

An Examination on the Nature of al-Ghazali Sufism

· KAMARUDIN HAJI SALLEH

ABSTRACT

This article aims at presenting al-Ghazali's nature of Sufism which remain somewhat controversial amongst the scholars nowadays. This problem arises because of the richness of al-Ghazali's thought; namely the number and complexity of the subjects with which his work deal and the different level of readers for whom they were written. Through the study of certain aspects of al-Ghazali's mystical thought, they are at least three different attitudes and perceptions arise on the nature of al-Ghazali's Sufism. Firstly, some commentators query whether al-Ghazali was a Sufi in the strict sense of the term. Secondly, both Islamic mystics and western writers generally recognise al-Ghazali as an orthodox (sober) Sufi. Lastly, an examination of al-Ghazali's concept of the soul, its relation to God, and his interpretations of the Qur'anic light-verses and veils-tradition, have led to the conclusion that he was an unorthodox (drunken) Sufi.

INTRODUCTION

No thinker of medieval Islam has attracted the interest of western scholars more than Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058 – 1111 A.D./450 – 505 H.) one of the most prolific writers of Islam and an outstanding jurist, theologian and Sufi. Many studies were carried out on the writings of al-Ghazali and brought to print numerous translations, academic writing, editings and compilations. As a result, we can see of his numerous works available in western languages mainly English, French and German, that have accumulated during the last hundred years. In spite of the study of his ideas and doctrines, however, we still do not know the answers to some of the most basic questions which arise regarding to him. For example, what was his real attitude to Sufism (Islamic Mysticism), Neoplatonism and Ismailite Shi'ism?. To what extent was he sincere in his conversion?. Did he really belong to Sufism?. There is also the broader issue of the authenticity a few of his writings and also taken by him. The consequence of the controversy bears fruits when much has been written on al-Ghazali, though we believe there are still many things to be done in order to solve these problems.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Concerning those problems scholars have proposed many solutions from different perspectives. This paper also attempts to evaluate and examine the nature of al-Ghazali's Sufism which is widely discussed by modern scholars. Each of them stands with his or her own perception and have touched upon the different facets and came to different conclusions. Recently, Julian Baldick in his book *Mystical Islam An Introduction to Sufism* attempted to undermine al-Ghazali's reputation as one of the renowned and celebrated Sufis. Baldick describes him as an inconsistent popularizer and also tried to relegate him beneath his Sufi brother Ahmad (d. 1126). He states "al-Ghazali does not really belong to Sufism, and the Sufis themselves do not usually give him much respect: they omit him from their lists of masters" (1986: 66). Baldick's opinions not only show an objection to what the thought as an over-respected to al-Ghazali but also a refusal to recognise al-Ghazali as a real Sufi. Previous writers unnecessarily had given more credit to al-Ghazali's works in Sufism. Baldick continually argues that "al-Ghazali works has neither the spiritual nor the philosophical rigour with which is has been often credited by many western writers" Meanwhile, he clearly disagree with the earlier western writers who say al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Revival of Religious Sciences) was a work which profoundly revealed mystical experience but is rather inclined to accept it merely as a book of ethics and conduct (1989: 65). This is a starting point which attracted me to write an essay on this issue in order to examine and asses not only al-Ghazali's thought but also to analyse Baldick's statement as well, whether or not it is consonant with the findings of other writers.

Notably, a previous scholar, Farid Jabre disputes the sincerity of al-Ghazali conversion to Sufism. He claims the main motive of al-Ghazali's action was fear of Batinites since he had been prominent as an opponent of the Batinites. Jabre points out that "he does not consider al-Ghazali as a real Sufi but assumes that the Sufism was, for al-Ghazali only a useful tool" (Hava Lazarus-Yafeh 1975, 275) or method to fight against the dangerous way of Batinites and Ta'limites (Isma'elite). Nevertheless, in detail both of Baldick and Jabre carry out the different understanding and acceptance of al-Ghazali's thought.

On the basis of these quotations, this paper attempts to examine and analyse the accuracy of such claims by looking at the nature of al-Ghazali's Sufism itself. The question whether or not al-Ghazali is a real Sufi and which type of Sufi fits to him and also what are the specific characteristics of a real Sufi, I hope will be answered. I would like to make an early remark that, the materials and arguments used in the essay mainly based on the secondary sources referring to previous studies and

findings which were written by scholars touching al-Ghazali's attitude, ideas and doctrines on Sufism.

THE ORIGIN OF SUFI TERM

The best way to tackle this issue is to delineate the proper meaning of the term Sufism, in brief that used in classical times and the real application of this term in Islamic context. In the course of time, a later development shows the transition of Sufism from a simple asceticism to a complex theory of the mystical discipline, then became a highly developed theosophical doctrine. We need not enter in the debate of the derivation of the name Sufi and the controversy over the origin and growth of Sufism.

