AL-GHAZĀLĪ’S POLITICAL THOUGHT: ITS NATURE AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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I. The Historical Setting: Challenges and Stimulants

Universally recognized as theologian, philosopher, master-sufi and jurist, the celebrated Hujjat-al-Islām (Proof of Islam), Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥāmid al-Ṭūṣī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, was also an outstanding and highly original political thinker.

A prolific writer, al-Ghazālī’s political ideas—especially as expressed in al-Iḥtiṣād fi’l Iʿtiqād, Mizān al-ʿAmal, Naṣīḥat al-Mulāk, Faḍāʾiḥ al-Bāṭiniyyah (or al-Mustaẓhirī) and Iḥyāʿ ‘Ulhām al-Dīn—are closely intertwined with his views on theology, philosophy, ethics, law and jurisprudence. A major expositor and interpreter of Islam in its many and all-encompassing facets, al-Ghazālī’s ideas in fact constitute an integral whole none of which can be fully comprehended in isolation from the others.

Like many other major political thinkers in both the Western and the Islamic traditions—Plato, Hobbes, Marx, al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Khaldūn included—al-Ghazālī’s interest in the theory and practice of politics was at least partly aroused and sustained by the fact that the political conditions in which he happened to live (born in 450 A.H./1058 A.D., died in 505 A.H./1111 A.D.) were far from perfect and the principal Islamic political institution, the caliphate, had for decades been in serious decline.

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1 Al-Subki, Tajuddin, Tabaqāt al-Shāfiʿyya al-Kubrā, 10 vols. (Cairo, Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabi, 1969) vol. 6, p.191. Al-Ghazālī’s first mentioned nisbah, al-Ṭūṣī, derives from his birthplace, a suburb of Ṭūṣ, near present day Meshed in Khurāsān, but he is, of course, much better known as al-Ghazālī (sometimes spelt al-Ghaṣālī with two ‘z’s or shadda) preceded with the kunya, Abū Ḥāmid.

2 See, for example, Al-Qalqashandi, Maʿāthir al-Ināfi fi Maʿālim al-Khilāfah, ed., ‘Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farraj (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Irshād, 1964); reprinted
Under the Buwayhids (945-1055) in particular, it had become little more than a plaything in the hands of the dominant war-lords who, as Shi`ites moreover, could not and, of course, did not, recognize the legitimacy of the Sunni `Abbasid caliphate even in theory.\(^3\)

No less disconcerting for al-Ghazālī was the fact that corruption, long known to have been widespread among the administrative and business classes, had also engulfed many among the `ulamā' This was particularly depressing because as bearers of the Shari`ah and Islamic ethics, the `ulamā' were, individually and collectively, expected to be not only examples of propriety and personal integrity but also leaders and standard bearers in the struggle for social reform, which for all Muslims was and remains a basic religious duty if not an article of faith.\(^4\)

In 1055 (i.e. three years before al-Ghazālī was born) the Seljuks, already in control of Khurāsān and Western Persia, finally destroyed the 110 year old Buwayhid hegemony over the enfeebled caliphate in Baghdad. Like the Buwayhids, the Seljuks were war-lords who, as such, continued to dominate the caliphate. Unlike their predecessors however, the Seljuks were Sunni Muslims and ardent defenders of the faith as articulated by al-Ash'arī and his followers; including al-Ghazālī’s renowned teacher, Imām al-Haramayn al-Juwainī and subsequently, al-Ghazālī himself.

Under the leadership of such able men as Tughrul-Beg, Alp Arslān and especially the brilliant wazir, statesman and administrator, Niẓām al-Mulk, the Seljuks did not only bring an end to the chaotic and unstable situation which had prevailed for several years previously—establishing important reforms of enduring value—but they also played crucial roles in the development of science and scholarship, especially through the establishment of a number of madrasahs (colleges of higher learning), generically known as

\(^3\) ibid., pp. 284 – 338.

\(^4\) For a thorough and thoughtful treatment of this subject in English, see Michael Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).