

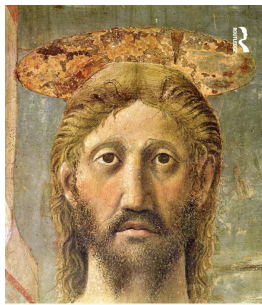
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**MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION**  
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## Medieval Philosophy of Religion

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### Al-Ghazali

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## AL-GHAZALI

Michael Marmura

Al-Ghazali (al-Ghazālī), Abū Ḥāmid Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī (1058–1111), a towering figure in the history of Islamic religious thought, was trained in Islamic law (*fiqh*) and Islamic theology (*kalām*). A severe logical critic of the philosophers al-Farabi (*d. c.950*) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina, *d. 1037*), condemning them as infidels for some of their philosophical theories, he nonetheless reinterpreted some of Avicenna's ideas and incorporated them within his theology. At the age of thirty-seven, he abandoned a prestigious teaching post in Baghdad to follow an ascetic mystic path. He became a noted Islamic mystic, a Sufī, and endeavoured to reconcile Sufism with traditional Islamic belief.

## LIFE AND WORKS

Born in the city of Ṭūsī, or its environs, in northeast Persia, al-Ghazali was educated in *madāris* (singular, *madrasa*). He studied first in Ṭūsī, and then in Jurjān on the Caspian Sea. His big educational move took place around 1077, when he went to the *madrasa* in Nishāpūr, where he studied with Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī, a jurist of the school of al-Shāfi'ī (*d. 820*) and the leading theologian of the Ash'arite school, named after its founder, al-Ash'arī (*d. 935*). There are indications that during his study with al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazali had an exposure to philosophy. His intensive study of it, however, came later in Baghdad.

After al-Juwaynī's death, al-Ghazali remained in Nishāpūr for some six years. He acquired the reputation of being a brilliant scholar of law. His writings in this period were on Islamic law. He was supported by Nizām al-Mulk (*d. 1092*), the vizier of the Seljuk Turkish sultans. These sultans held the real power in Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid caliphs. Their power, however, received its legitimacy from the Abbasid caliph. The Seljuk Turks had adopted Islam in its 'orthodox', Sunnī, form, and hence were in conflict with the counter Shī'ite caliphate in Egypt, the Fātimid, that took its name from Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet

Muhammad and wife of his cousin 'Alī. The Fāṭimid caliphs traced their ancestry to her.

Nizām al-Mulk was noted for establishing a series of religious colleges, *madrasas*, for the teaching of Shāfi'ī law, partly to counteract Fāṭimid teaching. These colleges were known as the Nizāmiyyas, after the name of their founder. The most prestigious of these colleges was the Nizāmiyya in Baghdad. Nizām al-Mulk appointed al-Ghazali as the professor of Shāfi'ī law at the Nizāmiyya in Baghdad. With this appointment al-Ghazali became part of the Abbasid–Seljuk establishment and we find that in this period, which lasted from 1091 to 1095, he wrote at the request of the Abbasid caliph al-Muztaḥhir (*d.* 1118) *Faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyya* (The scandals of the esoterics), a theological attack on Fāṭimid theological doctrine.

Probably at the beginning of this period, al-Ghazali underwent a period of scepticism. He tells us in his autobiography, written a few years before his death, that he began to doubt the senses: the shadow's movement, he reminded us, is imperceptible, yet we know that it takes place; again, an object like the sun appears as having the size of a coin, when astronomical proof indicates that it is larger than our earth. If the senses can deceive us, can we trust reason, namely, its primary principles such as the law of excluded middle? For, he observed, one cannot demonstrate the truth of such a principle without circular reasoning: without assuming it. This doubting of reason, he tells us, became a physical affliction that lasted two months. God, he then states, restored to him belief in reason.

It is during this Baghdad period that, despite having a heavy teaching schedule, al-Ghazali applied himself to an intensive study of philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Avicenna. He was impressed by Avicenna's logical writings. Deeming this logic a doctrinally neutral instrument of knowledge, he urged his fellow theologians and lawyers to adopt it. He maintained that it was essentially the same logic they used, but more elaborate and refined. He wrote several expositions of Avicenna's logic. These included *The Standard for Knowledge* (*Mī'ār al-'Ilm*) and *The Touchstone of Theoretical Investigation* (*Mihakk al-Nazar*), as well as the first part of his *The Aims of the Philosophers* (*Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*) (hereafter *The Aims*), which is generally recognized as belonging to this period. In the Introduction and Conclusion of *The Aims*, he states that he composed it to explain the theories of the Islamic philosophers (al-Farabi and Avicenna) as a prelude to his critique of these philosophers in his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*) (hereafter *The Incoherence*), which belonged to this period.

