" (Watt, p.34). The prophet ranked above adult intellect, who, in turn, exceeded the child's natural capacity of touch, sight, and hearing. The condition of the average adult is an inner battlefield of conflicting armies: "Know that man's heart has a connection to multiple armies, which lie within, and each gives it a behaviour and a characteristic: some are bad and cause self-destruction; others are good and lead it to happiness" (Al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 22).

Al-Ghazālī analogically naturalized the prophetic capacity of revelation in *donya*, indicating "something analogous to the special faculty of prophecy, namely dreams. In the dream-state a man apprehends what is to be in the future" (Watt, p. 34). From the universally primal human capability to touch, to the rarer ability to see angels, there is a unified and universal schema in *fitra* as designed by God. Al-Ghazālī reconceived *fitra* with a socially unifying foundation. Sufis must accept the rules of orthodoxy, while the orthodox must accept the visions of the Sufis. No longer did dreams undermine all certainties, instead guaranteeing higher mystery within a rationally unified world (*donya*). Al-Ghazālī wrote:

"the power of the combined knowledge of sciences and trades, with understanding the contents of books— geometry, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and religious sciences – forms one indivisible force. It contains the many fields of knowledge. Indeed, the entire world exists within it, like a grain of sand in the desert. ... Acquiring knowledge through education is the way of the sciences." (Al-Ghazālī, 1991, pp. 27-30)

Al-Ghazālī thus invested epistemology with social significance, celebrating education, science and trade, while contextualizing revelation within the pyramidically conceived social enterprise of scientific knowledge (i.e. child-like senses, adult intellect, and special prophecy). He wrote: "The intellect is one of the stages of human development in which there is an 'eye' which sees the various types of intelligible objects, which are beyond the ken of the senses." Beyond this, "prophecy also is the description of a stage in which there is an eye endowed with light such that ... the unseen and other supra-intellectual objects become visible" (Watt, p. 35). Certain

sciences, al-Ghazālī argues, depend upon the adoption of a larger than human perspective: “there are some astronomical laws based on phenomena which occur only once in a thousand years; how can they be arrived at by personal observation?” Al-Ghazālī’s “extra-intellectual objects” transcended the empirical, while establishing the recognition of multiple new social occupations within a wide cultural vista (Watt, p.36).

Extending the comparison to a social division of labor, al-Ghazālī argues: “if you are familiar with medicine and law, you can recognize lawyers and doctors”. The same ‘recognition’ principle explains authentic prophets, providing “necessary knowledge” that Muhammad is “in the highest grades of the prophetic calling” (Watt, p. 36). Prophecy becomes a calling comparable to medical practitioner in a divine labor division. Just as the astronomer sees the larger spatial-temporal reality, the prophet sees the end of the world in the “Last Day”. Al-Ghazālī thus socialized revelation within the naturalized epistemic continuum of *donya*. With a final existential twist, a rigorous habitus principle disqualifies outsiders who have not followed the path from judging prophecy. To judge prophets, one must make a “trial” based upon “several thousand instances”, where the inner peace procured is the basis of “necessary knowledge beyond all doubt”. It is an existential matter of lived experience, requiring experimental repetition over time. The scientific feature is only a “drop in the ocean of prophecy” (Watt, p. 35). A larger Sufi framework encompasses socially graded scientific knowledge.

A curious dream populism ensues. Dogma is fixed in the primordial encounter with an alien reality, as the learned are humbled in relation to the commoner. The *donya* vision corresponds to the levelling Sufi mass movement, while yet preserving Abbasid social structure. Al-Ghazālī writes: “Prophecy and guardianship come from the degree of integrity in mankind’s heart, attained initially by the general population through discoveries made in dreams, giving a path to wakefulness” (Al-Ghazālī, 1991, pp. 34-35). Al-Ghazālī’s naturalization of prophecy opened the terrain to the commonest citizen, despite urging mass exclusion from the dangers of formal education. The “light of prophecy”, the source of divine law, is analogically accessible to the ordinary population through dream experience. Everyone can dream, thus fleetingly partaking of prophecy. The very error of natural scientists and theologians has been to estimate truth in terms of “the measure of their [own] observations and reasonings”. The alien quality of dreams allows the future to inexplicably leak through. Just as someone with no

