1 *The Time and Life of Ghazālī*

Ghazālī and State-Making: "*Zamān al-Fatra*" (A Time of Religion's Eclipse)

Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub's *Farār az Madrasa* (*Escape from Madrasa*) is perhaps the most extensive biography of Ghazālī written in Persian. But it is more than a biography. In it, Zarrinkoub examines Ghazālī's intellectual formation not only in terms of its contributions to Islamic theology but as indications of influence from the Persian mystical tradition. Building on this narrative, we clarify how Ghazālī's mystical interpretation of Islam impacted the wider horizon of Islamic culture in the Abbasid world while avoiding an exclusive focus on Abbasid culture. This is because Ghazālī was in equal measure a product and leader of Seljuq's Persianate-inspired schools of thought. An appreciation of the historical and cultural confluence of the Abbasid and Seljuq Empires is crucial to explaining Ghazālī's reformist vision. Within Ghazālī's lifetime, the ideals and promises of the Seljuq state gave way to its sudden, chaotic demise, revealing in the process the glaring malfunctioning of a self-professed regime of salvation. Kenneth Garden has documented the impact of Ghazālī's disillusionment with politics after the collapse of the Seljuq regime he served: "In Aristotelian political thought, a well governed polis is a necessary basis for its inhabitants' pursuit of ethical perfection. But by 488/1095, after the regime he served had fallen to pieces, Ghazālī had given up on the possibility of politics providing a sound environment for the Practical Science and the pursuit of felicity."[1]

Ghazālī was born in 1058 CE in Tabaran, a district of Tus, in the province Khorasan, a part of present-day Iran. In 1040, years before his birth, the Seljuqs conquered the region of Khorasan. By the time that Ghazālī famously renounced his ties to the seminary there in 1095,

[1] Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī and His Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54.

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much of his life had been spent in the service of educational institutions patronized by the Seljuq regime. When Ghazālī was summoned in the year 1106, for a hearing before the Seljuq "King of the East," Sanjar, he was charged with having publicly criticized the founder of the Hanafi school of law some years before and was made to hear a list of his errors. Before the hearing, Ghazālī wrote a letter addressed to the sovereign, in which he reminded him of "his long service to the Seljuq regime and to the caliph, as well as of his renunciation of those ties [in 1095]." In that letter, Ghazālī described himself in his past life as having acted as "a messenger in important matters between the Sultan and the Commander of the Believers (the caliph)," before he saw "the world as it was and rejected it utterly." In the same letter, Ghazālī described his life in exile, explaining how during those travels he "swore at the grave of Abraham, the Friend of God – may God's prayers be upon him – no longer to go to any sultan, not to take the money of a sultan, and not to practice theological disputing or sectarian fanaticism."[2] Ghazālī's letter alludes to the political spiderweb of his earlier years, his role in it, and his bid to break free from the entanglements of courtly politics.

After advancing upon Khorasan and the Iranian mainland, the Seljuqs expanded west to conquer Baghdad, exploiting the power vacuum caused by struggles between the Abbasids and the Buyids to wrest this jewel from the former's control. The expanding and contracting boundaries of political power in Ghazālī's lifetime did not corrode the meaning of Islamic civilization but added layers to it. The Seljuq Empire stretched from modern-day Syria and Turkey in the west to Afghanistan in the east, and north to the Silk Road cities of Marv and Kashgar. While the caliph retained symbolic authority over Muslims worldwide and was not replaced despite the expansion of the Seljuqs, it was the Seljuqs who wielded effective power in the eastern Islamic lands, including in Baghdad, the seat of the caliphate. This system of "Abbasid–Seljuq rule" has been characterized as a "duoarchy." In return for their financial support, the Abbasids extended the cover of their symbolic prerogative to the Seljuqs, who wielded power on the ground. It was a matter of mutual need, with one holding the aura of legitimacy and the other wielding the weapon to protect and maintain its stability. Meanwhile, clandestinely, "each dynasty sought

[2] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 17.

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to expand its authority at the expense of the other."[3] Rival families vied suicidally with each other for power. These underlying forces would eventually tear apart the youthful Ghazālī's world.

The Seljuq Turks, recent converts to Islam, laid wreckage to the Turko-Persian kingdoms before them. They had conquered eastern Persian lands, forcing the Turkic Ghaznavid Empire into migration to the Indian subcontinent. Ghazālī served the Seljuq Empire, whose army consisted of Turkic nomads, while its administrators were, particularly after their expansion into Khorasan, of Persian origin. These Persian administrators included Niẓām al-Mulk, the vizier of the Seljuq Empire who is today considered "the most important statesman in Islamic history."[4] Niẓām al-Mulk's policies, the centerpiece of which was the government-sponsored madrasa system, laid the foundation for state administration in the Muslim world until modern times. Madrasas expanded to every urban center of the Seljuq Empire and are thought to have inspired future university systems in Western Europe.[5] His *Book of Government* examined justice and the role of government in Islamic society, inspiring later Muslim scholars like the historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) and acting as a reference for Machiavellian thought in the later European Renaissance.

Niẓām al-Mulk, like Ghazālī, was born near Tus, a city in the historic province of Khorasan, and subscribed to the Shāfiʿī legal school, while Seljuq rulers otherwise followed the Hanafi school. Niẓām al-Mulk and Ghazālī shared a world of cultural associations and doctrinal allegiances. When Niẓām al-Mulk endowed "a string of Shāfiī Madrasas, or colleges for the teaching of religious sciences, especially law" and "named the Niẓāmiyya Madrasas after their patron," he did not suspect that a young Ghazālī would study at the Niẓāmiyya of Nishapur.[6] In Khorasan, a fierce rivalry raged between the two legal schools, which went "beyond scholarly details of the law" to trigger "communal violence, political intrigue, and persecution of one sect by the other," earning it the label of "fanaticism" (*taʿaṣṣub*)

[3] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 17.
[4] Anthony Black, "Islamic and Western Political Thought: Does History Have Any Lessons?" *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 14, no. 3 (November 2011): 5–12.
[5] George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).
[6] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 20.

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from its contemporaries.[7] Ghazālī rose to the top of this fiercely competitive intellectual culture. He came to prominence having demonstrated his superior abilities in public debate and polemic, in a society where "theological debate was something of a spectator sport and a forum for talented scholars to impress powerful patrons."[8]

The Seljuqs staffed their institutions with more in mind than proficiency in lecturing. Religious scholars at the Niẓāmiyya in Baghdad served a further diplomatic function – acting as intermediaries between the Abbasids and the Seljuqs. From the information available to us about Ghazālī's six years at Niẓām al-Mulk's court, we can say that his work as a scholar had carried with it a double ambassadorial role in regional politics. Ghazālī served as Niẓām al-Mulk's emissary to the Abbasid caliph, "maintaining as amicable a relationship as possible between the Seljuq sultan and the Abbasid caliph."[9] While classical Islamic legal theory recognized the caliph as the executor of religious law – that is, the Shari'a – the sultan entered symbiosis with the caliph, borrowing from him signs of divine will and religious legitimacy in return for material protections. Ghazālī's role in politics, however wanted or not, and its cataclysmic undoing puts his subsequent life as reformer into much sharper perspective.

In this way, Ghazālī was a child of Niẓām al-Mulk's revolution in administration and politics, with its hopes for unifying the Seljuq and Abbasid states under the banner of justice and governance. Yet Ghazālī witnessed the sudden and tragic collapse of the Seljuq state, after Niẓām al-Mulk and Sultan Malikshāh were assassinated in an explosive chain of events. As Garden explains:

> [T]he stable and disciplined Seljuq regime that Niẓām al-Mulk had worked to create, the sectarian reconciliation he had sought to foster, and the harmony between the Abbasid head of the umma and the Seljuq military and political ruler proved to be so feeble. Not only had it collapsed; it had imploded into infighting between Seljuq and Abbasid and Seljuq and Seljuq, and there were at minimum plausible suspicions that the deaths that had launched the cycle of destruction were murders perpetrated by stakeholders in the system. It is hard to imagine this not changing the worldview of

[7] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 20.
[8] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 20.
[9] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 21.

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Al-Ghazālī, who had worked for Niẓām al-Mulk in creating the very system that had collapsed.[10]

The abrupt end of the Seljuq interval provides us with a new vision of Ghazālī as the subject of a failed state-building project, who nevertheless clung to the ideals of that lost revolution while plotting to reinstate its normative mission by other means. From the very beginnings of Ghazālī's life, institutional power and resource allocation manifestly shaped his intellectual biography. Following the collapse of the Seljuq state, a cycle of chaos and civil war plagued its former lands for thirteen years, while the Abbasid Empire, having lost its military protector, splintered into chaos. Only Khorasan, ruled by Sanjar was spared. There is no doubt that Ghazālī was acutely marked by these political disappointments. His writings describe the political disorder and military violence in vivid, almost emotional terms:

> Armies surrounded the City of Peace [Baghdad] whose outskirts were crowded with every sort of soldiery. It was a time of religion's eclipse (*zamān al-fatra*), and the world was overflowing with tribulation and roiling with strife. Swords were drawn in every region of the earth, and chaos was widespread in the rest of the country, where the flames of war did not abate and the stabbing and striking had no end. The armies craved riches and their maws yawned towards the treasuries. This led hearts to change and stirred up rancour and hatred.[11]

Ghazālī's description of a marauding military driven by material greed is an almost modern image of state collapse and terror. He describes the ensuing confusion, fear, and disappointment of inhabitants, who seem by his account to question their own certainties and beliefs after this. What Ghazālī calls "a time of religion's eclipse" was triggered by the highly suspect assassination of the Seljuq vizier: "[T]he regime of Malikshāh and Niẓām al-Mulk unravelled with breathtaking speed. On Ramadan 10, 485/ October 14, 1092, while travelling with the sultan from Isfahan to Baghdad, Niẓām al-Mulk was fatally stabbed in the vicinity of Nihāwand by an assassin who

[10] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 25.
[11] Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍāʾiḥ al-bāṭiniyya* [The Infamies of the Esotericists] (Cairo: Al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1964/1383), 186, quoted in Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 24.

