

Islamic Education: A Contrastive Analysis of Ibn Sīnā's and Al-Ghazālī's views

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Abstract

Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī were two great philosophers in the Muslim history. They shared in their ideas, among others, on man, society, and education. Their views on these subjects are to some extent different from each other. This paper is devoted to carry out a contrastive analysis of the ideas concerning Islamic education conceptualized by these two scholars, besides referring to their biography, their views on man, morality, society, and man's sources of knowledge; and highlighting their contributions towards Islamic Education.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Contrastive Analysis, Ibn Sīnā, Al-Ghazālī

Abstrak

Ibn Sina dan Al-Ghazali merupakan dua orang ahli falsafah terunggul dalam sejarah Islam. Kedua mereka telah menyetengahkan pendapat mereka mengenai manusia, masyarakat dan pendidikan. Pendapat mereka dalam banyak segi berbeza di antara satu sama lain. Makalah ini merupakan suatu analisis perbandingan mengenai konsep pendidikan Islam kedua tokoh tersebut. Di samping itu, makalah ini juga membentangkan hal-hal berhubung dengan biografi hidup, pandangan mengenai manusia, moral, masyarakat, sumber ilmu manusia dan memaparkan sumbangan mereka ke arah pendidikan Islam

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Islam, Analisis Berbandingan, Ibn Sīnā, Al-Ghazālī

Introduction

Ibn Sīnā and Al-Ghazali are two of the most distinguished and prominent Muslim scholars of all time. Though they lived during different eras, their intellectual ingenuity and prolific scholarly contributions gained them a respectable position not only in the Muslim world but also in the West. They were called and written as 'Avicenna' and 'Al Gazel' respectively in the West. Their acclaimed works expanded the depth and breadth of knowledge that they were regarded as the *magnum opus* of the different fields until today. Their exuberance and zest for knowledge was so profound and unparalleled to any of the contemporary scholars. It was their strong love and honest commitment for the search of knowledge that provided them the endless motivation to produce their most exceptional works. This paper attempts to deliberate on these two exceptionally remarkable scholars in terms of the similarities and differences on their philosophical views; their effects on Muslim education; and lessons

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that can be learnt from their personal conducts. Before a thorough deliberation is made on these two renowned scholars, an explication on the concept of knowledge from the Islamic perspective is most apt at this juncture in order to better appreciate the scholars' contributions in the realm of knowledge and intellect.

Knowledge from Islamic Perspective

Knowledge is placed at the greatest pinnacle in Islam. Indubitably, it is the source for man to know the Ultimate Reality, to profess and strengthen his devotion and conviction to the Divine Power, and to acknowledge that everything belongs to Him (including knowledge) and that one day everything will return to Him. On a more temporal level, it is a means for man to fulfill his responsibilities in conducting his worldly affairs which consequently should also lead him closer to the Almighty since these worldly affairs are '*ibādah*' to show his piety towards Him. From the Islamic perspective the multitude and multifarious knowledge possesses only one ultimate aim, that is, to know the Eternal Creator.

The importance of knowledge in Islam is most clearly depicted since the dawn of the conception and creation of man. *Sūrah Al-Baqarah*: 30-39 illustrates a conversation between God and the angels on the creation of Adam as the vicegerent or '*khalīfah*' on earth. The angles who were initially skeptical of this magnanimous plan were at ease upon witnessing Adam's ability to recite 'names of things' which were taught to him by Allah. They acknowledged their ignorance and limited knowledge and they displayed their respect toward Adam by prostrating. In this short but crucial episode, Allah has highlighted three important lessons for Muslims. Firstly, He illustrated the significance of the teaching and learning process whereby He was the teacher and Adam was the student; secondly, the knowledge of the 'names of things' which Allah had bestowed to Adam had given him dignity over those who were ignorant; and thirdly, the element of knowledge in the 'names of things' indicates that all knowledge commences from Him and belongs to Him.

The first revelation sent by Allah the Almighty to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) clearly accentuates the injunction for man to read and empower themselves with knowledge in order to pledge their obedience to Allah. Verses 1-5 in *Sūrah al-'Alaq*, particularly the words '*iqra*' (read) and '*qalam*' (pen), encapsulate a strong call for the believers to be 'literate' and thus knowledgeable so as to be closer to the Creator. The arrival of the Last Prophet (SAW) also brought the light (*nūr*) on the ignoramus (*jāhil*) and salvaged them from their state of disbelief (*kufir*) to the state of enlightenment.

These two fundamental evidences clearly depict the fact that the concept of knowledge from the framework of Islamic epistemology cannot be detached from the spiritual or transcendental entity for it is firmly entrenched in the

Power of Divinity as its most fundamental thrust. The search for knowledge becomes mandatory on all believers. The Prophet (SAW) said: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim".¹ In Islam, the quest for knowledge does not only connote a physical, emotional and mental engagement but more importantly it also involves the spiritual commitment where it is considered as *ibādah*, as it is to seek to know the Ultimate Truth.

Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī were two Muslim scholars *par excellence* who embodied the true essence of the spirit of intellectual quest as promulgated by Islam. Despite some fundamental differences in their approaches, both scholars held strongly to the premise that knowledge and Islam are intrinsically intertwined.