Sufism is the modern term used to translate the Arabic *tasawwuf*, which is the act or process of becoming a Sufi. Al-Hujwiri, in the mid-eleventh century, summed up what Sufi is:

Some assert that the Sufi is so called because he wears a woollen garment (*jama'-i suf*), others that he is so called because he is in the first rank (*saff-i awwal*), others say it is because the Sufis claim to belong to the '*ashab-i al-suffa* (the people of the Bench who gathered around the prophet's mosque), others, again, declare that the name derived from *safa'* (purity). (Al-Hujwiri 1959, 17)

Most Sufis favour to accept the derivation of word from *suf*, wool-the coarse woollen garment of the first generation of Muslim ascetics wore as a distinguishing mark. The earlier usage of term clearly shows the agreement to the simple meaning of Sufism, referring to straight forward faith in Islamic theology, personal devotion to God and trust (*tawakkul*) in Him under all conditions. Faith was accompanied by the practise of a well-controlled ascetic life and in many cases it meant renunciation of the world. A. J. Arberry (1970, 605) elucidates further that the:

Asceticism and quietism characterized the first phase of this movement, which was essentially a reaction against the wealth and luxury that flooding in from the conquered provinces of Byzantium and Persia, threatened to overwhelm Islam and to destroy its primitive simplicity and other-worldliness.

Abd. al-Rahman Jami (d. 492/898) said that, the first appearance of the Sufi name was used by Abu Hashim of Kufa who died in 776 A.D., and was a contemporary of Sufyan al-Thauri (d. 778 A.D.). Al-Sarraj mentions that the term Sufi was invented by the people of Baghdad perhaps in the middle of the ninth century. They found the word to use for such groups in Baghdad. However, the present writer are quite of

using such word due to Jahīz of Basra (d. 869 A.D.), when refers to “the Sufi amongsts the pietists” (al-Sufiya minā ‘l-nussak) and enumerates the names of several who were famous for their eloquence” (J. M. Hastings ed. 1921, 10).

After establishing the simple definitions of Sufism and Sufis practises in the earlier period who expressed themselves in a language very close to the Qur’an and Hadith, we can easily comprehend an exact meaning and application employed by the word Sufi instead of broad and ambiguous definition during the later development. Annemarie Schimmel admits that “to analyse the mystical experience is nearly impossible since words can never plumb the depths of the experience (1978, 7) and simultaneously to cover and encompass the varieties of definition which greatly rely on the different levels of mystical experience is also almost impossible. By putting the Sufi term in its classical context and parallel to Islamic doctrines, this task is made easier and would be enable one to allocate al-Ghazali’s position in Sufism, fairly This may be presumed from his confession of and association with Sufism.

I do agree that al-Ghazali did not have a major mystical experiences in terms of producing ecstatic utterances (Shatahat), gnostic theory (ma’rifa) and illumination (al-Isyraq) because for al-Ghazali Sufism means much more than the cultivation of ecstatic utterances. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh’s statement in line with my view when she claimed “I do not believe that al-Ghazali secretly cultivated and esoteric doctrine or truth” (H. L. Yafeh 1975,349). The problem is how do we account for the controversies and esoterics hints which abound in his diverse writings and teachings, assuming that al-Ghazali had such a kind of personal experience with God which he concealed and kept it silent together with his attitude that he did not want to make controversy and generate difficulties against the jurists, theologians and Muslim community In fact he had left enough data to convince us that he achieved a personal experience of the living presence of God and in *fana’* (passing away) stage.

This suggestion is naturally acceptable if we consider the whole of his *Mishkat al-Anwar* (The Niche for Lights) and *Risalat al-Laduniyyah* (Treatise Concerning Divine Knowledge), *Rawdat al-Talibin* (The Garden of the Seekers), originally written by him that clearly express advanced Sufistic Ideas and theories. In *Mishkat*, al-Ghazali plainly expresses the opinion of mystical speculation about the light and veil and for this reason some writers for instance M. Smith and W. H. T. Gairdner account al-Ghazali among the *drunken* Sufis¹. Another issue is, whether or not we make a fair judgement excluding al-Ghazali from the Sufi masters, merely because he is categorised as a *sober* and does not utter an ecstatic word as a symbol for drunken *hal* (stage).

The acceptance of the conclusion that the sober Sufi is not recognised as a real Sufi following Baldick's suggestion would arise some difficulties. In the al-Ghazali case for example, this inference leading to a denial of many of al-Ghazali's contributions to the Sufism world and credited given to him from Sufi *tariqahs* (orders). In addition to that division, I hardly found Muslim scholars used those words but some of them, for example F. Rahman and M. Abul Quasem prefer to use the term *orthodox* and *unorthodox* form of Sufism to differentiate between these two groups and of course, al-Ghazali is placed under the orthodox flag. F. Rahman (1972, 140) writes:

The influence of al-Ghazali in Islam is incalculable. He not only reconstituted orthodox Islam, making Sufism an integral part of it, but also was a great reformer of Sufism, purifying it of un-Islamic elements and putting it at the service of orthodox religion.

In fact, al-Ghazali's great contribution in Sufism lay not just in its development but also in his more meaningful theory and practice to search mystical experiences through the process of purification of the soul (*tazkiyyah al-nafs*) and upward progress to the stations (*maqamat*) and stages (*ahwal*) and finally to reach the gnostic goal (*ma'rifa*).