Speaking strictly from the point of view of the history of Islamic and European philosophy, *The Incoherence* is al-Ghazali's most important and influential work. It is an incisive logical critique directed at the philosophies of al-Farabi and Avicenna. Its primary purpose was to show that these philosophers had failed to 'demonstrate' their theories. In this work, his aim was to refute. To this period, however, belonged his most important theological book, *Moderation in Belief* (*Al-Iqtisād Fī al-'Itiqād*), a work he continued to regard highly after he became a mystic.

In 1095 al-Ghazali underwent a spiritual crisis that resulted in a physical illness and a temporary loss of speech. As he confessed in his autobiography, he realized that his motivation in his teaching and writing career was worldly success. It was not a genuine religious impulse. Underlying this was a dissatisfaction with the purely intellectual, doctrinal, aspects of religion. These, he realized, bypassed the religiously experiential, the *dhawq*, literally 'taste', the Sufis talked about. He had read the works of the Sufis and realized that it is their mystical experience that yielded the certainty in knowledge that had always been his real quest. Deciding to leave Baghdad and follow the Sufi path, he made appropriate arrangements for the welfare of his family, who were to remain in this city. Moreover, to leave his teaching post at the Niẓāmiyya without opposition from the authorities, he gave as a reason for his departure the intention to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

He first went to Damascus, where he secluded himself in the minaret of its great mosque. He then went to Jerusalem, where he secluded himself in the Dome of the Rock, visited Hebron and then travelled to Mecca and Madina. For some twelve years he abandoned teaching, following the path of Sufism. During this period he wrote his magnum opus, the voluminous *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion* (*Ihyā' ulūm al-Dīn*) (hereafter *The Revival*). In this work and shorter works he strove to reconcile traditional Islamic beliefs with Sufi teaching.

In 1106, at the urging of the Seljuks, he resumed teaching law, first at Nishāpūr and then at Tūs, where he died in 1111. During this period he wrote his major work on law, *The Choice Essentials of the Principles of Religion* (*Al-Muṣtaṣfā min Uṣūl al-Dīn*). He introduced this work with yet another account of Avicenna's logic as a useful tool for legal reasoning. After writing *The Revival*, he wrote a number of important and shorter non-legal works. These include: *The Highest Goal in Explaining the Beautiful Names of God* (*Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Asmā' al-Lāh al-Ḥusnā*); *The Jewels of the Qur'an* (*Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*); *The Book of Forty* (*Kitāb al-Arba'īn*), which sums up some of the main ideas in *The Revival*; *The Just Balance* (*Al-Qiṣṭās al-Mustaqīm*), a defence of logic and a critique of the Shī'ite theory of knowledge to which the Fāṭimids subscribed; *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Belief from Unbelief* (*Fayṣal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*); two mystical works, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kimīa-ye sa'ādat*), written in Persian, and *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-Anwār*); his autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error* (*Al-Munqīdh min al-Ḍalāl*); and his last work, *Restraining the Commonality from the Science of Kalām* (*Iljām al-'Awām 'an 'Ilmal-Kalām*).

## AL-GHAZALI AND THEOLOGY (KALĀM)

### *Background*

*Kalām*, sometimes designated as Islamic 'dialectical' theology, other times as Islamic 'speculative' theology, had its germinal beginnings with the political

conflicts that followed the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. They centred around the question of who was to succeed the Prophet as leader of the Islamic community. One group insisted that the leadership should be confined to 'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and his descendants. This group was referred to as 'the party', the *shī'a*, of 'Alī, from which the term *Shī'ite* derives. Others disagreed on this point, and in time began to be referred to as *Sunnīs*, followers of the customary way of life of the Prophet. The religious and political aspects of the conflict were intertwined. They gave rise to such questions as the nature of true belief, the extent to which human acts are predetermined, and the fate in the hereafter of the unrepentant yet gravely sinful Muslim.

By the middle of the eighth century, we have the beginnings of a school of theology that was to become dominant for a period of time. This was the Mu'tazilite school. The name derives from the verb *i'tazala*, 'to withdraw'. Some scholars have maintained that it acquired this name because it 'withdrew' or detached itself from the conflict between the Shī'ites and the Sunnīs. This school had two main branches, that of Basra and that of Baghdad, and many sub-branches. It defined itself as adhering to five principles. The first two of these principles, those of divine unity and divine justice, were the most basic.