“acquaintance with fire” would reject that “a thing the size of a grain” could “consume a whole town”, so the “strange features of the world to come” – lucidly recognized only by prophets – are rejected by those lacking their perceptive powers (Watt, p.42). Al-Ghazālī’s long sojourn off the map of organized Abbasid society located Sufism and orthodoxy within a common but heterogeneous intellectual space. Every common person could reach the summits of ultimate reality by dreaming in the valley where *deen* and *donya* meet within an ontological continuum.

The Spirituality of a Good Life

Al-Ghazālī therefore articulates a social ethic much broader than coercive state power. How to make the sea of difference into a shared citizenship was a core problem of the *Alchemy of Happiness*. Written around 1105, in the twilight of al-Ghazālī’s life, the book contained reflection upon a lifetime. Four rationalist premises echoe earlier epistemic claims from the *Deliverance from Error*: (1) the founding purpose of ascertaining “truth from amidst a welter of sects”; (2) to shift from “servile conformism to independent investigation”; (3) to overcome the restriction of “truth to uncritical acceptance of the Imam’s pronouncement”; (4) a “thirst for grasping the real meaning of things” (al-Ghazālī, 1980, p.3). Certainly, al-Ghazālī argues for independent thought, celebrating intellectual labor, even as he popularizes prophetic experience as “strange” dream encounters through a mass-based and egalitarian Sufi scheme.

Al-Ghazālī builds the core argument upon a Sufi-Orthodoxy antinomy: “how can man long for a thing of which he has no knowledge?” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.44). God cannot be known as an object of human knowledge: “no one knows the real nature of God but God Himself” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.10). God’s greatness “immeasurably transcends our cognitive faculties” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.15). Al-Ghazālī argues: “For perfect happiness, mere knowledge is not enough” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.45). Yet “happiness is necessarily linked with the knowledge of God” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 11). The antinomy follows: (a) we can never be happy without the knowledge; (b) we can never have the knowledge; (c) yet happiness is a civic duty. As we saw, “knowledge of God is possible by knowledge of God’s creation, which is the world” (Al-Ghazālī, 1991, pp. 13-20). It is not direct knowledge, but existential experience. Al-Ghazālī finds existential resolution to the epistemic quandary in that “man was intended to mirror forth the light of the knowledge of God” (al-Ghazālī,

2001, p. 24). Resolving the antinomy using Sufism, al-Ghazālī produces an existential, not epistemic, theory of the “good life”. He argues: “An exact philosophical knowledge of the spirit is not a necessary preliminary to walking in the path of religion” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.8). To know God is to love God, in the Sufi tradition, which in its perfect state is to “love all men” and the “whole of creation” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.47). From this premise, al-Ghazālī constructed a dialogic basis for universal truth in a vision of universal public belonging, grounded in *donya*.

Al-Ghazālīan citizenship involves an entire web of interdependent social relations in a material vision of human society. The “real necessities”, “clothing”, “food”, and “shelter”, involve a complex labor division based on “weavers, builders, metal workers, tailors, masons, and smiths”. Provided these workers remember God and the material essentials, without becoming overly “entangled in” or “fascinated by” the world (*donya*), they fulfil their divine function. This involves a “moral equilibrium”, avoiding “jealousy, hatred, hypocrisy, pride, deceit, etc.” (al-Ghazali, 2001, p.22-23). We might compare this to the 18th century British Enlightenment centered on the “moral sense”. Al-Ghazālī’s theory of Islamic social practice encompasses music and dance, singing birds and green grass, even Sufi erotic poetry (al-Ghazālī, 2001, pp. 26-27). It affirms the everyday worldly politics of pure enjoyment, as “the rational soul in man abounds in marvels, both of knowledge and power” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.9). There is joy in a meal, a walk, or a conversation, in *donya*. Al-Ghazālī praises married life over sainthood. The priority of taking care of dependents is esteemed over religious war (al-Ghazālī, 2001, pp. 36-37). One of Islam’s greatest thinkers asserts that quietly raising a happy family is superior to murder and destruction upon the path of Holy War.