Background of Ibn Sīnā

In 980 AD in the village of Afshānā in Bukhārā, the Muslim world received the birth of one of the most renowned Islamic scholars who contributed significantly to the glory of the Golden Age of Islamic Civilization (750-1258). His name was Abū 'Alī al-Ḥussain ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Sīnā.² His scientific and inquisitive inclinations were cultivated from a very tender age by the intellectual setting of his own family. His father, 'Abd Allah ibn Ali ibn Sīnā was one of the governors in the Samanid rule. He himself was a very learned and scholarly figure; and he appreciated intellectual debates and discourses which were commonly held in the vicinity of his household. During these occasions, Ibn Sīnā, albeit still young, would never fail to join his father and his companions. After their discussions were over, he then would start to seek clarification from his father on the issues previously discussed.³ It was most obvious that these intellectual discourses were the initial impetus in developing his spirit of inquiry that eventually led him to make enormous significant contributions to the Muslim world throughout his life. His father was also very much concerned about his education. He received tutoring from the best teachers during his time. He studied Arabic from Abu Bakr Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Barqī al-Khwarizmī; he attended Maḥmūd al-Massah school to study philosophy, geometry and Indian mathematics; and he gained a new interest in theoretical sciences and philosophical studies under the tutelage of

¹ Al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaimān ibn Ahmad, *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ* (ed. Ṭāriq ibn 'Iwaḍu Allah), Dār al-Ḥaramayn, Cairo, n.d. vol. 1, p. 7, Ḥadīth No. 9.

² Abd Rahman al Naqīb. Avicenna. International Bureau of Education. Vol.XXIII, no. 1 / 2, 1993, p.53

³ Ibn Sina – Pakar Perubatan (Siri Tokoh Cendekiawan Islam), [Trans. Abd Karim Mustafa], (DBP: KL, 2003), p. 2.

Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Natlī who also introduced him to Aristotelian doctrines.⁴ It was no surprise that before reaching 10, he already knew the Qur’an and other major texts and before he was 18, he was already a renowned figure in philosophical inquiries and medical sciences.⁵

The promotion for a vigorous and prosperous quest of scientific inquiry during the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate was another factor that contributed significantly toward Ibn Sinā’s thirst for knowledge and intellectual ingenuity. His acquaintance with Amīr Nūḥ ibn Manṣūr (976-997) enabled him to get admission to the royal library.⁶ It is important to note that during this time a huge number of philosophical and scientific works especially from the Greeks had already been translated into Arabic.⁷ Thus, his access to the Prince’s library provided him a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the wealth and treasure of knowledge, including the works of Aristotle.⁸

Despite his chaotic life and inadvertent involvement in the political turmoil around him, he was able to compose valuable works which were very much sought after and referred to in the Middle East and Europe for many centuries. Among his major contributions were *Al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*), a very systematic and comprehensive book on medicine, and *Kitāb al-Shifā* (*The Book of Healing*), his voluminous work on philosophy, mathematics, logic, natural sciences, psychology, geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and music.⁹ Others were *Kitāb al-Hāsil wa al-Maḥṣūl* dealing with various sciences, *Kitāb al-Majmū’* on mathematics, and *Kitāb al-birr wa al-Ithm* on ethics.¹⁰

He passed away on a Friday in the month of Ramaḍān in 1037 C.E. after suffering from colic. He was buried in Hamadan.¹¹

⁴ Abd Rahman, Avicenna, p.54

⁵ Ibid. p.54.

⁶ This relationship was developed after he was able to cure the Amir of his illness when other physicians have failed. Ibn Sina – Pakar Perubatan (Siri Tokoh Cendekiawan Islam). Translator Abd Karim Mustafā. (DBP: KL, 2003), p.13-17.

⁷ For an in-depth elaboration on the translation project initiated by Caliph Al-Ma’mun see The American Scientific Affiliation, “Al-Ghazali Contra Aristotle: an Unforeseen Overture to Science in 11th Century Baghdad”; available from www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1994/PSCF3-94Aulie.html; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010.

⁸ Masarrat Husain Zuberi. *Aristotle 384-322B.C and Al Ghazali 1058-1111 A.D.* (Noor Publishing House, India, 1992), p.18.

⁹ Islamonline.net, “Great Muslim Scholars –Avicenna”; available from www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1158321476432&pagename=Zone-English-HealthScience/HSELayout; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010.

¹⁰ “Abu ‘Ali al-Husayn b. ‘Abd Allah ibn Sina (370/980-428/1037)”; available from www.cis-ca.org/voices/s/ibnsina_mn.html; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010.

¹¹ Abbas Mahmud Aqqad. *Filsafat Pemikiran Ibn Sina*. (Pustaka Mantiq: Indonesia, 1988), p. 27

Background of Al-Ghazālī

Twenty-one years after the death of Ibn Sīnā in 1037 C.E, Muslim world celebrated the arrival of another prominent Muslim scholar. Abū Ḥāmid Mohammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī was born in 1058 C.E. in Ṭūs in the vicinity of Khourāsān into a family wool spinner.¹² Al-Ghazālī was exposed to Sufism since young age because his father was a traditional Sufī and after his father's death he and his younger brother were placed under the care of one of his father's Sufī friends.¹³ He started his formal education at a *madrasah* where he learned the different branches of religious studies.¹⁴ At 23, he travelled to Nīshāpūr to study at the *Nizāmīyyah* of Baghdad under the guidance of a famous scholar Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī known as Imām al-Ḥaramayn. After the death of his teacher, he was appointed the head professor at the school by the then *Vizier Nizām al-Mulk*. He lectured approximately 300 students every year and his involvement in Islamic debates shot his name to fame within a short period of time.¹⁵ In 1095, due to a 'spiritual crisis', he abandoned his career at *Nizāmīyyah* and left Baghdad for Damascus.¹⁶ The intricacy of this internal struggle and spiritual search for *'ilm al-yaqīnīyy* (peremptory knowledge) during the crisis was well deliberated in his book *Munqidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from the Error) where he mentioned that the crisis was resolved by "a light which God Most High caused to penetrate into my heart – the light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge."¹⁷ As a result, he rejected all material wealth and fame to lead the life of a Sufi.