By divine unity the Mu'tazilites meant that there is no multiplicity in the divine essence. This raised the question of the relation of the divine eternal attributes mentioned in the Qur'an to the divine essence. Would not affirming their existence introduce multiplicity in God's essence? One answer was that these attributes are identical with the divine essence. This raised two difficulties. The first is the difficulty of distinguishing one attribute from another. A more serious difficulty was that this identification meant that the divine act proceeded from God's nature or essence. This meant that God by his very nature was compelled to act. But would this not mean the denial of the attribute of will? To resolve this difficulty, the idea that the divine will itself was created was proposed. But then such a will would have to be preceded by another will that created it and this latter by yet another will and so on *ad infinitum*. Other Mu'tazilites strove in ingenious ways to interpret the divine attributes mentioned in the Qur'an in a manner that would not violate the principle of God's unity.

Their second cardinal principle, that of divine justice, entailed the doctrine of free will. A just God cannot reward or punish people for acts they are predetermined to do, or for acts that are beyond their capacity. Hence they maintained that human beings are morally accountable only for those acts they could do and can choose to do. Related to this is their belief that reason, independently of revelation, discerns in the moral acts their intrinsic 'goodness' or 'badness'. Hence, it is because an act is in itself morally good that God commands it and because it is in itself an evil act that God prohibits it. It is neither good nor bad simply because God either commands or prohibits it.

*Al-Ghazali's Ash'arism*

Ash'arism can perhaps be best understood as a reinterpretation of these two principles. Its founder al-Ash'arī, originally a Mu'tazilite of the school of Basra, rebelled against it, maintaining that it deviated from the traditional Islamic belief. He, however, sought to defend the more traditional belief by the use of reason. Al-Ghazali's position, basically that of al-Ash'arī, introduced certain refinements to it and is noted for reinterpreting some ideas of Avicenna, adapting them to his Ash'arite world perspective.

This perspective relates to the Ash'arite doctrine of the eternal divine attributes. As al-Ghazali explains it, such attributes as life, knowledge, will and power, although intimately related to the divine essence, are not identical with it. They are 'additional' to it. This does not violate the concept of divine unity. Just as ordinarily speaking a human does not become 'many' because of having life, knowledge, will and power, the divine essence does not become 'many' by the 'additional' divine attributes. These attributes, not being identical with the divine essence, do not impose any limitation on the divine act. Such an act is not the necessary consequence of the divine nature or essence. It is a free act, chosen by the eternal will. True enough, what the eternal divine will chooses is necessary in the sense that it must come to be. But the divine will could have chosen a different act or not to act at all. Once it chooses an act – and al-Ghazali reminds us that this language is metaphorical – what it chooses must come to be.

If such eternal attributes as life, knowledge, will and power are co-eternal, how do they relate to each other? There can be no knowledge without life, no will without knowledge, and no power without will. Life is a necessary condition for the existence of knowledge, knowledge a condition for will, and will a condition for power. To say that the existence of one attribute is a necessary condition for the existence of another does not mean that it is its cause. All these divine attributes are uncaused and co-eternal.

What God eternally wills is brought about by divine power. The attribute of divine power, which again is 'additional' to the divine essence, is pervasive. It does not consist of individual powers. It is an eternal power that brings about each and every existing entity and event, including the human act. In line with this occasionalist view, al-Ghazali holds that existents other than God have no causal efficacy. Rather, it is divine power that is the direct cause of all created existents and events. For al-Ghazali and the Ash'arites, the world consists of transient atoms and their transient accidents, that is, transient qualities all of which are the direct creation of divine power.

Al-Ghazali's main Ash'arite objection to the second cardinal Mu'tazilite doctrine, the principle of divine justice, is that it contradicts the concept of divine omnipotence. It imposes values extraneous to God to which God must adhere. For al-Ghazali, there are no moral values that belong intrinsically to acts. An act is morally good if God commands it, bad if he prohibits it. Moreover, the

Mu'tazilite view that human beings initiate or, as they expressed it, 'create' those acts for which they are morally responsible makes these acts impossible for God to perform. By definition, these acts are 'creaturely' acts, outside the province of direct divine power. God can create similar acts, but not identical ones.