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approached him posing as a Sufi petitioner. The assassin was seized and killed on the spot."[12]

Several weeks later, the thirty-seven-year-old Sultan Malikshāh also died of mysterious food poisoning. He had just returned from a hunting expedition, and, having feasted upon the kill, he became feverish, promptly retired to bed, and soon died in agony. Malikshāh's death catalyzed a bloody civil war and fragmented the empire into failed states, over which the late sovereign's sons warred. Ghazālī affirmed the widespread belief that Sultan Malikshāh had been deliberately poisoned when he referred to him as the "martyred Sultan." Sultan Malikshāh had reigned from 1072 to 1092, ascending to the throne under Niẓām al-Mulk. In 1087, Sultan Malikshāh dipped his saber symbolically into the Mediterranean Sea to secure the prolonged future and success of the Seljuq–Abbasid imperial order.[13] However, amidst a civilizational upsurge, one replete with innovations in poetry, philosophy, political science, mathematics, and astronomy, Niẓām al-Mulk was assassinated. As the assassin was instantly slaughtered, it was impossible to establish the killer's identity. We know, though, that Sultan Malikshāh routinely persecuted the Shi'a and, in particular, the Ismā'īlī Assassins (Persian *hashasīn*), a group of trained spies led by Hassan ibn Sabbah. Many therefore accused the Assassins, who regularly targeted Seljuq officials during the eleventh century, of Niẓām al-Mulk's death. A second theory charged that Sultan Malikshāh, resentful of his vizier's growing power and prestige, ordered the assassination himself. Whatever the case, the very public assassination of Niẓām al-Mulk and the death of Sultan Malikshāh following at its heels threw the Seljuq–Abbasid "duo-archy" into irreversible turmoil.

Ghazālī had an "extensive and complex relationship to the political authorities of his day." His adult life was "enmeshed in politics from beginning to end," and he remained "in the orbit of the most powerful men of his age throughout his career."[14] Only following their death and his own disillusionment did Ghazālī vow never again to participate in public theological debate, the very skill in which he excelled, and

[12] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 22.
[13] René Grousset, *L'épopée des Croisades* (Paris: Perrin, 2002), 12.
[14] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 18.

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that had secured his status with Niẓām al-Mulk before their mutual hopes were dashed.

Ghazālī's Early Life in Khorasan

Following the Abbasid Golden Age (775–861), the Muslim world splintered into a succession of dynasties. The Seljuq outpost of Ghazālī's upbringing was one of these fronts. The Fatimid dynasty of Cairo had been founded in 909 and drew on the support of Shi'i partisans in Baghdad to challenge Abbasid authority over the Islamic ummah while proselytizing everywhere in the eastern Islamic lands. Enemies to embedded powers existed within and without, finding support in the mosaic of religious and ethnic communities that sustained the empire's rapid economic growth. A monetary economy was created between the seventh and the twelfth centuries based on the expanding circulation of a stable high-value currency, the dinar. Muslim bankers, traders, and merchants pioneered some of the earliest uses of credit, checks, savings accounts, trusts, exchange rates, and banking institutions dealing in loans and deposits. Violence and civilization were never far apart. Until 1135, following Ghazālī's death, political crisis gripped feuding warlords and ultimately immobilized the Abbasid caliphate. Institutions imply networks, boundaries, and intermediaries who traverse them, creating different social classes and endowing each with radically different life possibilities. Ghazālī, the son of a poor but pious wool maker, was conscious of the dynamics of literacy and the institutionalization of financial resources. His father died in poverty while his children were still young and entrusted their education to a Sufi. But their Sufi guardian fell upon hard times. Lacking the means to care for the children, he sent them to a madrasa that met their basic needs. Although some have questioned this posthumous biographical tradition, it captures the contingencies of power and resources and their ideological adjuncts, which colored Ghazālī's upbringing. Ghazālī was exposed at an early age to the worldwide popular Sufi movement. Zarrinkoub evidences the revolution in the boundaries between collective self and other in the immense land-based empire of the Abbasids:

> [Ghazālī] was born in the village of Tabaran, in the outskirts of Tus, in Khorasan, in the year 1058 of the Gregorian calendar. [His father] spun

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wool in a small shop. His job was neither prestigious nor lucrative. "Ghazal" is an Arabic word meaning "craft," [and he was so named] because he sold wool. "Ghazālī" referred to his father's profession of selling wool. Though unable to read or write, he was a pious man who participated in both jurisprudential and Sufi congregations. He hoped his children would become preachers or scholars of Islamic jurisprudence. Their father soon fell ill. Before his death (in 1065), he entrusted his two young children to a Sufi friend with his entire savings, that the Sufi might raise and send them to school. Several years passed before the Sufi became too poor to feed and shelter the children and urged them to join the religious school of Tus to continue their education and take advantage of its financial aid.[15]

Hence, "[o]nce the basic necessities of life were covered through the religious school, Ghazālī could continue his education with peace of mind."[16] Given these early experiences of penury and loss, the acute sensitivity with which *The Alchemy of Happiness* analyzes how power is consolidated, broken down, and redistributed through the micro-institutions governing everyday life is not surprising, nor is the fact that the text functions primarily as an ethical guide for individuals and communities navigating the political and moral crisis of the rapidly growing Abbasid world. *The Alchemy of Happiness* is also a book about boundaries. Zarrinkoub, perhaps more importantly, indicates a second consequence of Ghazālī's early experiences in a distinctively pluralistic ethical outlook:

After a few years, Ghazālī went to Jorjan in Gorgan to pursue his education and attended the famous Islamic jurisprudence classes of Abūlqasim Ismā'īlī Jordan, who came from an Ismā'īlī family … [Later in] Nishapur [Ghazālī joined] a major centre for science and learning in a large city with famous mosques, Sufi monasteries, and many schools. Ghazālī widened his network of relationships beyond Imam Al-Ḥaramayn's [Al-Juwaynī] classes. He established a relationship with Abdulsalam Ibn Yusif Ghazvinī, one of the great Mu'tazilites in Nishapur, with whom he had debates and discussions. It was likewise said that, during this period, Ghazālī established a relationship with philosopher Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) and likely studied mathematics and astronomy with him.[17]

[15] Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub, *Farār az Madrasa: Dāstān-i Zindigī va Andīsh-ha-yi Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī* [Escape from Madrasa: On Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad Ghazālī's Thought and Life] (Tehran: Nashr-i Asar Milli, 1974), 1–3.
[16] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 11.
[17] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 27–44.

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Ghazālī's madrasa education therefore exposed him to diverse movements like Ismā'īlīsm, Mu'tazilism, and Sufism, as well as to contemporary thinkers like the poet, astronomer, and mathematician Omar Khayyam. These networks attest to the multiple cultural, linguistic, and religious worlds that the Abbasid Empire generated, the negotiations its leaders made, and constituted the context for Ghazālī's later argument for the utility of pluralism, which would become a template, described by Karen Barkey as an "Empire of difference," for later Islamic polities.[18] Ghazālī's exposure to diverse schools of Islamic thought provoked reflections upon the problem of identity, and this element is key to explaining his groundbreaking philosophical work. Ghazālī's argument that "the key to the truth about the divine is knowledge of the self" conceptualized the "self" as a pluralistic site of permanently changing boundaries.[19]

The forces that shaped Ghazālī's early experiences were political, economic, and embedded in the structures of class and market access. Changes in power and orders of wealth subverted public trust and destabilized the communal foundations by which people judged themselves and the world: "The love of wealth and esteem becomes a disease of the heart that attracts men to hypocrisy, falsehood, deception, enmity, and jealousy."[20] There were those "pretending to be Sufis, and misguiding people is their forte."[21] Con artists donned religious garb in a changing society of strangers. A fissure ruptured public stability, trust, and intelligibility. Historians have documented these social patterns in the Abbasid Empire:

> [C]omplete legal cover [existed] for organized criminal activities such as looting, smuggling, and assassination, allowing ringleaders to operate unchecked. Corruption of the police force and governors occurred not only in Baghdad, but also in Basra, Mosul, Kufa, Damascus, and Khurasan. Organized crime in Baghdad and the Provinces of the Caliphate stemmed from radical changes in the social, political, and cultural values and structures of the society.[22]

[18] Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[19] Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat* [The Alchemy of Happiness] (Tehran: Intisharat 'Ilmi va Farhangi, 1991), 13.
[20] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, Vol. 2, 992.
[21] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, Vol. 2, 655.
[22] Wisam Mansour, "'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves': An Allusion to Abbasid Organized Crime," *Global Crime* 9, nos. 1–2 (February–May 2008): 8–19.

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Social life was fraught with uncertainty and anxiety, and it was within this crisis that Ghazālī searched for knowledge. The world of education was riven with conundrums of belonging. Of Ghazālī's time in Nishapur in 470/1077 studying under Imam Al-Ḥaramayn (al-Juwaynī), the leading jurisconsult, legal theorist, and Islamic theologian of his time, Zarrinkoub writes:

> After several years of Imam Al-Ḥaramayn's *kalām* [science of discourse] classes, Ghazālī reached an apogee of learning at which point his teacher's classes ceased to offer him anything. The *kalāmī* topics could not address the new questions arising from the mystical field of philosophy… In addition, Imam Al-Ḥaramayn had regrets about devoting his life to *kalām*. Imam Al-Ḥaramayn died in 1085. His death, as the holder of social power for the Shāfiʿī scholarly community, left Ghazālī feeling wary of studying *kalām* as taught in school. This in turn made it difficult for him, a Shāfiʿī adherent, to continue to live in Nishapur, a city largely populated by Hanafi followers and scholars.[23]

Disillusioned with the limitations of formal education, a restless young Ghazālī's decision to leave Nishapur proved seminal. Zarrinkoub explains Ghazālī's attraction to Sufism, an alternative path to higher illumination, in terms of his surfeit of intellectual study. Ghazālī departed from Nishapur after Imam Al-Ḥaramayn's death and joined the court of Niẓām al-Mulk, which was just outside of Nishapur. Ghazālī's life after his flight from Nishapur was lived upon a boundary. It is as if he, having already crossed the chasm that separated the son of a wool maker from the caliphal court, sought to confront the most profound boundary known to humankind: that between himself and God. Ghazālī's world of educational, military, and state boundaries was charged with metaphoric significance:

> Ghazālī, not yet thirty years old, no longer saw Nishapur as a place fit to reside, and so left Nishapur for Askar. Askar was an area outside of the city where the army base of Sultan Malikshāh Seljuqī (1055–1092) was stationed. During this period, Khajih Niẓām al-Mulk (1018–1092), of Shāfiʿī faith and a strong Shāfiʿī advocate, was Malikshāh's vizier. Those living in Askar were likely to travel from town to town with the Sultan's army. Ghazālī travelled with the army to Isfahan and, several times, to Baghdad, finding an opportunity at this time to encounter the scholars of science and jurisprudence who would come to see the Sultan or Niẓāmal-Mulk.[24]

[23] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 49–50.
[24] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 54.