Al-Ghazālī was indeed a very loud and critical figure in protecting the sanctity and purity of the Islamic religious sciences. This earned him the title *Ḥujjat al-Islam* (Proof of Islam). During his time the Islamic knowledge was very much tainted with alien elements due to its exposure and encounter with various foreign cultures such as the Greeks and Hellenistic philosophy.¹⁸ Believing that he is the promised revivifier whom God sends during each

¹² Wool spinner or 'ghazzal'. This is how he acquired the title Ghazzaliy. Mustafa Abu-Sway. *Al-*

Ghazzaliyy- a study in Islamic epistemology. (DBP: K.L,1996), p.16.

¹³ Nabil Nofal. *Al-Ghazali*. International Bureau of Education. Vol.XXIII, no.3/4, 1993, p.519

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.519.

¹⁵ "Al-Ghazali"; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ghazali>; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali*, trans. Claude Field (S.M.Ashraf:Lahore,1987), p.20

¹⁸ "Al-Ghazali"; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ghazali>; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010

century, he took it as his responsibility to not only cleanse himself but also purify the Islamic body of knowledge from corrupt elements. During his period of seclusion, he wrote an encyclopedic work, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences). This voluminous piece is divided into four sections, the Acts of Worship, the Usages of Life, the Destructive Matters of Life and the Saving Matters of Life.¹⁹ Al-Ghazālī stated that his main objectives in writing these books were “to revive the science of religion, to bring to light the exemplary lives of the departed imams, and to show what branches of knowledge the prophets and the virtuous fathers regarded as useful”.²⁰ Other major works which were aimed at defending Islam were *Maqāsid al Falāsfah* (Aims of the Philosophers), *Tahāfut al- Falāsfah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah* (Beginning of Guidance) and *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* (Jewels of the Qur'an).²¹

This distinguished philosopher-cum-jurist passed away on December 1111 C.E. and under his bed was found a paper containing the following stanzas:

"...Do not believe that this corpse you see is myself. I am spirit and this is naught but flesh. I am pearl which has left its shell deserted. It was my prison where I spent my time in grief. I am a bird and it was my cage. Whence I have not flown forth and it is left as a token. Praise be to God, who hath now set me free..."²²

Ibn Sīnā's and Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Underpinnings

a) Concept of Man and Morality

Ibn Sīnā propounded that every human being is an amalgamation of three fundamental elements: body (*jism*), soul (*nafs*) and intelligence (*'aql*).²³ He explicated that “a body is a composite of two constituents, a substratum matter and a form.”²⁴ It is made up of two essential elements, the hidden (*sirr*) and the open (*'alin*). *Sirr* refers to the human mental powers while *'alin* encompasses the *jasad* (tangible body) at the exterior and the internal parts which are revealed via anatomy.²⁵ Ibn Sīnā's notion of the soul is reflective of

¹⁹ Al-Ghazali, *The Book of Knowledge*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (S.M.Ashraf: Lahore,1991) p.3-4

²⁰ Ibid., p. 2

²¹ Mustafa Abu-Sway. *Al-Ghazzaliyy- a study in Islamic epistemology*. (DBP: K.L,1996)

²² Masarrat. *Aristotle 384-322B.C and Al Ghazali 1058-1111 A.D.* p.155-6.

²³ Parviz Morewedge. *The Metaphysica of Avicenna*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p.251

²⁴ Ibid.,p.251

²⁵ Abd Rahman, *Avicenna*, p.53

the Aristotelian view where he demarcated it into three distinctive categories: vegetative, animal and rational souls. The qualities of the vegetative faculties are shared by both humans and plants and these qualities encompass the basic needs of growth, nutrition and reproduction.²⁶ The second category, the animal soul, places humans together with the animals but differentiates them from plants. He divided it into mobility and immobility.²⁷ The functions of mobility are to motivate humans to achieve the things they desire and to shun dangerous and harmful elements through instinctive reaction and rational movement. On the other hand, immobility helps to achieve comprehension and sense perception through the external senses (five senses) and internal senses (common senses), memory, imagination and conceptual imagination.²⁸ The third category is the one which distinguishes humans from animals and it is called intelligence. It is the most significant dimension that guides humans' physical and intellectual conduct through its practical and speculative nature.²⁹

With all the inherent varied faculties in a human being, Ibn Sīnā held that every person possesses the innate potential of being good or bad; it all depends on the kind of elements that he is exposed to. This is most indisputable since man is born upon the 'natural disposition' (*fiṭrah*). He further stressed that when an individual is exposed to an evil influence, it is required upon him to identify its opposite element i.e. the admirable quality, and compel himself to achieve it. He must accustom himself with this positive value until it has become a part of him. This means that he will not be hesitant to project this good value in his behavior when the need arises because he has successfully inculcated it in his soul. As such, the individual will practice this good behavior "at every appropriate occasion because the person has accustomed himself to it and is unable to act otherwise".³⁰ When a man reaches this stage in his moral upbringing, he can be considered an ethical person. He also stated that "The human being must prepare for his soul both reward and punishment, and govern it thereby."³¹ In this statement he was urging human beings to achieve high moral standards in their lives by guarding their actions through their reasoning; and should they deviate from the right path, they must punish their souls. However, they should be appropriately rewarded if their souls are virtuous. The fundamental basis of Ibn Sīnā's idea of man and morality is very much connected to the notion of man as a rational being who should be able to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong.

