AL-GHAZÂLÎ’S “SPIRITUAL CRISIS” RECONSIDERED

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There have been many speculations about the reality of al-Ghazâlî’s unexpected abandonment of his professorial position at the Niẓâmiyyah college¹ and his departure from Baghdad. It is the aim of this paper to question those speculations in an attempt to present an impartial account of what has become known in modern literature as the “spiritual crisis”² of al-Ghazâlî. However, the scope of this paper is limited to certain works, selected wholly on arbitrary bases, which, for the most part, relate an account distinct from what al-Ghazâlî himself has stated with regard to his “conversion” to taṣawwuf and his renunciation of the world.

After the death of al-Juwaynî in 478 A.H./1085 C.E.,³ his most prominent student, al-Ghazâlî went to the Camp (Al-Mu‘askar) to see vizier Niẓâm al-Mulk, whose court was a meeting place for scholars. There, he debated with other scholars on various subjects and won their respect. About six years later at Al-Mu‘askar, Niẓâm al-Mulk assigned al-Ghazâlî

³ ‘Abd al-Malik [Imâm al-Ḥaramayn] Ibn ‘Abd Allah [Al-Shaikh Abû Muḥammad] Ibn Yûsuf. He was the teacher par excellence at the time.
to teach at the Niẓāmiyyah of Baghdad, where he lectured between 484 A.H./1091 C.E. and 488 A.H./1095 C.E. This position won him prestige, wealth, and “respect that even princes, kings, and viziers could not match.” Al-Ghazālī, according to the Hanbalite scholar, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 A.H./1200 C.E.), who studied at the hands of al-Ghazālī’s student, the Mālikī judge Ibn al-ʿArabī, came to Baghdad directly from Aṣfahān where the Camp must have been located.

At the Niẓāmiyyah, several hundred students used to attend the lectures of al-Ghazālī. Some of those students became famous scholars, judges, and a few became lecturers at the Niẓāmiyyah of Baghdad itself. Also, according to Ibn al-Jawzī’s al-Muntazam fī Tārīkh al-Mulūk wa al-Umam, scholars such as Ibn ʿAqīl and Abū al-Khaṭṭāb, among the heads of the Hanbalite school of jurisprudence, attended his lectures and incorporated them in their writings.

4 Al-Subki, 6: 196-197.
7 They include: Judge Abū Naṣr al-Khaqānī (d. 544 A.H./1149 C.E.); Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī al-Mālikī (d. 545 A.H./1150 C.E.), who was quoted frequently in criticism of al-Ghazālī; Abū ʿAbdullah Ṣafī Ibn ʿAbd al-Rashīd al-Jilī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 541 A.H./1146 C.E.), whose lectures were attended by Ibn al-Jawzī; Abū Mansūr Saʿd Ibn Muḥammad al-Bazzār (d. 539 A.H./1144 C.E.), who taught at the Niẓāmiyyah; Imam Abū al-ʿAth Thālib Ahmad Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Burhān (d. 518 A.H./1124 C.E.), who taught at the Niẓāmiyyah for a short period; and Abū ʿAbdullāh Ibn Tūmart, founder of the Al-Muwaḥḥidūn state in Al-Maghrib, among many others. Al-Sharbāṣi made a mistake in listing Abū Ḥāmid al-İsfārayini (d. 496 A.H./1015 C.E.), who was one of the heads of the Shafiʿites, among the students of al-Ghazālī. See ʿAḥmad al-Sharbāṣi, ʿAlī-Ghazālī (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1975), 32.
8 Al-Sharbāṣi, 31.