AL-GHAZALI'S EXPOSITION ON SUFISM

To begin with the presentation, it would be good to investigate the early exposition of al-Ghazali in Sufism in order to comprehend and analyse his thought. Though in his own account of his development al-Ghazali speaks as if he began to study Sufism only after completing his studies of theology, philosophy and Isma'ilism, he was apparently acquainted with the Sufistic ideas and methods right from his early childhood.

This consideration is taken from the fact that his father was one of the pious dervishes who according to al-Subkī would not eat except what he could earn with his own hand and that he would spend as much time he could in the company of the divines (Al-Subkī 1324 A. H., 36) although we do not know the specific circumstances about his father and to what extent he influenced al-Ghazali's attitude in Sufism, we could guess it was by no means free from Sufi ideas. Before he died, his father entrusted the education of al-Ghazali and his younger brother Ahmad (d. 1126) to a pious Sufi friend Sheikh Yusuf al-Nassaj. Al-Ghazali's education included learning the Qur'an and Hadith, listening to the stories about saints, and memorising mystical love poems (M. Smith 1944, 10-11). It seems probable that, during his youth al-Ghazali and his

brother, Ahmad, studied and even practised Sufism under Syekh Yusuf al-Nassaj in Tus and then under al-Farmadhī at Nishapur. M. Saeed Sheikh (1963, 582) mentions:

From al-Farmadhī al-Ghazali learnt more about the theory and practice of Sufism. He even practised rigorous ascetic and sufistic exercises under his guidance but not to the desired effect. As he himself narrates, he could not attain to that stage where the mystics begin to receive pure inspiration from *high abode*.

At Naishapur, al-Ghazali became a student of a famous theologian al-Juwaynī, known as al-Imam al-Haramain where he possibly learnt also Sufism based on the assumption that Iman al-Haramain himself was reported to have been a pupil of the renowned Sufi Abu Nu'man al-Isfahani (d. 430/1038) (Sheikh 1963, 583). Therefore, in view of these facts, we have no doubt to believe that, al-Ghazali was completely familiar with the Sufi *way of life*. So al-Ghazali's eventual adoption of the Sufi path was in reality a continuation of these early influences that already existed. The exposition of Sufi theory and practice of course evident in his books written on Sufism and Sufis travellers and experiences.

Now, we inspect the second phase of how he came to accept mysticism and the sources which he studied in order to evaluate the influence of previous Sufi teachers towards him. Al-Ghazali pointed out that he found in Sufism the answer to his intellectual and spiritual quest because the mystic way combined knowledge and practice together, not in other fields such as philosophy and *kalam* (Muslim theology) which merely entails the theoretical aspects of knowledge. In his semi-autobiographical work, *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal* (The Deliverance From Error), which had been written after his conversion, al-Ghazali personally confessed that, "the intellectual belief was easier to me than the practical activity" (1985, 122) and he next turned with set purpose to the method of Sufism.

Al-Ghazali was absolutely convinced that Islam could be saved only through moral perfection and that could be attained only through the Sufi path, which was not dependent upon an authority derived from others, nor upon knowledge obtained derived from others, nor upon knowledge (through) obtained by study but which had developed through absolute love and service to Allah. The seekers who will achieve the ultimate happiness, the vision of Allah, not jurists, theologians or philosophers, but the mystics; and al-Ghazali identifies himself with the mystic: "I learned with certainty that it is above all the mystics who walk in the path of God; their life is the best life, their method the soundest method, their character the purest character" (*wa akhlaquhum azka al-akhlaq*) (M. A. Sherif 1975, 105).

In a statement about his sources, al-Ghazali mentions that, his chief masters in this fields were al-Makkī, al-Muhasibī, al-Junayd, al-Bistamī, and al-Shibli (M. Fakhry 1980, 277). He begins with al-Makki's work, *Qut al-Qulub* (The Food of Hearts), which he seems to consider his textbook of mysticism. Al-Subki, Arberry and Massignon precisely mentioned that the Quarter IV of *Ihya'* simply reproduced and copied by al-Ghazali from *Qut al-Qulub* of al-Makki. This section illustrates step by step the mystical virtues to be follow by the Sufi travellers for instance repentance, gratitude, fear and hope and so on. Then, al-Ghazali acknowledged an indebtedness to al-Muhasibi's masterpiece al-Ri'aya li-Huquq Allah (The Observance of God's Rights), who writings he studied extensively and contribute a great influence to him (Arberry 1950, 47). According to M. Smith: "In his teaching on the religious life, ascetical, devotional and mystical, al-Ghazali again bases his doctrine on those of al-Muhasibi while developing, and expanding what was suggested by al-Muhasibi into a much fuller system of mystical theology" (1974, 270).