²⁶ Ibid., p.54

²⁷ Parviz, *The Metaphysica of Avicenna*, p.253

²⁸ Ibid., p.253-4

²⁹ Ibid., p.254

³⁰ Abd Rahman, *Avicenna*, p.58

³¹ Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Siyasa*. op.cit., p. 1039; quoted in Abd Rahman Al Naqib. *Avicenna*. International Bureau of Education. Vol.XXIII, no. 1 / 2, 1993, p.58

Al-Ghazālī's concept of *self* encompasses four different entities: *nafs* (soul), *qalb* (heart), *rūh* (spirit) and *'aql* (intellect).³² He further expounded that the *nafs* (soul) is of four different types, vegetative, animal, human, and universal.³³ Each of these souls has its own unique characteristics in that the animal soul possesses the quality of sense perception which is lacking in the vegetative soul, but it is devoid of intellect which is a part of the universal soul. The human soul, however, possesses both the intellect and the thinking faculty which enables it to make choices and act accordingly.³⁴ Al-Ghazālī also highlighted that each human being is endowed with four different types of internal qualities: animal, ferocious, demoniacal, and angelic. According to him, which ever quality is supreme in an individual's make up will be translated into his or her behavior. For instance, individuals with the qualities of animal will be engulfed in rage, revenge, appetite and indignation, while those with the ferocious qualities have the desire to hurt and ruin, and the demoniacal qualities will land humans in treachery and fallacy. Only those with angelic qualities who constantly worship Allah will attain to His love. He urged humans to identify "what qualities predominate in your character, and in the predominance of which your true happiness consists."³⁵ Al-Ghazālī also stressed that these qualities are closely intertwined with one's soul, heart, or spirit. He mentioned that God has graced humans with body and spirit, and heart. The body is a mere vehicle where the heart reigns supreme.³⁶ It is thus the responsibility of humans to cleanse the heart and purify the soul so that the body will translate it into admirable behaviors which will elevate them closer to God.

Al-Ghazālī emphasized this in relation to the *fiṭrah* of human beings where they are neither good nor bad, yet they possess more potential toward the former than the latter. The humans' minds and behaviors are greatly influenced by their interaction with the society and the environment. At the initial stage, the family particularly the parents make the biggest impact on the children for they are the first source of knowledge where children learn about their cultures, values, customs and traditions. The second most influential authority is the

³² "Al-Ghazali"; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ghazali>; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010

³³ Hamid Fahmy Zarkashy, *Educational Thoughts of Al-Ghazali* (Kuala Lumpur: DBP), p.36

³⁴ Ibid., p.25

³⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Henry A.Homes Online Library of Liberty PLL v5 (generated January 22, 2010); available from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1844>; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010.

³⁶ Ibid., p.9

teachers who are responsible in conveying knowledge and shaping the thinking of the learners. He clearly stated this in *Tahāfut al-Falāsafah*:

In this universe lives man, a creature with an immortal soul and a mortal body. Man is neither good nor evil by nature, although his natural disposition is closer to good than to evil. Furthermore, he operates within a constrained framework, within which there is more compulsion than freedom of choice. He is not so much meant for this world, in which he toils, as for the hereafter, which he must aspire to and strive to achieve.³⁷

Considering the inevitable external and internal influences in the human development, it is imperative that humans must always purify their souls for the “soul is like a clean mirror into which, whenever a person looks, he may there see God.”³⁸

b) Concept of Society

According to Ibn Sīnā, societies are built on the fundamental concept of ‘cooperation’.³⁹ He highlighted the impossibility of human beings to exist in isolation of one another because of the inherent interdependency among its members. Human beings depend on each other in ensuring their survival, in fulfilling their needs and in accomplishing their educational goals. For instance, engineers, despite their professional status, will still depend on the contributions made by paddy planters for without them, the professionals will not be able to get their daily dose of rice. And the paddy planters will also depend on the skills of the engineers to build the irrigation systems for their paddy fields. This interdependency in a society requires that each member must be highly specialized in different crafts and skills so that they will be able to contribute essentially to the development and progress of the society. Besides that, the cooperation and interaction between the members of the society must be done according to certain guidelines and rules which are part of the whole social system. Inability to do so will lead towards chaos and anarchy. In order to achieve this harmony, it is imperative that the society be governed by a leader. Ibn Sīnā clearly delineated the duties of a leader: “to implement the principles of the law, wherever there is a text, and he is an independent interpreter (*ijtihād*) who consults people in authority where there is no text.”⁴⁰ In the choice of a leader, he expounded that the “legislator must be a human being who stands out from the others through qualities which ensure that his

³⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al-Falasifah*. Trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Pakistan Philosophical Congress: Lahore, 1963), p. 237

³⁸ Ibid., p.23

³⁹ Abd Rahman, *Avicenna*, p.56

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.57

word is obeyed and the people follow him.”⁴¹ The core of Ibn Sīnā’s system of governance lies in the principle that “the whole society must submit to the righteous holy law of God through the Prophet (SAW), who legislated it in the light of divine revelation.”⁴² It is now clear that Ibn Sīnā’s concept of society is one which is very practical in nature and strongly imbued with Islamic religious principles.

Al-Ghazālī, like Ibn Sīnā, also elucidated the importance of ‘togetherness’ in a society for “the existence of the individual is insignificant compared to the existence and strength of the group.”⁴³ He divided the members of a society into three distinctive groups according to their roles and abilities. The first group, which is the biggest, is the commoners. These are the people who are unable to grasp the concept of truth due to their incompetence or their indulgence in worldly affairs. As a result, they merely obey the dictates of the rulers. Next are the scholars who are involved in handling matters pertaining to religion and theology, while the elite are the rulers who are responsible on issues related to the governance of state. Al-Ghazālī stressed that despite these different classes, the ultimate goal of a society is none other than to uphold “the religion of God and of affording people the opportunity of adoring Him.”⁴⁴

c) Sources of Knowledge

Ibn Sīnā, following the Aristotelian Hellenistic tradition, held that the human soul differs significantly from the animal soul due to its ability to “conceptualize the intelligible” through the rational soul, also known as ‘material intellect’ or ‘potential intellect’.⁴⁵ He maintained that the intelligible emanated from the Pure Intellect (God), who is the principle of existence and the object of human knowledge. The rational soul captures the intelligible in two ways, divine inspiration and syllogistic reasoning. Divine inspiration does not necessitate the use of senses for it involves *a priori* intelligible or primary beliefs such as ‘whole is greater than part’ or ‘two contrasting elements cannot be present in a single entity simultaneously.’⁴⁶ It is constructed in the rational soul upon contact with the Active Intellect which is a form of emanation beneath the Pure Intellect.⁴⁷ On the other hand, syllogistic reasoning entails the provision of proof (*burhān*) which can be achieved by utilizing logic (the