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Hence, Ghazālī's fateful encounter with Niẓām al-Mulk, in whose mold Ghazālī would aspire to build to Seljuq-Abbasid imperial order. From this community of travelling scholars, soldiers, and statesmen, Ghazālī's considerable dialogic gifts propelled him to unexpected fame. Ghazālī found that his mastery of the written and spoken word let him reach across the boundaries of the world. The young Ghazālī recognized his capacity as an emissary rested on his ability to speak to the diverse human patchwork of the expanding Abbasid Empire:

> During Niẓām al-Mulk's viziership, it was commonplace for scholars to join army warmups to conduct lessons, lectures and debates among the troops. The Sultan's apparatus was a kind of travelling school. Ghazālī's gift for debate and discussion with other scholars, in this context, won him the favour of Khajih Niẓām al-Mulk. This, to such an extent that, despite Ghazālī's young age, Niẓām al-Mulk sent him to the Baghdad Caliph as the Sultan's messenger. It was a task usually entrusted only to the great scholars of the epoch, but now bestowed upon the youthful Ghazālī.[25]

Ghazālī's diplomatic rise and scholastic fame were part of a heterogeneous social movement, an ambulant caravan of scholars moving from city to city in an unstable empire aspiring to stable state foundations amidst decades of civil unrest. Following the chance meeting with Niẓām al-Mulk, came the peace-making mission, merging religion and politics in the conviction that the unification of the Seljuq and Abbasid kingdoms was at bottom identical with God's purposes. It was a threshold moment from which Ghazālī could hardly disengage, even if he wanted to. From his early navigation of Hanafi and Shāfiʿī tensions to the maturation of his mysticism beyond *kalām*, there is an intelligible pattern. The same holds for Ghazālī's entrance into the scholarly circuit surrounding the Abbasid military order. Each of these formative experiences for the young Ghazālī is a reference to encounters in a world where "the center could not hold."[26] A cultural revolution was emerging, and Ghazālī became a major, albeit perhaps unwilling, spokesman not only for proper individual religious practice but also for the Seljuq–Abbasid duo-archy that would maintain it. Garden explains the philosophical foundation of this attitude thus:

[25] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 74.
[26] William Butler Yates, "The Second Coming," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989). Accessed online at www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming.

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During this period in the court of Niẓām al-Mulk, Al-Ghazālī would likely have embraced the traditional Aristotelian conception of the Practical Science as beginning with a just ruler providing a stable political order, which would allow first for wise household management and only then for the cultivation of individual ethical perfection. But the political order he served, seemingly at the peak of its power, shattered within weeks and plunged into civil war with the untimely deaths of its major stakeholders, likely at one another's hands.[27]

The collapse of this "duo-archy" prompted Ghazālī to recognize that politics, with its power intrigues, was a poor foundation for a perfect union with God and to invert the traditional Aristotelian conception of Practical Science. And after all, the city-state of Aristotle's day, with its urban center and surrounding countryside, its outer walls of protection, was a small, hierarchically organized world of landed aristocrats, poor farmers, and slaves, which hardly compared to the populous and multi-confessional Abbasid Empire. This was a world of economic caprices, civil wars, tribal revolts, and diverse military forces, all in almost dialectical tension with stability and a process of geographic incorporation centered on trade, wealth, learning, and scientific innovation.

Ghazālī in Baghdad

In 1091, Niẓām al-Mulk appointed Ghazālī head of the Niẓāmiyya in Baghdad, then the most prestigious educational institution in the Islamic world.[28] Nazeer Ahmed explains the geopolitical significance of this appointment:

> The appointment of the celebrated Ghazālī, known among Western scholars as theologian, philosopher, and an appointment to the chair of *fiqh*, not dogmatic theology, there being no chair for this subject. Ghazālī's position was essentially that of a *faqīh* (jurisconsult). His professional training had prepared him for this field. Ghazālī arrived in Baghdad in the month of Jumādā I 484, Iṣbahān. Niẓām al-Mulk had bestowed upon him the honorific title of Ornament of Religion, Pride of the Imāms, and sent him to Baghdad to grace the chair of *fiqh*.[29]

[27] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 57.
[28] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 81.
[29] Usama Makdisi, "Muslim Institutions of Learning in Eleventh-Century Baghdad," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 24, no. 1 (1961): 39–40.

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The Abbasid–Fatimid ideological rivalry extended to the "patronage of learning and the trades." While the Fatimids formed Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 969, in the Abbasid context, decades later, Niẓām al-Mulk, "streamlined the Abbasid administration, rationalized the tax collection system and stimulated the economy that had been battered by the loss of trade with the Mediterranean." In short, these were structural reforms at a time of institutional crisis. It follows that Ghazālī's educational vocation had an additional geopolitical dimension in the form of the Abbasid–Fatimid rivalry. Ghazālī's awareness of the threats arrayed against the Abbasid Empire, combined with his providential concept of the state, gave his political philosophy a neo-imperial hue. The forms of military and ideological power Ghazālī encountered in Baghdad were of a far grander scale than he had experienced before:

> Baghdad was not only a capital of Islamic power but one of intellectual and scientific movements within the Muslim world as well. In the many schools, mosques and libraries of Baghdad learning and debate were booming. The Niẓāmiyya school of Baghdad, due to its connection with a well-known vizier – that is, Niẓām al-Mulk – and his financial support, was particularly grand in reputation and size compared to other schools.[30]

At thirty-three, Ghazālī reached the heights of worldly success and learnedness. Here it would seem that, through the life of the mind, the boundaries we have described might give way to harmony. Instead, the practice of religion deviated into power politics. The late ninth-century enervation of the Abbasid caliphate provoked fears of political disintegration and decay across the Islamic Empire. Ghazālī, as a leading Abbasid intellectual, confronted an epistemological crisis: The survival of the Abbasid state, on which the unfolding cosmic plan of God in part depended, hinged upon the stabilization of knowledge. Spurning dogma, Ghazālī recognized that the pluralism of the Abbasid Empire, however incidental, was essential to its political survival. Reconciling multiplicity and unity, he labored to reconcile Islamic intellectual traditions to those generated outside of but nonetheless integral to it. Ghazālī imaginatively reconfigured the relation between the Islamic past and the present world or *dunyā* to permit Abbasid survival. Military sources and ideological bastions of power, like Niẓāmiyya

[30] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 81.

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madrasas, came together to overcome the elements that militated against established Abbasid power.

Zarrinkoub captures how Ghazālī's teaching helped to generate criticism and dynamize the intellectual core of the Abbasid Empire. As a reformer invested in maintaining a stable social order conducive to proper religio-ethical conduct, Ghazālī held certain criterion by which the policies of the Abbasid–Seljuq state might be judged. According to these criteria, most theologians, "sycophants grovelling at the feet of political leaders," were "lacking in integrity and intellectual independence." Although the "learned" were meant to be the "guides to the road" to salvation, the "times are devoid of them," since the "learned" of his day, Ghazālī asserted, had been reduced to believing "there is no knowledge except government decrees" and to seeking "through polemics [to] attain glory."[31] The Islamic world, from Ghazālī's window onto it, was gripped by a crisis of political legitimacy. Ghazālī's appointment to Baghdad was meant to reverse the extent to which power struggles had undermined Baghdad's status and its centers of learning:

> [A series of academic appointments failed to] restore the previous distinction and status [of Baghdad's Niẓāmiyya], until word of classes [being taught] by the young Ghazālī, then only in his thirties, spread throughout Baghdad upon his arrival at Niẓāmiyya in 484/1091. Ghazālī's power of speech, charismatic personality and intelligence in debates, with his knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, its principles and *kalām*, quickly resulted in his widespread respect and renown in Baghdad, and his classes filled with students. The success of Ghazālī's classes was such that over 400 people reportedly took part and older scholars of other religions also attended, resulting in the Niẓāmiyya previous reputation being restored.[32]

Embroiled in geopolitical rivalry with the Fatimids, the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadi (r. 1056–1094) conceived of schools, primarily religious and military in their training, as political tools for resisting the growing Ismāʿīlī movement, emanating from Cairo in the east. The disastrous attempt to suppress rival religious movements was partly to blame for the undoing of the "duo-archy." When a deadly sectarian riot erupted between Baghdad's Hanbali and Ash'ari factions in 1077,

[31] Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 8.
[32] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 85–89.

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Niẓām al-Mulk's son was caught in the midst and almost fatally endangered, resulting in major tensions between the Seljuqs and the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadi. The Abbasids, lacking a military of their own and powerless to resist Seljuq interventions, found themselves forced to comply with Niẓām al-Mulk's demands for retribution. Within this complex political intersection, a many-sided power struggle transpired among scholars. The displacement of conflict to the arena of ideology reflected the Abbasid transition from conquest to rule.