Al-Ghazālī’s *donya* affirms scientific knowledge and practical ethics as *epistemology*, while sealing divine purpose with an *existential* principle. There is equal praise for achievements in the public space, such as “wishes for a livelihood, or for wealth, or learning.” To attain these, in an activist and social vision, man “must not merely say, ‘God is merciful’, but must exert himself” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.17). Al-Ghazālī affirms secular and practical knowledge, criticizing the Sufi tendency to “decry all knowledge” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 11). As microcosms of God, each human being is “entrusted with a little kingdom” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 14). In inherent human ignorance of “naked reality” (seen only after death), practical rationality mediates everyday

conduct and the divine plan. The “true greatness of man lies in his capacity for eternal progress” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 12). In this “progress”, the this-worldly and the otherworldly are mutually interdependent within a *donya/deen* continuum of “foreseeing and providing for the future” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.24). This entails socially embedded “responsibility” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 25). Al-Ghazālī’s vision is not a Pythagorean or Orphic belief in the immortal, immaterial human soul imprisoned in the human body. The soul is a “traveler who visits a foreign country for the sake of merchandise and will presently return to its native land”, which it must ceaselessly recollect (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 8). Moral knowledge, for al-Ghazālī, is social action in concrete circumstances, *donya*. Everyone must perform their social function. Reveling in the ambiguity of the liminal (*dihlīz*) is certainly frowned upon, even as that liminal space provides a universally unifying network for differences. But *dihlīz* is not home. Home is power, the secure grounding of Empire in *donya*.

New Tensions of Abbasid society

Al-Ghazālī occasionally relapses in anti-social Sufi idealism: “avoid means as you would a dead animal” as “death is the only truth” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 910). To undermine the wealth and power nexus would have destroyed the Abbasid Caliphate. Al-Ghazālī squarely faced this: “know that however reprehensible money is in some respects, it is also commendable in others, for there is both evil and good in it. And it is for this reason that God— the most excellent— has declared it in the Quran to be good” (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 152). His argument concerns regulating “the virtues of trade and vocation” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 465). The publicness is manifest: “There are many matters of this world and the Hereafter which cannot be fulfilled without the help of others” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.610). We return to the grounding epistemic self-knowledge principle: “nothing is closer to you than yourself,” and “if you do not know who you are, how can you know others?” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 13) It is a social, not a mystical, proposition.

Al-Ghazālī promotes a basic human ethic: “justice and fair play in dealings with others is of paramount importance to a Muslim” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 486). Examples reflect the new dilemmas of an affluent society: hoarding and prices, unequal wealth distribution, resentment and organized resistance from impoverished underclasses, and deviations from rule of law in property acquisition. For instance, multiplying

entrepreneurs are “wantonly buying the goods from the not so well off, poor, or destitute, at the higher price than its value, like cotton wool from the widow or the orphan” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 500). These iconic religious images of the dispossessed are an index for new class divides imperiling Abbasid stability.

Al-Ghazālī's politics address the conflicts of the new Abbasid society: “the condemnation of kings is based on the following facts – cruel and autocratic conduct” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.527). The secular ethic is striking: the criterion is not unconditional obedience to Sharia. Instead, references to Sharia are limited to benign sociological generalization. Allusions to social conflict, however, are vivid. The unspoken voice of the impoverished mass is articulated through Satan: “Satan misleads by whispering, ‘God forbid how it is just on the part of Allah that He has distributed the wealth without any cause – a transgressor has so much wealth that he does not know its true assessment, nor where to spend it, and kills many hungry, while giving them not a penny” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.928). Arbitrary social inequality condemned by Satan anticipates Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the devil championed the cause of the Civil War underclass. Al-Ghazālī, moreover, replies practically to Satan's demand, urging wealth redistribution: “wealth according to need is a panacea” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.936). A wealthy man should share his riches with the people (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.933). Yet wealth, if the Abbasid Empire is to thrive, cannot be categorically denied. Within the state-law ambit, it is a public benefit: “lawful wealth is a good thing for man” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 928). It becomes a curse through temptation to illegality, envy, and power struggle. Iblis has replaced “statues” (i.e. idols) with wealth, and the “world is the shop of Satan” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, pp.908-910). The antinomies between religious sensibility and practical state-making characterize *The Alchemy of Happiness*, exemplified in this image: “Wealth is like a snake. It has poisons as well as panacea” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.931).

