

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

Muddathir 'Abd al-Rahīm

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 Aḥmad al-Ṭūsī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī,¹ was also an outstanding and highly original political thinker.

A prolific writer, al-Ghazālī's political ideas—especially as expressed in *al-Iqtisād fi'l I'tiqād*, *Mizān al-'Amal*, *Naṣīhat al-Mulūk*, *Faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyyah* (or *al-Mustazhiri*) and *Ihyā' 'Ulūm 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.²

¹ Al-Subkī, Tajuddīn, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'yya al-Kubrā*, 10 vols. (Cairo, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1969) vol. 6, p.191. Al-Ghazālī's first mentioned nisbah, al-Ṭūsī, derives from his birthplace, a suburb of Ṭūs, near present day Meshed in Khurasān, but he is, of course, much better known as al-Ghazālī (sometimes spelt al-Ghazālī with two 'z's or *shadda*) preceded with the kunya, Abū Ḥāmid.

² See, for example, Al-Qalqashandī, *Ma'āthir al-Ināfa fi Ma'ālim 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 'Abbāsīd 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-Ḥaramayn al-Juwainī and subsequently, al-Ghazālī himself.

Under the leadership of such able men as Tughrul-Beg, Alp Arslān and especially the brilliant *wazīr*, 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

(Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1980), vol. I, p. 217 ff.

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).