After that, he mentioned that he studies a various scattered sayings (mutafariqat) of al-Junayd, al-Shibli, al-Bistamī and finally the discourses of unnamed mystics before mastering Sufism. In case of al-Bistamī (d. 261 A.H.), one of the well-known Sufi masters who was accused by jurists for his mystical heresies. Al-Ghazali quoted and referred to his ideas and sayings. Examining this statement, shows us the diversity of combination in al-Ghazali Sufism from the sober to drunken, meantime proving his acceptance to al-Bistamī as one of his teachers. On this account, to divest al-Ghazali from the Sufi masters as proposed by Baldick means that, at one stroke we cut off not only him but also teachers of Sufi's predecessor which al-Ghazali and his successors referred to. Al-Ghazali owes much to them in his writing and teachings. Therefore, al-Ghazali was able to utilise earlier materials to produce the brilliant work in terms of a synthesis and give a good and clear presentation on the basic features of mysticism which have appeared to us.

In later period, al-Ghazali's impact on Sufism could be summarised from a clear cut expression by 'Ain al-Qudat al-Hamadani, a great Sufi martyr, (d. 525/1131) from his saying that, his conversion to Sufism was as a result of readings al-Ghazali's writings especially *Ihya'* He recorded in detail as follows:

He study of the books of theology only increased his bewilderment and confusion. From this perilous state he was rescued, thanks to God's grace, by the perusal of the writings of the proof of Islam, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, a study which occupied him nigh on four years, and delivered him out of error and blindness. (Arberry 1969, 11)

‘Ain al-Qudat claimed receiving the Divine Grace that poured down in all manner of esoteric knowledge and precious revelations that were impossible to describe after his conversion to Sufism. The writings of al-Ghazali exercised such a powerful influence on ‘Ain al-Qudat as he states, “the eyes of spiritual vision began to open – and I do not mean intellectual vision” (Arberry 1969, 11) when reading various al-Ghazali’s books. His further advocates, that the views he expressed are no different from those expounded by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali also approximate to the truth, allowing for the well-known difficulty of determining al-Ghazali’s final position.

Next, another plain illustration told by Jamī in his anecdote to show how highly esteemed al-Ghazali was in Sufi moderate tariqahs:

The North African Sufi leader Abu’l ḥ-Ḥassan ash-Shadhili (d. 1288) saw in a dream vision that the prophet of Islam was extolling himself with al-Ghazali before Moses and Jesus... and he had ordered the punishment of some who denied him, and the marks of the whip remained visible on their bodies until they died. (Schummel 1978, 91)

The argument expressed above is certainly valid to measure how high was al-Ghazali status in so called the moderate Sufi circles even if not accepted by unorthodox Sufis. More than that, al-Ghazali had been a Sufi master when he established a khankah or hermitage which gathered many young disciples and trained them in the theory and practise of the Sufi life in his hometown at Tus. Significantly he produced several Sufi pupils who were well-known after his death (ed. Lewis, Pellat & Schacht 1965, 1083). Consequently, I do not see a concrete argument for omitting al-Ghazali from the Sufi masters considering his position in this context. With this explanation, we are certain about the position of al-Ghazali in Sufism and now we come to concentrate on the most important part, concerning to al-Ghazali’s attitude on Sufism which have appeared in many books and articles discussing him.

THE NATURE OF AL-GHAZALI’S SUFISM

On the basic of the assumption that al-Ghazali had no specific or major esoteric theory and doctrine (some facts suggest that he had an esoteric doctrine which he thought would be too dangerous to express openly), as in my previous statement, he still considered the discussion of certain subjects to be esoteric and dangerous to speak publicly This attitude parallel with his wide promulgation of the orthodox Sufism which is less emphasis and concern to such kind of experience. I will now attempt to discuss his thought in detail. I shall endeavour to extract a few statements

and quotations which could be useful to evaluate the nature of al-Ghazali's Sufism. Firstly, we look at al-Ghazali's position in the view of scholars.

Al-Ghazali received great esteem and respect in academic circles from east to west. The majority of Muslims agree that he is the Proof of Islam (*hujjat al-Islam*) and some even go too far to consider him the greatest authority of Islam after the prophet Muhammad. Nearly every Muslim scholar when discussing Islamic subjects not only on Sufism but also theology and philosophy quote his ideas. The following statement elucidates this further: "Al-Ghazali enjoys a unique position in the history of Sufism. The eclectic method produced in al-Ghazali, a great thinker and teacher which systematized Sufi doctrines and gave them clarity, precision, and purpose" (Nasrollah, Faramaz & Fariborz 1976, 82).

As Arberry indicated, "al-Ghazali brought out various aspects of the moral metaphysical, and mystical system in which he essayed to reconcile Sufism with Muslim orthodoxy and to prove that the Muslim life of devotion to the one God could be lived perfectly save by following the Sufi way" (Nasrollah 1976, 85) and it was through al-Ghazali's effort that Sufism attained a respected and an assured image within Islam. So doing, al-Ghazali as if wished to explain, that Sufism is part and parcel of Islam itself. It is a way of salvation, in any condition and cannot be divorced from the whole system of Islam. He succeeded to bring orthodoxy and Sufism into closer contact: the orthodox theologians still went their own way, and so did the Sufis, but the theologians became more ready to accept the Sufis as respectable, while the Sufis were more careful to remain within the bounds of orthodoxy. By firmly establishing the position of Sufism, al-Ghazali in fact has put himself in an important place in the history of this particular discipline of knowledge. R. A. Nicholson observes:

Muhammadan orthodoxy in its present shape owes much to al-Ghazali – and al-Ghazali was a Sufi. Through his work and example the Sufistic interpretation of Islam has in no small measure been harmonised with the rival claims of reason and tradition, but just because of this he is less valuable than mystics of purer type to the student who wishes to know what Sufism essentially is (Nicholson 1963, 24-25).