Al-Ghazālī posits a golden rule: “the secret is in treating others the way one would like to be treated by others” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 495). A strikingly secular ethic (*donya*) overrides religious dogmatism: “an upright person who is more human and compassionate towards those he meets, is far above those who are merely righteous” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.497). It means: those rigidly adhering to one interpretation of holy sources impede the construction of well-organized power and prosperity. The text is replete with ethical images confirming an emergent social ethic: “A man with a full

stomach forgets the hungry and poor” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 782). Honesty is esteemed: “A man’s word is his bond. A pledge broken is a trust shattered” (al-Ghazali, 2001, p.570). In trade, “there should be no cruelty to animals” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 483). We must “call each other with words of love and respect” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 555). He calls this “doing good things out of noble motive” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.499). A larger community of economically divided populations is implied. Excessive economic and political power inspire anti-social ethics, forgetting the principles of cohabitation: “kingship and landlordism are the cause of love of the world” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.926). Property acquisition was dividing populations, as political power abuse generated acrimony. The philosopher presents guidance and council to cope with these complex social problems. Yet nowhere does he promote a unified ideological identity to reap heaven’s most dazzling rewards.

Revival and Freedom

Conflicting public spatiality pervades al-Ghazālī’s arguments. He describes a situation which anticipates the sociological concept of a “complex society”:

[...] negotiations emerged among [workers] that gave rise to conflicts of interest, for each person was not satisfied with their lot and counted on others. So, three other kinds of requirements emerged from among the trades: politics and rule, jurisdiction and governance, and Islamic jurisprudence, known as the law of mediation. Each is a trade, even if most of the work does not depend upon the hands. In this way, jobs of the world have become many and interdependent, with the Creator at the center. (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 75)

The theme of exile correlates with the displaced identity of the “complex society”: “to leave one’s home and heart is very agonizing. But the escape becomes necessary” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.623). A further reaction is a mood of revival for a more natural and less self-conscious time in the Muslim past: “Everything was upright and above board, and an unwritten code of conduct prevailed” (i.e. the rule of the first four caliphs, when divinely sent inspiration remade Sharia law). However: “the reverse is the case now. The sincerity and sympathy of people for their brethren is in decline and vain questioning about other’s affairs is on the increase” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.605). A “complex society” produces the doubt of others’ motives: the insoluble and dark sea hidden by nature from others and oneself. Obsession with motives reflects unrest in the public space. The question of destiny implies agency, as populations cease to accept

their place. Satan represents this dangerous fissure in the Abbasid political body: "Satan involves a man in the question of destiny although its secret is hidden from all" (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.929). Al-Ghazālī, while discouraging open revolt, urges reformed behavior for all social classes. The rich are either "generous or miserly"; the poor either "contented or greedy" (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.923). An implied practical ethic will redistribute wealth to preserve Abbasid power and prosperity.

Two traditions of conceptualizing freedom occur in al-Ghazālī's thought. Al-Ghazālī's initial notion of agency figured the traditional pre-modern notion of "free will" in subordinating the "passions" – unbidden impulses to hunger, anger, lust, and fear – to self-disciplined reason. This is the alchemical shift "from the animal to the angelic" (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.24). Al-Ghazālī's theory, at this level, is an explicit political allegory. In obtaining "knowledge of oneself and of God", the "body may be figured as a kingdom, the soul as its king, and the different senses and faculties as constituting an army". Reason is the "vizier", passion the "revenue collector", and anger the "police officer". Passion must be "kept in due subordination to the king, but not killed", with "its own proper functions to fulfill". If passion masters "reason, the ruin of the soul infallibly ensues" (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.9). It is the unified body politic. There is also a second, more modern and pluralistic, conception of freedom of the will. This is the notion of "free will" as human agency confronted with multiple context-dependent alternatives. This double meaning of "free will" was the core meaning of "happiness" (*sa'adat*), contrasting with contemporary Islamist notions of total submission and blind obedience.