Against this charged semiotic background, Ghazālī's classes attracted a growing number of followers, who coalesced in the manner of a social movement. These gatherings sometimes departed from the realm of discourse and exploded into open conflict and bids for power. In his lifetime, several of Ghazālī's close allies were assassinated. These explosions represented the violent face of the Abbasid cultural revolution, a reaction from below to the ongoing persecution of Ismā'īlīs: "The enemy, for the Ismā'īlīs, was the Sunni establishment – political and military, bureaucratic and religious. Their murders were designed to frighten, to weaken, and ultimately to overthrow it."[33] Zarrinkoub reveals the destructive violence the Abbasid cultural revolution and its ultimate collapse entailed:

> Less than a year following Ghazālī's arrival in Baghdad, Khajih Niẓām al-Mulk was murdered at seventy-six, in 1092, after serving as vizier for 29 years to [the second Sultan] Alp Arslan Seljuqī (1029-1072) … Many rumors circulated regarding his murder: that he was killed by the Mystics, by Malikshāh's wife, or by the Ismā'īlīs. Whatever the real case, with the murder of Niẓām al-Mulk, Ghazālī found himself in a Baghdad [that was] swarming with competing scholars of different sects and that was riven with hostility between the Abbasid Caliph and the Seljuq Sultan, who had lost his main political ally … One month after Niẓām al-Mulk's death, Malikshāh was killed too, purportedly by Ismā'īlīs.[34]

Ghazālī's diplomatic task was short-lived: After merely a year, the leading protagonists in the organization of the "duo-archy" were killed, and Baghdad lapsed into a disorder punctuated by battles, executions, and the slaughter of countless men. This revolutionary reshuffling of power was a centrifugal moment, therefore, that imbued

[33] Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (London: Phoenix, 1967), 134.
[34] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 95–103.

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politics with the resonance of inter-sectarian violence. George Hourani accordingly divides Ghazālī's life into three periods. The first period dates from his arrival in Nishapur in 470/1077 to study with Imam al-Ḥaramayn to his "conversion to Sufism and retirement from teaching at Baghdad at the end of 488/1095."[35] According to Garden, a crisis of faith in politics precipitated the end of this first period:

> Ghazālī lost faith in this system [of "duo-archy"]. He continued to acknowledge the legal necessity of the Caliph as the guarantor of the law, but he recognized that the Caliph was reliant on the sultan, whose priority was the Machiavellian pursuit of power, not the establishment of a virtuous political order to allow for the cultivation of individual virtue and the pursuit of felicity. The starting point for his new vision then, was the virtuous individual, not the virtuous political order.[36]

Rather than abide by the Machiavellian path before him, which emphasized the need for powerful institutions from a place of distrust in individual instinct and goodwill, Ghazālī instead departed from and in the process turned received Aristotelian Practical Science upside down. The breakdown of the Abbasid body politic led Ghazālī to question the belief, stretching back to Aristotle, which had given rise to "three sub-disciplines: politics, economics (understood as management of the household), and ethics," "that one can only perfect oneself ethically in a well-ordered polis and a well-ordered household." Ghazālī reversed the Aristotelian value system, positing "ethics first, then economics, then politics." In this way, Ghazālī, remained within while inversing the Aristotelian tradition: "The fact that he included economics and politics shows that he was still thinking within the traditional philosophical schema but had downplayed the importance of politics providing the requisite context for ethical practice."[37]

The breakdown of political order under examination here calls into question historical narratives that explain Ghazālī's decision to leave his home and career for the itinerant life in terms of pure spirituality. Ghazālī's project of building a social order suitable to proper religious practice had come undone, and in its absence, he reverted to the priority of the individual believer. In view of this, Ghazālī's decision

[35] George F. Hourani, The Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings. www.Ghazālī.org/articles/gfh-gz3.pdf.
[36] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 57.
[37] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 53.

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to step away from his official teaching duties in 488/1095 expressed a disillusionment with men of the state.[38]

Thus, the following chain of events supports the thesis of Ghazālī's disenchantment with the state. After the death of Malikshāh in 1092, Taj al-Mulk unofficially became the Seljuq vizier. An Ismā'īlī and a possible ally of Hassan-i Sabbah, Taj al-Mulk had long harbored enmity toward Niẓām al-Mulk and was a potential orchestrator of his assassination. The Abbasid Caliph al-Mustaẓhir, meanwhile, had grown politically irrelevant and was reduced to a puppet. Anxious religious jurists struggled to reconcile their understanding of the caliph, who, according to traditional Islamic political theory, should be the universal ruler, with the Machiavellian reality of civil war among Seljuq princes in the east. Under these conditions, Ghazālī was not free to follow his conscience. His intellectual powers were harnessed to advance increasingly sectarian political interests. He was pressured to use his polemical skills to target the mysticism that had both repelled and attracted him since his earliest years. It was thus that Ghazālī emerged as a principal figure in the Abbasid power configuration:

> In 1094, [the] 16-year-old al-Mustaẓhir bi-llah (1094-1118) became Caliph. Ghazālī, now among Baghdad's renowned professors, a Ḥujjat al-Islam, and Imam of the Shāfi'īs, sat with the new Caliph and swore allegiance to him. During this period, at the new Caliph's behest, Ghazālī wrote a treatise rejecting mysticism, known as the "al-Mustaẓhiri" treatise because he produced it at the request of the Caliph al-Mustaẓhir. Ghazālī subsequently wrote other books and articles including *al-Qistas al-Mustaqīm* (*The Correct Balance*), *Ḥujjat al-Ḥaqq* (*Proof of the Truth*), and *Jawab Mufasal al-Khalāf*, which were refutations of the Mystics.[39]

Yet the mystical movement of Ghazālī's time harboured little resemblance to mysticism as we conceive of it today. The "mystics" in question were Ismā'īlīs. The Mustaẓhiri refuted Ismā'īlī claims to religio-political authority, while justifying caliphal rule and the division of power between caliph and sultan.[40] This writing suggests that Ghazālī remained wedded intellectually to the ideal of the Abbasid–Seljuq rule or the so-called duo-archy.

[38] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 18.
[39] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 103.
[40] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 26.

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Ghazālī's subsequent flight from public life was to a large extent a political move. The fuller significance of Ghazālī's action, however, has been obscured by a ready-made image of sainthood:

> Ghazālī's famous spiritual crisis of 488/1095 had a very worldly context. It must be understood at least partially as a response to the political events of his age, both because he felt morally compromised by his political involvement, as his vows demonstrate, and because Ghazālī despaired of the role of the regime in establishing a stable and just worldly order. . . . Ghazālī's grand ambitions for the transformation of the religious landscape of his age, spelled out in his *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, show that his departure from Baghdad was not a renunciation of the world. Rather it shows a redirected ambition, and one that he relied on his political connections to achieve . . . Far from a tormented soul, despairing of his own salvation, the author of *The Scale* [The Scale of Action (Mizan al Amal)] is a supremely confident man with a mission—a mission that remains fundamentally unchanged when it is repackaged in the *Revival*.[41]

Ghazālī's exit from public life therefore did not mean that his interest in Abbasid political life had waned. Ghazālī, who continued to correspond with various thinkers and statesmen during his self-imposed exile, remained involved in politics. Like Garden, rather than explain these events in terms of pure religion, Zarrinkoub's biography builds a backdrop of civil war, social precarity, economic distress, and contagious diseases:

> As insecurity and unrest increased in most cities throughout Iran . . . outside the city thieves threatened and plundered. In 492/1099, a severe cold destroyed vegetation and crops everywhere, sharply raising prices, [while] contagious illnesses killed many. In Nishapur, Imam al-Ḥaramayn's (al-Juwaynī) son was killed during a riot, as the civil war between the Seljuqī princes further destroyed cities, spread famine, and put immense financial pressure on the people.[42]

The geopolitical scene was equally dispiriting. Not long after Ghazālī left Baghdad in 1095, strife in the Abbasid Empire was worsened by the First Crusade in Syria in 492/1099, which saw the siege of Jerusalem and the pitiless massacre of its inhabitants. Preachers travelled the caliphate urging men to mobilize to recover al-Aqsa

[41] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 25.
[42] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 233–237.

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Mosque, the site of the Prophet's heavenly flight, from bloodthirsty crusaders. The eastern provinces were meanwhile ensnared in civil war between rival Seljuq princes, and the fate of Jerusalem slid from view as it came under Fatimid dominion. Masses of refugees meanwhile sought sanctuary in Baghdad, joining others in calling for holy war to drive the Franks from the Holy Land.[43]

Wrecked by internal violence and already weathered by protracted power struggles, the Abbasid–Seljuq state began to crumble. The scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) later looked back upon these unhappy days to produce his theory of history and state collapse. Thus, we understand how "Ghazālī's thought on the role of politics moved in a very different direction. The following year, he largely cut his ties with the regime, renouncing his position and moving from Baghdad to the Levant for two years, and then, after another brief stay in Baghdad, to his home region of Khurasan, never to return."[44]

Ghazālī 's ongoing dialogue with power during his period of exile suggests a thinker interested in widening the boundaries of moral inclusion for populations hitherto left outside of such consideration. Or as Garden put it Ghazālī:

> ... saw himself as the only qualified guide for his age, but to be a truly compelling guide, capable of rousting his fellow Muslims out of their heedlessness and convincing them to take up the pursuit of felicity, required more than knowledge. He could not present himself as the "preacher of faultless conduct" mentioned in *the Scale* as long as he remained in his compromising position at the Niẓāmiya Madrasa in Baghdad. To preach ethics to the broader mass of religious scholars would require a break with his position and his former life. He needed to present himself in a mode of authority broadly recognized by his fellow Muslims and appropriate to the talents and circumstances of most of those he might persuade to pursue felicity.[45]

Ghazālī, by this account, was profoundly concerned with widening the arena in which the public could speak back to power. Ghazālī understood that communicating the interests of public participants engaged the civilizational process. It was in this spirit that Ghazālī linked everyday economic issues to forms of state oppression, material

[43] A. C. S. Peacock, *The Great Seljuq Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 220.
[44] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 27.
[45] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 57.