If al-Ghazali, then, denies the Mu'tazilite claim that people choose and 'create' those acts for which they are morally accountable, how does he account for human moral responsibility? This brings us to his defence of the Ash'arite doctrine of *kasb*, 'acquisition'. According to this doctrine the human act, like any event in the world, is the direct creation of divine power. To create such an act, divine power must also create the necessary conditions for it, namely, life, knowledge, will and power, each of these attributes being also the direct creation of divine power. Does this mean that the created power in human beings is efficacious? Al-Ghazali maintains that it is not. He holds that what we ordinarily regard as the effect of our own power is also created for us by divine power. It is an 'acquisition' God creates for us. Moreover, human power is created with the creation of the human act that accompanies it. It does not precede the act.

Al-Ghazali holds that this theory is a compromise between extreme determinism and the doctrine of free will. But if human power is not efficacious, how do we differentiate the spasmodic movement from the one we regard as due to our own power and will? The answer to this is that both movements are created by divine power. The spasmodic movement, however, is created without the created power, while the movement we regard as being by our own doing is created simultaneously with the creation of human power. We ourselves experience the difference between the two movements. Al-Ghazali does not deny that this theory poses difficulties, particularly in relation to the question of moral responsibility. But the difficulties, he maintains, arise because we are thinking on the mundane level. It is through mystical vision (*al-mushāhada*) that the true nature of the doctrine of acquisition becomes comprehensible to us.

#### AL-GHAZALI AND PHILOSOPHY

In *The Incoherence*, al-Ghazali subjects twenty theories of the Islamic philosophers al-Farabi and Avicenna to logical criticism. Both philosophers had formulated closely related but not identical emanative metaphysical systems. Al-Ghazali's main criticisms are directed against Avicenna, but many of his criticisms apply to al-Farabi as well. The motive for al-Ghazali's criticism is religious. His approach, however, is logical: to prove that, contrary to the claims of these philosophers, they have failed to demonstrate their theories. Of the twenty theories he criticized, he regarded seventeen as heretical innovations, to some of which one Islamic sect or another had subscribed. Three, however, he regarded as utterly contrary to Islamic teaching, charging those who upheld them with infidelity (*kufir*).

The first of the three theories he condemned is the theory of the world's pre-eternity. According to Avicenna, the world emanates from God as a necessary consequence of the divine essence. In other words, it is by God's very nature or essence that God must bring about the existence of all other beings. For Avicenna, the essential cause does not precede its effect in time. It coexists with it. God is eternally in act. The world is the necessitated coexisting effect of an eternal essential cause. It must hence be eternal. For al-Ghazali, this meant a denial of the divine attribute of will. This also meant the denial of the eternal attributes presupposed by the eternal will: the divine attributes of life and knowledge. The second theory he rejected is Avicenna's theory that God knows only the universal aspects of the particulars in the terrestrial world. This meant, as al-Ghazali pointed out, that God does not have particular knowledge of individual human beings and their individual actions. It is thus a denial of divine omniscience, of the divine attribute of knowledge, as understood in traditional Islam.

Al-Ghazali then argues against Avicenna's theory of the individual immortality of souls according to which there is no bodily resurrection. While he agrees with Avicenna that there are spiritual rewards in the hereafter that are higher than the physical, the Qur'anic descriptions of physical rewards and punishments in the afterlife can only be rejected if the impossibility of bodily resurrection is demonstrated. But, argued al-Ghazali, none of Avicenna's arguments to prove such an impossibility have been demonstrated.

In the seventeenth Discussion of *The Incoherence*, al-Ghazali offers his famous critique of natural causation. The main concern behind this critique is the question of the miracles reported in the Scriptures. Avicenna maintained that some of these reports are literally true because they can be explained in terms of his theory of natural causation. Some reports, however, contradict such a theory. Hence, they cannot be true, and the language reporting them must be interpreted by the philosophers as metaphorical. With this, al-Ghazali strenuously disagrees.

He begins with a declaration of the Ash'arite position, namely, that the connection between what we habitually believe to be a cause and effect is not a necessary one. With any two things, where the existence of one does not entail the existence of the other, each can exist separately from the other. Some of the examples he gives are drinking and the quenching of thirst, satiety and eating, burning and contact with fire. All these are concomitant events, that God creates 'side by side'. God could create any of these without the other. He could, for example, create death without decapitation and a continuation of life after decapitation. Consider a piece of cotton when in contact with fire. What you actually observe is the occurrence of burning *with* the contact; you do not observe the burning *by* the fire. It is God, al-Ghazali then states, who enacts the burning.