⁴¹ Ibid., p.56

⁴² Ibid., p.56

⁴³ Nabil Nofal, *Al-Ghazali*, p.522

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.522

⁴⁵ Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (The Netherlands: E.J.Brill, 1988) p. 17

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Ibn Sina*, available from www.muslimphilosophy.com/ibnSina; Internet; accessed on 30 Mac 2010

conceptualization of logical truths); physics (verification of physical matters); mathematics and metaphysics.⁴⁸ Ibn Sīnā explained that this method is most effective due to the nature of the intelligible which is syllogistically structured hence demands the use of logic in comprehending their interconnectedness.⁴⁹

As for al-Ghazālī, he differentiated the thinking ability between human and animal in that the former possesses rational discernment (*mīz*) which is crucial in generating knowledge while the latter due to the lack of it relies purely on its instinctive nature.⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī's pursuit in the search for certitude or *'ilm al-yaqīnīyy* led him to investigate three sources of knowledge namely sense perceptions, necessary principles or reason, and divine illumination.⁵¹ He argued that evidences from sense perceptions do possess some doubtful elements and he quoted the 'sight' as an example. He stated that one may be deceived upon seeing the phenomena of 'shadow' or the 'size' of a concrete entity (i.e. a star and a piece of gold) which greatly depends on the perspective of the sight. In the same way, his analysis on the phenomena of sleep in relation to reason has obliterated his conviction of it being a source of certitude. Thus, he contemplated that "perhaps, there is above reason another judge who, if appeared, would convict reason falsehood, just as reason has confuted us."⁵² And he ascribed this third source "to the light (*nūr*) which God caused to penetrate into my heart – the light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge"⁵³ This *nūr* is the divine enlightenment that was bestowed on him through the path of Sufism where knowledge is revealed directly from God.

Analysis of Ibn Sīnā's and Al- Ghazālī's Philosophical Views

Both Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī propounded a similar idea on the concept of man. All human beings are born neither good nor bad but rather 'upon the natural disposition' (*fiṭrah* or *tabula rasa*). They are like a white piece of cloth; they will grow up according to the pattern chosen by their parents and the systems of environment they are exposed to. This concurs with a ḥadīth narrated by Abu Hurairah that the Prophet (SAW) said:

The mother of every person gives him birth according to his true nature (*fiṭrah*). It is subsequently his parents who make him a Jew or a

⁴⁸ Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* p. 17-18

⁴⁹ *Ibn Sina*; available from www.muslimphilosophy.com/ibnSina; Internet; accessed on 30 Mac 2010

⁵⁰ Mustafa Abu-Sway. *Al-Ghazzaliyy- a study in Islamic epistemology*. p.51-52

⁵¹ *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali*, p.16-20

⁵² *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali*, p.18

⁵³ *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali*, p.20

Christian or a Magian. Had his parents been Muslim, he would also remain a Muslim.⁵⁴

Upon realizing the delicate and pure nature of a child's mind and soul, both philosophers stressed the importance of early childhood education. Both of them agreed that the young souls must be exposed to the teachings of the creed and must be brought up according to the correct ethics at a tender age because these fundamentals will reverberate throughout their lives and shape their individual characters. Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī provided an explicit deliberation on the difference between animals and man in their categorization of the souls. Both of them highlighted that the crucial difference between these two species is the fact that humans are equipped with intellect or intelligence which enables them to analyze, synthesize, and comprehend universal concepts through the rational souls.⁵⁵ Both scholars also shared a common perception on the concept of society that it should be constructed on the basis of the divine law, which ultimately leads to pledge obedience to the Almighty. They elucidated that despite the different categories among the masses; there must be the spirit of cooperation and togetherness between them due to the indisputable interdependency which is critical in creating a strong Ummah. In the realm of knowledge, it is most explicit that these distinguished scholars held knowledge in such high esteem. In their own precise, elaborate and comprehensive manner they successfully articulated their own personal conception of knowledge and the whole spectrum related to it.

Nevertheless, it is also very conspicuous that these concepts were generated based on different epistemology and orientation. This is the main aspect where the scholars diverge. Ibn Sīnā applied a more rationalistic approach in elucidating knowledge due to the influences of the Greek philosophy particularly Aristotle. As a Neoplatonic philosopher he held to the theory of emanation and that knowledge too is a form of emanation from the Pure Intellect (God). This is reflective of Ibn Sīnā's attempt at reconciling philosophy with religion. Al-Ghazālī, on the other hand, through his mystical orientation gave greater prominence to revelation, the Quran and Sunnah. And in relation to knowledge, this principle is most evident in his voluminous composition of *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. However, al-Ghazālī's thought system should not be misconstrued as his rejection of reason for in *Tahāfut al-Falāsafah* he used reason as the weapon to display the fallibility of the philosophers. He opined that philosophy is acceptable as long as it does not contradict revelation.⁵⁶ He highlighted that the main weakness of Muslim philosophers adopting the Hellenistic tradition was their use of revelation to

⁵⁴ Sahih Muslim book 33 no 6429

⁵⁵ Abbas Mahmud Aqqad. *Filsafat Pemikiran Ibn Sina*. p.127

⁵⁶ Nabil Nofal, *Al-Ghazali*, p.520

suit their philosophical assumptions rather than learning and analyzing the religious precepts and extracting the philosophical principles from them.⁵⁷

Contributions toward Muslim Education

This part of the discussion will extract their valuable ideas and relate them to the total development of individuals through education. Besides that, an analysis of the scholars' personal conduct will also be highlighted in the hope that Muslims will gather considerable meaningful lessons from them.