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insecurity to modes of resistance, and the predatory behaviours of the powerful to social ruin:

> Though living in seclusion during these years, Ghazālī was not unaware of social and political issues. The disordered state [of this time] was reflected in his different letters to rulers, as well as his two treatises, *Tuḥfat al-Mulūk* and *Naṣīhat al-Mulūk*, written for the rulers … Ghazālī wrote several letters to authorities about the public crisis. In a letter to Majir al-Dowleh, one of Sultan Sanjar's viziers, he wrote, "The knife has reached the bones of the Muslim people and they are desperate" … In a letter to Fakhr al-Mulk, son of Niẓām al-Mulk, Sultan Sanjar's vizier, Ghazālī wrote: "This city has been ruined by famine and oppression … amidst public fear the farmers sell their harvests … All fear and dread have been awakened, as farmers and bakers stop selling grains and oppressors have become emboldened to steal and intimidate, seizing new houses and shops nightly."[46]

A number of rulers had revolted against Sanjar at the time of this letter, further weakening a Seljuq Empire already ravaged by years of dynastic wars. Local codes of conduct, governed by linguistic and cultural difference, constituted social boundaries. Yet these smaller worlds were contained within a larger civilization defined both by state collapse and a growing market economy and densely populated centers of commerce and industry. Hence crisis was coupled with diversity. Ghazālī's theology attempted to accommodate this 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."[47] His ideal of good citizenship within the Muslim community, meanwhile, focused on the eleventh-century nexus of market, state, and law, each of which expanded with the Abbasid Empire, and its attendant identity crisis as the wider state framework entered an increasingly dysfunctional cycle.

As we have seen, Ghazālī moved his focus from the polis, the heart of the Aristotelian tradition of political philosophy, to the individual believer. He asked, "If you do not know who you are, how can you know others?" Even as he focused on the believer, the terrain of Ghazālī's epistemology remained in this world. He argued that religious knowledge "is possible by knowledge of God's creation, which is the world," and he valued empirical knowledge as a transcript of God's creation: "Knowledge of the wonders of the world is achieved by the senses. And these senses are the essence [*qavam*] of the body."

[46] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 237. [47] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 13.

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The ways in which the body transmitted sensory input offered a metaphor for society, the "hands and feet" of which are "the craftsmen's city," while "the heart is the monarch and reason the vizier." Neighborhoods, families, and religions work together like the fingers of a hand to create the marketplace. In Ghazālī's writings, the wounded Abbasid body politic was subtly restored by reinstating the individual believer's body as a microcosm of a wider collective.[48]

Ghazālī addressed the individual believer in terms of an original conception of a universal ethic. Ethnic and religious identities had been shaped equally by Abbasid efforts to maintain and conquer territory. Amidst great historical turmoil, Ghazālī sought to generate a new universal ethical system that could appeal to and reconcile religious difference. He distinguished *ẓāhir* (exteriority) from *baṭin* (interiority) as discrete but complementary components of self-knowledge, embedding the empirical within a new universal culture. We cannot learn to know ourselves, Ghazālī maintained, until we distinguish the two substances from which we are created from two things: "the outer shell (*kalbad-i ẓāhir*) called the body, visible with the eyes, and the inner essence (*mana'-yi baṭin*), called the spirit (*nafs*), life (*jān*), and the heart (*dil*), which is knowable through the inner eye (*basirat-i baṭin*)."[49]

Ghazālī embedded this universal ethic within the principles of Practical Science. He remained attuned to the ways in which science reinforced the stability and growth of the Abbasid Empire. The subjects of the Abbasid state, stretching at one point from sub-Saharan Africa to China, were heirs to rich scientific traditions. The Islamic Golden Age witnessed not only a flurry of territorial expansion, but with it, a flourishing of the civilizational arts, science, and philosophy, which were in turn predicated on the inherited cultural legacies of Persia, Greece, China, and India. While scientific knowledge initially signified status, the disciplines of medicine, agronomy, and economy took on the status of political necessity as their indispensability in maintaining vast populations became apparent. The cost of maintaining a military and of constructing new capitals placed heavy tax burdens on rural populations, leading to abandoned agricultural fields and disrupted Mesopotamian irrigation works. The flight of peasants

[48] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 13–20. [49] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 15.

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from their lands created a vacuum that in turn gave rise to banditry, while dissident religious sects organized peasant uprisings.

The dynamics of empire building produced a crisis of governance within the Abbasid Empire, encompassing most corners of Asia, as well as the Mediterranean and East Africa.[50] Ghazālī articulated anxieties about the worsening crisis of Abbasid political legitimacy in terms of a quest for self-knowledge. As Garden argues, in an original intellectual move, Ghazālī "reverses the equation, making individual ethical perfection the starting point," which then expands first to righting the affairs of the household (economics), and then to righting the affairs of the neighborhood, then the city and surrounding countryside (politics). In doing so, he truly stands philosophy's Practical Science on its head. The foundation of a just – or righteous – society is the pious individual, not the virtuous ruler.[51]

However, Ghazālī did not isolate the individual entirely. He remained deeply concerned with collective life and religious practice in a wider society. In fact, although Ghazālī conceived of ethics at the scale of the individual, he posed "identity" itself as a problem. In his lifetime, the boundaries that rendered identity coherent were made increasingly tentative. The metaphor of espionage thus figured in Ghazālī's account, implying conflict and a struggle for power: "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."[52] While reason helped resolve this uncertainty by filtering, intuitive knowledge, *'ilm-i qalb*, is the path to the truth. However, as we will see, despite the axial significance of rational knowledge to knowing God and living rightly in the world, the two were not reduced to one.

The boundaries of traditional learning frustrated Ghazālī, who intuited a deeper level of meaning at play in the universe. Yet Ghazālī continued to engage in lecturing and writing, which he had not forsaken for a complete embrace of Sufism and mysticism. So, what precipitated his spiritual crisis and revolt? Zarrinkoub suggests, "During his final years at the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya, he was particularly preoccupied with his aim of refuting philosophy and mysticism in public debates." But Ghazālī's studied peripatetic philosophy and

[50] Jonathan A. C. Brown, "The Last Days of Al-Ghazzali and the Tripartite Division of the Sufi World Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali's Letter to the Seljuq Vizier and Commentary," *The Muslim World* 96, no. 1 (January 2006): 89–113.

[51] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 54.

[52] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 20.

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mystical thought for the purposes of polemically refuting them, often at the behest of his patrons, rather than for reasons related to sincere truth-seeking. It was on this basis that Ghazālī concluded that "the school environment and its pursuit of status were mismatched with any pursuit of pure truth."[53]

The madrasas held up a mirror to Ghazālī, and he disliked what he saw. In a letter later written to a friend, he expressed remorse for his earlier hypocrisy: "[T]here is no choice in Baghdad but to engage in debate, and one cannot refrain from greeting the Caliph."[54] The scholarly infighting at Baghdad coupled with the city's tempestuous political climate continued to disappoint Ghazālī. Zarrinkoub explains:

> What especially tired [Ghazālī] from teaching, discussion, thought and research, was the discourse of the school's jurisprudential scholars and their relentless pursuit of status. Even those jurisprudential scholars who were well known and well liked brimmed with pretence and duplicity … [They were] seeking renown and material wealth, making Ghazālī wary of his studies, his fame, and of the very spotlight that had been cast on him.[55]

The well-scripted rituals and intellectual restrictions of Abbasid court culture aggrieved Ghazālī. He began to find what had been the vibrant intellectual life of Baghdad stifling: "In response to a contrarian jurisprudential scholar named Abu Bakr bin Walid Quraishi, who challenged Ghazālī to a debate at the onset of his journey of 'escapism,' [Ghazālī] replied he had left behind such activities in Iraq as being for children."[56] Ghazālī's charge suggests the extent to which he felt that those entrusted with authority had failed to meet their responsibilities. Yet Ghazālī knew that he too had fallen short of his responsibilities. He had found fame in Baghdad only to awaken to its worthlessness as the Abbasid state fell into a spiral of violence. In this climate, Ghazālī found new aspirations beyond the confines of the Niẓāmiyya, in a wider Sufi movement extending from India to the western coast of Africa.

Legitimacy Crisis as Personal Experience

Ghazālī's proximity to power encouraged his pragmatic analysis of the Seljuq–Abbasid state, a patchwork of conquests united by symbolic

[53] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 110. [54] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 45.
[55] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 104–106.
[56] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 109.

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allegiance to the Abbasid caliph. The empire was like a puzzle, its pieces had not yet come together to form an unfragmented whole. 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."[57] The Abbasid Empire, with its political capital and religious center of Baghdad, "the City of Peace" (b. 762), with four gates, intended to reconcile the heavens with the four quarters of the known earth, should have reflected the divine unity of the empire of Shari'a.[58] Instead, opposing sects had formed in the struggle over leadership rights, a question linked to eternal salvation, and which laid the ground for a Sunni–Shi'i conflict.

Outside the confines of the Abbasid court, Ghazālī confronted a society in flux. After four years of teaching in Baghdad, a city animated by religious conflict and its representatives, Ghazālī endured a spiritual crisis at the height of his popularity in 1095. He surreptitiously left the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya for Syria, with neither wife nor child, to purify himself, a defining motif of Sufi self-realization.[59] Ghazālī removed his relationship with God abruptly from the public space of the Niẓāmiyya to the isolated realm of the individual soul, or the personal in today's speech, the seat of the self and struggle against it. Under his newfound asceticism, Ghazālī grew weak and ill. Although, as Zarrinkoub explains it, he first grew ill with disillusionment:

> Unrelenting thoughts, which crushed his spirit in their grip over long months, finally produced a physical crisis. Ghazālī was succumbing to the crippling pressures of spiritual pain, which reached its peak in 1095. Ghazālī's condition left him unable to open his mouth or speak. The strange feeling of becoming mute preoccupied him. On one occasion, Ghazālī attended a class only to have his ability to speak fail him. His dejection removed any desire to sleep or eat. Water would not go down his throat, nor bread conjure any taste in his mouth. Ghazālī's appetite died, and he could no longer digest. An illness was slowly killing him.[60]

[57] Quoted in Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India: Volume I* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 356.
[58] Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, ed., *Dictionnaire du Coran* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 2007), 820.
[59] Ghazālī experienced a spiritual crisis in 1095. He wrote in his autobiography that he abandoned his post at the Niẓāmiyya and travelled to Damascus, Jerusalem, and the Hejaz.
[60] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 126.