Marshal G. S. Hodgson by no means less supports this:

... Ghazali (d. 1111), who combined a mastery of the teachings of the ulama scholars on Shariah and Kalam with a respect for the independent wisdom of the Sufi mystics, helped to make Sufism acceptable to the ulama themselves. (Hodgson 197, 203)

These quotations explicitly indicate al-Ghazali's roles in accomplishing a religious synthesis of orthodoxy and Sufism. Historically, many scholars and ulama recognised al-Ghazali's Sufism lies within and not without the bound of orthodoxy (Islamic tenets) and this factor was helped the spreading of Sufism in Muslim societies. Then Sufism became mass movement by establishing a Sufi centres. Eventually its teaching were taught openly even in the religious schools and even when Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Jawzi, did appear from time to time to attack the excessive of Sufism, they were more or less lonely voices which did not succeed in diminishing the respect of the religious community for the Sufi. Those facts put al-Ghazali more than anyone else was said to have prepared the way for general recognition of Sufism.

On the other hand, during the Middle Ages the writings of Sufis eminent like al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi influenced the religion and scientific thought of the west. P. K. Hitti illustrated that, al-Ghazali's *Ihya'*, *Fatihah al-'Ulum*, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* and *al-Iqtisad fi al-'Itiqad* partly was translated into the Latin between 1150, they exerted marked influence on Jewish and Christian scholasticism. Al-Ghazali's thought indirectly affected St. Thomas Aquinas and Pascal successively (1970: 432). Idries Shah added that "the ideas which al-Ghazali passed on and which influenced both St. Thomas Aquinas the Dominican and St. Francis of Assisi, ... To the Sufi, the Ghazalian stream in two different emphasis is seen plainly in the work of both intellectual Dominicans and intuitive Franciscans" (1964, 148). Accordingly, it is not strange to find many western scholars giving a credence to al-Ghazali's contributions in Islamic tradition by comparing him with Luther, Aquinas and Francis in Christian tradition.

The importance of al-Ghazali's personality, it seems to me is that, his Sufistic theory and doctrine probably were acceptable from both sides of Sufism, primarily orthodox and to some extent to the unorthodox party also. This happened perhaps because of his writings focussed on two different levels of readers and could be interpreted respectively according to each of them. In this case, if al-Ghazali had an esoteric view but had not divulged it to everyone, al-Ghazali's division of people and science might be the substantial reason as a solution. He classified people into two groups: the masses (al-'awam) and the elites or initiates (al-khawas). It means that, al-Ghazali when he is writing to public and elite, his method interchangeably to fit both groups.

In practice, the ulama seem to follow the same rules when teaching the Muslim people in matters concerning mystical aspects, for example today in Malaysia, al-Ghazali's *Ihya'* is commonly delivered in mosques and pondok schools particularly touching the basic principles of ibadah (act of worship), 'adat (custom) and then followed by matters of concern to the

Sufi beginners such as *Kitab Sharh 'Ajaib al-Qalb* (Book of the Explanation of the Wonders of the Heart), the attributes causing to the destruction of the soul (al-Muhlikat) and leading to the purification or salvation (al-Munjiyat) and so on. However, the specific discussion about the Sufi practises and journeys are only taught when someone follows the Sufi Orders.

From the formulation accumulated by other researchers when measuring and commenting on al-Ghazali's Sufistic ideas, we turn to examine what al-Ghazali himself discovered through the Sufi way which can be deduced from his writings. Al-Ghazali described the journey of the Sufis start with knowing themselves because many Muslim sayings give the special status in relation to God. "O He who knows himself best knows his God best and God created Adam (man) after his own likeness" (Al-Ghazali 1952, 85). It is clear that, beginning from the knowledge of self leads to the knowledge of God and achieved nearness (qurb) with God, but it does not mean merely the metaphysical self, but at the same time include also the reason, mind and rituals. He writes further that "the heart was created pure in its origin, but the purity has become defiled by foul deeds, and that fair countenance disfigured by the darkness of sin" (Al-Ghazali t.t., 202). Because of this fault, in order to achieve the upward progress we begin with the combating their unworthy qualities, cutting their ties to the world, directing all of their thoughts towards God.