Ibn Sīnā

According to Ibn Sīnā, educational process is equivalent to the "making of an upright citizen, sound in body and mind, and preparing him for some intellectual or a practical work."⁵⁸ This process can be divided into two phases where the first phase involves attaining equilibrium in the holistic development of individuals since young. It connotes the idea that all the different aspects of human development i.e. physical, mental and moral must be given equal emphasis; that none should be neglected. He opined that education is "not aim[ed] exclusively at the intellectual development and the amassing of knowledge nor devote on moral aspect alone, but formation of a personality complete in body, mind and character."⁵⁹ The second phase is geared towards obtaining specific skills or specialization so as to enable individuals to contribute meaningfully to the society. This concurs with the Avicennian social theory that "society is founded based on cooperation, mutual exchange of services between its individuals."⁶⁰

Ibn Sīnā emphasized the importance of education since the birth of the child. He explicitly and carefully laid down the procedures that need to be implemented during child birth in his famous book *al-Qānūn*. He also meticulously explicated the forms of activities that are necessary at this infant stage such as sleep, bathing, suckling and other suitable exercises. The first stage of childhood begins at age 3 to 5 years. At this phase the aim of education is to provide happy childhood experiences through the development of physical and motor skills and some emphasis on musical appreciation. The focus of educational is more inclined towards moral development, physical coordination, and initial appreciation of virtuous behaviors. Ibn Sina held that children are ready to start the primary education at 6 years old and it will

⁵⁷ M. Saeed Sheikh, *Studies on Muslim Philosophy* (Lahore: S.M. Ashraf, 1997) p. 153

⁵⁸ Abd Rahman, *Avicenna*, p.58

⁵⁹ Ibid.,p.58

⁶⁰ Ibid.,p.59

continue until they reach 14 years of age. The knowledge acquisition at this stage is much more systematic and organized with a gradual decrease in the physical activities. Learning during this stage takes place in classes in a school or *maktab* rather than individually. Ibn Sīnā stressed that learning in groups is more advantages than having a personal tutor because it sets the foundation for children to interact with one another particularly in discussions and debates, to inculcate the value of competition and to emulate the good values among them.⁶¹ He stated in *Kitāb al-Siyāsah* that “the child should be taught alongside the children of the nobility (the great or the rulers) whose conduct is good and whose habits are acceptable. For children will teach and learn from one another in the process of building a strong friendship. If one child is left alone with the teacher, that is most likely to be unsatisfactory for them both; when the educator moves from one pupil to another, the risk of boredom is less, the pace of activities is more rapid and the child is eager to learn to succeed.”⁶² At this stage they are taught the Qur’an, Islamic metaphysics, language, literature, Islamic ethics and some minor practical skills. The last stage is the specialized education which starts from 14 years onwards. Education at this level is more concerned with acquiring a specialization in an area which the children will be interested to pursue as their future career. Ibn Sīnā stressed the importance of giving freedom to the child to chart his own future, his studies and vocation. He reiterated that they must not be forced to take up something which is against their interest and will.⁶³ At this stage too, parents and teachers should pay close attention on the child’s behavior for it will be indicative of his or her inclinations on the future occupation.

From Ibn Sīnā’s stages in education, it is most obvious that he did not merely focus on the acquisition of theoretical knowledge per se. Rather he gave greater emphasis on the mastery of practical skills which are essential in developing knowledgeable workers who can contribute effectively toward the progress of the society.

Al-Ghazālī

The essential foundation of al-Ghazālī’s philosophy of education lies mainly in the knowledge of the glorious Creator. His aim of education is “to cultivate man so that he abides by the teachings of religion and is hence assured

⁶¹ “Philosophy of Education”; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_education; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010

⁶² Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Siyasa*. op.cit.,p. 1039; quoted in Abd Rahman Al Naqib. *Avicenna*. International Bureau of Education. Vol.XXIII, no. 1 / 2, 1993, p.60

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.61

of salvation and happiness in the eternal life hereafter.”⁶⁴ He described knowledge as “a way which leads to the hereafter and its happiness, and the only means whereby we come close to God.”⁶⁵ He also accentuated on the excellence of teaching and learning where he mentioned that “For if knowledge is the most excellent of things, the process of acquiring it would then be a search for the most excellent, and imparting it would be promoting the most excellent.”⁶⁶ In his effort to integrate the pursuit of seeking knowledge with the ultimate realization of the Almighty, he carefully delineated the methodology in his most remarkable and voluminous work *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences). At the very beginning of this lengthy masterpiece he gave a thorough explication on the importance of knowledge by providing justifications based on the Islamic tradition and reason. Quoting the Qur'anic verses and the sayings of the Prophet (SAW), he successfully established the prominence of knowledge in Islam and the irrefutable significance of knowledge seeking. For instance, in *Sūrah Āli- 'Imrān*: 18, God proclaimed that “God bears witness that there is no God but He, and the angels and men endowed with knowledge, established in righteousness.”⁶⁷ And among the *hadiths* that he quoted were “the learned men are the heirs of the prophets”⁶⁸ and “the superior rank the learned man holds over the worshipper is similar to the superiority of the moon when it is full over the other stars.”⁶⁹ He further substantiated that “it is knowledge that distinguishes man from the other animals ... by virtue of his noble aims and ideals.”⁷⁰