Any large political and economic compound reposes upon tacit collective trust. Al-Ghazālī's existential doubt crisis, far from merely intellectual, was rooted in the civilizational crisis of trust undermining Abbasid legitimacy. As the foundations of confidence in the Islamic universal polity crumbled, men looked elsewhere for reassurance. These uncertain times gave the Shi'a message – that the Islamic community, having gone astray, required redirection – a renewed public attention. Both Shi'a branches, the Twelvers and the Isma'ilis, profited from public confusion. A man of a strong mind can impose a mental disorder upon himself, an experiment becoming compulsion. Al-Ghazālī, after a "protracted effort" to "doubt" sense perception and necessary truths, found that he "could no longer trust sense-perception". Haunted by the invisible movement of immobile shadows, he suspected only "first principles" of

mathematical calculation provided accurate knowledge. The “heavenly body” of the sun, seen only as “the size of a shilling”, is shown by “geometrical computation” to be “greater than the earth in size” (Watt, p.12). Nothing in the world was obvious.

Truth and Dialogue: a modern concept of freedom

The Alchemy of Happiness explicitly rejects absolute knowledge for anyone. Seeking to understand time and space in their full significance involves “crossing the bounds of sanity” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.85). Rather, al-Ghazālī promoted self-critical detachment: “If a man struggles his whole life, in his eye appreciation and criticism by others may become equal” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.1002). Reason involves listening. Because of “reason”, “the soul of man holds the first rank among created things” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.10). Reason was a unifying human ideal, in pursuit of cohabitation in a community of difference. A limit to divine knowledge follows, urging against “knowledge” hardened into “dogmatic prejudice” (al-Ghazālī, 2001, p.10). Al-Ghazālī wrote:

“Arrogance lies in knowledge, for when the scholar sees themselves as possessing complete knowledge, they see others in effect as animals as compared to themselves, and arrogance overtakes them. This will result in them expecting care and service, and respect and submission from people.” (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 257)

Al-Ghazālī reached a striking epistemic conclusion. He declared the independence of a truth-statement from the speaker: (1) He bifurcated truth into a secular category, without significance for religion (mathematics, logic), and the religious category of revelation; (2) Al-Ghazālī also argued that every truth-enunciation consists of clusters, which may contain truthful or non-truthful elements. To locate the pure truth, these clusters require dismantling; (3) From this, al-Ghazālī condemned fanaticism. Muslim fanaticism, based on prejudice, condemns the speaker in view of identity, and thereby may blindly condemn the elements of truth spoken by a pagan, Christian or other non-Muslim; (4) Because the truth is independent, and is composed of clusters, every enunciation requires a careful unpacking by the sincere truth seeker. This entails the necessity for a dialogic operation in all truth seeking, including theological disputes dividing Fatimid and Abbasid scholars with deadly geopolitical stakes. From a philosopher reputed to have suppressed rationality in favor of Islamic dogmatism, this should invite reconsideration. How did al-Ghazālī reach the independent truth thesis, and why did he give it such importance within the Abbasid intellectual context?

Opposing blind fanaticism to truth seeking, al-Ghazālī introduced the epistemic theory of clusters. Sometimes truth and falsehood are mixed within a single discursive cluster. He wrote: “Weak intellects have concluded that, since their author is a falsifier, [their ideas, books, etc.] must [also] be false” (Watt, p.21). One must differentiate true and false assertions within any single discursive cluster, irrespective of religious belonging or ethical standing. The “ignorant man” thinks that “religion must be defended by rejecting every science connected with the [rationalist] philosophers” (Watt, p.18). This discredits religion. When an educated non-Muslim “hears who has knowledge of such matters by apodeictic demonstration”, he “does not doubt his demonstration, but, believing that Islam is based on ignorance and the denial of apodeictic proof, grows in love for philosophy and hatred for Islam” (Watt, p.18). Universal objective knowledge exists for all human beings, independently of religious belonging. The ignorant of all religions might deny it, based on narrow fanaticism. By doing so, they do not stop the knowledge from being true. Moreover, they harm their own religion in ignorantly denying objective knowledge. Knowledge of *donya* is autonomous of religious belonging.