Al-Ghazali adds, the Sufis argue that the heart possesses an organ of sight like the body, and outward things are seen with the outward eye, and inward realities with the eye of the heart. The knowledge gained through the vision of the eye of the heart (ayn al-qalb) has the immediacy and directness of sensual knowledge but concerns the spiritual world. The spiritual knowledge is identified with the heart and is what the Sufis call presential knowledge (al-ilm al-huduri) or the divine knowledge (al-ilm al-ladunni or al-ilm al-ilhami) (1938, 300). This pure intellect or knowledge is immanent in the heart of everyone but only actualised to the followers of the Sufi way at different degrees and in different modes since the Sufi carries within his own being the prophetic light which he experiences directly through the reality of prophecy (haqiqat al-nubuwwah). Say al-Ghazali "what became clear to me of necessity from practicing the Sufi way was the true nature and special character of prophesy" (1980, 96).

All the impressive and amazing experiences here were described by al-Ghazali himself since he was a distinguished Sufi and naturally able to give an authentic and authoritative account of the Sufi methodology. As far as the way to the knowledge of the true reality is concerned, al-Ghazali considers the Sufi method as the most excellent method, and the Sufis as the most excellent knowers of the Truth. For he himself found the light of certainty in the spiritual path of the Sufis.

In view of these facts, we take for granted that al-Ghazali's method in Sufism is orthodox, specifically assuming his objective to purify Sufism of un-Islamic elements and in wider scope to make the theologians and masses appreciate the Sufi way. Al-Ghazali had done his works successfully by giving a better and more objective account of spiritual experience through rational knowledge. But he maintained that the *real notion* of God as He may cannot be achieved by ordinary believers or theologians (merely using the human faculties) except the Sufis.

On the other hand, in approaching the tendency of al-Ghazali's as an intoxicated Sufi, we also found the decisive argument stated by him that he ever experienced the highest level of Sufi state (hal); that is *fana'* (passing away) and *dhawq* (taste) which we could conclude that he was in intoxicated situation (at this hal, the Sufis usually utter mystical ejaculation) with God. This experience only illuminate after he detached himself from all worldly ties and turn wholly to God. Al-Ghazali's expressions in this context were caused some scholars to infer that he actually had the mystery experiences with God which he was not at liberty to discuss. This idea particularly manifested in books of which authenticity is in dispute or doubt.

Encouraged by this distinctive stimulation al-Ghazali has no word to condemn or reject the ecstatic utterances spoken by some eminent Sufis. His critics show the agreement to some extent: "the words of passionate lovers in the state of ecstasy should be concealed and not spoken of" (1963, 624). Occasionally, the approval of al-Ghazali for Hallaj's ecstatic utterances (shathahat al-sufiyyah) is good example of the sympathy of al-Ghazali for al-Hallaj. But he rejected disclosing the secrets that Sufis discover to the masses, wondering bring about of misunderstanding or misrepresenting the real meaning of the words which nobody knows what exact intention of the speaker.

Al-Ghazali was one of those who maintained that al-Hallaj's error in declaring 'ana al-Haqq, I am the Truth, lay not in the sentiment itself, which represented a legitimate Sufi hal state, but in having uttered it publicly where it could confuse common people; for this he had to be punished lest the common people suppose that blasphemy was to be tolerated. (Hodgson 1974, 191)

The detailed observation on al-Ghazali's thought in *Mishkat al-Anwar* which he elaborated in detail the concept of light-verses and veils-tradition will surprise us because its clearly contains much of the pantheistic formulation. For example, al-Ghazali's comparison of Allah, the Universal Light and Real Light and the perfect human soul as a sun with sunlight that indicate nothing except sun (Allah), in fact, there is no light but He. Furthermore, this theory employed the notion that this

world is only a shadows of Allah. Its having no reality or actuality whatsoever but is devoured by the being of Allah. This understanding fit to al-Ghazali's concept of *la huwa illa huwa* (there is not it but He) in his saying: "He is everything: He is that He is: none but he has ipseity or hetty at all" (Al-Ghazali 1924, 62). In addition al-Ghazali attempted to differentiate between the ability of masses to perceive Allah and the elites by saying that "There is no deity but Allah is the Many's declaration of Unity: that of the Few is "There is no he but He"; the former is the more general, but the later is more particular, more comprehensive, more exact, and more apt to give him who declares it entrance into the pure and absolute oneness and Onliness" (1924, 112-13). Sheikh expresses that al-Ghazali in this context took a very lenient view of the obviously pantheistic utterances of the Sufis of extreme type such as I am the Creative Truth which was said by al-Hallaj, the most famous victim of outraged orthodoxy

R. A. Nicholson seems to agree that al-Ghazali also expresses the advanced Sufistic and philosophical view inspired from his own personal experience that explicitly resembled in his works. "But while his religious and ethical teaching has its roots in Sufism, and while his writings are saturated with Sufistic ideas he himself was more than a Sufi: otherwise he could not have done the work he did" (1964, 56-7). M. Smith repeatedly mentions that al-Ghazali's most essential sources in mystical discussions come from his personal experience:

He himself had experienced illumination and ecstasy, he had received revelations which it was not lawful to describe, he had entered into that direct knowledge of the Divine which was incommunicable, but it was this experience which enabled him to give his teaching with the assurance born of his personal conviction of the truth of what he taught (1964, 105).