Al-Ghazali then raises a possible objection an opponent may raise: if this is the case and the causal disconnection of natural things is deemed possible, then chaos would ensue. Al-Ghazali responds that such chaos does not ensue, for these are possibilities rather than necessities, and God in his goodness does not create for



us a disorderly course in nature. But even if we grant the opponent that there are necessary causal connections in nature, provided one does not deny God voluntary action, the miracles deemed impossible remain possible though divine intervention. This does not mean that al-Ghazali subscribes to this theory. On the contrary, in the *Moderation* and the *Revival* he gives explicit endorsement to the Ash'arite doctrine that denies necessary causal connection in things, attributing all action to divine power.

It is, however, al-Ghazali's endorsement of Avicenna's logic that once again raises the causal question. Al-Ghazali held that this logic is a philosophically neutral tool of knowledge. This includes for him Aristotelian demonstration. But for Avicenna, who follows Aristotle in this, scientific demonstration is based on the causal theory al-Ghazali rejects. For a resolution of this difficulty, al-Ghazali invokes the Ash'arite doctrine of *irjā' al-āda*: God's ordaining events to proceed in a habitual, uniform way. This uniformity is not necessary in itself and hence can be disrupted. This disruption occurs when God creates a miracle on behalf of a prophet. When such a miracle occurs, God removes momentarily from the believer knowledge of this uniformity, creating in its stead knowledge of the miracle. Ordinarily, the world follows the uniform pattern ordained by the divine will, a pattern that includes those events we normally regard as causes and effects. Such events behave as though they are real causes and effects, when in fact they are not. Rather, they are concomitant events that have no causal efficacy. But they follow an order that parallels the cause–effect sequences in Avicenna's philosophy. It is on this basis that al-Ghazali advocates causal reasoning and scientific demonstrative inference. In other words, al-Ghazali accepts the reasoning pattern of demonstrative logic, substituting for its underlying Aristotelian causal theory his own Ash'arite theory.

#### MYSTICISM

In approaching al-Ghazali's mysticism a first question that arises is its relation to his Ash'arite *kalām*. For although he was an Ash'arite in theology, he was critical of this discipline and his criticisms of it are related to his mysticism. A second question concerns the relation of his mysticism to his attitude towards philosophy.

In his autobiography he tells us that he had contributed works to *kalām*, yet it did not satisfy his quest after certainty. He held that the main function of *kalām* – by which he intended *Ash'arite kalām* – is the defence of Sunni Islamic belief against heretical innovations. This defence is certainly needed. But the teaching of *kalām* should be confined to the few; the masses should not be exposed to it. They will not understand its arguments, which will simply confuse them, leading them to a loss of faith. There are Muslims who can follow its arguments, and if afflicted by doubts about their faith *kalām* could provide a remedy. It could restore to them their faith. *Kalām*, for al-Ghazali, is thus a means to an end. It is an error to take it

as an end in itself, to believe that indulging in it constitutes what is experientially religious. In *The Revival*, he indicates that some ardent, sincere theologians have committed such an error. Their dogmatic defence of Islamic belief has often acted as a veil preventing them from the apprehension of 'realities'.

What, then, are these 'realities'? These, for al-Ghazali, belong to the realm of the unseen, to the world of the divine kingdom ('*ālam al-malakūt*). Glimpses of this world are attained through direct mystic vision (*mushāhada*), leading to the knowledge that the only reality is God and his acts. This is experiential knowledge, *ma'rifa*, gnosis, and it varies in degrees of intensity as the mystic wayfarer advances in the spiritual journey towards the divine.

However, traditional belief, as defended by *kalām*, and gnosis are related. Al-Ghazali illustrates this by an example. The belief that a certain individual is in the house may be due to the fact that the one who informs us about this is a person we have always known to be truthful. This belief is analogous to the belief of the common people, who accept the truths of religion on faith. They would have heard such truths from their parents and teachers. These truths become firmly established in their hearts. But this does not guarantee total immunity to error. If, however, in addition to being informed by a reliable witness about the existence of the individual in the house, one also hears his voice, the certainty that such an individual is in the house increases, although again error may take place. This level of knowing is akin to that of the theologians who add to traditional belief some evidential proof (*dalīl*). It is, however, when one gets into the house and actually sees the individual that one attains certainty. This is analogous to the gnosis of the mystic. Al-Ghazali then explains that cognitions of the Gnostics vary in degree of intensity and clarity and even in the number of the things apprehended. This knowledge, however, remains certain because it represents what is directly experienced.

Some of our thoughts on the mundane level often lead us to paradoxes. This is particularly the case when struggling with such questions as determinism and the freedom of the will. It is through mystical insight, which provides access to the realm of the divine kingdom, that such paradoxes are resolved. For the mystic would then have a vision of things in their true light.