Hence, al-Ghazālī writes: “A grievous crime indeed against religion has been committed by the man who imagines that Islam is defended by the denial of the mathematical sciences” (Watt, p.18). Al-Ghazālī holds that “there is nothing in revealed truth opposed to these sciences by way of either negation or affirmation, and nothing in these sciences opposed to the truths of religion” (Watt, p.18). He argues that “Nothing in logic is relevant to religion by way of denial or affirmation”. Further, “Just as it is not a condition of religion to reject medical science, so likewise the rejection of natural science is not one of its conditions” (Watt, p.19). Two mutually independent types of objective truth exist in the world, *deen* and *donya*. By al-Ghazālī’s account, a non-Muslim can profess the truth over a Muslim, within the secular realm of objective knowledge. Individuals who illegitimately mix secular and religious categories, of whatever religion, al-Ghazālī argues, only cast doubt upon themselves. These confused utterances only “impair [others’] belief in the intelligence of the man who made the denial and, what is worse, in his religion” (Watt, p.19). Religious identity cannot substitute the value of secular objective knowledge in dealings with *donya*. Consider the Ottoman myth of the red apple (*Kizil Elma*), where the Empire was predestined to conquer the world because

it was an Islamic empire (Berkes, p. 57). Al-Ghazālī, conceiving this problem centuries before, certainly disagreed. A modern consequentialist conception of freedom is implied, where technology operates on objective principles impervious to identity.

Al-Ghazālī saw a dual reality. Objective reality has overlapping but mutually excluded divine signs (*deen*) and quantitative properties (*donya*). The sun and the moon as physical entities endure independently of human existence. Any pagan can accurately measure their quantitative reality, but only Muslims can correctly perceive the divine signs. He writes: “There is nothing here obliging us to deny the science of arithmetic which informs us specifically of the orbits of sun and moon” (Watt, p.19). Al-Ghazālī explained Islamic objections in terms of *deen*: “the recognition that nature is in subjection to God most high, not acting in itself but serving in the hands of its Creator” (Watt, p.20). The sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements are commanded. The overlapping dimensions of objective reality, al-Ghazālī argues, have their danger zone in metaphysics. Here, al-Ghazālī advances an argument concerning the hazards of “intellectual confusion”. The “errors of the philosophers” al-Farabi and Ibn Sina occur in “the conditions of proof they lay down in logic”. In denying bodily resurrection, arguing that God knows only universals, and proclaiming the world everlasting, they “differ from all Muslims” (Watt, p.20). Al-Ghazālī writes, “I have presented the grounds for regarding as corrupt the opinion of those who hastily pronounce a man an infidel if he deviates from their own system of doctrine” (Watt, p.20). His predecessors were “infidels” because they went astray logically, not because they embraced non-Islamic ideas *per se*.

Al-Ghazālī did not aspire to terminate, but rather to promote, Abbasid public dialogue, warning of the perils of ignorance, passion, and confusion. His fundamental epistemological insight was against thinking based on blind allegiance, while affirming the need to neatly differentiate the true and false components of any discursive cluster. Al-Ghazālī writes: “the proximity between truth and falsehood does not make truth falsehood nor falsehood truth” (Watt, p.23). We hereby understand al-Ghazālī’s long dialogue with the Fatimid Isma’ili doctrine. He condemned the Fatimid ideology for mistrusting rationality: “Rational considerations are not to be trusted, according to your view”. He contends, however, that rationality is inescapable: “the matter comes back to the intellectual proofs that you deny”. The stakes of unresolved intellectual dispute

between rival empires was politically grave: “blood was shed, towns reduced to ruins, children orphaned, communications cut and goods plundered”. Al-Ghazālī seeks not to obliterate the Fatimid ideology, but to meet it half-way: “We went a long way in agreeing with them; we accepted their assertion that ‘instruction’ is needed and an infallible ‘instructor’” (Watt, p.24).