Most importantly, when he speaks of successive and gradual stages of mystical ascent in the pages of *Munqidh min al-Dhalal*: "... is the sinking of the heart completely in the recollection (dhikr) of God; and the end of it, is complete absorption (fana') in God; (Al-Ghazali 1967, 61). This statement leads one to believe that al-Ghazali had traversed to different levels of experience. It traces his *safar* (itinerary) to God, marked it by a dozen stages and stations mainly repentance (tawba), earnest striving (mujahada), self-examination (muhasabah), gnosis (ma'crifa), passing away (fana') and many others which some virtues acquired and other grace received. Al-Ghazali calls the Sufis as masters of states (arbab al-ahwal) not purveyors of words (ashab al-'aqwal) firmly established his principle in assessing who is the real Sufi. The Sufis are concerned with the different states and stations which adept must experience before he

can reach the Divine Presence. According to al-Ghazali, when the Sufis experience *mushahadah*, *mukashafah*, and *dhawq* then see even when awake the angels and “the spirits of the prophets and hear voices from them and learnt useful things from them” (1967, 61).

R. J. McCarthy indicates from al-Ghazali’s own word that:

Ghazali asserts that he sometimes achieved ecstasy and had the revelation of things which could neither be numbered nor expressed [paras 93-94]. Certainly from the words of al-Ghazali it appears clear that the Author would wish to share with his reader the enthusiasm for similar experiences and for the courageous and heroic undertaking of the Sufi way. (McCarthy 1980, 96)

Al-Ghazali at times is aware his expressions are extravagant and clearly contradict with the religious commandments. However, he says “do not blame me for the extravagance of my expression. The wildness of my speech is small as compared to my intoxication” (Cited in S. H. Nadeem 1979, 102). Analysis of this statement, shows us that al-Ghazali really was in an intoxicated condition when many things he experienced were incommunicable mysteries and he was not trying to tantalise at all. Another profound statement is the prose by al-Ghazali which Nadeem also cited:

My tongue is unable to describe my attributes. What I say can be interpreted to mean that I am the One. I am nothing but Thee, whether it be Thy Person or Unity. And Thou art nothing but the very essence of any selfhood. (Nadeem 1979, 103).

To describe in detail what so called, the Sufi absorption is, when the worshipper thinks no longer of his worship or himself, but is altogether absorbed in Him Whom he worships, that state, by the gnostic, is called the passing away of mortality, when man has so passed away from himself that he feels nothing of his bodily members, nor of what is passing without, nor what passes within his own mind. To a higher level for perfect absorption means, he is unconscious not only himself, but of his absorption. For *fana'*, from *fana'* is the goal of *fana'* (Smith 1972, 73).

This seems to be pure monism and one is reminded of what al-Ghazali wrote elsewhere that there is no god but God was a definition only fit for popular consumption, whereas the privileged held the formula, there is no He but He as I mentioned earlier¹³. On top of that, we are sure about al-Ghazali’s principles that, in whatever situation even in intoxication, he tries to avoid producing the ecstatic utterances like I am a Truth because his words could be misinterpreted or mislead in term of relations of God-man by his followers. However, I believe he was sometimes in a deeply intoxicated hal with God. In view of this fact al-

Ghazali, however rejected the naming of the experience with God such as identification (ittihad) or unification (wusul) or inherence or indwelling (hulul) in Him because such words if we taken literally completely contradict to religious commandments and therefore should not be used to describe any condition in personal relation with God. Those words al-Ghazali mentioned as an error to be applied in describing such relations.

When Allah's light has shined on the heart of a saint he is bewildered by excess of beauty. Sometimes his tongue takes a lead in this state of bewilderment and he says that he is the Reality (Ana I haq)... He has been deceived by a small portion (star) of the lights of God. (Nadeem 1979, 103)

If I rightly understand al-Ghazali attitude, he never denies the possibility and reality having experience of God, nearness (qurb) or proximity but he had a quite clear view that the Sufis should not exaggerate or proclaim such controversial words (even if they are true) because it's clearly in contradiction with the common notion of theologians, jurists and masses that God is transcendent. I think this suggestion is useful to reconcile al-Ghazali's diverse esoteric hints which could to some extent imply a pantheistic element.

CONCLUSION

My conclusions may summed up briefly as follows: al-Ghazali certainly was a real Sufi, and his authentic writings like *al-Munqidh* also plainly attest to this, not only in book such as *Mishkat* but, paradoxically. In greater degree, his *Ihya'* contained fully Sufi-flavoured that is accessible to follow and equally clear elucidating the process of early Sufis travels step by step. In other words, *Ihya'* is one of the most extensive and influential work on Sufi ethics (not an advanced Sufistic theory or ecstatic utterances) which express al-Ghazali's mystical re-evaluation and interpretation of traditional Islam.