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Ghazālī strained under the elevated expectations of him. It was the interpretative labors of the jurists that extracted the Shari'a, from the Qur'an. The magnitude of this responsibility filled Ghazālī, at the head of this class of exegetes, with dread and profound epistemological uncertainty: "[First principles] can only be repelled by demonstration; but a demonstration requires knowledge of first principles . . . it is impossible to make the demonstration."[61] Ghazālī recalled suffering during this time from an "unhealthy condition," a "malady," and a "baffling disease"; as Zarrinkoub put it, for "two months," Ghazālī "was a sceptic, in fact though not in theory nor in outward expression."[62] His faith faltered as he fell into intellectual confusion. But his decision to take leave of the madrasa suggests that at the root of his confusion was a belief in the corrosive effects of institutionalized education:

> Ghazālī sought escape himself and everything else. The impetus for this escape was liberation from school: escaping everything that constricted the human soul in its crushing shell of doubt and uncertainty: the how's and why's that lead the mind to dead ends.[63]

Before leaving Baghdad, Ghazālī appointed his brother, Ahmad, his replacement as the head of Niẓāmiyya. He had not divulged to anyone his intention of leaving. Instead, he left Baghdad on the pretext of a pilgrimage to Mecca. In his autobiographical work *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (Deliverance from Error), Ghazālī explained, "I had been thinking of [going to] Damascus . . . but to prevent the Caliph, my friends, and other scholars from discovering my plan to migrate to Syria, I announced that I only intended to make pilgrimage (*hajj*)." It was thus that "although Ghazālī did not intend to return to Baghdad, he refrained from revealing as much."[64] The date of Ghazālī's departure from Damascus to Jerusalem is unclear. We know only that, upon reaching Jerusalem, Ghazālī spent most of his time at al-Aqsa, in thought and worship. Although Ghazālī encountered figures from his youth in Khorasan there, he maintained his seclusion. In *al-Munqidh*, Ghazālī wrote that he daily entered al-Aqsa without speaking to

[61] W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 13.
[62] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 134. See also Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 13.
[63] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 107.
[64] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 107.

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anybody. It was here that Ghazālī wrote the famous letter. Upon his arrival at al-Khalil, or Hebron, a city thirty kilometers or nineteen miles from Jerusalem famed for the tombs of Ibrahim, Isaac, and Jacob, Ghazālī wrote: "I have made three vows: one is to no longer accept money from a Sultan, the second is to never visit a Sultan, and the third is to engage in no further debates. If I breach any of these vows, I will go internally and externally mad. . ."[65]

Ghazālī's retreat into solitude, as we established, was in some ways already driven by a spiritual unease bordering on a madness. He was visited with paranoid visions of a phantom interrogator; W. Montgomery Watt explains his fear thus, "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."[66] Ghazālī grew anxious at the possibility of infinite regress, at the malignance inhering in invisible horizons. This labyrinthine skepticism was far from scientific scrutiny. His imaginary interlocutor "heightened the difficulty [of trusting the intellect] by referring to dreams," which, in the Islamic tradition, fell into one of three categories: Satanic destabilizations, inconsequential visions, and divine messages. For Ghazālī, dreams represented the collapse of certainty.

Ghazālī nonetheless remained engaged in public life even in this period of self-imposed seclusion through his writings and the cultural channels through which they travelled. While in Jerusalem, Ghazālī began writing his famous book, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*). In *Iḥyāʾ*, he set aside jurisprudence in favor of concentrating on the question of reviving religious thought in Islam.[67] From Jerusalem, Ghazālī proceeded to Mecca, where he performed the hajj, then returned to Baghdad, although he studiously avoided Niẓāmiyya. Back in Baghdad, Ghazālī lived in the old monastery Ribāṭ Abū Sa'd, a monastic lodge where Sufis, passing travellers, and others inclined toward asceticism resided for periods of time, suggesting his family had left Baghdad for Tus. During his time at Ribāṭ Abū Sa'd, Ghazālī read aloud excerpts from *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* to the residents. Audiences slowly gathered at Rabat to join these

[65] Mehdi Ghorbanian, ed., *Makatibe Farsi-ye Ghazālī*' [Ghazālī' Persian Writings] (Tehran: Hekmat Sina Publisher, 2014), 45.
[66] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 12.
[67] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 233.

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gatherings.[68] Yet Ghazālī did not revel in fame. Rather, feeling like he had once again lost his solitude, Ghazālī left Baghdad for the Khorasan Road linking Mesopotamia to the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia.[69]

The Sufi Exit

At the time of Ghazālī's flight from Baghdad, Sufism was expanding from India to Spain, generating sectarianism, controversy, and theological wrangling in its train. Ghazālī, tired of a life that had grown into a "veritable thicket of attachments," considered Sufism a method for regaining "health and even balance."[70] Sufism involved "turning away from wealth and position and fleeing from all time-consuming entanglements," which in Ghazālī's case covered "teaching and lecturing," "sciences that were unimportant and contributed nothing to the attainment of eternal life."[71] Sufism, with its emphasis on transcendence, circumvented the tangle of legal disputes miring jurists, and although it viewed the first four caliphs as "pious," it regarded the dynastic politics and other sectarian squabbles as inconsequential.[72] That is, the Sufi movement thought the pursuit of politics, let alone the idea of intrinsically linking any established regime to religion, as misguided. To Ghazālī, its open horizons left the road to salvation easier to navigate. The boundaries appeared to have been removed altogether and yielded to the wide-open vista of eternity.

Ghazālī had already contributed to rationalist philosophy, an original theory of knowledge responsive to the Mu'tazili-Ash'ari controversy. But this Helleno-Christian intervention was behind him now. Intellectual labors, for the Sufis, distracted from self-transcendence and from living life at the level of the moment, which was imperative since God remakes the world with each instant. Every moment is a passing miracle, a transcendental encounter. The conviction that "a new day ushered in a new hope of God, and a concern for future needs was seen as totally opposed to a complete trust in Him" laid the ground for al-Arabi's later theory of the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*), a theosophical Sufism integrating Neoplatonism and seeking oneness with

[68] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 152.
[69] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 154–155.
[70] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 13.
[71] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 30.
[72] Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 24–25.

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the creator.[73] Sufis were primarily concerned with self-mastery through a continuous spiritual struggle that affirmed being over knowing, and everyday habitus over argumentation.[74]

Sufism, moreover, especially its more anarchic variants, revolutionized everyday values. Ghazālī was an early participant in a moral revolution that would influence phenomena like Chishti Sufism, whose thirteenth-century founder preached nonviolence and taught that "if one is very hurt, one should pray to God to guide one's enemy toward the right path."[75]

Sufis also tended to promote dialogue, not force, as a way of resolving differences, "Annihilate the enemy by discussion" was their motto.[76] Ghazālī was both inspired by and helped shape a proliferation of Sufi orders. Yet for all the discomfort Ghazālī endured in the scripted confines of the Niẓāmiyya, he did not feel entirely at home within the boundaries of Sufism either.

Back Home in Khorasan

"The knife has reached the bones of the Muslim people…"

At the time of Ghazālī's return to Khorasan, Sultan Sanjar ruled (1097–1118) the province. It was a center of political, cultural, and religious life in the Sunni Islamic world until the mid-twelfth century. Sufism in Islamic Khorasan showed distinct traces of Buddhism and Manicheanism. Such syncretism suggested an air of dynamic cultural exchange, but this period was also one of intense material privation, as famine, illness, and riots gripped Khorasan. Although Ghazālī lived in seclusion during these years, he was not unaware of contemporary social and political conditions and continued his correspondence with rulers, as well as work on his two treaties, *Tuḥfat al-Mulūk* and *Naṣīḥatal-Mulūk*, written at the request of another ruler.[77] There is a subtle but forceful contradiction to this, since Sufism entailed the renunciation of worldly concerns and interests, which still had a hold over Ghazālī, who found peace neither in Sufism nor established power.

[73] Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 142.
[74] Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 156.
[75] Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 123.
[76] Quoted in Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 147.
[77] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 237.

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Ghazālī's letters to rulers during this interval addressed the everyday suffering of ordinary people. As we have seen, Ghazālī warned leaders that desolation had reached a pitch: "the knife has reached the bones of the Muslim people and they are desperate."[78] Ghazālī's language departed from a world of pure religious meaning, to enter the sociological space of everyday justice. As Garden has argued, Ghazālī did not reject philosophy but revitalized it to shift its emphasis to the individual believer as the prime ethical subject: "Ghazālī did not refute philosophy so much as critically engage it. Ghazālī is approaching his task within a philosophical framework, offering guidance to felicity in the hereafter through ethical self-perfection and the acquisition of correct knowledge through rational investigation."[79]

Ghazālī's vision of ethics and rational investigation is detailed systematically in *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat* written in 499/1105, well after the formative upheavals of his eventful public life and one year before Ghazālī was summoned before the court of the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar. In *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, Ghazālī articulated a new meaning for collective identity, which had epistemic and ethical aspects. The epistemic aspect involved individuals fulfilling their place in a divine plan using their specialized vocational knowledge. The ethical aspects required that these same individuals extend compassion to others in their environment, while enjoying the everyday experience within the boundaries set by religion. In light of these epistemic and ethical aspects, Ghazālī did not endorse obedience to authority as the path to social happiness. Ghazālī urged reform of orthodox Islamic education and acceptance of nonreligious knowledge, which provided the technological and scientific foundation of the Abbasid Empire. Sufism provided Ghazālī's resources for his pluralistic concept of knowledge and communal identity. A reformed understanding of Islam, Ghazālī's *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat* suggests, contained the road to collective happiness.