Also in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, al-Ghazālī thoroughly detailed out the appropriate duties of the students and teachers. For example, among the duties of the students are to purify their souls before they embark on the search for knowledge because any impurities in the heart will obstruct their fulfillment in its quest as a form of worship; to be very focused in seeking knowledge by decreasing their ties with the worldly affairs; to show greatest respect and remain humble toward the teacher; and to prioritize the branch of knowledge sought in order to avoid confusion.⁷¹ On the duties of the teachers, he emphasized that they are to treat the learners with sympathy as they would their own children; not to expect any kind of rewards or appreciation in doing their job; to ensure that the knowledge conveyed is suitable according to the

⁶⁴Nabil Nofal, *Al-Ghazali*, p.523

⁶⁵ Book of Knowledge, p.26

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 27

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 10

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 11

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 13

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 15

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 126-139

students' level of comprehension; and to allow students to embark on a particular task which they deem qualified upon the learners.⁷²

Al- Ghazālī's framework of the curriculum clearly represents his ideals of placing religion in the process of teaching and learning. He opined that children should start attending school upon reaching the age of 6 years. At this stage, their education should concentrate on Qur'anic studies such as reading and memorizing the Qur'an and memorizing the Hadiths as well as developing their literary skills. Besides that, inculcation of moral values is also being implemented.⁷³ Upon reaching puberty - 15 to 17 years of age - children will attend secondary education where they are taught the religious sciences and the natural sciences. He emphasized the importance of children to acquire mastery of the religious sciences prior to the natural sciences so that they will be aware of the religious requirements upon them and that their lives will be guided according to the Islamic principles.

On top of that, al-Ghazālī also provided a thorough ethical guidance in fostering moral conducts during the children's developmental process. He stressed that children must be educated with morally acceptable behaviors since tender age. For example, they must be taught to eat using the right hand; they must recite *Bismillah* before they eat, reaching for the food nearest to them. Besides that, they must be trained to develop noble qualities such as humility, patience, respectful, trustworthiness etc.⁷⁴

A reflection on al- Ghazālī's conception of education indubitably shows the entrenchment of religion as the fundamental basis in the pursuit of knowledge. He also placed knowledge and its whole entirety at the highest pinnacle in the life of a Muslim. It clearly accentuated his conviction that "clear understanding and clear intellect are the highest attributes of man, because through the intellect the responsibility of God's trust is accepted, and through it man can enjoy the neighborhood (nearness) of God."⁷⁵ It is most conspicuous that the eventual aim of seeking knowledge is to attain the 'neighborhood of God' and "happiness in the hereafter."⁷⁶ Hence, he equated a learned man to being "the keeper of God's most valuable treasures..."⁷⁷

A close look at the systems of education as proposed by both scholars clearly shows the interconnection between the process of teaching and learning to that of religious principles where holistic development of individuals becomes the main focus. Both Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī emphasized the

⁷² Ibid., p. 144-153

⁷³ Hamid Fahmy Zarkashy, *Educational Thoughts of Al-Ghazali* p.60

⁷⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, vol.3; quoted in Hamid Fahmy Zarkashy, *Educational Thoughts of Al-Ghazali* p.78

⁷⁵ Book of Knowledge, p.29

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.29

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.29

importance of providing religious guidelines to the learners since tender age due to the 'natural disposition' of human beings. The proper inculcation of values need to be carried out right after birth for it has a crucial influence on the learners' habit formation. Besides that, both of them also stressed on the need for the learners to be equipped with the knowledge of craft and industry so as to useful members of the society. It is most apparent that in respect to ethical guidelines in human development, al-Ghazālī proved to make the most contribution through his manual on ethics – *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* – which earned him the title “philosopher of Religion and Ethics.”⁷⁸

Besides the scholars' philosophical thoughts and methodological guidance, their personal experiences and conduct can also become a constructive epistemology for Muslims to emulate. Ibn Sina mentioned in his *Autobiography* that “Every time I was at a loss about a problem, concerning which I was unable to find the middle term in a syllogism, I would repair on its account to the mosque and worship, praying humbly to the All-Creator to disclose to me its obscurity and make its difficulty easy.”⁷⁹ This statement explicitly illustrates the undeniable importance of ‘prayer’ as a way of sustaining a strong spiritual relationship with the Almighty in ones pursuit of gaining knowledge. This is fundamentally so since all knowledge comes from Him and belongs to Him. Thus, it is only apposite that should one faces difficulties and hardships in fathoming any concepts or ideas, one should return to the Owner of the *'ilm* to shed light on those complexities. Ibn Sīnā also narrated an incident where he was gravely confused upon reading Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The text proved to be very challenging for him that even after reading it for forty times and memorizing its content, he was still unable to decipher the gist. Eventually, by the grace of God, he was given the enlightenment after he bought a book for three *dirhams* from the market. The book was *On the Purposes of Metaphysics* written by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī where he provided a thorough explication on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Ibn Sina stated that “I rejoiced at this and the next day I gave much alms to the poor in gratitude to God Exalted.”⁸⁰ The ‘giving of alms in display of gratitude’ is indeed a very honorable act for it connotes the idea that the joy of a Muslim must also be shared in the spirit of camaraderie among Muslims. Furthermore, it also indicates a sense of humility in the soul of the achiever when he is bestowed with *'ilm* by God Most Knowledgeable that his material wealth seems to be insignificant to the substantial worth of the *'ilm*.

⁷⁸ Nabil Nofal, *Al-Ghazali*, p.523

⁷⁹ W.E. Gohlman, *The Life of Ibn Sina* (New York: Albany, 1974); quoted in Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (The Netherlands: E.J.Brill, 1988) p.