Al-Ghazali devotes himself to restore equilibrium and harmony between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam which lasted with Sufism officially accepted. He believes that the mystical experience leaves no doubt comparing the rational ways and the ultimate goal of Sufism is to attain ma'rifa that will reveal the Divine Reality. However, the distinctive mystical experience should not make the Sufis or esoterist belittle and negate the injunctions of the Shariah. I became convinced that, though al-Ghazali had some experience of mystical ecstasy, he appears never to have sought this for its own sake and I also firmly hold that al-Ghazali Sufism is orthodox fashion without becoming either heretical in

doctrine or antinomian on practise and this made it possible for ordinary Muslims to adopt Sufi practise. Finally, the impressive statement from al-Ghazali to show the tranquility and peace of Sufis' follower feeling could be judged from his own word: what I experience I shall not try to say: call me happy, but ask me no more.

NOTES

1. See how Margaret Smith estimates al-Ghazali place in history of Islamic Mysticism. *Al-Ghazali: The Mystic* (London, 1944) pp. 190-92. W. H. T. Gairdner in his introduction to *Mishkat al-'Anwar* advocates the whole passage on pp. 19 and 20 and 22-24, revealed an element of pantheism, where not only is the most extreme language of the extreme wing of Sufism (Ana I Haqq and the rest) quoted with guarded approval but there is open eulogy of the formula *la huwa illa Huwwa*, "there is not it but He", which is declared to be more expressive of real, absolute truth than *syahadah* (Muhammandan) creed itself *la ilaha ill-Allah*. "there is no god but God" pp. 61-62. According to Annemarie Schimmel, *Mishkat* may be regarded as an expression of that set of opinions that the perfected mystic "believes in secret between himself and Allah, and never mentions except to an inner circles of his students" pp. 96.

REFERENCES

- The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 1965. 12 vols. ed. Lewis, B., Pellat Ch., Schacht, J., London Luzac & Co.,
- The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. 1921. 12 vols. ed. Hastings, J., Edingburgh: T & T Clark.
- Arberry, A. J. 1950. *Sufism An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. London George Allen and Unwin.
- _____ 1969. *A Sufi Martyr An Apologia of 'Am al-Qudat al-Hamadani*. trans. London George Allen and Unwin.
- Baldick, J. 1989 *Mystical Islam An Introduction to Sufism*. London .I. B. Tauris and Co.
- Gairdner, W. H. T. 1952. trans. *Al-Ghazali's Mishkat Al-Anwar The Niche for Light*. Lahore Sh. Muhammad Ashraf.
- Fakhry, M. 1970. *A History of Islamic Philosophy* New York & London Columbia Uni. Press.
- Fatemi, S, N. F F 1976. *Sufism Message of Brotherhood, Harmony, and Hope*. New Jersey A. S. Barnes and Company.
- Hitti, P. K. 1970. *History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present*. 10 ed. London Macmillan.
- Hodgson, M. G. S. 1974. *The Venture of Islam The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*. vol. 2. Chicago & London Uni. Of Chicago Press.
- Holt, P. M., Lambton, A. K. S., Lewis, B. 1970. *The Cambridge History of Islam The Further Islamic Lands, Islamic Society and Civilization*. Cambridge: Uni.

- Press.
- Al-Ghazali, A. H. no date. *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*. vol. III and IV Beirut Dar al-Ma'rifa.
- _____ 1955. *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*. Beirut Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani.
- _____ 1938. *al-Risalat al-Laduniyyah*. trans. M. Smith in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. London.
- _____ 1973. *Miskat al-Anwar* ed. Abu al-'Ala Afifi, Cairo al-Dar al-Qaumiyah.
- Lazarus – Yafeh, H. 1975. *Studies in Ghazali*. Jerusalem The Magnes Press.
- McCarthy, R. J. 1980. *Freedom and Fulfillment An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazali's al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal and Others Relevant Works* al-Ghazali. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Nadeem, S. A. 1979 *A Critical Appreciation of Arabic Mystical Poetry*. Lahore Islamic Book Service.
- Nicholson, R. A. 1963. *The Mystics of Islam*. London Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- _____ 1964. *The Idea of Personality in Sufism*. Lahore S. H. Muhammad Ashraf.
- Rahman, F 1972. *Islam*. Chicago Uni. Press.
- Schimmell, A. 1978. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill Uni. of North Carolina Press.
- Shah, I. 1964. *The Sufis*. New York Doubleday & Company.
- Sharif, M. M. 1963. *The History of Muslim Philosophy*. vol. 1., Wiesbaden Otto Harrassowitz.
- Sherif, M. A. 1975. *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue*. Albany State Uni. of New York Press.
- Smith, M. 1944. *Al-Ghazali The Mystic*. London Luzac & Co.
- _____ 1974. *Al-Muhasibi A. D. 781 – 857 An Early Mystic of Baghdad*. Amsterdam Philo Press.
- _____ 1972. *Readings From the Mystic of Islam*. London Luzac & Com.
- Al-Subki, Taqiyuddin. *Tabaqat al-Shafi'yyah al-Kubra*. 1964-76. 10 vol., ed. M. M. al-Tanabi & Abd al-Fatah M. al-Hiyaji. Cairo Isa al-Babi al-Halabi.
- Watt, W M. 1967 *The Faith and Practice*. trans. *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Jabatan Usuluddin dan Falsafah
Fakulti Pengajian Islam
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi
Selangor D.E.