In this spirit, Ghazālī expanded the boundaries of belonging, sidestepping the confessional differences and sectarian skirmishes that undermined Islam's monovocal truth. One Seljuqī Sultan requested that Ghazālī pen a treatise "on the objectives of Muslimhood ... and on all that is beneficial, such as justice and the goodness in people." In response, Ghazālī wrote *Tuḥfat al-Mulūk* in 1099, at a time when

[78] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 234.
[79] Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 40.

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Seljuqī princes were warring, and Jerusalem was falling to Christian Crusaders. Ghazālī broached the subject of jihad with *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, alluding to the vulnerabilities wrought by civil war. Although Ghazālī did not name the ruler who commissioned the work, Sultan Muḥammad (1082–1118) reigned over the eastern provinces at the time. Ghazālī wrote, "[T]he infidels have occupied Islamic land and seized the Muslims' pulpits, turning al-Khalil's Garden into pig pens, and Zachariah's Alter and the cradle of Jesus into a tavern for infidels."[80] Ghazālī refrained from emphasizing differences between Hanafi and Shāfiʿī Islamic sects, instead uniting Muslims against the Christian Crusaders. He freely quoted Hanafi rulings alongside Shāfiʿī ones, encouraging the Sultan to recognize the unifying power of jihad. Even during his period of Sufi practice and seclusion, Ghazālī therefore remained a public political figure, redefining communal identity and belonging against the winds of civilizational ascent and decline. Ghazālī's ongoing efforts to create a world amenable to prosperity, peace, and the pursuit of the religious life carries the resonance of early memories of the failed "duo-archy" state-making experiment, and he wondered how so dire a catastrophe might be avoided.

It is thus unsurprising that Ghazālī never fully reconciled himself to Sufism. Instead, after withdrawing from politics for eleven years, he rejoined the Abbasid establishment, inspired by his Sufi encounter to reformulate the Shari'a for Abbasid times. Ghazālī admired Sufis as "men of real experiences, not of words." Sufis believed immediate experience ought to be "tasted" and embrace the distinction between "knowing" and "being": "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."[81] Before his period of self-imposed seclusion, Ghazālī had experienced an existential crisis, which metastasized into physical illness. "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."[82]

[80] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 239–240.
[81] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 29.
[82] Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī's Path to Sufism: His Deliverance from Error* (al-Munqidh min al-Dalal), trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000), 19–20.

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The unfolding drama had its backdrop in Baghdad, a city teeming with traders, soldiers, and slaves of different colors and creeds, and which was the center of Hanafi and Hanbali scholarship, translation, and scientific experimentation. Yet competing military powers fragmented the city, while the *ulama* lacked the power to impose religious uniformity. Institutional failures thus strained the empire even further over the course of Ghazālī's troubled but questing life. Abbasid Baghdad was an early instantiation of what Karl Polanyi called "complex society," where the economy grows distinct from the political state, both disrupting and sustaining it.[83] The explosion of political, economic, military, and ideological powers rendered impossible closed identities based on traditional cosmologies. With no unifying social sanctuary, there remained the archetype of the Sufi saint who tames the wilderness, with its feral animals and mad men, and ultimately overpowers the devil as he masters the animal-like desires and temptations of his lower self (*nafs*). Believing "the choice still remained open," Ghazālī resolved to "quit Baghdad."[84]

Death cast its shadow over Ghazālī's existential horizon – not mundane physical death, but the passage from one world to another. At the terminus of life, death awaited him, where like a prison gate, choice closed. 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 encouraged fear of the implications of renunciation: "If you leave this influential position, these comfortable, dignified circumstances free from troubles and disturbances . . . then you will probably come to yourself again and will not find it easy to return."[85] A man abandoning family and professional occupation for an itinerant life must have unwavering resolution. Ghazālī "lost his power of choice." God "made it easy for my heart to turn away from position and wealth, family and friends."[86] 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 perplexed: "There was much talk about me among all the religious leaders of Iraq, since none of them would

[83] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), 120.
[84] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 30.
[85] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 30.
[86] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 31.

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allow that withdrawal from such a state of life … could have a religious cause."[87]

For almost ten years, Ghazālī lived the Sufi life to revive (*tajdid*) his purity of faith. In this time, Ghazālī underwent an inner "annihilation" process, ridding himself of intellectual clutter, like philosophical notions of the "absolute," leaving only inner emptiness to be filled by God.[88] Alone in the mosque of Damascus, or at the Rock of Jerusalem, 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."[89] Ghazālī, following Sufi wisdom, dedicated every moment, asleep or awake, to *fana'* or the ceaseless recollection of God. Scholars, he came to realize, no matter how learned, had "no way of" improving either the Sufis' "life or character."

Dunyā, or this world, was all but eclipsed by *din*. Yet Ghazālī returned from the world of illumination with a message for humankind of *dunyā*'s redemption. He spread this message in part as a spokesman for the Abbasids, in their war against the Fatimids and other opponents. Yet he tried to remain uncorrupted by politics, while lending vital force to the Abbasids' divine mission. Ghazālī offered a cyclic conception of universal history, where the contemporary era was in decline, but a spiritual renaissance was impending which would restore the purity of Islam. He declared: "[Corruption] is a fixed and determinate character of this time; what benefit to you, then, are solitude and retirement, since sickness has become general, the doctors have fallen ill, and mankind has reached the verge of destruction?"[90]

Illness was a metaphor for the trial of a chaotic life, to which Ghazālī offered a cure, taken from his excursion into the wild. Ghazālī insisted that his return to the Abbasid establishment from the spiritual wilderness was not a relapse: "I myself know that, even if I go back to the work of disseminating knowledge, it will not be a return to my former life."[91] The traumatizing collapse of the "duo-archy," the years in seclusion exiled from family and home, had not been in vain. Ghazālī reasoned that "previously I had been disseminating the knowledge by

[87] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 31.
[88] Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 87. See also Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 27.
[89] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 32.
[90] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 39.
[91] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 40.

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which worldly success is attained . . . [but] now I am calling men to the knowledge by which worldly success is given up and its low position in the scale of real worth is recognized."[92] Ghazālī reconciled himself to established power by reconceptualizing *dunyā* and incorporating his former adversaries, the philosophers, the teachers, and even the mystics, into a new boundary of belonging.

Return to the Sciences

Fakhr al-Mulk (1043–1106), the son of Niẓām al-Mulk and a vizier to the Seljuq sultan Ahmad Sanjar, asked Ghazālī, as his father had done before him, in 1106 to move from Tus to Nishapur to address "the waning state of science and learning at the Nishapur Niẓāmiyya." Zarrinkoub writes: "In the years that Ghazālī had been absent from Nishapur, Abu Muḥammad Samarqandī, the principal instructor at the Nishapur Niẓāmiyya following the death of the illustrious Imam al-Ḥaramayn, taught classes on hadith. The Niẓāmiyya ceased to be a hub for discussion and debate on *kalām*."[93] But returning to teaching after twelve years of seclusion was no easy task for Ghazālī, and he rejected Fakhr al-Mulk's invitation, explaining that he wished to spend his remaining years in isolation. But Fakhr al-Mulk persisted, insisting this time that "worship provided no excuse for withholding the fruits of his being from the Muslim people." With the collective good thus invoked, Ghazālī could not refuse Fakhr al-Mulk's demand. Ghazālī's peers, moreover, saw his return to education as a "positive new beginning and a reason for the revival of science and religion."[94] Ghazālī himself wrote:

> It so happened that in (499/1106) they obliged the writer of these words, after twelve years occupying a corner in seclusion to go to Nishapur and contribute to the flourishing of religious knowledge and publication, for weakness and defect had corroded the path of learning. So the hearts of loved ones awakened the masters of truth and seekers of insight for assistance in this movement. Punishments were administered in sleep and wakefulness, for this movement is a source of good and a reason for the revival of

[92] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 40.
[93] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 243.
[94] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 243.

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learning and religion. Then since he accepted and began teaching, and students came from across the world, jealousy also emerged.[95]

In the end, Ghazālī relented and joined the Niẓāmiyya. Ghazālī's instruction combined standard Islamic jurisprudence and *kalām* to supplement the classes on hadith already being taught. Real faith transcended jurisprudential theory and resembled inner illumination, as Ghazālī recounted in his treatise *Mishkat al-Anwār* (The Niche for Lights). The growing prominence of this illuminationist dimension marks an evolution in Ghazālī's thought and teaching away from *kalām* to Sufism, from proof to revelation. His teaching transgressed the boundaries tacitly agreed upon and shared by his professional colleagues, resulting in controversy.[96]

Ghazālī referred to the "jealousy" of his peers, particularly the Hanafi clerics whose power and authority had ballooned under Sultan Sanjar's reign. Jurists complained of Ghazālī to the Sultan, who, as we have seen, called on Ghazālī to present himself in Askar (the court camp outside of Nishapur) and respond to these charges in 1106. Ghazālī declined, citing the vow he had taken in Jerusalem, "on the head of Mashhad Khalil," to henceforth neither visit nor accept money from any Sultan. Ghazālī wrote a letter to Sanjar, defending his innocence:

> I sat in seclusion in a corner for twelve years and separated myself from others. Subsequently, Fakhr al-Mulk – God bless him – required my presence in Nishapur. I said, "These days, my speech would not be tolerated, for, at this moment, everything turns against whomever speaks truth." Fakhr al-Mulk replied, "Sanjar is a just prince, and I will rise to your aid." Today, the situation is so dire that I hear things that, had I dreamt them, I would say [religion] is wilting. It would scarcely be a wonder if someone were to protest what is related to rational learning, for there is obscurity and difficulty in my speech sufficient to make it inaccessible to many. I am merely one person, [so] whatever I may have said in explanation, I can set right with anyone in the world, and stand behind it; this is easy. But I cannot tolerate them saying I have dishonored Imam Abu Hanifeh – God bless him.[97]

Indeed, "the pressures and accusations against Ghazālī from the jurists and the Hanafis increased, provoking his decision to leave

[95] Ghorbanian, *Makatibe Farsi-ye Ghazālī*', 11.
[96] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 246.
[97] Ghorbanian, *Makatibe Farsi-ye Ghazālī*', 10.