The Abbasid regime instructed al-Ghazālī to undertake a propaganda war against Fatimid ideology: “I received a definite command from His Majesty the Caliph to write a book showing what their religious system really is” (Watt, 23). Al-Ghazālī undertook serious research, studying books and interviewing members of the sect. Indeed, he did the job of analyzing the Ta’limiyah system too well. He recalled that: “some of the orthodox (Ahl al-Haq) criticized me for my painstaking restatement of their arguments. ‘You are doing their work for them’, they said, ‘for they would have been unable to uphold their system in view of these dubious and ambiguous utterances had you not restated them and put them in order’” (Watt, p.24). The Abbasid regime had intended al-Ghazālī to rubbish the Fatimid Caliphate ideology. Instead, he analyzed and reconstructed the system. In his defense, al-Ghazālī stated: “Where such a doctrine is widely known, it ought to be refuted, and refutation presupposes a statement of the doctrine” (Watt, p.24).

Against the grain of other Abbasid intellectuals, al-Ghazālī believed in the necessity for a systemic and rational method of intellectual exchange, and not the partisan fanaticism of seeking to merely annihilate the adversary’s view. He argues: “I could not be satisfied with the prospect that I might be suspected of neglecting the essential basis of their proof, or of having heard it and failed to understand it My aim was to repeat their false doctrine as far as possible, and then to bring out its weak points” (Watt, p.24). Al-Ghazālī attributes the dangerous spread of false ideologies to the systemic absence of rational dialogue: “Violent fanaticism ... provoked the supporters of truth to prolong the debate with them about the presuppositions of their argument” (Watt, p.24). That is, Abbasid intellectuals, blindly rejecting the Fatimid argument based on belonging, attacked it fruitlessly upon specific points which were, in fact, universally true as *donya*. Al-Ghazālī suggests that hating your enemies clouds your judgment. The controversy in question, the need for an infallible instructor, al-Ghazālī

holds to be a universal truth common to the Fatimid and Abbasid Empires. In one case it is the Imam and in the other Muhammad. He contrived a logical common ground.

Conclusion: the secular (*dunya*) and religious (*deen*)

The Islamic tradition is perhaps lacking less in the idea of the secular (*dunya*), and more in the social structural processes of secularization. This includes the political and social institutionalization processes, involving differentiation of public and private spheres, and the crystalizing of their relative autonomy from the state. This was certainly not viable in the 11th century Abbasid Empire. If anything, however, Islamic intellectuals engaged the problems of “complex societies” prior to their Western counterparts. It is hard to find an intellectual assault of corresponding imaginative magnitude in Western societies at the time of al-Ghazālī’s intervention. Al-Ghazālī’s thought represents a provisional reckoning with the structural and institutional issue of complex societies, imaginatively renegotiating the new Abbasid political space of economic expansion, institutional proliferation, cultural innovation, and religious pluralism. The rival Egyptian Ismaili state contributed to ideological crisis. Sufism posed an existential challenge through its self-nihilating practices, challenging social organization in the name of the divine. Converted Sunni nomadic Turks from the East undermined Abbasid stability. Pluralism was the foremost intellectual and political challenge facing al-Ghazālī, a man committed in equal parts to spiritual sincerity, and Abbasid material civilization. The *Alchemy of Happiness* investigated the causes of these complex events, in a comprehensive ethical manual for all Muslims, portraying what constitutes a good citizen in the Islamic community where the “world is a market place passed by pilgrims on their way to the next” (al-Ghazali, 2001, p. 18). These sociological rudiments explain the historic duality of secular and religious life within the Islamic context more convincingly than the postmodern notion of an inauthentic Western “episteme” penetrating Muslim societies in the colonial era.