Turning to al-Ghazali's attitude towards philosophy, even though he was a severe critic of the Islamic philosophers, he was also influenced by them. There are particularly two areas of his thinking where this influence is seen, namely, in the realms of moral philosophy and metaphysics. Al-Ghazali adapts to his mystical thought certain moral concepts that are largely Aristotelian. He also develops a metaphysical framework (inspired by the famous verse of light, Qur'an 24:35, to be discussed below), wherein he expresses his mystical thought. In this there is a discernible Avicennan influence.

The most conspicuous of the Aristotelian moral concepts that al-Ghazali embraces and adapts is the doctrine of the mean. He introduces it in terms of the Aristotelian/Avicennan theory of the division of the human rational faculty into

the theoretical and the practical. In summing up Avicenna's theory of the soul in the eighteenth Discussion of *The Incoherence*, he indicates that this theory can be interpreted in terms of the Ash'arite doctrine of *irjā' al-'āda* (defined earlier in discussing al-Ghazali's endorsement of Avicenna's logic). The doctrine of the mean developed in other writings by al-Ghazali is introduced in discussions of the practical faculty. The task of this faculty is to control and manage the lower faculties. This involves developing those dispositions that are termed virtues. These consist of the mean between excess and deficiency. The typical example al-Ghazali gives is Aristotle's definition of courage as the mean between cowardice and rashness. Al-Ghazali, however, introduces a religious, Islamic, element to this concept of the mean, as he maintains that it is arrived at through both reason and the revealed law. Divine help is needed for arriving at it. This doctrine entails habituating the soul to act in moderation and to subdue the animal passions. It is an act of purification, a requirement of piety for Muslims in general and a necessary prerequisite for the mystic wayfarer in his journey towards gnosis. Pursuit of the mean leads to a hierarchy of virtues, the highest of which is the love of God.

Turning to metaphysics, the most philosophically metaphysical of al-Ghazali's works is his *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-Anwār*), an interpretation of the beautiful verse of light (Qur'an 24:35) which begins, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth". Avicenna had given a philosophical interpretation of this verse in terms of his emanative worldview. One discerns here the influence of Avicenna's emanative metaphysics and epistemology on al-Ghazali's interpretation. The two interpretations, however, remain different.

For al-Ghazali, the true light is God. Physical light is only light in a metaphorical sense. This does not mean that it does not have real existence on the mundane level. It has this mundane reality and experiencing it is a first step in the process leading to mystical knowledge. We know physical light through sight. Sight, however, has its limitations: a higher form of knowing that overcomes these limitations is through reason. It involves the act of intellectual apprehension on the philosophical level. This is knowledge of the elect (*al-khawāṣṣ*). There is, however, a higher level of intellectual apprehension, confined to "the elect of the elect" (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*), the mystics, which can bring about a gradual access to the realm of the divine.

All creation is an effusion of a series of lights, descending from God. These represent levels of light that are hierarchically arranged, the closest to God, the source of all the lights, being the highest. There are some parallels here between this view and Avicenna's emanative system. But these parallels must be drawn with caution. For in the third Discussion of *The Incoherence*, al-Ghazali subjected Avicenna's emanative scheme, as expressed in the *Metaphysics* of his voluminous *The Healing* (*Al-Shifā'*), to severe criticism. Avicenna's explanation of how the world emanates from God, al-Ghazali points out, is arbitrary and involves absurd non sequiturs. There is nothing in *The Niche of Lights* to indicate that al-Ghazali no longer subscribes to the criticism of Avicenna's emanative system in *The*

*Incoherence*. What seems to be a more basic difference between his metaphysics and that of Avicenna is that in *The Niche of Lights* al-Ghazali is speaking of a level of apprehension, that of “the elect of the elect”, that is higher than Avicenna’s philosophical level, at least as the latter expresses it in the *Metaphysics* of *The Healing*. On the other hand, when it comes to Avicenna’s description of the mystic’s spiritual journey in his late work, *Directives and Pointers (Al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt)*, we discern an affinity between the mystical views of these two thinkers.

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On CAUSATION see also Vol. 5, Ch. 17. On DIVINE UNITY see also Ch. 13. On FREE WILL see also Chs 2, 9, 19; Vol. 1, Ch. 18; Vol. 3, Chs 9, 15; Vol. 5, Ch. 22. On MYSTICISM see also Ch. 7; Vol. 5, Chs 2, 3.

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