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Nishapur and return to Tus."[98] Yet Sanjar refused to accept his excuse. He issued another summons, forcing Ghazālī to break his vow and face the young Sultan. Ghazālī is reported to have spoken to the Sultan about the need for justice and beneficence to counter the world's instability. This pleased Sanjar, and he decided to grant Ghazālī's request to return to Tus.[99] We are inclined to ask the following question: Why did Ghazālī's teachings inspire violent polarities? It seems to be because Ghazālī challenged the authority of those who transmitted the traditions upon which Islamic society was based. Ghazālī lived in two worlds: the almost populist world of contemporary Sufism, and the elite world of philosophical, theological, and juridical scholarship. This is a combination portending the radical change in human outlook that we associate with the modern era of free speculation, which came centuries later in Western European countries through bloody religious wars and the Scientific Revolution.

It therefore should not surprise us that Ghazālī's relationship to power was troubled. Still, he continued to envision the state as an instrument of public virtue. This belief, far from rigid, sprang from a primordial encounter with an incommensurable reality. Objectivity and self-knowledge were existentially united: "You must seek the truth about yourself, what you are, from whence you came, where you're going, what your purpose is, and for what purpose you were created. This involves [questioning] both what your happiness consists of, and what your hardship consists of."[100]

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"; "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."[101] He was open to diverse views: "Whenever I meet one of the Batiniyah [i.e., Ismā'īlīs], I like to study his creed." Ghazālī scrutinized received convention: "[A]s I drew near adolescence, the bonds of mere authority (*taqlid*) ceased to hold me and inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me,

[98] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 249.
[99] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 251.
[100] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 13–14.
[101] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 10.

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for I saw that Christian youths always grew up to be Christian, Jewish youth to be Jews and Muslim youths to be Muslims."[102]

Ghazālī approached a near-secular epiphany concerning the process of acculturation. Communities were existentially invested in their religious identities. In the process, humankind's original disposition (*fitra*), which had guided them toward a recognition of God's oneness, had been corrupted. Ghazālī aspired in its wake to differentiate "between sound tradition and heretical innovation."[103] He hence retreated from the sociological epiphany, aspiring instead to rebuild the conviction that his community possessed the truth, while all others wander in error. This explains his "inner urge to seek the true meaning of *fitra*, and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through the 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."[104]

Yet Ghazālī's reconstruction of *fitra* was informed by historical circumstance. Using *dīn* and *dunyā* to redefine the frontier between belief and transgression, he protected scientific knowledge from fanaticism, while making Shari'a both a prescriptive and a rational force in human affairs. Ghazālī concluded that transcendence did not stand apart from our other logical capabilities. The senses of touch, sight, and sound, and the mental powers of discernment and intellect were features of our "original condition" (*fitra*). Beyond them was "yet another stage" (i.e., prophecy), where "another eye is opened, which beholds the unseen, what is to be in the future, and other things which are beyond the ken of intellect."[105] Prophecy exceeded intellect, which, in turn, exceeded our sensorial capacities. Inside us, a battle waged between these spheres and ways of knowing: "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."[106]

Dunyā, for Ghazālī, rendered intelligible the collective experiences of a society in flux. Ghazālī explained the capacity for revelation in

[102] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 11.
[103] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 10.
[104] Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 3.
[105] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 34.
[106] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 22.

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dunyā as "something analogous to the special faculty of prophecy, namely dreams. In the dream-state a man apprehends what is to be in the future."[107] From the universal capacity for touch, to the rarer ability to see angels, there is a unified and universal schema in *fitra* designed by God, which Ghazālī reconceived as a foundation for a theory of social unity.[108] Sufis must accept the rules of orthodoxy, while the orthodox must accept the Sufis. No longer did dreams undermine all certainties, instead they situated experience within a rationally unified world (*dunyā*). Ghazālī wrote:

> [T]he power of the combined knowledge of the sciences and trades, along with an understanding of 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.[109]

Ghazālī thus celebrated education, the sciences, and trade, while contextualizing revelation within an epistemic pyramid which ascended from child-like senses to adult intellect to divine prophecy. Certain sciences, Ghazālī argues, depend upon adopting a perspective larger than human perspective: "[T]here are some astronomical laws based on phenomena that occur only once in a thousand years; how can they be arrived at by personal observation?" Ghazālī's "extra-intellectual objects" transcended the empirical, while recognizing multiple new social positions within a wider cultural vista.[110]

Extending the comparison to the social division of labour, Ghazālī argued, "If you are familiar with medicine and law, you recognize lawyers and doctors." The same principle of recognition explained that the Prophet Mohammad is "in the highest grades of the prophetic calling." And just as the astronomer sees larger but intangible realities, the prophet, seated atop the divine division of labor, sees the end of the world in the "Last Day."[111] Ghazālī thus naturalized revelation within the epistemic continuum of *dunyā*. Finally, Ghazālī disqualified outsiders from judging prophecy, lest they have completed a "trial" of

[107] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 34.
[108] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 11.
[109] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 27–30.
[110] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 36.
[111] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 36.

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"several thousand instances" to secure inner peace, which is the basis of "necessary knowledge beyond all doubt." It is a matter of lived experience, requiring repetition over time.

Although his emphasis on experience erected a hierarchy of sorts, a curious populist analysis of the dream followed. Ghazālī wrote, "Prophecy and guardianship equal the integrity of mankind's heart, [and are] attained initially through discoveries made in dreams, providing a path to wakefulness."[112] Ghazālī's analogy between the "light of prophecy" and the experience of dreaming opened divine knowledge to the ordinary population. The very error of natural scientists and theologians has been to estimate truth in terms of "the measure of their [own] observations and reasonings." 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.[113] Ghazālī's long withdrawal from 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 *dīn* and *dunyā* meet.

When Ghazālī returned to Tus from Nishapur, he built a Sufi monastery and a school near his home. Ghazālī thereby revealed his life's dual commitments. Despite "escaping" the world of education earlier in his life, Ghazālī subsequently devoted his life to teaching. In the final years of his life, he divided his time in Tus between the school and the monastery – that is, between teaching and asceticism. Ghazālī finished writing *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* and *The Alchemy of Happiness* during the same period of seclusion.[114] Ghazālī was a reformer, and for him the flight from "school" was a principled refusal to either learn or teach within a system governed by Islamic orthodoxy. Ghazālī's embrace of Sufism, then, was a critique of the clerical dogma, as we will see in more detail in the next section. Even as he was drawn into the orbit of Sufism, however, Ghazālī never forsook Shari'a law. In fact, a number of his most notable works on Shari'a were written following his period of seclusion. Among them was his treatise on the principles of Islamic

[112] Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat*, 34–35.
[113] Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, 42.
[114] Zarrinkoub, *Escape from Madrasa*, 261–262.

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jurisprudence *al-Mustasfa min 'Ilm al-Usūl* (*On the Legal Theory of Muslim Jurisprudence*), and *Iljam al-'Awāmm 'an 'Ilm al-Kalām* (*Saving Muslims from Speculative Theology*), both of which he finished shortly before his death.

Ghazālī's life, from his birth in the great north-eastern civilizational crossroad of Tus to his experience of orphanhood and education, produced in him unusual depths of moral sincerity, intellectual hunger, and insight. Ghazālī's appointment at the madrasa of Nishapur placed him in direct contact with the Seljuq Sultan, revealing the knot tying power to knowledge in an Islamic Empire stretching from the Aegean to Turkestan. By the time that Ghazālī was made head of the prestigious Baghdad Niẓāmiyya, putting him in direct relation with the court of the caliph, he was already contemplating the mendacity of the senses and the deeper truth of mathematics: How could the fact that a star appears minuscule to our eyes, but be revealed by calculation to be almost as large as the earth suggest otherwise? Ghazālī's written reflections reveal a man caught in the throes of civilizational conflict and scientific revolution, and who personally saw that scientific truth transcended the confines of any religious identity to stand as both universally demonstrable and independent of religious truth. All the while, Ghazālī became the ideological voice of the Abbasid state as it navigated sectarian struggles and the creative destruction of empire-building. Ghazālī appreciated that science provided the epistemological and practical foundations for the expansion of the Abbasid Empire, which claimed to be the manifestation of the divine will upon the face of the earth, in opposition to other religious empires that made an identical claim while struggling to mobilize material resources in an early modern technology and arms race.

These conundrums perplexed Ghazālī, and his writings reveal a probing search for answers to the entanglements of politics, science, and religious experience. Instead of seeking a reductive solution, Ghazālī remapped the world in terms of a system of subtle boundaries, grounded in *dīn* and *dunyā*, wherein anyone, from pagans to learned Muslims, could reach equally accurate conclusions through scientific methodology. Yet Ghazālī's penetrating reflections came at a heavy personal price. He was repulsed by the ambition and vanity of Abbasid intellectual life, the hypocrisy of political power, and the shallowness of his Niẓāmiyya colleagues, for whom scholarship was a game. Ghazālī's deep religiosity and natural sincerity tortured him with

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visions of hell, making the weight of responsibility for his every public utterance unbearable.

Struck dumb and silenced, Ghazālī renounced his senior status at the peak of his power and prestige, and with it, their attendant material conveniences and comforts. The widely respected scholar retreated into an itinerant life of seclusion. Ghazālī vanished, abandoning his home and his family as well as his public responsibilities. The defining encounter with Sufism charged Ghazālī's intellectual growth, a spiritual and ecstatic sense of collective being, and a protest movement, entirely beyond the religious parochialism and conceptual hair-splitting of his early academic training. Although Ghazālī had vowed during his Sufi odyssey to avoid the mechanics of power, he did eventually return to the Abbasid establishment to teach and lead the way into the future as a new man transformed by the insights he gained after years of suffering, contemplation, and transcendence. That is, the only viable mode by which Ghazālī might return to public life was as a reformer, promising to reconcile the divisions within the Muslim world of his day. If we study Ghazālī's message objectively, we find not just a mystic but a visionary articulating a pluralistic future and – in his most innovative moments – a conceptual bifurcation dividing the works of humankind from those of God.

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