Having struggled for a decade as a Sufi with the highest forms of ineffable consciousness, al-Ghazālī wisely clung to the essential thread of his earlier and comparatively mundane intellectual endeavors. The “true nature of prophecy”, he maintained, was in the “original condition” of *fitra*. The combination of a deep crisis of doubt, and a profound conviction of the truth of his received worldview, provoked al-

Ghazālī to overcome the unreliable polyvocal contest through personal discovery of the absolute, or the genuine ontological anchor lost in past time. *Fitra* is historically an Epicurean and Platonic idea of humanity's innate consciousness of the eternal. At the base of al-Ghazālī's quest was the breakdown of the mutual human trust underpinning a human civilization in crisis, and the attendant personal despair. His writings show his epistemic investigation was no mere pedantic exercise: "Now that this despair has come over me, there is no point in studying any problems except on the basis of what is self-evident, namely, necessary truths and affirmations of the senses." The Qur'an, by this account, or revelation, is not a self-evident source of truth. It requires the socially mediated dialogic interval of persuasion. Al-Ghazālī thus broke away from "beliefs I had merely taken over from others" and "the trust most men have" (Watt, p.12).

The secular (*donya*) refers to non-religious matters as al-Ghazālī understood them: firstly, economy, the arts, marriage, and so forth; and, secondly, knowledge of the world based on empirical evidence, logic, and reason. Al-Ghazālī does not consider them an oppositional binary. This casts doubt on the current academic enthusiasm for representing traditional Islam in the mirror image of French post-structuralism, as we saw with Moosa. Similarly, Talal Asad (also at the 2010 CUNY Great Issues Conference) argues that Europe was the unique origin of the religious-secular dualism. He writes: "The terms 'secularism' and 'secularist' were introduced into English by free thinkers in the middle of the nineteenth century" to "avoid the charge of being 'atheists' and 'infidels'" (Asad, p.23). He then asserts that the "secular" is a fake category, as applied to Islam, for it has roots uniquely in Christianity. For "the secular" is "neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it" nor "a simple break from it". It is "certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life" (Asad, p.25). And "secular Europe" is "ideologically constructed in such a way that Muslim immigrants cannot be satisfactorily represented in it" (Asad, p.159). Asad hereby reproduces the similar "incommensurability" argument of Islamism and the extreme Right. Within limits, Asad makes an important point. Many European scholars, especially the Orientalist tradition, have ignored the historical genealogy of the secular in Islamic classical texts and practice. However, Asad is mistaken in failing to acknowledge that a comparable conceptual dualism has also pervaded the Islamic tradition. This intellectual stream pre-dated European secularism. So long as the Foucauldian

dichotomy between “modernity” and “subjugated knowledge” persists, this rich terrain of intellectual and empirical history will remain occluded.

Al-Ghazālī’s *Deen-Donya* discussion provides a counterpoint to destabilize the formulaic anti-modern current of Asad’s argument. There is nothing like the “Europe and its other” dynamism, if we examine intellectual history within the institutional matrix of “complex societies”. “Complex societies” are Karl Polanyi’s category for comparative analysis in early modernity. It is hardly an exaggeration to locate the Abbasid Empire within the category as a 12th century variant. Harold J. Berman’s *Law and Revolution* has done this for European societies, arguing that elements of modernity’s institutional matrix require a deeper 11th century historical excavation. Here, we have presented a comparable case for an Islamic intellectual history integrating al-Ghazālī within expanding Abbasid civilization. Al-Ghazālī addressed a crisis of culture and values in the Abbasid Empire. His notion of ‘revivalism’ was really a matter of constructing a pragmatic – even sociological - knowledge. His writings articulated, for Muslims, a concrete notion of Islam for all aspects of a newly complex life, including personal and collective aspects of a dynamic and growing composite civilization. Al-Ghazālī categorized these matters in terms of *Donya* [this world] and *deen* [faith or religion]. This is the germ of a dualism that Asad, and his followers, neglect to acknowledge. It results in a romantic simplification of the global Islamic civilizational legacy, a formulaic anti-modernist template ideal for the crudely nihilistic worldview of contemporary Islamists.

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