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⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.28

Al- Ghazālī's ideological precepts and teachings are not only evident in his writings but more so in his own lifestyle. One very conspicuous example lies in his fifth tenet on the duty of a student where he said that "the seeker after knowledge should not allow any branch or kind of praiseworthy knowledge to escape him without carefully examining it in order to become familiar with its aims and purposes, and should time permit, he should take it up in detail..."⁸¹ Upon close scrutiny on his works, particularly his autobiographic piece *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* or The Confessions of al-Ghazālī, it can be detected that there is a strong parallelism between this principle on the duty of learners and his personal practice. He eloquently described in *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* that:

From the period of adolescence, that is to say, previous to reaching my twentieth year to the present time when I have passed my fiftieth, I have ventured into this vast ocean; I have fearlessly sounded its depths and like a resolute diver, I have penetrated its darkness and dared its danger and abysses. I have interrogated the beliefs of each sect and scrutinized the mysteries of each doctrine, in order to disentangle truth from error and orthodoxy from heresy. I have never met one who maintained the hidden meaning of the Koran without investigating the nature of his belief, nor a partisan of its exterior sense without inquiring into the results of his doctrine. There is no philosopher whose system I have not fathomed, nor theologian the intricacies of whose doctrine I have not followed out.⁸²

This description was meant to highlight on his spiritual journey in the search for truth whereby after traversing and dissecting the different school of thoughts and faiths he eventually produced a comprehensive critique on the scholastic theologians (*al-Mutakallimūn*), the esoteric (Batinites), the philosophers and the sufis. It is most obvious that this episode of his life exemplified his own preaching on the fifth principle in the duty of students because prior to developing the critique he made a thorough investigation on every minute aspect of theology. By doing so, he was also upholding the eighth tenet in the duty of the teacher which calls them to practice the things they preach. Hence, M. Saeed Sheikh's (1997) description of al- Ghazālī is most apt where he stated that Al-Ghazali was a philosopher whose "life and work are so intimately connected that it is difficult to separate one from the other."⁸³

Another crucial lesson from these scholars which Muslims should emulate is their spirit on the love for knowledge, their zest for scientific and spiritual enquiry which culminated in the production of numerous famous and important works. Ibn Sīnā, for instance, composed approximately 450 pieces of

⁸¹ Book of Knowledge, p.134

⁸² Al-Ghazali, *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali*. Trans. Claude Field (Lahore: S.M. Ashraf 1987) p. 13

⁸³ M. Saeed Sheikh, *Studies on Muslim Philosophy* p. 125

writings where only 240 survived till today. Out of this number 150 were on philosophy, 40 on medicine and the rest were on numerous sciences such as psychology, geology, mathematics, astronomy and logic.⁸⁴ Similarly, al-Ghazālī had approximately 457 titles in his name which included manuscripts, treaties and the like.⁸⁵ All these numbers do not only depict their wealth and depth of knowledge but more importantly they accentuated the skills of these scholars as prolific writers. Furthermore, a closer inspection into their writings will elicit a noticeable passion for details. For example, Ibn Sina, in delineating the guidelines in testing new drugs, meticulously listed down the components that are involved and steps that need to be taken.⁸⁶ He was also acclaimed as “the first scientist to graphically describe, in minute detail, the different parts of the eye (e.g., the conjunctive sclera, cornea, choroids, iris, retina, layer lens, aqueous humor, optic nerve, and optic chiasma).”⁸⁷ The same could be said of al- Ghazālī. For example, in *Alchemy of Happiness*, his profound literary gift was brought to the fore in the following lines:

Know, O student of wisdom! that the body, which is the kingdom of the heart, resembles a great city. The hand, the foot, the mouth and the other members resemble the people of the various trades. Desire is a standard bearer; anger is a superintendent of the city, the heart is its sovereign, and reason is the vizier. The sovereign needs the service of all the inhabitants. But desire, the standard bearer, is a liar, vain and ambitious. If the sovereign, the heart, should invariably consult with reason, his vizier, and, when desire was transgressing, should give to wrath to have power over him...there would then be an equilibrium in the condition of the kingdom, and all the members would perform the functions for which they were created, their service would be accepted at the mercy seat, and they would obtain eternal felicity....⁸⁸

By providing the analogy of a ‘human body’ to that of a ‘great city’, al-Ghazālī was able to give an illustration on the symmetrical parallelism of the workings of both entities which indirectly will enhance understanding. There are many more of these examples in his famous works.

⁸⁴ Avicenna Biography, available from www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Avicenna.html; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010

⁸⁵ Al-Ghazali, available from www.al-bushra.org/arbhrtg/ghazzali.htm; Internet; accessed 24 February 2010

⁸⁶ Islamonline.net, “Great Muslim Scholars –Avicenna”; available from www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1158321476432&pagename=Zone-English-HealthScience/HSELayout; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Henry A.Homes Online Library of Liberty PLL v5 (generated January 22, 2010); available from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1844>; Internet; accessed 27 February 2010.

These irrefutable evidences clearly portray the scholars' ingenuity of thoughts, their creativity in conveying ideas and zeal for clarity and precision.

Conclusion

Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī are two Muslim philosophers who displayed exceptional scholarly attitude. The juxtaposition of these scholars definitely accentuates their similarities in the realm of knowledge and education while simultaneously brings forth their point of divergent views related to the origin of knowledge and the reconciliation between religion and philosophy. Both scholars displayed a very close relationship between their intellectual quest and the recognition of God as the Ultimate Truth. This relationship is not only evident in their writings and thoughts but also in their personal conduct. They unraveled the greatness of God in the body of knowledge that they studied and in return their conviction or 'faith' for Him became stronger and firmer such as *'ilm yaqīnīyy* (peremptory knowledge) sought by al-Ghazālī. These two scholars are excellent epitome of the spirit of intellectual pursuit of knowledge as aspired by the Islamic epistemology. It is imperative for Muslims to learn from their legacy and emulate their devotion and fortitude in knowledge in order to defeat the intellectual stagnation and revive intellectual growth.